Moving dependent accusatives into the subject position

1 Overview Icelandic accusative subjects of the sort shown in (1a), which contrast with German nominative subjects shown in (1b), played an important role in supporting Sigurðsson’s (1989) promotion analysis of non-nominative subjects, but have received less attention in work on case-marking since.

(1)  a. Ólafur var hvergi að finna __.  
    b. Er war nirgends zu finden __.

‘Ólafur was nowhere to be found.’ (Ice.)  ‘He was nowhere to be found.’ (Ger.)

In this talk, I discuss the analysis and theoretical implications of accusative subjects with a focus on the construction in (1). I argue that the Dependent Case (DC) analysis of accusative makes sense of the observation that something special has to happen, structurally, to get an accusative DP into the subject position. I then propose that constructing sentences such as (1) requires a derivation where the derived subject moves past a (null) thematic subject, in apparent violation of Relativized Minimality (RM), and that different languages may have different strategies for accomplishing this. The Icelandic way results in a “structural” (="dependent") accusative in the subject position, casting doubt on theories of oblique subjects which rely on the distinction between inherent and structural case.

2 Dependent Case The analysis of accusative case as a “dependent” case says that nominative and accusative case marking is independent of “Case” licensing; instead, case-marking is computed on the basis of hierarchical relations between DPs (Yip et al. 1987; Marantz 1991; McFadden 2004), or between a DP and some other element with which it may have no direct syntactic relation (Sigurðsson 2012; Schäfer 2012). Sticking to the former type of proposal, if two DPs are in the same domain, and neither is marked with “inherent” case, then one will get dependent case, and the other will get an unmarked case. For nominative-accusative systems, if DP $\alpha$ c-commands DP $\beta$ from a A-position, then DP $\beta$ gets dependent case, and this is what we call accusative; DP $\alpha$ will be the unmarked case (nominative). The reason that accusatives have a hard time ending up in SpecTP, then, is that T attracts the closest DP, which will generally be DP $\alpha$—the DP conditioning accusative case, not the one receiving it.

3 Accusative Subjects A number of proposals have pursued the idea that various kinds of accusative subjects, most notably those that Sigurðsson (2006) calls Fate Accusatives (FAs), receive the same structural accusative as any accusative object (Haider 2001; Platzack 2006; Sigurðsson 2006, 2012; Schäfer 2008, 2012). FAs, unlike the Impersonal Modal Construction (IMC) (for example), involve accusative subjects.

(2) a. Hefur { bátinn } rekið { *bátinn } að landi?  
    has { boat.the.ACC } driven { *boat.the.ACC } to land  
    ‘Has the boat drifted ashore?’  (Fate Accusative)

b. Þarf { *bátinn } að mála { bátinn } strax?  
    need { *boat.the.ACC } to paint { boat.the.ACC } immediately  
    ‘Does one need to paint the boat immediately?’  (IMC)

From a DC perspective, this means that accusative is conditioned on the DP by something which does not prevent it from moving to the subject position, in apparent violation of RM. Schäfer 2012, for example, proposes that FAs have silent “weather pro” subjects which are featurally defective and allow the accusative to move past them, while the IMC has a non-defective silent subject that does not.

4 More Accusative Subjects Accusative subjects of the sort in (1a) are somewhat restricted lexically; they have an existential-like meaning and occur frequently with verbs like finna ‘find’, sjá ‘see’, and fá ‘get’, among others. But however they are built, it is almost inconceivable that they involve anything other than ordinary, structural/dependent accusative. If the verb assigns dative or genitive, for example, this case is preserved.

(3) Skipsins er ekki að venta fyrir en á morgun.  
    ship.the.GEN is not to expect until tomorrow  
    ‘The ship is not expected until tomorrow.’
Again unlike the IMC, but like FAs, the accusative in (1a) is a structural subject, and thus involves another instance where something, presumably PRO, conditions accusative case but does not block movement past it.

5 Analysis The analytical possibility I would like to pursue draws from Hicks’s (2009) analysis of tough-movement. The idea is that the accusative is A’-snuggled past PRO as part of a larger constituent (cf. Collins 2005), and then moves out of this constituent from its derived position. Most of the examples attested in the literature involve a negative quantifier or adverb, suggesting that similar to the silent wh-operator invoked by Hicks, this construction may involve a step similar to Quantifier Movement (QM), which is most commonly associated with negative elements (Rögnvaldsson 1987; Jónsson 1996; Svenonius 2000).

(4) þið þurði ekkert að segja. [TP you need [ nothing, to say <nothing> ] ]

(1a) is then analyzed as in (5). A step of A’-movement smuggles the accusative past PRO as part of a larger XP containing an operator, and from this position, the accusative moves to the subject position.

(5) [TP Ólaf<acc> was [ XP OP<neg> <Ólaf> nowhere ], to [TP PRO<NOM> [VoiceP ... find <XP> ] ]]

Dependent case is determined on the basis of the tail of the A’-chain (as usual), where the accusative is c-commanded by PRO; since there are no arguments in the higher clause, the accusative is free to move to the subject position, unlike (4), and unlike with the IMC, which has a null subject in the matrix clause.

6 Support Like with QM, a range of quantifiers is attested smuggling accusatives to the subject position. Focus movement is possible as well, as expected on the analysis of QM in Kayne (1998), and may involve an overt focus particle like einnig (7). The intermediate QM step for non-negative quantifiers is supported by the agreeing floating quantifier in (8). ((6)–(8) are attested examples.)

(6) Í greininni [...] er ýmsan fróðleik að finna um lengdarmál á Íslandi fyrir öldum...

(7) ef til vill er hana einnig að finna í bunka af gömlum sendibréfum maybe is il.F.ACC also to find in pile of old letters ‘maybe it is also to be found in a pile of old letters’

(8) Summu íslensks tilveruréttar er alla að finna á þjóðveldistímabilinu 872-1262, ACC of Icelandic existence is all.ACC to find in commonwealth period the 872-1262 ‘The sum of Icelandic existence is all to be found in the commonwealth period 872-1262.’

Due to various restrictions on this construction, standard diagnostics for A’-movement have proved difficult to apply to the first movement step in (5). This step is, however, supported by Across-the-Board (ATB) movement. When one conjunct is a preposition-taking verb, ATB movement strands the preposition, which is possible in Icelandic under A’-movement but not A-movement (Maling & Zaenen 1985). Some (but not all) speakers resist tala við on its own, as in (9b), but all speakers I have asked find (9a) much better or perfect.

(9) a. Par var enganí að sjá e, eða tala við e. b. Par var enganí að tala við e.

7 Implications Movement to the subject position is not case-driven; DPs of any case-marking can move to the subject position, including ordinary accusative objects. Nevertheless, accusative subjects are marked or special, and the DC analysis of accusative provides an explanation for why: something special, structurally, has to happen to both condition accusative case on a DP and have that DP be the closest to the subject position. The nominative case marking on German (1b) then suggests that German has a different strategy for moving the object out of the infinitive, possibly related to the availability of long-passives, absent in Icelandic.