

1

Introduction

1.0 Icelandic and its closest relatives

Icelandic is a North Germanic language currently (2007) spoken by some 300,000 people. It is thus most closely related to the other Nordic languages, that is, Faroese, Norwegian, Danish and Swedish (see, e.g., Haugen 1976, 1982; Braumüller 1991; Höskuldur Thráinsson 1994a; Vikør 1995; Torp 1998). It is often maintained that it has changed less than the other Germanic languages, presumably largely due to its geographical isolation. From roughly 1870 to 1915 some 20,000 Icelanders emigrated to North America, and Icelandic was spoken by these emigrants for some decades, for example, in Manitoba, Alberta, British Columbia and North Dakota. There are still some relics of this Western Icelandic in North America, although it is about to disappear (see, e.g., Haraldur Bessason 1967, 1971; Clausen 1986; Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir 1990, 1997).

Modern Icelandic is closer to Faroese than to the other Nordic languages, both morphologically and syntactically. Hence there are numerous references to Faroese in this book, especially in the comparative sections at the end of each chapter. In addition, these sections contain comparative material from the other Nordic languages, although it is more anecdotal.

1.1 Nominal inflection and agreement

Some knowledge of Icelandic morphology is necessary for anyone who wants to understand the morphosyntax of the language. In the following overview the main emphasis is on those aspects of inflectional morphology that figure in various case and agreement phenomena. For further details the reader is referred to Stefán Einarsson 1945 and Höskuldur Thráinsson 1994a.¹

¹ Icelanders use the patronymic system and thus most people do not have a family name. People are not called by their 'last name' (this being their father's (or sometimes mother's) first name plus *-son* 'son' or *-dóttir* 'daughter') nor is it used for the

2 Introduction

1.1.1 Nouns and adjectives

Icelandic has a three-valued **gender** system, **m**(asculine), **f**(eminine) and **n**(euter). The grammatical gender of nouns is only indirectly related to the sex of their referents, as in German, for instance. Thus while most words referring for instance to female humans are feminine, it is also possible to find masculine and neuter words referring to females. Besides, words referring to things and concepts can be masculine, feminine or neuter:

- (1.1) a. strákur (m.) ‘boy’, stóll (m.) ‘chair’, svanni (m.) ‘woman (poetic)’
 b. stelpa (f.) ‘girl’, mynd (f.) ‘picture’, hetja (f.) ‘hero’
 c. barn (n.) ‘child’, borð (n.) ‘table’, fljóð (n.) ‘woman (poetic)’, skáld (n.) ‘poet’

Nominal categories, such as nouns, adjectives, articles, pronouns, have four **cases**, **N**(ominative), **A**(ccusative), **D**(ative) and **G**(enitive) and two **numbers**, **sg.** (singular) and **pl.** (plural). The inflectional paradigms of the **nouns** vary, depending on the gender and inflectional class of the noun (see, e.g., Höskuldur Thráinsson 1994a:153). Adjectives modifying nouns agree with them in gender, case and number. This holds both for attributive and predicative adjectives:

- (1.2) a. gular hestur gul mynd
 yellow(Nsg.m.) horse(Nsg.m.) yellow(Nsg.f.) picture(Nsg.f.)
 gult borð gular myndir
 yellow(Nsg.n.) table(Nsg.n.) yellow(Npl.f.) pictures(Npl.f.)
- b. Ég sá gula hænu.
 I saw yellow(Asg.f.) hen(Asg.f.)
- c. Þessar hænur eru gular.
 these hens(Npl.f.) are yellow(Npl.f.)

1.1.2 Articles and definiteness

Icelandic has no indefinite article and the **definite article** is normally suffixed to nouns but has its own inflection (gender, number, case). This is illustrated in (1.3):

- (1.3) Inflection of the suffixed definite article:
- | | | | |
|------|---------------------|---------------------|-----------------|
| | m. | f. | n. |
| Nsg. | hest-ur- inn | mynd- in | borð- ið |
| Apl. | hest-a- na | mynd-ir- nar | borð- in |

Footnote 1 (*cont.*)

purposes of alphabetization in Iceland. Hence I will refer to Icelandic authors by their full name here and they will be listed under their first name in the references.

In addition, there is a lexical (or free-standing) form of the article. It can only be used if the noun is modified by an adjective, and it is commonly said to be characteristic of formal or written Icelandic. As we shall see below, this is not entirely accurate since the two forms of the article are not completely equivalent from a semantic point of view. Adjectives modifying definite nouns normally have the ‘weak’ (or definite) form, regardless of the position of the article (i.e., whether it is free or suffixed) (st. = strong; w. = weak):

- (1.4) g
ur hani g
li hani-**nn** **hinn** g
li hani
 yellow(st.) rooster yellow(w.) rooster-the the yellow(w.) rooster

The free-standing article and the suffixed article are in complementary distribution, that is, there is normally no ‘double definiteness’ in Icelandic of the type found, for example, in Faroese, Norwegian and Swedish (see, e.g., Höskuldur Thráinsson et al. 2004, section 5.2.1 *passim*):²

- (1.5) g
a borðið **hið** g
a borð ***hið** g
a borðið
 yellow(st.) table-the the yellow(w.) table the yellow table-the

There is an exception to the rule that weak adjectives modify definite nouns. Consider the following near-minimal pair:

- (1.6) a. Ég horfði upp í bláan himin**inn**.
 I looked up into blue(st.A) sky-the(A)
 b. Ég horfði á bláa bíl**inn**.
 I looked at blue(w.A) car-the(A)

In (1.6a) we have a strong (or indefinite) form of the adjective *blár* ‘blue’ and the sentence means roughly ‘I looked up into the sky, which happened to be blue’ (non-restrictive). Sentence (1.6b), on the other hand, can be paraphrased roughly as ‘I looked at the blue car (and not, say, the red one)’, that is, the weak (or definite) adjective gives a restrictive reading when modifying a noun with the suffixed article. When no such restriction is appropriate, the weak form sounds semantically odd, since it implies an inappropriate restriction (§ is used here and elsewhere to indicate semantic (or pragmatic) anomaly):

² There are some exceptions to this in Icelandic. Thus the demonstrative pronoun *hinn* ‘the other’ obligatorily modifies a definite noun, for instance: *hinn *maður/maðurinn* ‘the other man(indef./def.)’ (lit. ‘the other man-the’). In a few other cases the suffixed definite article is possible after a demonstrative pronoun; cf. examples like the following: *Hann er á naturvakt þessa vikulvikuna* ‘He has the night shift this week(indef./def.)’. We will return to the distribution of the definite article in chapter 3 below, where some comparison with the other Scandinavian languages will be made.

4 Introduction

- (1.7) Rautt/\$rauða nefið á honum glóði í myrkrinu.
 red(st./\$w.)nose-the on him glowed in dark-the
 ‘His red nose glowed in the dark.’

The weak form of the adjective would imply that the person had more than one nose.

Interestingly, this semantic generalization does not hold for weak adjectives following the free-standing article. Thus *hinn blái bíll* ‘the blue car’ (which sounds very formal or even poetic) does not have a restrictive reading of the kind *blái billinn* does. The distribution of the articles will be discussed in more detail in the section on noun phrases in chapter 3. But it should be noted here that the free-standing article is sometimes required and the suffixed one excluded when a non-restrictive reading of a definite noun phrase is needed (see also Halldór Ármann Sigurðsson 2006b):

- (1.8)
 a. **Hin** vinsæla hljómsveit/*Vinsæla hljómsveit**in** 4 × 100 leikur fyrir dansi.
 the popular band / popular band-the 4 × 100 plays for dance
 ‘The popular band 4 × 100 plays during the dance.’
 b. Ég styð **hina** sanngjörnu tillögu/*sanngjörnu tillöguna um launahækkun.
 I support the fair proposal/fair proposal-the about salary-raise
 ‘I support the fair proposal of salary increase.’

Hence it is clearly a simplification to say that the difference between the free-standing article and the suffixed one is mainly one of formal vs. informal language.

1.1.3 Pronouns

Most pronouns in Icelandic inflect for case, number and gender. The inflection is sometimes quite irregular and suppletive, as is common in Germanic. The (simplex non-possessive) **reflexive pronoun** *sig* is different from other pronouns in that it does not inflect in gender nor in number and has no nominative form (A *sig*, D *sér*, G *sín*). The reflexive pronoun can only have 3rd person antecedents, that is, there is no special reflexive form for 1st and 2nd person in Icelandic (nor in any of the other Scandinavian languages). There is also a **complex reflexive** pronoun in Icelandic, *sjálfan sig* ‘self refl.’ The first part of it inflects for gender and number and agrees with the antecedent, and both parts inflect for case, which is assigned by the relevant case assigner (e.g. a transitive verb or a preposition):

- (1.9) a. Strákarnir_i elska **sjálfa** **sig**_i.
 boys-the(Npl.m.) love self(Apl.m.) refl.(A)
 ‘The boys love themselves.’

- b. Hún_i er ekki með sjálfri sér_i.
 she(Nsg.f.) is not with self(Dsg.f.) refl.(D)
 'She is out of her mind.'

There are no **relative pronouns** in Icelandic, only relative particles (or complementizers). The most common relative complementizer is *sem* 'that, which', but *er* 'that, which' is also used in written or formal Icelandic:

- (1.10) a. Þetta er maðurinn [sem kom í gær]
 this is man-the that came yesterday
 'This is the man that came yesterday.'
 b. Konan [sem ég talaði við] er hollensk.
 woman-the that I talked with is Dutch
 'The woman that I talked to is Dutch.'

The relative complementizer *sem* in Icelandic behaves very similarly to the English relative *that*. Thus it cannot follow a preposition (**Konan við sem ég talaði . . .* **The woman to that I spoke . . .*), it cannot occur in possessive phrases (**Maðurinn sem kona hringdi . . .* **The man that wife called . . .* (intended sense: *whose wife . . .*)), and so on. But it differs from its English counterpart in that it can introduce non-restrictive as well as restrictive relative clauses. Thus the following sentence is in principle ambiguous (in spoken Icelandic there would normally be an intonational difference, sometimes also indicated by commas around the non-restrictive relative in written Icelandic):

- (1.11) Íslendingar sem borða mikinn fisk verða almennt gamlir.
 Icelanders that/who eat much fish become in general old
 'Icelanders that eat a lot of fish become old in general.'
 'Icelanders, who eat a lot of fish, become old in general.'

1.1.4 Unstressed pronouns and cliticized forms

Unstressed 3rd person pronouns in Icelandic typically have somewhat reduced forms and it is useful to be familiar with these:

- (1.12) hann → 'ann 'he(N/A)', honum → 'onum 'him(D)'
 hún → 'ún 'she(N)', hana → 'ana 'her(A)', henni → 'enni 'her(D)'
 það → 'ða 'it(N/A)', því → 'ðví 'it(D)'

This reduction of unstressed pronouns is normally not shown in the orthography and it will only be indicated in this book when there is special reason to do so. The unstressed pronominal forms do not function as clitics of the type familiar from the Romance languages, for instance. Thus there is no difference in the position of pronominal objects and full NP objects in sentences like the ones in (1.13):

6 Introduction

- (1.13) a. Ég hef lesið bókina.
 I have read book-the
 b. Ég hef lesið hana / 'ana.
 I have read it [lit. 'her', since *bók* 'book' is feminine]
 c. *Ég 'ana hef lesið.

There are constructions, however, where (unstressed) pronominal objects do not have the same 'distribution' as full NP objects:

- (1.14) a. Ég las ekki bókina / bókina ekki.
 I read not book-the / book-the not
 'I didn't read the book.'
 b. Ég las *ekki 'ana / 'ana ekki.
 I read not it / it not
 'I didn't read it.'

The variant where the object precedes the negation is normally referred to as Object Shift, and facts of this sort are commonly described by saying that it is obligatory to 'shift' (unstressed) pronouns across the negation and sentence adverbs with similar distribution. This phenomenon will be discussed in some detail below.

A more clitic-like element is the unstressed form of the 2nd person pronoun which is normally attached to the imperative and to the finite verb in (other) verb-subject contexts, for example direct questions. Observe the following:

- (1.15) a. the imperative form: far 'go' finn 'find' les 'read'
 b. imperative + pronoun: far þú finn þú les þú
 go you find you read you
 c. the common imp. form: farðu finndu lestu
 d. direct question: ferð þú? finnur þú? lest þú?
 ferðu? finnurðu? lestu?
 go you find you read you

The imperative itself is the bare stem of the verb. In formal speech the 2nd person pronoun *þú* 'you' can follow it, but it does not have to. The bare imperative without an accompanying pronominal form is found in very formal or even biblical and poetic language: *Gjör rétt, þol ei órétt*, lit. 'Do right, tolerate not injustice', *Kom, vornótt, og syng* . . . lit. 'Come, spring night, and sing . . .'. It is also found in various relatively fixed expressions: *Kom inn!* 'Come in!', *Gef mér!* 'Give me (some)!'. The imperative with the non-reduced form is similarly restricted in the modern language: *Far þú og gjör slíkt hið sama* 'Go and do likewise.' In the common form of the imperative the 2nd person pronoun attaches to the verbal stem in a reduced form, as shown in

(1.15c) (the *-ðu*, *-du*, *-tu* – for a discussion of the morphophonemics of the Icelandic imperative forms, see, e.g., Orešnik 1972, 1980).³ Similarly, the informal direct question forms would be *ferðu*, *finnurðu* and *lestu* as shown in (1.15d), meaning ‘do you go?’, ‘do you find?’ and ‘do you read?’, respectively (subject-verb inversion is not restricted to auxiliaries in Icelandic and there is no *do*-support).⁴

Finally, it should be mentioned here that the *-st*-ending of the so-called ‘middle verbs’ (or ‘*-st*-verbs’) in Icelandic is generally considered to derive historically from the reflexive pronoun *sig* (Old Norse *sik*, see especially Kjartan G. Ottósson 1992). This is illustrated in a simplified form in (1.16):

- (1.16) ON Þeir klæddu sik → ON Þeir klæddusk → Mod. Ic. Þeir klæddust
 they dressed refl. they dressed they dressed

Thus Old Icelandic had both the reflexive construction *Þeir klæddu sik* ‘They dressed’ (lit. ‘They dressed themselves’) and the middle form (with a reflexive reading) *Þeir klæddusk* ‘They dressed’, where the connection between the reflexive pronoun *sik* and the middle marker *-sk* may have been fairly transparent. Modern Icelandic has the middle (or *-st*-) form *Þeir klæddust* ‘They dressed’ and also a roughly synonymous reflexive construction *Þeir klæddu sig* ‘They dressed.’ But the semantic differences between many *-st*-forms in the modern language and the corresponding reflexive constructions, and sometimes also a complete lack of non-*-st*-verbal forms corresponding to some *-st*-verbs, make it difficult to argue for a synchronic derivation of the *-st*-forms from an underlying reflexive construction or some such in many

³ As pointed out by Orešnik and others, ‘hybrid’ forms of the imperative also occur, i.e. forms like *farð þú* ‘go!’, where the *-ð* at the end of the verbal form would seem to derive from forms like *farðu*, with the enclitic *-ðu*, although a full form of the pronoun *þú* follows. While interesting from a morphophonemic point of view, these need not concern us here.

⁴ When ‘orders’ are given to more than one person, the basic verbal form used is identical to the 2nd plural form (indicative) of the verb: *þið farið* ‘you go’, *farið!* ‘go (pl.)’. Here, too, a weakened form of the personal pronoun can be attached to preceding verbal forms. Thus *farið þið* → *fariði* ‘go(pl.)’, *finnið þið* → *finniði* ‘find(pl.)’. The same goes for other cases where a finite verb precedes the 2nd pl. pronoun, e.g. in direct questions. Thus *lesið þið?* ‘do you read?’ becomes *lesiði?* in non-formal speech. This reduction of the plural pronoun is normally not indicated in the spelling, however, whereas the reduction of the singular form is. Note that the parallelism between imperative (or cohortative) forms and (other) verb-subject cases mentioned above breaks down in the 1st pl. There the cohortative construction cannot have a pronoun (cf. *Förum!* ‘Let’s go!’ and not **Förum við*) whereas the inversion constructions do, of course (cf. *Förum við á morgun?* ‘Are we going tomorrow?’, lit. ‘Go we tomorrow?’).

8 Introduction

instances (see, e.g., Anderson 1990; for a more derivational approach, see Kissock 1995). We will return to the middle verbs in chapter 4.

1.2 Verbal morphology, agreement and auxiliary constructions

1.2.1 Person and number

Finite verbs in Icelandic agree with (nominative) subjects in **person** and **number**. The morphological markers for person and number appear to be fused, however (just like the markers for case and number in the nominal inflection), or at least very difficult to separate. This can be seen from the examples in (1.17) (see also Höskuldur Thráinsson 1994a:159 – for arguments that person and number are distinct syntactic categories in Icelandic nevertheless, see, e.g., Halldór Ármann Sigurðsson 2000, 2001):

(1.17)	present indicative			past indicative			
	1sg.	ég	horf-i	bit	ég	horf-ð-i	beit
	2 -	þú	horf-ir	bit-ur	þú	horf-ð-ir	bei-st
	3 -	hann	horf-ir	bit-ur	hann	horf-ð-i	beit
	1pl.	við	horf-um	bit-um	við	horf-ð-um	bit-um
	2 -	þið	horf-ið	bit-ið	þið	horf-ð-uð	bit-uð
	3 -	þeir	horf-a	bit-a	þeir	horf-ð-u	bit-u
			'look'	'bite'			

The verb *horfa* is an example of a weak (or regular) verb and *bíta* is a strong (or irregular) verb.

1.2.2 Tense and mood

Icelandic only has two morphologically distinct **tenses**: the unmarked **present** (or non-past) tense and the **past** tense. Weak verbs form past tense with a dental suffix, as is typical for Germanic languages (-ð-, -d- or -t-, depending on the final sound of the stem), whereas strong verbs show various (systematic but unpredictable) vowel changes (the so-called **ablaut** patterns). The rich agreement morphology illustrated above is one of the main differences between Icelandic and the other Scandinavian languages and it is of some interest to note that it is found both in the **indicative mood** and the **subjunctive mood**, since it has sometimes been maintained that subjunctive forms are non-finite or 'non-tensed' in Icelandic:⁵

⁵ It is true, however, that the tense of an embedded subjunctive clause is typically dependent on the tense of the matrix clause. This will be discussed in chapter 8.

(1.18)	present subjunctive				past subjunctive			
	1sg.	ég	horf-i	bít-i	ég	horf-ð-i	bit-i	
	2 -	þú	horf-ir	bít-ir	þú	horf-ð-ir	bit-ir	
	3 -	hann	horf-i	bít-i	hann	horf-ð-i	bit-i	
	1pl.	við	horf-um	bít-um	við	horf-ð-um	bit-um	
	2 -	þið	horf-ið	bít-ið	þið	horf-ð-uð	bit-uð	
	3 -	þeir	horf-i	bít-i	þeir	horf-ð-u	bit-u	

1.2.3 Non-finite verb forms

The non-finite verb forms are traditionally considered the **infinitive** and the two participles, the **present participle** and the **past participle**. The infinitive typically ends in *-a* in Icelandic, as can be seen if it is compared to the imperative:

(1.19)	infinitives:	tala	horf-a	dæm-a	bít-a
	imperatives:	tala	horf	dæm	bít
		'talk'	'look'	'judge'	'bite'

The so-called present participle is formed by adding *-(a)ndi* to the stem of the verb: *sofandi* 'sleeping', *gangandi* 'walking'. It does not inflect at all in Modern Icelandic. The past participle usually ends in *-ur* or *-inn* and it inflects in gender, number and case as illustrated here with partial paradigms:

(1.20)		m.		f.		n.
	Nsg.	dæm-d-ur	bit-in-n	dæm-d	bit-in	dæm-t bit-ið
	A -	dæm-d-an	bit-in-n	dæm-d-a	bit-n-a	dæm-t bit-ið
	Npl.	dæm-d-ir	bit-n-ir	dæm-d-ar	bit-n-ar	dæm-d bit-in
	A -	dæm-d-a	bit-n-a	dæm-d-ar	bit-n-ar	dæm-d bit-in
		'judged'	'bitten'			

The past participle is used in the passive, for instance, where it agrees with a (nominative) subject: *Hundurinn var bitinn* 'The dog(Nsg.m.) was bitten(Nsg.m.)', *Bækurnar voru lesnar* 'The books(Npl.f.) were read(Npl.f.)'. The accusative form can then occur in the so-called accusative-with-infinitive construction, for instance: *Ég tel bókina hafa verið lesna* 'I believe the book(Asg.f.) to have been read (Asg.f.)'. The perfect auxiliary *hafa* 'have' selects a non-inflecting form of the main verb, and this form is identical to the N/Asg.n. form of the participle: *Hundurinn hefur bitið manninn* 'The dog has bitten the man.' Because this form is non-inflecting, it is sometimes referred to as the **supine** form of the verb, but it is always identical to the form of the participle which is found in the passive when the participle agrees with a Nsg.n. subject (for a discussion of syntactic differences between inflected participles and supine forms, see, e.g., Halldór Ármann Sigurðsson 1989:322ff.):

10 Introduction

- (1.21) a. Barnið var elt.
 child-the(Nsg.n.) was chased(Nsg.n.)
 b. Þeir hafa elt hana.
 they have chased(Nsg.n. – or sup.) her

While all types of main verbs in Icelandic can take *hafa* ‘have’ as the perfective auxiliary, inflected participial forms of certain intransitive verbs of motion can be used with the verb *vera* ‘be’ in a resultative sense: *Hann hefur farið* ‘He has gone(Nsg.n. – or supine)’ vs. *Hann er farinn* ‘He is gone(Nsg.m.)’. Auxiliary constructions are discussed in more detail in the next section (for a discussion of resultatives see Whelpton 2006).

1.2.4 Auxiliary constructions

The so-called auxiliary verbs in Icelandic do not form a separate inflectional class. Thus the verbs that are most frequently listed as auxiliaries in Icelandic grammar books (*hafa* ‘have’, *vera* ‘be’, *munu* ‘will’) show rich agreement morphology like other verbs and also inflect for tense. Furthermore, these verbs do not have special ‘privileges of occurrence’ like auxiliaries in some other languages (cf. English, for instance, where it is basically auxiliary verbs only that undergo subject-verb inversion), except that the modal *munu* can never be preceded by another auxiliary. (The same holds for the modal *skulu* ‘shall’.) Because of this, auxiliary verbs in Icelandic can only be defined as ‘the class of verbs that are used systematically to express grammatical categories’, such as the **passive**, **perfect**, **progressive** and various **modal** constructions (e.g. with *munu* ‘will’).

The **passive** in Icelandic is formed by the auxiliaries *vera* ‘be’ and *verða* ‘become’ plus the past participle of the main verb, as already mentioned. The passive auxiliary normally agrees with a nominative subject in person and number and the participle agrees with a nominative subject in number and gender (and even case, as illustrated above – for further discussion, see chapter 3). The agent of a passive construction can be expressed in a prepositional phrase with the preposition *af* ‘by’ + D, but it is normally left unexpressed:

- (1.22) a. Einhver opnaði skápinn.
 somebody(Nsg.) opened(3sg.) cupboard-the(Asg.)
 ‘Somebody opened the cupboard.’
 b. Skápurinn var opnaður.
 cupboard-the(Nsg.m.) was(3sg.) opened(Nsg.m.)
 ‘The cupboard was opened.’

The *-st*-forms (or middle forms) of many verbs in Icelandic can have a passive-like meaning: