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Preface and acknowledgements

The purpose of this book is twofold: first, to present some of the basic and most interesting facts about the syntax of Icelandic in an accessible and organized fashion, and second, to introduce the reader to the research that has been done on Icelandic syntax. It is mainly intended for students and researchers in the field of linguistics, especially those who are interested in Scandinavian syntax. The book is thus a theoretically oriented descriptive work that refers the reader to a representative sample of the research done on Icelandic syntax over the past thirty years. Hence it should be a useful introduction for those who want to do such research on their own and familiarize themselves with the descriptive and theoretical issues that have figured in the linguistic discussion, possibly preventing them from re-inventing the wheel. Special emphasis is on those areas that have aroused interest among theoretical linguists and those doing research on comparative syntax. For that reason the book contains a fair amount of comparative material from the other Scandinavian languages, especially Faroese, the Scandinavian language closest to Icelandic, and far more references to linguistic literature than is common in handbooks and overviews.

As can be seen from the table of contents, the chapters typically fall into two parts. The first part gives a descriptive overview and the second contains a discussion of some theoretical and comparative issues. Those who are mainly interested in a quick overview of the basic facts covered in each chapter can thus simply read the first part and skip the theoretical and comparative discussion. Those who are more interested in theory and comparison, for example, because they are already familiar with the main characteristics of Icelandic syntax, can concentrate on the second part of each chapter. Obviously, theory and description cannot be entirely separated, and hence this kind of organization necessarily leads to some overlap and repetition. It should, however, make the book accessible and interesting to a wider audience. Thus the book should be a suitable introduction to Icelandic syntax for students of Germanic or Scandinavian languages, even if they are not particularly interested in syntactic theory. But it should also be pointed out
that this kind of organization has two additional consequences: first, references to relevant theoretical literature are often mainly found in the theoretical sections and not in the descriptive overview; second, the descriptive overview is sometimes an oversimplification, as overviews tend to be (although exceptions to the main rule are sometimes pointed out in footnotes).

Because of its twofold aim, the book is not simply a handbook on the syntax of Icelandic, presenting the facts in the framework most fashionable today (or in some entirely theory-neutral fashion, if that were possible). Instead, it frequently dwells on analyses and arguments that have been presented in frameworks of yesterday. One of the reasons is the author’s firm belief that the fashionable analyses and frameworks of today will soon be considered just as obsolete as those of yesterday. Another reason is the fact that it is frequently possible to learn something about the nature of syntactic facts and syntactic argumentation by studying previous accounts and the reasons why they were proposed in the first place and then abandoned for more recent ones (by some linguists at least). For this reason it should be possible to use this book as a textbook and not only as a handbook.

Although the book thus refers to much of the research that has been done on the syntax of Icelandic, it has not been possible to do justice to it all. The book is also inevitably influenced by my own beliefs about the nature of Icelandic, and to some extent it contains a summary of my own research but also some new observations. The theoretical slant is influenced by the framework adopted in most of the existing research on Icelandic syntax, that is, some version of the so-called Principles-and-Parameters approach, including pretty faithful government-binding (GB) variants, minimalist variants and other less orthodox variants. This is arguably not entirely fair to those who have done interesting work on Icelandic within other frameworks, such as LFG, GPSG/HPSG, construction grammar, optimality theory, and so on. I have, however, tried to include the results of research done in different frameworks, and I have also tried to avoid going into very technical and theory-specific details. Although this is not always possible, I believe that most of the book should be accessible to advanced undergraduates and beginning graduate students of general linguistics and Germanic (including Scandinavian) linguistics.

Much of the material in this book has been developed in connection with the teaching of various courses, mostly in the Department of Linguistics at Harvard University (1991–95) and at the University of Iceland (mainly after 1995). It has also been tried out on students at the European Summer School of Logic, Language and Information (Copenhagen Business School 1994),
the LOT Winter School of Linguistics (Catholic University of Nijmegen 1997), LSA Summer Institute (Cornell University 1997) and the University of the Faroes in Tórshavn (2002). In addition, it has figured in various linguistic talks and presentations that I have given in different places. Feedback from students and colleagues at all these places has been invaluable.

At the risk of offending most of those that have assisted me in one way or another in this project, I would like to mention a few who stand out: Steve Anderson for his role in getting this project off the ground; Jorge Hankamer and Judy Aissen for introducing me to syntax way back when; Avery Andrews for being a pioneer in Icelandic syntax research and discovering various intriguing facts about it; Joan Bresnan, Sten Vikner, Sam Epstein, Jonathan Bobaljik and Chris Collins for working with me and thus making me a better linguist; Noam Chomsky for his interest in Icelandic syntax and his thought-provoking ideas; Joan Maling for keeping the syntactic flame in Iceland going when it seemed to be turning into a mere flicker; Eiríkur, Halldór Árman, Sigga Sigurjóns, Jóhannes, Matthew and Tolli for being instrumental in establishing a community of syntacticians in Reykjavík, who could talk to each other about syntax (although we tend to have too little time to do so); the Scandinavian syntax mafia, including Christer, Anders, Lars, Tarald, Peter, Elisabet, Kirsti, Sten, Tor, Óystein, Lars-Olof, Cia, Kjartan, Gunnar Hrafn, Jóhanna, Thorbjörg and others, for creating interesting and stimulating networks in various guises and under various names; my Faroese collaborators and teachers, Zakaris, Jógván, Hjalmar and Turíð, for teaching me Faroese and about Faroese, and the same goes for Eivind and for Michael Barnes; Thóra and Martin, my Faroese host family, for making it possible for me to feel at home in Tórshavn; and my students at Harvard (including the ones from MIT), in Reykjavík, in Tórshavn and elsewhere, who have made me work hard at presenting facts about Icelandic syntax in an accessible way and have provided me with interesting ideas of their own in theses, papers and homework problems too numerous to acknowledge properly (although some of their work figures rather prominently in the references). Special thanks to Matthew and Halldór Árman for reading the whole manuscript and making extremely valuable comments on it, to Óystein and Gunnar Hrafn for commenting on parts of it, and to my students Theódóra and Hlíf for going through the entire manuscript in a critical and inquisitive fashion in a seminar in the spring of 2006, together with Eiríkur, Jóhannes, Tolli and me.

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I would like to thank my family for bearing with me while I was spending time on this book instead of spending it with them. Special thanks to my wife Sigga for reading and discussing parts of this work and telling me when she thought the presentation could be improved. Last but not least, many thanks to Helen Barton at CUP who kept believing (it seemed) that I would eventually finish the book.