

# THE QUIRKY CASE OF QUIRKY CASE: UNDERSTANDING DATIVE SUBJECTS IN ICELANDIC

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## INTRODUCTION

Grammatical case is a structural relation where a DP, the dependent, is marked for its grammatical relation to the head, the verb. One language which has contributed significantly to linguists' understanding of case is Icelandic. Though most Icelandic subjects are marked using nominative case, so-called 'quirky' subjects are marked using a non-nominative case. Dative subjects have received significant attention in the literature. This project aims to provide an overview of the features of dative subjects in Icelandic and outline past analyses of these arguments, assessing their strengths and weaknesses from a Minimalist framework. Ultimately, I will outline several limitations of using  $\theta$ -roles as a framework for analyzing quirky case and follow Wood (2015) and Wood and Sigurðsson (2014) (as well as Cuervo's (2003) work on Spanish dative subjects) in arguing that dative subjects are best analyzed as applied arguments introduced in spec-AppI before moving to the subject position spec-TP, which explains their subject-like properties. I will argue for the importance of accounting for grammaticalization and historical processes in our models of syntax, using current and historical changes in Icelandic and its relatives. Finally, I will compare Icelandic with other languages with oblique subjects, contrasting it with languages in which subject case marking varies with tense, aspect, and/or volitivity and/or which may have a lower final position than spec-TP.

## OVERVIEW OF DATIVE SUBJECTS IN ICELANDIC

Before launching into an analysis of dative subjects, it is important to first establish their key properties. In Icelandic, dative can appear in a wide variety of positions and fulfill a wide variety of functions. That dative subjects are really subjects (that is, occupying the subject position of spec-TP) has been amply demonstrated by the literature, which has shown that dative subjects pass an array of subjecthood tests, some of which are shown below.

- a. Reflexive Binding (Sigurðsson, 1992)  
Henni<sub>i</sub> leiðist bókin<sub>i</sub> sin<sub>i</sub>  
her.DAT<sub>i</sub> bores book.NOM self's.NOM<sub>i</sub>  
'She finds her own book boring.'
- b. Subject-verb Inversion (Andrews, 1982)  
Hefur henni alltaf þótt Ólafur leðinlegur?  
has she.DAT always thought Olaf.NOM boring.NOM  
'Has she always considered Olaf boring?'
- c. Ellipsis (Wunderlich, 2003)  
Hann segist vera duglegur, en \_\_\_ finnst verkefnið of þungt  
he.NOM claims be diligent but (he.DAT) finds the homework too hard  
'He claims to be diligent but finds the homework too hard.'
- d. Raising (Sigurðsson, 1992)  
Henni virðist [t hafa leiðst bókin]  
she.DAT seems [t have bored book]  
'She seems to have found the book boring.'

Though quirky dative subjects pass a number of subject tests, they lack a distinctive feature of subjects – the ability to trigger verb agreement. When no object is present, as in (2a), default agreement occurs. However, when a nominative object is present, as in (2b), the verb agrees in number with the nominative argument.

- (2) a. Þeim var hjálpað (Sigurðsson, 1992)  
they was.3SG helped  
'They were helped.'
- b. Henni leddust þeir (Taraldson, 1995)  
she.DAT bored.3PL they.NOM  
'She was bored with them.'

Constructions with a dative subject and nominative object can be symmetrical, as in (3a-b), or asymmetrical, as in (3c-d). Symmetrical constructions allow either the dative or nominative argument to occupy subject position, while asymmetrical constructions only allow the dative argument to occupy subject position.

- (3) a. Mér hafa alltaf nægt tvennir skór. (Wood & Sigurðsson, 2014)  
me.DAT have.3PL always sufficed two.pairs shoes.NOM  
'I have always made do with two pairs of shoes.'
- b. Tvennir skór hafa alltaf nægt mér.  
two.pairs shoes.NOM have.3PL always sufficed me.DAT  
'I have always made do with two pairs of shoes.'
- c. Mér hefur aldrei líkað svona dónaskapur  
me.DAT has never liked such rudeness.NOM  
'I have never liked such rudeness.'
- d. \*Svona dónaskapur hefur aldrei líkað mér  
such rudeness.NOM has never liked me.DAT  
'I have never liked such rudeness.'

## DATIVE SUBJECTS AND THEMATIC ROLES

Many commentators (ZMT, 1985; Smith, 1997) have observed that there is a relationship between  $\theta$ -roles and dative case assignment. They note that dative subjects are frequently associated with experiencer semantics, as in the examples in (4):

- (4) a. Mér grömdust þessi umm æli (Maling & Jónsson, 1995)  
me.DAT angered these remarks  
'I was angry at these remarks.'
- b. Mér líkar nýi vinnumaðurinn vel  
me.DAT likes new.the.workman.NOM well  
'I like the new workman.'

Under this analysis, objects are assigned nominative case either due to their thematic role as causers or as a default case. However, this analysis is limited by the fact that the relationship between  $\theta$ -roles and case is more tenuous than one might expect if one was wholly responsible for the other:

- (5) Haraldur hræðist hunda (Thráinsson, 2007)  
Harold.NOM fears dogs.ACC  
'Harold fears dogs.'

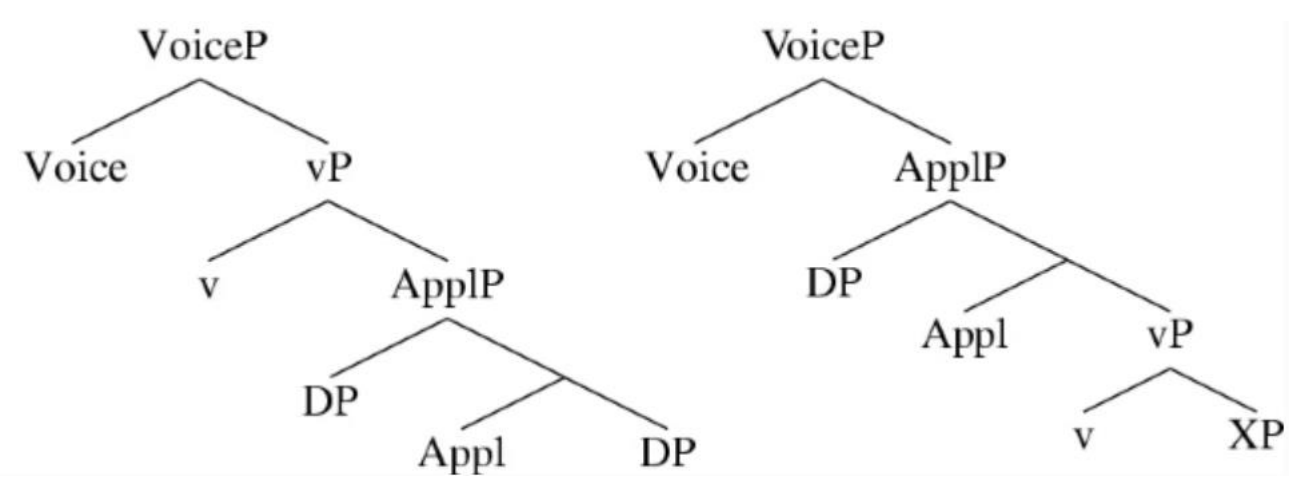
Assuming that  $\theta$ -grids are stored in the lexical entry of a verb may create further problems when semantics are compositional. Adjectival datives in Icelandic, an example of which is shown in (6), are able to take on a centre of evaluation meaning, but require compositional semantics to establish that evaluation is possible (Wood & Sigurðsson, 2022).

- (6) a. Hún var okkur \*(góður) kennari (Wood & Sigurðsson, 2022)  
she was us.DAT good teacher  
'She was a good teacher to us.'

Finally, this analysis must either rely on multiple underlying structures or contend with locality issues to explain why symmetric dative-nominative constructions would allow the nominative argument to occupy subject position.

## DATIVES AS APPLICATIVES

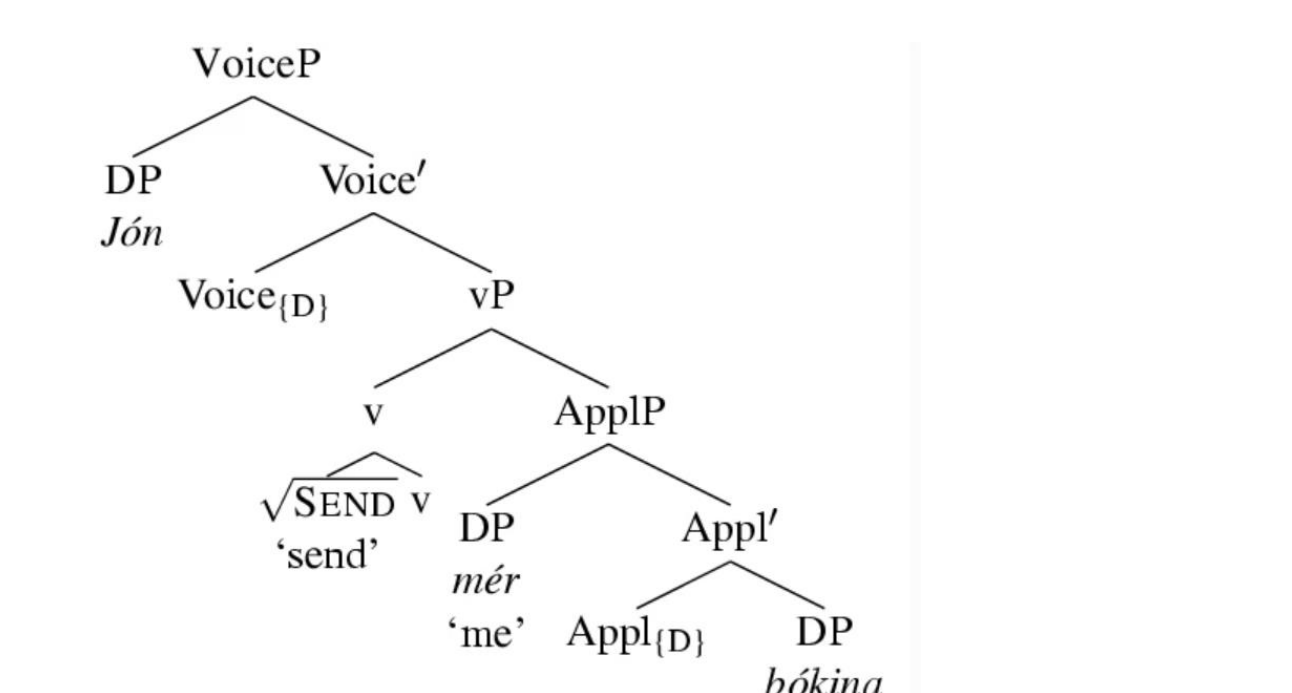
An alternative approach to dative subjects is to analyze them as applied arguments. Applicatives are a construction used to introduce a wide variety of non-core arguments. Pykkänen (2002, 2008) famously proposed two attachment heights for applicatives, shown below:

- (7)  (Wood, 2015)

Wood (2015) argues that Icelandic does not have high applicatives, due to restrictions on free datives:

- (8) Bjartur ýtti (\*Önnu) bílnum inn í skúrin  
Bjartur pushed (\*Anna.DAT) the.car.DAT into the.garage  
'Bjartur pushed the car into the garage for Anna'

However, Icelandic can introduce applied arguments in spec-AppI of a low applicative.

- (9) a. Jón sendi mér bókina (Wood, 2015)  
John.NOM sent me.DAT the.book.ACC  
b.  (Wood, 2015)

If Appl obligatorily marks its specifier with dative case, this can explain why dative case is retained even after movement, or passivization in the case of indirect objects of ditransitives. Nominative case can be assigned by default.

## RELATED CONSTRUCTIONS

The following syntactic constructions are other ways to arrive at dative-nominative constructions.

- (10) Passivized Ditransitives (Falk, 1990)  
Ólafi var gefin bókin  
Olaf.DAT was given the.book.NOM  
'Olaf was given the book.'
- (11) –st constructions (Wood, 2015)  
Honum fyrirgáfuðust allir glæpimir  
him.DAT forgave.3PL-ST all the.crimes.NOM  
'He got forgiven all his crimes.'

## FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Dative sickness is an interesting phenomenon where accusative experiencer subjects (12a) become dative (12b) in some dialects.

- (12) a. Mig langar að fara (Smith, 1997)  
me.ACC long to go  
'I long to go.'
- b. Mér langar að fara (Smith, 1997)  
me.DAT long to go  
'I long to go.'

This suggests that the connection between experiencer semantics and dative case is important. Barðdal (2011) notes that this has changed over time, with Old Norse dative case tied to "happenance" events as well as experiencers.

Sigurðsson (2003) points out that for a child learning Icelandic, learning dative case is valuable because it serves not only a grammatical function but a social one, signalling their belonging to a linguistic group.

## DATIVE SUBJECTS CROSS-LINGUISTICALLY

Although Icelandic is well-known for its oblique subjects, it is not the only language to make use of them. Many South Asian languages use frequent non-nominative marking on subjects. Often, this is with psych-verbs, as seen in (13):

- (13) a. Tamil (Asher, 1985)  
ava[ukku] tampiye piṭikkaatu  
3SG.F.DAT younger.brother.ACC like-FUT-NEG  
'She doesn't like little brother.'
- b. Malayalam (Mohanani, 1982)  
enikkə weeḍṇiccu  
I-DAT felt.pain  
'I felt pain.'
- c. Hindi (Mohanani, 1994)  
tuṣaar-ko cuhee-se qar lagtaa hai  
Tushar-DAT mouse-INSTR fear.NOM struck-IMPERF be-PROF  
'Tushar is afraid of mice.'

However, oblique subjects in these languages are also often triggered by tense, aspect, or volitivity. For example, Sinhala marks verbs for volitivity, with involitive verbs taking an oblique subject:

- (14) a. lal natəwə. (Chou & Hettiarachchi, 2016)  
Lal.NOM dance.VOL  
'Lal (actively/voluntarily) dances.'
- b. lal-ṭə nətəwə  
Lal-DAT dance.INVOL  
'Lal (involuntarily) dances.'

Chou and Hettiarachchi (2016) argue that these involitive subjects are in a lower position than volitive subjects, based on quantifier scope.

- (15) a. lamai hēməkəna-mə nətəwə nəhə  
children all.NOM-EMP danced.VOL not  
'All children did not (voluntarily) dance.'  
'Not all children (voluntarily) danced.'
- b. lamai hēməkəna-ṭə-mə nətəwə nəhə  
children all-DAT-EMP danced.INVOL not  
'# All children did not (involuntarily) danced.'  
'Not all children (involuntarily) danced.'

These findings suggest that there are different kinds of dative subjects cross-linguistically: they can be associated with different verbal morphology and end up in different positions than in Icelandic.

## CONCLUSION

Quirky case marking allows linguists an opportunity to investigate case by teasing apart abstract and morphological case,  $\theta$ -roles and licensing. I argue that dative case is the result of dative subjects being generated in spec-AppI, where they are assigned case, before moving to spec-TP to act as subjects, explaining their subjectlike behaviour. Though  $\theta$ -roles alone are not sufficient to explain the syntax of dative-nominative constructions or to explain the behaviour of all experiencer subjects, phenomena like dative sickness provide evidence that the link between experiencer semantics and dative marking is important. Dative subjects are not unique to Icelandic, and I recommend that further research be focused on cross-linguistic, historical, and social variation in dative subjects.

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