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a brief overview

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Icelandic declarative V1: a brief overview.

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Abstract

This squib is a brief state of the art overview of declarative V1 in Icelandic, old and modern. Three (relevant) types of such clauses are discussed: Narrative Inversion, with an overt topical subject directly after the verb, Presentational V1, with an overt non-topical subject, and Null-subject V1. Narrative Inversion is a robust main clause phenomenon, whereas Presentational V1 and Null-subject V1 are found in subordinate clauses, albeit less frequently than in main clauses. The restrictions on declarative V1 have remained largely stable throughout the history of Icelandic. All three types are continuity/linking orders, hence typical of narrative and other cohesive texts, but very rare, almost nonexistent, in common discourse types in spoken language. Overall, declarative V1 is more characteristic of and common in Old Icelandic texts than in Modern Icelandic texts, presumably as the bulk of the preserved Old Icelandic texts are narrative texts, while such texts are only a fraction of accessible Modern Icelandic texts.

Icelandic, old and modern, is a verb-second (V2) language, with *SVX* (Subject-Verb-X) as the neutral and most common order in declarative clauses. Nevertheless, it also has a range of *verb-initial declaratives* (V1 declaratives).¹ As in most other Germanic varieties, informal topic drop and conjunction reduction commonly yield V1 orders, disregarded here (but see Sigurðsson 1989, 2011).²

Three relevant V1 declarative types can be discerned, depending on the properties of the subject. See (1).

- (1) a. **Narrative Inversion (NI):** VS orders with an overt *topical subject* directly after the finite verb: “Wrote I/she/they/Mary (etc.) then a letter”. The subject is a given topic at the clausal level (hence most commonly in the 1st person singular, Sigurðsson 1990, 1994), often with a preceding coreferential aboutness topic at the discourse level (Sigurðsson 2018).
- b. **Presentational V1:** V(X)S orders with an overt *non-topical subject*, usually indefinite and commonly late in the sentence: “Came then many ships”.
- c. **Null-subject V1:** V1 orders with a null subject, *pro*, nonreferential in Modern Icelandic (expletive, arbitrary, or generic), but either nonreferential or referential in Old Icelandic (where referential *pro* was not frequent, though):
“Had thus often been rather nice there” = ‘It had thus ...’

¹ That is, “declaratives” in contrast to interrogatives, imperatives, and exclamatives.

² V1 arises in subordinate clauses by extraction, “Mary know I that ___ saw him” (‘I know that Mary saw him’), etc. (see Zaenen 1985). I set this aside here.

See the Modern Icelandic examples in (2)–(4).

- (2) **Skrifaði** ég þá grein ... NI
wrote I then article
'Then I wrote an article ...'.
(*Lögmannablaðið* 2002,2: 26, on timarit.is)
- (3) **Voru** þá nokkrir drengjanna farnir í burtu. Presentational V1
were then some boys-the gone in way
'Some of the boys had then left.'
(*Tíminn* 1966, http://timarit.is/view_page_init.jsp?pageId=3260235)
- (4) **Var** beðið eftir dómara til kl. 5.30. Null-subject V1
was waited after referee till clock 5.30
'(Some) people waited for a referee until 5.30.'
(*Tíminn* 1966, http://timarit.is/view_page_init.jsp?pageId=3260235)

V1 declaratives of this sort (or these sorts), in particular in Old Icelandic, have been widely discussed. For variably extensive treatments (from brief comments to whole works), see, for example, Lund (1862), Braune (1894), Mock (1894), Bernstein (1897), Falk & Torp (1900), Nygaard (1900, 1906), Netter (1935), Hallberg (1965), Heusler (1967), Rieger (1968), Haiman (1974), Kossuth (1978a, 1978b, 1980, 1981), Platzack (1985), Sigurðsson (1990, 1994, 2018), Rögnvaldsson & Thráinsson (1990), Thráinsson (2007), Faarlund (2008), Franco (2008), Butt et al. (2014), Booth (2018).

Common properties

Common to all three types is that they either contain no overt subject or only a “demoted” subject, not in focus (resisting accentuation). All three types are “continuity” or “linking” orders, hence typical of *cohesive texts*, but very rare, almost nonexistent, in common discourse types in spoken language (conversations, short statements, out of the blue comments, etc.).³ In Old High German, in contrast, “V1-clauses serve to introduce a new discourse referent ... and therefore are

³ While exclamative V1 is natural in the spoken language (Sigurðsson 1990, n. 10). Declarative V1 is often found in dialogues in the sagas. As argued by Sigurðsson (1994: 155–158), however, what is camouflaged as “direct discourse” in the sagas is hardly representative of spoken language, but rather to be seen as part of the author narration (see also Netter 1935). The saga dialogues and monologues (often long and narrative) are of course not recorded spoken language, instead involving fictive scene settings of verbal events that supposedly took place centuries before they were first shaped in writing, in the style of formally trained and educated scribes.

typically used in presentational sentences, foremost in the beginning of texts or episodes” (Hinterhölzl & Petrova 2010: 316). This is orthogonal to Icelandic, where declarative V1 *never* initiates an episode, neither in longer narratives nor in short anecdotes. The introduction of a new discourse referent is compatible with Presentational V1, though, but obviously incompatible with NI and Null-subject V1.

Declarative V1, in particular NI, is most common in narrative texts, above all the Old Icelandic sagas and related genres in later Icelandic, such as biographies and history writings of various sorts (including personal letters and newspaper obituaries, even sports reports, to some extent, see (3) and (4)). Another genre where it is easily found is reasoning texts (political, scholarly). Due to its continuity/linking function, declarative V1 (of all three types) is particularly common in *ok-/og-* ‘and’ conjuncts, but virtually nonexistent in adversative *en-* ‘but’ conjuncts (Sigurðsson 1990, 1994; see also Platzack 1985).⁴ In addition, all three types commonly contain linking discourse particles/adverbials (temporal, locative, logical) in the middle field, such as *þá* ‘then’, *því* ‘thus’, *þess vegna* ‘therefore’; see (2) and (3).

Distinguishing properties

All three types are rare in subordinate clauses. However, the instances of V1 found in subordination (relativization and extraction apart) are almost exclusively either Null-subject V1 or Presentational V1 (see Sigurðsson 1990, 1994 for a detailed study of NI and Presentational V1 in this respect). NI, in contrast, is a robust root phenomenon. See (5).

- | | | | |
|-----|----|---|-------------------|
| (5) | a. | * þegar verður hann kominn | *NI |
| | | when will-be he come | |
| | b. | þegar verða komnir bjórkælar við nammibarinn | Presentational V1 |
| | | when will-be come beer-coolers at candybar.the | |
| | | ‘when beer coolers will have been introduced at the candybar’ | |
| | | hross.blog.is/blog/hross/entry/343764/ – March 11, 2010 | |
| | c. | þegar verður komið í ... | Null-subject V1 |
| | | when will-be come into | |
| | | ‘when (some) people will get into ...’ | |
| | | sigurjonn.blog.is/blog/sigurjonn/?offset=10 – March 11, 2010 | |

Another distinguishing property, in the *modern* language, has to do with expletive *það* ‘it, there’. As expletive *það* is incompatible with topical subjects (see Sigurðsson 1989, Engdahl et al.

⁴ In the Old Icelandic counts in Sigurðsson 1994 (Table III), declarative V(X)S turned out to be 8,3 times more common than SV after *ok*, whereas SV was 213 times more common than V(X)S after *en*. A quick search in <http://timarit.is/> (2018-12-05) shows that declarative V(X)S is common in modern newspaper texts after *og* (“and went we then to ...”, etc.) but exceedingly rare after *en* (“but went we then to ...”).

2018), there is no competition between NI and *það*-initial order. On the other hand, expletive *það* has long been gaining ground in presentational clauses and in clauses with nonreferential *pro*, hence at the expense of Presentational V1 and Null-subject V1. See (6)–(8).

- (6) **Það skrifaði ég þá grein.*
 there wrote I then article
 Intended: ‘Then I wrote an article.’
- (7) (*Það*) *hafa því margir stúdentar lesið bókina.*
 (there) have thus many students read book-the
 ‘Thus, many students have read the book.’
- (8) a. (*Það*) *var því farið að syngja sálma.*
 (there) was thus begun to sing psalms
 ‘Thus, (some) people began singing psalms.’
 b. (*Það*) *er því oft kalt í íbúðinni.*
 (it) is thus often cold in apartment-the
 ‘It is thus often cold in the apartment.’

Frequency and grammaticality

Overall, there is no question that declarative V1 is more common in Old Icelandic texts than in Modern Icelandic texts. The loss of referential *pro* and the increased frequency of expletive *það* have contributed to this development for Null-subject V1 and Presentational V1, but the statistical effect of this in the written language is marginal (Butt et al. 2014); referential *pro* was not highly frequent in Old Icelandic, and the expletive is commonly considered too informal for written style. For NI, the effect is obviously zero. Nevertheless, it is clear that NI is more salient in the preserved Old Icelandic texts than in Modern Icelandic texts in general.

The results in Butt et al. (2014) and in Kossuth (1978a) show markedly reduced declarative V1 frequency in the 20th century.⁵ It is not immediately obvious how to interpret these results. At first sight, they might seem to indicate an ongoing historical change, but an alternative explanation is that the bulk of the preserved Old Icelandic texts are narrative texts, while such texts are only a fraction of accessible Modern Icelandic texts. The results in Sigurðsson 1990, 1994 suggest that declarative V1 has been a strongly genre- and style-related phenomenon throughout the history of Icelandic. In Sigurðsson’s word order counts, the

⁵ Butt et al. (2014) draw their results from the IcePaHC corpus. The corpus contains some tagging errors (e.g., conflating topic drop and V1, it seems), but the effects of this are probably statistically marginal in most cases.

frequency of declarative V1 turned out to be *higher* in the 20th century texts studied than in the Old Icelandic texts with which they were compared. See (9).

(9) The ratio $V(X)S/SV+V(X)S$ in non-conjoined declarative main clauses in Sigurðsson (1994, 62, 149):

Old Icelandic texts: 24%

20th century texts: 38%

The text with the lowest $V(X)S/SV+V(X)S$ ratio (7%) in these counts is a religious text from around 1200, and the second lowest result (9%) was actually found for the famous *Brennu-Njals saga*, from around 1300, indicating that V1 is not only genre related but also highly individual and style related.

The 20th century texts studied by Sigurðsson were specifically selected as they were expected to show high frequency of V1, but that just underscores the point: when comparable texts are compared one gets largely compatible results, across the centuries. In addition, the syntactic restrictions on V1 have remained stable. It is largely a main clause (root) phenomenon in both Old and Modern Icelandic, it has a continuity/linking function in both Old and Modern Icelandic, it commonly contains linking discourse particles/adverbials in the middle field across the centuries, and it is especially frequent in *og*- ‘and’ conjuncts but virtually nonexistent in adversative *en*- ‘but’ conjuncts in both Old and Modern Icelandic.

Stylistic fashion is amenable to fluctuation over time. Declarative V1 is rather unfashionable nowadays (I dare say). It is easy to find Modern Icelandic texts, even otherwise rather traditional narrative texts, with close to zero occurrences of declarative V1. Declarative V1 has clearly moved farther to the outskirts of language use over time. But this does not indicate a *grammatical* change. Declarative V1 is perfectly grammatical in Modern Icelandic.

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