

Arguments in a cold climate

Stability and change in Icelandic weather verbs

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The standard view

Weather verbs in Modern Icelandic are “no-argument predicates” (Thráinsson 2007:267)

The same view has been standard for Old Icelandic (Nygaard 1905)

(1) a. Í gær rigndi
yesterday rained
'Yesterday it rained'

b. Í gær hvessti
yesterday got-windy
'Yesterday it got windy'

The standard view

The expletive *það* 'it' is attested from the 16th century onwards. It only occurs clause initially.

(2) a. **Það** rigndi í gær
it rained yesterday
'It rained yesterday'

b. Í gær rigndi (***það**)
yesterday rained it
'Yesterday it rained'

The standard view

The element *hann* (weather-*hann*) inverts with a finite verb. Although it does not refer to anything, it has been considered a pronoun (Thráinsson 2007, 2012).

(3) a. **Hann** rignir í dag
he rains today
'It rains today'

b. Í dag rignir **hann**
today rains he
'Today it rains'

The standard view

There is no mention of the fact that weather verbs can occur with full NPs.

- (4) a. **Vindurinn** kólnar
the-wind.NOM gets-cold
'The wind gets cold'
- b. **Vindinn** hvessir
the-wind.ACC gets-windy
'It's getting windy'
- c. **Eldi** rignir
fire.DAT rains
'It's raining fire'

Our aims in this paper....

- 1) Argue against the idea that Icelandic weather verbs are “no-argument predicates”
- 2) Present data where weather verbs are accompanied by NPs
- 3) Show that the NPs are subjects (either nominative or oblique)
- 4) Propose a new analysis of weather-*hann* as a quasi-argument

Our aims in this paper....

- 5) Show that the emergence of weather-*hann* can be related to the use of NPs with weather verbs and the loss of *pro*-drop
- 6) Emphasize the stability of weather verbs: despite some general syntactic changes, the argument structure of weather verbs has changed very little from Old to Modern Icelandic

Það

Only occurs clause-initially, not only with weather verbs

Það is a FILLER

- (5) a. **Það** rigndi í gær
 it rained yesterday
 ‘It rained yesterday’
- b. Í gær rigndi (***það**)
 yesterday rained it
 ‘Yesterday it rained’

NOT a quasi-argument, like English *it*, German *es*, MScand. *det*

Evidence for argument status

Weather verbs in control clauses:

- (6) Stundum rignir eftir að ___ hafa snjóað.
sometimes rains after to ___ have.inf snow
'It sometimes rains after having snowed.'

In English, control clauses have been considered evidence for the quasi-argument status of weather-*it* (e.g. Chomsky 1981:323–325).

- (7) It sometimes rains after ___ snowing

Evidence for argument status

By contrast, impersonal passives in Icelandic cannot occur in control infinitives, presumably because they are subjectless (e.g. Eythórsson 2008).

(8) *Í samkvæminu var sungið án þess að vera dansað.

at the party was sung without it to be.inf danced

Intended meaning: 'At the party people sang without dancing.'

Evidence for argument status

Weather-*hann* inverts with a finite verb:

(9) a. **Hann** rignir í dag
he rains today
'It's raining today'

b. Í dag rignir **hann**
today he rains
'Today it's raining'

Evidence for argument status

OLD ICELANDIC									
		NOM	ACC	DAT			NOM	ACC	DAT
precipitation	<i>drífa</i> 'snow'	x	x	x	phase change	<i>frysta</i> 'freeze'		x	
	<i>fenna</i> 'snow'		x			<i>hlána</i> 'thaw'	x		
	<i>rigna</i> 'rain'	x		x		<i>(hlýna)</i> 'get warm'			
	<i>snjóa</i> 'snow'					<i>kólna</i> 'get cold'	x		
					<i>þiðna</i> 'thaw, melt'	x			
wind	<i>blása</i> 'blow'	x	x		brightness	<i>birta</i> 'brighten'			x
	<i>hvessa</i> 'get windy'		x			<i>dimma</i> 'get dark'			x
	<i>lygna</i> 'abate (of wind)'		x			<i>lýsa</i> 'brighten'			x
	<i>lægja</i> 'abate (of wind)'		x			<i>myrkva</i> 'get dark'			x
					<i>rökkva</i> 'get dark'				
					<i>(skyggja)</i> 'get dark'				

Evidence for argument status

MODERN ICELANDIC										
		NOM	ACC	DAT				NOM	ACC	DAT
precipitation	<i>drífa</i> 'snow'	x	x		phase change	<i>frysta</i> 'freeze'				
	<i>fenna</i> 'snow'		x			<i>hlána</i> 'thaw'	x			
	<i>rigna</i> 'rain'	x		x		<i>hlýna</i> 'get warm'	x			
	<i>snjóa</i> 'snow'			x		<i>kólna</i> 'get cold'	x			
						<i>þiðna</i> 'thaw, melt'	x			
wind	<i>blása</i> 'blow'	x	x		brightness	<i>birta</i> 'brighten'	x	x		
	<i>hvessa</i> 'get windy'	x	x			<i>dimma</i> 'get dark'	x	x		
	<i>lygna</i> 'abate (of wind)'	x	x			<i>lýsa</i> 'brighten'	x			
	<i>lægja</i> 'abate (of wind)'	x	x			<i>myrkva</i> 'get dark'				
						<i>rökkva</i> 'get dark'			x	
						<i>skyggja</i> 'get dark'			x	

Evidence for argument status

- (10) Vítt er orpið / fyrir valfalli / rifs reiðiský, / rignir **blóði**.
wide is thrown before the-slain.DAT reef.GEN angry-cloud rains blood.DAT
'A cloud of anger is spread wide above those who have fallen. It rains blood.'
(ÍT, Brennu-Njáls saga, ch. 157.)
- (11) Fyrst rigndi **blóði** og þeir brenndust....
first rained blood.DAT and they got-burned
'First it rained blood and they got burned...'
(<http://bergthoraga.blog.is/blog/bergthoraga/?year=2014;month=3>)

Evidence for argument status

- (12) Þá lægði **storminn** og kvómu þeir heilir til lands.
then abated the-storm.ACC and came they whole to shore
'Then the storm abated and they arrived safely on shore.'
(ÍT, Helga kviða Hundingsbana II)
- (13) **Vind** lægir smámsaman...
wind.ACC abates little-by-little
'Little by little the wind abates...'
(http://www.mbl.is/frettir/innlent/2015/12/08/vindinn_laegir_smam_saman/)

Evidence for argument status

- (14) Litlu eftir þetta heyrðu þeir, at **veðr** tók at hvessa...
shortly after this heard they that weather.ACC took to get-windy
'Shortly after this they heard that it got windy...' (ÍT, Göngu-Hrólfs saga)
- (15) ...og brimið vex og **vindinn** hvessir.
And the-surf grows and the-wind.ACC gets more windy
'...and the surf increases and it gets more windy.'
(http://timarit.is/view_page_init.jsp?pagelId=2138875)

Evidence for argument status

(16) ...þá kólnar **veðrátta**.

then gets-cold weather-condition.NOM

‘...then the weather gets cold.’ (ONP, Enc^{ll}624 122¹¹)

(17) **Veður** kólnar síðdegis.

weather.NOM gets-cold afternoon

‘The weather gets cold in the afternoon.’

(http://www.mbl.is/frettir/innlent/2002/10/30/vedur_kolnar_siddegis/)

Subject NPs!

In Modern Icelandic subject tests can be applied to establish the subjecthood of the NP with weather verbs, both in nominative and oblique case.

In Old Icelandic this is possible too.

It is all connected somehow

Í gær hvessti **vindinn**.
yesterday got-windy the-wind.ACC

Í gær hvessti **hann**.
yesterday got-windy he

Í gær hvessti.
yesterday got-windy

‘Yesterday it got windy.’

Pro-drop in Old Icelandic

“Thus, English and French are ‘hot’ languages, Italian and Spanish are ‘medium’, whereas Chinese and Portuguese, for example are ‘cool’.”

“On this ‘temperature scale’ Old Icelandic was close to the [freezing point...](#)”

Sigurðsson 1993:247 (cf. Huang 1984), see also Walkden et al. 2016

Pro-drop in Old Icelandic

Null subject refers to a subject in the preceding clause:

- (18) **Skeggið** var svo sítt að ___ lá í knjám honum...
the-beard.NOM was so long that ___ lay on knees him
'The beard was so long that it lay on his knees....'

(Ólafs saga helga) (Rögvaldsson 2005:631)

Pro-drop in Old Icelandic

Null object refers to a subject in the preceding clause:

- (19) ...**hún** var svo stór að akurkarl einn mundi eigi lyft ___ fá af jörðu
she.NOM was so big that ploughman alone would not lift ___ may off ground
‘She was so big that a single plowman would not be able to lift her from
the ground.’

(Sigurðar saga þögla) (Rögnavaldsson 2005:630)

Pro-drop in Old Icelandic

Null subject refers to an object in the preceding clause:

- (20) ...þá hljóp Egill að Grími og rak **exina** í höfuð honum
then ran Egill to Grímur and drove the-axe.ACC into head his
svo að þegar stóð ___ í heila
so that immediately stood ___ in brain

(Egils saga Skallagrímssonar) (Rögvaldsson 2005:631)

Pro-drop in Old Icelandic

Null subject refers to an object in the preceding clause:

(21) ...bað Finnbogi **pá** ríða Ríða __ út á fellið....

Asked Finnbogi them.ACC ride out on the-mountain

‘Finnbogi asked that they should ride... They ride out on the mountain.’

(Finnboga saga ramma) (Rögnvaldsson 2005:609)

Pro-drop in Old Icelandic

Null subject with no DP antecedent:

- (22) Og í því kom Finnbogi að og leggur til Jökuls svo
and in that.DAT came Finnbogi to and lays to Jökull.GEN so
að þegar stóð ___ í beini
that soon stood ___ in bone.DAT

‘And in that moment Finnbogi came and struck Jökull so that his weapon was stuck in Jökull’s bone.’

Pro-drop in Old Icelandic

Null subject with the weather verb *lygna* ‘abate’?

(23) **veðr** var á ok snæfall mikit ok ____ lygnir um aptaninn.

weater.NOM was on and snowfall much and ____ abates on the-evening

‘There was bad weather and lots of snow, but it got calm in the evening’.

(ONP, GíslFrg 42⁹)

Pro-drop in Old Icelandic

Nú lægir **vindinn** vs. Nú lægir

now abates the-wind.ACC now abates

‘Now the wind abates’

Reanalysis of *pro*-drop as a quasi argument with weather verbs where the referent could not be retrieved from the context.

Elsewhere *pro*-drop continued.

To be or not to be an NP

		OLD ICELANDIC							
		NP	∅	SUM			NP	∅	SUM
precipitation	<i>drífa</i> 'snow'	5	9	14	phase change	<i>frysta</i> 'freeze'	3	2	5
	<i>fenna</i> 'snow'	4	0	4		<i>hlána</i> 'thaw'	2	1	3
	<i>rigna</i> 'rain'	28	16	44		<i>(hlýna)</i> 'get warm'			
	<i>snjóa</i> 'snow'	0	6	6		<i>kólna</i> 'get cold'	7	3	10
wind	<i>blása</i> 'blow'	7	2	9	brightness	<i>birta</i> 'brighten'	5	4	9
	<i>hvessa</i> 'get windy'	7	5	12		<i>dimma</i> 'get dark'	1	9	10
	<i>lygna</i> 'abate (of wind)'	1	2	3		<i>lýsa</i> 'brighten'	1	70	71
	<i>lægja</i> 'abate (of wind)'	10	0	10		<i>myrkva</i> 'get dark'	4	25	29
						<i>rökkva</i> 'get dark'	0	7	7
					<i>(skyggja)</i> 'get dark'				

Weather-*hann*

Modern Icelandic:

This element emerged in the 17-18 century

Distribution: behaves like the pronoun *hann* 'he'

Non-referential!

Weather-*hann*

A confused blogger wants to know who “he” is:

(24) ..loksins hélt **“hann”** (himinn?? Hver er þessi **hann**??) nógu þurr...

finally remained he (the-sky) who is this he enough dry

‘Finally “he” (the sky?? Who is this he??) stayed dry enough...’

(http://oskimon.com/2003_07_01_gamalt.html)

Weather-*hann*

Hypothesis on the diachronic development:

Restrictions of *pro*-drop in Modern Icelandic - covert arguments realized overtly

Weather-*hann* originally a referential pronoun

Reanalyzed as a non-referential quasi-argument

Never became widespread, restricted to certain registers/dialects

Weather-*hann*

Oldest examples with weather-*hann*:

(25) ... **snjór** kom anno 1581, eptir það minnsta grasár; **hann** dreif

snow came in-year 1581 after that smallest grass-year he snowed

allan góu þrælinn.

all Góa's the-slave.ACC

‘Snow came in the year 1581, after that very little grass; it snowed constantly the last day of the month Góa.’

(ROH, Safn til sögu Íslands I-IV) (17th century)

Weather-*hann*

Referential weather-*hann*?

(26) **Hann** er að hvessa.

he is to get-windy.INF

‘It’s getting windy.’ (ROH, Sigurður Pétursson 1950:77) (1798)

The verb *hvessa* can take a masculine NP, e.g. *vindur* ‘wind’

Weather-*hann*

Reanalyzed as a quasi-argument:

(27) ...**hann** snjóaði hjer mest síðari part dags...

he snowed here most latter part day.GEN

‘It snowed the most here during the latter part of the day...’

(http://timarit.is/view_page_init.jsp?issId=273382)

Arguments at freezing point

Argument type	Old Icelandic	Modern Icelandic
Quasi-argument	covert	covert or <i>overt</i> (<i>hann</i>)
NP argument	overt or <i>covert</i>	overt

Stability: Covert quasi-arguments and NPs survive into Modern Icelandic!!

Conclusions

1) Icelandic weather verbs have arguments

a) Quasi-argument (overt or covert)

b) NP argument

2) Weather-*hann* is a quasi-argument

3) Weather verbs can be accompanied by NPs in nominative or oblique case

These NPs are clear subjects in Modern Icelandic and plausibly so in Old Icelandic.

Conclusions

- 4) Weather-*hann* was originally an overt representation of *pro*-drop and was later reanalyzed as a quasi-argument
- 5) Despite some general syntactic changes, the argument structure of weather verbs has changed very little from Old to Modern Icelandic

