



Variation: Facts and Figures

Höskuldur Thráinsson
University of Iceland



The purpose of this paper

- To tell you about recent and ongoing work on Icelandic and Faroese dialect syntax (IceDiaSyn and FarDiaSyn), what the main objectives are, what the methodology has been like, and why we think this work is descriptively and theoretically interesting.



The structure of the presentation

- Main objectives of IceDiaSyn and FarDiaSyn
- Some methodological points
- Selected descriptive discoveries
- Theoretical relevance

Main objectives of IceDiaSyn and FarDiaSyn

Some questions:

- Is Icelandic syntax as uniform as often assumed?
- If there is variation in Icelandic syntax, what is it like (extent, nature, variants, distribution of variants, inter- and intra-speaker variation ...)?
- How similar to (or different from) Icelandic is Faroese? Does it show similar variation? (Maybe it does not because of the extensive Danish influence in the past.)
- Once we have characterized this variation, what can it tell us about the nature of linguistic variation, linguistic change and linguistic knowledge, e.g. types of change, nature of internalized grammars, parameters ...?



An intermezzo on large scale overviews

A long standing tradition in Iceland:

- Björn Guðfinsson: extensive phonological overviews in the 1940s (over 6500 school children tested)
- Höskuldur Thráinsson and Kristján Árnason: extensive phonological overviews in the 1980s (some 2800 speakers, all age groups, all parts of the country)
- Ásta Svavarsdóttir and later Jóhannes Gísli Jónsson and Thórhallur Eythórsson: Subject Case marking (Dative sickness) in the 1990s: some 200 and 900 students, respectively
- Sigríður Sigurjónsdóttir and Joan Maling: the New Passive/New Impersonal around 2000 (over 1700 subjects)
- IceDiaSyn and FarDiaSyn



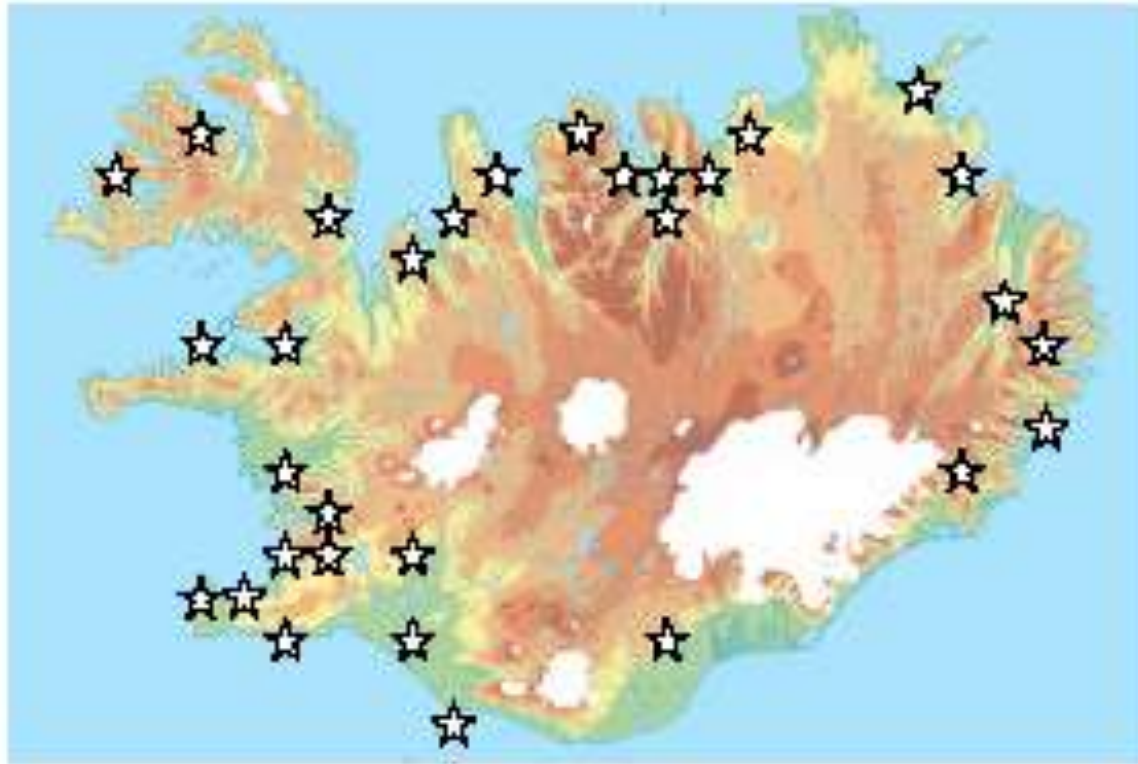
Methodological points, 1

What we did/are doing in IceDiaSyn:

- **Pilot study** in Iceland (2004-2005)
- **Three large overviews**: some 30 locations, roughly 3x750 speakers, 4 age groups (15, 20-25, 40-45, 65-70 (+/- 3 years)), some 45 constructions and over 500 test sentences, written questionnaires including various tasks
- **Two smaller overviews** piggy-backing on a national questionnaire for 16 year olds (2x7-800 subjects)
- **Interviews** with a subset of the speakers
- **50+ hrs. of spontaneous speech** of various types
- **Student essays** (from 16-20 year olds) and **blogs**
- **More interviews planned**



Places visited in IceDiaSyn





Methodological points, 2

What we have done/are doing in FarDiaSyn:

- **A preliminary study in 1997** (some 120 high school students in Tórshavn)
- **A pilot study for FarDiaSyn in 2006** (6 different places, 4 age groups, some 240 subjects)
- 3. **Structured interviews in 2008** (NORMS and NLVN: 6 different places, a group of over 30 linguists (10 from Iceland), interviews with 30–50 speakers each ...) **w**
- 4. **Large overviews underway** (written questionnaires, different age groups, some 20 places, approx. 24 speakers in each ...)
- 5. **More interviews are planned**

Places visited in Far. pilot study





Methodological points, 3

In the big surveys we have (cf. e.g. Schütze 1996 (ch. 5), Cornips and Poletto 2005):

- made sure that everybody got the **same instructions** by having the administrator read written instructions to the participants (the instructions were also printed on the questionnaire)
- **explained the grading scale** we were using by giving examples
- **varied the order** of the test sentences (half of the subjects got the sentences presented in one order, half the opposite)
- **tested various constructions** in each overview and **included fillers** (both grammatical and ungrammatical ones)
- **varied the tasks** (absolute judgments, relative judgments, fill-ins)
- **had a coffee break** half way through the session to try to prevent excessive fatigue and boredom
- **included context sentences** to try to make sure that all subjects were thinking of similar contexts



Methodological points, 4

- **tried to use natural sounding examples** (short, simple, “real”, semantically plausible and free of “disturbing words”)
- tested **multiple examples** of each construction to minimize unwanted effects (e.g. lexical, semantic, pragmatic ...)
- **played some of the sentences from a CD** to be able to control effects of intonation and stress
- tried to make the contrasting variants close to being **minimal pairs**
- tested **different types of speakers** (age groups, locations ...)
- threw out data from **“unreliable speakers”** and avoided “language specialists”
- tried to make sure in the instructions that the speakers would **report on their own intuition** (cf. Henry 2005)



Methodological points, 5

Two important points:

- It is sometimes recommended to ask for **relative rather than absolute judgments** (cf. e.g. Schütze 1996:77ff.). We have experimented extensively with both methods and found that asking for relative judgments can be problematic at times but it is sometimes useful to use both methods.
- It is sometimes recommended to ask **indirect rather than direct questions** (e.g., “What do people around here say?” “What is most common in your (local) dialect?” rather than “Could you say this yourself?”). In our kind of study it is impossible to use indirect questions – and we also think they are methodologically problematic.



Methodological points, 6

Potential problems with soliciting relative judgments:

- Sometimes tricky to create a context that is equally plausible for both (all) variants.
- The preferred variant sometimes “rules out” the other(s) as speakers are often reluctant to accept more than one when faced with a choice.
- Comparison of variants may draw unfortunate attention to variation and cause speakers to think of prescriptive “rules”.



Methodological points, 7

An example of the usefulness of combining absolute and relative judgments:

	selection of dative case	acceptance of dative case (absol. judgm.)
object case with <i>rústa</i> 'smash, demolish'	88,1%	83,6%
subject case with <i>langa</i> 'want'	19,2%	68,2%

- Note also that there will be a **significant negative correlation** between judgments of opposite values of variables when there is little intra-speaker variation but not if there is considerable variation of that kind:
rústa Dat/Acc object: significant negative correlation (at the 0.01 level)
langa Dat/Acc subject: no such negative correlation



Methodological points, 8

The importance of asking direct questions:

- The “indirect method” (asking “What do people around here say?” ...) **cannot be used** if one of the goals is to compare groups of speakers and interpret the results statistically.
- The indirect method **cannot be used** where there is very little awareness of the existence of (local) dialects.
- Most importantly: An indirect question is **not** a question about an individual speaker’s **intuition**, i.e. not a question soliciting an “acceptability reaction” based on “an individual grammar” (cf. Henry 2005b). It is more like a sociological question about beliefs and opinions – which is a different thing.



Selected descriptive discoveries

Icelandic: Over 40 constructions, including:

- Dative Sickness
- The New Passive (Impersonal)
- The Extended Progressive
- Verb Movement (and possible lack thereof)

Faroese: Many of the same constructions, including:

- Dative Subjects
- Passives
- Expletives
- Verb Movement (or lack thereof)



Icel. Dative Sickness – examples and overview

Some examples (Dat. subj. for earlier Acc. subj., cf. e.g. Jónsson and Eythórsson 2005, Thráinsson 2007):

- (1) a. **Okkur Þorvaldi** langar að fara á þorrablót
us Thorvald(D) want to go to thorrablót
- b. **Honum** hlakkar til að komast loksins heim.
him(D) looks forward to to get finally home
- c. **Strákunum** langar til að fara með honum
the-boys(D) want to to go with him
- d. Hann spurði hvort **mér** vantaði ekki lán.
he asked if me(D) needed not loan
- e. Hún heldur að **honum** vanti annan síma.
she thinks that him(D) needs another phone

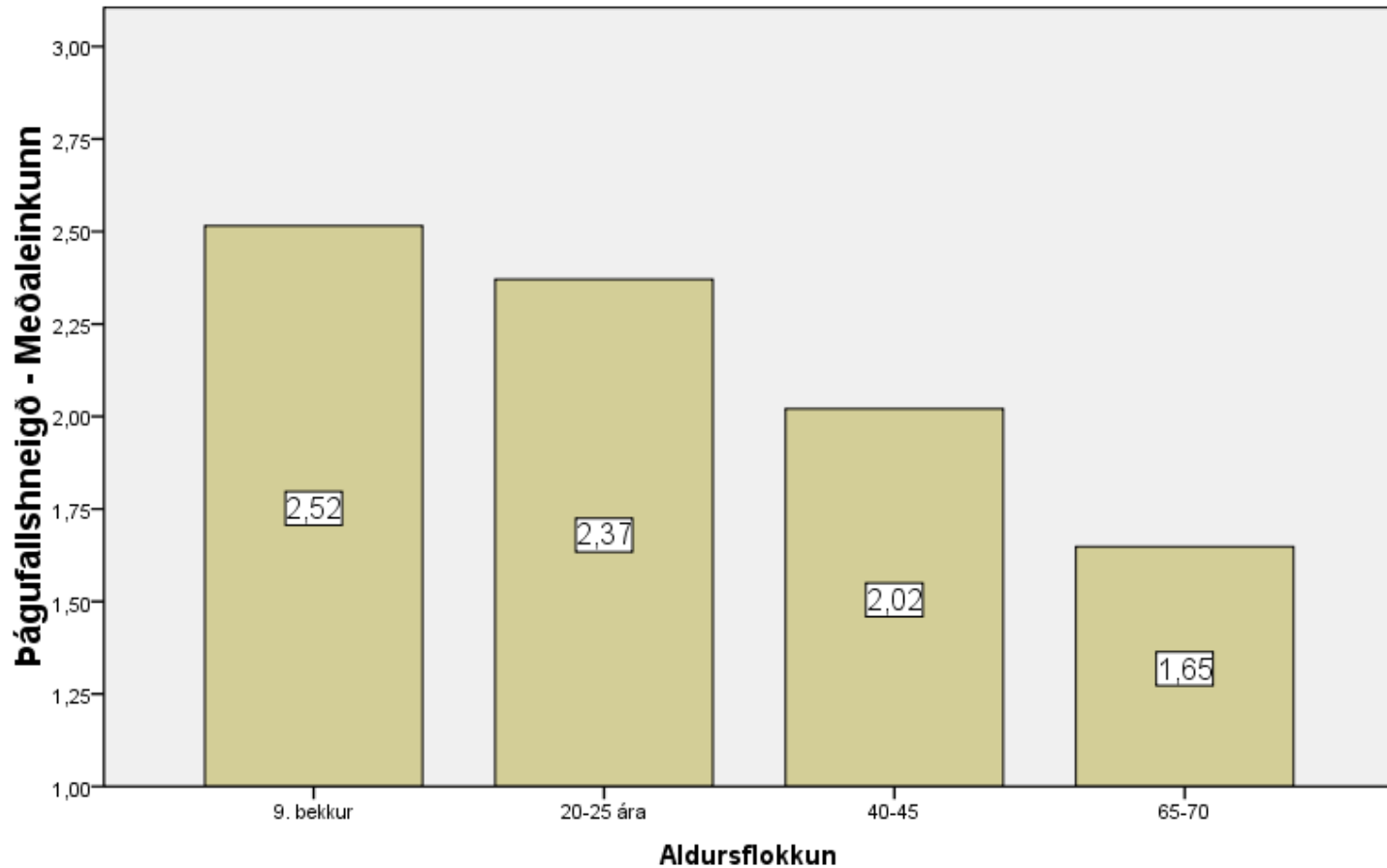
Age: Strong correlation and highly significant (Pearson corr. 0,511, $p < 0,001$)

Education: Weaker but significant correlation ($p < 0,05$, controlling for age).

Area: No clear geographical differences (somewhat less common in some rural areas (e.g. Borgarfjörður) and in NE Iceland (esp. in Thingeyjarsýsla) than elsewhere. Relatively uncommon in Reykjavík but common in Selfoss and Keflavík (S and SW Iceland).



Icel. Dative Sickness and age





The New Passive in Icel., examples and overview

Some examples (non-agreeing participle and non-nom. (def.) argum., cf. e.g. Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir 2002, Thráinsson 2007):

- (2) a. Það var **rekið** **manninn** út af staðnum.
 there was thrown(sg.n.) the-man(sg.m.A) out of the place
- b. Það var strax **dæmt** **vítaspyrnu**
 there was immediately called(sg.n.) foul(sg.f.A)
- c. Það var **beðið** **mig** að vaska upp.
 there was asked(n.sg.) me(sg.f./m.A) to was up
- d. Það var **skammað** **mig** fyrir letina.
 there was scolded(n.sg.) me(sg.f./m.A) for the-laziness
- e. Það var **strítt** **honum** á hverjum degi.
 there was teased(n.sg.) him(sg.m.D) on every day

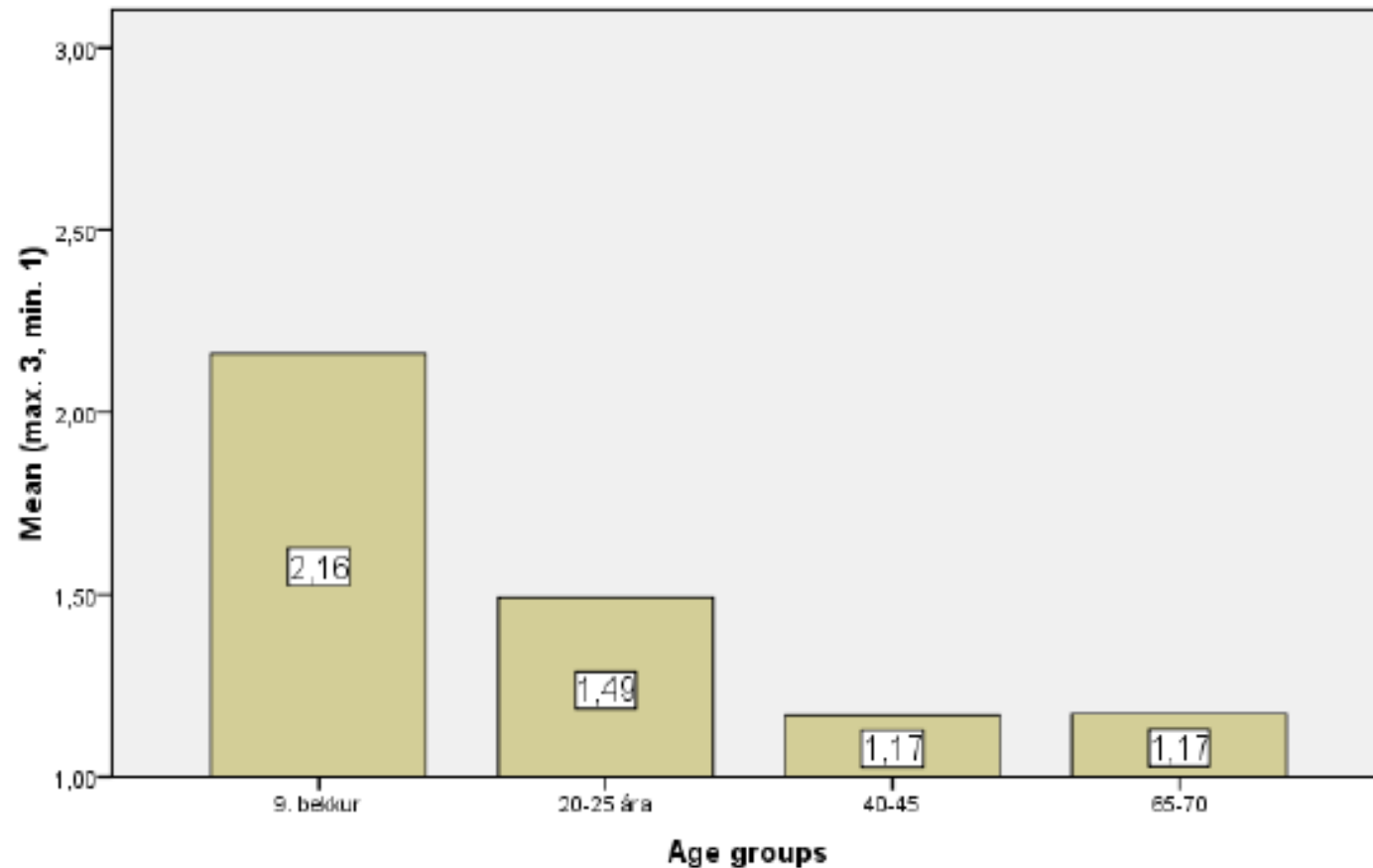
Age: Strong correlation and highly significant (Pearson corr. 0,586, $p < 0,001$)

Education: Weaker but significant correlation (Pearson corr. 0,308, $p < 0,05$, controlling for age).

Area: No clear geographical differences (somewhat less common in some rural areas (e.g. in Borgarfjörður (W) and Thingeyjarsýsla (NE)) than elsewhere. Relatively uncommon in Reykjavík but common in Selfoss and Keflavík (S and SW Iceland)).



The New Passive in Icel. and age



The Extended Progressive in Icel. – examples and overview

Some examples (progressive ('be' + inf.) extended to stative verbs, cf. Thráinsson 2007):

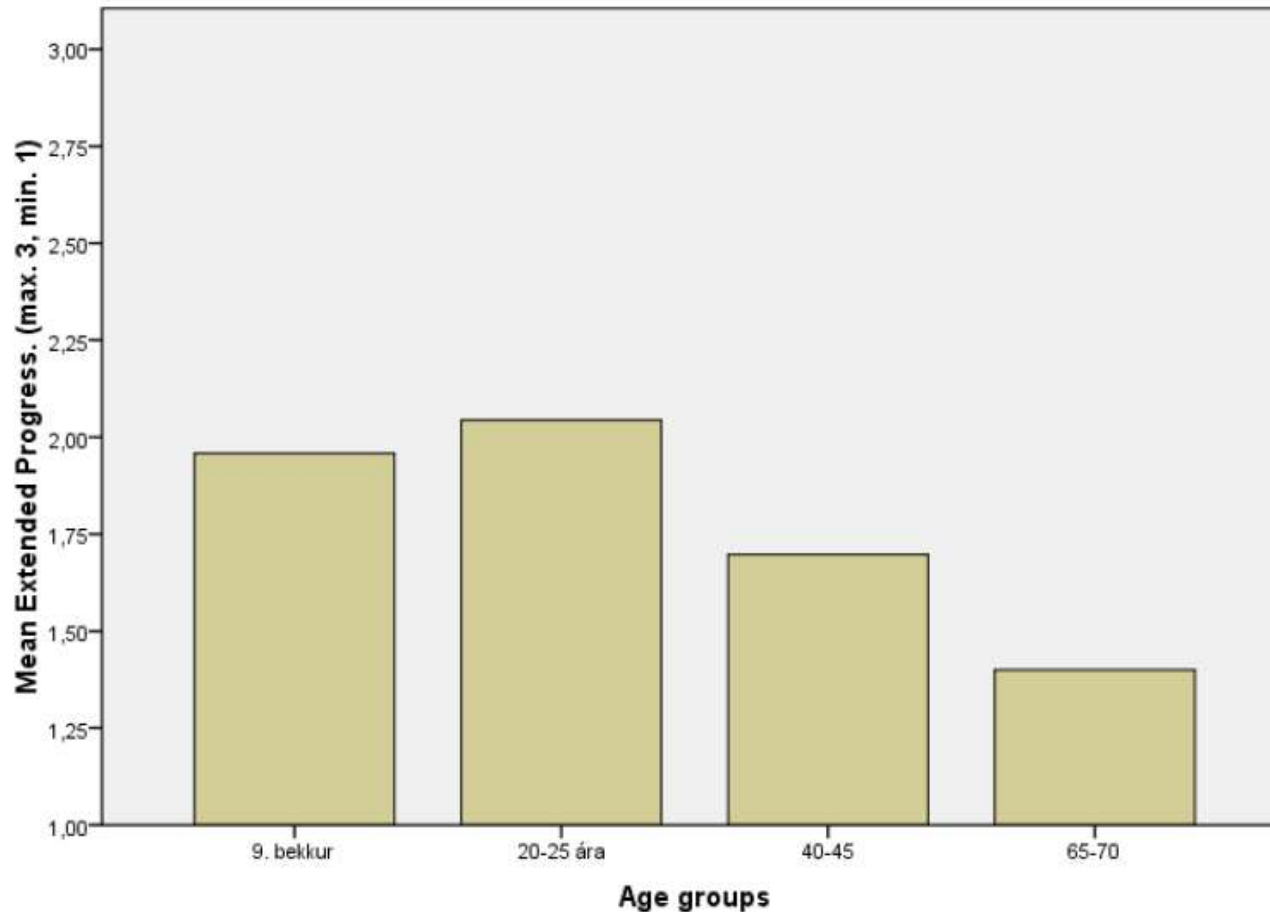
- (3) a. Honum **er að leiðast** alveg óskaplega í vinnunni.
him is being bored completely terribly at the-work
- b. Hann **er vonandi að skilja** enskuna betur núna.
he is hopefully understanding the-English better now
- c. Hann **er bara ekki að skilja** stærðfræðina.
he is just not understanding the-math
- d. Fólk **var bara ekki að vilja** fara heim.
people were just not wanting go home
- e. Hún **er ekki einusinni að mega** fara út á kvöldin.
she is not even maying go out in the-evening

Age: Fairly strong correlation and highly significant (Pearson corr. 0,407, $p < 0,001$).

Education: No correlation with education.



The Icel. Extended Progressive and age



Verb Movement in Icel. (and possible lack thereof)

A recent claim (Wiklund et al. 2007:211):

“verb movement is optional in embedded questions, relative clauses, and adverbial clauses in varieties of Icelandic”

and (Wiklund et al., 2007:214):

“*að* is optional when there is verb movement in embedded questions and relative clauses ... When there is no verb movement, *að* is obligatorily absent”

It is true that it is **possible to find instances of Adv-Vf order in embedded clauses in Icelandic**, especially in relative clauses and certain types of adverbial clauses and *wh*-clauses, but they vary considerably in their acceptability and the **Vf-Adv order is always the default order in all types of embedded clauses** (see Angantýsson (in progress) and Thráinsson 2008 for alternative accounts).

We were **not able to find any evidence for the claim about the relationship between presence/absence of *að* and Vf-Adv/Adv-Vf order** in relative clauses and embedded questions.



Icel. Verb Movement, 2

Acceptance of some Vf-Adv and Adv-Vf orders:

Example sentences	Order	Accepted by	N of subjects
Hann spurði hvort þeir hefðu alltaf verið flughræddir he asked if they had always been afraid of flying	Vf-Adv	88,7%	754
Hún spurði hvort þeir alltaf hefðu verið hræddir við mýs he asked if they always had been afraid of mice	Adv-Vf	12,2%	756
Þar var alls konar matur sem henni líkaði ekki there was all sorts of food that she liked not	Vf-Adv	87,7%	756
Þar var margt fólk sem hann ekki þekkti there was many people that he not knew	Adv-Vf	36,3%	753



Icel. Verb Movement, 3

Acceptance of some Adv-Vf orders in embedded *wh*-questions with and without *að* 'that':

Example sentences	<i>að</i>	Accepted by	N of subjects
Hann spurði hvort að hún aldrei hefði borðað kjöt he asked whether that she never had eaten meat	+	10,1%	713
Hann spurði hvort þeir aldrei hefðu borðað svið he asked whether they never had eaten sheep heads	-	10,0%	710
Hann spurði hvort að þeir alltaf hefðu búið í kjördæminu he asked whether that they always had lived in the-district	+	17,8%	754
Hann spurði hvort hún alltaf hefði sungið falskt he asked whether she always had sung out-of-tune	-	18,3%	711

Dative Subjects in Faroese – examples and overview

Example sentence	Dat. subj.	Accepted by	N of subjects
Henni dámar , at hyggja í sjónvarp her(D) likes to look at TV	+	87%	77
Hon dámar , at lurta eftir tónleiki she(N) likes to listen to music	-	55,1%	78
Honum tørvar ikki, at hugsa meira um tað him(D) needs not to think more about that	+	77,6%	76
Hann tørvar ikki at hava svar til alt he(N) needs not to have answer to everything	-	22,7%	75
Henni nýtist ikki, at hugsa um klokkuna her(D) needs not, to think about the-clock	+	70,1%	77
Hon nýtist ikki, at standa í bíðirøð she(N) needs not to stand in line	-	55,8%	77
Honum manglar , at gera húsini liðug him(D) lacks to make the-houses ready	+	61,0%	77
Hann manglar , at prógva tað í verki he(N) lacks to prove it in work	-	63,6%	77



Far. Dative Subjects, 2

- The preceding table shows a considerable inter-speaker, intra-speaker and lexical variation in the use of Dat. vs. Nom. subjects in Faroese (cf. the preceding table). Many of the verbs listed by Thráinsson et al. (2004:254ff.) as taking Dat. subjects are uncommon in the spoken language. Very few verbs take exclusively Dat. subjects anymore.
- The substitution of Nom. for Dat. subjects is apparently not a recent development, since there is **no significant correlation between age and Nom. (for D.) subject** in our data so far, neither for the verbs in question as a whole nor for the most common one, *dáma* 'like'.



Far. Dative subjects, 3

The data just observed indicate that it is tricky to test Holmberg & Platzack's (H&P's) claim (1995:173) about examples like the following as evidence for "weak" morphological case in Faroese:

- (4) a. **Mær** dámar mjólkina.
me(D) likes the-milk
- b. Hann heldur **meg** dáma mjólkina.
he believes me(A) like the-milk.

This needs to be tested with verbs that only allow Dat. subjects (at least for the speakers in question) – and it can be done (data based on judgments from 6 speakers of Faroese, who all agreed on this(!)):

- (5) a. **Mær** hóvar hetta best.
me(D) likes this best
- b. *Eg hóvi hetta best.
I(N) like this best.
- c. Hon helt **mær**/*meg hóva hetta best.
she believed me(D/*A) like this best





Faroese Passives

Expected and unexpected passives:

Example sentence	Def. DO	Accepted by	N of subjects
Tað bleiv sligið meg . there was hit(n.sg.) me(sg.f./m.A)	+	1,3%	77
Sunnumorgunin varð sligið ein mann í andlitið. Sunday morning was hit(n.sg.) a man(sg.m.A) in the-face	-	5,2%	77
Tað bleiv vaskað teimum væl um hárið there was washed(n.sg.) them(pl.) carefully about the-hair	+	22,1%	77
Tað bleiv róst henni í bløðunum there was praised(n.sg.) her(D) in the-papers	+	35,1%	77
Tað bleiv givið gentuni eina dukku . there was given(n.sg.) the-girl(D) a doll(sg.f..A)	-	21,8	78
Tað bleiv lovað henni eina teldu there was promised(n.sg.) her(D) a computer(sg.f.A)	-	41,6%	77

- Relatively **weak but significant correlation with age** (PCorr 0,295, $p = 0,01$), omitting the first two examples. So this may be a new development.



Expletive constructions in Faroese

Transitive expletives are accepted by some speakers (cf. also Thráinsson et al. 2004:281ff.):

Example sentence	Accepted by	N of subjects
Tað hevur onkur etið súreplið there has somebody eaten the-apple	19,5%	77
Tað keypti onkur húsini hjá Róa there bought somebody the-house of Rói	16,9%	77
Tað hevði onkur tikið súkluna hjá mær there had somebody taken the-bike of mine	23,1%	78
Tað hevur helst eingin lisið hana til enda there has probably nobody read it to end	37,7%	77

No significant correlation with age.



Expletive constructions in Faroese, 2

Some speakers accept the **high subject position** in (intransitive) expletives (as opposed to MSc., cf. e.g. Vangsnes 2002, Thráinsson 2007):

Example sentence	Accepted by	N of subjects
Tað hevði onkur dansað í garðinum there had somebody danced in the-garden	33,8%	77
Tað eru nakrir gestir komnir úr Íslandi there are some guests come from Iceland	67,5%	77
Tað blivu nógvir pengar tiknir there was much money taken	62,3%	77
Tað hevði ein ketta verið í køkinum there had a cat been in the-kitchen	33,8%	77

No significant correlation with age.



Verb Movement in Faroese

Adv-Vf order is the default order in all types of embedded clauses (cf. Thráinsson et al. 2004:297ff., 438ff.), which is the opposite of Icelandic:

Example sentence	Vf-Adv	Accepted by	N of subjects
Hann er keddur av, at Jógvan hevur ongantið lisið hana he is sad over that Jógvan has never read it	Vf-Adv	24,7%	77
Tey harmast um, at neyðhjálpin ongantið kom fram í Asia they are sad that emergency-aid never came forth in Asia	Adv-Vf	76,3%	76
Lat hana vera, um hon vil ikki koma við let her be if she wants not come with	Vf-Adv	44,2%	77
Lat hann fáa frið, um hann ikki vil hava teg let him have peace if he not wants have you	Adv-Vf	82,1	78
Hann spurði, hví Pætur hevði ikki lisið bókina he asked why Peter had not read the-book	Vf-Adv	32,5%	77
Foreldrini spurðu, hví Pætur ikki hevði ringt heim the-parents asked why Peter not had called home	Adv-Vf	89,6%	77
Har var nógvur matur, sum hon hevði ongantið smakkað there was much food that she had never tasted	Vf-Adv	28,6%	77
Har vóru nógv fólk, sum hon ongantið havði sæð fyrr there was much people that she never had seen before	Adv-Vf	92,3%	78

Some correlation between Vf-Adv and age (PCorr. 0,224) and **almost significant** (p = 0,055 – but note the direction: younger more Vf-Adv!)

Theoretical relevance of this kind of variation studies

- 1. Variation as evidence for different types of linguistic change:**
 - The Icelandic data show the difference between **change that spreads lexically** (Dative Sickness, Extended Progressive) vs. **non-lexically** (New Passive); **slowly** (Dative Sickness) and **fast** (Extended Progressive), **across generations** (Extended Progressive) or **not** (New Passive). Interesting for theories of change, cf. e.g. Hale (2006) and Lightfoot (2006) (who argue for the role of acquisition in language change) vs. Croft (2000), who wants to link change and usage.
- 2. Variation as evidence for inter- vs. intra-speaker variation:**
 - While inter-speaker variation is something which generative variationists love, intra-speaker variation is more difficult to reconcile with popular models of internalized grammars and parameter setting, unless one assumes some sort of a grammar-competition model (cf. Kroch 2001 and references cited there). But it has also been argued that intra-speaker variation cannot always be a reflection of competing grammars (cf. e.g. Jónsson and Ethórsson 2005 on variation in subject case in insular Scand – cf. also Adger 2006, 2007, Adger and Smith 2005 on alternative ways of accounting for intra-speaker variation).



Theoretical relevance, 2

What about parameters?

This kind of variation studies offers a new way of “testing” parameters: Where do we find (statistically significant) correlations? Some examples from the Faroese data under discussion (cf. also Thráinsson 2009):

- There is a significant correlation between the acceptance of a “high” subject in intransitive expletive constructions and the acceptance of transitive expletives (PCorr. 0,356, significant at the 0.01 level). (Predicted by Jonas 1996, Bobaljik and Jonas 1996, Bobaljik and Thráinsson 1998, etc.).



Theoretical relevance, 3

Looking for parametric correlations, contd.:

- There is a significant correlation between the acceptance of Vf-Adv order in embedded clauses (other than bridge verb complements) and Stylistic Fronting (PCorr. 0.357, significant at the 0.01 level). (Predicted by H&P)
- There is some correlation between the acceptance of Vf-Adv order and the acceptance of transitive expletives but it is not statistically significant in this data (PCorr 0.286, $p = 0.081$). (There is expected to be correlation here according to Jonas 1996, Bobaljik and Jonas 1996, Bobaljik and Thráinsson 1998, etc.).

etc.



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An epilogue: The blind men and the elephant

(because it is better to have 40 slides than 39)

An elephant is like a

- pillar (if you feel the leg)
- rope (if you feel the tail)
- tree (if you feel the trunk)
- fan (if you feel the ear)
- wall (if you feel the belly)
- solid pipe (if you feel the tusk)

So you need to feel the whole elephant to know what it is like.

