

Structural ambiguity and the history of impersonal constructions in Icelandic

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1 *Það* in Icelandic

1.1 Topic placeholder *það*

- Icelandic exhibits the verb-second (V2) constraint.
- Topicalized constituents occupy the clause-initial prefinite position.
→ A topic position (e.g. Rögnvaldsson & Thráinsson, 1990; Sells, 2001, 2005).
- In topicless sentences, expletive *það* occupies the clause-initial prefinite position:

(1) **Það** var dansað í gær.
EXPL be.PST dance.PASS.PTCP yesterday
'It was danced yesterday.'

- In the same construction type with a topicalized constituent, expletive *það* is absent:

(2) [Í gær] var (***það**) dansað.
yesterday be.PST (*EXPL) dance.PASS.PTCP
'Yesterday it was danced.'

- Expletive is a **structural placeholder for the topic position**.
→ Signals a topicless V2 sentence (Zaenen, 1983; Rögnvaldsson & Thráinsson, 1990; Sells, 2005).
→ Cf. 'expletive topic' (Faarlund, 1990).

1.2 Cataphoric *það*

- Contexts where *það* co-occurs with a clausal argument.
→ *Það* has cataphoric reference to the clausal argument:

(3) Og **það**_{*i*} er ótrúlegt [hvað þeir eru áhrifamiklir]_{*i*}.
and CATPH be.PRS unbelievable how they be.PRS influential
'And it is unbelievable how influential they are.' (1985, Margsaga.625)

(4) **Það**_{*i*} veit ég [að þér leið ekki alltaf vel þegar þú varst lítill drengur]_{*i*}.
CATPH know.PRS I.NOM COMP you.DAT feel.PST NEG always well when you be.PST little boy
'I know it that you did not always feel well when you were a little boy.' (2008, Mamma.841)

- I assume that *það* and the clausal argument contribute to the same argument slot of the matrix verb (see Berman et al., 1998 on German).
- In LFG terms:
 - In (3), both *það* and clausal argument map to the SUBJ function; unify at f-structure.
 - In (4), both *það* and clausal argument map to the OBJ function; unify at f-structure.
 Dalrymple & Lødrup (2000): all complement clauses in Icelandic bear the OBJ function
- Topic placeholder *það* (1) is motivated for structural reasons.
 - Does not map to a grammatical function.

1.3 Historical context

- In Old Icelandic (1150-1350), cataphoric *það* already well attested (Faarlund, 1990; Rögnvaldsson, 2002):

(5) **Það**_i var rétt [að spakur engill boðaði Guð borinn spökum Gyðingum]_i.
 CATPH be.PST right COMP wise angel proclaim.PST God born wise.DAT Jews.DAT
 ‘It was right that a wise angel proclaimed God born to wise Jews.’ (1150, Homiliubok.1319)

(6) **Það**_i vildi ég [að þú ræddir ekki um]_i.
 CATPH wish.PST I.NOM COMP you.NOM talk.PST NEG about
 ‘I wished it that you didn’t talk about it.’ (1275, Morkin.1280)

- But in other contexts, *það* is absent (V1):

(7) _____ Var þá hleypt suður til Reykja...
 ØEXPL be.PST then run.PASS.PTCP south to Reykír
 ‘It was run south to Reykír...’ (1250, Sturlunga.406.624)

This paper: accounting for the spread of *það* from contexts like (5)/(6) to contexts like (7).

Data from the Icelandic Parsed Historical Corpus (IcePaHC, Wallenberg et al., 2011), plus other texts.

2 Cataphoric *það* in diachrony

2.1 Clausal subjects

- I investigate the historical status of cataphoric *það* in constructions with a clausal subject:

(8) **Það**_i var rétt [að spakur engill boðaði Guð borinn spökum Gyðingum]_i.
 CATPH be.PST right COMP wise angel proclaim.PST God born wise.DAT Jews.DAT
 ‘It was right that a wise angel proclaimed God born to wise Jews.’ (1150, Homiliubok.1319)

- Old Icelandic: good evidence that cataphoric *það* is a subject in these contexts.

→ In fronting contexts, *það* inverts with the verb:

- (9) Satt er **það**_i [að mikið afbragð er Grettir annarra manna]_i...
 true be.PRS CATPH COMP great paragon be.PRS Grettir other.GEN men.GEN
 ‘It is true that Grettir is a great paragon of other men...’ (1310, Grettir.1695)

→ In y/n-interrogatives, *það* inverts with the verb:

- (10) Er **það**_i satt, Halli, [að þú hefir eigi hefnt föður þíns]_i?
 be.PRS CATPH true Halli.NOM COMP you.NOM have.PRS NEG avenge.PST.PTCP father your
 ‘Is it true, Halli, that you have not avenged your father?’ (1275, Morkin.1203)

But! *Það* appears to behave less like a subject over time...

- Postfinite *það* decreases in fronting contexts (XP-V-*það*), (9).

Time period	XP-V- <i>það</i>	XP-V-XP	Total	% XP-V- <i>það</i>	χ^2 *
1150-1750	27	6	33	81.8%	*
1751-1900	5	4	9	55.6%	
1901-2008	7	11	18	38.9%	***
All periods	39	21	60	65.0%	

Table 1: Proportion of postfinite *það* in constructions with clausal SUBJ and fronting in IcePaHC, 1150-2008

- Postfinite *það* also decreases in V1 contexts (V-*það*), (10).

Time period	V- <i>það</i>	V-XP	Total	% V- <i>það</i>	χ^2
1150-1750	50	14	64	78.1%	**
1751-1900	6	8	14	42.9%	
1901-2008	1	13	14	7.1%	***
All periods	57	35	92	62.0%	

Table 2: Proportion of postfinite *það* in V1 constructions with clausal SUBJ in IcePaHC, 1150-2008

- By contrast, clause-initial prefinite *það* (8) remains stable over time.

Time period	<i>það</i> -V-	V-	Total	% <i>það</i> -V-	χ^2
1150-1750	89	14	103	86.4%	
1751-1900	41	8	49	83.7%	
1901-2008	72	13	85	84.7%	
All periods	202	35	237	85.2%	

Table 3: Proportion of prefinite *það* in constructions with clausal SUBJ in IcePaHC, 1150-2008

* χ^2 -test to examine whether observed values for each time period deviate significantly from expected values given overall distributions across the whole corpus ($p < 0.05^*$, $p < 0.01^{**}$, $p < 0.001^{***}$).

- **Conclusion:** Cataphoric *það* becoming less frequent in contexts where it is unambiguously a subject (postfinite position), but remains stable in clause-initial prefinite position.

→ Appears to be losing its subject status.

→ Becoming a placeholder for the clause-initial prefinite position?

- **Why is this interesting?**

1. Explains mixed behaviour of cataphoric *það* in modern Icelandic (Thráinsson, 1979).

→ Observation: postfinite *það* in constructions with clausal subjects possible, but dispreferred.

→ Thráinsson (1979): change from prefinite placeholder ('surface adjustment particle') to subject.

→ Historical findings: *það* shows mixed subject behaviour as a reflex of its declining subject status.

2. This is contra the standard account for the emergence of expletives in Germanic:²

(11) Prefinite expletive > subject expletive

→ Challenged by Icelandic findings:

(12) Subject 'expletive' > prefinite expletive

2.2 Clausal objects

- I investigate the status of cataphoric *það* in constructions with a clausal object.

→ Constructions which lack an overt subject ('impersonals'):

(13) En *það*_i má segja [að enginn hefur sá séð ógurlegar sjónir]_i...
 but CATPH may say.INF COMP no-one have.PRS DEM seen horrible visions
 'One can say it that no-one has seen such horrible visions...' (1220, Gylfa.48.6)

- Frequency of prefinite *það* relatively stable over time.

Time period	<i>Það</i> -V-	V-	Total	% <i>Það</i> -V-	χ^2
1150-1350	12	11	23	52.2%	
1351-1550	5	6	11	45.5%	
1551-1750	5	3	8	62.5%	
1751-1900	7	2	9	77.8%	
1901-2008	5	4	9	55.6%	
All periods	34	26	60	56.7%	

Table 4: Proportion of prefinite *það* in constructions with clausal OBJ in IcePaHC, 1150-2008

- Thráinsson (1979, 221): sentences like (13) involve topicalization of *það*, modified by clause.

²Breivik (1983), Ingham (2001) on English; Lenerz (1985) on German, but Axel (2007) for counterevidence; Falk (1993) on Swedish; Faarlund (1990) on Norwegian, but Kinn (2016) for counterevidence; Haiman (1974), Richards & Biberauer (2005)

- But very often the clause is discourse-new information; cannot be a topic:

(14) Síðan helt Haraldur konungur flotanum suður til Englands. Og það_i segja menn, then sail.PST Haraldur.NOM king.NOM fleets.DAT.DEF south to England and CATPH say.PRS men.NOM þá er konungur lá í höfn einni, [að kona ein kom ofan af landi og when king.NOM lie.PST in harbour one COMP woman.NOM one.NOM come.PST down from land and á björgin fram, er voru við höfnina, og kvað vísu]_i;... on cliffs.DEF forth REL be.PST by harbour.DEF.
 ‘Then King Haraldur sailed with his fleets south to England. And men say **it** that when the king lay in a certain harbour, **that a woman came down from the land and onto the cliffs**, which were by the harbour, and said a verse:...’ (1275, Morkin.1924)

- Topicless construction; *það* in the topic position.
 → Topic position placeholder?
- Postfinite *það* in sentences with topicalization very rare.
 → *það* restricted to the prefinite (topic) position.

(15) Það_i er nú að segja frá Alexandro konungi, [að hann hefir lagst til svefns]_i. CATPH be.PRS now to say.INF from Alexander king COMP he have.PRS go.PST to sleep
 ‘One can now say it of King Alexander that he has gone to sleep.’ (1300, Alexander.1380)

(16) Nú er að segja frá Alexandro, [að, hvar sem hann fer, þá...]. now be.PRS to say.INF from Alexander COMP wherever he go.PRS RSMP
 ‘Now one can say of Alexander that, wherever he goes, then...’ (1300, Alexander.396)

Time period	XP-V... <i>það</i>	XP-V...	Total	% XP-V... <i>það</i>	χ^2
1150-1350	1	50	51	2.0%	
1351-1550	2	21	23	8.7%	
1551-1750	2	31	33	6.1%	
1751-1900	1	5	6	16.7%	
1901-2008	0	15	17	0.0%	
All periods	6	122	128	4.7%	

Table 5: Proportion of postfinite *það* in constructions with clausal OBJ in IcePaHC, 1150-2008

- **Conclusion**
 → Already in Old Icelandic: *það* functions as a structural placeholder for the topic position.

- **Why is this interesting?**

1. Shows that topic placeholder *það* – generally viewed as relatively recent – has a long history.
2. Indicates that we have two different types of cataphoric *það* in early Icelandic:
 - (a) A **subject *það*** in constructions with clausal subjects.
 - (b) A **topic position placeholder *það*** in constructions with clausal objects.

2.3 Ambiguous clausal arguments

- A third type of construction with cataphoric *það* and a clausal argument.
 → Matrix clause predicate is a passive transitive which can take a clausal complement, e.g. *segja* ‘say’:

(17) **Það**_{*i*} er sagt [að Bárður bóndi átti sætur]_{*i*}.
 CATPH be.PRS say.PASS.PTCP COMP Bárður farmer own.PST mountain-pastures
 ‘It is said that Bárður the farmer owned mountain pastures.’ (1350, Finnbogi.636.641)

- I argue that constructions like (17) are structurally ambiguous, and allow for 2 possible analyses:
 → **Promotional passive** construction.
 → **Syntactically active impersonal** construction.
- **Passivization vs. impersonalization**, (e.g. Blevins, 2003; Kibort, 2006; Kibort & Maling, 2015).
 → Status of mapping between θ -roles and grammatical functions.

Passivization	Impersonalization
Change in mapping (Detransitivizes)	No change in mapping (Preserves transitivity)

Table 6: Passivization versus impersonalization

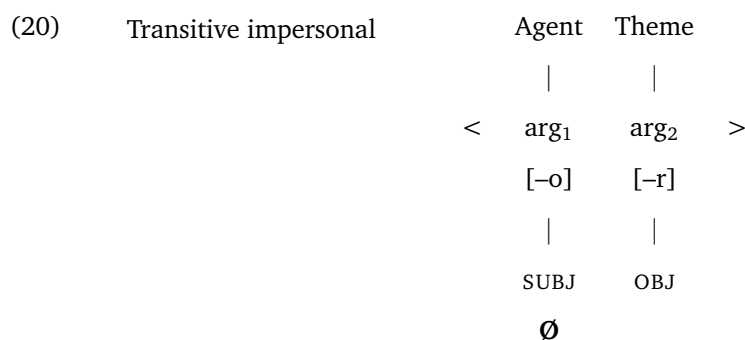
- I model this with Kibort’s Mapping Theory within LFG (e.g. Kibort, 2004, 2007, 2008, 2014).
 → Transitive verb *segja* ‘say’, which takes 2 arguments, an Agent and a Theme.

(18) Transitive default

	Agent	Theme	
<	arg ₁	arg ₂	>
	[-o]	[-r]	
	SUBJ	OBJ	

(19) Transitive passive

	Agent	Theme	
<	arg ₁	arg ₂	>
	[-o]	[-r]	
	[+r]		
	(OBL _{θ})	SUBJ	



(21) **Það_i** er sagt [að Bárður bóndi átti sætur]_i.
 CATPH be.PRS say.PASS.PTCP COMP Bárður farmer own.PST mountain-pastures
 ‘It is said that Bárður the farmer owned mountain pastures.’ (1350, Finnbogi.636.641)

- Passive analysis: clausal argument (Theme) maps to SUBJ (not in subject position due to weight).
 → Það maps to SUBJ.
- Impersonal analysis: clausal argument (Theme) maps to OBJ.
 → Það maps to OBJ.

Analysis	Clausal argument	Cataphoric það
Passive	SUBJ	SUBJ
Impersonal	OBJ	OBJ

Table 7: Two analyses for það var sagt [að...]

(22) [Að jörðin er hnöttót] er vitað.
 COMP earth.DEF be.PRS round be.PRS know.PASS.PTCP
 ‘That the Earth is round is known.’ (Thráninsson, 1979, 90)

- Elsewhere:
 → Berman (2003, 162) for passive ‘say’-verbs in German: clausal Theme can map to SUBJ or OBJ.
 → Bennis (1986) on Dutch: both *het* (it-type expletive) and *er* (there-type expletive) are possible:

(23) a. **Het** wordt gezegd [dat Jan ziek is].
 it is said that Jan ill is
 b. **Er** wordt gezegd [dat Jan ziek is].
 there is said that Jan ill is

(24) a. [_{CP} Het_i wordt [_{IP} t_i [_{VP} t_i gezegd [_{CP} dat Jan ziek is]]]] (het originates in object position)
 b. [_{CP} Er_i wordt [_{IP} t_i [_{VP} gezegd [_{CP} dat Jan ziek is]]]] (er originates in subject position)

→ Vikner (1995, 233-4) on Danish: both *det* (it-type) and *der* (there-type) possible.

- Morphological passives as syntactically active impersonals with a suppressed subject in Icelandic:
 → ‘Impersonal passive’ (Sigurðsson & Egerland, 2009).
 → ‘New Impersonal’ (Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir, 2002); but disputed! (Eythórsson, 2008; Jónsson, 2009)

- Prefinite *það* frequent in ambiguous type:

Time period	<i>það</i> -V-	V-	Total	% <i>það</i> -V-	χ^2
1150-1350	33	5	38	86.8%	
1351-1550	5	4	9	55.6%	
1551-1750	6	3	9	66.7%	
1751-1900	5	0	5	100.0%	
1901-2008	1	0	1	100.0%	
All periods	50	12	62	80.6%	

Table 8: Proportion of prefinite *það* in ambiguous clausal argument constructions in IcePaHC, 1150-2008

- Postfinite *það* less frequent than prefinite type but does occur:

Time period	XP-V- <i>það</i>	XP-V-XP	Total	% XP-V- <i>það</i>	χ^2
1150-1350	9	16	25	36.0%	
1351-1550	2	2	4	50.0%	
1551-1750	3	4	7	42.9%	
1751-1900	1	3	4	25.0%	
1901-2008	0	6	6	0.0%	
All periods	15	31	46	32.6%	

Table 9: Proportion of postfinite *það* in ambiguous clausal argument constructions in IcePaHC, 1150-2008

- (25) Og nú er **það**_i sagt [að Haraldur gráfeldur konungur fellur þar...]_i
 and now be.PRS CATPH say.PASS.PTCP COMP Haraldur grey-cloak king fall.PRS there
 ‘And now it is said that King Haraldur Grey-cloak falls there...’ (1260, Jomsvikingar.490)
- (26) Eða man **það**_i jafnan skulu ætlað vera, [að eg sjá son ins versta
 or will CATPH equally shall intend.PASS.PTCP be.INF COMP I.NOM see son DEF.GEN worst.GEN
 manns Neptanabi]_i ?
 man.GEN Neptanab
 ‘Or should it equally be intended that I see the son of the worst man?’ (1300, Alexander.28)

- **Conclusion:**

→ I interpret this intermediate result as supporting my proposal for the 2 analyses:

1. Passive with clausal SUBJ – *það* shares SUBJ function; preferred in postfinite position.
2. Active impersonal with clausal OBJ – *það* shares OBJ function; dispreferred in postfinite position.

→ Cataphoric *það* very frequent in prefinite position: some of these will be SUBJS (in the passive analysis); some will be OBJs (in the impersonal analysis).

Under impersonal analysis, *það* is an OBJ and is positionally restricted to the clause-initial prefinite position
 → Behaves as a **topic position placeholder**

3 The spread of *það*

- Cataphoric *það* is already established in Old Icelandic as a topic position placeholder in impersonal constructions with clausal objects:

- (27) **Það**_{*i*} er sagt [að Bárður bóndi átti sætur]_{*i*}.
 CATPH be.PRS say.PASS.PTCP COMP Bárður farmer own.PST mountain-pastures
 ‘One says it that Bárður the farmer owned mountain pastures.’ (1350, Finnbogi.636.641)
- (28) En **það**_{*i*} má segja [að enginn hefur sá séð ógurlegar sjónir]_{*i*}...
 but CATPH may say.INF COMP no-one have.PRS DEM seen horrible visions
 ‘One can say it that no-one has seen such horrible visions...’ (1220, Gylfa.48.6)
- (29) En **það**_{*i*} er vitanda, [að þá gofgum vér réttlega postula guðs alla]_{*i*}...
 but CATPH be.PRS know.PRS.PTCP COMP then honour.PRS we rightly apostles god.GEN all...
 ‘But one knows it that we then rightly honour all of God’s apostles...’ (1150, Homiliubok.304)

Time period	<i>Það-V-</i>	V-	Total	% <i>Það-V-</i>	χ^2
1150-1350	45	16	61	73.8%	
1351-1550	10	10	20	50.0%	
1551-1750	11	6	17	64.7%	
1751-1900	12	2	14	85.7%	
1901-2008	6	4	10	60.0%	
All periods	84	38	122	68.9%	

Table 10: Proportion of prefinite *það* in impersonal constructions with clausal OBJ in IcePaHC, 1150-2008

- In impersonal constructions with no clausal object, prefinite *það* is absent in older Icelandic (pre-1900):

- (30) ...og _____ má eigi einum munni allt senn segja.
 and ØEXPL may NEG one.DAT mouth.DAT all at once say.INF
 ‘...and one cannot say everything at once with one mouth.’ (1260, Jomsvikingar.875)
- (31) _____ Var síðan leitað vandlega.
 ØEXPL be.PST then search.PASS.PTCP carefully
 ‘One then searched carefully.’ (1210, Jarstein.537)

Time period	<i>Það-V-</i>	V-	Total	% <i>Það-V-</i>	χ^2
1150-1350	2	80	82	2.4%	**
1351-1550	1	47	48	2.1%	*
1551-1750	0	24	24	0.0%	
1751-1900	3	32	35	8.6%	
1901-2008	24	7	31	77.4%	***
All periods	30	190	220	13.6%	

Table 11: Proportion of prefinite *það* in impersonal constructions without clausal OBJ in IcePaHC, 1150-2008

- But there are some exceptions!

→ All instances of *það* in impersonal constructions with no clausal object pre-1900 feature a ‘say’-type predicate, i.e. a transitive verb which optionally takes a clausal object:

- (32) **Það** er mælt um sakir þær allar sem hér eru taldar, um
EXPL be.PRS speak.PASS.PTCP about things DEM all REL here be.PRS tell.PASS.PTCP about
frumhlaup og um sár og um víg og lagalöstu alla...
personal-assault and about wound and about manslaughter and law-evasions all
‘One talks about all those things which are told here, about personal assault and about injury and
about manslaughter and all evasions of the law...’ (1270, Gragas.334)³
- (33) **Það** er nú að segja frá Hrafn. Hann kom á Eyri og...
EXPL be.PRS now to say.INF from Hrafn he come.PST on Eyrir and
‘Now one can speak of Hrafn. He came to Eyrir and...’ (1350, Finnbogi.1394)
- (34) **Það** er nú sagt af einum ríkum manni og mikilhæfum og nökkuð
EXPL be.PRS now say.PASS.PTCP of one rich man and talented and somewhat
framferðugur til veraldligr hluta sem eg hirði eigi frá að segja.
ready to worldly things REL I.NOM care.PRS NEG from to say.INF
‘One now speaks of one rich and talented man and somewhat readily to worldly things which I
care not to report.’ (1475, Ævintýri.477)⁴
- (35) Þessi fregn flaug um allan bæinn og **það** var ekki talað um annað en
DEM news fly.PST about all town.DEF and EXPL be.PST NEG tell.PASS.PTCP about other than
Hans og dauða hans.
Hans and death his
‘This news flew around the whole town one did not tell of anything other than Hans and his
death.’ (1883, Voggur.87)

→ Same predicates where cataphoric *það* is already strongly attested in Old Icelandic, cf. (27)-(29).

In new contexts which lack clausal argument, *það* can no longer share a grammatical function.

→ Has become a ‘truly empty’ structural placeholder expletive.

- As of c.1900, *það* generalises as topic placeholder to impersonal constructions with all types of predicates:

→ Accounts for dramatic increase in *það* as of 1900.

- (36) ... **það** var barið; Geimundur og Snjólaug komu jafnsnemma til dyranna...
EXPL be.PST knock.PASS.PTCP Geimundur and Snjólaug come.PST same-time to doors.DEF
‘...someone knocked; Geimundur and Snjólaug came to the door at the same time...’
(1902, Fossar.1623)
- (37) **Það** á að spara með þessu.
EXPL own.PRS to save.INF with DEM
‘One ought to be sparing with this.’ (1985, Marg saga.232)
- (38) Og **það** þarf að draga skipin úr sjó á haustum...
and EXPL need to pull.INF ships.DEF out sea in autumns
‘And one needs to pull the ship in out of the sea in autumn...’ (2008, Ofsi.390)

³Introduces a new chapter.

⁴Again, introduces a new chapter.

4 Conclusion

- In Old Icelandic we already have two types of cataphoric *það*:
 1. *Það* which shares the SUBJ function with a clausal argument; behaves like a subject.
 2. *Það* which shares the OBJ function with a clausal argument; structural placeholder for the topic position in topicless sentences.
- Over time: *það* generalises in this function to all types of topicless impersonal construction, including those where it can't be cataphoric/share a grammatical function.
 - 'Say'-type predicates serve as a bridging context.
 - Partially reliant on structural ambiguity of *It was said [that...]* type.
- Accompanying change:
 - Subject cataphoric *það* in constructions with clausal subjects begins to lose its subject properties and transitions towards being a positionally restricted topic position placeholder.

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