

# Notes on the Semantics of the Dative in Modern Icelandic

メタデータ	言語: eng 出版者: 公開日: 2017-10-03 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): 作成者: メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/2297/442">http://hdl.handle.net/2297/442</a>

# Notes on the Semantics of the Dative in Modern Icelandic\*

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## I. Introduction

It has been pointed out by the researchers in the relevant field that NPs in the overt dative case are much more semantically diverse than those in other cases in many languages (Blake 1994, Draye 1996, Heine 1997, Rudzka-Ostyn 1996, Van Hoescke 1996, etc.). It has also been noticed that languages vary as to the selection of the semantic information their dative NPs carry.

The purpose of the present paper is to explore the kinds of semantic information the dative in Modern Icelandic encodes. For this purpose, I assume the set of semantic roles and examine the possibility for each semantic role to be expressed in terms of a dative NP as well as a PP in Modern Icelandic<sup>1</sup>. It will be shown that the agent and locative arguments within the argument structure of a verb cannot be projected onto the dative NP in this language.

## II. Preliminaries

This paper assumes the inventory of semantic roles which have been hypothesized in the tradition of the generative grammar. In their postulation of the Lexical Mapping Theory, Bresnan and Kanerva (1989), for example, refer to the semantic roles *agent*, *benefactor* / *goal*, *experiencer*, *instrument*, *theme* and *locative*.<sup>2</sup> They also claim that these roles constitute a hierarchy according to their relative prominence. The left to right order of the roles presented above reflects this hierarchy. Section III of this paper examines whether or not each of the semantic roles in this hierarchy can be expressed by means of a dative NP in Modern Icelandic within simple sentences. At the same time, the same section discusses the possibility for each semantic role to be realized by a PP. As for the definitions of the semantic roles, I follow Bresnan and Kanerva (1989) for theme, and Blake (1994) for the other roles, as stated in (1).

## (1) Definition of Semantic Roles:

- agent*: The entity that performs an activity or brings about a change of state.
- benefactor*: The animate entity on whose behalf an activity is carried out.
- goal*: A sentient destination.
- experiencer*: The creature experiencing an emotion or perception.
- instrument*: The means by which an activity or change of state is carried out.
- theme*: The role whose state / location or change of state / location is predicated of by the verb. *Theme* includes *patient*.
- locative*: The position of an entity.

## III. Data and Discussions

1. *Agent*

Cross-linguistically, *agent* assumes the following two structural positions: the subject position in the active sentence, and the demoted oblique position in the passive sentence (Givón 1993). The *agent* in the latter position is best exemplified by the NP following the preposition *by* in the English passive, such as *by Mary* in *John was hit by Mary*. In English, passive agents are expressed by a PP. However, studies have reported the kind of languages whose passive agents are expressed by NPs which are case-marked in the dative. Latin is one such language, and in fact, passive agents in this language can be realized either by a dative NP or by a PP, as shown in (2) below.<sup>3</sup>

- (2) a. Caesari omnia erant agenda.  
 Caesar-DAT everything-NOM be done  
 'Everything had to be done by Caesar.' (Van Hoeske 1996)
- b. Scutum a Caesare militi detractum est.  
 the shield-NOM by Caesar-ABL soldier-DAT taken away be  
 'The shield was taken away from the soldier by Caesar.' (Van Hoeske 1996)

Taking into account the two kinds of syntactic expressions of a passive agent in Latin, we could expect the possibility for a language with dative case-inflection to express its passive agent in terms of a dative NP. However, Modern Icelandic, despite its rich case-inflection system, does not follow this pattern. Passive agents in Modern Icelandic can only be syntactically realized by a PP which is headed by the preposition *af*, and not by a dative NP, as shown in (3) and (4), respectively.

- (3) a. Hún var sannfærð af Höskuldi.  
 she-NOM was convinced by Hoskuldur-DAT  
 'She was convinced by Hoskuldur.' (Zaenen and Maling 1990)
- b. Skipinu var sökkt af skipstjóranum.  
 the ship-NOM was sunk by the captain-DAT  
 'The ship was sunk by the captain.' (Zaenen and Maling 1983)
- (4) a. \*Hún var sannfærð Höskuldi.  
 she-NOM was convinced Hoskuldur-DAT  
 'She was convinced by Hoskuldur.'
- b. \*Skipinu var sökkt skipstjóranum.  
 the ship-NOM was sunk the captain-DAT  
 'The ship was sunk by the captain.'

In Andrews (1982), there is an example which at first glance appears to be an instance of the dative subject carrying the agent role. This example is shown in (5).

- (5) Honum mælist vel í kirkjunni.  
 him-DAT spoke well in the church-DAT  
 'He spoke well in the church.' (Andrews 1982)

According to the English gloss reading, the underlined NP in (5) looks as though it was a good example of the dative subject. However, there are two observations which undermine this possibility.<sup>4</sup> First, the semantics denoted by the sentence in (5) is that 'he was found to speak well in the church,' or, in other words, 'people thought that he spoke well in the church.' Second, if the adverb *vel* 'well' does not occur in (5), the sentence is not acceptable, as illustrated in (6a). In such a case, the subject of the sentence must be in the nominative case, as in (6b).

- (6) a. \*Honum mælist í kirkjunni.  
 him-DAT spoke in the church-DAT  
 'He spoke in the church.'
- b. Hann mælist í kirkjunni.  
 he-NOM spoke in the church-DAT  
 'He spoke in the church.'

The two observations mentioned above suggest that there is no agency involved on the part of the dative subject in (5). Also, they suggest that when the verb *mælist* 'spoke' subcategorizes for the agent subject, the subject is required to be in the nominative case.

Andrews (1982) cites another example of a dative subject, which, just like (5), does not denote agency. Consider (7).

- (7) Stúlkunni svelgdist á súpunni.  
 the girl-DAT mis-swallowed on the soup-DAT  
 'The girl swallowed the soup wrong.' (Andrews 1982)

The verb *svelgdist* in (7) in fact denotes the event where the subject *choked on* something. Also, this verb can be replaced neither by *borðaði* 'ate' nor *drakk* 'drank,' for the sentence to mean 'the girl swallowed the soup (intentionally),' as illustrated in (8a). In such a case, as in (8b), the subject must be in the nominative case.

- (8) a. \*Stúlkunni borðaði/drakk súpuna.  
 the girl-DAT ate/drank the soup-ACC  
 'The girl swallowed the soup.'
- b. Stúlkan borðaði/drakk súpuna.  
 the girl-NOM ate/drank the soup-ACC  
 'The girl swallowed the soup.'

Based on the observations above, the dative subject in (7) should not be considered as an agent, given the definition of this role in (1). Hence, it is concluded that a Modern Icelandic agent cannot be syntactically expressed by a dative NP. It is always realized on the surface in terms of a PP.

## 2. Benefactor

Benefactor in Modern Icelandic has the possibility of occurring both as a dative NP and as a PP. In the latter case, either of the prepositions *fyrir* 'for' or *handa* 'for' heads the PP, as shown in the (b) examples of (9) and (10). The (a) sentences in (9) and (10) contain benefactor NPs in the dative case.

- (9) a. Hann byggði Möríkku hús.  
 he-NOM built Maríkka-DAT a house-ACC  
 'He built Maríkka a house.'
- b. Hann byggði hús fyrir Möríkku / handa Möríkku.  
 he-NOM built a house-ACC for Maríkka-ACC for Maríkka-DAT  
 'He built a house for Maríkka.'
- (10) a. Amma prjónaði barninu peysu.  
 grandmother-NOM knitted the child-DAT a sweater-ACC  
 'Grandmother knitted the child a sweater.'
- b. Amma prjónaði peysu  
 grandmother-NOM knitted a sweater-ACC  
fyrir barnið / handa barninu.  
 for the child-ACC for the child-DAT  
 'Grandmother knitted a sweater for the child.'

The alternation which is observed between the (a) sentences and the (b) sentences in (9) and (10) is of what has been traditionally called the *Dative Shift*, where the benefactor argument syntactically alternates between an indirect object NP and an oblique PP. However, unlike English, it seems that this alternation in Modern Icelandic is not always actualized because of some semantic constraint on the selection of the verb. For example, the grammatical judgement of the native speakers varies concerning the acceptability of the (a) sentence in (11), although the (b) sentence in (11), where benefactor is marked by a PP, is invariably judged acceptable.

- (11) a. ??Mamma bakaði börnunum kökur.  
 mommy-NOM baked the children-DAT cookies-ACC  
 'Mommy baked the children cookies.'

- b. Mamma bakaði kökur  
 mommy-NOM baked cookies-ACC  
fyrir börnin / handa börnunum.  
 for the children-ACC / for the children-DAT  
 'Mother baked cookies for the children.'

According to Joan Maling (p.c.), Modern Icelandic dative NPs carrying the benefactor role are possible with verbs which denote creation, while the acceptability of their occurrence within a sentence decreases with verbs denoting preparation of food. However, for my current purposes, I shall not pursue in this paper the explication of the exact factor which determines the acceptability of benefactor dative NP in the Modern Icelandic Dative Shift construction.

### 3. Goal

Goal arguments are easily found in Modern Icelandic in the dative NP form. They are also found in the PP form, headed by the preposition *til* 'to'. Observe the examples in (12) for the former instances of goal, and (13) for the latter. The citation ZM&T (1990) throughout this paper refers to Zaenen, Maling, and Thráinsson (1990).

- (12) a. Honum voru gefnir peningarnir.  
 him-DAT was given the money-NOM  
 'He was given the money.' (Andrews 1990)
- b. Ég sagði þér söguna.  
 I-NOM told you-DAT a story-ACC  
 'I told you a story.' (ZM&T 1990)
- c. Ég gaf konungi ambáttina sína.  
 I-NOM gave the king-DAT his maidservant-ACC  
 'I gave the king his maidservant.' (ZM&T 1990)
- (13) a. Bróðir hans fór til Tokio.  
 his brother-NOM went to Tokyo-GEN  
 'His brother went to Tokyo.'
- b. Ég vinn frá morgni til kvölds.  
 I-NOM work from morning-DAT till night-GEN  
 'I work from morning till night.'





- (16) a. Hún stakk Möríkku hnífi.  
 she-NOM stabbed Marikka-ACC a knife-DAT  
 'She stabbed Marikka with a knife.'
- b. Þeir gengu þurrum fótum yfir ána.  
 they-NOM crossed dry feet-DAT over the river-ACC  
 'They crossed over the river with dry feet (lit.)' (Kress 1982)

Modern Icelandic expresses instrument in the PP form as well. (17) stands as one of such examples.

- (17) Hún drap mann með hnífum hans.  
 she-NOM killed a man-ACC with his knife-DAT  
 'She killed a man with his knife.'

## 6. Theme

(18) contains four instances of the dative NPs which represent the theme role in Modern Icelandic.

- (18) a. Skipstjórinn sökk skipinu.  
 the captain-NOM sank the ship-DAT  
 'The captain sank the ship.' (Zaenen and Maling 1983)
- b. Ferðunum fækkaði um þriðjung.  
 the trips-DAT decreased by one-third  
 'The trips decreased by one-third.' (Zaenen and Maling 1983)
- c. Hún hjálpaði móður hans.<sup>5</sup>  
 she-NOM helped his mother-DAT  
 'She helped his mother.'
- d. Honum skrikaði fótur.  
 him-DAT slipped foot-NOM  
 'He slipped.'

While dative NPs which carry the theme role are abundant in Modern Icelandic, examples in which the this role is expressed by a PP were not found in the preparation of this paper.

## 7. *Locative*

Two dative NPs were found that might be considered as expressing the locative role in Modern Icelandic. Consider one of them which is given in (19).

- (19) Mér vantar hnif.  
 me-DAT lack a knife-ACC  
 'I lack a knife. / I don't have a knife.' (Yip, Maling and Jackendoff 1987)

At first glance, it appears that (19) only denotes the state which is effectively expressed by the English gloss reading. However, Yoshihiko Iura pointed out to me that the sentence in (19) is normally uttered in the sense 'I need / want a knife.' This fact suggests that the dative subject in (19) must not be understood as a locative, but as an experiencer, since this argument denotes the emotion of an individual.

If the speaker intends to express the situation where s/he does not have a knife only descriptively, there are two ways to do so in Modern Icelandic. One is to use the verb *skorta* 'to lack'. However, this verb requires an accusative subject, and the use of a dative subject is not permitted, as illustrated in (20).

- (20) a. Mig skortir hnif.  
 me-ACC lack a knife-ACC  
 'I lack a knife. / I don't have a knife.'
- b. \*Mér skortir hnif.  
 me-DAT lack a knife-ACC  
 'I lack a knife. / I don't have a knife.'

The other way to describe the same situation is through the use of the verbs which denote possession, i.e., *eiga* 'own,' *hafa* 'have' and *vera (með)* 'be (with)' embedded in a negative sentence.<sup>6</sup> Consider the following sentences for the usage of these verbs.

- (21) a. Ég a hundinn.  
 I-NOM own a house-ACC  
 'I own a house.'

- b. Ég hef godan tíma nuna.  
I-NOM have good time-ACC now  
'I am having a good time now.'
- c. Hann er með hatt.  
he-NOM is with a hat-ACC  
'He is with a hat. (lit.) / He has a hat. / He is wearing a hat.'

The possessors are expressed by the nominative NPs in the subject position of the above sentences. In addition, these NPs could be understood as carrying the locative role within the sentence, since they denote the location where the referents of the object NPs exist.<sup>7</sup>

It is important to notice that dative NPs cannot replace the subjects of (21a) and (21b), as illustrated in (22a) and (22b), respectively.

- (22) a. \*Mér a hundinn.  
me-DAT own a house-ACC  
'I own a house.'
- b. \*Mér hef godan tíma nuna.  
me-DAT have good time-ACC now  
'I am having a good time now.'

Moreover, as for the sentence which expresses a possessee-possessor relation utilizing *vera* (*með*) 'be (with)', the possessor argument, i.e., the locative argument, can be realized as an NP in the dative case, neither in the subject position, as in (23a), nor in the non-subject position, as in (23b).

- (23) a. \*Honum er með hatt.  
him-DAT is with a hat-ACC  
'He is with a hat. (lit.) / He has a hat. / He is wearing a hat.'
- b. \*Hnifurinn er henni  
the knife-NOM is her-DAT  
'The knife is at her (lit.).'

Hence, it should be concluded that the Modern Icelandic possessive constructions that employ the verbs *eiga*, *hafa* and *vera* do not choose dative NPs as their locative subjects.

(24) contains another example which appears at first glance a locative instance of dative

## NPs in Modern Icelandic.

- (24) Hún reið hestinum.  
 she-NOM rode the horse-DAT  
 'She rode the horse.'

The sentence in (24) denotes the event where the referent of the subject *hún* 'she' not only got on a horse, but also exerted control over the horse. Thus, this sentence expresses a series of activities done by a female individual, such as getting on a horse, running the horse, whipping the horse, and stopping the horse. However, the important part of the semantics of the verb *reið* 'rode' is on the control activities over a horse, which were performed by the referent of the subject NP. According to my informants, in the interpretation of (24), getting on a horse is an inevitable activity for the realization of the control activities over the horse.

It follows then that the subject of (24) is semantically agent, since so much agency is read in its semantics. It also follows that the dative object *hestinum* 'the horse' is a theme (patient), in that it is controlled over by the agent subject. Therefore, the dative NP in (24) is not a locative, but a theme.

Notice that the same verb (*reið* 'rode') has the usage for expressing only the event in which someone got on a horse. This usage is available when the dative object in (24) is replaced by a PP as in (25).

- (25) Hún reið á hestinum.  
 she-NOM rode on the horse-DAT  
 'She rode on the horse.'

(26) instantiates the locative role that is syntactically realized in the PP form. In fact, locative PPs are abundant in Modern Icelandic. Three of them are given in (26) for reference.

- (26) a. Hún steig á bak hestinum.  
 she-NOM got on the horse's back-ACC  
 'She got on the back of the horse.'

(Guðfinnsson 1990)

- b. Hún býr í sveitinni.  
 she-NOM live in the country-DAT  
 'She lives in the country.'
- c. Marikka setti bókina á borðið.  
 Marikka-NOM put the book-ACC on the desk-ACC  
 'Marikka put the book on the desk.'

The underlined locative PPs in (26) cannot be replaced by corresponding dative NPs.

This point is illustrated in (27).

- (27) a. \*Hún steig bak hesti.  
 she-NOM got the horse's back-DAT  
 'She got on the back of the horse.'
- b. \*Hún býr sveitinni.  
 she-NOM lives the country-DAT  
 'She lives in the country.'
- c. \*Marikka setti bókina borðið.  
 Marikka-NOM put the book-ACC the desk-DAT  
 'Marikka put the book on the desk.'

Based on the above observations on the syntactic realization of the locative role in Modern Icelandic, this section concludes that the locative role in the argument structure of a verb in this language is projected onto a PP, but not onto a dative NP.<sup>8</sup>

#### IV. Conclusion

The observations presented in the preceding section are summarized in the table in (28). The symbol '✓' designates that it is possible for a dative NP or a PP to contain the semantic information denoted by a given semantic role, while '—' designates the opposite. The left to right order of the semantic roles on the table reflects Bresnan and Kanerva's (1989) hierarchy of semantic roles.

(28)

	<i>agent</i>	<i>benefactor / goal</i>	<i>experiencer</i>	<i>instrument</i>	<i>theme</i>	<i>locative</i>
dativeNP	—	✓ / ✓	✓	✓	✓	—
PP	✓	✓ / ✓	✓	✓	—	✓

The table in (28) shows that the benefactor, goal, experiencer, instrument and theme roles can be syntactically realized by the Modern Icelandic dative case, while the agent and locative roles cannot. It is interesting to note that the agent and locative roles respectively occupy the highest and the lowest positions on Bresnan and Kanerva's hierarchy of semantic roles. The correlation between the hierarchy and the dative realization of the roles might possibly be of some significance. However, the possibility surely depends on the data from similar studies in many languages to what was presented in this paper. I hope that such studies will continue both synchronically and diachronically, since their accumulation could lead to the postulation of a new linguistic typology: the typology of the dative in natural languages.

#### NOTES:

\* The author would like to express her sincere gratitude to the following individuals: Yasutaka Kaneko, Yoshihiko Iura, Koji Irie, Höskuldur Thráinsson and Joan Maling. She also would like to thank Peter Edwards for his kind help with the stylistic improvements of this paper.

1. Modern Icelandic exhibits the following four cases: nominative, accusative, dative and genitive. Unlike German and many other Germanic languages, even proper nouns inflect according to the case. Thus, for example, the feminine proper noun *Marikka* inflects into *Marikka* for the nominative case, and into *Mörriku* for accusative, dative and genitive cases. Also, the case-inflection for the masculine proper noun *Egil* gives *Egill*, *Egil*, *Agli* and *Egils*, as nominative, accusative, dative and genitive forms respectively. In addition, Modern Icelandic is typologically classified as having the canonical word order of SVO.

2. The Lexical Mapping Theory contains principles governing the projection between the argument structure of a predicate and its lexical form. See Alsina (1992) and Bresnan and Kanerva (1989), among others.
3. In (2) and throughout this paper, the relevant part of the example sentences as well as its English gloss readings are underlined. Moreover, the abbreviations used in the English gloss for the examples in this paper are interpreted as follows: NOM(inative), ACC(usative), DAT(ive), GEN(itive), ABL(ative) and PASS(ive).
4. I owe these observations to Höskuldur Thráinsson.
5. The Japanese sentence which corresponds to (18c) is shown in (i), where the object of the verb is marked by the accusative case.

(i) Kanojo-ga      kare-no      okaasan-o      tesudatta.  
 she-NOM          he-GEN          mother-ACC      helped  
 'She helped his mother.'

However, it is interesting that older generations find this sentence unacceptable. They consider that the object of the verb should be case-marked by the dative marker *-ni*, as shown below.

(ii) Kanojo-ga      kare-no      okaasan-ni      tesudatta.  
 she-NOM          he-GEN          mother-DAT      helped  
 'She helped his mother.'

6. *Eiga* 'own,' *hafa* 'have' and *vera* 'be' inflect triggered by the person and number of the subject of the sentence as summarized in the following table.

person	<i>singular</i>			<i>plural</i>		
	1	2	3	1	2	3
<i>eiga</i>	<i>á</i>	<i>átt</i>	<i>á</i>	<i>eigum</i>	<i>eigið</i>	<i>eiga</i>
<i>hafa</i>	<i>hef</i>	<i>hefur</i>	<i>hefur</i>	<i>höfum</i>	<i>hafið</i>	<i>hafa</i>
<i>vera</i>	<i>er</i>	<i>ert</i>	<i>er</i>	<i>erum</i>	<i>eruð</i>	<i>eru</i>

7. Mirto (1991) argues that *essere* 'be' and *avere* 'have' in Italian do not serve as the main predicates of the sentences but are auxiliary verbs which carry information on tense and aspect within the sentence. Thus, it might be possible that in Modern Icelandic *hafa* 'have' and *vera* (*með*) 'be (with)' are auxiliary verbs.

Moreover, according to Yoshihiko Iura (p.c.), *hafa* is usually used with the possessed NP (the object NP) which denotes the possessor's interest, idea and experience. Hence, the

following example, whose possessed NP is not of these kinds, is not acceptable.

??Ég        hef        hundinn.  
 I-NOM    have    a house-ACC  
 'I have a house.'

Then, the subject of *hafa* might be identified as an experiencer.

However, none of the above points as to the semantic identification of the subject of *hafa* and *vera* affects the arguments in the current section.

8. For more discussions on the locative as well as an analysis of the possessive dative in Modern Icelandic, see Saiki and Kaneko (1999).

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