

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-59190-4 - The Syntax of Icelandic
Hoskuldur Thrainsson
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

The Syntax of Icelandic

Icelandic is a syntactically interesting language, with aspects of its word order, clause structure, agreement patterns and case system arousing much theoretical interest and debate in recent years. This is an informative and accessible guide to the structure of Icelandic, focusing in particular on those characteristics that have contributed greatly to syntactic research. Each chapter is divided into two main sections – providing both a descriptive overview and a discussion of the theoretical and comparative issues involved – and a wide range of topics is covered, including case, agreement, grammatical relations, thematic roles, word order, clause structure, fronting, extraposition, complement, adjuncts, pronouns and inflection. Also explored in detail are the similarities and differences between Icelandic and other related languages. Presupposing only a basic knowledge of syntax and complete with an extensive bibliography, this comprehensive survey will be an important tool for all those working on the structure of Scandinavian and Germanic languages.

HÖSKULDUR THRÁINSSON is Professor in the Department of Icelandic, University of Iceland. His recent books include *Íslensk tunga: Setningar* (*A Handbook on Icelandic Syntax*, 2005), and *Faroese: An Overview and Reference Grammar* (2004).

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-59190-4 - The Syntax of Icelandic
Hoskuldur Thrainsson
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE SYNTAX GUIDES

General editors:

P. Austin, B. Comrie, J. Bresnan, D. Lightfoot, I. Roberts, N. V. Smith

Responding to the increasing interest in comparative syntax, the goal of the Cambridge Syntax Guides is to make available to all linguists major findings, both descriptive and theoretical, which have emerged from the study of particular languages. The series is not committed to working in any particular framework, but rather seeks to make language-specific research available to theoreticians and practitioners of all persuasions.

Written by leading figures in the field, these guides will each include an overview of the grammatical structures of the language concerned. For the descriptivist, the books will provide an accessible introduction to the methods and results of the theoretical literature; for the theoretician, they will show how constructions that have achieved theoretical notoriety fit into the structure of the language as a whole; for everyone, they will promote cross-theoretical and cross-linguistic comparison with respect to a well-defined body of data.

Other books available in this series

The Syntax of Early English

O. FISCHER ET AL.

The Syntax of Spanish

K. ZAGONA

The Syntax of Hungarian

K. KISS

The Syntax of Chichewa

S. MCHOMBO

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-59190-4 - The Syntax of Icelandic
Hoskuldur Thrainsson
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

The Syntax of Icelandic

HÖSKULDUR THRÁINSSON



Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-59190-4 - The Syntax of Icelandic
Hoskuldur Thrainsson
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521591904

© Höskuldur Thráinsson 2007

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2007

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-521-59190-4 hardback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or
accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to
in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such
websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Contents

Preface and acknowledgements *page ix*

1 Introduction 1

1.0 Icelandic and its closest relatives 1

1.1 Nominal inflection and agreement 1

1.2 Verbal morphology, agreement and auxiliary constructions 8

2 Word order and clause structure 17

2.1 A descriptive overview 17

2.1.1 The basic clause structure assumed 17

2.1.2 The default order of constituents and some variations 21

2.1.3 Alternative subject positions 26

2.1.4 Positions of finite and non-finite verbs 27

2.1.5 Alternative object positions 31

2.1.6 Positions of adverbs 37

2.2 Some theoretical and comparative issues 40

2.2.1 The nature of V2 40

2.2.2 Subject positions and functional categories 45

2.2.3 Verbal morphology and embedded word order 58

2.2.4 Object positions, functional categories and properties of objects 64

2.2.5 Adverbs and syntactic structure 79

3 Order of elements within the phrase 88

3.1 A descriptive overview 88

3.1.1 Order within the (extended) noun phrase 88

3.1.2 Order within the (extended) verb phrase 96

3.2 Some theoretical and comparative issues 100

3.2.1 Noun Phrase architecture and the order of constituents 100

3.2.2 Verb Phrase architecture and the order of constituents 127

4	Case, agreement, grammatical relations and thematic roles	146
4.1	A descriptive overview	146
4.1.1	Some structural properties of subjects and objects	146
4.1.2	Case marking of subjects, objects and indirect objects	156
4.2	Some theoretical and comparative issues	181
4.2.1	Structural and lexical case	181
4.2.2	Morphological case and abstract case	192
4.2.3	Case, semantic association and thematic roles	198
4.2.4	Some changes – and comparison with the other Scandinavian languages	222
4.2.5	Relationship between case and agreement	232
4.2.6	Some comparative notes	242
5	Passives, middles and unaccusatives	249
5.1	A descriptive overview	249
5.1.0	Introduction	249
5.1.1	Regular passivization and thematic roles	250
5.1.2	Passivization of ‘impersonal’ verbs	257
5.1.3	Prepositional passive, impersonal passive and the expletive passive	262
5.1.4	The New Passive/New Impersonal	273
5.1.5	‘Middle verbs’ and the passive	283
5.1.6	Unaccusatives	293
5.2	Some theoretical and comparative issues	301
5.2.1	Faroese middles, passives and case (non-)preservation	301
5.2.2	Passives and middles in Mainland Scandinavian	306
5.2.3	Impersonal passives in Scandinavian	307
6	Different types of expletive constructions	309
6.1	A descriptive overview	309
6.1.0	Introduction	309
6.1.1	Types of expletive constructions in Icelandic	309
6.1.2	The positions available to the overt expletive in Icelandic	312
6.1.3	The positions available to the associate of the expletive in Icelandic	313
6.1.4	The positional requirements of different associates	317
6.1.5	More on real and apparent exceptions to the Indefiniteness Requirement	324
6.2	Some theoretical and comparative issues	327
6.2.1	Structural position and role of expletive elements	327
6.2.2	Expletive constructions in the other Scandinavian languages	333

6.2.3	The ‘associate positions’ revisited	337	
6.2.4	The differences – and what can be said about them	339	
7	Fronting, focusing, extraposition and NP-shift	341	
7.1	A descriptive overview	341	
7.1.1	Fronting of non-subjects	341	
7.1.2	Topicalization and Wh-movement across clause boundaries	349	
7.1.3	Stylistic Fronting and the overt expletive	352	
7.1.4	Stylistic Fronting and Topicalization	355	
7.1.5	Left Dislocation and Contrastive Dislocation	357	
7.1.6	Clefts and relatives	359	
7.1.7	Extrapositions and rightward movement	361	
7.2	Some theoretical and comparative issues	368	
7.2.1	Stylistic Fronting vs. Topicalization	368	
7.2.2	Stylistic Fronting, expletives and subject gaps	375	
7.2.3	Some comparative evidence	376	
7.2.4	Possible landing sites and some theoretical proposals	385	
7.2.5	Syntactic positions, movements, gaps and information structure	390	
8	Finite and non-finite complements and adjuncts	394	
8.1	A descriptive overview of finite subordinate clauses	394	
8.1.1	Complements vs. adjuncts	394	
8.1.2	Tense and mood in complement clauses	395	
8.1.3	Distribution of <i>að</i> -clauses and <i>hv</i> -clauses	402	
8.1.4	Tense and mood in adjunct clauses	404	
8.1.5	Relative clauses and <i>hv</i> -clauses	406	
8.1.6	Complementizer deletion	409	
8.2	A descriptive overview of infinitive constructions	410	
8.2.0	Introduction	410	
8.2.1	Independent infinitives	416	
8.2.2	Complements of control verbs, including prepositional verbs	418	
8.2.3	Complements of modal verbs	421	
8.2.4	Complements of aspectual verbs	428	
8.2.5	On the distribution of <i>að</i> -infinitives	430	
8.2.6	Accusative with infinitive	436	
8.2.7	Nominative with infinitive and raising to subject position	440	
8.3	Some theoretical and comparative issues	443	
8.3.1	Complementizer deletion	443	
8.3.2	Extra complementizer elements	448	
8.3.3	Some structural properties of control complements	450	

viii Contents

8.3.4	AcI, Object Shift, NcI and raising	452
8.3.5	Modal constructions	458
9	Pronouns, reflexives and empty categories	461
9.1	A descriptive overview	461
9.1.1	Basic distribution of reflexive and non-reflexive pronouns in Icelandic	461
9.1.2	Cross-clausal anaphoric dependencies	465
9.1.3	Reflexives inside infinitival complements	473
9.1.4	Empty pronominal elements	475
9.2	Some theoretical and comparative issues	483
9.2.1	The standard Binding Theory	483
9.2.2	Pronouns and reflexives in the Scandinavian languages	484
9.2.3	Is Icelandic a pro-drop language?	501
	References	505
	Index of subjects	530
	Index of languages and dialects	555
	Index of names	560

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

x Preface and acknowledgements

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 Ármann, 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, Øystein, 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, Jógvan, Hjalmar and Turið, 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 Ármann for reading the whole manuscript and making extremely valuable comments on it, to Øystein 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.

This book is partially based on research made possible by grants from the Icelandic Research Fund (through RANNÍS) and from the Research Fund of

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-59190-4 - The Syntax of Icelandic
Hoskuldur Thrainsson
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

xii Preface and acknowledgements

the University of Iceland, and I was fortunate enough to get the opportunity to work on it during sabbaticals at MIT, University College London, and in Jónshús in Copenhagen (although I was always trying to do too many other things at the same time). In addition to people already mentioned, Guðrún Höskuldsdóttir, Kristín M. Jóhannsdóttir, Ásgrímur Angantýsson, Halldóra Björt Ewen and Einar Freyr Sigurðsson assisted in this research and I thank them for their pleasant cooperation.

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.