

NULL OBJECTS IN ICELANDIC

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1. INTRODUCTION

In modern Icelandic, there are several varieties of unexpressed null arguments that are not found in other Scandinavian languages (except to some extent in Faroese).¹ One type is the empty subjects illustrated in (1):²

- (1) a. *Við vorum þreyttir og okkur fannst myndin leiðinleg.*
we (NOM) were (1-pl) tired and us (DAT) found (3-sg) the-movie boring
'We were tired and we found the movie boring.'
- b. *Við_i vorum þreyttir og e_i fannst/*fundumst myndin leiðinleg.*
we were tired and found (3-sg/*1-pl) the-movie boring
'We were tired and found the movie boring.'

As discussed in Rögnvaldsson (this volume: 349–353), these sentences cannot be analyzed as cases of VP-coordination because the verb in the second conjunct does not agree with the overt subject and because the two verbs impose different case requirements on their subjects.

Empty objects also occur in the second conjunct, as shown in (2) (see also Rögnvaldsson, 1980; Zaenen, Maling, and Thráinsson, this volume: 132, n. 11; Hjartardóttir, 1987; Creider, 1986; Áfarli and Creider, 1987):

- (2) *Hann_i þreif blaðið_j og e_i reif e_j í tætlur.*
 he grasped the-paper and tore to pieces
 'He grasped the paper and tore (it) to pieces.'

In this article I discuss the syntactic status of the unexpressed object argument in such sentences and the pragmatic conditions under which such object gaps occur. In section 2, I give an informal characterization of the circumstances under which such constructions are possible. In section 3, I show that the empty objects can bind reflexive pronouns, can act as governors of PRO, and can take adjunct small clauses and conclude that in a theory like that sketched in Rizzi (1986), they must be treated as empty categories in the syntax. This raises the question of their feature decomposition. In section 4, I show that they find a natural place in the extended feature system proposed by Thráinsson (in press). In the last section I invoke some pragmatic constraints to account for further characteristics of the conjuncts in question.

2. DISTRIBUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF OBJECT GAPS IN ICELANDIC

It is well known that various types of gaps occurred in Old Icelandic or Old Norse (Nygaard, 1905). An example of an object gap is given in (3):

- (3) *Höðr tók mistiltein_i og skaut e_i at Baldri.*
 'Höðr took mistletoe and shot (it) at Baldur.'

In her extensive study of gaps in Old Icelandic, Hjartardóttir (1987) shows that the antecedent of a gap did not have to bear the same grammatical relation as the gap itself; and, furthermore, although their content was always recoverable from the discourse, some gaps did not have any linguistic antecedent.

In Modern Icelandic, however, identity of grammatical relations is a necessary condition for subject and object gaps; sentences such as (4) are impossible in all styles and for all speakers:

- (4) **Ég_i sá myndina og e_i gerði mig reiðan.*
 'I saw the movie and (it) made me angry.'

Hjartardóttir (1987) did not find any examples of object gaps in her Modern Icelandic texts, although such gaps were apparently perfectly grammatical up to at least the eighteenth century. Hjartardóttir claims that no genuine object gaps occur in Modern Icelandic; she acknowledges the existence of some putative examples, but she argues that they are either historical residues or else the verbs in question do not take obligatory objects.

In this article I argue that examples of object gaps are in fact grammatical in

Modern Icelandic, at least in the spoken language of many speakers. Examples of such sentences are the following:

- (5) *Ég tók blaðið_i og braut e_i saman.*
'I took the paper and folded (it) together.'
- (6) *Jón tók bók_i úr hillunni og gaf mér e_i.*
'John took a book from the shelf and gave me (it).'
- (7) *Hann nauðgaði henni_i og myrði e_i síðan.*
'He raped her and murdered (her) afterwards.'
- (8) *Hann ýmist lofaði mig_i eða lastaði e_i.*
'He either praised me or condemned (me).'

The conditions under which the object gaps are possible seem to be the following: first, the subject of the second conjunct is not overtly expressed, and, second, there is an antecedent for the object gap, namely, the object of the first conjunct. The rationale for these conditions is discussed in section 5, but first I address the question of whether the unexpressed argument is syntactically present or whether it is only semantically needed.

3. SYNTACTIC CHARACTERIZATION OF THE OBJECT GAP

One way to account for sentences such as (5)–(8) without postulating syntactically empty NPs would be to argue that the verbs in the second conjunct are used intransitively. In some cases this is certainly a possible analysis. For example, in (9) it is not clear that we are dealing with a transitive use of the verb *lesa* 'read'.

- (9) *Ég tók bókina_i og las e_i.*
'I took the book and read (it).'

As in English, the verb *lesa* 'read' can be used either transitively or intransitively, as illustrated in (10):

- (10) a. *Ég var að lesa bókina.*
'I was reading the book.'
b. *Ég var að lesa.*
'I was reading.'

Thus, although the most natural interpretation of (9) is, of course, that I began reading the particular book that I took, not just any unspecified book, it might be possible to argue that *lesa* is being used in its intransitive sense in (9).

However, this explanation is not available for all verbs. The verb *dá* 'admire'

is obligatorily transitive, as shown by the clear ungrammaticality of (11b). Such a verb cannot drop its object unless it stands in the second conjunct in a conjoined structure, as it does in (11c).

- (11) a. *Ég dái þig.*
 'I admire you.'
 b. **Ég dái.*
 'I admire.'
 c. *Ég elska þig_i og dái e_i.*
 'I love you and admire (you).'

Rizzi (1986) argues that there is no reason to postulate an empty position in the syntax for other cases of pseudotransitive verbs, for example, the English sentences in (12) and (13).

(12) *This leads (people) to the following conclusion.*

(13) *John is always ready to please (people).*

Rizzi assumes that there is a lexical rule that can absorb the thematic object of certain verbs; hence, there will be no violation of the projection principle. Note, however, that the understood objects in (12) and (13) do not, in each instance, have to have an antecedent in the same sentence. In Icelandic, however, such cases are usually not possible; we have cases like (11) but not like (12) or (13), as is shown by the ungrammaticality of (14) and (15):

(14) *Þetta leiðir (*fólk) til eftirfarandi niðurstöðu.*
 'This leads (people) to the following conclusion.'

(15) *Jón er alltaf fús til að gleðja (*fólk).*
 'John is always ready to please (people).'

Stronger arguments for postulating an empty position in the syntax can be made using the tests proposed in Rizzi (1986). He shows that empty objects in Italian can act as controllers of PRO, they can bind a reflexive, and they can take an adjunct small clause. No such sentences are possible in English, for instance.

Let us now see how these tests can be used in order to determine the nature of the missing objects in Icelandic. First, (16) illustrates the fact that an empty object can bind a reflexive:

- (16) *Ég hjálpaði honum_i á fætur og fylgdi e_i heim til sín_i.*
 I helped him on feet and followed (him) home to REFL
 'I helped him to his feet and followed him to his home.'
 (17) *Ég tók bókina_i og færði e_i eiganda sínum_i.*
 I took the-book and brought (it) owner REFL
 'I took the book and brought it to its owner.'

Such examples are clearly grammatical. It is also clear that the object in the first conjunct is not a possible antecedent of the reflexive, as the ungrammaticality of (18) shows:

- (18) **Ég hjálpaði honum_i á fætur og fylgdi þér heim til sín_i.*
 I helped him on feet and followed you home to REFL
 'I helped him to his feet and followed you to his home.'

This indicates that the empty object in the second conjunct is the only possible antecedent for the reflexive.

More marginally, the empty object can also be the controller of PRO:

- (19) ?*Ég hótaði honum_i og skipaði e_i að PRO fara.*
 'I threatened him and ordered (him) to leave.'
 (20) ?*Ég hrinti honum_i og bannaði e_i að PRO rísa á fætur.*
 I pushed him and forbade (him) to rise on feet
 'I knocked him down and forbade him to stand up.'
 (21) ?*Ég vakti hana_i og bað e_i að PRO hafa sig_i til.*
 I woke her and ordered (her) to have REFL to
 'I woke her up and ordered her to get ready.'

Furthermore, the empty object can take an adjunct small clause:

- (22) *Ég uppörvaði Harald_i og gerði e_i stoltan af sjálfum sér_i.*
 'I encouraged Harold and made (him) proud of himself.'
 (23) *Ég þekkti hann_i vel og taldi e_i mjög heiðarlegan.*
 I knew him well and believed (him) very honest
 'I knew him well and believed him to be very honest.'

These examples suffice to show that there is really an empty object position in the second conjunct in these sentences. It is not possible to claim that a lexical rule has changed the thematic structure of the verbs in question so that they do not take objects in these sentences; if this were the case, all of the sentences in (16)–(23) should be ungrammatical (Rizzi, 1986).

4. TYPOLOGY OF EMPTY NPS IN ICELANDIC

In the previous section I have shown that there are syntactically empty object NPs in Icelandic. It remains to determine their feature decomposition. Chomsky (1982) suggested that the typology of empty categories mirrors that of overt categories, in the following manner:

(24)	Anaphors	Pronouns	Overt Categories	Empty Categories
	+	—	anaphors (<i>himself</i>)	NP-traces
	—	+	pronouns (<i>he</i>)	<i>pro</i>
	+	+	excluded	PRO
	—	—	R-expressions (<i>John</i>)	variables

In Chomsky's (1982:85) original formulation, *pro* was thought of as the empty subject of *pro*-drop languages: "We want to establish that in the core cases, *pro* appears only as the subject of a sentence with AGR in a *pro*-drop language. . . . This will follow if we require that the content of *pro* must not only be determined, but in fact 'locally determined' by the AGR element of the thematic complex . . . of which it is a part."

It has been pointed out (Áfarli and Creider, 1987) that it is not entirely clear what the type of the empty objects in Norwegian (and Icelandic) is under these assumptions. *Pro* would appear to be the best candidate, but according to Chomsky's analysis, *pro* should not be found in object position in a language such as Icelandic, since it seems rather unlikely that Icelandic could be classified as a real *pro*-drop language. Icelandic lacks most of the features usually thought of as characteristic of *pro*-drop languages. In fact, there are no indications that even Old Icelandic was a *pro*-drop language like Italian, for instance (Thráinsson and Hjartardóttir, 1986).

It is also doubtful whether the content of *pro* would be locally determined by AGR in all cases. As mentioned above, subject gaps are possible in the second of two conjoined sentences, even though the verb of the second conjunct takes a non-nominative subject:

- (25) *Við_i vorum svangir og e_i langaði í mat.*
 we were (1-pl) hungry and wanted (3-sg) food
 'We were hungry and wanted food.'

The verb *langa* 'want' takes a non-nominative subject and thus always stands in the third-person singular. However, speakers have no difficulties in interpreting the gap in the second conjunct as referring to *við* 'we', which is first-person plural. It is thus clear that the content of an empty subject NP can be recovered through identity of grammatical relations, even when the agreement facts point in another direction.

We return to the determination of the type of empty category involved. Rizzi (1986) argues that *pro* is not limited to subject position; it can also occur in object position in some languages, such as Italian, provided that the interpretation is generic. Some of his examples are shown in (26)–(27):

- (26) *Il bel tempo involgia e a [PRO restare].*
 'The nice weather induces *e* to stay.'
- (27) *La buona musica riconcilia e con se stessi.*
 'Good music reconciles *e* with oneself.'

Rizzi argues for the separation of formal licensing of *pro* from the recovery of its content. He argues that *pro* is licensed by a governing head, and that the class of licensing elements is parametrized. In Italian, for instance, it includes both INFL and V, whereas in English this class has no member at all. French, for instance, is not a *pro*-drop language, but it allows *pro* in object position; in that language, V, but not INFL, would be a member of the licensing class.

As for the interpretation of *pro*, Rizzi argues that it is assigned the grammatical specification of the coindexed features on the licensing head. To account for the fact that object *pro* in Italian can only have generic interpretation, Rizzi adds the following rule:

- (28) Assign *arb* to the direct θ -role.

This means that "the θ -slot acquires some intrinsic content: the usual feature specification associated with *arb*: [+human, +generic, +plural], etc. A *pro* with such a content is then sanctioned . . . in a way that is fully parallel to the sanctioning of a definite pronominal (or arbitrary) interpretation to a subject *pro*" (Rizzi, 1986: 521–522).

The Icelandic data give support to Rizzi's (1986) idea of separating formal licensing from the recovery of the content of *pro*. Like Italian, Icelandic allows empty expletive subjects in small clauses:

- (29) *Ég tel e ótrúlegt að Jón komi.*
'I consider (it) unlikely that John comes.'

But Icelandic is different from Italian in that it does not allow empty objects with generic interpretation:

- (30) **Þetta góða veður hvetur e til [að PRO stoppa].*
this nice weather induces *e* to stay

To explain this, we assume that Icelandic is like English in that rule (28) only applies in the lexicon in both languages; in contrast, Icelandic is like Italian in having V as a member of its *pro*-licensing class.

However, Icelandic differs from both English and Italian in having empty objects with referential interpretation. As mentioned above, the empty objects Rizzi discusses only have generic interpretation, due to rule (28). Icelandic is, however, by no means the only language that has referential empty objects; Bresnan (1982: 342) shows that in Malayam, *pro* objects can have either generic or indefinite interpretation. Cole (1987) also shows that in some languages (e.g., Imbabura Quechua, Korean, and Thai), *pro* in object position can be referential but does not have to have generic interpretation.

Now note that it is common to all the empty objects mentioned (except the ones with a generic interpretation) that they have some sort of antecedent in the preceding discourse, not always a c-commanding one and not in their own governing category, but nevertheless some overt NP that serves to determine the

content of each. This is not so for the empty subject *pro* in *pro*-drop languages; as is well known, it can be freely used without any linguistic antecedent. This means that *pro* in subject position, on the one hand, and the referential empty category in object position found in many languages (and in subject position in Icelandic), on the other, cannot easily be collapsed into a single category.

Fortunately, there is a solution to this dilemma. Thráinsson (in press) has recently argued that the two features [\pm anaphor], [\pm pronominal] cannot sufficiently account for the variety of overt NPs that occur in the languages of the world. He proposes a system with four binary features; in addition to the two traditional ones [\pm anaphor] and [\pm pronominal], he proposes [\pm R-expression] (a feature he attributed to Lasnik, 1986) and [\pm independent reference] (or \pm i.r., for short). Since some of the logically possible feature combinations are incompatible, this gives us eight possible feature combinations. Thráinsson argues that this is, in fact, what we need, and he gives examples from different languages of all these types. This feature system is shown in (31), along with some of Thráinsson's examples:

(31)	Feature Complex	Category	Example
a.	[+i.r., +R, -an, +pr]	pronominal epithets	<i>the bastard</i>
b.	[+i.r., +R, -an, -pr]	true R-expressions	<i>John</i>
c.	[+i.r., -R, -an, +pr]	pronominals	<i>he</i>
d.	[+i.r., -R, -an, -pr]	some possessives and personal pronouns	<i>his, sein</i> (German)
e.	[-i.r., -R, +an, +pr]	pronominal anaphors, PRO	<i>ham selv</i> (Danish)
f.	[-i.r., -R, +an, -pr]	anaphors	<i>himself</i>
g.	[-i.r., -R, -an, +pr]	pronominal LDRs	<i>taan</i> (Malayam)
h.	[-i.r., -R, -an, -pr]	logophoric LDRs	<i>sig</i> (Icelandic)

I propose that Thráinsson's new feature, [\pm independent reference] is what distinguishes the two types of *pro* we have been discussing. The *pro* we get in subject position in the *pro*-drop languages is clearly [+i.r.]; it can be used without any syntactic antecedent at all. This is never the case with object *pro*, apparently; it always needs some antecedent, although the rules according to which it picks this antecedent can differ cross-linguistically. In Icelandic, for instance, the antecedent must be contained in a preceding conjoined clause and must bear the same grammatical relation as the empty category in question; in other languages, the antecedent might be either a subject or an object in a superordinate clause (Cole, 1987).

Note that this predicts that subject and object gaps in Icelandic are of the same nature: neither type is capable of bearing independent reference. Thus, both would belong to category (31g) in Thráinsson's scheme, whereas the "traditional" *pro* of *pro*-drop languages such as Italian would belong to category (31c).

5. CONDITIONS ON GAPS IN MODERN ICELANDIC

It has often been observed (Nygaard, 1905; Rögnvaldsson, 1980; Hjartardóttir, 1987; Áfarli and Creider, 1987) that object gaps are usually much better in clauses that do not have a separate subject. Some examples are shown in (32)–(33):

- (32) a. *Jón kyssti Maríu_i og faðmaði e_i.*
 ‘John kissed Mary and embraced (her).’
 b. **Jón kyssti Maríu_i og Pétur faðmaði e_i.*
 ‘John kissed Mary and Peter embraced (her).’
- (33) a. *Jón tók bókina_i upp og rétti mér e_i.*
 John picked the-book up and handed me (it)
 ‘John picked up the book and handed it to me.’
 b. **Jón tók bókina_i upp og Pétur rétti mér e_i.*
 John picked the-book up and Peter handed me (it)
 ‘John picked up the book and Peter handed it to me.’

As Hjartardóttir (1987: 108) points out, this does not mean that all instances of object gaps are also instances of VP-coordination, since sentences such as (34) (her example) are grammatical:

- (34) *Englendingar_i drekka dökkan bjór_j og e_i þykir e_j góður.*
 Englishmen (NOM) drink (3-pl) dark beer and finds (sg) (it) good
 ‘Englishmen drink dark beer and find it is good.’

Given the arguments in Rögnvaldsson (this volume: 349–353) and Bresnan and Thráinsson (this volume: 355–365), this sentence must be analyzed as a case of S-coordination, since the verb *þykja* takes dative subjects.

Van Valin (1986) argues that when two VPs with different tenses appear to be conjoined, this must be an instance of S-coordination. It is perfectly possible to have both subject and object gaps in the second conjunct even though the tenses are different:

- (35) *Ég elskaði hana_i áður, en hata e_i núna.*
 I loved her before, but hate (her) now
 ‘Once I loved her, but now I hate her.’

It remains true that the object can only be absent when the subject, too, is absent, regardless of the syntactic analysis given to account for the lack of an overt subject in the second conjunct. This condition on object drop needs to be accounted for. In my view the best account is a pragmatic one. It is clear that there must be some pragmatic relation between two conjoined sentences. This is, of course, the case for conjunction in general; but it appears that such a relationship is automatically established if the two conjuncts share the same subject (Rögnvaldsson, 1981). Since the subject is most often the topic of the sentence, it

seems natural that something that the subject has done is logically related to something else that he/she/it has done. In contrast, the object position is not the normal position for the topic; hence, it is much more difficult to see a logical relationship between two conjoined sentences having the same object.

This explanation is supported by the fact that an object gap in the second conjunct is often much better if the object of the first conjunct has been topicalized than if it stays in place:

- (36) a. ?**Sigga elskar þennan mann_i, en María hatar e_i.*
 'Sigga loves this man but Mary hates (him).'
 b. ?*Þennan mann_i elskar Sigga e_i, en e_i hatar María e_i.*
 this man loves Sigga but (him) hates Mary
 'Sigga loves this man, but Mary hates him.'

The inverted word order shows that the empty object in the second conjunct has been topicalized. This is reminiscent of Huang's (1984) proposal that genuine object drop does not exist in any language, only topic drop. However, Thráinsson and Hjartardóttir (1986) have demonstrated that Huang's proposal cannot explain all cases of object gaps in Icelandic.

I propose the following explanation for the fact that the second conjunct must not contain an overt subject for an object gap to be possible: It is a very general tendency in Icelandic, as in very many languages, for topical (or given) NPs to occur early in the sentence; nontopical (or new) NPs, in contrast, tend to occur toward the end of the sentence. Empty NPs must be thought of as extremely "given"; their content must be wholly derivable from the context. This means that they should have a strong tendency to occur as early in the sentence as possible. As shown above, some sentences with object gaps that are unacceptable if they have normal word order become acceptable if the object in the first conjunct is topicalized; the word order of the second conjunct shows that then we must also assume that the empty object of that conjunct is topicalized.

When both subject and object of the second conjunct are given, both of them have a tendency to occur as early as possible. Since only one phrase can occupy the first position, however, the object will have to put up with its base-generated position after the verb. This is acceptable if neither NP is more topical than the other.

However, when a new subject is introduced in the second clause, it necessarily carries more information than an empty object. This means that the order of the NPs in that clause is quite opposite to the preferred word order; hence, the sentence is pragmatically unacceptable.

Various other factors can interfere with the possibility of having an object gap in the second conjunct. If the object of the first clause is a pronoun, it is often easier to have an object gap in the second clause; otherwise, the same word

would have to be repeated, which is often avoided for stylistic reasons. This may be the reason why (37b) is, for me at least, slightly more acceptable than (37a), even though both have an overt subject in the second conjunct:

- (37) a. **Jón kyssti Maríu_i, en Péturfaðmaði e_i.*
 ‘John kissed Mary, but Peter embraced (her).’
 b. ??*Mamma kyssti mig_i, en pabbi faðmaði e_i.*
 ‘Mommy kissed me, but Daddy embraced (me).’

In (37a) we need not repeat *Maríu* ‘Mary’; we would use the pronoun *hana* ‘her’ instead. But in (37b) we must either repeat *mig* ‘me’ or else drop the object entirely.

In most of the examples of empty objects presented in this article, the empty object should have had the accusative case. Generally, it appears to be much easier to drop accusative than dative or genitive objects.³ In the latter case, idiosyncratic case marking would get lost; and it seems that some speakers cannot accept that.

- (38) **Ég þekkti Pétur_i vel og hjálpaði e_i oft.*
 I knew Peter (ACC) well and helped [him (DAT)] often.’
 (39) **Ég elskaði þessa stelpu_i og sakna e_i mjögmikið.*
 ‘I loved this girl (ACC) and miss [her (GEN)] very much.’

A related fact is that some speakers also do not like to drop subjects with irregular case marking; such speakers would not accept (40), which I find perfectly grammatical (cf. Hálfðanarson, 1984):

- (40) *Fundurinn_i hefst í dag og e_i lýkur á morgun.*
 ‘The meeting (NOM) starts today and [it (DAT)] finishes tomorrow.’

The same is true of the loss of idiosyncratic case marking in EQUI constructions (Thráinsson, 1979). However, dative objects can sometimes be omitted if the verb in the first conjunct also takes a dative object, as in (16), (19), and (20), for instance; direct matching (of case as well as grammatical function) thus appears to be important.

6. CONCLUSION

In this paper I have shown that Modern Icelandic has empty object NPs with referential interpretation. However, the distribution of these empty objects is very limited. They can only occur in the second of two conjoined sentences and must be coreferential with the object of the first conjunct. These same conditions

apply to empty subjects, which also have been shown to occur in Icelandic (see, e.g., Rögnvaldsson, this volume: 349–353).

The empty objects do not fit into Chomsky's (1982) classification of empty categories. However, both the empty objects and subjects in Icelandic appear to fall into an extended feature system recently proposed by Thráinsson (in press). They differ from the well-known *pro* of *pro*-drop languages such as Italian by having a minus value for the feature [\pm independent reference], whereas *pro* has a plus value for that feature.

I have suggested that the reason why empty subjects are common in Icelandic, whereas empty objects are rare, is most likely a pragmatic one. Subjects are usually topical, whereas objects are not; and two conjoined sentences rarely share the same object. Since ellipsis can be thought of as the clearest sign of topicality, object gaps can only be expected under some special pragmatic circumstances.

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NOTES

¹The extended projection principle of GB also leads us to hypothesize some empty expletives in Icelandic. These are discussed in Platzack (1987); I do not discuss them here.

²Van Valin (1986) argues that such subject gaps also occur in English. The agreement facts are, of course, not available in English; but Van Valin points out that the two verbs in question can have different tenses, which should be impossible if they share the same INFL. Given standard assumptions about the basic sentence structure of the Scandinavian languages (see, e.g., Holmberg, 1986), Van Valin's arguments appear to carry over to Icelandic (although we might have to refer to COMP instead of INFL):

- (i) *Ég_i vaknaði snemma og e_i er því þreyttur.*
'I work up early and am therefore tired.'

³[Similar constraints hold for topic drop in German. The German examples of topic drop cited by Huang (1984) from Ross (1982) all involve nominative and accusative NPs. Genitive objects are rare, but similar examples with dative objects are unacceptable, according to Ralf-Armin Mester and Klaus Netter (personal communications).—Eds.]

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