Structured exceptions and case selection in Insular Scandinavian

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Abstract. The diachronic development of case selection in Insular Scandinavian (Icelandic and Faroese) provides strong support for a dichotomy of structured exceptions, which display partial productivity, and arbitrary exceptions, which are totally unproductive. Focusing on two kinds of exceptional case, we argue that verbs taking accusative experiencer subjects form a similarity cluster on the basis of shared lexical semantic properties, thus enabling new lexical items to be attracted to the cluster. By contrast, verbs taking genitive objects have no common semantic properties that could be the source of partial productivity.

1. Introduction

The syntax of natural languages is characterized by general mechanisms that operate independently of particular lexical items and enable the speaker to produce and understand an infinite number of sentences.1 Thus, it is fair to say that syntax, more than any other component of grammar, illustrates the regular and creative aspect of language. Still, syntax is not entirely free of irregularities, especially in the domain of argument realization. To take one example, the fact that envy can have two objects in English (e.g. I envy you your good looks) is an exception to the generalization that only verbs denoting transfer of some kind can be ditransitive in English (see Goldberg 1995: 131–132 for relevant discussion).

1. The work reported on here was funded in part by a three-year research grant from Rannís – The Icelandic Centre for Research during 2004–06, which is gratefully acknowledged. We wish to thank Heimir Freyr Viðarsson, our research assistant at the University of Iceland, for his invaluable assistance in preparing this paper. We would also like to thank an anonymous reviewer and the editors for useful comments, and the latter in particular for their patience. The authors bear a joint responsibility for the paper, but divided their labor in such a way that Jóhannes Gísli largely took care of the Icelandic part and Thórhallur of the Faroese part.
In this paper we argue that exceptions to general patterns of argument realization are of two kinds. First, there are exceptions that are stored in the lexicon without any associative links between them, i.e. links which make it easier for speakers to memorize the exceptions. These can be referred to as arbitrary exceptions as they are based on an arbitrary list of lexical items. Second, there are exceptions which involve clustering of lexical items on the basis of shared semantic properties. These can be called structured exceptions and they display partial productivity in contrast to arbitrary exceptions. Thus, arbitrary exceptions are totally unproductive whereas structured exceptions can be extended to new lexical items, provided that these exceptions have sufficient token frequency.²

As we illustrate below, the diachronic development of case selection in Insular Scandinavian (Icelandic and Faroese) provides strong support for the proposed dichotomy between structured and arbitrary exceptions. The discussion will focus on two kinds of exceptional case selection, accusative subjects and genitive objects. It will be shown that accusative subjects, especially experiencer subjects, have been semi-productive in the history of Insular Scandinavian whereas genitive objects have been completely unproductive. To account for this difference, we argue that verbs with accusative experiencer subjects form a similarity cluster on the basis of shared lexical semantic properties. This enables new lexical items to be attracted to the cluster. By contrast, verbs with genitive objects are a disparate group with no common semantic properties that could be the source of partial productivity.

Exceptional but semi-productive classes are probably best known in inflectional morphology. For instance, the class of strong verbs in English exemplified by *cling/clung* has been shown to be productive in experiments where speakers are asked to produce past tense forms of nonce verbs (Bybee and Slobin 1982, and Bybee and Moder 1983). This class has also attracted some new members, e.g. the originally weak verbs *dig, fling* and *string* (Jespersen 1942:49–53), despite the sharp reduction in the overall number of strong verbs in the history of English. Bybee and Moder (1983) argue that the productivity of the *cling/clung* class is based on the phonetic similarity between the verbs in this class. They claim that *cling/clung* verbs are organized by family resemblance around a prototypical member with a velar nasal word-finally; thus, there is no rule at work here since there is no single phonetic feature that all these verbs have in common. Moreover, many verbs that are phonetically similar to

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2. Our use of the term “new lexical item” in this context lumps together verbs that are truly new in the language as well as verbs that are attested in Old Icelandic but with a different subject case.
the *cling/clung* verbs have a different inflection (e.g. *rig, bring* and *ring* in the sense ‘encircle, put a ring on’). Clearly, our claims about exceptional and semi-productive case in Insular Scandinavian are similar in spirit to this proposal although we will not make any use of prototype theory.  

The paper is organized as follows. In section 2, we provide some background information on the Icelandic case system. Section 3 discusses the decline of genitive objects in the history of Icelandic. The diachronic development of accusative subjects is discussed in section 4, where it is shown that accusative case has been extended to the subjects of some new verbs. Comparative data from Faroese are presented in section 5 and shown to follow the Icelandic pattern discussed in sections 3 and 4. Finally, some concluding remarks are offered in section 6.

2. The case system of Icelandic

There are two basic types of case in Icelandic: structural case and lexical case. Structural case is determined by syntactic position whereas lexical case is selected by particular lexical items. The main evidence for this dichotomy comes from the fact that lexical case is preserved in passives and ECM-infinitives but structural case is not (see e.g. Zaenen, Maling and Thráinsson 1985). Using these diagnostics, nominative subjects and accusative objects represent structural case whereas oblique subjects and dative and genitive objects exemplify lexical case.

Nominative is by far the most common subject case in Icelandic, as illustrated in (1). However, numerous non-agentive verbs take oblique subjects, as in (2). The verb *langa* ‘want’, for example, selects an accusative subject and *leiðast* ‘be bored’ takes a dative subject and a nominative object.

(1)  
a. **Nemendurnir** lásu bókina.  
   the.students-NOM read-3.PL the.book-ACC  
   ‘The students read the book.’

b. **Við** hjálpuðum nágrönnunum.  
   we-NOM helped-1.PL the.neighbours-DAT  
   ‘We helped the neighbours.’

c. **Faðirinn** saknar barnanna.  
   the.father-NOM misses the.kids-GEN  
   ‘The father misses the kids.’

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3. We have also been influenced by Pinker’s (1999) discussion of strong verbs in English which, in turn, draws on ideas from connectionist psychology.
Nominative subjects trigger number and person agreement with the finite verb but oblique subjects do not. Apart from this difference, oblique subjects behave syntactically very much like nominative subjects in Icelandic (see Zaenen, Maling and Thráinsson 1985, Sigurðsson 1989:204–209, and Jónsson 1996:110–119 among others).

Accusative is clearly the most common object case in Icelandic, but many verbs take dative objects, e.g. hjálpa ‘help’, as in (1b). Only a handful of verbs select genitive objects (see Appendix for a list), including sakna ‘miss’, as shown in (1c). Nominative objects occur almost exclusively with two-place verbs taking dative subjects, such as leiðast ‘be bored’, as in (2b).

Lexical case in Icelandic is semantically predictable in some instances and this is most evident with dative indirect objects (see Yip, Maling and Jackendoff 1987, Jónsson 2000, and Maling 2002). It can also be argued that dative case on experiencer subjects is largely predictable from lexical semantics (Jónsson 1997–98, 2003). The focus of this paper is on lexical case that is idiosyncratically associated with particular lexical items and therefore has to be learned on an item-to-item basis. It is impossible, for example, to derive the accusative subject with langa ‘want’ or the genitive object with sakna ‘miss’ from the lexical semantics of these verbs. Hence, it must be specified in the lexical entries of these verbs that they select an accusative subject and a genitive object, respectively.4

Still, as we will show in this paper, the semantic similarity between verbs taking accusative experiencer subjects has enabled these verbs to display some productivity in the history of Icelandic. This means that the productivity of a particular case frame does not require semantic (or syntactic) predictability. On the other hand, the status of accusative experiencer subjects in current-day Icelandic is quite weak as there is a strong tendency to replace them by dative

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4. We will not concern ourselves here with the issue of how idiosyncratic case arises diachronically. For interesting discussion on “irregularization” in inflectional morphology, see Nübling (this volume).
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subjects, a phenomenon often referred to as Dative Sickness or Dative Substitution.\(^5\) Contrast the example in (3) with the one in (2a):

(3) \textit{Mér langar að fara.}
    \textit{me-DAT wants to go}
    ‘I want to go.’

It has been shown that idiosyncratic case is acquired rather late in Icelandic (Sigurðardóttir 2002 and Björgvinsdóttir 2003) and for some speakers it may never be acquired with certain verbs. For example, a child that fails to acquire the standard accusative case with \textit{langa} ‘want’ during the critical period of language acquisition is likely to use a dative subject instead, as in (3). Thus, Dative Substitution is an ongoing diachronic change that results from the unsuccessful transmission of a grammar from one generation of speakers to the next. We will assume that the loss of genitive objects in the history of Icelandic also has its roots in language acquisition but lack of historic data makes it nearly impossible to argue for this on empirical grounds.

3. **Genitive objects**

3.1. Old Icelandic

The number of verbs taking genitive objects has been significantly reduced in the history of Icelandic, from about 100 verbs in Old Icelandic to about 30 in Modern Icelandic (see Appendix).\(^6\) With many of these verbs, the genitive object has been replaced by a PP or an object bearing a different case. In some cases, the verb has simply become obsolete, at least in the use where a genitive object was possible. We have not systematically investigated all the genitive object verbs in Old Iceland but we suspect that high frequency is the most important factor in explaining why some of these verbs have survived but others have not.

To judge by the textual sources, many of the genitive object verbs were already quite rare in Old Icelandic. Genitive objects were also losing ground in

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5. There is also a tendency to substitute nominative for oblique case on theme/patient subjects in Modern Icelandic, so called Nominative Substitution (see Eythórsson 2002, Jónsson 2003, and Jónsson and Eythórsson 2003, 2005 and references cited there).

6. The loss of genitive objects is well-known from other Germanic languages (see e.g. Delsing 1991 on Swedish, Allen 1995:217–219 on English and Donhauser 1998 on German).
that some verbs could occur with other cases or PPs instead of the genitive (see Nygaard 1906:142–148 for examples). One example is the verb *missa* ‘miss, lose’ which alternated between genitive and accusative object in Old Icelandic. In Modern Icelandic the object must be accusative, except for a few idiomatic phrases which preserve genitive, e.g. *missa* marks ‘be to no avail’ (literally ‘miss the target’), *missa sjónar á* ‘lose sight of’ and *missa fótanna* ‘trip’ (literally ‘lose the feet’).

Verbs with genitive objects in Old Icelandic can be divided into five syntactic classes, depending on the number and case marking of other arguments of the verb. The three biggest classes are exemplified in (4):7

(4)  

a. Nominative subject + Genitive object (NG-verbs)  
Ásgerður var þá eftir og gætti búsi þeirra.  
Ásgerður was then left and guarded farm-GEN their  
‘Ásgerður then stayed behind and looked after their farm.’  
(Egils saga, p. 455)

b. Nominative subject + Accusative object + Genitive object (NAG-verbs)  
Þorgeir latti hann utanferðar.  
Þorgeir discouraged him-ACC travel.abroad-GEN  
‘Þorgeir discouraged him to go abroad.’  
(Finnboga saga ramma, p. 651)

c. Nominative subject + Dative object + Genitive object (NDG-verbs)  
Hann kvæðst ekki varna mundu henni máls.  
he said not prevent would her-DAT speech-GEN  
‘He said he would not prevent her from speaking.’  
(Brennu-Njáls saga, p. 160)

There was also a small class of verbs taking an accusative experiencer subject + genitive object (*fylla* ‘become full of’, *fýsa* ‘want’, *girna* ‘desire’, *minna* ‘(seem to) remember’, *vara* ‘expect’, *vilna* ‘expect, hope’, and *vænta/vætta* ‘expect’), and an even smaller class of verbs with a dative experiencer subject + genitive object (*batna* ‘get better’, *bætast* ‘recover from’, *fá* ‘suffer’, *létta* ‘recover from’ and *ljá* ‘get’). This is exemplified in (5):

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7. Most of the examples from Old Icelandic in this paper are cited from editions using Modern Icelandic spelling (see bibliography) but they have all been checked for authenticity against critical editions or manuscripts.
a. Accusative subject + Genitive object (AG-verbs)

\[
\text{Þess minnir mig að þú mundir þá koma it-GEN remembers me-ACC that you would then come 'I seem to remember that you would come then.' (Heiðarvíga saga, p. 1391)}
\]

b. Dative subject + genitive object (DG-verbs)

\[
\text{Þuríði batnaði sóttarinnar Þuríður-DAT improved the.illness-GEN 'Þuríður recovered from her illness.' (Eyrbyggja saga, p. 608)}
\]

Most of the AG-verbs and DG-verbs have either become obsolete (in the relevant use) or have ceased to select genitive case. For instance, the DG-verb \text{batna} 'get better' can only take a nominative object in Modern Icelandic. The only verb that still takes a genitive object is \text{vænta} 'expect', but the subject case has shifted to nominative. However, four of the AG-verbs still select accusative subjects (i.e. \text{fylla} 'become full of (water)', \text{fýsa} 'want', \text{minna} '(seem to) remember' and \text{vara} 'expect'). This is consistent with the major empirical claim of this paper that accusative subjects have been more resistant to diachronic change than genitive objects in the history of Icelandic.

The historical decline of genitive objects can also be seen with NAG-verbs. Members of this class in Old Icelandic include the following verbs:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{beiða} & \ 'request', \text{biðja} 'request', \text{dylja} 'hide', \text{eggja} 'incite', \text{firna} 'blame', \text{fregna} 'ask', \text{frétta} 'ask', \text{fylla} 'fill with', \text{fyrirkunna} 'blame for', \text{fýsa} 'incite', \text{krefja} 'demand', \text{kveðja} 'demand', \text{letja} 'discourage', \text{minna} 'remind', \text{saka} 'accuse of', \text{spyrja} 'ask', \text{æsa} 'incite'
\end{align*}
\]

Of all these verbs, the only ones that are still regularly used with genitive objects are \text{biðja} 'request', \text{krefja} 'demand' and \text{spyrja} 'ask'. This is exemplified in (7):

\[
\]

8. Barðdal (2001:197–198) claims that DG-verbs disappeared in Icelandic because of their low type frequency. An alternative explanation is that the token frequency of genitive objects with each DG-verb was simply too low for the genitive to be successfully acquired.

9. As already mentioned, \text{fylla} 'fill with', \text{fýsa} 'incite' and \text{minna} 'remind' also occur as AG-verbs in Old Icelandic.
(7) Ég þarf örugglega að biðja þig einhvers.
   I need surely to ask you-ACC something-GEN
   á morgun.
   tomorrow
   ‘I will surely need to ask you to do something tomorrow.’

With the other NAG-verbs, the genitive has been replaced by PPs, unless the verb has become obsolete or lost the sense indicated in (6). One example of this is minna ‘remind’. In Old Icelandic this verb could be used either with a genitive object, as in (8a), or a PP complement, but in Modern Icelandic it only takes a PP, as in (8b):

(8) a. Hón hefir minnt mik þeirra hluta.
   she has reminded me-ACC those-GEN things-GEN

b. Hún hefur minnt mig á þá hluti.
   she has reminded me-ACC of those-ACC things-ACC
   ‘She has reminded me of those things.’
   (Fornmannasögur.i.3)

With some verbs the genitive has become more or less restricted to formal registers in Modern Icelandic, e.g. bíða ‘wait for’. For example, while the PP-variant in (9b) sounds very natural in all kinds of registers, the genitive variant in (9a) is clearly rather formal. This is very different from Old Icelandic where the genitive was the norm and the PP-variant was extremely rare.

(9) a. Margir biðu Jóns.
   many waited.for John-GEN

b. Margir biðu eftir Jóni.
   many waited for John-DAT
   ‘Many waited for John’

The story of genitive objects in Icelandic is a story of continuous loss and no gain. In fact, we are aware of only one verb with a genitive object that has been added to the vocabulary of Icelandic in the last centuries.10 This is the verb óska ‘wish’, a variant of æskja ‘wish’ which takes a genitive object and is already attested in Old Icelandic. Moreover, we only know of one example

10. The verbs íðra ‘repent’ and krefjast ‘demand’ are attested with a genitive object in Modern Icelandic but not in Old Icelandic. Still, they can hardly be seen as new additions since the variants íðrast ‘repent’ (with the suffix –st) and krefja ‘demand’ (without the suffix –st) are attested with a genitive object in Old Icelandic.
where a genitive object has become a variant alongside an original accusative or dative object. This happened in the Eastern fjords of Iceland with the verb *nenna* ‘bother’ where genitive replaced dative.\(^\text{11}\) We suspect that this development has its roots in phonology: The most common dative object with *nenna* is *pessu* ‘this’, which becomes homophonous with the genitive form *pess* ‘this’ if the final vowel is elided. Deletion of the final vowel takes place regularly before a word that begins with a vowel, e.g. before the negation *ekki* ‘not’ which quite often follows the verb *nenna*. Thus, the change from dative to genitive with *nenna* seems to be a case of reanalysis triggered by phonological neutralization of the contrast between dative and genitive.

3.2. Analysis

The facts discussed above show that genitive objects have been extremely unproductive in the history of Icelandic. This has manifested itself in the following ways:

\begin{enumerate}
\item The number of verbs taking genitive objects has sharply declined from the Old Icelandic period.
\item There are hardly any cases where genitive has become a variant with verbs originally taking accusative or dative objects.
\item Virtually no new verbs with genitive objects have been added to the Icelandic lexicon since the Old Icelandic period.
\end{enumerate}

We claim that this lack of productivity is because verbs selecting genitive objects in Old (and Modern) Icelandic do not form any semantically coherent subclasses.\(^\text{12}\) In other words, they are arbitrary exceptions to general case selection rules in Icelandic. Thus, Nygaard (1906:142–148), in his classic syntax of Old Icelandic, is at pains to classify verbs with genitive objects, presenting no fewer than eight subclasses and most of them are neither well-defined nor coherent.

One may wonder about the NAG-verbs listed in (6) which seem to form a reasonably coherent class as most of these verbs denote communication which the referent of the indirect object is expected to respond to in some way. The problem with this class seems to be that the genitive is not common enough

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11. Using *flýta sín* ‘hurry’ with a genitive (literally ‘hurry self-GEN’) instead of the standard *flýta sér* ‘hurry’ with a dative is also a known dialectal feature of the Eastern fjords of Iceland. However, this may not be relevant for our purposes since the reflexive pronoun here is probably not an argument of the verb.

12. Verbs with genitive objects are all non-telic, i.e. they denote events that do not have a natural endpoint. Still, that property does not distinguish them from other transitive verbs as many non-telic verbs take accusative or dative objects.
to provide a real basis for productivity. To take one example, the verb *eggja* ‘incite’ only occurs with genitive objects that denote some kind of action or undertaking (e.g. *atganga* ‘attack’, *verk* ‘deed’, *ferð* ‘trip’ or *útganga* ‘walking out’), and even these kinds of noun phrases are often expressed as objects of the preposition *til* ‘to’ when they are used with *eggja*.13

Being arbitrary exceptions, verbs with genitive objects are stored in the lexicon without any associative links between them. Such links between lexical items make them easier to memorize and therefore more learnable and less likely to undergo diachronic change. However, this may not be sufficient to explain why verbs with genitive objects have failed to attract new members. We seem to need the additional assumption that new verbs entering the language always follow some general pattern with respect to case selection. Thus, a new verb cannot easily be analogized to an established verb on the basis of semantic similarity between the two verbs, a phenomenon referred to as isolate attraction by Barðdal (2001). This can be seen with the verb *passa* ‘guard, take care of’, an 18th century borrowing from Danish. Since this verb is more or less synonymous with the NG-verb *gæta* ‘guard, take care of’ it looks like a good candidate for isolate attraction. Still, despite its obvious affinity with *gæta*, the verb *passa* has selected an accusative object from its earliest attestation. The accusative with *passa* represents the default object case and this option seems to be chosen whenever there is no semantic class of dative verbs that the new verb could be attracted to. However, a new verb may vary between accusative and dative object if the semantic basis for dative case is unclear. A case in point is the loan verb *transportera* ‘transport’ which is possible both with a dative and an accusative object. Arguably, the dative is chosen by those speakers who feel that *transportera* belongs semantically to the class of motion verbs selecting a dative object (e.g. *hrinda* ‘push’, *kasta* ‘throw’, *lyfta* ‘lift’, *sveifla* ‘swing’ and *ýta* ‘push’; see Maling 2002 and Svenonius 2002 for a discussion of these verbs). By contrast, speakers who do not share this intuition will opt for the default accusative. The latter choice may be influenced by the fact that the verb *flytja* ‘move, transport’, selecting an accusative object, is semantically closer to *transportera* than any other verb. However, this would not necessarily be a case of isolate attraction as the existence of *flytja* might simply prevent speakers from placing *transportera* in the same class as motion verbs with dative objects.

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13. An informal count in the electronic corpus of Old Icelandic texts at http://www. lexis.hi.is (Textasafn Orðabókar Háskólan) reveals that genitive occurs with about 12% of the examples of *eggja*. 
4. **Accusative subjects**

Verbs with accusative subjects divide into two main types semantically: experiencer verbs and verbs taking theme/patient subjects. These classes will be discussed separately in 4.1 and 4.2 below since there are important differences between them in terms of their diachronic development.

4.1. Verbs with experiencer subjects

For convenience, all the verbs with accusative experiencer subjects in Old Icelandic are shown in (11) with some preliminary semantic subclassification. This list, as the list in (18) below, is quite extensive as it includes all verbs that occur at least once with an accusative subject in a critical edition of Old Icelandic texts. Note also that some of these verbs could occur with a nominative or a dative subject in Old Icelandic (see Viðarsson 2006 for a detailed discussion):

(11) Verbs with an accusative experiencer subject in Old Icelandic:


e. Verbs with affected experiencers: henda ‘happen to, concern’, kosta ‘cost’, skipta ‘matter to’, tíma ‘happen to’, varða ‘concern’

Some representative examples from the first three classes are provided in (12):
(12) a. og mun þeg ekki saka  
and will you-ACC not be.hurt  
‘and you will be all right’  
(Víga-Glúms saga, p. 1926)

b. mig og fólk mitt skortir aldrei mat  
me-ACC and people-ACC my-ACC lacks never food  
‘Me and my people never run out of food’  
(Bandamanna saga, p. 21)

c. en ekki slægir mig hér til langvista  
but not wants me-ACC here for long.stay  
‘But I am not tempted to stay here for a long time’  
(Grettis saga, p. 1094)

As the overview in (11) illustrates, these verb classes are fairly coherent semantically. This can be seen e.g. in the number of verbs having roughly the same meaning, e.g. the verbs in (11b) and all the verbs glossed as ‘want’ in (11c). This raises the question if these verbs really are exceptional rather than following a rule linking accusative subjects and verbs meaning ‘want’. We doubt that there can be such a narrow lexical rule, e.g. because it might not be learnable. In any case, this hypothetical rule would not apply to the verb vilja ‘want’ which takes a nominative subject in Old Icelandic as well as in Modern Icelandic.

Thus, we conclude that verbs with accusative experiencer subjects are structured exceptions, i.e. they are not stored as isolated items in the lexicon but linked via shared lexical semantic properties. Therefore, it is unsurprising that these verbs have displayed some productivity in the history of Icelandic. First, among the many new verbs that have been added to the Icelandic lexicon since the Old Icelandic period there are some that take accusative experiencer subjects, e.g. hrylla við ‘be horrified by’, óra fyrir ‘dream of’ and ráma í ‘have a vague recollection of’:

(13) a. Nemendurna hryllir við þessari tilhugsun.  
the.students-ACC horrifies at this thought  
‘The students are horrified by the thought of this.’

b. Engan hefði getað órað fyrir þessu.  
nobody-ACC had could dreamed for this  
‘Nobody could have dreamed of this.’

c. Mig rámar í að hafa hitt hann einu sinni.  
me-ACC recollects in to have met him one time  
‘I have a vague recollection of having met him once.’
None of these verbs is attested in Old Icelandic but the oldest examples that we have found of *hrylla við* and *óra fyrir* are from the 17th century and the oldest example of *ráma í* is from the 19th century.14

Second, we know of one loan verb taking an accusative subject, the verb *ske* ‘happen’. According to Óskarsson (1997–1998), the oldest example of this verb is from the end of 14th century. In that particular example, and many later ones, the verb takes an accusative experiencer subject. The following example is from the middle of the 17th century:

(14) *eins og mig hafði skeð fyrir átta árum* as me-ACC had happened for eight years

‘As had happened to me eight years earlier’

(Píslarsaga séra Jóns Magnússonar, p. 60)

The youngest example of an accusative subject with *ske* that we have found is from the middle of the 19th century. In Modern Icelandic the affected experiencer is always expressed by a PP with the preposition *fyrir* ‘for’ (if it is expressed at all).

Third, accusative has become a variant with some experiencer verbs. With the verbs *hlakka til* ‘look forward to’ and *kvíða fyrir* ‘dread, be anxious about’, both accusative and dative as well as the original nominative are possible subject cases in Modern Icelandic. This is shown for *kvíða fyrir* in (15):

(15) a. *Hún kveið fyrir prófunum.*
she-NOM was.anxious for the.exams

b. *Hana kveið fyrir prófunum.*
her-ACC was.anxious for the.exams

c. *Henni kveið fyrir prófunum.*
her-DAT was.anxious for the.exams

‘She was anxious about the exams.’

Fourth, accusative subject used to be possible with the verbs *vona* ‘hope’ (Old Icelandic *vána*) and *skynja* ‘sense’ although nominative is the original subject case with these verbs and the only possible subject case in Modern Icelandic.15

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14. These examples are in the electronic corpus of Icelandic texts at http://www.lexis.hi.is (Ritmálssafn Orðabókar Háskóla).n
15. Interestingly, there are many examples of a genitive object with *vona* in ROH, mostly dating from the 19th century. It seems that the verb is used in the sense ‘expect’ in these examples, similar to the genitive object verb *vænta* ‘expect’. It is not clear to us whether this is a genuine case of a new verb taking a genitive object.
(16) a. Þá vonar mig að þær smámsaman fjölgi
then hopes me-ACC that they gradually increase
‘Then I hope that they increase in number.’
(Alþingistíðindi 1859,466; ROH)

b. mig skiniar ecki sannara en seigi
me-ACC senses not truer than say
‘I do not sense more truthfully than I say.’
(GAndrDeil, 45; ROH)

Our final example here is klæja ‘itch’ which only takes a dative subject in Old Icelandic (17a) but also occurs with an accusative subject in Modern Icelandic (17b):

(17) a. því að mér klæjar þar mjög
since me-ACC itches there much
b. því að mig klæjar þar mjög
since me-ACC itches there much
‘because I am itching there so much.’
(Sturlunga saga, p. 560)

The examples in (13)–(17) illustrate the partial productivity of verbs with accusative experiencer subjects in the history of Icelandic. However, it seems that this class has become unproductive in present-day Icelandic. This can be seen most clearly in Dative Substitution, as in (3) above, which first became common in the middle of the 19th century and has become widespread in present-day Icelandic. The overall number of verbs with accusative experiencer subjects has also declined somewhat since the Old Icelandic period.

The only sign of productivity of this class in present-day Icelandic that we know of is the occasional use of accusative for the regular nominative with the verbs finna til ‘feel pain’ and kenna til ‘feel pain’ (literally ‘feel to’). Using accusative for nominative with these verbs is not unexpected as many verbs denoting physical discomfort take accusative experiencer subjects (see (11a)).

4.2. Verbs with theme/patient subjects

Verbs with accusative theme/patient subjects in Old Icelandic can be divided into three semantic classes. As shown in (18), the class of verbs denoting change of state is by far the biggest:
(18) Verbs with theme/patient subjects in Old Icelandic


Representative examples from all these three classes are provided in (19) below. Note that the singular agreement on the verb in (19b) is crucial in showing that the subject is accusative rather than nominative.

(19) a. **Pá velkti lengi úti í hafi** them-ACC tossed long out in ocean ‘They were in rough seas for a long time.’ (Eiríks saga rauða, p. 526)

b. **Fraus að honum klæðin öll.** froze-3.SG at him clothes-ACC all-ACC ‘All his clothes froze to his body.’ (Finnboga saga ramma, p. 635)
Verbs with accusative theme/patient subjects have shown very limited productivity in the history of Icelandic. In fact, of the 77 verbs listed in (18), only about 10–15 are still regularly used with an accusative subject in Modern Icelandic and even these verbs are increasingly used with nominative subjects. This number includes none of the stative verbs and only two motion verbs, *bera* ‘carry’ and *reka* ‘drift’. Moreover, we know of only one verb where accusative seems to have replaced nominative case with theme/patient subjects. This is the verb *drífa* að ‘come flocking’ exemplified below where Old Icelandic (20a) is contrasted with Modern Icelandic (20b):

(20) a. *Aðfanga*ág jóla *drífa* *flokkarnir* að bænum
    Christmas Eve flock the.bands-NOM to the.farm

b. *Aðfanga*ág jóla *drífur* *flokkana* að bænum
    Christmas Eve flocks the.bands-ACC to the.farm

‘On Christmas Eve the bands come flocking to the farm.’
(Svarfdæla saga, p. 1788)

It is also worth noting that accusative is sometimes used instead of the original nominative case with the verb *taka niðri* ‘touch bottom’ in Modern Icelandic as shown in (21). The use of the accusative here is presumably influenced by all the accusative subject verbs denoting phenomena involving natural forces (see further discussion below).

(21) a. *Báturinn* tók *niðri.*
    the.boat-NOM took down

b. *Bátinn* tók *niðri.*
    the.boat-ACC took down

‘The boat touched bottom.’

It could be argued that verbs with accusative theme/patient subjects in Old Icelandic formed semantically coherent classes just like verbs with accusative experiencer subjects. Nevertheless, these verbs have shown very little productivity in the history of Icelandic. We hypothesize that there are two reasons for this lack of productivity. First, the token frequency of these verbs was quite low
since they had a very restrictive usage. For instance, many of the verbs listed in (18b) were primarily used to describe phenomena involving natural forces, e.g. the verb lægja ‘lower’. Some fairly typical examples of this verb are shown in (22):

(22) a. *En þegar um vorið er sjó tók að lægja*
    but already in the spring as see-ACC began to lower
    ‘But already in the spring as the sea got calmer.’
    (Egils saga, p. 408)

b. *þegar er sólina lægði*
    already as the sun-ACC lowered
    ‘already when the sun set’
    (Eyrbyggja saga, p. 579)

c. *Þá tók að lægja veðrið*
    then began to lower the weather-ACC
    ‘Then the storm subsided’
    (Brennu-Njáls saga, p. 219)

The other reason for the lack of productivity of accusative theme/patient subjects is competition from verbs with the “middle” suffix -st. The regular way of forming causative pairs in Old and Modern Icelandic is by marking the intransitive (inchoative) variant by the suffix -st in which case the subject must be nominative. This is exemplified by the verb opna ‘open’ in (23):

(23) a. *Jón opnaði hurðina*
    John-NOM opened the door-ACC

b. *Hurðin opnaðist*
    the door-NOM opened

Many of the verbs listed in (18) could in fact take the suffix -st in Old Icelandic and in some cases this variant would encroach upon the semantic territory of these verbs with the result that the form with -st prevailed. This is the case, for example, with the verbs endurnýja ‘renew’, grynna ‘become shallow’, opna ‘open’, sjá ‘be seen’ and velkja ‘be tossed about’, which have all been ousted as intransitive verbs by endurnýjast, grynnast, opnast, sjást and velkjast.

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16. Low type frequency cannot be the explanation here since the number of verbs with accusative theme/patient subjects is quite high; in fact, it is clearly higher than the number of verbs in the productive class of verbs with accusative experiencer subjects.
5. Comparison with Faroese

The Faroese case system is quite similar to the Icelandic one. However, an important difference is that lexical case has been lost to a much greater extent in Faroese than in Icelandic, both with subjects and objects. In particular, genitive case has more or less fallen out of use in Faroese and has been replaced by other case forms or by prepositional constructions (see Thráinsson et al. 2004: 248–252).

Given the close relations of the two Insular Scandinavian languages, an investigation of the changes in lexical case in Faroese is interesting in order to test the predictions of our hypothesis for Icelandic that a semantically coherent class is more resistant to change than a non-coherent class.

However, there is a problem with a diachronic investigation of Faroese in that this language is poorly documented in its older periods. Therefore, it is not possible to trace the changes Faroese has undergone as thoroughly as in Icelandic, which is well documented from the 12th century onwards. Already in early texts, i.e. the Faroese ballads and other texts from the late 18th century and the early 19th century, Faroese was in the process of losing some of the case patterns that are still preserved in Icelandic (Thráinsson et al. 2004: 426–436).

As a result of these changes, in Modern Faroese no verbs take genitive objects, whereas accusative case on subjects is still found, although only to a very limited degree (see Barnes 1986, Petersen 2002, Eythórsson and Jónsson 2003, Thráinsson et al. 2004, and Jónsson and Eythórsson 2005). Thus, the Faroese facts are comparable to the Icelandic ones discussed in section 4 above, although the development in Faroese is in a sense more “progressed” than in Icelandic. This means that the situation in Faroese is consistent with the hypothesis that a semantically coherent class is more resistant to change than a non-coherent class.

5.1. Genitive objects

Whereas adnominal genitives and genitive objects of prepositions still occur to some extent in Modern Faroese, genitive objects of verbs have completely disappeared. Modern Faroese verbs corresponding to verbs taking genitive objects in Old and Modern Icelandic typically take accusative objects or PP complements. Examples from Faroese involving the monotransitives freista ‘tempt’ and njóta ‘enjoy’, both with an accusative object, are given in (24) (Poulsen et al. 1998):
(24) Faroese
a. um høgra eyga títt freistar teg, tá slít tað
   if right eye your tempts you-ACC, then tear it out
   ‘if your right eye tempts you, then tear it out.’

b. Hann neyt gott av hennara strevi.
   he enjoyed good-ACC of her hard.work
   ‘He benefited from her hard work.’

As shown in (25), these verbs take genitive objects in Modern Icelandic, as was also the case in Old Icelandic:

(25) Icelandic
a. ef heegra auga þitt freistar þín, þá slít það
   if right eye your tempts you-GEN, then tear it out
   ‘if your right eye tempts you, then tear it out.’

b. Hann naut góðs af hennar striti.
   he enjoyed good-GEN of her hard.work
   ‘He benefited from her hard work.’

However, there are a few examples of genitive objects preserved in older Faroese, as evidenced in the ballads (cf. Thráinsson et al. (2004: 431, ex. (120)). The relevant verbs are all monotransitives, e.g. goyma ‘watch (over)’,17 hevna ‘avenge’, vitja ‘visit’, vænta ‘expect’ and bíða ‘wait for’.

(26) Older Faroese
a. tann ið duranna goymir.
   he who the.doors-GEN watches
   ‘he who watches the door.’

b. hevna mín.
   avenge me-GEN

17. Note that in Old Icelandic, the verb geyma (corresponding to Faroese goyma) also occurs with the accusative in the meaning ‘keep’. In Modern Icelandic geyma only means ‘keep’ and only takes an accusative object.
d. aftur skalt tú vænta mín.
   back shall you-SG expect me-GEN
   ‘you shall expect me (to come) back.’

e. kirkjumaður bíðar tín.
   churchman waits you-GEN
   ‘the church man waits for you.’

Already in the ballads and 19th century texts there are also examples of the innovative accusative with some of these verbs, as in (27) (cf. Thráinsson et al. 2004: 431, ex. (121)).

(27) Older Faroese
a. hevna tap faðir síns.
   avenge loss-ACC father his
   ‘avenge the loss of his father.’

b. kom pápin at vitja hana.
   came father.the to visit her-ACC
   ‘the father came to visit her.’

c. hann væntar ringt veður seinnapartin.
   he expects bad weather-ACC afternoon
   ‘He expects bad weather in the afternoon.’

There are no known examples of genitive objects of ditransitives in the ballads. Apparently, these had already been replaced by accusative objects or PP complements by the time of their composition, as in the examples in (28) involving bíðja ‘ask’ and krevja ‘demand’ (cf. Thráinsson et al. 2004: 433, ex. (125a, 125c–d)).

(28) Older Faroese
a. Eg bað hann eina bón.
   I asked him-ACC a-ACC favor-ACC
   ‘I asked asked him a favor.’

b. Teir kravdu hann eftir lyklinum til
   they demanded him-ACC after key.the-DAT to
   húsíð.
   house.the
   ‘They demanded the key to the house from him.’

18. Interestingly, two verbs, bíða ‘wait for’ and goyma ‘watch’, which today govern accusative, could earlier also take dative (cf. Thráinsson et al. 2004:431). This indicates that, with these two verbs, genitive was first replaced by dative case, and only later by accusative.
c. *Teir kravdu lykilin til húsið frá honum.*  
   they demanded key.the-ACC to house from him  
   ‘They demanded the key to the house from him.’

The question arises why genitive objects were lost earlier with monotransitives than ditransitives. Presumably, genitive objects were preserved longer with monotransitives than ditransitives simply because the former had a higher token frequency.\(^{19}\) As a result, there would have been less evidence for the language learner of genitive case with ditransitive verbs, which would have made it more difficult to preserve this type of genitive from one generation to the next. Moreover, it can also be seen in Modern Icelandic that genitive objects are more robust with monotransitives than with ditransitives. In particular, the replacement of genitive objects by PPs is very common, and is attested already in Old Icelandic as well (see section 3).

### 5.2. Accusative subjects

Around fifty verbs with oblique subjects are documented in Faroese sources, all of them involving experiencers, whereas no verbs taking oblique theme/patient subjects are attested (cf. Petersen 2002, Thráinsson et al. 2004). However, most of the relevant verbs have fallen into disuse, occurring only in fixed expressions that have a literary or an archaic flavor. Therefore, the token frequency of the oblique subject verbs in current spoken Faroese is a lot lower than the above figure indicates.

There is a strong tendency in Faroese to substitute nominative case for oblique case on subjects (Nominative Substitution). Thus, for example, the original accusative case with *droyma* ‘dream’ (29a) has been virtually eliminated in favor of nominative case (29b):

(29) Faroese

a. *Meg droymdi ein sáran dreym.*
   me-ACC dreamt-3.SG a bad dream-ACC

b. *Eg droymdi ein sáran dreym.*
   I-NOM dreamt-1.SG a bad dream-ACC
   ‘I had a bad dream.’

\(^{19}\) See Bybee (1994) for the relevance of lexical and categorial token frequency in inflectional morphology. Thus, analogical leveling has been observed to affect the less frequent lexical items first while the more frequent ones persist longer.
Most of the verbs taking oblique subject in Faroese take dative subject. This includes verbs originally taking subjects in the accusative that was replaced by dative (Dative Substitution), e.g. lysta ‘want’ in (30) (cf. Barnes 1986, Petersen 2002, Eyðhórsson and Jónsson 2003).

(30) Faroese

a. $\textit{Meg mæ-ACC lystir at vita}$.
   me-ACC wants to know

b. $\textit{Mær me-DAT lystir at vita}$.
   me-DAT wants to know

   ‘I want to know.’

There are very few speakers of Modern Faroese who recognize accusative as a possible subject case with experiencer verbs (Eyðhórsson and Jónsson 2003, Jónsson and Eyðhórsson 2005). However, there is evidence that it was productive to some extent in earlier Faroese. This evidence involves a few verbs that are likely to be new creations in Faroese: hugbíta (eftir) ‘long for’, nøtra ‘shudder’, skríða (í feginsbrúgv, ófeginsbrúgv) ‘tickle (in the left/right eyebrow), i.e. ‘expect (something good/bad)’, and minnast ‘remember’. The following examples are from Thráinsson et al. (2004: 253):

(31) Faroese

a. $\textit{Meg mæ-ACC nøtrar í holdið}$.
   me-ACC shudders in flesh
   ‘I shudder.’

b. $\textit{Meg me-ACC skríður í feginsbrúgv}$.
   me-ACC tickles in left eyebrow
   ‘I expect something good.’

These verbs either did not exist, or did not take an oblique subject, in Old Icelandic, and the same is true of Modern Icelandic. Particularly telling in this respect is the verb minnast, an -st-verb which has replaced the active minna ‘remember’ (with accusative subject). Old and Modern Icelandic -st-verbs are incompatible with accusative subjects so the occurrence of this verb with an accusative must be a Faroese innovation. In any case, the existence of verbs taking accusative experiencer subjects in Faroese that do not have a counterpart in Old and Modern Icelandic indicates a partial productivity of such verbs at an earlier stage of the language. This is compatible with the hypothesis (cf. 4.1 above) that verbs taking accusative subjects form a coherent semantic class whereas verbs taking genitive objects do not.
The fact that oblique experiencer subjects were preserved longer than theme/patient subjects in Faroese is likely to be due to the higher token frequency of the former, thus making them easier for children to acquire during the acquisition period. For example, the verbs that originally took accusative experiencer subjects include some very common ones (e.g. droyma ‘dream’, minnast ‘remember’), whereas the verbs that may be assumed to have taken accusative theme subjects in earlier Faroese (e.g. reka ‘drift’, taka út ‘take out’) appear to be infrequent in the spoken language (cf. Thráinsson et al. 2004:276–277).

6. Conclusion

As we have amply illustrated in this paper, there are good reasons for distinguishing between two kinds of exceptions to general patterns of argument realization: what we have termed structured exceptions, which involve clustering of lexical items on the basis of shared properties, and arbitrary exceptions, which involve an arbitrary list of lexical items. Structured exceptions display partial productivity and can be extended to new items, whereas arbitrary exceptions are totally unproductive. We have argued that the diachronic development of case selection in Insular Scandinavian (Icelandic and Faroese) provides strong support for this dichotomy. The discussion has focused on two cases of exceptional case selection: accusative subjects and genitive objects. We showed that accusative experiencer subjects, have been semi-productive in the history of Insular Scandinavian whereas genitive objects have been completely unproductive.

Appendix

In this appendix we have left out all verbs that only occur with the relevant case in idiomatic expressions such as nema staðar ‘stop’ (literally ‘hold place-GEN’) and kosta kapps ‘try’. We have also omitted verbs that are listed in dictionaries of Old Icelandic but only attested in Norwegian texts.

(A) Verbs with genitive objects in Old Icelandic


(B) Verbs with genitive objects in Modern Icelandic

(C) Verbs with accusative subjects in Old Icelandic
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