

Dative Subjects and Nominative Objects

They're totally groovy!



OUR ROADMAP

- Non-nominative subjects in Icelandic
- Icelandic vs German
- A look at nominative objects

SOURCES

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The Big Picture

- **Key Point:** Dative (and other non-nominatives) that are in subject (sentence-initial) position in Icelandic are actually subjects; they're not topicalized objects (cf. German).

Why is this relevant?

- These facts force us to divorce case and grammatical function, which was somewhat novel in 1985.
 - Nominative does not necessarily mean subject.
 - Dative does not necessarily mean indirect object.
- We know that Ergative-Absolute systems (and split Ergative systems) divorce case and grammatical function, so it's not so shocking that Nominative-Accusative systems would also.
- And we know that agreement is dependent on case, not grammatical function. Verbs tend to agree with Nominative/Absolute arguments, not with "subjects".
- Passivization teaches us that datives (and other non-accusative objects) "preserve" their case when they move to subject position. This disproves the claim that semantic objects (internal arguments) move in passives solely for the purpose of case assignment.

These non-nominatives really aren't objects that have been fronted

- (1)
- a. Mig dreymdi í nótt
me-A dreamed in night
'I had a dream last night'
 - b. Sumum leiðist að læra heima
some-D is-bored to study at home
'Some (people) find it boring to do homework'
 - c. Jóns nýtur ekki lengur við
John-G enjoys not longer at
'John is no longer available'

(Jónsson 2003: 130)

TRUE STORY.

What are the properties of non-nominative subjects?

In general, non-nominative subjects are less agentive than their nominative counterparts.

- (2)
- Fólkinu sárnuðu þessi ummæli
the people-D hurt these words-N
'The people were hurt by these words'
 - Hana verkjar í bakið
her-A aches in the back
'Her back is aching'
 - Mig minnir að hann búi í Reykjavík
me-A remembers that he lives in R.
'I seem to remember that he lives in Reykjavík'
 - Eiriki finnst þetta ómögulegt
Eric-D finds this-N impossible

- (4)
- Þeir sömdu um þetta
they-N agreed on this
'They reached an agreement on this'
 - Þeim samdi ekki
them-D agreed not
'They did not get along'

- (5)
- Börnin lærðu að hlýða
the children-N learned to obey
 - Börnunum lærðist að hlýða
the children-D learned to obey

- (4a): *they* volitionally agree on something
- (4b): *they* have the experience of not getting along
- (5a): the children learn to obey either by experience or conscious effort.
- 5b): the children learn to obey by experience.

(Jónsson 2003: 131-133)

So, what makes us believe that these are subjects?

Topicalization

- Icelandic is Verb-Second (V2), so if some constituent is topicalized, the subject appears after the verb.
- If an object is topicalized, there can be no additional topicalization.

- (a): The object *refinn* 'the fox' has been topicalized
- (b): The PP cannot be topicalized

a. Refinn skaut Ólafur með þessari byssu.
the-fox.Acc shot Olaf.Nom with this shotgun
'The fox, Olaf shot with this shotgun.'

b. *Með þessari byssu skaut refinn Ólafur
with this shotgun shot the-fox.Acc Olaf.Nom
'With this shotgun, the fox Olaf shot.' (ZMT, EX 19)

Topicalization and Questions

- In questions, the subject follows the tensed verb.
 - (a): ‘help’ is a verb that has a nominative subject and a dative object.
 - (b) is the question counterpart to (a). The tensed verb inverts with the subject.
 - Topicalization is not possible with a question.
 - (c): the topicalized object cannot follow the verb. The dative cannot follow the verb.
- a. Sigga hafði aldrei hjálpað Haraldi.
Sigga.Nom had never helped Harold. Dat
‘Sigga had never helped Harold.’
- b. Hafði Sigga aldrei hjálpað Haraldi.
Had Sigga.Nom never helped Harold. Dat
‘Had Sigga never helped Harold?’
- c. * Hafði Haraldi Sigga aldrei hjálpað.
Had Harold. Dat Sigga.Nom never helped
‘Had Harold Sigga never helped?’
(ZMT, EX 20)

Non-nominatives and Questions

- Non-nominative subjects, unlike topics, can follow the verb in a question = a
- The nominative object is topicalized= b
- The nominative cannot invert with the finite verb = c
- **The Dative patterns like a subject and the Nominative patterns like an object.**

a. Hefur henni alltaf þótt Ólafur leiðinlegur?
has she.Dat always thought Olaf.Nom boring.Nom
'Has she always thought Olaf boring?'

b. Ólafur hefur henni alltaf þótt leiðinlegur?
Olaf.Nom has she.Dat always thought boring.Nom
'Olaf, has she always thought boring?'

c. *Hefur Ólafur henni alltaf þótt leiðinlegur?
has Olaf.Nom she.Dat always thought boring.Nom
'Has Olaf, she always thought boring?'
(ZMT, EX 21)

In general, only a subject can be the antecedent of a reflexive (but see the ZMT paper for a more nuanced description of reflexives).

- a: the subject is the antecedent for the reflexive.
- b: the object cannot be the antecedent for the reflexive.
- c/d: the dative is the antecedent. If these datives were topicalized objects, we would expect them to behave like the object in b.

Reflexivization

- a. Sigga barði mig með dúkkunni sinni/*hennar.
Sigga.Nom hit me.Acc with doll.Dat **her(refl)/*-refl**
'Sigga hit me with her doll.'
- b. Ég barði Siggu með dúkkunni hennar/*sinni.
I.Nom hit **Sigga.Acc** with doll.Dat **her/*refl**
- c. Henni þykir bróðir sinn/*hennar leiðinlegur.
her.**Dat** thinks brother.Nom **her(refl)/*-refl** boring
'She finds her brother boring.'
- d. Hverjum þykir sinn fugl fagur.
everyone.**Dat** thinks **his(refl)** bird.Nom beautiful

Coreference with PRO

In subject control, PRO is coreferential with the matrix subject, irrespective of case. PRO is accusative in (c) and dative in (e).

PRO is not coreferential with objects in subject control. (Icelandic does have object control and it patterns like English.)

- a. Ég vonast til að fara heim.
I.Nom hope.1sg for that to go home
'I hope to go home.'
- b. Mig vantar peninga.
me.Acc lack.3sg money.Acc
'I lack money.'
- c. Ég vonast til að vanta ekki peninga.
I.Nom hope.1sg for that to lack not money.
'I hope not to lack money.' (ZMT, EX 28-29)
- d. Krökkunum áskotnuðust/áskotnaðist nýir litir.
kids.the.dat got.3pl/3sg new crayons.nom
'The kids got new crayons.'
- e. Krökkunum líkar/líka til að áskotnast nýir litir.
kids.the.dat like.3pl/3sg for that to get new crayons.nom.
'The kids like to get new crayons.'

Indefinite Subject Postposing

Icelandic allows for expletive constructions much more widely than English does.

b: When a subject is indefinite, an expletive sentence can be used. The expletive *það* comes at the beginning of the sentence, followed by the verb, which is followed by the subject.

c: The dative object has been topicalized.

d/e: The expletive sentence is not allowed with topicalization.

a. Þjófur hefur stolið hjólinu mínu
a thief.Nom has stolen bicycle.Dat my.Dat
'A thief has stolen my bicycle.'

b. Það hefur þjófur stolið hjólinu mínu
there has a thief.Nom stolen bicycle.Dat my.Dat
'A thief has stolen my bicycle.'

c. Hjóli hefur þjófurrinn stolið
a bicycle.dat has thief.the.Nom stolen
'A bicycle, the thief has stolen.'

d. *Það hefur hjóli þjófurrinn stolið
there has a bicycle.Dat thief.the.Nom stolen
'A bicycle, the thief has stolen.'

e. *Það hefur hjóli stolið þjófurrinn
there has a bicycle.Dat stolen thief.the.Nom
'A bicycle, the thief has stolen.' (ZMT, EX 24)

The Dative here can appear in an expletive sentence

b: The dative can be post-posed.

c: The nominative has been topicalized.

d: The nominative cannot be post-posed.

The dative is a subject and the nominative an object.

a. Einhverjum hefur þótt Ólafur leiðinlegur.
someone.Dat has thought Olaf.Nom boring
'Someone has found Olaf boring.'

b. Það hefur einhverjum þótt Ólafur leiðinlegur.
there has someone.Dat thought Olaf.Nom boring
'Someone has found Olaf boring.'

c. Ólafur hefur einhverjum þótt leiðinlegur.
Olaf.Nom has someone.Dat thought boring
'Olaf, someone has found boring.'

d. *Það hefur Ólafur einhverjum þótt leiðinlegur.
there has Olaf.Nom someone.Dat thought boring
'Olaf, someone has found boring.'

a. Þeir fluttu líkið og þeir grófu það.
they.Nom moved.3pl corpse.the and they.Nom buried.3pl it
'They moved the corpse and they buried it.'

b. Þeir fluttu líkið og grófu það.
they.Nom moved.3pl corpse.the and buried.3pl it
'They moved the corpse and (they) buried it.'

The elided subject in the second clause cannot be coreferential with the object in the first clause.

c. *Líkið hræddi þá og grófu það.
corpse.the.Nom scared them.Acc and buried it
'The corpse scared them and (they) buried it.'

d. Nemendurnir sátu á löngum fyrirlestrum og leiddist/leiddust þau óskaplega.
students.the.nom sat in long lectures and bored.3sg/3pl them.nom immensely
'The students sat in long lectures and (they) felt immensely bored by them.'

- The elided subject in the second clause is coreferential with the overt subject in the first clause.
- The object in the second clause is nominative because the elided subject is dative.
- AND, we see that the verb optionally agrees with the nominative.
- If the second nominative were a subject, the verb would necessarily agree.

Interim Summary I

Several pieces of evidence point to the conclusion that subjects in Icelandic need not be nominative

- Topicalization
- Question Formation
- Reflexivization
- Co-reference with PRO
- Indefinite subject postposing and expletive sentences
- Ellipsis

Overview of Icelandic Passives

- When a sentence with a nominative and accusative object is passivized, the syntactic subject/semantic object surfaces as nominative.
 - The auxiliary agrees with the nom is person and number.
 - The participle agrees with the nom in case, gender, and number.

a. Einhver opnaði skápinn.
someone.Nom opened.3sg cupboard.the.Acc.sg.masc
'Someone opened the cupboard.'

b. Skápurinn var opnaður.
cupboard.the.Nom.sg.masc was.3sg opened.Nom.sg.masc
'The cupboard was opened.' (Thráinsson 2007:10)

(2)a. Lögreglan tók Sigu fasta.
the-police took Sigga(A) fast(A)
The police arrested Sigga.

b. Sigga var tekin föst af lögreglunni.
Sigga(N) was taken fast(N) by the-police(D)
Sigga was arrested by the police.⁴

- BUT, when the underlying object is not accusative in the active, the semantic object keeps its case.
- Neither the auxiliary nor the participle agree with the non-nominative.

a. Ég hjálpaði þeim.
I.Nom helped.1sg them.Dat
'I helped them.'

b. Þeim var hjálpað.
them.Dat was.3sg helped.Nom.neut.sg
'They were helped.'

c. Ég mun sakna þeirra
I.Nom will.1sg miss them.Gen
'I will miss her.'

d. Þeirra var saknað.
them.Gen was.3sg missed.Nom.neut.sg
'They were missed.'

Ditransitives in Icelandic

- The subject is always nominative.
- The indirect and direct objects can come in different combinations.
- For some case frames, only the first NP can be passivized.
- For the Nom-Dat-Acc pattern (e), either NP can passivize and interesting things happen.

(37)a.	Þeir leyndu Ólaf sannleikanum.	ACC-DAT
	<i>they concealed [from]-Olaf(A) the-truth(D)</i>	
b.	Jón bað mig bóna.	ACC-GEN
	<i>Jon asked me(A) a-favor(G)</i>	
c.	Ég sagði þér söguna.	DAT-ACC
	<i>I told you(D) a-story(A)</i>	
d.	Ólafur lofaði Maríu þessum hring.	DAT-DAT
	<i>Olaf(N) promised Mary(D) this(D) ring(D)</i>	
e.	María óskaði Ólafi alls góðs.	DAT-GEN
	<i>Mary wished Olaf(D) everything(G) good(G)</i>	

The auxiliary and the participle both have to agree with the nominative

- a. Konunginum voru gefnar ambáttir
king.the.Dat was.3pl given.Nom.fem.pl maidservants.Nom.fem.pl
'The king was given maidservants.'
- b. Ambáttin var gefin konunginum.
maidservant.the.Nom.fem.sg was.3sg given.Nom.fem.sg king.the.Dat
'The maidservant was given to the king.' (ZMT, EX 44)
- c. Öllum börnunum voru /*var gefnar/*gefið kökur.
all.Dat children.the.Dat.pl were.3pl/*sg given.pl.Nom.fem/*sg.Nom.neut. cakes.Nom.pl.fem
'All the children were given cakes.'

When passivized, dative objects pattern like syntactic subjects - except for agreement

Question Formation

In question formation of passives, either the dative or the nominative can invert with the verb.

(47) *Subject-Verb Inversion*

a. Um veturinn voru konunginum gefnar ambáttir.
in the-winter were the-king(D) given slaves(N)
In the winter, the king was given (female) slaves.

b. Um veturinn var ambáttin gefin konunginum.
in the-winter was the-slave(N) given the-king(N)
In the winter, the slave was given to the king.

(48)a. Voru konunginum gefnar ambáttir?
were the-king(D) given slaves(N)

Was the king given slaves?

b. Var ambáttin gefin konunginum?
was the-slave(N) given the-king(D)

Was the slave given to the king?

Það (Expletive) Constructions

The expletive construction is allowed with passives, and either the dative or nominative can immediately follow the verb.

(50) *Indefinite Subject Postposing*

- a. Það voru konungi gefnar ambáttir í vetur.
there was king(D) given slaves(N) in winter
There was a king given slaves this winter.
- b. Það var ambátt gefin konunginum í vetur.
there was slave(N) gefin konunginum(D) in winter

- The subject in the first conjunct is nominative.
- The elided NP in the second conjunct can be nominative or dative.

(51) *Subject Ellipsis*

- a. Konungarnir fóru víða og — voru
the-kings(N) traveled widely and —(D) were
oft gefnar ambáttir.
often given slaves
- b. Ambáttin kom frá Írlandi og — var
the-slave came from Ireland and —(N) was
gefin konunginum.
given the-king(D)

Another Way of Thinking About Case Assignment: an Algorithmic Approach

(61) Icelandic Association Principles

- a. If there is only one thematic role, it is assigned to SUBJ; if there are two, they are assigned to SUBJ and OBJ; if there are three, they are assigned to SUBJ, OBJ, 2OBJ. (*Universal*)
- b. AGENTS are linked to SUBJ. (*Universal*)
- c. Case-marked THEMES are assigned to the lowest available GF. (*Language Specific*)
- d. Default Case Marking:¹⁸ the highest available GF is assigned NOM case, the next highest ACC. (*Universal*)

The Basic Idea:

- Each verb has a theta/thematic grid which specifies the semantic contribution of the verb's arguments. (This approach assumes that the subject is an argument of the verb.)
- Thematic roles are mapped to grammatical function.
- Sometimes case sticks with the thematic role and sometimes case is assigned based on grammatical function.
- Idiosyncratic case marking is associated with a particular thematic role and is preserved under passivization.
- Other cases are assigned based on the "default" scenario.

(60) **gæta** 'take care of' ⟨agent, theme⟩
GEN

lofa 'promise' ⟨agent, theme, goal⟩
DAT DAT

(63) **gefa**: V⟨agent theme goal⟩
[+dat]

- | | | | |
|----|------|------|------|
| a. | SUBJ | OBJ | 2OBJ |
| b. | SUBJ | 2OBJ | OBJ |

German ≠ Icelandic

- Sentence-initial datives in German do not pattern like subjects.
- German has subject control = (80)
- Passives can be formed with verbs that take accusative object – e.g., ‘admitted’.
- In (81a), the object becomes nominative and controls PRO.
- (81b) is completely ungrammatical.
 - If the dative case is preserved, it cannot control PRO.
 - The dative object cannot become nominative.

(78) Ihm wurde geholfen. (German)
Honum var hjálpað (Icelandic)
him(D) was helped.

(80) Er hofft weg zu gehen.
he hopes away to go

Datives can't control PRO

- (81)a. Er hofft aufgenommen zu werden.
he hopes admitted to be
- b. *Ihm/*Er hofft geholfen zu werden.
him(D)/he(N) hopes helped to be

Subject Ellipsis in German

a: The subject in the second conjunct can be elided...

b: ...even if the second conjunct is passive – and the passivized noun is nominative.

c. The NP in the second conjunct cannot be elided. The passivized noun is dative.

d/e. The dative NP cannot be elided in an active sentence – either clause-initially or clause-finally.


(82)a. Er kam und (er) besuchte die Kinder.
he(N) came and (he) visited the children

b. Er kam und (er) wurde verhaftet.
he came and (he) was arrested

c. *Er kam und ____ wurde geholfen.
he came and ____ (D) was helped

d. *Er sah die Damen und ____ gefielen sie.
he saw the ladies and ____ (D) pleased them(f.)

e. *Er sah die Damen und sie gefielen ____.
he saw the ladies and they pleased ____ (D)



Interim Summary 2

In Icelandic, arguments that have a “special” case retain that case when passivized.

These NPs syntactically behave like subjects.

Sentence-initial datives in German do not behave like subjects.



NOMINATIVE OBJECTS IN ICELANDIC

Object Shift

In a lot of Scandinavian languages, objects can move higher than their initial positions. (You can look up Holmberg's Generalization for more info.)

a. Non-shifted Accusative Object
Hún hefur því sennilega ekki hitt þa um kvödið.
she.Nom has thus probably not met them.Acc in evening.the
'She has probably not met them in the evening.'

b. Shifted Accusative Object
Hún hitt þa því sennilega ekki um kvödið.
she.Nom met **them.Acc** thus probably not in evening.the
'She probably did not meet them in the evening.'

The Nominatives in (c/d) pattern the same way as the Accusatives in (a/b).

c. Non-shifted Nominative Object
Henni hafa því sennilega ekki leiðst þeir um kvödið.
her.Dat have thus probably not bored they.Nom in evening.the
'She has probably not felt bored by them in the evening.'

d. Shifted Nominative Object
Henni leiddust þeir því sennilega ekki um kvödið.
her.Dat bored **they.Nom** thus probably not in evening.the
'She has probably not been felt by them in the evening.'
(Boeckx 2008)

Mér finnst/finnast skot af Brennivíni bragðgóð en vinum mínum finnst/finnast þau sterk.
 me.dat find.3sg/3pl shots.nom of Brennivín tasty but friends.dat my.dat find.3sg/3pl them.nom strong
 'I find shots of Brennivin tasty but my friends find them strong.'

- We've seen that verbs optionally agree with nominative objects.
- In ECM, the matrix verb optionally agrees with the embedded nominative subject.
- This subject is behaving like an object.

Word order isn't the problem (remember Standard Arabic?)

Post-verbal Unaccusative

Það opnuðu/*opnaði allir bankar og kaffihús í Kringlunni klukkan tíu.
expl open.3pl/*3sg all banks.nom.pl and coffeehouses.nom.pl at Kringlunni clock ten
'All banks and coffeehouses in Kringlan open at 10.'

Post-verbal Unergative

Það dönsuðu/*dansaði þrír bræður
expl danced.3pl/*3sg three brothers.nom.pl
'Three brothers danced.'

- Icelandic also allows expletive constructions with intransitives with nominative subjects.
- BUT, agreement with the verb is obligatory.
- **Optional agreement affects nominative objects, not just post-verbal nominatives.**

A long-standing part of the grammar of Icelandic

(1) a. Honum líkaði stórilla aðgerðir þeirra (Svarfdæla saga, 1794)

he.dat liked.3sg badly operations.their.nom

'He really didn't like their operations. / He was very dissatisfied with their operations.'

b. Þórði líkaði illa hennar málsemdir (Bjarnar saga Hítðælak., 120)

Þórði.sg.dat liked.3sg badly her.speech.nom

'Þórður didn't like her speech.'

c. Þá líkuðu honum gerðir eigi betur en fyrra sumar (Sturlunga, 75)

then liked.3pl he.dat operations not better than earlier.summer.nom

'Then he liked "the operations" not better than the earlier summer.'

d. Báðum konungunum líkuðu þessi andsvör (Hrólf's saga Gautr., 47)

both.dat kings.dat liked.3pl these.answers/protests.nom

'Both of the kings liked these answers/protests' (Jónsson, to appear, EX 27.8)

Optional agreement in monoclausal sentences in the Sagas.

(1) a. Þeim þótti [þau **tíðindi** mikil vera] (Fóstbræðra saga, 778)
they.dat found.3sg those.news.nom big to be
'They found these news to be big.'

b. Þótti mönnum [þetta **mikil fádæmi**] (Hrólf's saga Gautr., 140)
found.dft men.dat this big exceptional.nom
'They found this to be a big exception.'

c. Oddi þóttu [þetta **mikil tíðindi**] (Bandamanna saga, 7)
Oddur dat found.3pl this big news.nom
'Oddur found this to be big news.'

d. Gretti þóttu [illar **spár hans**] (Grettis saga, 1003)
Grettir.sg.dat found.3pl bad his.prophecies.nom
'Grettir found his prophecies to be bad.' (Jónsson, to appear, EX 27.9)

Optional agreement in biclausal sentences in the Sagas.



Summary

- Icelandic active sentences illustrate that we cannot (necessarily) pair case and grammatical function.
 - Subjects need not be nominative.
- In passives, “non-structural” case is retained.
- In Icelandic, the passivized object behaves like non-structurally case-marked NPs in actives.
 - Not so in German
- Nominative objects in Icelandic syntactically pattern like accusative objects.
- Nominative objects and embedded nominative subjects in ECM both allow for optional agreement.