

# Genitives and other Cases in Old Norse-Icelandic\*

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## 1 Diachronic Predictions

One of the questions raised when reading Ellen Hellebostad Toft's dissertation relates to whether, and what kind of, diachronic predictions may be derived from her synchronic analyses of the genitive in Old Norse-Icelandic. I quote the dissertation (p. 349):

There may have been a clear conceptual link [between the adnominal and the adverbial GEN] at an earlier historical stage that has been gradually bleached and possibly lost.

It is of course true that if the type frequency of the genitive object construction had been higher in Old Norse-Icelandic, it would have been more likely that such a conceptual link existed and it might also have been easier to establish the nature of the link. However, the following prediction can be derived from the analysis:

- (1) The hypothesized conceptual link between adnominal and adverbial genitive constructions at an earlier stage of the language under investigation should be found in earlier layers of Indo-European.

Now, as stated above, if such a link existed, one should be able to find traces of it in earlier layers of the Indo-European languages. Given that Sanskrit

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\* I thank Eystein Dahl for giving me access to his Vedic database on object case marking

represents an earlier layer of Indo-European, an investigation of the Nom-Gen construction in Sanskrit should reveal the existence and nature of the conceptual link between the adnominal and the adverbial genitive, which Toft hypothesizes existed.

The Rīgveda contains approximately 150,000–170,000 words of running text, and 129 transitive verbs have been identified (Dahl 2009). Of these 129, only 17 occur with a genitive object:

- (2) *ad-* ‘eat’, *aś* ‘consume’, *īś* ‘control’, *ūh* ‘observe’, *kan-/kā* ‘be satisfied with’, *kam* ‘long for’, *kar-*<sup>(2)</sup> ‘praise’, *kṣay-*<sup>(2)</sup> ‘have power over’, *cet-* ‘behold, see’, *jambh-* ‘bite’, *joṣ* ‘be pleased with’, *tarp-* ‘enjoy’, *pā-*<sup>(1)</sup> ‘drink’, *mad-* ‘take pleasure in’, *man-* ‘comprehend’, *rāj* ‘rule over’, *vay<sup>i</sup>* ‘wish’, *ved-* ‘find, learn, know’, *śrav-* ‘hear, listen to’

These can be divided into the following lexical semantic verb classes (17 types):

- (3) **Emotion:** *kan-/kā* ‘be satisfied with’, *kam* ‘long for’, *joṣ* ‘be pleased with’, *tarp-* ‘enjoy’, *mad-* ‘take pleasure in’, *vay<sup>i</sup>* ‘wish’  
**Cognition:** *ūh* ‘observe’, *cet-* ‘behold, see’, *man-* ‘comprehend’, *ved-* ‘find, learn, know’, *śrav-* ‘hear, listen to’  
**Consumption:** *ad-* ‘eat’, *aś* ‘consume’, *pā-*<sup>(1)</sup> ‘drink’, *jambh-* ‘bite’  
**Authority/Control:** *īś* ‘control’, *kṣay-*<sup>(2)</sup> ‘have power over’, *man-rāj* ‘rule over’  
**Praising:** *kar-*<sup>(2)</sup> ‘praise’

A comparison with an Old Norse-Icelandic corpus, compiled by the author, yields the following lexical semantic verb classes (24 types) (Barðdal 2008: 75–76):

- (4) **Asking and wishing:** *biðjast (hjálpar)* ‘ask for help’, *leita (aðstoðar)* ‘ask (for help)’, *spyrja (spurninga)* ‘ask (questions)’, *óska* ‘wish’  
**Cognition:** *gæta* ‘take into consideration’, *vera fullviss* ‘be sure’, *verða áskynja* ‘realize’, *verða vísari* ‘find out’, *verða vart* ‘be aware of’  
**Emotion:** *njóta* ‘enjoy’, *sakna* ‘miss’, *skammast (sín)* ‘be ashamed (of oneself)’, *vanta* ‘expect’, *þurfa* ‘need’  
**Social influence:** *mega (sín)* ‘be influential’, *njóta (hylli)* ‘be popular’

**Miscellaneous verbs:** *afla* ‘obtain’, *bíða* ‘await’, *ganga dultir* ‘hide’, *hefst* (*handa*) ‘begin’, *krefft* ‘demand’, *nema* (*staðar*) ‘stop’ *vefja* (*máls*) ‘mention’, *vitja* ‘visit’

While verbs of consumption are generally Nom-Acc verbs in Old Norse-Icelandic, and verbs of authority/control are generally Nom-Dat verbs, it is clear that the two languages share two subconstructions, namely verbs of cognition and verbs of emotion.

However, given the low type frequency of the Nom-Gen pattern in Vedic Sanskrit and given its semantic range, it seems highly unlikely that there existed a conceptual link between the adnominal and the adverbial genitive constructions in any prehistoric period of Old Norse-Icelandic. Such a period can at least not be assumed to have existed since the documentation of Indo-European. Therefore, the conceptual link requirement must either be abandoned or it must be assumed to have existed in Proto-Indo-European and gotten lost before the individual language families branched off. However, such a link can of course not be posited for Proto-Indo-European if there is no evidence in the daughter languages to support it.

## 2 Nominal vs. Verbal Constructions

The lack of historical evidence for a conceptual link between the adnominal and the adverbial genitive raises a related question, namely whether categories including verbal and nominal heads really are equivalent, as implied by the comparison of nominal constructions in Chapers 5–7 and verbal constructions in Chapter 8.

One difference between the two types of constructions is that adnominal constructions have a predefined structure, i.e. [GEN [N]] or [[N] GEN], while adverbial constructions have different structure depending on the semantics of the verb, i.e. [GEN-V], [GEN-V-N], [N-V-GEN], [N-V-N-GEN]. Another difference lies in the fact that adnominal constructions are completely schematic, while verbal constructions are dependent on their verbs, hence they are not completely schematic, but the “head” is lexically filled with the verb. This in turn means that one can say that the adnominal genitive is “governed” by the structure, while adverbial genitives are “governed” by lexical heads, i.e. by specific verbs. Or, in the classical generative terminology the adnominal construction is fully structural, while the adverbial construction is lexical (see otherwise Barðdal 2011a for a discussion and criticism of this dichotomy).

Another question that arises is to which degree the results on the similarities and differences between adnominal and adverbial genitives carry over to other languages. For instance, do the two types of constructions found in Old Norse-Icelandic behave similarly in other languages? Are the semantic properties of the adnominal genitive, for instance, similar to what we find in other languages, while the semantic properties of the adverbial genitive are different? I am inclined to answer these questions in the positive, in that the adnominal construction in Old Norse-Icelandic is presumably similar to adnominal genitive constructions in other unrelated languages, while the adverbial construction might well be very different in unrelated languages, although of course, this remains to be investigated. However, the approach of the dissertation takes it for granted that the two constructions are compatible, presumably because of the similarity in form, namely that both are *genitive* (see next section).

Toft concludes that it is not possible to arrive at a generalized semantic schema for adnominal and adverbial constructions, amongst other things because the adverbial genitive is only found with a limited set of verbs (p. 349). But what if the adverbial genitive had behaved more like, say, the adverbial accusative? Would it then have been possible to arrive at a joint schematic meaning? It is not clear from the discussion in the dissertation whether this enterprise is impossible because of the low type frequency of the adverbial genitive, because the adverbial genitive comes with the wrong verb classes, or because the adverbial genitive and the adnominal genitive are different in nature. These are some of the issues that Toft could have used more space developing and elaborating on in a more detailed fashion.

Yet another, although a related, question involves the psychological reality of the analysis, i.e. of a generalized semantic schema which would include both the adnominal and the adverbial construction. Would an abstract schematic meaning, generalizable across both adnominal and adverbial constructions, if obtainable, be psychologically real in speakers' minds? I am far from convinced that a unified category 'genitive' exists in speakers' minds irrespective of constructions. And it seems to me that such an assumption would, in the end, result in the analysis that all constructions of a language are ultimately semantically related at some abstract schematic level. I sincerely doubt that such an analysis would be to Toft's liking.

### 3 Similarity in Form and Meaning

Toft makes the following claim (p. 348): “In cognitive linguistic approaches similarities of form are strongly argued to reflect similarities in meaning.” It is certainly true that this claim is endorsed within cognitive linguistics, also known as the “form–meaning isomorphism principle” (Bolinger 1977, Haiman 1985, Hiraga 1994, Krug 2001, Marzo 2008). However, I believe that this is a major myth within cognitive linguistics, as it assumes a one-to-one mapping between meaning and form, long debunked in morphology. To give a few textbook counterexamples: English has the same form for the genitive *-s* and the plural *-s*, yet the meaning is not the same. Also, English has different plural morphs, *-s*, *-en*, *-ø*, which all denote the same meaning. Here this difference in form does not reflect a difference in meaning. Also, if similarity in form reflects similarity in meaning, this would exclude both polysemy and homophony from language, or at least homophony, and there would never be any competing constructions in diachrony, as far as I can gather.

Instead of arguing against this myth, Toft suggests that there must have been a link between the adnominal and the adverbial genitive at an earlier stage in the history of Old Norse-Icelandic, as already discussed above. Here I would like to offer an advice to Toft, namely that one should not be afraid of questioning some of the “truths” within one’s own paradigm, because if nobody criticizes them, frameworks will not evolve, and it is a well-known fact that paradigms tend to evolve from within.

### 4 Compatibility of Cognitive Grammar and Construction Grammar

As both Cognitive Grammar (CG) and cognitive Construction Grammar (CxG) seem to be able to handle the data discussed in this dissertation, it is unclear to me why Toft chooses to use both. First of all, this seems to only add to the number of figures in the text, and second, CG and cognitive CxG are not really compatible in all respects.

For instance, Radical Construction Grammar (RCG) assumes that the parts are derivatives of the whole, while vanilla Construction Grammar assumes both that the construction as a whole is a primitive and that the parts are primitives. Therefore, in RCG the parts do not exist outside of the whole. Compare the following quote from Croft (2001: 55–56)

... no schematic syntactic category is ever an independent unit of grammatical representation in Radical Construction Grammar. Every schematic category is a part of a construction, which defines that category. Only words, being completely substantive, may be independent units of grammatical representation in Radical Construction Grammar.

Therefore, on a RCG approach, the adnominal and the adverbial genitives are two different constructions, even though they share case marking, and they should therefore not be lumped together (cf. Barðdal 2003). This further means that one should not draw conclusions about one on the basis of the other. It is unclear from the argumentation in the dissertation whether Toft takes a CG grammar stand on this issue or whether she takes a RCG stand on this, but perhaps views this particular case as being an exception somehow.

Moreover, this criticism not only applies to the comparison of adnominal and the adverbial genitives, but also to the comparison within the category of adverbial genitives, where different constructions are compared, i.e. transitive (Nom-Gen, Dat-Gen), ditransitive (Nom-Acc-Gen, Nom-Dat-Gen) and intransitive (Gen-only):

- (5) a. *Þá leitaði hann ráða* Transitive Nom-Gen  
 then sought he.NOM advice.GEN  
 ‘Then he asked for advice’ (p. 288)
- b. *Þá batnar því sóttu* Transitive Dat-Gen  
 then recover it.DAT illness.GEN  
 ‘Then it will recover from its illness’ (p. 288)
- c. *Þau löttu hann þeirar ferðar* Ditransitive Nom-Acc-Gen  
 they.NOM dissuaded him.ACC this.GEN trip.GEN  
 ‘They dissuaded him from this trip’ (p. 288)
- d. ... *biður þú þér eigi lækningar?* Ditransitive Nom-Dat-Gen  
 ask you.NOM yourself.DAT not treatment.GEN  
 ‘... you don’t ask for treatment for yourself?’ (p. 288)
- e. *Hér getr þess, at ...* Intransitive Gen-only  
 here mentions that.GEN that  
 ‘Here it is mentioned, that ...’ (p. 322)

It seems clear that the genitive “parts” here are not all parts of the same “whole.” The ultimate consequence of a RCG analysis is the view that we speak using constructions, which means that no lexical or grammatical item ever occurs outside of a construction, and hence that the construction as a whole must be a part of the analytic component. To give an example, the meaning of the Norwegian lexical item *kome* ‘come’ varies depending on which construction it is used in:

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|--|-----------|
| (6) a. <i>Han kjem.</i><br>he comes<br>‘He’s arriving.’                  | Main Verb |
| b. <i>Han kjem til å dø ...</i><br>he comes to to die<br>‘He’ll die ...’ | Auxiliary |

In (6a) *kome* means ‘come’, while in (6b) it functions as a modal or future auxiliary meaning ‘will’. This example illustrates very clearly how the meaning of the parts is dependent on which whole the parts occur in. Another example from Icelandic, involving case is the following:

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|--|--------------------------|
| (7) a. <i>Hann leiddi barnið.</i><br>he.NOM lead child-the.ACC<br>‘He took the child by the hand.’       | Nom-V-Acc                |
| b. <i>Honum leiddist barnið.</i><br>he.DAT lead- <i>st</i> child-the.NOM<br>‘He was bored by the child.’ | Dat-V <sub>st</sub> -Nom |

These examples show the verbal stem *leiða* has different meanings depending on which syntactic construction it instantiates. In (7a) it means ‘take by the hand’, while in (7b) it means ‘be bored’. Consider also the following examples, where different verbs instantiate the same construction, i.e. the Dative Subject Construction, evoking the question of what the meaning of the dative is here:

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| (8) a. <i>Honum líkaði hákarlinn vel.</i><br>he.DAT liked shark-the.NOM well<br>‘He liked the rotten shark.’ |  |
|--|--|

- b. *Honum hugnaðist hákarlinn.*  
he.DAT minded shark-the.NOM  
'He liked the rotten shark.'
- c. *Honum finnst hákarl góður.*  
he.DAT finds shark.NOM good  
'He likes rotten shark.'
- d. *Honum þykir hákarl góður.*  
he.DAT finds shark.NOM good  
'He likes rotten shark.'
- e. *Honum þóknaðist hákarlinn.*  
he.DAT pleased shark-the.NOM  
'He liked the rotten shark.'
- f. *Honum geðjaðist að hákarlinum.*  
he.DAT liked at shark-the.DAT  
'He liked the rotten shark.'

Observe that all the predicates in (8) mean 'like' and they all occur with a dative subject. One may analyze the dative as an Experiencer, although it is unclear whether the Experiencer meaning comes from the verb, the construction or the dative itself. It is, of course, possible to argue that here the meaning of the verb, the construction and the dative overlap. In that case, how should we analyze the following examples?

- (9) a. *Honum skrikaði fótur*  
he.DAT lose foot.NOM  
'He slipped.'
- b. *Honum seinkaði.*  
he.DAT got-delayed  
'He was delayed.'
- c. *Honum varð vísa á munni.*  
he.DAT became poem.NOM on mouth  
'He happened to speak out a poem.'



In the examples in (9), there is no experiencer meaning involved, yet all these examples are instances of the Dative Subject Construction. That is, they all share the form of the subject, namely the dative.

These are some of the analytical problems that arise, taken a Radical Construction Grammar approach. One also becomes acutely aware of the fact that nothing exists outside of constructions, which hopefully enhances our analytical abilities and tools and contributes to a more rigorous analysis, better representing the psycholinguistic reality of speakers. In contrast, working towards a generalized meaning abstracts away from all this.

One solution to the problems that I have outlined above is to work with a model of language in terms of constructions where lexical items and grammatical categories are treated as inseparable parts of these constructions. This also entails that lexicon–grammar interactions can be modeled in terms of lexicality–schematicity hierarchies, consisting of verb-specific constructions, verb-class-specific constructions, event-specific constructions, etc. (cf. Croft 2003, Barðdal 2006, 2008, 2011b, Barðdal, Kristoffersen & Sveen 2011). It is clear from the dissertation that Toft is in favor of employing such lexicality–schematicity hierarchies, as she introduces them into her taxonomic networks, for instance in Figure 5 on p. 346. The only problem that I have with Figure 5 is that at the same time that it attempts to be a lexicality–schematicity hierarchy, it is also a taxonomic network of the type used in CG, including different adverbial constructions with genitives, like the transitive, intransitive, ditransitive and the impersonal construction. As such, one can of course say that Toft is consistent in her effort to combine CG and RCG, although, as argued above, this is one of the prominent differences between these two variants of construction grammar.

## 5 Prototypical Transitivity and Frequency

Toft (p. 190) adheres to the claims of Waugh et al. (2006) that “a semantic prototype should be present in 2/3 of the tokens”. This claim stands in a stark contrast to mainstream ideas about prototypicality, here cited from Næss (2007: 27)

... a crucial property of prototype categories is that they are defined in maximal opposition to contrasting categories within the same domain. Thus it is an essential property of a prototype definition of a transitive clause that it singles out the properties which distinguish such clauses from the main contrasting category, namely intransitive clauses.

It is pointed out in the dissertation that the various adverbial genitive constructions are not prototypical examples of argument structure constructions conveying transitive events, as they often denote events which entail non-affected objects (p. 318–319). As such the adverbial genitive constructions are instances of non-prototypical transitive constructions.

I would like to raise my doubts about Waugh et al.’s claim that two thirds of the tokens must represent the semantic prototype. Consider, for instance, Tables 1 and 2, which show the number of tokens and types found in the author’s Old Norse-Icelandic corpus. Table 2 gives the number of two-place predicates, illustrating that the Nom-Acc construction, which should represent the prototypical transitive construction, does not consist of 66% of the types, but only 53%.

Old Norse-Icelandic tokens		
	N	%
Nom	71	6.2
Acc	<b>776</b>	67.2
Dat	<b>252</b>	21.8
Gen	<b>56</b>	4.8
Total	1,155	100%

Table 1 (Barðdal 2001: 180)

Old Norse-Icelandic types		
	N	%
Dat-Nom	33	10.0
Nom-Acc	<b>173</b>	53.1
Nom-Dat	<b>105</b>	31.6
Nom-Gen	<b>21</b>	6.3
Total	332	100%

Table 2 (Barðdal 2008: 155)

Transitivity in Old Norse-Icelandic (in terms of thematic roles)			
	Thematic Roles	N	%
Nom objects	<b>Content</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>97.14</b>
	Theme	1	
	Cause	1	
Acc objects	<b>Content</b>	<b>473</b>	<b>61.67</b>
	Theme	291	
	Ben	3	
Dat objects	<b>Content</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>41.73</b>
	Ben	66	
	Theme	52	
	Instrument	13	
	Loc	10	
Gen objects	<b>Content</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>90.38</b>
	Theme	5	

Table 3 (Barðdal 2001: 187–188)

Table 3 shows the distribution of thematic roles across the four object constructions in the Old Norse-Icelandic material. The role here referred to as *Content* corresponds to Toft’s “unaffected” object. As evident from Table 3, the accusative object of canonical transitive constructions in Old Norse-Icelandic texts only involves “prototypical transitive actions” and “an affected object” in 38.33% of the cases, at best. According to the claim that

a semantic prototype must be instantiated by at least two thirds of the tokens, a prototypical transitive event can simply not be defined in terms of “an affected object”, unless of course the two thirds requirement be dropped.

It is true that the genitive object construction is far from the transitive prototype in that 91% of the tokens are non-affected, but 62% of the Nom-Acc tokens are, in fact, also non-affected. Therefore, taking Waugh et al.’s claims to their logical conclusion, the majority of accusative objects are not prototypical objects either.

## 6 Conclusion

Despite the matters that I have discussed above, there are several positive issues that remain to be mentioned. First of all, this dissertation is exceptionally well written and well structured, and the language of the dissertation is excellent. Toft shows an independent ability to gather and analyze data, and she presents rigorous and well-thought-through analysis. She describes her data and her method in a clear and concise manner, allowing for a reproduction of the investigation in order to verify the results. The dissertation bears witness of a good knowledge of the literature and a good knowledge of the theoretical framework. In short it is an intellectual achievement of a high standard.

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