

The Emergence of Dative Sickness in 19th Century Icelandic

A well-known change in Icelandic, termed Dative Sickness or Dative Substitution, entails that accusative subjects change into dative subjects, as shown in (1):

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| <p>(1) Mig langar í ís.
 me.ACC longs in ice-cream
 ‘I want ice cream.’</p> | <p>→</p> | <p>Mér langar í ís.
 me.DAT longs in ice-cream
 ‘I want ice cream.’</p> |
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This process has been subject to substantial interest in the international literature (Svavarsdóttir 1982, Zaenen, Maling and Thráinsson 1985, Halldórsson 1982, Rögnvaldsson 1983, Svavarsdóttir, et al. 1984, Smith 1994, Eythórsson 2000a–b, 2002, Barðdal 2001:134–38, 2004, 2008, Smith 2001, Jónsson 2003, Jónsson and Eythórsson 2005) and it is generally agreed upon that the change is based on thematic roles, i.e. as it is put in the generative literature, the change from accusative to dative case on subjects is a change from idiosyncratic case marking to regular thematically-based case marking of experiencers (cf. Jónsson 2003, Jónsson and Eythórsson 2005)

These generative analyses create one major anomaly pertaining to the onset of this change in the latter part of the 19th century, which has not even been addressed in earlier writings. On the assumption that the prerequisites for this change have existed ever since Old Icelandic, the question arises as to why the change takes place as late as in the latter part of the 19th century and not earlier.

On the present usage-based constructional account, I outline an analysis based on lexical semantic verb classes and show that there is a substantial overlap in the semantics of the two constructions, which in turn undermines the generative explanation based on a change from idiosyncratic to thematic case marking. That is, if the two constructions both instantiate more or less the same lexical semantic verb classes, there is no reason to analyze the Accusative subject construction as being assigned idiosyncratic case marking and the Dative subject construction as being assigned thematic case marking. With this explanation gone, the question is invoked as to why the change causes accusative subjects to change into dative subjects and not vice versa.

I propose an analysis in terms of type frequency, as there is a substantial difference in the type frequency of the two constructions, with ca. 200 accusative and 700 dative subject predicates in Icelandic. I show in a corpus-based study of both Old and Modern Icelandic that the type and token frequency of the accusative subject construction has remained stable from Old to Modern Icelandic, while the type and token frequency of the dative subject construction has in fact gone down during the same period. It turns out that this reduction has affected certain lexical semantic verb classes more than others, resulting in a shift in the semantics of the construction, with experience-based predicates now being in the spotlight. This in turn explains why the construction unexpectedly started gaining in productivity during the latter part of the 19th century, despite the reduction in type and text frequency. This paper thus offers a genuine account of the onset of Dative substitution in the history of Icelandic in terms of a usage-based Construction Grammar, showing how Diachronic Construction Grammar may contribute to shedding light on old obscurities within the field of syntax and language evolution.