Some changes in Icelandic Verb Endings

Various changes occur in the system of verb endings from Old Icelandic to Modern Icelandic. The main changes we observe are the following:

a. 1st p. sg. pret. ind. of weak verbs -a becomes -i

b. Indicative endings replacing old subj. endings in 1st p. sg. and many plural forms.

c. 1st p. sg. pres. ind. takes after 2nd and 3rd p., -r (but this change seems sporadic and is later reversed)

There are some indications that these changes are related. They all appear to be analogical and they all involve changes in the 1st person sg.

The focus of this paper will be the change from -a to -i in the preterite of weak verbs. This change of the final vowel appears to be an analogical change reflecting the influence of the 3rd person sg. ending -i, being generalized to the 1st person, e.g. the preterite forms of kalla ‘to call’:

<table>
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<th>Preterite Singular</th>
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<td><strong>Old</strong></td>
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<td>1. kallað-a ‘I called’</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. kallað-ir ‘you called’</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. kallað-i ‘he/she called’</td>
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The basis for this pattern is probably the strong preterite where 1st and 3rd person sg. have the same form, e.g. 1st p. tók, 2nd p. tókt, 3rd p. tók from taka ‘take’ However it seems that the innovative ending spread throughout the lexicon in several stages. The change starts around 1300 but mostly takes hold in the 15th century. It seems to affect ō-verbs and preterite-present verbs differently and likely earlier than other verb classes. For those verb classes the change appears to be over around 1500 and for others around 1600.

There are some indications that phonological and/or syntactic factors may have played some role in the development, such as the initial vowel of a following word and perhaps also the position of the verb form in a sentence.

The goal of the paper is to try to identify the potential factors involved in this change and map out how the different stages of the change might have taken place. The starting point is the oldest Icelandic original diplomas before 1450 (Stefán Karlsson 1963). The fixed expressions found in many diplomas involving 1st person verb forms enable us to track these changes over time and facilitates comparison between periods.

The evidence from the original diplomas will be compared with other diplomatic material, such as later transcriptions of old diplomas and original diplomas from 1450-1600.
The results of this investigation will then be put into context to see how they relate to other linguistic changes over time and if they may shed some light on the general development of the verb endings in Icelandic.

References


Kjartan Ottósson. *The Icelandic middle voice, the morphological and phonological development*. Lund: Department of Scandinavian Languages.


