

# Expletives and clause structure in the history of Icelandic

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## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Topic placeholder *það*

- Topicalized constituents occupy the clause-initial prefinite position.  
→ A topic position (e.g. Rögnvaldsson & Thráinsson 1990).
- 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 fronted constituent, expletive *það* is absent:

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

- Expletive is not a subject; **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**<sub>*i*</sub> er ótrúlegt [hvað þeir eru áhrifamiklir]<sub>*i*</sub>.  
and CATPH be.PRS unbelievable how they be.PRS influential  
'And it is unbelievable how influential they are.' (1985, Margsaga.625)

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

- Cataphoric *það* inflects for case:

(5) En *þess<sub>i</sub>* get ég fyrst [að þú sért maður íslenskur]<sub>*i*</sub>...  
 but CATPH.GEN guess.PRS I.NOM first COMP you.NOM be.PRS.SBJV man Icelandic  
 ‘But first I guess that you are an Icelandic man...’ (1275, Morkin.1564)

- 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); both contribute information to the PRED feature of the same GF.
- In (3), both *það* and clausal argument map to the SUBJ function; unify at f-structure.  
 → *það* introduces a variable in the form of a canonical value [PRED ‘pro’].  
 → Clausal argument introduces a semantic restriction on the variable [RESTR [PRED ‘...’]].

(6)

PRED	‘be<SUBJ,PREDLINK>’												
SUBJ	<table style="border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;">RESTR</td> <td style="padding: 5px;">[ PRED ‘how influential they are’ ]</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;">PRED</td> <td style="padding: 5px;">‘pro’</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;">PERS</td> <td style="padding: 5px;">3</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;">NUM</td> <td style="padding: 5px;">SG</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;">GENDER</td> <td style="padding: 5px;">NT</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;">CASE</td> <td style="padding: 5px;">NOM</td> </tr> </table>	RESTR	[ PRED ‘how influential they are’ ]	PRED	‘pro’	PERS	3	NUM	SG	GENDER	NT	CASE	NOM
RESTR	[ PRED ‘how influential they are’ ]												
PRED	‘pro’												
PERS	3												
NUM	SG												
GENDER	NT												
CASE	NOM												
PREDLINK	[ PRED ‘unbelievable’ ]												

- 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.

(7)

PRED	‘know<SUBJ,OBJ>’												
SUBJ	<table style="border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;">PRED</td> <td style="padding: 5px;">‘pro’</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;">PERS</td> <td style="padding: 5px;">1</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;">NUM</td> <td style="padding: 5px;">SG</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;">CASE</td> <td style="padding: 5px;">NOM</td> </tr> </table>	PRED	‘pro’	PERS	1	NUM	SG	CASE	NOM				
PRED	‘pro’												
PERS	1												
NUM	SG												
CASE	NOM												
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NUM	SG												
GENDER	NT												
CASE	ACC												

- Topic placeholder *það* (1) is motivated for structural reasons.  
 → Does not map to a grammatical function.

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### 1.3 Historical context

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

(8) **Það**<sub>i</sub> var rétt [að spakur engill boðaði Guð borinn spökum Gyðingum]<sub>i</sub>.  
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)

(9) **Það**<sub>i</sub> vildi ég [að þú ræddir ekki um]<sub>i</sub>.  
CATPH wish.PST I.NOM COMP you.NOM talk.PST NEG about  
'I wished that you didn't talk about it.' (1275, Morkin.1280)

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

(10) Var þá hleypt suður til Reykja...  
be.PST then run.PASS.PTCP south to Reykir  
'It was run south to Reykir...' (1250, Sturlunga.406.624) (impersonal)

(11) Voru þar tvö skip í búnaði.  
be.PST there two.NOM ships.NOM in preparations  
'There were two ships in the preparations.' (1250, Sturlunga.408.710) (presentational)

### 1.4 The project

Research questions:

1. When did expletive *það* emerge in impersonals and presentationals?
2. How does cataphoric *það* behave diachronically, and does it play a role in the emergence of expletive *það*?
3. Was *þar* 'there' ever available as an expletive in Icelandic? (Cf. 'it'- vs. 'there'-type elsewhere in Germanic).

Aspects of Icelandic clause structure to consider:

1. V2
2. The information structural organisation of the clause.
3. The properties and positional distribution of subjects.

Method:

- Corpus-based study (IcePaHC, Wallenberg et al. 2011).
- Plus some manual investigations of early texts.
- Matrix clauses only.
- LFG for formal analysis.

## 2 Cataphoric *það* in diachrony

### 2.1 Clausal subjects

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

(12) **Það**<sub>*i*</sub> var rétt [að spakur engill boðaði Guð borinn spökum Gyðingum]<sub>*i*</sub>.  
 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:

(13) Satt er **það**<sub>*i*</sub> [að mikið afbragð er Grettir annarra manna]<sub>*i*</sub>...  
 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:

(14) Er **það**<sub>*i*</sub> satt, Halli, [að þú hefir eigi hefnt föður þíns]<sub>*i*</sub>?  
 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*), (13).

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

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

- Postfinite *það* also decreases in V1 contexts (V-*það*), (14).

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

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

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

- By contrast, clause-initial prefinite *það* (12) remains stable over time.

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

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

- **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 (Thránsson 1979).
  - Observation: postfinite *það* in constructions with a clausal subject possible, but dispreferred.
  - Thránsson (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:<sup>2</sup>

(15) Prefinite expletive > subject expletive

→ Challenged by Icelandic findings:

(16) 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'):

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

<sup>2</sup>Breivik (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)

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

Time period	<i>það</i> -V-	V-	Total	% <i>það</i> -V-	$\chi^2$
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%	
<b>All periods</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>56.7%</b>	

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

- Thráinsson (1979: 221): sentences like (17) involve topicalization of *það*, modified by clause.
- But typically the clause is discourse-new information; cannot be a topic:

(18) Og fyrir þá sök heitir hún svo, að hún fellur strítt, og fer svo skjótt til  
 and for DEM sake be-called.PST she.NOM so COMP she.NOM fall.PRS strong and go.PRS so swiftly to  
 að jafna sem ið flugskjóta dýr það, er tigris heitir. Það<sub>i</sub> er skjótast að  
 to make-equal.INF as DEF very-swift beast DEF REL TIGRIS be-called.PRS EXPL be.PRS quickest to  
 segja frá för Alexandri, [að hann sækir fund Darii]<sub>i</sub>...  
 say.INF from journey Alexander COMP he.NOM seek.PRS meeting Darius  
 ‘And for that sake she is so called, that she falls strong and travels so swiftly to be equal to that very  
 swift creature which is called the Tigris. One can say quickest of Alexander’s journey, **that he seeks a  
 meeting with Darius...**’ (1300, Alexander.1113)

(19) En að Lögbergi um morguninn stendur Oddur upp og talar hátt: "Hér varð  
 and at law-rock about morning.DEF stand.PRS Oddur.NOM up and speak.PRS loudly here become.PST  
 maður sekur í nótt er Óspakur heitir í Norðlendingadómi um víg Vala. En  
 man outlawed in night REL Óspakur be-called.PRS in Norðlendingadómur about battle Vali.GEN but  
 það<sub>i</sub> er að segja til sektarmarka hans [að hann er mikill vexti og  
 CATPH be.PRS to say.INF to outlaw-characteristics he.GEN COMP he.NOM be.PRS great size and  
 karlmannlegur]<sub>i</sub>.  
 manly  
 ‘And at the law rock one morning Oddur stands up and speaks loudly: "Here in the night a man was  
 outlawed who is called Óspakur in Norðlendingadómur for Vali’s battle. But one can say for his outlaw  
 characteristics **that he is of a great size and manly.**"’ (1350, BandamennM.575)

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

(20) Það<sub>i</sub> er nú að segja frá Alexandro konungi, [að hann hefir lagst til svefnis]<sub>i</sub>.  
 CATPH be.PRS now to say.INF from Alexander king COMP he have.PRS go.PST to sleep  
 ‘One can now say of King Alexander that he has gone to sleep.’ (1300, Alexander.1380)

(21) 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...það	XP-V...	Total	% XP-V...það	$\chi^2$
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%	
<b>All periods</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>122</b>	<b>128</b>	<b>4.7%</b>	

Table 5: Frequency 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 a clausal subject.
  - (b) A **topic position placeholder *það*** in constructions with a clausal object.

→ Question: How should we analyse this positionally restricted *það*?

### 3 Impersonals

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

(22) Það<sub>i</sub> er sagt [að Bárður bóndi átti sætur]<sub>i</sub>.  
 CATPH be.PRS say.PASS.PTCP COMP Bárður farmer own.PST mountain-pastures  
 ‘One says that Bárður the farmer owned mountain pastures.’ (1350, Finnbogi.636.641)

(23) En það<sub>i</sub> má segja [að enginn hefur sá séð ógurlegar sjónir]<sub>i</sub>...  
 but CATPH may say.INF COMP no-one have.PRS DEM seen horrible visions  
 ‘One can say that no-one has seen such horrible visions...’ (1220, Gylfa.48.6)

(24) En það<sub>i</sub> er vitanda, [að þá gofgum vér réttlega postula guðs alla]<sub>i</sub>...  
 but CATPH be.PRS know.PRS.PTCP COMP then honour.PRS we rightly apostles god.GEN all...  
 ‘But one knows that we then rightly honour all of God’s apostles...’ (1150, Homiliubok.304)

- In impersonal constructions with no clausal object, prefinite *það* is absent in earlier Icelandic (V1):

(25) ...og má eigi einum munnni allt senn segja.  
 and may NEG one.DAT mouth.DAT all at once say.INF  
 ‘...and one cannot say everything at once with one mouth.’ (1260, Jomsvikingar.875)

(26) Var síðan leitað vandlega.  
 be.PST then search.PASS.PTCP carefully  
 ‘One then searched carefully.’ (1210, Jarstein.537)

Time period	<i>það</i> -V-	V-	Total	% <i>það</i> -V-	$\chi^2$
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%	***
<b>All periods</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>190</b>	<b>220</b>	<b>13.6%</b>	

Table 6: Frequency of prefinite *það* in impersonal constructions without clausal OBJ in IcePaHC, 1150-2008

- But there are some exceptions!

→ 3 examples with *það* pre-1550.

→ ‘Say’-type predicate, i.e. a transitive verb which optionally takes a clausal object:

(27) **Það** er mælt um sakir þær allar sem hér eru taldar, um  
 CATPH 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  
 ‘The following is said 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)<sup>3</sup>

(28) **Það** er nú að segja frá Hrafn. Hann kom á Eyri og...  
 CATPH be.PRS now to say.INF from Hrafn he.NOM come.PST to Eyrir and  
 ‘This can now be said of Hrafn. He came to Eyrir and...’ (1350, Finnbogi.1394)<sup>4</sup>

(29) **Það** er nú sagt af einum ríkum manni og mikilhæfum... Hann tók  
 CATPH be.PRS now say.PASS.PTCP of one rich man and talented he.NOM take.PST  
 sótt hættliga.  
 sickness dangerous  
 ‘This is now said of one rich and talented man... He took dangerously ill.’  
 (1475, Ævintyri.477)<sup>5</sup>

→ Same predicates where cataphoric *það* is already strongly attested in Old Icelandic, cf. (22)-(24).

In new contexts which lack clausal argument, *það* can still be cataphoric.

- As of c.1850, *það* appears in impersonal constructions with a wider range of predicate types:

(30) **Það** þurfti ekki að vitja um Hans...  
 EXPL need.PST NEG to check about Hans  
 ‘It is not necessary to check up on Hans...’ (1883, Voggur.81)

(31) ... **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)

<sup>3</sup>This sentence introduces a new chapter.

<sup>4</sup>This example initiates a new discourse.

<sup>5</sup>This sentence initiates a new chapter.

(32) **Það** má reyna að telja einhverjum öðrum en mér trú um það.  
 EXPL may try.INF to tell.INF someone other than me truth about DEM  
 ‘One may try to tell someone other than me about that.’ (1908, Ofurefli.1638)

(33) **Það** á að spara með þessu.  
 EXPL own.PRS to save.INF with DEM  
 ‘One ought to be sparing with this.’ (1985, Margsgaga.232)

(34) 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)

- Interpretation: *það* generalises as topic placeholder to impersonal constructions with all types of predicates.
- The third and final stage in the historical development by which *það* becomes established in the clause-initial prefinite position in the full range of topicless impersonal constructions:

	Predicate	Clausal argument?	<i>Það</i> is cataphoric?
Stage 1	say-type	yes	yes
Stage 2	say-type	no	yes
Stage 3	all predicates	no	no

## 4 Presentationals

- Another context where *það* functions as a topic position placeholder in present-day Icelandic:  
 → Presentational constructions which are ‘all new’ (topicless).

(35) a. **Það** voru mýs í baðkerinu í gær.  
 EXPL be.PST mice.NOM in bathtub.DEF yesterday  
 ‘There were mice in the bathtub yesterday.’  
 b. Í gær voru (\***það**) mýs í baðkerinu.  
 yesterday be.PST (\*EXPL) mice.NOM in bathtub.DEF  
 ‘Yesterday there were mice in the bathtub.’

- In Old Icelandic, the expletive is absent in presentational constructions.  
 → V1 presentationals (11).
- But evidence that *þar* ‘there’ can function as an expletive in earlier stages (pre-1720).  
 → *þar* co-occurs with a locative.

(36) **Þar** var mikill fjöldi dýra á skógi með öllu móti.  
 there be.PST great.NOM crowd.NOM animals.GEN in forest.DAT with all shape  
 ‘There was a great crowd of animals in the forest of all shapes.’ (1250, Eirik.10.2)

(37) **Þar** var ein hella stór á vellinum.  
 there be.PST one.NOM rock-slab.NOM big.NOM on field.DEF  
 ‘There was a certain big slab of rock in the field.’ (1400, Gunnar.679)

(38) Þar var gnægð grjóts og viður hér og þar við sjávarströndina  
 there be.PST abundance.NOM stone.GEN and wood.NOM here and there with sea-beach.DEF  
 með björgunum.  
 with cliffs.DEF  
 ‘There was an abundance of stone and some wood here and there by the beach with the cliffs.’  
 (1650, Illugi.563)

(39) Þar bjó í Kaupinhafn einn slátrari sá er Kristján hét...  
 there live.PST in Copenhagen one.NOM butcher.NOM DEM.NOM REL Kristján be-called.PST  
 ‘There lived in Copenhagen one butcher called Kristján...’ (1661, Indiafari.35.258)

(40) Og hann segir með Davíð: Þar er ekkert heilt á mínu holdi fyrir þinni  
 and he.NOM say.PRS with Davíð there is nothing.NOM healthy.NOM on my flesh for your  
 ógnan, þar er enginn friður í mínum beinum fyrir mínum syndum...  
 menaces there is none.NOM peace.NOM in my bones for my sins  
 ‘And he says with Davíð: There is nothing healthy on my flesh for your menaces, there is no peace  
 in my bones for my sins...’ (1720, Vidalin.1029)

- Also plausible instances of expletive *þar* in postfinite position:

→ Behaves as SUBJ.

(41) Þá er liðsafnaður var um Strandir voru þar menn norðan um Flóa...  
 then REL troop-gathering be.PST about coast be.PST there men northwards about bay  
 ‘When the gathering of troops was at the coast, there were men northwards at the bay...’  
 (1250, Sturlunga.406.650)

(42) Gekk hann í móti sínum fóstbróður með allmikilli gleði, og var þar  
 go.PST he.NOM against his-own foster-brother with all-great joy and be.PST there  
 allmikill fagnafundur...  
 all-great.NOM joyful-meeting.NOM  
 ‘He went towards his foster brother with great joy and there was a greatly joyful meeting...’  
 (1480, Jarlmann.569)

(43) Að sönnu er þar gnægð endurlausnarinnar hjá honum...  
 of course be.PRS there abundance.NOM redemption.NOM in he.DAT  
 ‘Of course there is an abundance of redemption in him...’ (1630, Gerhard.492)

- And instances where *þar* is an alternative to cataphoric *það* in constructions with a clausal object.

→ Again, *þar* can be pre- or postfinite.

(44) Þeir bræður voru íslenskir að kyni og úr Austfjörðum. Þar er nú til að taka  
 DEM brothers be.PST icelandic at kin and out-of East-Fjords there is now to to report.INF  
 [að Freydís Eiríksdóttir gerði ferð sína heiman úr Görðum]...  
 COMP Freydís.NOM Eiríksdóttir.NOM make.PST journey.ACC her-own home out Garðar.DAT  
 These brothers were Icelandic by kin and from the East Fjords. There is now to report that Freydís  
 Eiríksdóttir made her journey home from Garðar...’ (1250, Græn, 7.3)

(45) Nú er þar frá að segja [að skútumaðurinn vaknar]...  
 now be.PRS there from to say.INF COMP ship-man.DEF awake.PRS  
 ‘Now there is to say that the shipman awakes...’ (1661.Indiafari.52.726)

- When does *það* emerge as an expletive in presentationals?

Time period	<i>það</i> -V-XP	V-XP	Total	% <i>ÞAÐ</i> -V-XP	$\chi^2$
1150-1350	0	39	39	0.0%	***
1351-1550	5	33	38	13.2%	***
1551-1750	4	21	25	16.0%	***
1751-1900	35	19	54	64.8%	
1901-2008	86	5	91	94.5%	***
<b>All periods</b>	<b>130</b>	<b>117</b>	<b>247</b>	<b>52.6%</b>	

Table 7: Frequency of prefinite *það* in presentational constructions in IcePaHC, 1150-2008

→ Early examples from 1475 onwards:

- (46) **Það** var einn kvinna er fastaði við brauð og vatn fyrir Marju  
 EXPL be.PST.SG one.NOM.SG woman.NOM.SG REL fast.PST with bread and water for María.GEN  
 messu Magdalena.  
 mass Magdalena  
 ‘There was one woman who fasted with bread and water for Mary Magdalene’s mass.’  
 (1475, *Ævintyri*.17)<sup>6</sup>

- (47) **Það** eru margir kimar niður við sjómálið...  
 EXPL be.PRS.PL many.NOM.PL bilges.NOM.PL down by high-waterline.DEF  
 ‘There are many bilges down by the high waterline.’ (1661, *Indiafari*.73.1287)

→ Dramatic increase visible in data for 1751-2008.

→ Across all periods, *það* is restricted to prefinite position.

- Period of competition in presentationals between *þar* (older) and *það* (newer):

→ *þar* attested 1150-1720; pre- and postfinite.

→ *það* attested 1475-2008; postfinite only.

- Why is this interesting?

1. If we accept the expletive analysis of *þar*, then Icelandic had an expletive available in presentationals earlier than previously thought (Rögnvaldsson 2002).
2. Competition between ‘it’-type and ‘there’-type expletives elsewhere in presentational constructions in historical Germanic.<sup>7</sup>
3. Icelandic and English: diverging pathways of change.
  - English pre-1550 has both *there* and *it* in presentationals > *there* wins.
  - Older Icelandic has both *þar* (‘there’-type) and *það* (‘it’-type) > ‘it’-type wins.
4. Another challenge for the Prefinite First Hypothesis:  
 subject expletive (*þar*) > prefinite expletive (*það*)

<sup>6</sup>This sentence begins a new chapter.

<sup>7</sup>(Pfenninger 2009, Light 2015, Lenerz 1985 on German; Faarlund 1990: 70-2, Kinn 2011 on Middle Norwegian; Breivik 1983: 257-9, 324, Denison 1993: 97, Pfenninger 2009: 54-56 on early English).

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## 5 Conclusion

### Icelandic underwent 3 related developments in 1751-2008:

1. *það* generalises as a topic position placeholder to all topicless impersonals constructions on model of restricted cataphoric contexts.
2. Prefinite *það* increases in frequency in presentationals, out-competing earlier form *þar* (subject).
3. Cataphoric *það* in constructions with a clausal subject becomes increasingly restricted to prefinite position: subject > topic position placeholder

→ 3 approximately simultaneous changes, centred around a structural position.

### Questions:

- What changes with the effect that the topic position can no longer be unfilled?
- How to analyse positionally restricted cataphoric *það* which co-occurs with a clausal object?
- Why did Icelandic lose the ‘there’-type?

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