New perspectives on word order variation in Icelandic ditransitives: a diachronic corpus study

It is a well-known fact about Icelandic word order and argument structure that typical ditransitive verbs such as *gefa* ‘give’ allow variable theme-recipient orders alongside the canonical order recipient-theme, so-called Inversion, provided the theme is at least as definite as the recipient (cf. Ottósson 1991). This is exemplified in (1a,b), respectively. In stark contrast, ditransitives like *skila* ‘return’, *svipta* ‘deprive’ and *ræna* ‘rob’ impose strict linearisation conditions on their internal arguments, as shown in (2). Scholars generally assume this to be a fact about the base-generated argument structure and subcategorisation of individual lexical items rather than a general movement operation like Scrambling (e.g. Collins & Thráinsson 1996, Thráinsson 2007). It has also been suggested that animacy may play a role, Inversion being most readily accepted if both internal arguments are animate (cf. Thráinsson 2007). According to the literature, Old Icelandic apparently patterns with Modern Icelandic in that Inversion applies in very much the same environments and is subject to the same restrictions (cf. Hróarsdóttir 2000, Haugan 2000).

In this talk, I will present the results of an ongoing study which bears on these issues, using the syntactically parsed diachronic corpus of Icelandic comprising the 12th to the 21st centuries (cf. Wallenberg et al. 2011) and factoring in argument type, animacy, definiteness, weight etc., along the lines of Bresnan et al. (2007). These data will be supplemented with other historical material publicly available. I will show that, contrary to the picture often drawn in the literature, Inversion seems to have been in a steady decline over the centuries. It developed from initially being a common phenomenon, not strictly confined to specific lexical items, case-marking patterns, thematic roles, definiteness hierarchies etc., and thus available in environments corresponding to (1b,c) and (2b), to becoming a very marked feature in Modern Icelandic syntax. The latter finding is in some agreement with Dehé (2004), whose study of Modern Icelandic informants revealed that examples such as (1b) were either rejected or considered odd, despite their alleged grammatical status in the linguistic literature. (The variation in judgments is indicated with ‘%’ below.)
I will discuss these findings by taking into consideration the possible concomitant effects of the historical change from OV to VO (see Rögnvaldsson 1996, Hróarsdóttir 2000), which on some theoretical accounts ought to correlate with the loss of Scrambling phenomena (e.g. Haider 2005). I will also speculate on the relevance of the hybrid OV/VO nature of projection (Haider’s Type 3 or T3) towards the fixed VO system of Modern Icelandic and diachronic restrictions in dative marking (cf. Holmberg & Platzack 1995). The take-home message will be that Early Modern to Modern Icelandic exhibits less convergence with the Old Icelandic system than is usually recognised.

Examples

(1) a. Jón gaf konunni bókina
   John gave the woman the book
   ‘John gave the woman the book’

   b. % Jón gaf bókina konunni
   John gave the book the woman
   ‘John gave the book to the woman’

   c. ?* Jón gaf bók konunni
      John gave a book the woman
      ‘John gave a book to the woman’

(2) a. Jón skilaði konunni bókinni
      John returned the woman the book
      ‘John returned the woman the book’

   b. *Jón skilaði bókinni konunni
      John returned the book the woman
      ‘John returned the book to the woman’

References


Haugan, Jens (2000) Old Norse word order and information structure.


