

DISCOURSE STRUCTURE AND THE REORGANISATION OF THE ICELANDIC ASPECTUAL SYSTEM

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Icelandic is commonly considered a conservative language. While this claim holds true for its morphology, especially in the broader Germanic perspective, one area that has undergone considerable changes since the 16th century is the mapping between syntax and discourse structure.

To date, scholarly work in this area has focused on the syntactic reflexes of these changes, attempting to find a parsimonious explanation of why phenomena co-occur. Booth & Beck (2021), for instance, argue from a syntactic perspective that this shift can be understood at least partially in terms of the emergence of SpecTP as a dedicated subject position, which led to a number of effects visible in the grammar of Icelandic. These include a decrease in *Stylistic Fronting* (when, in clauses with a gap, non-subject XPs are fronted to the pre-finite position), a decrease in V1 declaratives, as well a decrease in argument drop, accompanied by an increase in the expletive element *það* (Rögnvaldsson, 1995, 2002).

In this talk, I will argue that otherwise puzzling facts from the history of the language can be better understood if one takes the shift in discourse structuring as fundamental. While most research to date has focused on a limited set of syntactic phenomena, I bring new data to bear on this question: the emergence of two aspectual markers, the BÚINN-perfect and the VERA AÐ-progressive.

The shift in mapping between form and discourse structure in the history of Icelandic represents, more broadly, a shift from a predominantly *bounded* system for expressing narrative to a predominantly *unbounded* one (see Petré, 2010, 2014; Los, 2012 on a similar shift in the history of English).

One can directly observe this shift in corpora, for instance by mapping the rise of the temporal subordinator *þegar* ‘when’ alongside the decline of the adverbial conjunction *þá* ‘then’ as a foregrounder and topic-time anchor. I trace the shift in discourse structure alongside the emergence of innovative aspectual markers in two corpora of historical Icelandic (**IcePAHC**, Wallenberg et al. 2011 and **Íslenskt textasafn**, Úlfarsdóttir et al. 2013). I show that what seem to be abrupt changes in the corpus record no longer seem so abrupt when considered in the larger context of this shift from a bounded to an unbounded system. Rather, the loss of topic-time anchors like *þá* ‘then’ paved the way for the emergence of new ways of construing events (cf. Los, 2012).

References

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