Argument Structure, Syntactic Structure and Morphological Case of the Impersonal Construction in the History of Scandinavian

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1. Introduction

In a recent paper by Anward and Swedenmark (1997) it is suggested that the loss of morphological case in the history of Swedish is due to word order taking over the role of signalizing thematic structure. I will show here that the validity of this suggestion is confirmed by the development of the impersonal construction in different dialects in Scandinavian.

In this paper I will explore one aspect of the relation between argument structure, syntactic structure and morphological case in the history of Scandinavian. I will concentrate on the so-called impersonal construction and leave out what has been called impersonal proper (Rögnvaldsson 1996: fn 2), which includes constructions as weather verbs and other constructions without an overt NP. This study will therefore only include constructions with overt NPs; (prototypically) a Theme and an Experiencer, the Experiencer being coded in another case than nominative, mostly accusative or dative:

(1)a. Porleif dreymdi enn draum og ... (Rögnvaldsson 1996:3)
   Porleif (acc.) dreamt (3p. sg.) yet a-dream (acc.) and ...
   ‘Porleifur had yet another dream and …’
   b. Braut fýsir mig nú ... (Rögnvaldsson 1996:3)
      away want (3p. sg.) I (acc.) now ...
      ‘now, I want to get away …’

(2)a. honom drømde een drøm om ena nat (Falk 1995:203)
   he (obl.) dreamt a dream during one night
   ‘he had a dream one night’
   b. mere pina bör thessom än hinom (Falk 1995:206)
      more pain deserve they (obl.) than others
      ‘they deserve more pain than the others’

\(^1\) Or, alternatively, they propose that word order has taken over the role of signalizing thematic structure because of the loss of the morphological case system.
The examples in (1) are from Old Icelandic, the examples in (2) are from Old Swedish and the examples in (3) are from Old Danish.

I will argue that the impersonal construction did not disappear in Mainland Scandinavian because the Oblique Experiencer was an object, which has hitherto been the mainstream explanation, but rather that it disappeared because the role of case has changed in the history of Mainland Scandinavian, as opposed to the development in Icelandic. The case system of Icelandic is still very much intact and the constructions discussed here are still allowed in Modern Icelandic.

2. The Data

The syntactic status of Oblique Experiencers has caused intensive debate in the last two decades where Scandinavian is concerned, and even longer in the case of English. There is a consensus in the literature that Modern Icelandic and Modern Faroese exhibit Oblique Subjects and nominative objects (see Sigurðsson 1992 on Icelandic, and the references cited there; Barnes 1986 on Faroese). Rögnvaldsson (1996) has shown beyond doubt that Oblique Experiencers of the impersonal type behave as syntactic subjects already in Old Icelandic. I have elsewhere (Barðdal 1997) compared data from all the Old Scandinavian languages and Old English, and a result of that comparison has been that the syntactic evidence in favour of the subjectionhood of Oblique Experiencers is overwhelming. This can be illustrated here with some examples of PRO-infinitives. For more data and a detailed discussion, the reader is referred to the above-mentioned works.

(4)a. Porgils kvaðst leiðast þarvistín
Porgils said (refl.) be-bored (inf.) there-stay-the
‘Porgils said that he was bored by staying there’
b. Þórður kvæðst þykja tvennir kostir til
   Þórður said (refl.) feel (inf.) two possibilities exist
   ‘Þórður said that he felt that two possibilities existed’
   (Rögnvaldsson 1996:17)

(5)a. os duger ey ther æptir langa
    us helps not that for long
    ‘it does not help us to long for that’

b. huaat hælper idher ther æptir langa
   what helps you that for long
   ‘what help is it to you to long for that’
   (Falk 1997:25)

(6)a. him burþ to liken well his lif
    he should like well his life
    ‘he should like well his life’

b. good is, quaþ Joseph, to dremen of win
   good is, said Joseph, to dream of wine
   ‘it is good to dream of wine, said Joseph’
   (Seefranz-Montag 1983: 133–134)

The examples in (4) are from Old Icelandic, the examples in (5) are from Old Swedish and the examples in (6) are from Old English.

Thereby, Old Scandinavian most presumably also has nominative objects. The examples in (4) from Old Icelandic can be used to illustrate that.

(4)a. Porgils kvæðst leiðast þarvistin
    Porgils (nom.) said (refl.) be-bored (inf.) there-stay-the (nom.)
    ‘Porgils said that he was bored by staying there’

b. Þórður kvæðst þykja tvennir kostir til
    Þórður (nom.) said (refl.) feel (inf.) two possibilities (nom.) exist
    ‘Þórður said that he felt that two possibilities existed’
    (Rögnvaldsson 1996:17)

Nominative objects are also attested in Old Swedish according to Falk (1997:40):

(7)a. tok sonenom thz forthryta
    started the-son (obl.) that (nom.) resent
    ‘the son started to resent that’
b. æn sidhan hænne kom innan hugh forbudit, tha wilde hon ...
but since she (obl.) came in mind the-ban (nom.), then wanted
she ...
‘but since she remembered the ban, she then wanted ...

Another unusual property of Modern Icelandic, not so widely known, is
the fact that some verbs, prototypically with a nominative Theme and an
Oblique Experiencer, have a choice regarding what constituent to single
out as a subject (see Bernóddusson 1982 for Icelandic and Barnes 1986 for
Faroese):

(8)a.i Honum hafði hentað petta ágætlega
him (dat.) had suited this (nom.) fine
‘This had suited him fine’
a.ii Hafði honum hentað petta ágætlega?
had him suited this fine
‘Had this suited him fine?’
a.iii Petta hafði hentað honum ágætlega
this (nom.) had suited him (dat.) fine
‘This had suited him fine’
a.iiií Hafði petta hentað honum ágætlega?
had this suited him fine
‘Had this suited him fine?’
b.i Mér hafði gagnast petta ágætlega
me (dat.) had helped this (nom.) fine
‘This had been of help to me’
b.ii Hafði mér gagnast petta ágætlega?
had me helped this fine
‘Had this been of help to me?’
b.iii Petta hafði gagnast mér ágætlega
this (nom.) had helped me (dat.) fine
‘This had been of help to me?’
b.iiií Hafði petta gagnast mér ágætlega?
had this helped me fine
‘Had this been of help to me?’
c.i Mér hafði ekki komið petta við
me (dat.) had not come this (nom.) with
‘This is none of my business’
(9) a. **Eiríki hafði sárað þessi niðurstaða**
Eiríkur (dat.sg.) had (3p.sg.) hurt this result (nom.sg.)
‘Eiríkur was hurt by this result’

b. **Hafði Eiríki sárað þessi niðurstaða?**
had (3p.sg.) Eiríkur (dat.sg.) hurt this result (nom.sg.)
‘Was Eiríkur hurt by this result?’

c. **Þessi niðurstaða hafði sárað Eiríki**
This result (nom.sg.) had (3p.sg.) hurt Eiríkur (dat.sg.)
‘This result had hurt Eiríkur’

2 Such as the verb **gefa** ‘give’:

i. Jón gaf Guðmundi bókina
Jón (nom.) gave Guðmundur (dat.) the book (acc.)
‘Jón gave the book to Guðmundur’

ii. Guðmundi var gefin bókin
Guðmundur (dat.) was given the book (nom.)
‘Guðmundur was given the book’

iii. Bókin var gefin Guðmundi,
the book (nom.) was given Guðmundur (dat.)
‘The book was given to Guðmundur’

Bernóðusson (1982:38) gives sárna ‘become hurt’ as an example of what I have here classified as b). And fylgja ‘follow, accompany’ can be used to illustrate example of type c) (based on an example in Jónsson 1994).
d. Hafði þessi niðurstaða sámað Eiríki?
Had (3p.sg.) this result (nom.sg.) hurt Eiríkur (dat.sg.)
‘Had this result hurt Eiríkur?’

(10) a. Vélinni hafa alltlf fylgt leiðbeiningar
the-machine (dat.sg.) has (3p.pl.) always accompanied
instructions (nom.pl.)
‘The machine has always come with instructions’

b. Hafa vélinni alltlaf fylgt leiðbeiningar
has (3p.pl.) the-machine (dat.sg.) always accompanied
instructions (nom.pl.)
‘Has the machine always come with instructions?’

c. Leiðbeiningarnar hafa alltlf fylgt vélinni
the-instructions (nom.pl.) have (3p.pl.) always accompanied
the-machine (dat.sg.)
‘The instructions have always come with the machine’

d. Hafa leiðbeiningarnar alltlf fylgt vélinni
have (3p.pl.) the-instructions (nom.pl.) always accompanied
the-machine (dat.sg.)
‘Have the instructions always come with the machine?’

Bernódusson (1982) illustrates that both NPs, one at the time, pass all
subjecthood tests for Modern Icelandic. The choice of subject appears to
be determined by contextual factors only. Similar data as in (8) and (9)
are also attested from older versions of Mainland Scandinavian. The ex-
amples in (11) are from Older Swedish and so is (12)b, (12)c is from Old
Danish, while (12)a is from Old Icelandic.

(11) a.i I synderheet behagade honom Rijkscantzlerens svar
especially pleased him (obl.) the-chancellor’s answer (nom.)
‘he was especially pleased by the chancellor’s answer’

a.ii at thet behagha migh mjökt bätr til a wara så her hos honom
that it (nom.) pleased me (obl.) much better to be so here with
him
‘that it pleased me much more to be here with him’

b.i Tvivels utan ahnade det honom, at här skulle …
doubt without suspected it (nom.) him (obl.), that here would
…
‘without doubt he suspected that here would …’

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b.ii Mig anar intet godt af denna riksdag
me (obl.) suspects nothing good (nom.) from this parliament
'I suspect that nothing good comes from this parliament'
(Falk 1997:176–178)

c.i thz ma än lykkes at thz bäter gaar
it (nom.) may still succeed that it better goes
'it is still possible that things will get better'

c.ii erik konunge lykkadis tha bäter³
Erik king (obl.) succeeded then better
'King Erik then succeeded better'
(Söderwall 1884–1918)

(12)a.i líkaði honum stófilla þóf þetta
liked he (dat.) badly squabble (nom.) this
'he really disliked this squabble'
(Fritzner 1896)

a.ii (...) þá líkar hon mér yfir allar þær er ek hefi fyrr sét ok heyrt
then likes she (nom.) me (dat.) over all those which I have ear-
lier seen and heard
'her I like best of all I have seen or heard earlier'
(Kristoffersen 1991:88)

b.i thz angra mik nu
it (nom.) worries/regrets me (obl.) now
'I worry/regret that now'

b.ii honom angradhe at ...
he (obl.) regretted that ...
(Söderwall 1884–1918)

³ (11)c illustrates that Sw. lykas could have an optional nominative Theme or an optional
Oblique Experciencer. Falk (1997) argues that many Experciencer constructions in Old(er)
Swedish were constructed with the Experciencer as an optional argument. I argue that the
nominative Theme can be considered optional, as well. Consider the following examples
from Modern Icelandic:
i. Mér gekk vel
   I (dat.) went well
   'it turned out well for me'

ii. Það gekk vel
   it went well
   'it turned out well'
It is worth noting that the nominative Theme, when it is a pronoun can anticipate a clausal argument, as many of the examples in this paper show, i.e., the Theme argument can also be realized as a clause.

Since the Old Mainland Scandinavian examples in (11) and (12) seem to correspond to the Modern Icelandic examples in (8) and (9) it seems natural to assume that there was a category of verbs in Old Scandinavian, as in Modern Icelandic, which had a choice regarding which constituent to single out as a subject and which to single out as an object. These are verbs with an Oblique Experiencer and a nominative Theme.4

3. The Development

Two things have happened in Mainland Scandinavian in the course of time; a) Oblique Subjects have changed their case from oblique to nominative, b) verbs alternating their syntactic structure have stabilized either with the old Oblique Subject as a nominative subject or with the old nominative Theme as a subject and the Oblique Experiencer as an object. Which of the two constructions has survived varies from dialect to dialect. In some cases, both constructions still exist in the same dialect, sometimes with a slight difference in meaning.

Various explanations have been offered for the change from impersonal to personal.5 In conformity with Vennemann (1973) Faarlund

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4 To my knowledge, this analysis was first proposed by Bernðóðsson (1982) for Old Icelandic, later by Røgnvaldsson (1996) for Old Icelandic, by Barðdal (1997) for Old Scandinavian in general, and by Allen (1995) for Old English.

5 There are reasons to believe that this change is in fact not a single change but two changes. First a general tendency of Oblique Experiencer Subjects changing their case from accusative or dative to nominative. This change is manifested as a synchronic variation between nominative and accusative/dative and is salient in the history of Icelandic (see Halldórsson 1982), the history of German (see Smith 1994), the history of Old and Middle English (see Allen 1995) and Old Scandinavian (see examples in Söderwall (1884–1918) and Kalkar (1886–1892)). The other change is not manifested as a variation, but as a
(1987) argues that this is a reflection of a change from topic-prominence to subject-prominence. Seefranz-Montag (1983, 1984) argues that the change is a demand for nominative subjects, not oblique ones. Lightfoot (1991) argues that obviously Oblique Subjects are doomed to disappear in a language which does not have morphological case, and therefore they changed. Falk (1997) argues that impersonal constructions were subjectless and that subjectlessness became ungrammatical. These are only some examples of the many shades of explanation available in the literature.

I argue that the reason for this change from impersonal to personal is to be found in the changes in the case system. Let us briefly consider the situation in Modern Icelandic; the fact is that subjects in Modern Icelandic can be morphologically marked as nominative, accusative, dative and genitive, and the same is true of objects. In such a language, morphological case can hardly be said to be used to encode syntactic relations. After the break-down of the morphological case system in Mainland Scandinavian, the only manifestation of case is pronominal variation. The pronominal variation is twofold: nominative and non-nominative. The dualism of the pronominal variation does not allow for any other interpretation than a one-to-one correspondence between case and syntactic relations. In such a system, Oblique Subjects, now only visible when the subject is a pronoun, cannot be interpreted as anything but objects. And since such an interpretation would be fundamentally wrong, Oblique Subjects are forced to change their case from oblique to nominative in order to keep their syntactic status as subjects. The representation of the change is illustrated in the following example, where i. is the older variant and ii. is the younger variant.

change from oblique to nominative, and thereby as a total loss of the impersonal construction. This change happens in Scandinavian and English after the break-down of the morphological case system. I will not speculate about the relatedness of these two changes here.

6 I ignore here the fact that the distribution of the cases over syntactic functions is not even, and that there are big differences in frequency.  

7 Sundman (1985) argues against a proposed analysis that the Oblique Experiencer was re-analysed as a subject because the morphological distinction between nominative and oblique had been neutralized in common nouns. She points out that the analysis does not hold since in the majority of cases the Oblique Experiencer was a pronoun but not a noun. The explanation proposed in this paper has the advantage that it is based on the Oblique Subject usually occurring as a pronoun.
The arguments of the verbs which could alternate their syntactic structure, were also subject to the same change in the case system. But here a choice was available for the language (or the speaker). Either the verbs in question kept the Experiencer as a subject with the subsequent change in case form from oblique to nominative, or they kept the nominative Theme as a subject and the Experiencer as an object. In some dialects both constructions exist side by side.

(14) a.i  **Jag** lyckades att ...  
I succeeded in  
'I succeeded in/managed to ...'

a.ii  **Det** lyckades att  
It succeeded that  
'It was manageable to'

b.i  **hvorudi han** ogsaa lykkedes  
in-which he also succeeded  
'he also succeeded with this'

b.ii  **det** lykkedes **ham** aldeles ...  
it succeeded him definitely  
'he definitely succeeded with this'

c.i  men se om **du** lyktes **deri**  
but see if you succeeded in-that

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8 I remind the reader that I am assuming that we are dealing with two categories of impersonal verbs; the verbs which select Oblique Subjects as dreya 'dream', which do not allow any alternation, and the verbs which allow alternation as behaga 'suit' or lika 'like'. The difference between the two is that the former does not have a nominative Theme, while the latter does.
c.ii  **det** har aldrig lykkets **nogen** før  (Modern Norwegian)
that ha never succeeded anyone before
‘no-one has succeeded in that before’

d.i  **Jag** felar en krona  (Southern Swedish)
I lack a crown

d.ii  **Det** felar **mig** en krona  (Southern Swedish)
it lacks me a crown

e.i  **Du** vil fortryde begge Dele  (Modern Danish)
you will regret both parts

e.ii  **Det** fortryder **mig** allermeest, at jeg ...  (Modern Danish)
it regrets me the-most that I ...
‘I regret most that I ...’

f.i  **Jag** ångrar **detta**  (Modern Swedish)
I regret this

f.ii  **Petta** ångrar **mig**  (Modern Icelandic)
this bothers me

The examples from Swedish are based on Falk (1997:157). The Danish examples are from Dahlerup (1923) and the Norwegian examples are from Knudsen and Sommerfelt (1937).

4. The Advantage of the Proposed Analysis
The basic advantage of the analysis presented here is twofold. First it provides a convincing explanation of the fact that Oblique Subjects disappeared in spite of the fact that they were syntactic subjects and not syntactic objects. Second the analysis also gives an explanation frame for why different Scandinavian dialects show variation in the syntactic structure of the former impersonal construction, without a basic change in the thematic or the syntactic structure, which we otherwise would have to assume.

This analysis assumes that the relation between argument structure and syntactic structure has become tighter in the history of Scandinavian, due to the loss of the morphological case system. This has not happened in Icelandic, which still allows for a variation in the syntactic structure of many impersonal verbs, due to Icelandic still allowing Oblique Subjects. In Icelandic, and Old Scandinavian, the most natural analysis for
(8)–(12) is that the thematic structure is the same, it is only the syntactic structure that differs; that a verb with this thematic structure has access to two syntactic structures. While in Modern Mainland Scandinavian it is most natural to analyse these constructions in (14) as one verb with two argument structures and subsequently two syntactic structures. This can be graphically illustrated as in (15) with a. for Icelandic and Older Scandinavian and b. for Modern Mainland Scandinavian.

(15)

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a. V
   / \ 
A1  A2
 /  \
S1  S2

b. V
   / \ 
A1  A2
 /  \
S1  S2
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References


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9 Another interpretation of the data would be that the Scandinavian languages are developing towards less optionality in word order, or towards a tighter relation between argument structure and syntactic structure (which is the basic claim of Anward and Swedenmark 1997), and that this development is a general development for all the Scandinavian languages (being a part of a bigger typological change), including Icelandic and Faroese. This development would then have two representations, a stronger variant, exemplified by Modern Mainland Scandinavian, and a weaker variant, exemplified by Modern Icelandic. This is definitely an interesting research agenda, but for the time being I will be satisfied with the claim that the loss of case in Scandinavian has resulted in a change from one argument structure, mapped on two syntactic structures, to two argument structures and their two equivalent syntactic structures.


