

# ‘Subjectless’ constructions and expletives: syntactic change in Icelandic

Hannah Booth  
University of Manchester

## 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).

### 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 it that you did not always feel well when you were a little boy.’ (2008, Mamma.841)

- Three possibilities:

1. *Það* has no PRED feature; non-thematic argument (Kaplan & Zaenen, 1989 on English extraposition).
2. *Það* introduces its PRED feature only optionally (cf. Andrews, 1990 on clitic doubling in Spanish).
3. *Það* introduces one aspect of the PRED feature (cf. Berman et al., 1998 on German constructions with *es* + clausal argument).

- Both *það* and the clausal argument contribute information to the PRED feature of the same GF.

→ *Það* introduces a variable in the form of a canonical PRED value [PRED 'pro'].

→ Clausal argument introduces a restriction on this variable, under feature RESTR: [RESTR [PRED '...']].

- The two aspects unify at f-structure under the same GF.

- In (3), both *það* and clausal argument map to the SUBJ function:

(5)

PRED	'be<SUBJ,PREDLINK>'	
	RESTR [ PRED 'how influential they are' ]	
	PRED 'pro'	
SUBJ	PERS 3	
	NUM SG	
	GENDER NT	
	CASE NOM	
PREDLINK	[ PRED 'unbelievable' ]	

- In (4), both *það* and clausal argument map to the OBJ function:

(6)

PRED	'know<SUBJ,OBJ>'	
	PRED 'pro'	
SUBJ	PERS 1	
	NUM SG	
	CASE NOM	
	RESTR [ PRED 'that you did not always feel...' ]	
	PRED 'pro'	
OBJ	PERS 3	
	NUM SG	
	GENDER NT	
	CASE ACC	

→ Dalrymple & Lødrup (2000), following Thráinsson (1979): Icelandic complement clauses map to OBJ.

- 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):

(7) **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)

(8) **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 it that you didn't talk about it.' (1275, Morkin.1280)

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

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

**This paper:** accounting for the spread of *það* from contexts like (7)/(8) to contexts like (9).  
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:

(10) **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:

(11) 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:

(12) 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*), (11).

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

- Postfinite *það* also decreases in V1 contexts (V-*það*), (12).

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

- By contrast, clause-initial prefinite *það* (10) 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: Proportion 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 (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.

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

2. This is contra the standard account for the emergence of expletives in Germanic:<sup>2</sup>

(13) Prefinite expletive > subject expletive

→ Challenged by Icelandic findings:

(14) 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’):

(15) 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 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-	$\chi^2$
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: Proportion of prefinite *það* in constructions with clausal OBJ in IcePaHC, 1150-2008

- Thráinsson (1979, 221): sentences like (15) involve topicalization of *það*, modified by clause.
- But very often the clause is discourse-new information; cannot be a topic:

(16) En *það*<sub>i</sub> er að segja frá Hermóði [að hann reið níu nætur dökkva  
 but EXPL be.PRS to say.INF from Hermóður.DAT COMP he.NOM ride.PST nine nights.ACC dark.GEN  
 dala og djúpa]<sub>i</sub>...  
 dales.GEN and deep.GEN  
 But one can say of Hermóður that he rode for nine nights through dark and deep dales...?  
 (1250, Gylfa.49.15)

- Topicless construction; *það* in the topic position.

→ Topic position placeholder?

<sup>2</sup>Breivik (1983), Ingham (2001) on English; Lernerz (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)

- Postfinite *það* in sentences with topicalization very rare.

→ *Það* restricted to the prefinite (topic) position.

(17) **Það**<sub>*i*</sub> er nú að segja frá Alexandro konungi, [að hann hefir lagst til svefns]<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 it of King Alexander that he has gone to sleep.’ (1300, Alexander.1380)

(18) 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>	$\chi^2$
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: 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’:

(19) **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  
 ‘It is said that Bárður the farmer owned mountain pastures.’ (1350, Finnbogi.636.641)

- I argue that constructions like (19) 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 a-structure and f-structure.

Passivization	Impersonalization
Change in mapping	No change in mapping
Demotion of default SUBJ	Suppression of default SUBJ
Absent at f-, a- and c-structure	Present at f- and a-; absent at c-structure.

Table 6: Passivization versus impersonalization

- I model this difference with Kibort's Mapping Theory (e.g. Kibort, 2004, 2007, 2008, 2014).

- Transitive verb *segja* 'say', which takes 2 arguments,  $arg_1$  and  $arg_2$ , (Agent, Theme).

(20) say default

Agent	Theme
< $arg_1$	$arg_2$ >
[-o]	[-r]
SUBJ	OBJ

(21) say passive

Agent	Theme
< $arg_1$	$arg_2$ >
[-o]	[-r]
<b>[+r]</b>	
OBL <sub>θ</sub>	SUBJ

(22) say impersonal

Agent	Theme
< $arg_1$	$arg_2$ >
[-o]	[-r]
SUBJ	OBJ
∅	

(23) **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  
 ‘It is said that Bárður the farmer owned mountain pastures.’ (1350, Finnbogi.636.641)

- Passive analysis: clausal argument (Theme) maps to SUBJ (dispreferred in subject position due to weight).  
 → *Það* maps to SUBJ.

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

- Impersonal analysis: clausal argument (Theme) maps to OBJ.  
 → *Það* maps to OBJ.

Analysis	Clausal argument	Cataphoric <i>það</i>
Passive	SUBJ	SUBJ
Impersonal	OBJ	OBJ

Table 7: Two analyses for *It is said [that...]*

- Elsewhere:  
 → Berman (2003, 162) for passive ‘say’-verbs in German: clausal Theme can map to SUBJ or OBJ.

(25) gesagt < Agent Theme >  
           [-o]        [-r]  
                           [NOM]  
 -----  
                   ∅        SUBJ (DP)  
                           SUBJ/OBJ (CP)

→ Bennis (1986) on Dutch: both *het* (*it*-type expletive) and *er* (*there*-type expletive) are possible:

(26) 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

(27) a. [<sub>CP</sub> Het<sub>i</sub> wordt [<sub>IP</sub> t<sub>i</sub> [<sub>VP</sub> t<sub>i</sub> gezegd [<sub>CP</sub> dat Jan ziek is] ] ] ] (*het* originates in object position)  
       b. [<sub>CP</sub> Er<sub>i</sub> wordt [<sub>IP</sub> t<sub>i</sub> [<sub>VP</sub> gezegd [<sub>CP</sub> 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 passives: ‘impersonal null subjects’ (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-	$\chi^2$
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%	
<b>All periods</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>80.6%</b>	

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

- Postfinite *það* less frequent than in clausal subject type, but more frequent than in clausal object type:

Time period	XP-V- <i>það</i>	XP-V-XP	Total	% XP-V- <i>það</i>	$\chi^2$
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%	
<b>All periods</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>32.6%</b>	

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

- (28) Og nú er **það**<sub>i</sub> sagt [að Haraldur gráfeldur konungur fellur þar...]<sub>i</sub>  
 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)
- (29) Eða man **það**<sub>i</sub> 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]<sub>i</sub> ?  
 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:

- (30) **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 it that Bárður the farmer owned mountain pastures.’ (1350, Finnbogi.636.641)
- (31) 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 it that no-one has seen such horrible visions...’ (1220, Gylfa.48.6)
- (32) 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 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>	$\chi^2$
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%	
<b>All periods</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>122</b>	<b>68.9%</b>	

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):

- (33) ...og \_\_\_\_\_ má eigi einum munnni 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)
- (34) \_\_\_\_\_ 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>	$\chi^2$
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 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:

- (35) **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)<sup>3</sup>
- (36) **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 Eyri and  
‘Now one can speak of Hrafn. He came to Eyri and...’ (1350, Finnbogi.1394)
- (37) **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 veraldligna 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)<sup>4</sup>
- (38) 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. (30)-(32).

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.

- (39) ... **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)
- (40) **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)
- (41) 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)

<sup>3</sup>Introduces a new chapter.

<sup>4</sup>Again, introduces a new chapter.

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## 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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