

**SIGRÍÐUR SIGURJÓNSDÓTTIR & HÖSKULDUR
THRÁINSSON
UNIVERSITY OF ICELAND**

REGIONAL VARIATION IN ICELANDIC SYNTAX?

1. Introduction

In this paper we report on the first major study of syntactic variation in Icelandic and present some preliminary results. This study is a part of the *Scandinavian Dialect Syntax* (ScanDiaSyn) project (see e.g. <http://uit.no/scandiasyn>). We will first describe the plans and methodology of our project, then give an example of regional variation in Icelandic syntax (which is apparently very rare), and finally discuss an example of age related variation that bears on the methodology adopted by us.

2. The scope and methodology of the study

Before we began our ongoing project, we did a pilot study in 2004–2005. It had two goals. First, we wanted to try out different methods of data solicitation. Second, we were searching for instances of variation to study in more detail in the ScanDiaSyn survey that we were planning. Partly based on the results of our pilot study (see e.g. Thráinsson et al. 2005, Thráinsson 2006), we planned a project where the data are mainly solicited by using the following sources:

- (1) a. **Written overviews**, using questionnaires asking the subjects to give acceptability judgments, insert forms in blanks, choose between alternative variants of constructions, etc.
- b. **Guided interviews**, centering around selected constructions.
- c. **Corpora** (spoken language, written language).

The subjects in the overviews are divided into four age groups (15–16 year olds, 20–25, 40–45 and 65–70), giving a total of some 960 subjects in each overview, evenly distributed with respect to gender, age, and social class. There will be three separate written overviews, involving different constructions each time. The reason we have decided to compare subjects from four different age groups is the fact that most of the syntactic variation found in Icelandic appears to be age related rather than being regional or related to social variables such as education. In the pilot study we investigated over 30 different constructions and in some 12 of these there were indications of possibly interesting variation. In all instances the variation was related to age, in two (or mainly one, see section 3) of these it also appeared to vary regionally, and in three of them there was some indication of correlation between the variation and education of the subjects (see also studies by Svavarsdóttir 1982, Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir 2002, Sigurjónsdóttir and Maling 2001, 2002).

The methodology is partially based on the results of our pilot study. When asking for judgments of acceptability in the written overviews, the subjects are given a three way choice defined as shown:

- (2) *yes* = ‘a natural sentence, I could easily say this’
 ? = ‘a questionable sentence, I could hardly say this’
 no = ‘an impossible sentence, I could not say this’

Many dialectologists and sociolinguists are very sceptical about the use of written questionnaires of the kind we are using. It is important to keep in mind, however, that while it has proven to be rather useless to ask speakers about their pronunciation, it is a standard procedure in syntax to ask for judgments of acceptability. But it is not always possible to do that in a reliable fashion using written questionnaires. Our results, both from the pilot study and the overview done so far (see section 4), show, however, that this can be done in Iceland. We believe that there are at least three reasons for this:

- (3) a. The syntactic variation found in Icelandic is relatively minor and very few people are aware of its existence (with only a couple of exceptions).

- b. The regional phonological differences are also very minor. Thus the standard orthography of the language does not invoke any idea of a standard vs. a dialectal variant. People do not even think of representing phonological differences in the orthography.
- c. There does not seem to be any relationship between phonological and syntactic variation — and there are no known morphological differences correlating with syntactic differences either.

All this makes it unproblematic to use standard orthography in written questionnaires soliciting data on syntactic variation. This is presumably not true of other Scandinavian languages (with the exception of Faroese).

We are very much aware of the potential problems involved in asking speakers to give acceptability judgments using longish written questionnaires (see e.g. the discussion by Cornips and Poletto 2005). That is one of the reasons why we have varied the tasks in the questionnaires, breaking up the sequences of questions asking for judgments by inserting little narratives where the subjects are asked to insert particular forms, adding sections where the speakers are supposed to choose between two or more variants of a particular construction, etc. The instructions (read aloud to all the subjects) emphasize that we are mainly interested in variation in spoken language and that we want them to give us their own personal opinion.

Two additional points should be made about the questionnaires. First, we always include a context sentence to “set the stage” for the actual sentence to be evaluated, as illustrated in (4):

(4)

	já	?	nei	Athugasemdir
<i>Gummi var ekki heima í gær.</i>				
Mamma hans hélt að hann hafi farið í bió.				

The subject is asked to judge the second sentence by checking off one of the three possibilities. Second, in our last overview we plan to present at least some of the example sentences aurally too, i.e. play

prerecordings from a CD. The pilot study showed that this is useful in cases where intonation and stress make a difference.

We use the interviews to study selected constructions in more detail, and study the corpora for comparative purposes, as we shall see in section 4. But there is no way, of course, that we could do systematic comparison of subjects from different parts of the country and different age groups by relying on corpora only.

3. A regional variant in Icelandic syntax

In the pilot study we looked for variation in a particular kind of possessive NPs, since we had some reason to expect that regional variation was involved. This was tested further in the first part of our ScanDiaSyn survey. The relevant variation is illustrated in (5):

- (5) a. Þetta er **billinn** **hans** Jóns.
this is car-the his John-GEN
b. Þetta er **bill** Jóns.
this is car John-GEN
c. Þetta er **billinn** Jóns.
this is car-the John-GEN
'This is John's car.'

Here the a-variant is the default one for most speakers and it contains a definite noun (*billinn*) followed by the genitive form of a personal pronoun (or the proprial article, as it is often called, here *hans*) and a proper noun in the genitive form (*Jóns*). The proprial article can also be used with proper-noun-like nouns such as for example *mamma* 'mom' and *pabbi* 'dad'. The b-variant has the indefinite form of the noun *bill*, no proprial article before the genitive form of the name, and it is slightly formal. The c-variant, on the other hand, has the definite form of the noun *billinn* followed by the possessive genitive of the name. It had been noticed, although not studied systematically until now, that people in two towns in Northern Iceland, Ólafsfjörður and Siglufjörður, tended to use this last variant. Ólafsfjörður was included in the pilot study and the results were as expected. Most of the speakers there accepted the c-variant whereas speakers elsewhere rejected it and

only accepted the a- and b-variants. Typical differences between regions in the pilot study are shown in (6) (Akureyri is a town in Northern Iceland, some 60 km away from Ólafsfjörður, whereas Reyðarfjörður is a town in Eastern Iceland):

(6)		<i>yes</i>	<i>?</i>	<i>no</i>
	Ólafsfjörður	95%	0%	5%
	Akureyri	10%	33%	57%
	Reyðarfjörður	0%	22%	78%

As shown here, the overwhelming majority of the subjects in Ólafsfjörður accepted this regional variant whereas only 10% do so in neighbouring Akureyri and nobody in Reyðarfjörður.

In our first overview we included many more subjects and regions. The subjects were asked to judge the following sentence, which is another example of the regional variant:

(7)	Tölvan	mömmu	var tekin	en ekki	mín.
	computer-the	mom-GEN	was taken	but not	mine
	'Mom's computer was taken but not mine.'				

The results for example (7) confirm those of the pilot study but also indicate that this construction is not as restricted geographically as we thought. A sample of the acceptance rate is shown in (8):

(8)		<i>yes</i>	<i>?</i>	<i>no</i>
	Dalvík	10%	31%	59%
	Siglufjörður	80%	10%	10%
	Ísafjörður	7%	7%	86%
	Patreksfjörður	24%	7%	69%
	Selfoss	10%	3%	87%
	Kirkjubæjarklaustur	25%	20%	55%

The first two towns are geographically very close to Ólafsfjörður (not included in the overview) but only one of them (Siglufjörður) seems to share this regional variant with Ólafsfjörður (possibly because it has only been possible to drive from Dalvík to Ólafsfjörður for the past 40

years because of the high mountains separating the towns). The next two are located in the (formerly rather isolated) North-West corner of Iceland, quite far from Ólafsfjörður, and here this regional feature seems to pop up again to some extent in one of the towns (Patreksfjörður) but not the other. Finally, the last two locations are in Southern Iceland and there appear to be some traces of this feature in the second one (Kirkjubæjarklaustur), which used to be somewhat isolated in the past. These results indicate that this construction is more widespread geographically than previously thought.

Although our results are only preliminary so far, they are interesting for a number of reasons. First, although the core area of this regional feature turns out to be exactly where we expected it to be (Ólafsfjörður, Siglufjörður), this feature also shows up elsewhere. Second, in the core area there is no significant difference between the age groups tested, whereas this variant is somewhat more common among the younger speakers than the older ones when it is the minority variant (see Ottósdóttir 2006). Third, the systematicity of the results, together with the fact that they partially confirm a general belief about the core area of this regional variant, indicates that our methods, in particular the use of a written questionnaire asking for acceptability judgments, are reasonably reliable. In the next section we will see further confirmation of this.

4. Dative substitution, tested and attested

The term Dative Substitution refers to the fact that many speakers use dative case instead of the original accusative case on the subject of certain experiencer verbs. This variation is illustrated in (9):

- (9) **Mig/Mér** langar í nýjan bíl.
 me-ACC/DAT longs for new car
 ‘I want a new car.’

Dative Substitution (henceforth DS) has been fought against in Icelandic schools to some extent for decades now. As a result it is somewhat stigmatized, at least among a part of the population.

DS was first studied systematically by Svavarsdóttir (1982). Her subjects were 202 11 year old children from 11 schools around the country. In her study she used a particular fill-in method, which has been imitated in later studies (see e.g. Jónsson and Eyþórsson 2003, 2005), including our pilot study. The method is illustrated in (10):

- (10) Put one of the forms *hún/hana/henni/hennar* ‘she(Nom/Acc/Gen/Dat)’ in the blanks below as appropriate for the context:
Rakel er ellefu ára og á heima við sjóinn. ____ ætlar að fara í veiðiferð með pabba sínum. ____ hlakkar mikið til ...
‘Rachel is 11 years old and lives by the sea. ____ is going fishing with her dat. ____ is looking forward to ...’

In the pilot study, we included some examples involving this variation and we also had a narrative with fill-ins of the kind illustrated. In addition, some of the subjects were asked about this variation in the interviews. In general, there were no significant differences in the results obtained by these different methods, although some subjects indicated in the interviews that they knew that using the dative in this context was “bad” or “wrong”. Because of this, one might have expected that it would be difficult to get reliable results using written questionnaires. We now turn to this issue.

Most previous studies on DS involved children (see e.g. Svavarsdóttir 1982, Jónsson & Eyþórsson 2003, 2005). Jónsson & Eyþórsson did, however, include some adult subjects for comparative purposes in their study. They observed that the younger subjects (mostly 11 year olds tested by the fill-in method) were significantly more likely to use the DS variant than the adults tested (2003:15). Now there are at least two possible explanations for this:

- (11)a. The adults were more aware of what was being tested and hence consciously avoided the (somewhat stigmatized) dative.
b. Dative substitution is less common among the older speakers.

In our pilot study we found a similar correlation between age and DS as shown in (12) (the results are a combination from the judgment task and the fill-in task for the verbs *langa* ‘want’ and *vanta* ‘need’):

(12)		20–25	40–45	65–70
	Acc	72%	79%	94%
	Dat	28%	21%	6%

As shown here, the DS variant is the minority variant in all instances and only used/accepted by 6% of the oldest age group. If the reluctance to use/accept the DS variant was due to deliberate avoidance, one would probably have expected the middle generation to avoid it more consciously than the oldest one. This suggests that the correlation with age observed by Jónsson and Eypórrsson in their study (2003) reflects a real difference rather than conscious avoidance by the older generation.

An interesting confirmation of this conclusion comes from a preliminary study of two corpora of spoken Icelandic (interviews, narratives) from around 1970–1980. The first one is from Icelandic in Iceland, the second from Western Icelandic (mainly spoken in Canada, see e.g. Arnbjörnsdóttir 2006). Most of the subjects were born in the beginning of the 20th century and (13) shows their use of accusative vs. dative with the common DS verbs *langa* and *vanta* combined:

(13)		<i>Acc.</i>	<i>Dat.</i>	<i>Nom.</i>	
	Icelanders	96%	4%	0%	(N 46)
	Western Icelanders	64%	27%	9%	(N 80)

As shown here, the numbers for the DS variant in Iceland are very close to the figures we found for the oldest generation in our pilot study by using a written questionnaire, see (12). Interestingly, the change towards DS (and subsequently nominative substitution) has gone much further and faster in Western Icelandic and sociolinguistic explanations are probably not hard to find (e.g. less social pressure).

Finally, recall that our ScanDiaSyn project does not only involve written questionnaires and interviews but also the study of corpora of various kinds. As shown by Svavarsdóttir (2006), the frequency of the DS variant in the spoken language corpora that we have available is largely compatible with the results that we have obtained by our written questionnaires. Dative use with the most common DS verbs *langa* and *vanta* is shown in (14) and compared to the acceptance rate for the dative variant in the studies made by ÁS (= Svavarsdóttir 1982),

JGJ&ÞE (= Jónsson and Eyþórsson 2003, 2005), our pilot study, spontaneous speech data obtained by Finnur Friðriksson (FF, see e.g. Friðriksson 2004), and a spoken language corpus that we are in the process of compiling (SLC, see Thráinsson et al. 2005). All the figures represent 3pers.sg only, except the ones from Finnur Friðriksson:

(14)	<i>ÁS</i>	<i>JGJ&ÞE</i>	<i>Pilot</i>	<i>FF</i>	<i>SLC</i>	
	<i>langa</i>	32%	40%	18%	15%	25%
	<i>vanta</i>	35%	45%	20%	18%	0%

A couple of comments are in order here. First, there is nothing in these figures to suggest that the use of written questionnaires will give lower figures for DS than found in actual usage. The figures from “actual usage” are in fact lower in all instances. Second, the high percentage found by Svavarsdóttir on the one hand and Jónsson and Eyþórsson on the other is undoubtedly due to the fact that DS is more common among the youngest generation (they tested 11 year old children). The results from the pilot study mentioned above support this conclusion, as do the figures from the interviews with speakers from the oldest age group, see (13). The figures from the youngest group in the pilot study (the 20–25 year olds) are 28% for *langa* and 30% for *vanta*. Third, it is not clear why we do not have any examples of DS with the verb *vanta* in our spoken language corpus so far. That is one of the mysteries we still need to investigate.

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siggasig@hi.is

hoski@hi.is

