

# Dative/Accusative variation and event structure in Icelandic

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Variation in datives: a micro-comparative perspective

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## 1. Introduction

Icelandic displays ACC/DAT variation both in subjects and objects. The variation between accusative and dative experiencer subjects in Icelandic is known as Dative Substitution (DS):

- (1) a. *Stelpuna/Stelpunni langar að fara*  
the.girl.ACC/DAT wants to go
- b. *Mig/Mér hefur aldrei vantað pening*  
me.ACC/DAT has never needed money.ACC

DS has been intensively investigated in recent years. As a result, it is both well documented and reasonably well understood (see Jónsson & Eythórssón 2005 and references cited there):

- Directionality: DAT replaces ACC, but see Ingason (2010) on some cases where ACC replaces DAT.
- Limits of variation: DS affects only experiencer subjects (oblique theme subjects are often replaced by nominative case).
- Sensitivity to person and number of the subject as DS is least common with 1st person singular subjects.
- Intra-speaker as well as inter-speaker variation.
- Formal variation as DS is not sensitive to any known semantic or pragmatic factors.
- Change in progress (unstable variation) since the middle of the 19th century (for a discussion of Old Icelandic, see Viðarsson 2009).
- Change rooted in language acquisition (not adult innovation).
- Negative attitude by prescriptivists towards DS (cf. the Icelandic term *þágufallssýki*, literally “Dative Sickness”).

DS is an example of an idiosyncratic case being replaced by a more regular case as accusative experiencer subjects are only selected by verbs whereas dative experiencer subjects are also found with adjectives (e.g. *Honum er kalt* ‘He(DAT) is cold’).

In contrast to DS, variation between dative and accusative objects in Icelandic has received very little attention in the linguistic literature (but see Maling 2002 for some examples). This variation usually involves verbs that denote some kind of motion, e.g. how a ball is put in motion. For convenience, we can refer to these verbs as “football verbs”. Verbs of this kind include *slá* ‘hit, punch’, *skalla* ‘head’ and *negla* ‘nail, hit hard’:

- (2) a. *Markmaðurinn sló boltann/boltanum yfir markið*  
 the.goal.keeper punched the.ball.ACC/DAT over the.goal
- b. *Messi skallaði boltann/boltanum í netið*  
 Messi headed the.ball.ACC/DAT in the.net
- c. *Albert negldi boltann/boltanum fram*  
 Albert nailed the.ball.ACC/DAT forward

A search in an electronic newspaper corpus (timarit.is) reveals that the accusative variant is older than the dative variant with all these verbs. The accusative is more common with *slá* and *skalla* but dative seems to be more common with *negla*. We will return to these and other alternating verbs in section 3.

## 2. Object case in Icelandic

Accusative is the default (structural) case on objects in Icelandic but the number of verbs taking direct dative objects is quite high, compared to e.g. German or Faroese. According to Maling (2002), verbs with direct dative objects in Icelandic are almost 500. (For information about the token frequency of accusative and dative objects in Icelandic, see Barðdal 2008.)

Since accusative is structural case with objects in Icelandic, there should be no semantic restrictions on accusative objects. This is true in that transitive verbs with accusative objects are found in almost all semantic classes of transitive verbs. There are very few narrowly defined classes that have dative objects exclusively:

- Verbs of emission (*blikka* ‘blink’, *gjósa* ‘erupt, spew’, *hringja* ‘ring’, *leka* ‘leak’, *pissa* ‘urinate’, *rigna* ‘rain’, *æla* ‘vomit’)
- Throw verbs (*henda* ‘throw away’, *kasta* ‘throw’, *sparka* ‘kick’, *þeyta* ‘fling’)
- Pour verbs (*ausa* ‘scoop, ladle’, *hella* ‘pour’, *skvetta* ‘splash’, *sletta* ‘splash’)

(The terms for the last two classes here are taken from Levin 1993.)

- (3) a. *Nautið meig þá öllu vatninu*  
 the.bull urinated then all.DAT the.water.DAT
- b. *Eldfjallið gaus mikilli ösku*  
 the.volcano spewed much.DAT ash.DAT  
 ‘The volcano spewed a lot of ashes’

Dative objects are quite common among verbs of social interaction (e.g. *hjálpa* ‘help’, *fagna* ‘rejoice’, *fylgja* ‘accompany’ and *hlýða* ‘obey’) and various motion verbs. However, accusative objects are also found with interaction verbs (e.g. *aðstoða* ‘assist’) and motion verbs (e.g. *hreyfa* ‘move’ and *draga* ‘move’). As discussed by Blume (1998), verbs of social interaction tend to take dative objects cross-linguistically.

Various verb classes take accusative objects exclusively (or at least predominantly). These classes consist of transitive verbs whose objects have many patient-related properties:

- Verbs of creation (*baka* ‘bake’, *byggja* ‘build’, *elda* ‘cook’, *prjóna* ‘knit’)
- Change-of-state verbs derived from adjectives (*bleyta* ‘wet’, *fylla* ‘fill’, *herða* ‘tighten’, *lengja* ‘lengthen, extend’, *þynna* ‘dilute’)
- Object experiencer verbs (*angra* ‘anger’, *gleðja* ‘please’, *hryggja* ‘sadden’)
- Butter verbs (*bronsa* ‘bronze’, *girða* ‘fence’, *innramma* ‘frame’, *króma* ‘chrome’, *krydda* ‘spice’, *merkja* ‘label’, *múra* ‘plaster’, *salta* ‘salt’, *söðla* ‘saddle’, *tjarga* ‘tar’, *varalita* ‘lipstick’, *veggfóðra* ‘wallpaper’)

- (4) a. *Eiríkur bakaði kökuna*  
Eric baked the.cake.ACC
- b. *Stjórnin herti reglurnar*  
the.board tightened the.rules.ACC
- c. *Fréttirnar glöddu mig*  
the.news pleased me.ACC  
‘The news made me happy’
- d. *Sigga innrammaði myndina*  
Sigga framed the.picture.ACC

Nevertheless, there are some highly transitive verbs that take dative objects, e.g. various verbs of killing like *slátra* ‘slaughter’ and *bana* ‘kill’.

Interestingly, there are some verbs in Icelandic that alternate between accusative and dative where the accusative is used for physically affected objects but the dative is used for objects undergoing motion:

- (5) a. *Jón sópaði gólfíð*  
Jón swept the.floor.ACC
- b. *Jón sópaði snjónum burt*  
Jón swept the.snow.DAT away

Svenonius (2002) claims that dative case in Icelandic is assigned to objects if the verb denotes two subevents that do not overlap temporally. For instance, the two subevents in (5a) are temporally indistinguishable as the action of the agent cannot be teased apart

from the effects on the object. The subevent associated with the agent in (5b) need not last for the duration of the movement subevent since the agent does not completely determine the outcome of the second subevent. Although this analysis works very nicely for examples like (5a) vs. (5b), this cannot be the whole story for transitive motion verbs in Icelandic as we will see in section 3 below.

### 3. Variation between dative and accusative objects

In some cases, a new dative variant seems to be influenced by semantic similarity with another verb. This can be seen e.g. with *hespa af* ‘finish quickly’ which is almost synonymous with *ljúka (af)* ‘finish’ which selects a dative object.

- (6) a. *Ég ætla að hespa þetta/þessu af*  
 I intend to wrap this.ACC/DAT up  
 ‘I will finish this quickly’
- b. *Ég ætla að ljúka þessu af*  
 I intend to finish this.DAT off  
 ‘I will get this over with’

This is not surprising given the fact that case assignment by novel verbs in Icelandic is sometimes determined by semantic affinity with an already existing verb. For instance, *díllíta* ‘delete’ takes a dative object just like *eyða* ‘delete, spend’:

- (7) a. \* *Einhver díllítaði fælinn*  
 somebody deleted the.file.ACC
- b. *Einhver díllítaði fælnum*  
 somebody deleted the.file.DAT
- c. *Einhver eyddi skjalinu*  
 somebody deleted the.file.DAT

Returning to football verbs, I am aware of at least 11 such verbs that vary between ACC and DAT object: *flikka* ‘flick’, *hamra* ‘hammer’, *hitta* ‘meet’, *hreinsa* ‘clear away’, *klína* ‘stick’, *krossa* ‘cross’, *negla* ‘nail, hit hard’, *skalla* ‘head’, *skrúfa* ‘screw, put a spin on’, *slá* ‘hit’ and *smyrja* ‘butter’.

- (8) a. *Markmaðurinn sló boltann/boltanum yfir markið*  
 the.goal.keeper punched the.ball.ACC/DAT over the.goal
- b. *Messi skallaði boltann/boltanum í netið*  
 Messi headed the.ball.ACC/DAT in the.net
- c. *Albert negldi boltann/boltanum fram*  
 Albert nailed the.ball.ACC/DAT forward

The analysis of Svenonius (2002) rules out the accusative variant here since the second subevent is temporally distinguishable from the first subevent. The variation in examples like (8) seems to reflect a dual status of the object in terms of event decomposition. The object is a patient with respect to the first subevent which involves the agent making forceful contact with an entity but a non-patient with respect to the second subevent involving movement of the entity denoted by the object. Thus, accusative highlights the (forceful) contact with the object whereas dative highlights the movement of the object.

As expected, when verbs like *slá* and *skalla* are used as pure contact verbs, only accusative case is possible:

- (9) a. *María sló mig*  
Mary hit me.ACC
- b. \**María sló mér*  
Mary hit me.DAT
- (10) a. *Zidane skallaði ítalska varnarmanninn*  
Zidane headed the.Italian defender.ACC  
'Zidane headbutted the Italian defender'
- b. \**Zidane skallaði ítalska varnarmanninum*  
Zidane headed the.Italian defender.DAT

ACC/DAT variation is also possible when the dative seems to mark motion in a metaphorical sense:

- (11) a. *Það varð að framlengja leikinn/leiknum*  
there had to extend the.game.ACC/DAT  
'The game had to go into overtime'
- b. *Emilía sló inn gögnin/gögnunum*  
Emily hit in the.data.ACC/DAT  
'Emily entered the data'

The semantic components licensing the case variation in examples like (8) are contact vs. motion. There are also some verbs in Icelandic that vary between accusative and dative object on the basis of creation vs. motion. This can be seen with the verbs *hræra saman* 'stir together' and *hnoða saman* 'knead together, make (in a clumsy way)', as in (12). These verbs can be construed as verbs of creation, triggering accusative object, but if they are construed as verbs of motion, dative case is assigned to the object.

- (12) a. *Þú skalt hræra þetta/þessu saman*  
you should stir this.ACC/DAT together
- b. *Hann reyndi að hnoða saman eitthvað/einhverju*  
he tried to knead together something.ACC/DAT

These verbs involve two subevents that are temporally indistinguishable. This suggests that the crucial factor here is the status of the object as a non-patient undergoing movement or a patient (e.g. being contacted or created). This characterization also fits well with the traditional observation that verbs taking dative objects tend to be low in semantic transitivity (see e.g. Blume 1998).

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