

Subjecthood, topicality and mixed configurationality in the history of Icelandic

This talk will explore complex changing interactions between word order, grammatical relations and discourse functions in a language which is neither fully argument-configurational nor fully discourse-configurational, taking the history of Icelandic as a case study.

Old Icelandic (OIce) and Present-Day Icelandic (PDIce) exhibit subtle differences wrt. the interaction between the prefield, subjecthood and topicality. In clauses with an unexpressed topical subject, the prefield could be occupied in OIce, e.g. (1), but must be unoccupied in PDIce, cf. (2).

(1) Þá svarar loksins
then answers finally
'Then (he) finally answers' (OIce: 1275, Morkin.89)

(2) a. (Ég) þekki það ekki
I recognise that NEG
'(I) don't recognise that'
b. Núna þekki *(ég) það ekki
now recognise I that NEG
'Now (I) don't recognise that'
(PDIce: Sigurðsson 1993: 254–255)

Presentationals with a postfinite non-topical subject, meanwhile, show the reverse; whereas the prefield was typically unoccupied in OIce, e.g. (3), in PDIce the prefield must be occupied, e.g. by an adjunct or an expletive, cf. (4).

(3) Kom þá veður á móti þeim.
came then wind towards them
'There then came wind towards them' (OIce: 1250, Eirik.9.2)

(4) Það komu nokkrir vopnaðir menn af næstu bæjum
EXPL came some armed men from next farms
'There came some armed men from the nearby farms' (PDIce: 2008, Ofsi.634)

I will show how these differences can be accounted for in terms of complex changing interactions between position, subjecthood and topicality, as modelled within Lexical Functional Grammar (Bresnan & Kaplan 1982; Bresnan et al. 2016), which assumes argument functions and discourse functions to be independent of position, represented at separate dimensions (f-structure, i-structure) which map to c(onsituent)-structure (e.g. Butt & King 1996; Nordlinger 1998; Snijders 2015).

I assume that two competing principles wrt. the assignment of topicality are active in Icelandic: one structural (argument functions in the prefield are topics) and one functional (subjects are topics). Over time, these principles converge, such that the prefield is increasingly associated with both subjecthood and topicality (cf. the findings in Booth & Beck 2021). In line with this convergence of subjecthood and topicality on the prefield, clauses where the prefield hosts a non-subject (e.g. adjunct) are interpreted as lacking a topical subject ("thetic", cf. Sasse 1987). The prefield

thus plays an increasingly important role in encoding the distinction between topic-comment andthetic clauses. This manifests itself in increased restrictions on the prefield in non-subject-initial clauses, whose occupied/unoccupied status encodes respectively whether the clause is thetic, cf. the presentational in (4), or a topic-comment clause whose topic is an unexpressed subject, cf. (2).

References

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