

Micro-level conflict in the productivity of anticausativization strategies Evidence from the history of Icelandic

The objective of this paper is, first, to argue that different morphosyntactic strategies used to form anticausatives are productive in different periods of Icelandic, a language characterized by rich inflection. Second, we show how shifts in anticausativization strategies coincide with factors in other domains of grammar (cf. Cennamo 2022). Our analysis is carried out on the basis of the diachronic variation exhibited by selected predicates in historical corpora (e.g. ONP, RMH). Expanding on Ottosson (2013), we identify five different causative-anticausative patterns in Old and Modern Icelandic (1a–e); the case frames for the relevant predicates are given within square brackets.

- (1) a. Weak-strong alternation: caus. *sökkti* ‘sank’ [Nom–Acc] : anticaus. *sökk* ‘sank’ [Nom]
b. *na*-verbs: caus. *braut* ‘broke’ [Nom–Acc] : anticaus. *brotnaði* ‘broke’ [Nom]
c. Case-Preserving Anticausativization (CPA): caus. *hvessti* ‘sharpened’ [Nom–Acc] :
anticaus. *hvessti* ‘got windier’ [Acc]
d. Lability: caus. *lokaði* ‘closed’ [Nom–Dat] : anticaus. *lokaði* ‘closed’ [Nom]
e. *st*-predicates: caus. *opnaði* ‘opened’ [Nom–Acc] : anticaus. *opnaðist* ‘opened’ [Nom]

Two of these strategies, (1a) and (1b), ceased being productive already in pre-Old Icelandic (before 1150 AD). Their unproductivity is reflected in the fact that occasionally some predicates may form an anticausative in more than one way (2a), or occur with double marking simultaneously (2b):

- (2) a. OldIcel *sökk-ti-st* ‘sunk’, a weak form with *-st* for an older strong form *sökk* in (1a)
b. ModIcel *brot-na-ði-st* ‘broke’, with both *-na-* and *-st* instead of *brot-na-ði* in (1b)

The remaining three strategies (1c–e) show productivity to a varying degree in Modern Icelandic, engaging in a “micro-level conflict” against each other. We posit a hierarchy of strategies for the modern language such that the *st*-strategy (1e) is selected provided the relevant *st*-form does not already have another function (reflexive, reciprocal and denominals). The productivity of this strategy is clearly boosted by the ubiquity of the *st*-suffix with all kinds of verb formations. In cases where the *st*-form is dispreferred or unavailable, a different strategy (CPA or lability) is selected. The strategy of labile verbs (1d) seems to be gaining ground, having previously been rather limited (witness new verbs in the semantic domain of technology like *hlaða* ‘charge’ and *starta* ‘start’). In some cases its rise may be “accidental”, due to a common change called Nominative Substitution, whereby an oblique subject is replaced by a nominative (e.g. Svavarsdóttir 1982). However, even in Modern Icelandic, the emergence of new oblique subjects can still be triggered by CPA (1c).

In conclusion, the diachrony of anticausativization strategies in Icelandic suggests that in this highly inflected language, morphological marking with anticausatives ((1a-c), (1e)) is preferred over an unmarked option (1d). Nevertheless, various conflicting factors create a micro-level tension in the grammar, affecting the productivity of the different anticausativization strategies. Thus, Nominative Substitution replaces oblique subjects and the otherwise very productive *st*-suffix reaches a point of saturation due to its multifunctionality, leaving the labile option as the most viable one in Modern Icelandic.

References

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