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**Publication Date**

2003

Peer reviewed

**Grammatik i fokus**  
*Festskrift till Christer Platzack*  
*den 18 november 2003*

Volym 1

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**Grammar in focus**  
*Festschrift for Christer Platzack*  
*18 November 2003*

Volume 1

**Redaktörer/Editors**

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Grammatik i fokus/Grammar in focus

Redaktörer/Editors: Lars-Olof Delsing, Cecilia Falk, Gunlög Josefsson &  
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Omslag/Cover: Lars Emilsson, Malmö

Översättning av förord/Translation of foreword: Alan Crozier, Skatteberga

Foto/Photo: Kennet Ruona, Lund

Porträtt/Portrait: Siri Ekberg, Lund

ISBN 91-631-4570-7

Institutionen för nordiska språk, Lunds universitet, Lund

<http://www.nordlund.lu.se>

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Wallin & Dalholm, Lund 2003

# Syncretism and double agreement with Icelandic nominative objects

Carson T. Schütze

## 1. Introduction: A restriction on nominative objects

Icelandic is (in)famous for its quirky case constructions, the most studied of which is the set of verbs that take Dat(ive) subjects and Nom(inative) objects (henceforth “Dat-Nom” verbs). These include psychological predicates (1), as well as the passives of ditransitives (2a). A long literature (Andrews 1976, Thráinsson 1979, Zaenen, Maling and Thráinsson 1985, Sigurðsson 1989, i.a.) has established that in such sentences the Dat DP indeed occupies the structural subject position, according to at least a dozen diagnostics. See Jónsson 1996 for a summary, and introduction of important new tests. The only subject-like property that tracks the Nom DP rather than the Dat DP in such sentences is agreement: the verb can never agree with a Dat subject, and generally must agree with a Nom object (2b). Aside from that, the Nom in sentences like (1) and (2) behaves like a direct object: again, see Jónsson 1996 for diagnostics. In clauses with no Nom argument, the finite verb must appear in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular form (3).

- (1) Henni höfðu leiðst þeir.  
her(D) had-3pl bored.at they(N)  
‘She had found them boring.’ (Sigurðsson 2000: 87)
- (2) a. Henni voru gefnir hattarnir.  
her(D) were-3pl given the-hats(N)  
‘She was given the hats.’  
b. \*Henni var gefið hattarnir.  
her(D) was-3sg given the-hats(N) (Sigurðsson 1996: 27)
- (3) Mig hefur/\*hef/\*hafa vantað mýs.  
me(A) has-3sg/\*1sg/\*3pl lacked mice(A)  
‘I have lacked mice.’

This much has already caused plenty of anguish for syntacticians, but there is a further curious restriction on Dat-Nom sentences, which will be the focus of this paper: as observed by Sigurðsson (1990–1991), Dat-Nom sentences are

generally ungrammatical if the Nom object is 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> person (4). Hereafter I refer to this fact as the “3p restriction.” (See below for vital qualifications.)<sup>1</sup>

- (4) a. \*Henni líkaðir þú.  
her(D) liked-2sg you-sg(N)  
(‘She liked you.’)  
b. \*Henni líkuðum við.  
her(D) liked-1pl we(N)  
(‘She liked us.’)

No such restriction holds of canonical Acc(usative) objects in Icelandic (unsurprisingly), but also, there is no such restriction for quirky-subject verbs whose object is in a case other than Nom. The latter fact implies that the 3p restriction in Dat-Nom clauses cannot be attributed simply to the presence of a quirky subject; rather, relevant must be the conjunction of the subject being Dat and the object being Nom.

Further evidence that the Nom case of the object is crucial to the 3p restriction can be found in Faroese (Barnes 1986, Platzack 1987), which has quirky subject constructions that are quite similar to those in Icelandic, but differ crucially in that where Icelandic has Nom objects, Faroese has Acc objects:

- (5) Honum nýtist fleiri bókahillar heima hjá sær.  
him(D) needs-3sg more bookshelves(A) at-home with self  
‘He needs more bookshelves in his home.’ (Barnes 1986: 19)

Those Acc objects never trigger any sort of agreement on the finite verb, and they are not subject to any person restrictions. On an analysis such as that in Schütze 1997, in which both the object Nom in Icelandic and the object Acc in Faroese Dat-subject constructions are argued to be structural cases (they are not  $\theta$ -related, lexical, quirky, or inherent), we can further conclude that the 3p restriction in Icelandic depends not just on the object getting structural case, but specifically on it being marked Nom (as opposed to Acc).

One additional piece of confirmation of the very narrow conditions that trigger the 3p restriction comes from ditransitive verbs whose active case pattern is Nom-Dat-Acc. A subset of these allow passivization in two different ways, with either the goal or the theme becoming the subject; the resulting case patterns are Dat-Nom and Nom-Dat, respectively. While the former shows the 3p restriction on the Nom theme (6a) (cf. (2)), the latter does not (6b).

<sup>1</sup> Hrafnbjargarson (2001) reports an apparently contradictory generalization, namely that in Dat-Nom constructions, 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> person Nom objects are always grammatical with 3sg verbal agreement. Unfortunately, the only examples used to illustrate this involve a Dat-subject verb that takes a small clause complement rather than a DP object. The former, like an infinitival complement (cf. footnote 2), behaves differently from the latter.

- (6) a. \*Henni voruð sýndir/sýndar þið.  
 her(D) were-2pl shown(m/f) you-pl(N)  
 ('She was shown you.')
- b. Þið voruð sýndir/sýndar henni.  
 you-pl(N) were-2pl shown(m/f) her(D)  
 'You were shown to her.'
- (Sigurðsson 1996: 32)

This shows that the 3p restriction cannot possibly be stated just in terms of  $\theta$ -roles; it must refer to the surface object position.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Previous accounts

Several accounts of the 3p restriction have been proposed within the Minimalist framework (Taraldsen 1995, D'Alessandro 2002, Sigurðsson 2000, i.a.). Instead of describing any in detail, I present a bare-bones version that embodies their general spirit. They have generally attributed the 3p restriction to the notion that person agreement has somehow been consumed from Infl by virtue of the presence of the Dat subject, while number agreement has not. Reasons for this vary, e.g., the suggestion that AgrS is split into PersonPhrase and NumberPhrase, with the former higher than the latter, so that the Dat, by virtue of being a subject, occupies Spec-PersonP (the EPP position) but leaves open Spec-NumberP. But this approach has a basic problem in the context of the realization (Chomsky 1995, chapter 4) that  $\phi$ -features of DPs, unlike  $\phi$ -features of Infl, are interpretable and therefore do not require checking. The approach predicts that Infl will be unable to agree in person with a 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup>

<sup>2</sup> One more bit of evidence for the importance of the object position comes from an ECM-like construction, illustrated in (i):

- (i) Okkur virtist/virtust þeir hafa verið gáfaðir.  
 us(D) seemed-3sg/3pl they(N) to-have been intelligent  
 'We perceived them to have been intelligent.'
- (Sigurðsson 2000: 99)

When the downstairs Nom subject is 3<sup>rd</sup> person, the upstairs verb (whose subject is Dat) can agree with it, but this agreement is not obligatory, unlike the situation with an upstairs Nom object, cf. (2). Tellingly, agreement becomes impossible if the downstairs subject is 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> person; however, the sentence is still grammatical if the matrix verb is 3sg:

- (ii) Henni þótti/\*þóttir þú vera dugleg.  
 her(D) thought-3sg/\*2sg you-sg(N) to-be industrious  
 'She thought that you were industrious.'
- (Sigurðsson 1996: 36)

I conclude that this construction in principle allows the downstairs Nom subject to behave as if it has raised to an upstairs object position (e.g., Spec-AgrOP) or not, but when such raising would result in a violation of the 3p restriction, it is excluded, and (longer distance) agreement is unavailable. In Schütze 1997 I argue that the unraised variant is possible because Nom case and (phonologically null) agreement are in fact being checked internal to the embedded infinitival clause; since the Nom DP is a subject in its own clause, there is no person restriction constraining it there.

person Nom object (given that Infl has used up its person agreement), but that such an object should be grammatical anyway with default agreement or just number agreement, since the person features of the Nom DP require no checking by Infl.<sup>3</sup> This prediction is exactly backwards: 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> person Nom objects are never possible with a verb that is unambiguously 3sg or 3pl, but as we shall see in the next section, they are (sometimes) possible with verbs that agree with them in person as well as number.

Some analyses (e.g. Boeckx 2000) also suggest that the Icelandic facts are parallel to phenomena in Romance, especially impersonal *si/se* constructions; I focus on Italian, as do Taraldsen and D'Alessandro. They observe that in this construction, agreement with a 3<sup>rd</sup> person object is possible, often preferred (Salvi 1991), while agreement with a 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> person object is impossible (7). Problematically, however, 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> person clitic objects *are* possible when the verb is in the nonagreeing 3sg form (8), unlike in Icelandic. D'Alessandro claims that (7) vs. (8) corresponds to a difference in the case of the object, Nom vs. Acc, and therefore that (8) represents an irrelevant construction not attested in Icelandic. (In fact it would be like Faroese.) Unfortunately, since there are no distinct Nom clitics in Italian, there is no way to verify this claim.<sup>4</sup>

(7) In televisione si {vedono loro / \*vedi tu}.  
 on TV SI see-3pl they(N/A) / see-2sg you-sg(N)  
 'People see them on TV.' (D'Alessandro 2002)

(8) In televisione {mi/ti/lo/la} si vede.  
 on TV {me/you-sg/him/her} SI sees-3sg  
 'People see me/you/him/her on TV.'

A second problem in trying to draw a parallel between Italian and Icelandic is that Italian has another construction that is much more similar to Icelandic Dat-Nom verbs, namely Psych predicates. These have Dat subjects and Nom objects, according to D'Alessandro's analysis, but unlike in Icelandic they are fine with 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> person Nom objects,<sup>5</sup> and the verb unambiguously agrees in person as well as number with the object.

(9) a. Gli piacete voi.  
 him(D) please-2pl you-pl(N)  
 'He likes you.' (D'Alessandro 2002)  
 b. Mi piaci.  
 me(D) please-2sg  
 'I like you.'

<sup>3</sup> Anagnostopoulou (2003) and Béjar and Rezac (to appear) avoid this problem by effectively requiring that interpretable features sometimes *do* have to enter Agree relations.

<sup>4</sup> Strong pronouns instead of the clitics in (8) are ungrammatical regardless of whether they are Nom or Acc, breaking the potential parallel with Faroese.

<sup>5</sup> Contra Anagnostopoulou (2003: 308), citing David Pesetsky (p.c.).

### 3. Analysis: Double agreement and syncretism

In contrast to the approaches just discussed, I suggest that the 3p restriction in Icelandic is the result of the following requirement on verbs in Icelandic:

(10) The verb must 1) agree with the subject, AND 2) agree with the Nom DP (if any).

In canonical Nom-Acc clauses these two requirements of course do not conflict since they pick out the same DP, and in clauses with no Nom DP, clause 2) has no effect. In Dat-Nom clauses, however, (10) calls for the verb to agree both with the Dat subject and with the Nom object. Descriptively, we know that Dat subjects cannot actually have their  $\phi$ -features copied onto the verb; instead, the attempt to agree with a quirky subject results in a 3sg verb form, often analyzed as a default. Thus, the result of trying to agree with the subject of a Dat-Nom clause is that the verb should be 3sg. The result of trying to agree with the Nom DP, I claim, is that the verb should bear the  $\phi$ -features of that DP (including person as well as number); that is, there is nothing impoverished about this (object) agreement. The consequence of these two requirements is that in general the verb is required to be in two different forms; to the extent that the Spell-Out branch has no way to satisfy both requirements, there can be no valid output, so the derivation crashes at PF. This explains the badness of (4).

However, if the inflectional paradigm happens to make it possible for the two requirements of (10) to be met by a single phonological form, the derivation will not crash. Thus, Dat-Nom clauses are grammatical just in case there is a single verb form that both looks like it agrees with the subject and looks like it agrees with the object.<sup>6</sup>

This proposal was inspired by the detailed survey of agreement judgements conducted by Sigurðsson (1990–1991, 1996), who observed the following descriptive generalization: “Many speakers seem to accept [1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> person] nominative objects in so far as they can be interpreted such that they both do and do not control agreement.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, (11c and d) are essentially fine because all three singular forms of this verb are syncretic; (11a) is completely out because the 1pl form sounds nothing like the 3sg form; (11b) is

<sup>6</sup> As given, this analysis predicts that the 3p restriction should not hold in nonfinite clauses, because infinitives in Icelandic show no inflection. As this paper was going to press I received Sigurðsson (in press), where it is reported that 1st/2nd person Nom objects in infinitival clauses are clearly better than in finite clauses but not perfect. Further investigation is called for.

<sup>7</sup> Thus, Boeckx’s (2000: 358) wording is misleading when he claims that “if the [nominative] object is first or second person, only number, not person, agreement obtains.” On the other hand, later he asserts that “no matter which agreement pattern is chosen, sentences involving a Quirky 3<sup>rd</sup> person [subject] and a 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> person nominative ‘object’ are hopelessly bad” (p. 367); this is clearly false.



marginally possible, according to Sigurðsson, because the 2pl verb form sounds very similar to the 3sg form. This generalization plays no role in Sigurðsson's analysis, however. My proposal is that Sigurðsson's generalization *is* the explanation for the behaviour of Nom objects.

- (11) a. \*Henni leiddumst við. bored.at-3sg = leiddist  
 her(D) bored.at-1pl we(N)  
 b. ?Henni leiddust þið.  
 her(D) bored.at-2pl you-pl(N)  
 c. (?)Henni leiddist ég.  
 her(D) bored.at-1sg I(N)  
 d. (?)Henni leiddist þú.  
 her(D) bored.at-2sg you-sg(N)

#### 4. Syncretism and ineffability

From a perspective such as Distributed Morphology (Halle and Marantz 1993), I am suggesting that the 3p restriction is an instance of ineffability where the morphology (specifically, the process of realizing the syntactic structure with vocabulary items) can filter out an otherwise valid structure. On my view the Icelandic facts can be assimilated to many of the known cases of ineffability, which involve conflicting requirements on a surface form.

The best-known example involves German free relatives (Groos and van Riemsdijk 1981). In German, a free relative is usually ungrammatical if the case assigned to the *wh*-phrase in the embedded clause differs from the case that would be assigned to a DP in the matrix position of the whole free relative; in (12a) the cases are Nom and Acc, respectively. However, if the forms of the *wh*-words appropriate to these positions happen to be syncretic, the sentence turns out to be grammatical (12b).<sup>8</sup>

- (12) a. \*Ich zerstöre, wer/wen mich ärgert.  
 I destroy who(N)/who(A) me upsets  
 ('I destroy who upsets me.')
- b. Ich zerstöre, was mich ärgert.  
 I destroy what(N/A) me upsets  
 'I destroy what upsets me.'

Sauerland (1996) offers an analysis consistent with the spirit of my approach but differing somewhat in the details. He suggests that free relatives involve two distinct (adjacent) positions where *wh*-words are generated, one in Spec-CP of the relative clause and the other heading the DP that contains the relative clause. A rule in the Spell-Out branch deletes one of the adjacent *wh*-words just in case they are identical in form, deriving (12b) from *Ich zerstöre was*,

<sup>8</sup>The facts are more complex than this description suggests; see Vogel 2002.

*was mich ärgert*. What Sauerland does not make explicit is how to ensure that the derivation will crash if this rule cannot apply due to lack of identity. (For OT-based approaches, see Trommer 2002 and Vogel 2002.)

In the case of Icelandic verbs, it would be harder to find syntactic motivation for claiming that there are two independent verb positions involved. I suggest the following (sketchy) alternative that could cover both Icelandic agreement and case matching effects. Suppose that, in situations that will need to be delimited, the syntax can specify conflicting sets of feature values on some node, which are kept distinct because they cannot be fully unified. Then Spell-Out must interpret such a node, with two sets of features where normally one would be expected, by applying Vocabulary Insertion as usual to each of those feature sets independently, and then comparing the results: if the outputs are phonologically identical, that form is employed and the derivation proceeds; otherwise, it crashes at this point.<sup>9</sup>

## 5. Final remarks

The major question begged by this paper is of course *why* the grammar of Icelandic should include (10), a question I cannot fully answer (see Rezac 2000 for some ideas). I assume that (10) might reduce to one setting of the parameter that distinguishes Icelandic from Faroese with respect to the case pattern in quirky-subject clauses (cf. (1) vs. (5)). If Nom case and verbal agreement are two sides of the same coin, we would not want to state one in terms of prior determination of the other, as (10) does. I suggest that the requirement in Icelandic is actually that Tense must try to establish an agreement relationship with a non-quirky DP, if the closest DP, in its own specifier (the subject), is quirky. In Faroese, by contrast, Tense never looks beyond its own specifier for something to agree with, and as a result a non-quirky DP gets Acc case from a lower functional head.

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<sup>9</sup> Herein lies the solution to a potential problem that the astute reader may have noticed: given what I have said so far, 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural Nom objects should be generally banned for the same reason that 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> person ones are. The solution lies in ensuring that 3pl Nom objects do not lead to two separate sets of features being specified on the verb, which is possible if a quirky subject yields a 3<sup>rd</sup> person agreement feature, but no number feature. This seems reasonable if we think of quirky subjects as similar to PP subjects: there is no way they can encode number distinctions, so they trigger no value of Infl's number feature, but they definitely do represent a subject that is not 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> person, and are distinct from the total absence of a subject. Thus, 3pl features can unify with the features associated with a quirky subject, but features of a 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> person Nom object cannot, so only the latter will trigger the establishment of a second matrix of agreement features on the verb, hence the need for two separate Vocabulary Insertion operations and the potential for the results to conflict.

### Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to Ivano Caponigro for his native speaker intuitions and help with the Italian data. Standard disclaimers apply. This work was supported by a UCLA Academic Senate grant.

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