The Alternating Behavior of 'Like' in Old Norse-Icelandic: Facts or Fiction

In a recent article, Sigurðsson & Viðarsson (2020) claim that the verb *líka* 'like' in Old Norse-Icelandic is an alternating Dat-Nom/Nom-Dat verb, as opposed to Modern Icelandic where this same verb is uncontroversially a non-alternating Dat-Nom verb. The difference between the two is that alternating verbs may instantiate two diametrically opposite argument structures, i.e. Dat-Nom and Nom-Dat, while non-alternating Dat-Nom verbs only instantiate one of these, the Dat-Nom argument structure (Bernódusson 1982, Barnes 1986, Jónsson 1997–98, Barðdal 1999, 2001, Barðdal, Eythórsson & Dewey 2014, 2019, Platzack 1999, Wood & Sigurðsson 2014, Somers & Barðdal 2022, inter alia).

Sigurðsson & Viðarsson (2020) base their claims on both language internal Old Norse-Icelandic evidence and on the comparative evidence from the other early Germanic languages (Fischer & van der Leek 1983, Allen 1986, 1995, Barðdal 1998, Eythórsson & Barðdal 2005). Starting with the comparative evidence, it has been argued for Old English that *lician* is an alternating verb in that language (Allen 1995: 141) and the same has been argued for *galeikan* in Gothic (Eythórsson & Barðdal 2005: 833).

Turning to the language internal evidence for an alternating analysis of *líka* in Old Norse-Icelandic which Sigurðsson & Viðarsson introduce, this consists of data involving two subject tests, i) control infinitives and ii) word order. Sigurðsson & Viðarsson present several examples of control infinitives with the verb *líka* where it is indeed the nominative and not the dative that is left unexpressed in such structures. This they take as conclusive evidence that the nominative behaves syntactically as a subject and the dative as an object. Likewise, Sigurðsson & Viðarsson also present a handful of examples involving word order distribution, which are incompatible with a Dat-Nom analysis of the argument structure of *líka*, and call instead for a Nom-Dat analysis of the relevant structures.

While we agree with Sigurðsson & Viðarsson on their analysis of the relevant control infinitives, in that there is no doubt that these examples show that it is indeed the nominative that is left unexpressed and not the dative, we still call into question the relevance of their data set. As they acknowledge themselves, all their examples of control infinitives are from translated texts, and the same applies to their word order examples. In general, translated examples may well be taken to speak for authenticity, but for these particular examples, we argue that the relevant translations are word-for-word glosses of the Latin verb *placere* which sometimes means 'like' and sometimes 'please', depending on its argument structure (cf. Cluyse, Somers & Barðdal 2023).

Therefore, in order to shed light on this issue, we present word order statistics for *líka* in Old Norse-Icelandic. The data have been extracted from three different sources: i) the Saga Corpus, ii) the Icelandic Text Archive, and iii) the Dictionary of Old Norse Prose (ONP), resulting in a dataset containing approximately 200 occurrences of *líka*. It turns out that there is a major divide between native and translated texts. This means that in texts originally written in the Old Norse-Icelandic vernacular, *líka* consistently occurs with a Dat-Nom order, unless the nominative contains a demonstrative pronoun, then the Nom-Dat word order is preferred. This suggests that *líka* could only instantiate the Dat-Nom argument structure construction in texts originally written in Old Norse-Icelandic, with the Nom-Dat word order representing topicalizations. In contrast, in the translated texts, the proportions between Dat-Nom and Nom-Dat with *líka* are more even and are not tied to word class. Therefore, since any "alternating" behavior of *líka* is confined to translated texts, we conclude that this seeming behavior is a translation effect.

Our alternative analysis of the data involving Old Norse-Icelandic *líka* above makes a certain prediction, namely that the existing alternating analysis of Old English *lician* and Gothic *galeikan* may be equally faulty as the analysis provided by Sigurðsson & Viðarsson, as most if not all instances in Old English and Gothic are also translations. In other words, our analysis predicts that the apparent alternating behavior of 'like' in Old English and Gothic may also be a translation effect.

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