

Information structure and word order change: verb-first and verb-second in Icelandic

Hannah Booth & Christin Beck, University of Konstanz

We present an account for the diachrony of Icelandic clause structure, focusing on changes in how information structure is encoded syntactically. Our account concerns the diachrony of verb-first (V1) and verb-second (V2) in Icelandic, making a theoretical contribution to previous work (Platzack 1985; Sigurðsson 1990; Butt et al. 2014) and contributing to wider discussions on V1/V2 in Germanic and beyond (e.g. Axel 2007, Hinterhölzl & Petrova 2010, Jouitteau 2010). On the basis of findings from a series of corpus investigations using IcePaHC (Wallenberg et al. 2011), we show that the relative position of the finite verb and subject topics changes throughout the history of the language, whereby a relatively flexible positional distribution of subject topics gradually yields to a new system with an emerging unique subject topic position.

V2 is robustly attested in Old Icelandic matrix clauses. The only deviation from V2 are V1 structures, e.g. (1). This contrasts with other early Germanic languages where V3 and V-later structures are also attested (e.g. Kiparsky 1995; Walkden 2015).

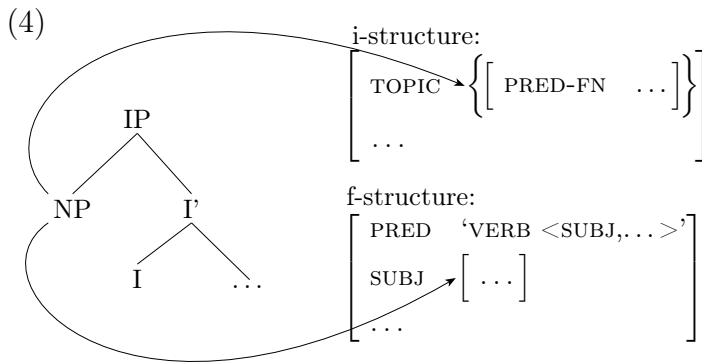
- (1) **Pórir** hann þá eigi að stefna til gatnanna.
dare.PRS he.NOM then NEG to go.INF to paths.DEF
'He then dares not make for the paths.' (1250, Sturlunga.445.2015)

Using the architecture of Lexical-Functional Grammar (LFG) – where constituency and functional information are handled at separate levels – we can neatly capture the restricted possibilities for verb position in Old Icelandic by assuming that I is an obligatory functional category, a fixed structural position for finiteness. Thus, V2 and V1 sentences are both rooted in I; the only difference is that for V2 SpecIP is occupied, see (2), for V1 it is not, see (3), where SpecIP is absent via LFG's principle of Economy of Expression (Bresnan et al. 2016).



Our account for V1, with an 'empty' specifier position, is similar to previous proposals (e.g. Rögnvaldsson & Thráinsson 1990) but contra other accounts which assume that the finite verb occupies C in V1 declaratives (e.g. Sigurðsson 1990 and Franco 2008). The latter are motivated by the assumption that SpecIP is a unique subject position, within a framework where subjects are defined via position. In LFG, subjects are captured at f-structure and need not be associated with a fixed structural position (Dalrymple 2001). An IP-rooted account is thus in principle as acceptable as a CP-rooted account. In fact, as we show, there are empirical arguments in favour of an IP-rooted account, concerning the specific information-structural characteristics of the prefield and the immediately postfinite position.

V2 is robustly attested throughout the Icelandic diachrony, with V1 still an option in the modern stage (Butt et al. 2014). Therefore we assume that the c(onstituency)-structure of Icelandic remains stable over time. However, V1 decreases in frequency over time. This is connected with changes in the way information structure is encoded syntactically, i.e. via structural position. Within LFG, we can capture this in terms of a change in the mapping between c-structure and a separate information-structural dimension (i-structure, see King 1997). Specifically, subject topics increasingly favour the prefield throughout the history of Icelandic. We interpret our findings as evidence that Icelandic is undergoing a change with respect to the association between information structure (i-structure) and clause structure (c-structure). Specifically, we propose that the prefield in Icelandic – SpecIP in our account – is emerging as a unique structural position for subject topics. In other words, the c-structure to i-structure and c-structure to f-structure correspondences in (4) become stronger over time.



We also show that this overall change can be linked to wider diachronic developments in Icelandic concerning two prefield phenomena previously observed for historical Icelandic, namely Stylistic Fronting (Hróarsdóttir 1998) and the rise of expletive *það* (Eythórsson & Sigurðardóttir 2016; Hróarsdóttir 1998; Rögnvaldsson 2002; Booth 2018).

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