

The productivity of Case-Preserving Anticausatives in Icelandic

Modern Icelandic is by and large a Nom-Acc language although it also has oblique subjects which suggest a different type of alignment. In this paper we examine oblique subjects in the historical context of Icelandic, focusing on their occurrence with certain types of anticausatives, as in (1b), termed here Case-Preserving Anticausatives (CPA). Empirically, our investigation is based on independent data collection from historical sources and corpora.

(1) a. Vindurinn rak bátinn að landi.
wind.the.nom drive.3sg.past boat.the.acc to land
'The wind drove the boat ashore.'

b. Bátinn rak að landi.
boat.the.acc drive.3sg.past to land
'The boat drifted ashore.'

We show that the relationship between the causative/transitive and anticausative/intransitive variants formed in the anticausativization strategy in (1) is transparent and to some degree predictive in Modern Icelandic (cf. Sigurðsson 1989). This result contradicts a claim made by Barðdal et al. (2020) stressing the opacity of the CPA strategy (dubbed by them Oblique Anticausatives) in Modern Icelandic. Barðdal et al. (2020:421) state that the anticausative structures, as in (1b), have a metaphorical meaning, but the corresponding causative ones, as in (1a), do not. Thus, there would not be a derivational relationship between the anticausative and the causative construction synchronically, since the causative non-metaphorical structure must be older historically. We provide evidence against this view, claiming that the connection between the causative and anticausative variants must still be transparent as new instances of CPA would otherwise not be expected. We show that the relationship between the causative and anticausative variants is still productive in Modern Icelandic. Given that the case of the subject of the anticausative variant matches the case of the object of the causative/transitive variant, this further illustrates that there must be a synchronic relationship between the two.

The results suggest that CPA as an anticausativization strategy enjoys remarkable productivity in Modern Icelandic, despite the strong undercurrent in the language conspiring to eliminate idiosyncratic case marking. More generally, we show that different diachronic processes, independent of subjecthood, can lead to the creation of new oblique subjects, at least in a richly-inflected language like Icelandic. Thus we argue that, in addition to CPA, other strategies, notably middles (*st*-forms), have also indirectly contributed to the emergence of oblique subjects at different stages of the language.

References

Barðdal, Jóhanna, Leonid Kulikov, Roland Pooth & Peter Kerkhof. 2020. Oblique anticausatives: a morphosyntactic isogloss in Indo-European. *Poznan Studies in Contemporary Linguistics* 56(3), 413–449.

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