From complex to simple prepositions in Icelandic:
The case of *á bak við* to *bakvið* 'behind'

It has been proposed that the prepositional domain in Icelandic is the subject of an ongoing change (Friðjónsson 2005), involving simple prepositions, originally adverbs, becoming complex when denoting temporal and positional relationships. Witness ***eftir*** 'after' in (1a) (from Friðjónsson 2005:25) which gives way to ***á eftir*** 'after' in (1b).

(1) a. …gekk djákninn **eftir** honum   b.   …gekk   **á eftir**   honum.
        walked deacon after him-DAT   *walked on after him-DAT*
        'The deacon walked behind him' (17th century)   '... walked behind him' (MIce)

In this paper, I document and discuss an ongoing change (Rögnvaldsson 2021) that exhibits the opposite directionality, i.e., going from a complex to a simple preposition; cf. (2) where (2b) represents an innovation. The type of examples in (2) are found in written material from the 18th century onwards (ROH). The directionality ((2a) to (2b)) is here argued to be linked to interactions between the prepositional and the nominal domain as opposed to the prepositional and the adverbial domain, as is the case for (1).

(2)   a. **Á   bak   við** húsið   b.   **Bakvið**   húsið
         PREP back-A PREP house-A   *PREP   house-A*
         'Behind the house.'   'Behind the house.'

Interestingly, a comparable structure in Old Icelandic (c. 1150–1640) consists of a preposition and a noun, followed by a noun in the dative case (3).

(3)   …**á   bak**   húsum
         PREP back-A   houses-D
         '... behind (the) houses.' (ONP, *Grettis saga, ch. 45*)

Documenting the use of structures as in (2)–(3), schematically presented in (4), in both modern (Twitter, RMH) and historical sources (ONP, ROH), I argue that the development occurred in two steps. First, the (4a) was replaced by (4b). The motivation for the change is the opaqueness of the dative case-assignment in (4a) which causes the introduction of a preposition assigning accusative, highlighted by the square brackets in (4). A parallel development includes tendencies of Genitive Avoidance (Kjartansson 1979, Jónsson 2017) in phrases such as *þak hússins-DAT* 'the house's roof' which are often reconstrued as *þakið á húsinu-ACC* 'the roof of the house' (for a similar change in pseudo-partitives see Grestenberger 2015).

(4)   a. **P + N$_1$-ACC** [+ N$_2$-*DAT*]   :: ***á bak*** + *DAT* (3)
          b. **P$_1$ + N$_1$-ACC** [+ **P$_2$** + N$_2$-*ACC*]   :: ***á bak við*** + *ACC* (2a)
          c. **P** + N-*ACC*   :: ***bakvið*** + *ACC* (2b)

Second, the complex prepositional structure in (4b) gave rise to the simple prepositional structure in (4c) when N$_1$-*ACC* (*bak*) along with the following preposition P$_2$ (*við*) grammaticalized into a single preposition (*bakvið*). Being unaccented in pronunciation, P$_1$ (*á*) is omitted although a variant of (4c), ***á bakvið*** + *ACC,* is occasionally found within and across speakers; this situation reflects an unresolved tension between one and two-word prepositions in the prepositional system. Two-word prepositional structures are very common in Icelandic (Berthele et al. 2015), for instance ***á undan*** + *DAT* 'before' and ***inni í*** + *DAT* 'inside'.

To conclude, an investigation into the history of individual prepositional constructions in Icelandic shows a contradictory directionality. The change from (1a) to (1b) represents a change from a simple to a complex preposition (see Friðjónsson 2005), while the change from (4b) to (4c), shows a directionality from complex to simple. I propose that the origin of the prepositions (whether they come from an adverb or a noun) affects directionality in their historical development.

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ONP = *Ordbog over ded norrøne prosasprog*. Copenhagen: Den Arnamagnæanske Kommission (eds). Access at: https://onp.ku.dk/onp/onp.php

RMH = Risamálheild [Gigaword Corpus]: Steingrímsson, Steinþór, Sigrún Helgadóttir, Eiríkur Rögnvaldsson, Starkaður Barkarson and Jón Guðnason. 2018. Risamálheild: A Very Large Icelandic Text Corpus. *Proceedings of LREC 2018*, 4361–4366, Japan. Accessed at: https://malheildir.arnastofnun.is/?mode=rmh2022

ROH = *Ritmálssafn Orðabókar Háskólans*. Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum (eds.). Access at: http://ritmalssafn.arnastofnun.is/

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