

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Introduction to Morphological Case in Icelandic

Icelandic, being a Germanic language, has great similarities to German as regards the inflectional system. Verbs inflect for person, number, tense and mood. Nouns belong to one of three gender classes and inflect for number and case. Adjectives inflect for gender, number and case, and so do the suffixed definite article, demonstratives, indefinite pronouns, possessives, personal pronouns, reflexives, ordinals and the first four cardinals. The morphological case system has stayed intact from Old Icelandic to Modern Icelandic, with only a few syncretisms of forms, which has not affected the system as a whole (see Ottósson 1987, 1990). Svavarsdóttir, for instance, in her study on the inflectional system (1993), identifies 27 classes of noun inflection in Modern Icelandic.

Icelandic has a case system with four case forms: nominative, accusative, dative and genitive (see elementary books on Icelandic, such as Einarsson 1949 in English, Kress 1982 in German, Guðmundsson 1922 in Danish, Jónsson 1984 in Norwegian, and Barðdal, Jörgensen, Larsen and Martinussen 1997 in Swedish). The morphological paradigm can be illustrated as in the following examples of *a*-stems (masc. and neut.) and *i*-stems (fem.):

*Table 1.1:* The indefinite paradigm.

Indef.	masc.	fem.	neut.
nom.sg.	hestur	bók	barn
acc.	hest	bók	barn
dat.	hesti	bók	barni
gen.	hests	bókar	barns
nom.pl.	hestar	bækur	börn
acc.	hesta	bækur	börn
dat.	hestum	bókum	börnum
gen.	hesta	bóka	barna

*Table 1.2:* The definite paradigm.

Def.	masc.	fem.	neut.
nom.sg.	hesturinn	bókin	barnið
acc.	hestinn	bókina	barnið
dat.	hestinum	bókinn	barninu
gen.	hestsins	bókarinnar	barnsins

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nom.pl.	hestarnir	bækurnar	börnin
acc.	hestana	bækurnar	börnin
dat.	hestunum	bókunum	börnunum
gen.	hestanna	bókanna	barnanna

*Table 1.1* illustrates the words, *hestur* 'horse', *bók* 'book' and *barn* 'child', in the indefinite form, and *Table 1.2* gives the same words but with the suffixed definite article.

As is evident from *Tables 1.1* and *1.2*, case has a morphological representation in Icelandic. It is manifested morphologically through endings (or the lack thereof), and occasionally in stem variation, for example in the pronoun paradigm, as is generally the case for the Indo-European languages (see Howe 1996). When two cases are identical in form, for instance the nominative and accusative of *barn* 'child' above, the noun can be replaced by another noun which does not have identical forms, if the need arises to identify the relevant case form.

As mentioned above, adjectives inflect for gender, number and case, meaning that there is case agreement within the noun phrase in Icelandic. There is also double case inflection in definite nouns in Icelandic, first in the stem itself and secondly in the suffixed definite article:

- (1)    a. gamli hesturinn                      b. gamla hestinn  
           old.nom horse.nom-the.nom      old.acc horse.acc-the.acc
- c. gamla hestinum                      d. gamla hestsins  
           old.dat horse.dat-the.dat        old.gen horse.gen-the.gen

However, since case agreement is of no importance in this thesis I will only gloss the head noun for case in the remainder of this work.

A peculiarity of Icelandic is that it exhibits oblique subjects, i.e. syntactic subjects in accusative, dative and genitive, as well as nominative objects (Andrews 1976, Thráinsson 1979, Bernóðsson 1982, Zaenen, Maling and Thráinsson 1985, Sigurðsson 1989 and subsequent work, Jónsson 1996, 1997-98, Barðdal 1999a, 2001a):

- (2)    a.    **Þú** hefur séð Svein.  
           you.nom have seen Sveinn.acc  
           'You have seen Sveinn.'
- b.    **Þig** hefur dreymt Svein.  
           you.acc has dreamt Sveinn.acc  
           'You have dreamt of Sveinn.'

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- c. **Þér** hefur líkað **maturinn**?  
you.dat has pleased food-the.nom  
'Did you like the food?'
- d. **Þess** gat í skrifum hans.  
it.gen appeared in writings his  
'It was obvious from his writings.'

I will discuss the criteria for defining subjects and objects in section 3.2.1 below. However, it is worth mentioning that the finite verb in Icelandic does not necessarily agree with the syntactic subject in number and person. When the subject is in the nominative case the finite verb agrees with it, as in (3a) below:

- (3) a. **Ég hef** séð Svein.  
I.nom have.1p.sg seen Sveinn.acc
- b. Mig **hefur** dreymt Svein.  
I.acc has.3p.sg dreamt Svein.acc

However, when the subject is in accusative, dative or genitive case the verb usually turns up in the default 3p.sg. form, as in (3b) above. This is true unless the syntactic object is in the nominative, then the verb can optionally agree with the nominative object. In (4a) the finite verb is in the default 3p.sg. form, as is the case when the subject is oblique. In (4b), though, the finite verb is in 3p.pl., thus agreeing with the nominative object which is 3p.pl.

- (4) a. **Mér hefur** alltaf fundist kartöflur góðar.  
I.dat has.3p.sg always found potatoes.nom good.nom  
'I've always liked potatoes.'
- b. **Mér hafa** alltaf fundist kartöflur góðar.  
I.dat have.3p.pl. always found potatoes.nom good.nom  
'I've always liked potatoes.'

It thus seems like a correct description of Icelandic to say that Icelandic does not have subject-verb agreement but rather nominative-verb agreement (see Sigurðsson 1990-91). Moreover, these data also illustrate that morphological case is not a morpho-syntactic phenomenon in Icelandic, since case does not directly reflect syntactic functions. These data also show that Icelandic can be regarded as being neither a head nor a dependent marking language.

After these preliminaries on morphological case in Icelandic I now proceed to theories of case.

## 1.2 Theories of Case

Most modern linguistic theories or theory systems try to account for case, the usage of cases and case systems in the languages of the world. These theoretical systems are not necessarily general theories of case but rather subtheories in larger systems. To mention a few, I may point out the theories of Chomsky ((1981)1993), Fillmore (1968), Dik (1978) and Starosta (1988).

Chomsky has assumed that morphological case is solely a syntactic device in the world's languages. The term case has also been used to describe the semantic representations of syntactic relations (Fillmore's deep case). Dik argues that morphological case can be both a syntactic phenomenon and a semantic phenomenon. His ideas regarding syntactic and semantic cases are based upon a typological distinction between active, ergative and accusative languages. In his system, active languages have semantic cases and accusative languages have syntactic cases. Starosta also assumes that the morphological cases may be either semantic or syntactic. He distinguishes himself from Dik insofar as he assumes that nominative is a syntactic case and that all the other cases are semantic.

There are also scholars who argue that the morphological cases are basically a semantic phenomena (see Wierzbicka 1981, 1983). Some linguists have related case and the usage of cases to aspect, i.e. to the event type of the action denoted by the predicate. Yli-Vakkuri (1987), Nemvalts (1996) and Tommola ((1986), here cited by Nemvalts) have all drawn attention to this usage of the morphological cases in the Finno-Ugric languages. The usage of case has also been related to mood and modality (Yli-Vakkuri 1987). Yet some other linguists (Jackendoff 1990:49 and following him Hentschel 1993) argue that cases are only diacritics and have no deeper function or role.

To sum up, it has been argued that the morphological cases are syntactic, semantic, aspectual and modal phenomenon, and finally, that they are diacritics. From this it should be clear that there is no consensus in the literature on the nature and function of morphological case.

More specifically for case in the Modern Scandinavian languages, we can identify three main debates:

- the break-down of the case system in Mainland Scandinavian
- the fate of the Impersonal construction in Scandinavian

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- the syntactic status of the oblique Experiencer in the Impersonal construction in Old Scandinavian.

Beginning with the debate on the break-down of the case system in Mainland Scandinavian, some scholars have argued for a connection between the break-down and the Middle Low German influence on Scandinavian (Jahr 1994, 1995), while others have argued against this (Norde 1994), and claimed that it was a language-internal development (Ringgård 1986), stemming from apocope (Marold 1980), changes in word order (Faarlund 1987, 1990, 1999), changes in the null-subject parameter (Platzack 1987), and/or the emergence of the article system (Delsing 1991, Holmberg 1994, Anward and Swedenmark 1997).

Secondly, scholars have proposed different accounts of the development of the Impersonal construction, i.e. the development from oblique Experiencers to nominative Experiencers, as in *mik drømer* 'me dreams' which has changed into *jag drömmer* 'I dream' in Swedish, and an equivalent change has taken place in all the other Mainland Scandinavian languages (Sundman 1985, Faarlund 1987, 1990, 1999, Falk 1995, 1997, Barðdal 1998, Eythórsson 2000, Barðdal and Eythórsson 2001).

Finally, it is possible to argue either that the oblique Experiencer is not a syntactic subject (Faarlund 1987, 1990, 1999, Kristoffersen 1991, 1994, 1996, Mørck 1992, Falk 1997) or that its behaviour is that of a syntactic subject (Rögnvaldsson 1991, 1995, 1996a, Barðdal 1997, 2000a, Haugan 1998, Barðdal and Eythórsson 2001).

When it comes to morphological case in Icelandic, Zaenen, Maling and Thráinsson (1985) have dealt with passive and passive-related case phenomena. They suggest that the mechanisms of case assignment are of three kinds: semantic (i.e. thematic), idiosyncratic (i.e. lexical) and functional (i.e. syntactic). Rögnvaldsson (1983a) has addressed the question of what the possible roots of the "dative sickness" or dative substitution are. Sigurðsson (1989, 1991, 1992) and Jónsson (1996) have discussed case in Modern Icelandic and investigated the mechanism that controls the representations of case. Jónsson (1997-98) has investigated the semantics of the dative subject of impersonal verbs in Icelandic. Barðdal (1999a, 2001a) investigated the substantial class of Dat-Nom verbs which can take either argument as the subject/object. A minimalism account of these has been presented by Platzack (1999). Sigurðsson (2000) has studied the relation between morphological case and agreement. Maling (2001) has investigated the relation between morphological case, syntactic functions and thematic roles. The Impersonal constructions (Bernódusson 1982) have received abundant attention in the literature, either because the case of the Experiencer argument has changed into dative or because it has changed

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into nominative (Svavarsdóttir 1982, Halldórsson 1982, Svavarsdóttir et al. 1984, Smith 1994, 1996, Jónsson 1997-98, Eythórsson 2000).

Rögnauldsson (1983a), Zaenen, Maling and Thráinsson (1985), Jónsson (1997-98), Barðdal (1999b, 1999c, 2000c, 2001a) Eythórsson (2000) and Maling (2001) have addressed and worked on the question what the function of the cases or the case system in Icelandic is. There are also scholars who have noted that morphological case in Icelandic does not behave as they expect. I quote Delsing (1995:175):

- (5) Jag kan inte här göra annat än att peka på att något som förändrar rollen hos kasus i isländskan tycks ske någon gång under dessa sekler.

'Here I can only point out that something which changes the role of case in Icelandic seems to have taken place some time during these centuries.'

The following statement is from Hróarsdóttir (1996:132-133, see also Boeckx 1998):

- (6) ... the case-system has lost most of its real function; it might even be in the present day language for a decorative purpose only.

Here it is suggested that the Icelandic case system is an ornament.

Such statements presumably have their origin in the idea that morphological case is a syntactic device. This idea has been around for a long time; it can at least be traced as far back as to Falk and Torp (1900:238), and presumably springs from the typological fact that some case languages seem to have "freer" word order than other "caseless" languages. Obviously, even though morphological case in Icelandic does not conform to this pattern, that does not automatically entail that all other possible information communicated by morphological case is functionless. Before any empirical research has been done on morphological case, in order to establish its function, I cannot see any reason to assume that it is syntactic and nothing but syntactic. In this work I will show that the view of morphological case as being solely a syntactic phenomenon is too narrow.

Thus, in my view, the question of what the function of case is in Icelandic is an empirical question and not a theoretical one. If a given theory is our starting point, then our answers to the question may be rooted in that theory, irrespective of the nature of the theory, and irrespective of empirical facts about case. To find an answer to this question it is essential

to do empirical research on morphological case in both Modern and Old Icelandic. That is the basic task of this thesis.

### 1.3 Hypothesis and Goals

The use of the term *case* widely varies. It has been used to denote an abstract feature or characteristics of nominal elements (Chomsky's theory), to encode semantic representations of syntactic relations, manifested in the so-called thematic roles (Fillmore's case). Some theoretical linguists use the term case as a label for nominal relations and their syntactic representations (Lehmann 1985). Traditionally the term *case* is used to denote an inflectional category, with many alternative representations, such as nominative, genitive, dative, accusative, ablative, adessive, and so on. These cases are morphologically manifested as different case forms, via stem variation or morphological endings. It is this last usage of the term case that will be used in this thesis.

In the present work I will confine myself to answering one question, stated as follows:

(7) What is the function of the Icelandic case system?

Since different theories have had alternative things to say about morphological case (see the previous section) it is clear that we cannot assume that morphological case necessarily is a homogeneous category. My working hypothesis is that case can be a heterogeneous or multifunctional category (see also Janda 1993), that case can possibly have more functions than only one, as is stated in (8):

(8) Morphological case is a multifunctional category.

Our goal here will be to try to isolate, at least some of the functions morphological case has in Icelandic. By *function* I mean the motivation for case. What is it that motivates the existence of this grammatical category, which is only visible in nominal elements? Most grammatical categories correspond to independent cognitive categories, hence tense corresponds to time, number to amount, and so on. No such cognitive equivalent is readily found for case (cf. Janda 1993).

It is obvious that when a syntactic subject may be case-marked as nominative, accusative, dative and genitive it becomes difficult to regard any specific case as the case of the syntactic subject. The same is true for the syntactic object in Icelandic; it can also be case-marked by four case forms. In this respect, Icelandic differs from most of the other Germanic

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languages. The majority of them, however, lost their case systems during the Middle Ages; this applies to English, Dutch and the Mainland Scandinavian languages. The only (standard) Germanic languages which have retained the cases are Icelandic, Faroese and German.

Moreover, there are data that suggest that the older Scandinavian languages, i.e. Old Swedish and Old Danish, and even Old/Middle English and Old/Middle High German, were more like Icelandic and Faroese, when it comes to the morphological marking of syntactic functions, than their corresponding modern equivalents (see Barðdal 1997, 2000a and Barðdal and Eythórsson 2001 for an overview of the Old Scandinavian languages, Seefranz-Montag 1983 and 1984 on Old High German and Old English, and finally Allen 1986 and 1995 on Old English). Also, there are no data that speak against the assumption that the medieval Germanic languages were similar to Modern Icelandic and Faroese in their case marking of syntactic functions (see Barðdal and Eythórsson 2001). Given the assumption that the older Germanic languages had a structure and a case system similar to Modern Icelandic, which has been argued for by Barðdal 1997, 2000a, the question undeniably arises why the morphological case system was lost in Scandinavian, English and Dutch, and not in Icelandic, Faroese and German.

The main goal of this thesis is therefore to map the possible different functions of the Icelandic cases; a syntactic aspect of the case usage, a semantic aspect, and possibly other aspects of the cases which have hitherto received little attention. Only then will it be possible to state directly what the function of case is. In addition, it will become possible to evaluate prevailing theories and renew them according to empirical facts and findings on case.

### 1.4 Methods

There are two principal methods which will be employed in this survey. The first is a corpus-based investigation of the relation between morphological case, syntactic functions and thematic roles. From frequency figures, and figures on correlations between morphological case and the other variables, I will draw conclusions on the function of the Icelandic cases, i.e. their syntactic and semantic aspects. This method will be applied to both Old and Modern Icelandic texts. The difference (if any) between these two language stages may be used as a basis for forming hypotheses about the nature of the development of the case systems in the other Germanic languages, hypotheses which also have to take into account the situation in the present-day Germanic languages. This development is

generally well described for the neighbouring languages (see references above and also Delsing 1991, 1995, Norde 1997 and Anward and Swedenmark 1997).

The other method to be employed in this thesis is to collect new verbs in Icelandic and investigate the cases they assign to their arguments. By investigating the case assignment of new verbs it may be possible to identify the case factors that are productive in the Icelandic language of today. No such study has previously been carried out for Modern Icelandic (see however Barðdal 1999b for a similar study on 15th-century Icelandic), nor for any other languages as far as I am aware.

This study is important in that it aims at increasing our knowledge of one particular part of the Icelandic language, namely, the case system and its functions. In addition it aims at establishing an empirical basis for new and revised theories of case. Moreover, every new piece of knowledge on case in Icelandic can shed new light on the development of case in the other Germanic languages, since Germanic case is best preserved in Icelandic.

Finally, even though my goals in this research are empirical, i.e. I see it as an empirical investigation of morphological case, this work will not be without theoretical streaks. In fact I have found the tools of Cognitive Linguistics, more precisely Construction Grammar and the Usage-based model, to be useful. Therefore, when appropriate, I will employ their terminology and research methods.

## 1.5 Disposition

This book is divided into two main parts: Part I and Part II. Part I is the synchronic part of this work, including Chapters 2-6, whereas Part II, i.e. Chapter 7, adds a diachronic and a comparative aspect to this study.

Chapter 2 gives a short overview of the main theoretical assumptions of Construction Grammar and the Usage-based model, it introduces the basic terminology of that framework, and gives a short overview of how morphological case would be dealt with.

In Chapter 3 the general methods of my corpus-based investigation are described, and the criteria used for tagging the texts in the corpus are given. An overview of the distribution of morphological case across syntactic functions and thematic roles is presented.

Chapter 4 contains the results for Modern Icelandic of the corpus-based investigation. I compare the statistical correlations between morphological case, syntactic functions and thematic roles in language use, more precisely in five genres of written Icelandic and one genre of spoken

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Icelandic. The existing correlations are used as a basis for my conclusions on the function of case in Icelandic.

In chapter 5 I present a collection of new or novel verbs in Icelandic and examine the morphological case they assign to their arguments. The predictions on the productivity of the cases that follow from the basic assumptions of one of today's most prevalent grammatical theories, namely, the generative tradition's distinction between structural and lexical case, will be evaluated against our data. New verbs and the morphological case they assign to their arguments cannot be examined without a general theoretical discussion on productivity, and this is undertaken in Chapter 5. Some fundamental ways for languages to acquire new verbs will be discussed and some speculations made about the basis on which speakers assign morphological case to the arguments of these verbs.

Chapter 6, the last chapter in the synchronic part, gives an overview of various other different uses of morphological case in Icelandic, such as dative with movement verbs and dative with human arguments.

Chapter 7 gives a description of the corpus-based investigation of Old Icelandic and its results. The correlations of morphological case, syntactic functions and thematic roles are established and compared with Modern Icelandic. Differences in frequencies due to stylistic factors are also discussed. Finally, I examine theories on the development of morphological case and measure them against my results. I then extend the discussion to the development of morphological case in the Germanic languages, and explore the predictions of Construction Grammar and the Usage-based model, and how this combined framework can give a unified account of the development of morphological case in the Germanic languages.

Chapter 8 is a summary of the main conclusions of this book.