Flyktförsök

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Accusative and Dative Case of Objects of some Transitive Verbs in Icelandic and the Semantic Distinction between them

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0. Introduction

It is not commonly known that Icelandic verbs can assign more than one case to their objects. I have noticed three main types of this kind of case assigning (Barðdal 1992b) which I will enlist in this paper.

I will present data that sheds new light on the role of accusative and dative case (in relation to one another) of objects of Icelandic transitive verbs. The differences between using accusative or dative case are mainly of three types, which will, each and every one, be presented in sections 1, 2 and 3 below. The data has been collected from various grammatical litterature, including dictionaries and grammar books that enlist transitive verbs in Icelandic, all to be found in the References. Some of the data I have collected during the last couple of years. That is mainly the data presented in section 3.

1.

According to "prescriptive grammar of Icelandic" a verb like keyra (drive) assigns accusative case to its object, as illustrated in (1) below1:

(1) Maria keyrði Jón(acc.) heim.
    Mary drove John home

However, it is noticeable that many speakers of Icelandic use dative case with this verb:

1 When I say "prescriptive grammar" I am talking about the information you get when you look up in a dictionary, and according to dictionaries the verb keyra assigns accusative case.
(2) Maria keyrði Jóni(acc.) heim.

This has been looked at as "wrong" and not analyzed any further. I have made the hypothesis (Barðdal 1992b) that this case assigning can either be exemplary in case assignment of similar verbs in Icelandic like klóra (scratch) or in case assignment of certain prepositions like með (with). This is illustrated in (3), (4) and (5) below:

(3) a. Maria klóraði Jón(acc.) í andlitið.
   Mary scratched John in the face

b. Maria klóraði Jóni(dat.) á bakinu.
   Mary scratched John on the back

The difference between (3)a and (3)b is that in the latter example John presumably asks Mary to scratch him on the back, because he itches. But in the former example Mary attacks John and causes him thereby to get a scratch in his face. John is the victim. He gets scratched whether he likes it or not and there is nothing he can do about it.

(4) a. Anna for ùt að ganga með manninum(dat.).
   Ann took a walk with the man

b. Anna for ùt að ganga með maninn(acc.).
   Ann took the man for a walk

(5) a. £Anna for ùt að ganga með hundinum(dat.), ²
   Ann took a walk with the dog

b. Anna for ùt að ganga með hundinn(acc.).
   Ann walked the dog

² The pound-symbol is here used instead of the star to illustrate that the sentence is not ungrammatical in itself, but the situation has to be pretty absurd for the sentence to be OK.
The difference between (4)a and (4)b is that in the former example, where Anna takes a walk with the man, in dative case the man is her equal, but in the latter example, where Anna takes the man for a walk, in accusative case the man is not her equal, he could be handicapped or perhaps very old. At least he is in the need of some assistance, he is not capable of taking a walk by himself. To the most extreme one could understand (4)b as if Anna "walked the man", that she led him in a leash all over. The difference in (5)a and (5)b is somewhat similiar. One understands (5)b as Anna walked the dog but (5)a as if Anna and the dog were equals, they took a walk together, the weather was nice, they talked about everything and nothing, and so forth.

From these examples it is clear that the use of accusative case has a different meaning from the use of dative case. In (3), (4) and (5) the using of accusative case means that the object has somewhat lower status, it is not in the position of deciding itself: John when he is scratched, the man who is taken for a walk and the dog that is walked; the use of dative case indicates on the other hand that the object in question is the speaker's equal: John that asks for his back to be scratched, the man that goes for a walk with Anna, we therefore have the "ungrammaticality" or the "absurdness" of (5)a.; dogs are not usually asked out for a walk, in the same sense we ask other people to join us.

This could therefore explain the use of dative case with verbs like keyra. The speaker has the differences illustrated above in his "grammatical system" and one could claim that he has therefore "reanalyzed" the case assignment of those verbs, that by using accusative case, sentences like (1) above sound as if John was a parcel, a horse, or a dog, as if John was taken, put in the car and transferred perhaps by force to his house.
This "reanalyzing hypothesis" of course only counts for the use of dative case of those speakers of Icelandic that use dative case with these verbs and it means that they are marking the dative case more than the others that use the "correct" accusative case. The users of accusative case do not see this difference. The distinction is however hardly that great that one can talk about different theta-role assignment here. When a brief look is taken at both the accusative and the dative object it seems that both have been assigned the role of THEME. However, it could be possible that the accusative object has been assigned the role of THEME and the dative object has been assigned the role of BENEFACTIVE, because it seems somewhat obvious that John in (1) above benefits from being driven home, as well as he is "undergoing the action expressed by the predicate" (Haegeman 1991:41). But the distinction here is not very clear and I suppose it is possible to find arguments for both analyses, so I am not going to dwell on that any further.

This was the first type mentioned above of a verb being able to assign more than one case to its object. Let us now turn to the second one.

2.

Some verbs in Icelandic can assign both accusative and dative case (not at the same time of course) to their objects, according to "prescriptive grammar" and all speakers of Icelandic agree on this. This is illustrated in (6) to (9) below:

(6) a. Kristín þvoði handklæðið(acc.).
    Christine washed the towel

    b. Kristín þvoði barninu(dat.).
    Christine washed the baby
(7) a. Kristín þurkaði handklæðið(acc.).
Christine dried the towel
b. Kristín þurkaði barnínunu(dat.).
Christine dried the baby

(8) a. Kristín strauk handlegginn(acc.) á sér.
Christine stroked her arm
b. Kristín strauk kettinum(dat.).
Christine stroked the cat

(9) a. Kristín greiddi hárið(acc.).
Christine combed the hair
b. Kristín greiddi Jóni(dat.).
Christine combed John

From these examples it is clear that the verbs in (6) to (9) can assign both accusative and dative case. The action expressed by the verb is the same, in (6)a and (6)b Christine washes the towel and the baby in the same sense, so both will be clean, the only difference is that the baby is alive but the towel is not. And this same difference is to be found in all the other paired examples in (7) to (9). One can however see a similarity between this "case-pattern" here and the "case-pattern" illustrated in section 1., in the differences of using the accusative and dative case with the verb *keyra*. Accusative is here used for "dead things" and dative is used for "humans". This can not be denied inspite of the fact that the feature [+/- human] is not a distinctive feature in the theta-role assignment (Magnússon 1986). It seems, however, that in Icelandic this distinction is made, and it is made through the case assignment of the verb, perhaps without the verb assigning different theta-roles. One could perhaps claim that this difference found here can also be an examplary to the "new case assignment pattern" of the verb *keyra*.

Let us now turn to the third type mentioned above of verbs assigning accusative or dative case to their object.
3.

These are verbs like *moka* (shovel), *sópa* (sweep), *blanda* (mix), *smyrja* (smear, spread), *hvísla* (whisper), *hlaða* (pile) and *raka* (rake). This type will be given most space in this paper since it is somewhat different from the others. There definitely seems to be another rule behind the assignment of dative case here than in the examples above. Let us look at (10) to (15):

(10) a. *Hann mokar snjó*(acc.).
He shovels the snow

b. *Hann mokar snjónum*(dat.) burt.
He shovels the snow away

(11) a. *Hann sópar gólfíð*(acc.).
He sweeps the floor

b. *Hann sópar ruslinu*(dat.) saman.
He sweeps the garbage together

(12) a. *Hann blandar djús*(acc.).
He mixes the juice

b. *Hann blandar vatninu*(dat.) saman við djúsið.
He mixes the water with the juice

(13) a. *Hann smyr brauðið*(acc.).
He spreads the bread

b. *Hann smyr smjörinu*(dat.) á brauðið.
He spreads the butter on the bread

(14) a. *Hann hvislar textann*(acc.).
He whispers the lines

b. *Hann hvislar textanum*(dat.) út í salinn.
He whispers the lines out in the hall

(15) a. *Hann hleður vegginn*(acc.).
He piles the wall

He piles up the bricks
The interesting thing here is that when the verb assigns dative case it is often a particle verb or a verb that has some kind of a "locative complement". This is illustrated in (16):

(16)  a  ?Hann mokar snjónum(dat.).  
      b  ?Hann sópar ruslinu(dat.).  
      c  ?Hann blandar vatninu(dat.).  
      d  ?Hann smyr smjörinu(dat.).  
      e  ?Hann hvislar textanum(dat.).  
      f  ?Hann hleður mýrsteinunum(dat.).

All the sentences in (16) are somewhat illformed. Even though I would not judge them as totally ungrammatical, but they are somehow incomplete, as if something is missing, as if the speaker has not completed the utterance. What seems to be the case here, is that the verb and the particle assign together the dative case of the object, (as indeed Chomsky (1981) has suggested and Åfarli (1985) for particle verbs) but not the verb alone. This explains why the object gets different case depending on whether the verb is a particle verb or not. This is however not the only way to explain this difference in case assigning. If we take a better look at the pairs in (10) to (15) we see that there is a slight difference in meaning. In (10)a. "he is shoveling the snow" but there is no implication of him shoveling the snow away. In (14)a. "he is whispering the lines" but in (14)b. he is whispering them "out in the hall so they can be heard there". This distinction, or a similar one, goes for all the pairs in (10) to (15). It is somehow as if the emphasis in the examples with dative object is on the motion or the movement which the verb expresses, either as the movement has more space, that is organized movement from one place to
another (the snow, the lines and the bricks) or somehow the movement is more complete, it takes place at a defined space and evolves around the object (the garbage, the bread and the water). In the examples with accusative object, on the other hand, the emphasis is merely on the action expressed by the verb. To support this "rule of movement", which seems to be the underlying factor in dative case assigning (at least of these verbs), there are a lot of verbs in Icelandic that express movement and assign dative case, as illustrated in (17):

(17)  
- boka hlutunum(dat.) áfram  (move things slowly forward)
- dreifa bréfunum(dat.)  (distribute the letters)
- skvetta vatninu(dat.)  (splash, slosh the water)
- vefja treflinum(dat.) um hálsinn  (wrap, wind the scarf around the neck)
- velta boltanum(dat.)  (roll the ball)
- varpa einhverju(dat.) af sér  (throw something off oneself)
- þjappa einhverju(dat.) saman  (compress something together)
- þrýsta einhverju(dat.) saman  (thrust, press something together)
- bylta hlutunum(dat.)  (overturn things)
- kasta boltanum(dat.)  (throw the ball)
- henda ruslinu(dat.)  (throw the garbage away)

It is of course not always the case that a verb which expresses movement assigns dative case. There are, without doubt, many verbs in Icelandic that express movement but nevertheless assign accusative case. The verb hrísta (shake), for instance, assigns accusative case to its object. But it seems, however, like the general rule is that verbs which express movement assign dative case to their objects.
The interesting thing here is that it seems that this general rule, underlying the assignment of dative case, is effecting the case-assignment of other verbs in Icelandic, which also express movement but should in fact assign accusative case. Let us take a look at the examples in (18) to (20):

(18) a. Hann bretti upp ermarnar(acc.).
He rolled up the sleeves

b. ?Hann bretti upp ermunum(dat.).

(19) a. Hann jafnaði allt(acc.) út.
He leveled everything

b. ?Hann jafnaði öllu(dat.) út.

(20) a. Hann nældi þetta(acc.) við vegginn.
He pinned this to the wall

b. ?Hann nældi þessu(dat.) við vegginn.

The examples above are all pretty commonly heard in modern Icelandic. In (21) to (25) below, I illustrate examples that I have heard and noticed especially:

(21) Hann ákvað að fram lengja dvölinni(dat.).
He decided to extend his stay

(22) Eg reytti af mér bröndurunum(dat.).
I plucked off the jokes
I told endless jokes

(23) Eg tætti af mér bröndurunum(dat.).
I ripped off the jokes
I told endless jokes

(24) Eg þarf að stokka öllu(dat.) upp.
I have to shuffle everything
I have to rearrange everything
(25) Hann keyrði út vörunum(dat.).
He drove out the deliveries
He delivered the goods

All the verbs in (21) to (25) express movement, and all assign, according to prescriptive grammar, accusative case in Icelandic. When I heard, for instance, (22) I automatically visioned the jokes flying from the lips of the speaker, all over, and landing on the floor.

From this data it should be evident that the dative case is obviously on the march, perhaps towards more markedness, because this use of the dative case is certainly marked for movement and at the same time it is on the march towards being more frequent.

It has been noted and accounted for in the litterature that dative case is "on the march" in Icelandic subjects (Svavarsdóttir 1982; Svavarsdóttir et.al. 1984) meaning that accusative quirky subjects tend to become dative quirky subjects, due to some "regularity tendency". One can certainly say the same thing about the accusative objects becoming dative objects in the cases listed above, due to a "regularity tendency", however not of the same sort. The "regularity tendency" I have discussed here is due to semantic restrictions, the dative case is reserved for objects of verbs that express motion or movement. The reason that the dative case (and nominative case) gets stronger in Icelandic subjects is claimed to be because the accusative case is reserved for objects. If that is the case, that accusative case is reserved for objects, then the dative case certainly has to strengthen itself and mark itself more clearly. The fact that transitive verbs that assign accusative case but not dative are in great majority and all transitive new verbs (loan-verbs and neologism) in

3 All the speakers I am quoting were under the age of thirty.
4 This is illustrated in the fact that accusative quirky subjects tend either to become nominative or dative.
Icelandic assign accusative case but not dative (Rögnvaldsson 1983a: 193), certainly supports these results.

4. Summary

In this paper three various types of case assignment distinctions in Icelandic have been discussed. These are distinctions between accusative and dative case assignment of various transitive verbs. These are verbs like keyra (drive) that, according to "prescriptive grammar", assign accusative case but seem to be assigning dative case within the grammar of many native speakers of Icelandic. It was suggested that the underlying rule for this dative case assignment already exists in the grammar and the examples mentioned as possible patterns were the case assignment of the verb klóra (scratch) and the preposition me> (with). It was claimed that speakers who use the "wrong", dative case feel that the use of accusative case indicates that the object is looked at as "lower in status", that it can not have a will of its own. It was even suggested that the verb possibly assigned different theta-roles, the role of THEME and BENEFACTIVE.

In section 2, another type of distinction between accusative and dative case assignment of the same verb was presented. The pattern there seemed to be rather similar to the one in section 1. Accusative case was assigned to "dead things" and dative case to "humans", in spite of the fact that the distinction "dead/alive" is not considered to affect to assignment of theta-roles. In Icelandic that distinction is obviously symbolized with different case assignment.

At last, in section 3, yet another type of difference in case assignment of the same verb was presented. The underlying rule seemed to be another than the one in section 1. and 2. It seemed clear that if the verb expressed "motion" or "movement" it more likely assigned dative
case than accusative. And, what is more interesting here is that this rule is obviously having some effect on "movement verbs" that are supposed to assign accusative case. This was correlated with the fact that accusative quirky subjects have a tendency to become either nominative or dative, in order to establish the role of accusative case as a common case for objects (Rögnvaldsson 1993b). The fact that transitive verbs that assign accusative case to their objects are in great majority in Icelandic, seems to support this analysis. In addition, most new verbs in Icelandic assign accusative case. When this is taken into consideration, it seems obvious that if the dative case is going to maintain its role as a case for objects it has to mark itself more clearly than before.

REFERENCES


