Not so Quirky: On Subject Case in Icelandic¹

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1 Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of subject case in Icelandic, extending and refining the observations of Jónsson (1997-1998) and some earlier work on this topic. It will be argued that subject case in Icelandic is more predictable from lexical semantics than previous studies have indicated (see also Mohanan 1994 and Narasimhan 1998 for a similar conclusion about Hindi). This is in line with the work of Jónsson (2000) and Maling (2002) who discuss various semantic generalizations about case assignment to objects in Icelandic.

This paper makes two major claims. First, there are semantic restrictions on non-nominative subjects in Icelandic which go far beyond the well-known observation that such subjects cannot be agents. It will be argued that non-nominative case is unavailable to all kinds of subjects that could be described as agent-like, including subjects of certain psych-verbs and intransitive verbs of motion and change of state.

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Second, the traditional dichotomy between structural and lexical case is insufficient in that two types of lexical case must be recognized: truly idiosyncratic case and what we might call semantic case. Accusative subjects and dative theme subjects belong to the first category whereas dative goal or experiencer subjects belong to the second one. Therefore, I will use the term oblique subject rather than “quirky” subject for non-nominative subjects in Icelandic since the latter term is based on the assumption (rejected here) that lexical case is always idiosyncratic.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 compares nominative and oblique subjects, illustrating semantic restrictions on oblique subjects in various verb classes. Section 3 shows that accusative subjects are systematically excluded from certain predicates that can have dative subjects. This is argued to support the view that accusative case on subjects is always idiosyncratic whereas dative case on goal and experiencer subjects is semantic. Section 4 discusses two ongoing changes in subject case in Icelandic: Dative Substitution, which affects accusative experiencer subjects, and Nominative Substitution, which affects oblique theme subjects. Both of these changes involve loss of truly idiosyncratic case on subjects in Icelandic. The main conclusions of the paper are summarized in section 5.

2 Nominative vs. oblique subjects

Some verbs in Icelandic take a subject in accusative, dative or genitive case. This is exemplified in (1) below:²

(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’

Dative case is clearly the most common case on oblique subjects in Icelandic (see Jónsson 1997-1998, 2001) but accusative case is also reasonably

² I use the following abbreviations for the four cases in Icelandic: N = nominative, A = accusative, D = dative and G = genitive.
common. Genitive subjects are extremely rare in Icelandic (see Jónsson 2000, 2001) and therefore they will be ignored here.³

In traditional grammars of Icelandic oblique subjects are often referred to as “quasi-subjects” (“frumlagsígildi”), presumably because they do not control agreement on the finite verb. The finite verb is invariably third person singular irrespective of the person and number of the oblique subject, unless it agrees in number with a nominative object. However, as first argued by Andrews (1976), oblique subjects in Icelandic behave like nominative subjects in all other respects (see also Thráinsson 1979:462-76, Zaenen, Maling & Thráinsson 1985, Sigurðsson 1989:204-9 and Jónsson 1996:110-19). This can be illustrated by a number of syntactic tests which need not concern us here.

This section compares nominative subjects with oblique subjects from a lexical semantics point of view. Agent, experiencer and theme subjects are discussed in separate subsections below but the final subsection touches on the theoretical implications of the data. The contrast between nominative and dative goal subjects is not reviewed here but see Jónsson (2000) for discussion.

2.1 Subject case on agents

Oblique subjects in Icelandic are typically found with verbs denoting feelings, physical sensation, cognition or perception:

(2) a. Fólkinu sárnuðu þessi ummæli
    the people-D hurt these words-N
    ‘The people were hurt by these words’

b. Hana verkjar í bakið
    her-A aches in the back
    ‘Her back is aching’

c. Mig minnir að hann búi í Reykjavík
    me-A remembers that he lives in R.
    ‘I seem to remember that he lives in Reykjavík’

d. Eiríki finnst þetta ómögulegt
    Eric-D finds this-N impossible

The subject of these verbs is an experiencer but oblique subjects can have other theta-roles (see sections 2.3 and 3 below). As many researchers have observed, oblique subjects in Icelandic cannot be agents. This is true not only of prototypical agents, i.e. agents acting volitionally, but also of

³ With respect to the distinction between idiosyncratic case and semantic case discussed in section 3, it is quite clear that genitive case on subjects is idiosyncratic.
non-volitional agents (cf. Jónsson 1997-1998). These two kinds of agents will be discussed separately in the following subsections.

2.1.1 Volitional agents

That oblique subjects cannot be volitional agents can be seen not only by inspecting extensive lists of oblique subject verbs in Icelandic (see Jónsson 1997-1998, 2001) but also by looking at verbs that alternate between nominative and dative case depending on whether the subject is a volitional agent or not. One of these verbs is *blæða* ‘bleed’:

(3) a. Mér  blæddi
   me-D bled
   ‘I was bleeding’

   b. Mér  blæðir þetta í augum
   me-D bleeds this-N in eyes
   ‘I am deeply troubled by this’

   c. Ég  blæddi
   I-N paid

In the literal sense of (3a), the subject of *blæða* is a dative experiencer. In the metaphorical sense of (3b), the subject retains its dative case because the subject is still an experiencer. However, when the verb means ‘pay’ (in colloquial Icelandic) the subject is an agent and gets nominative case. This shift from dative to nominative is expected if there is a general rule excluding oblique case on agents.

Another interesting verb is *semja* ‘agree’. In its usual agentive sense the subject has nominative case (4a) but the subject gets dative case if the verb means ‘to get along’ (4b) (in which case the subject is not an agent):

(4) a. Þeir   sömdu um þetta
    they-N agreed on this
    ‘They reached an agreement on this’

   b. Þeim   samði ekki
    them-D agreed not
    ‘They did not get along’

   The dative in (4b) seems to mark the absence of volition. A similar use of the dative can be seen in various pairs involving the “middle” suffix–st:4

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4 The suffix –st itself does not trigger dative case on a subject as seen by the fact that many – st-verbs have a nominative subject (including agentive verbs). For further discussion on this suffix, see Anderson (1990), Ottósson (1986, 1989) and Maling (1991).
The difference between læra and lærast is that lærast has the more restricted meaning 'to learn by experience' whereas læra means 'to learn' whether by experience or by a conscious effort. Another difference is that lærast usually takes a clausal complement but læra can easily have an NP complement. Thus, (6a) is acceptable whereas (6b) is not:

(6) a. Börnin læru ensku
the children-N learned English-A

b. *Börnunum lærist enska
the children-D learned English-N

The verbs læra and lærast contrast in that the subject of læra can be a volitional agent whereas the subject of lærast cannot. Therefore, the subject of læra must have nominative case.

Another interesting pair is mæla 'speak' vs. mælast vel 'speak well' as illustrated in (7) below:

(7) a. Hún mælti nokkur orð
she-N spoke some words-A

‘She said a few words’

b. Henni mæltist vel
her-D spoke well

‘She delivered a good speech’

Although (7b) looks like a counterexample to the claim that oblique subjects cannot be volitional agents, the subject fails standard tests for volitional agents, e.g. compatibility with intentional phrases like af ásettu ráði 'deliberately':

(8) *Henni mæltist vel af ásettu ráði
her-D spoke well of set mind

‘She delivered a good speech deliberately’

By contrast, the nominative subject of mæla in (7a) is a volitional agent which passes this test:

(9) Hún mælti nokkur orð af ásettu ráði
she-N spoke some words-A of set mind

‘She spoke a few words deliberately’
Many verbs in Icelandic have a dative subject even if they entail an agentive event (see list (G) in the appendix). In the case of *maelast* this event is the event of talking. The dative case on the subject is possible because these verbs denote an outcome which is conceptualized as being accidental and not involving any energy from the subject. As a result, the subject is not an agent in any sense of the word (see 2.1.2 on non-volitional agents).

2.1.2 Non-volitional agents

Following Cruse (1973) and many others, I assume that an argument is an agent by virtue of using its own energy in carrying out the action even if no volition is involved. On this view, the non-volitional subject of (10b) is an agent just as the volitional subject of (10a):

(10) a. Jón eyðilagði stóllinn til þess að hefna sín
    John-N destroyed the chair-A to it to revenge himself-G
    ‘John destroyed the chair to get revenge’

    b. Jón eyðilagði stóllinn óviljandi
       (með því að setjast á hann)
       John-N destroyed the chair-A unintentionally
       (by sitting on it)

There are many verbs in Icelandic like *eyðilegja* ‘destroy’ whose subject is either a volitional agent or a non-volitional agent. All such verbs have a nominative subject in both cases, i.e. the case of the subject never shifts from nominative to oblique in the absence of volition if the subject remains an agent. Thus, oblique subject cannot be agents of any kind (Jónsson 1997-1998). This is further illustrated by the fact that some subclasses of intransitive verbs in Icelandic must have a nominative subject, e.g. hiccup-verbs and verbs of non-verbal expression (using the terminology of Levin 1993).

Some examples of these verbs are given in (11) and (12) below:


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5 For extensive lists of Icelandic verbs in various semantic classes discussed in this paper, see Jóhannsdóttir (1996).
face’, hlæja ‘laugh’, hnykla brýnnar ‘frown’, skæla ‘weep’, stynja ‘groan’ etc.

Hiccup-verbs and verbs of non-verbal expression are intransitive verbs that refer to physical processes which are usually involuntary. All of these verbs have a nominative subject because the subject is an agent, at least in the sense of using its own energy.

Verbs of emission in Icelandic take nominative subjects because they involve internal energy of the subject. This includes intransitive verbs denoting emission of sound or light (geisla ‘beam’, leiftra ‘sparkle’, ljóma, ‘glow’, skína ‘shine’, tindra ‘twinkle’; bergmála ‘echo’, duna ‘resound’, hljóma ‘sound’, niða ‘murmur’, tifa ‘tick’ etc.) and verbs denoting emission of a substance from the body (anda ‘breathe’, hósta ‘cough’, gubba ‘vomit’, slefa ‘drool’, æla ‘puke’ etc.). There is one notable exception, the verb bleyða ‘bleed’ which takes a dative subject (as seen in (3a) above). The reason is that the subject is an experiencer since there is no internal energy involved with bleyða (as seen by the fact that a dead person can bleed).

Some verbs of emission have a “possessive” dative subject in idiomatic expression as in (13). Since the subject is not an agent in this case, dative case is possible here.

(13) Honum geislar af hvarmi
him-D beams of eyes
‘His eyes shine (of happiness)’

Psych-verbs with experiencer objects always have a nominative subject in Icelandic. For many of these verbs, the subject is typically an inanimate or abstract thing (and not a volitional agent) as in the following examples:

(14) a. Þessi frétt gladdi mig
these news-N pleased me-A
b. Listaverkið hneykslaði marga
the artwork-N shocked many-A
‘The work of art shocked many people’
c. Tónlistin róar sjúklingana
the music-N calms the patients-A

Pesetsky (1995) argues that subjects of object experiencer verbs are causers, which I take to be a subclass of agents. Hence, these verbs must have nominative subjects in Icelandic. In fact, all transitive verbs which entail that the object is affected in some way have nominative subjects because the subjects of such verbs are agents. The verb eyðileggja ‘destroy’ e.g. takes a nominative subject even if the subject denotes something that is
not even capable of volition, such as a natural agent (15a), an abstract thing (15b) or an inanimate thing (15c):

(15) a. Vindurinn eyðilagði kofann  
the wind-N destroyed the hut-A
b. Hatrið eyðileggur alla von um frið  
the hatred-N destroys all hope-A of peace
(af því það er svo ljótt)  
the house-N destroys the street-A (because it is so ugly)

The association between non-volitional agents and nominative case can also be seen in transitivity pairs\(^6\) with some verbs of motion such as *aka* ‘drive’, *bakka* ‘drive backwards’, *fljúga* ‘fly’ and *lenda* ‘land’. This is illustrated below with the verb *aka* ‘drive’:

(16) a. Jón ók bílnum á ljósastaur  
John-N drove the car-D into lamp post
‘John drove the car into a lamp post’
b. Bíllinn ók á ljósastaur  
the car-N drove into lamp post
‘The car drove into a lamp post’

The subject in (16b) must be nominative even if it corresponds to a dative object because the subject is an agent in the sense of using its own energy which comes from the machine of the car.\(^7\) The dative case on the object is also expected since verbs denoting to put something in motion usually take a dative object in Icelandic (Maling 2002).

Another interesting pair that displays an alternation between a dative object and a nominative subject is given in (17):

(17) a. Ég hringdi bjöllunni  
I-Nrang the bell-D
b. Bjallan hringdi  
the bell-N rang

Nominative case is required in (17b) since the subject is an agent as subjects of intransitive verbs of emission usually are. Note that *hringja* ‘ring’

\(^6\) I use the term *transitivity pair* to refer to a pair where the object of a transitive variant corresponds to the subject of an intransitive variant of the same verb even if the object may not have same theta-role(s) as the subject. Note that only a subset of transitivity pairs are *ergative pairs*.

\(^7\) Presumably, the subject is a theme in addition to being an agent because it undergoes motion. By contrast, the object of *aka* ‘drive’ is only a theme because vehicles that have no internal source of energy (such as wheelbarrows) can be objects of *aka*.
entails emission of sound only in the intransitive variant. This is shown by the fact that (18) below is not a contradiction:

\[(18) \quad Ég hringdi bjölluni en bjallan hringdi ekki\]

I-N rang   the bell-D but the bell-N rang   not

‘I rang the bell but the bell didn’t ring’

This sentence could be felicitously uttered in a situation where I touch a door bell to make it ring but the door bell is broken so that no sound is heard. This shows that the object of *hringja* is not an agent in any sense and therefore the object can have lexical case.

To summarize, the nominative on the intransitive subject in examples like (16b) and (17b) falls under the generalization that no agents of any kind can have oblique case. This is an important point which has hitherto gone unnoticed.

**2.2 Subject case on experiencers**

Case marking on experiencer subjects in Icelandic is a complicated matter which cannot be adequately dealt with here. In this section, I will focus on psych-verbs and mostly ignore other verbs with experiencer subjects, i.e. verbs denoting physical sensation, perception and cognition.

I will argue below for the following two generalizations on case assignment to experiencer subjects in Icelandic:

\[(19) \quad \text{Psych-verbs denoting strong positive feelings cannot have an oblique subject.}\]

\[(20) \quad \text{Psych-verbs which canonically take animate objects cannot have an oblique subject.}^8\]

Ideally, (19) and (20) should be seen as one generalization: “Agentive” experiencers cannot have oblique case. This is intuitively clear at least with respect to (19) because strong emotions involve more energy than other emotions and positive emotions are generally more controllable than negative ones. Typically, negative emotions are triggered by something external to the experiencer as seen by the fact that most verbs denoting negative feelings have an experiencer object (*annoy, sadden, worry* etc.).9

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8 Note that this is different from Taraldsen’s (1994) claim that nominative objects (of non-*s*-verbs) in Icelandic cannot be [+ human] (see the reply by Maling & Jónsson 1995).

9 Interestingly, there are far fewer object experiencer psych-verbs in Icelandic than in English. This may partly be due to the fact that many oblique subject psych-verbs in Icelandic correspond to object experiencer psych-verbs in English.
As for (20), it seems to me that the experiencer usually has more control over feelings towards animate objects than feelings towards inanimate or abstract things. For some reason, inanimate or abstract things are the standard triggers of emotions as seen by the fact that object experiencer verbs tend to have subjects denoting inanimate or abstract things (cf. the examples in (14)).

Needless to say, the generalizations (19) and (20) rely on rather vague notions such as “strong” and “canonically”. I will try to clarify these notions below and discuss some useful diagnostics so that (19) and (20) can be tested empirically.

The classes in (19) and (20) partially overlap in that some verbs belong to both (e.g. dá ‘admire’ and elska ‘love’) but they still have to be distinguished. The verb þrá ‘desire’ e.g. denotes a strong positive feeling but the canonical object is not animate:

(21) a. María þráir að komast í frí
Mary-N desires to get in a vacation
‘M. really wants a vacation’
b. María þráir viðurkenningu
Mary-N desires recognition-A
c. María þráir Eirík
Mary-N desires Eric-A

Note that (21c) can only mean sexual desire. It cannot mean e.g. that Mary really wants Eric as head of her department. This shows that (21c) does not represent the basic meaning of þrá ‘desire’.

Conversely, vorkenna ‘feel sorry for’ only takes animate objects but it describes a feeling that is negative and neutral with respect to strength:

(22) a. Ég vorkenni Jóni
I-N feel-sorry-for John-D
‘I feel sorry for John’
b. *Ég vorkenni húsinu
I-N feel-sorry-for the house-D

That vorkenna describes a feeling that is neutral with respect to strength is supported by the fact that it can take an intensifying prefix:

(23) a. Ég dauðvorkenni Jóni
I-N dead-feel-sorry-for John-D
‘I feel really sorry for John’
b. Ég sárvorkenni Jóni
I-N pain-feel-sorry-for John-D
‘I feel really sorry for John’
Intensifying prefixes in Icelandic attach only to those psych-verbs that denote feelings which are not necessarily strong (e.g. sjá eftir ‘regret’, skammasið ‘be ashamed’, and öfunda ‘envy’ all of which have a nominative subject). This makes sense because intensifying prefixes would be semantically vacuous on verbs denoting inherently strong feelings. However, this is only a partial criteria because some verbs cannot have an intensifying prefix even if they denote feelings which are neutral with respect to strength (e.g. the verb líka ‘like’ which takes a dative subject).

### 2.2.1 Strong positive emotions

The generalization in (19) entails that all verbs denoting strong positive feelings take a nominative subject in Icelandic. These include at least the following verbs:


Note that verbs denoting strong negative feelings may take an oblique subject, e.g. hrylla við ‘be horrified by’ and ofbjóða ‘be outraged’, but some take a nominative subject, e.g. fyrirlíta ‘despise’:

(25) a. Sveinn fyrirlítur svona menn
Sveinn-N despises such men-A
‘Sveinn despises such men’

b. Mig hryllir við tilhugsuninni
me-A shudders at the thought
‘I shudder at the thought’

c. Þeim ofbauð þetta kæruleysi
them-D outraged this carelessness-N
‘This carelessness outraged them’

To see how the strength of a positive emotion affects subject case it is instructive to compare vilja ‘want’ which takes a nominative subject with langa ‘want’ which takes an accusative subject:

(26) a. Krakkarnir vilja fara
the kids-N want go
‘The kids want to go’

b. Krakkana langar að fara
the kids-A wants to go
‘The kids want to go’

Despite superficial similarities, there are various semantic differences between these two verbs, most notably the fact that vilja denotes a stronger
feeling than *langa*. Thus, *langa* can take an intensifying prefix but *vilja* cannot:

(27) a. Krakkana **dauð.langar** að fana
    the kids-A dead-wants to go
    ‘The kids are dying to go’

    b. Krakkana **sárlangar** að fana
    the kids-A pain-wants to go
    ‘The kids are dying to go’

(28) a. *Krakkarnir** dauð.vilja fana
    the kids-N dead-want go
    ‘The kids are dying to go’

    b. *Krakkarnir** sárvilja fana
    the kids-N pain-want go
    ‘The kids are dying to go’

Another pair which illustrates the same point is *þurfa* ‘need’ which takes a nominative subject and *vanta* ‘need, lack’ which takes an accusative subject:

(29) a. Ég **þarf** peninga
    I-N need money-A
    ‘I need money’

    b. Mig **vantar** peninga
    me-A needs money-A
    ‘I need money (right now)’

   Not surprisingly, *þurfa* denotes a stronger need than *vanta* as seen by the fact that only *vanta* can have an intensifying prefix:

(30) a. Mig **bráð.vantar** peninga
    me-A quick-needs money-A
    ‘I need money urgently’

    b. Mig **sárvantar** peninga
    me-A pain-needs money-A
    ‘I need money urgently’

(31) a. *Ég** bráð’àr** parf** peninga
    I-N quick-need money-A
    ‘I need money urgently’
b. *Ég sárþarf peninga
   I-N pain-need money-A
   ‘I need money urgently’

The verbs *þurfa and vanta also differ in that *þurfa generally describes a more permanent need than vanta. Thus, (29a) above can easily be understood as ‘I generally need money (but not necessarily right now)’ whereas (29b) can only mean that I need money right now. Indeed, there is a clear tendency for psych-verbs with oblique subjects to denote temporary feelings but this requires further investigation.

2.2.2 The canonical object is animate

If the canonical object of a psych-verb is animate, the subject must be nominative. These verbs include the following:


For some of the verbs listed in (32) the object must be animate, e.g. vorkenna ‘feel sorry for’ (cf. the examples in (22)) and samgleðjast ‘be happy for’:

(33) a. Ég samgleðst þér innilega
   I-N rejoice with you-D sincerely
   ‘I am really happy for you’

b. *Ég samgleðst húsinu innilega
   I-N rejoice with the house-D sincerely
   ‘I am really happy for the house’

c. *Ég samgleðst því innilega að þú skulir hafa unnið
   I-N rejoice with it-D sincerely that you should have won
   ‘I am really happy that you won’

However, some of these verbs can be used with inanimate objects (34b) or abstract objects (34c) in an extended sense:10

(34) a. María elskar/hatar Svein
    Mary-N loves/hates Sveinn-A

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10 In fact, examples like (34b) and (34c) are slightly substandard in Icelandic, presumably because they are due to influence from English.
That the canonical objects of *elska* ‘love’ and *hata* ‘hate’ are animate can be seen in examples where the objects are left out in which case they can only be understood as animate:

\[35\] Hann kann að elska en ekki að hata

‘He knows how to love (people) but not how to hate (people)’

Moreover, the verbs *elska* ‘love’ and *hata* ‘hate’ can only be passivised if the object is animate:

\[36\] a. María var elskuð/ hötuð af öllum

Mary was loved/ hated by everyone

b. *Poppkorn er elskuð/ hatað af öllum

popcorn is loved/ hated by everyone

There is no psych-verb with an oblique subject whose canonical object is animate. Psych-verbs with oblique subjects typically denote feelings towards events or inanimate things. One example of this is the verb *sárna* ‘hurt’:

\[37\] a. Honum sárnuðu þessi ummæli

‘He was hurt by these remarks’

b. Honum sárnaði að vera ekki boðinn í afmælið

‘He was offended by not being invited to the birthday party’

c. *Honum sárnaði nemandinn

‘He was hurt by the student’

Note that \(37c\) is ungrammatical. To indicate a feeling towards an individual, the preposition *við* ‘at’ has to be used:

\[38\] Honum sárnaði við nemandann

‘He was hurt by the student’
The verb *líka* ‘like’ also illustrates the point that oblique subject verbs do not canonically take animate objects:

(39) a. Eiríki líkar þetta hús  
Eric-D likes this house-N

b. Eiríki líkar Magga sem kennari  
Eric-D likes Magga-N as a teacher

Examples where *líka* ‘like’ takes an animate object are most naturally understood as meaning that the subject likes the object in a particular role as in (39b) (see Maling & Jónsson 1995). To bring out more clearly the reading that the subject likes the object as a person, the preposition *við* ‘at’ is used:

(40) Eiríki líkar (vel) við Mögu  
Eric-D likes (well) at Magga
‘Eric likes Maggie’

The verb *leiðast* ‘find boring’ seems to be the only oblique subject psych-verb that can take an animate object where the interpretation is a personal feeling towards the object. This is shown in (41):

(41) Jóni leiðist Sigga  
John-D bores Sigga-N
‘John finds Sigga boring’

Crucially, the object of *leiðast* can also be an abstract thing (42a) or an event (42b) and such examples are just as representative as (41) of the core meaning of *leiðast*:

(42) a. Jóni leiðist þetta nöldur  
John-D bores this nagging-N
‘John finds this nagging boring’

b. Jóni leiðist að vakna á morgnana  
John-D bores to wake up in the mornings
‘John doesn’t like waking up in the morning’

This shows that the canonical object of *leiðast* is not necessarily animate. In fact, *leiðast* doesn’t even need an object as shown in (43):

(43) Jóni leiðist  
John-D bores
‘John is bored’

In this section, the validity of the generalization in (20) has been illu-
strated by examining various psych-verbs. Interestingly, it appears that all verbs which canonically take animate objects have a nominative subject. This can be seen with the verb *gruna* ‘suspect’. This verb takes a nominative subject if the object is animate (44a) but an accusative subject if the object is a clause (44b):

(44) a. Þeir gruna mig um að hafa stolið smjörinu
    they-N suspect me-A of to have stolen the butter
    ‘They suspect me of having stolen the butter’

b. Pá grunar að ég hafi stolið smjörinu
    them-A suspects that I have stolen the butter
    ‘They suspect that I stole the butter’

I am not aware of any other verb which shows this kind of variation between nominative and accusative case on the subject. Still, it is clearly desirable to be able to make sense of this variation instead of treating it as an idiosyncratic fact about one particular verb.

2.3 Subject case on themes

Nominative is clearly the most common case on theme subjects in Icelandic. Verbs with oblique theme subjects that are part of everyday language are only about thirty (see the appendix for extensive lists). Hence, it is not surprising that these verbs have a tendency to get nominative case on the subject as discussed in 4.2. below.

Intransitive verbs with theme subjects can be divided into two main classes: (i) motion verbs and (ii) verbs denoting change of state. These classes are discussed separately in 2.3.1 and 2.3.2 below. It should be noted that there is a systematic contrast between verbs with nominative theme subjects and verbs with oblique theme subjects: The latter verbs cannot combine with productive verbal suffixes in Icelandic, –st or –na, but quite many verbs with nominative theme subjects have these suffixes (e.g. *fyllast* ‘become full’, *hreyfast* ‘be moved’, *kastast* ‘be thrown’, *rotta* ‘rot’ and *þornna* ‘dry’). As discussed in 3.1 below, this restriction follows from the fact that oblique case on theme subjects is idiosyncratic case.

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11 Oblique theme subjects of intransitive verbs appear to be quite rare cross-linguistically. In fact, I am not aware of any language other than Icelandic that has such subjects.

12 An apparent counterexample is the verb *hnigna* ‘decline’ which takes a dative subject and seems to have the suffix –na. However, it is actually derived from *hnígin* the past participle of *hníga* ‘sink’ (Blöndal 1989). There are at least two verbs with a dative theme subject that are formed by suffixation, *fækka* ‘become fewer’ and *seinka* ‘be delayed’, both of which have the unproductive suffix –*ka*. 
2.3.1 Motion verbs

Many intransitive motion verbs have transitive counterparts where the causer is expressed as a subject. If the subject of the intransitive variant is nominative, the suffix –st is usually added to the verb as in (45b):

(45) a. Jón hreyfði stóllinn
   John-N moved the chair-A
   
   b. Stóllinn hreyfðist
      the chair-N moved

However, if the subject of the intransitive variant is accusative or dative, no suffix is added to the verb:

(46) a. Brimið rak bátinn á land
      the surf-N drove the boat-A to shore

   b. Bátinn rak á land
      the boat-A drove to shore
      ‘The boat was driven to the shore’

(47) a. Tillagan þokaði málinu áleiðis
      the proposal-N moved the case-D forward

   b. Málinu þokaði áleiðis
      the case-D moved forward

Many intransitive motion verbs have no transitive counterpart with a causer subject. A close inspection of such verbs in Icelandic reveals the following generalization:

(48) Strictly intransitive motion verbs cannot have an oblique theme subject.

The correctness of this generalization is seen e.g. by the fact that strictly intransitive verbs denoting movement of liquid always take a nominative subject (e.g. fljóta ‘flow’, fossa ‘gush’, seytila ‘trickle’ and streyma ‘stream’).

13 The alternation between structural accusative case on the object and lexical accusative on the intransitive subject in (46) is surprising but see Sigurðsson (1989:281-2) and Zaenen & Maling (1990) for discussion on this issue.

14 The only potential exception to this generalization that I know of is the verb býta ‘be moved’. To judge by Böðvarsson (1983), this verb takes a dative subject and cannot be used transitively. Since this verb is not part of my vocabulary and I haven’t found any examples of it in written texts, I cannot be sure that this is a genuine counterexample.
Other strictly intransitive verbs of motion with nominative subjects are e.g. 
detta 'trip', falla 'fall', fjúka 'blow away', hrynja 'collapse', hrökkva
'jump, fly', risa 'rise' and siga 'sink'.

The generalization in (48) entails that all intransitive motion verbs with
oblique subjects have transitive counterparts. Note, however, that some of
these verbs require a particular particle that may be absent or unnecessary in
the transitive variant, e.g. lenda saman 'clash' which corresponds to the
transitive verb lenda 'land'. This is particularly common with verbs that
assign dative case to the theme argument.

The absence of a transitive counterpart with a causer subject indicates
that a verb denotes an eventuality that arises from the internal properties
of the intransitive subject. To borrow the terminology of Levin & Rappaport
Hovav (1995:91), the verbs covered by (48) are verbs of internally caused
eventuality. Subjects of such verbs are more agent-like than subjects of ver-
bs with transitive counterparts because the event in the second case involves
an external force even when the verbs are used intransitively. To take an
example, it is easy to see that the event described in (46b) is impossible with-
out some external force bringing it about (e.g. a heavy wind). By contrast,
verbs of internally caused motion denote events that can easily happen with-
out any obvious cause external to the subject (e.g. someone can fall without
anybody pushing him).

2.3.2 Change-of-state verbs

Many change-of-state verbs with accusative subjects are derived from
nouns, e.g. daga uppi 'be caught by the daylight (and die as a result)', hema
'freeze' and ysta 'curdle' which are derived from the nouns dag(ur) 'day',
hem 'a thin ice' and os(ur) 'cheese'. Most of the verbs derived from nouns
are strictly intransitive, e.g. daga uppi:

(49) a. *Nefndin       dagaði  uppi tillöguna
      the committee-N died       the proposal-A
      'The committee killed the proposal'
b. Tillöguna     dagaði uppi
      the proposal-A died
      'The proposal got nowhere'

Change-of-state verbs with dative subjects are significantly fewer than
change-of-state verbs with accusative subjects (see lists (C) and (J) in the

15 Strong verbs such as falla 'fall', fjúka 'blow away' and risa 'rise' are strictly intransitive
even if they are etymologically related to the weak transitive verbs falla 'fell, shed', feykja
'blow away' and reisa 'raise, erect', respectively.
appendix). Most of these verbs can be used transitively but some are strictly intransitive, e.g. *hnigna* 'decline':

(50) a. *Keisarinn* hnignaði Rómaveldi  
    the emperor-N declined the Roman empire-D  
    ‘The emperor caused the Roman empire to decline’

b. Rómaveldi hnignaði  
    The Roman empire-D declined  

Examples like (49) and (50) show that some strictly intransitive change-of-state verbs have oblique case on the subject. This suggests that some verbs of inherently caused change of state have an oblique subject whereas other verbs have a nominative subject. However, it seems to me that the best examples of internal causation are verbs that select a very narrow range of subjects with certain physical properties, e.g. the verb *ryðga* ‘rust’ which only applies to metals and things made of metals. All the strictly intransitive verbs that clearly fall into this class in Icelandic have a nominative subject, e.g. the verbs listed below:  

(51)  

It is not clear if any oblique subject verb belongs to this core class of internally caused change-of-state verbs, or verbs of entity-specific change of state in the terminology of Levin (1993:246-7). The verb *hnigna* ‘decline’ e.g. can be used with subjects denoting various abstract things or even humans and *daga upp* ‘die’ also has many different uses. There are some strictly intransitive change of state verbs with accusative subjects that take a very narrow range of subjects, e.g. *brima* ‘foam’ (only the sea) and *hema* ‘freeze’ (only rivers). However, these verbs describe events that are brought about by the weather and therefore they may be classified as externally caused change of state verbs even if the causer cannot be overtly expressed.

If these remarks are correct, the generalization in (48) can be broadened to include all verbs denoting an internally caused event, whether it is motion or change of state. This would be highly desirable from a theoretical point of

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16 It is worth emphasizing that all of these verbs are strictly intransitive in Icelandic even if their English counterparts may not be. In fact, the distinction between internally and externally caused change-of-state verbs in English may not be based on the possibility of having a causer subject (see McKoon and MacFarland 2000).
view but more research is still needed to establish that verbs denoting an internally caused event cannot have an oblique subject.

2.4 Summary and theoretical implications

To summarize the major claims of the preceding subsections, oblique case cannot be assigned to the following types of subjects in Icelandic: (a) agents of all kinds, (b) experiencers of psych-verbs denoting strong positive feelings, (c) experiencers of (psych)-verbs which canonically take animate objects, (d) strictly intransitive verbs of motion and (e) verbs of entity-specific change of state. If the rather speculative remarks in the preceding subsections are correct, this is not a random set as all of these verb classes have an agent-like subject.

In this section I would like to discuss briefly how these restrictions on oblique subjects can be accounted for. It is usually assumed that agent subjects in Icelandic cannot have oblique case because agents are external arguments and therefore projected outside the domain of lexical case assignment (see e.g. Holmberg and Platzack 1995:37). This is certainly true for volitional agents but the problem is that transitive verbs with non-volitional agents do not passivize in Icelandic or do so very marginally. This is shown in (52):

(52) a. *Ég var gladdur af þessari frétt
   I-N was pleased by these news

   b. *Uppskerunni var bjargað af rigningunni
      the crop-D was saved by the rain

Since passivization is generally assumed to apply to all verbs with an external argument, the ungrammaticality of (52) suggests that non-volitional agents are internal arguments. As a result, there is no obvious way of explaining why they cannot have oblique case.

Turning to experiencer subjects, most of the verbs describing strong positive feelings and verbs which canonically have animate objects can undergo passivization (see (36a)). This means that the subject is an external argument and cannot get oblique case. Of the verbs listed in (24) and (32) the only ones that do not passivize are the verbs of lacking (vilja ‘want’, þarf ‘need’, þrúa ‘desire, long for’ and þurfa ‘need’) and the verbs samglaðjast ‘be happy for’ and samhryggjast ‘mourn with’. This is exemplified in (53):

(53) a. *Peningar eru þurftir
   moneys-N are needed
   ‘Money is needed’
b. *Þér var samglaðst innilega
   you-D was rejoiced with sincerely
   ‘People were really happy for you’

I am not sure what to say about the verbs of lacking (apart from þarf-
nast) but it is unsurprising that þarf nast, samgledjast and samhryggjast can-
not passivize because many verbs with the suffix –st fail to passivize even if
the subject is a volitional agent, e.g. annast ‘take care of’, forbast ‘avoid’
and verfast ‘defend against’.

Finally, all intransitive verbs with theme subjects in Icelandic are unac-
cusative (i.e. have no external argument), as seen by the fact that they do not
undergo impersonal passivization. Hence, it is not obvious why strictly
intransitive verbs of motion and verbs of entity-specific change of state
cannot have oblique case on the subject.

In short, the problem is that an important subset of verbs that exclude
oblique case on the subject do not seem to have an external argument (as
seen by their failure to passivize). It would take us too far afield to fully
discuss how to solve this problem but let me make two suggestions.

The first possibility is to reject the view that passives are a relevant test
by assuming that passivization only applies to a subset of verbs with an
external argument. Of course, this means that we would have to find some
other syntactic test to separate verbs with an external argument (i.e. verbs
that systematically exclude oblique subjects) from verbs without an external
argument. I am not aware of any such test but it may well exist.

Another option is to assume that the subject of the problematic verbs is
an “intermediate” argument, i.e. an argument projected lower than an
external argument but higher than an internal argument. On this view,
oblique case would only be assigned to internal arguments and passivization
would only apply to verbs with an external argument. This would explain in
a simple way why there are verbs that systematically exclude oblique case
on the subject and yet fail to undergo passivization. This idea can be imple-
mented in different ways depending on one’s assumptions about the internal
structure of the VP and related projections but we need not go into any deta-
ils here.

3 Dative vs. accusative subjects

This section compares dative and accusative subjects in order to show that
accusative subjects obey certain restrictions which do not hold of most dati-
ve subjects. These restrictions concern verbs with oblique subjects (see 3.1
below) as well as idiomatic expressions (see 3.2 below).
3.1 Verbs

As discussed by Jónsson (1997-1998), verbs with dative subjects outnumber verbs with accusative subjects. Moreover, the latter class is restricted in that no verb with a suffix can have an accusative subject, whether the suffix is \( -st \) or \( -na \).\(^{17}\) This can be seen in various transitivity “triplets” where the subject of the intransitive variant is accusative (54b) or nominative (54c) depending on the presence of \( -st \):

(54) a. Ég fyllt í báttinn
    I-N filled the boat-A
    ‘The boat got swamped’

b. Báttinn fyllt í
    the boat-A filled
    ‘The boat got swamped’

c. Báturinn fylltist í
    the boat-N filled
    ‘The boat got swamped’

By contrast, many dative subject verbs have the suffix \( -st \), in particular verbs denoting success or failure (55a,b) and verbs of acquisition (55c,d):

(55) a. Þeim tókst að öpna dýrnar
    them-D succeeded to open the doors
    ‘They managed to open the doors’

b. Konunn dvald í bænum
    the woman-D stayed at the farm
    ‘The woman stayed at the farm longer than intended’

c. Jóni áskotnaðist þessi pení
    John-D got this pen-N
    ‘J. got this pen by chance’

d. Mér hlótaðist mikill heiður
    me-D received great honor-N
    ‘I received a great honor’

As a result of this restriction, there are no accusative subject verbs that fall into these two verb classes (see appendix).

There are also many \( -st \)-verbs with dative experiencer subjects as shown by examples like (1b), (2d) and (41) and list (E) in the appendix. By contrast, verbs with theme subjects cannot have any productive suffix (as discussed in 2.3). The distribution of suffixed verbs suggests that oblique

\(^{17}\) Note that some verbs with accusative subjects have the stem extender \( -ó \), e.g. the verbs derived from nouns discussed in 2.3.2.
case on subjects divides into two classes: (i) dative case on experiencers and goals (which is compatible with productive suffixation) and (ii) accusative case and dative case on themes (which is incompatible with productive suffixation). Since subjects of verbs denoting success or failure (as in (55a,b)) do not obviously qualify as experiencers or goals it might be more accurate to characterize the first class as dative case on non-themes but this is not crucial for our purposes.

To understand these facts about suffixation one must keep in mind that a suffixed verb consists of two parts: a verbal stem and a suffix which is the head of the morphologically complex verb as shown in (56):

(56) \[ \text{V} \]

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{stem} \\
\text{suffix}
\end{array}
\]

There are good reasons to believe that accusative case on subjects and dative case on theme subjects is an idiosyncratic feature that needs to be specified in the lexical entry of the relevant stem (see also 3.2 and 4 below). However, such a feature associated with the stem in (56) cannot percolate up to the verb since the stem is not the head of the verb and there are severe restrictions on percolation from a non-head (see e.g. Lieber 1992:91-93). The result is that idiosyncratic case “disappears” when a suffix is added to a stem selecting idiosyncratic case as seen in pairs like íðra ‘regret’ and íðrást ‘regret’:\n
(57) a. Mig íðrar þess að hafa sagt þetta
   me-A regrets it-G to have said that
   ‘I regret that I said that’

b. Ég íðrást þess að hafa sagt þetta
   I-N regret it-G to have said that
   ‘I regret that I said that’

By contrast, dative case on goal and experiencer subjects is assigned by general lexical rules which apply to morphologically complex verbs as well as verbal stems. Hence, suffixation will not “bleed” assignment of dative case to goal and experiencer subjects. In fact, since nearly all verbs with dative goal subjects have the suffix –st (see list (H) in the appendix), it appears that suffixation actually “feeds” assignment of dative case to goal subjects.

18 Note that íðrást still assigns genitive case to the object. This is a potential problem because genitive case on objects is rather uncommon and would seem to be idiosyncratic case.
Case assigned by general lexical rules will be referred to as semantic case.\textsuperscript{19} It is not a trivial matter to formulate these rules, especially for dative experiencer subjects, and I will not attempt to do so here. As for goals, Jónsson (2000) argues that dative case on goals in Icelandic is largely predictable from semantics. Goal subjects with dative case e.g. systematically differ from goal subjects with nominative case in that the former denote “pure” recipients with no agent properties.

As mentioned in footnote 12, verbs with dative theme subjects can host the unproductive suffix –\textit{ka}. I don’t think this is much of a problem because it is plausible to assume that an unproductive suffix may have been reanalysed as part of the stem (and stems can assign idiosyncratic case).

3.2 Idioms

Many idiomatic expressions have a dative subject and they are mainly of two kinds. First, there are idiomatic expression with motion verbs. These idioms usually contain an indefinite noun (underlined in the examples below) denoting something which is inalienably possessed by the referent of the dative subject. This is exemplified in (58) with the idioms \textit{skrika fótur} ‘fall’, \textit{falla tár} ‘cry’ and \textit{líða úr minni} ‘forget’:

\begin{enumerate}
\item \begin{tabular}{ll}
Ferðamanninum & skrikaði fótur í gíánni \\
the tourist-D & slipped foot-N in the ravine \\
\end{tabular} \begin{tabular}{l}
‘The tourist fell in the ravine’
\end{tabular}
\item \begin{tabular}{ll}
Jóni & féllu tár þegar hann heyrði fréttina \\
John-D & fell tears-N when he heard the news \\
\end{tabular} \begin{tabular}{l}
‘John cried when he heard the news’
\end{tabular}
\item \begin{tabular}{ll}
Henni & líður þessi dagur aldrei úr minni \\
herr-D & passes this day-N never out of memory \\
\end{tabular} \begin{tabular}{l}
‘She will never forget this day’
\end{tabular}
\end{enumerate}

Second, there are quite many idiomatic expressions with a dative subject and the verbs \textit{vera} ‘be’ or \textit{verða} ‘become’:

\begin{enumerate}
\item \begin{tabular}{ll}
Për er í nöp við mig \\
you-Dare in nose with me \\
\end{tabular} \begin{tabular}{l}
‘You (sg.) dislike me’
\end{tabular}
\end{enumerate}

\textsuperscript{19} Yip, Maling & Jackendoff (1987) use the term \textit{thematic case} for case assigned to goals in Icelandic but I prefer the term semantic case because I believe that semantic factors other than theta-roles are relevant here.
b. Jóni er engin launung á því
   John-D is no secret-N in that
   ‘J. does not want to hide it’

c. Þeim varð að ósk sinni
   them-D became to wish their
   ‘Their wish came true’

d. Guðrúnu varð hreinlega orðfall
   Guðrún-D became simply word loss-N
   ‘G. simply became speechless’

Since these idioms involve verbs which do not assign case, the dative on
the subject could only be assigned by a general rule. This means that the
dative must be a semantic case.

By contrast, there are no idioms of this kind with an accusative subject.
This is easily explained by assuming that accusative case on a subject is
always idiosyncratic and never assigned by a general rule. There are very
few idiomatic expressions with accusative subjects in Icelandic and they all
contain verbs that take accusative subjects independently such as reka
‘drift’, setja ‘put’ and taka ‘take’ (as in reka í rogastans ‘be very surprised’,
setja hljóðan ‘become quiet’ and taka sárt ‘take to heart’). Hence, the accu-
sative on the subject of these idioms is selected by the verb.

4 Loss of idiosyncratic case

As argued in section 3, oblique case on subjects in Icelandic divides into
two types: semantic case (dative case on goals and experiencers) and idio-
syncratic case (accusative case and dative case on themes). I believe that
further support for this division comes from two ongoing changes in Modern
Icelandic, Dative Substitution and Nominative Substitution, illustrated in
(60) and (61):

(60) Experiencer subject: accusative → dative (Dative Substitution)
(61) Theme subject: acc./dative → nominative (Nominative Substitution)

If my claims about the dual nature of lexical subject case are correct,
both of these phenomena involve loss of idiosyncratic case, which is
replaced by semantic case (Dative Substitution) or structural case (Nomin-
avative Substitution). As discussed in below, these changes cannot be explain-
ed by focusing on the relative size of the verb classes involved and ignoring
the dual nature of lexical subject case in Icelandic.
4.1 Dative Substitution

There is a strong tendency in Modern Icelandic to replace accusative case by dative on experiencer subjects. This is often referred to as Dative Sickness or Dative Substitution (see e.g. Svavarsdóttir 1982, Halkdórsdóttir 1982, Smith 1994, 1996, Eythórsson 2000a, 2000b and Gíslason 2001) and frowned upon by language prescriptivists. To give a few examples, the verbs *langa* ‘want’, *vanta* ‘need’ and *kitla* ‘feel ticklish’ traditionally take accusative subjects:

(62) a. **Míg** langar að fara heim
   me-A wants to go home
   ‘I want to go home’

   b. **Pá** vantar fleiri stóla
      them-A needs more chairs-A
      ‘They need more chairs’

   c. **Stelpuna** kitlaði í tána
      the girl-A tickled in the toe
      ‘The girl was ticklish in the toe’

However, many speakers of Modern Icelandic use dative instead on the subject of these verbs, apparently with no difference in meaning:

(63) a. **Mér** langar að fara heim
   me-D wants to go home
   ‘I want to go home’

   b. **Peim** vantar fleiri stóla
      them-D needs more chairs-A
      ‘They need more chairs’

   c. **Stelpunní** kitlaði í tána
      the girl-D tickled in the toe
      ‘The girl was ticklish in the toe’

In addition, the verbs *hlakka til* ‘look forward to’ and *kvíða fyrir* ‘dread’ traditionally have nominative case on the subject but some speakers prefer accusative or dative:

(64) a. **Krakkarnir** hlakka til jólanna
     the kids-N look forward to Christmas
     ‘The kids look forward to Christmas’

   b. **Krakkana** hlakkar til jólanna
      the kids-A looks forward to Christmas
      ‘The kids look forward to Christmas’
c. **Krökkunum** hlakkar til jólanna
   the kids-D looks forward to Christmas
   ‘The kids look forward to Christmas’

(65) a. **Hún** kvíðir fyrir prófunum
   she-N dreads for the exams
   ‘She dreads the exams’

b. **Hana** kvíðir fyrir prófunum
   her-A dreads for the exams
   ‘She dreads the exams’

c. **Henni** kvíðir fyrir prófunum
   her-D dreads for the exams
   ‘She dreads the exams’

We might refer to this as Oblique Substitution but we can assume that using dative with **hlakka til** and **kvíða fyrir** is a case of Dative Substitution.

As argued in 2.2, oblique case cannot be assigned to subjects of psych-verbs denoting strong positive feelings or subjects of (psych)-verbs which canonically take animate objects. However, the verbs **hlakka til** and **kvíða fyrir** belong to the rather small class of psych-verbs that have a nominative subject but do not seem to systematically exclude oblique case on the subject. Other verbs in this class are **harma** ‘regret, lament’, **iðrast** ‘repent’, **kunna við** ‘like, find appropriate’, **óttast** ‘fear’, **sjá eftir** ‘regret’, **vona** ‘hope’ and **vonast til** ‘hope’.\(^{20}\) It is not clear to me why **hlakka til** and **kvíða fyrir** are the only verbs in this class that have a tendency to get oblique case even if they are different from the rest by virtue of expressing feelings towards future events.

Dative is clearly more common than accusative on experiencer subjects in Icelandic because of all the idiomatic expressions with dative experiencer subjects (see section 3.2) and the fact that many adjectives select dative experiencer subjects but no adjective takes an accusative subject.\(^{21}\) Dative Substitution could therefore be seen as a process whereby a small class of predicates (with accusative experiencer subjects) is assimilated into a bigger class of predicates (with dative experiencer subjects). Still, it is unlikely that the relative size of these two classes is the real driving force behind Dative Substitution. If that was the case, we would expect accusative as well as

\(^{20}\) As we know by now, verbs with the suffix –*st* cannot have an accusative subject but nothing seems to rule out a dative subject.

\(^{21}\) The lists in the appendix suggest that verbs with accusative experiencer subjects are just as many as verbs with dative experiencer subjects. Still, there is a clear contrast in that about half of the verbs in the first class are obsolete or quite rare in Modern Icelandic whereas most of the verbs in the second class are common in everyday language.
dative experiencer subjects to turn nominative since nominative is the most common case on experiencer subjects in Icelandic. In my view, the only way to make sense of Dative Substitution is to assume that it is driven by the well-known tendency to eliminate irregularities in the grammar as accusative case on experiencer subjects is idiosyncratic. By contrast, dative case on experiencer subjects is unaffected because it is assigned by a general rule of which the change into dative case is simply an automatic consequence. If there was no such rule, accusative experiencers would become nominative.

4.2 Nominative Substitution

Intransitive verbs of motion or change of state are unaffected by Dative Substitution because the subject is a theme. This is exemplified below (where (66a) = (46b)):

(66) a. **Báttinn** rak á land
    the boat-A drifted to shore
    ‘The boat drifted to the shore’

b. **Tröllkessuna** dagaði uppi
    the giantess-A dawned up
    ‘The giantess was caught by the daylight (and died as a result)’

c. **Vindinn** lægði skýndilega
    the wind-A abated suddenly

As shown in (67), Dative Substitution is impossible with these verbs:

(67) a. *Bátnum* rak á land
    the boat-D drifted to shore
    ‘The boat drifted to the shore’

b. *Tröllkessunni* dagaði uppi
    the giantess-D dawned up
    ‘The giantess was caught by the daylight (and died as a result)’

c. *Vindinum* lægði skýndilega
    the wind-D abated suddenly

However, these verbs have a tendency to get nominative case on the subject instead of accusative as shown in (68). Following Smith (1994, 1996), I will refer to this as Nominative Substitution:

(68) a. **Báturinn** rak á land
    the boat-N drifted to shore
    ‘The boat drifted to the shore’
b. Tröllkessan dagaði uppi
   the giantess-N dawned up
   ‘The giantess was caught by the daylight (and died as a result)’

c. Vindurinn lægði skyndilega
   the wind-N abated suddenly

Nominative Substitution also affects verbs that take dative theme sub-
jects, e.g. the verbs lykta ‘end’, hvolfa ‘capsize’ and seinka ‘delay’:

(69) a. Leiknum lyktaði með jafntefli
   the game-D ended with draw
   ‘The game ended in a draw’

   b. Bátnum hvolfdi á miðjum flóanum
      the boat-D capsized in middle the bay
      ‘The boat capsized in the middle of the bay’

   c. Fluginu seinkaði um þrjá klukktíma
      the flight-D delayed by three hours
      ‘The flight was delayed by three hours’

(70) a. Leikurinn lyktaði með jafntefli
   the game-N ended with draw
   ‘The game ended in a draw’

   b. Báturinn hvolfdi á miðjum flóanum
      the boat-N capsized in middle the bay
      ‘The boat capsized in the middle of the bay’

   c. Flugið seinkaði um þrjá klukktíma
      the flight-N delayed by three hours
      ‘The flight was delayed by three hours’

Nominative Substitution mostly affects theme subjects in Modern
Icelandic (but see Eythórsson 2000a, 2000b and Halldórsson 1982 for a
discussion of earlier stages of Icelandic). Nominative Substitution also dif-
fers from Dative Substitution in that it is much less known and therefore
much less stigmatized. In fact, Böðvarsson (1983) gives nominative as a
possible subject case with the verbs fjölga ‘increase in number’, fækka ‘de-
crease in number’ and linna ‘stop’ even if dative is the usual subject case
with these verbs.

Since the number of verbs with nominative theme subjects is far greater
than the number of verbs with oblique theme subjects, Nominative
Substitution entails the assimilation of a relatively small class of verbs into a
much bigger class. As with Dative Substitution, this change is best explained
by reference to the dual nature of lexical case in Icelandic. In short, oblique
case on theme subjects is in the process of disappearing because it is idiosyncratic case.

5 Conclusion

In this paper, I have illustrated various regularities concerning subject case in Icelandic that have been overlooked in previous work on this topic. My major claims can be summarized as follows:

First, I have argued that oblique case cannot be assigned to subjects of: (a) agentive verbs of any kind, (b) psych-verbs denoting strong positive feelings, (c) (psych)-verbs which canonically take animate objects, (d) strictly intransitive motion verbs and (e) verbs denoting entity-specific change of state. Semantically, all of these verb classes seem have an agent-like subject. However, it is not clear if they form a syntactic class as only some of these subjects behave like external arguments with respect to passivization in Icelandic.

I have also argued that lexical subject case divides into two kinds: semantic case (dative case on goals and experiencers) and idiosyncratic case (accusative case and dative case on themes). Idiosyncratic case on subjects differs from semantic case in three ways: (a) it is incompatible with productive suffixation, (b) it is excluded from idioms with non-case-assigning verbs, and (c) it is in the process of disappearing in Modern Icelandic as seen by Dative Substitution (affecting accusative experiencers) and Nominative Substitution (affecting oblique themes).

Needless to say, many issues require further study, e.g. the hypothesized division of lexical subject case into semantic case and idiosyncratic case. The exact nature of the lexical rule assigning dative case to experiencer subjects needs to be examined in detail, especially since my discussion of experiencer subjects has been largely restricted to psych-verbs. It is also very important to investigate to what extent my claims about lexical subject case in Icelandic carry over to lexical case on objects or to lexical case in other morphologically rich languages.

Appendix

This appendix is based on Jónsson (2001) and contains extensive lists of verbs with accusative and dative subjects in Icelandic. Many of these verbs have been taken from Böðvarsson (1983) and are no longer part of the active vocabulary of Modern Icelandic. This is especially true of verbs with accusative subjects.

For convenience, the verbs have been divided into various semantic classes and this classification is based on the meaning of the verb when used
with an oblique subject. The verbs *batna* ‘get better’, *hitna* ‘get warmer’, *skána* ‘get better’ and *versna* ‘get worse’ e.g. are classified as experiencer verbs because the dative subject of these verbs is an experiencer even if the nominative subject is a theme.

Note that the experiencer verbs *draga um* ‘need’, *offerja* ‘be outraged’ and *óa við* ‘dread’ vacillate between accusative and dative subject according to Böðvarsson (1983) and therefore they are listed both in (A) and (E) below.

I. Verbs with an accusative subject

(A) Experiencer verbs:


(B) Motion verbs

(C) Change-of-state verbs


(D) Other verbs

klæða ‘suit (as a dress)’, sjá ‘be seen’, skilja ‘split’, stafa ‘beam’, þvera ‘blow in the opposite direction’

II. Verbs with a dative subject

(E) Experiencer verbs


(F) Verbs of convenience


(G) Verbs of success and failure


22 These verbs are characterized by the fact that they have two arguments, dative and nominative, and either one can be the subject. The term ‘verbs of convenience’ is hardly a good one but the problem is that these verbs form a class that is difficult to define in semantic terms.
well/badly’, vegna ‘fare’, veitast ‘find sth easy/difficult’, vinnast ‘get work done’

(H) Verbs of acquisition


(I) Motion verbs


(J) Change-of-state verbs


(K) Other verbs

aga saman ‘be a mess’, farast ‘be hypocritical’, hálta við ‘be on the verge of’, hætta til ‘have a (bad) tendency to’, rigna ‘rain’, skjóta fyrir ‘be seen’, sleppa ‘be discounted’, svipa til ‘resemble’, venda ‘turn’
References


