

Null subjects in early Icelandic

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Recently, considerable attention has been given to the existence of a partial null subject property in the Old Germanic languages. However, comparatively little empirical or theoretical work has been done on Old Icelandic in the years since Sigurðsson (1993). This is unfortunate, since previous studies indicate that Old Icelandic null subjects have characteristics which to some extent set this language apart from its early Germanic cognates. In terms of diachrony, it has been asserted that Icelandic did not lose its null subject property until ‘the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries’ (Hjartardóttir 1987; paraphrased in Sigurðsson 1993: 248). This is notable since it has been documented that the other Old Germanic languages lost the null subject property at much earlier stages. In terms of syntactic distribution, recent quantitative work by Walkden (2012) demonstrates that null subjects occur in Old Icelandic subordinate clauses to an extent which is significantly higher than in Old English, Old High German and Old Swedish (cp. Axel 2007, Håkansson 2008, Rusten 2013, Walkden 2013). Assuming that the licenser in these languages is an Aboutness topic in SpecShiftP (see Walkden 2012), it is unclear why finite subordinate clauses in Old Icelandic should project this phrase more often than those of other early Germanic languages. Furthermore, in terms of syntactic licensing, there has been some debate about whether or not all null subjects are the same. Sigurðsson (1993) proposes that Old Icelandic has both pro-drop and topic drop, while Sigurðsson (2011) and Walkden (2012) assume one basic licensing mechanism. Thus, although Walkden (2012) provides useful data supporting an account of Old Icelandic as a partial null subject language, there are still lacunae left to be filled here. Crucially, there is a serious lack of systematically analysed quantitative data covering the development of null subjects in Icelandic in the period following the late 13th century.

This paper aims to expand on the work by Walkden (2012) and to present the preliminary findings of a large-scale, longitudinal investigation of null subjects in the history of Icelandic. Using the *Icelandic Parsed Historical Corpus* (Wallenberg et al 2011), all null and overt pronominal subjects occurring in finite clauses have been extracted from 61 Icelandic texts which span *c.*850 years of the history of the language. We will show that referential and generic null subjects are considerably more frequent in Old Icelandic than in e.g. Old English, and we will also demonstrate that frequencies for null subjects remain comparatively high on an overall basis in both main and subordinate clauses until as late a stage as the 19th century. We thus provide substantial empirical support for Hjartardóttir’s (1987) claim concerning the longevity of the null subject phenomenon in Icelandic.

On the basis of these data, we will argue that Sigurðsson’s (1993) account of Old Icelandic null arguments faces certain empirical problems. Sigurðsson claims that two different syntactic strategies for identifying referential null arguments are required for Old Icelandic: topic drop – i.e. the relevant null arguments are ones ‘that do not behave like a pronominal, but like a variable bound by a null operator’ – and ‘genuine *pro*-drop’ (1993: 247). Explicitly motivated by preserving the *identification hypothesis* (Jaeggli 1982), this approach has the advantage of letting Sigurðsson dismiss the majority of Old Icelandic main clauses with a null subject as corollaries to the type of ‘pronoun zap’ commonly found in Modern Germanic, as exemplified in (1).

- (1) (Ég) þekki það ekki.
(I) recognise that not
‘I don’t recognise that.’ (after Sigurðsson (1993: 254))

Sigurðsson's (1993: 251) prediction is that instances of 'genuine' referential pro-drop must have an NP antecedent, while instances of topic drop may or may not have such an antecedent. We will demonstrate that this prediction is not systematically borne out by the data, as illustrated in example (2).

- (2) En þá Jesús hafði edik ið til sín tekið, sagði hann:
and when Jesus had vinegar that.ACC to him.RFLX taken, said he
Fullkomnað er *pro*
complete is pro
'And when Jesus had drunk that vinegar, he said: it is complete.'
(1540.NTJOHN.REL-BIB,229.1531)

Since the clause containing the null subject is not verb-initial, this cannot be an instance of topic drop. Furthermore, Modern Germanic 'pronoun zap' predominantly affects first person pronouns (although not categorically so, see e.g. de Korte 2008, Trutkowski 2011, Weir 2012). The situation observed in early Icelandic does not conform to this state of affairs, as the vast majority of null subjects in the early period have third person reference (Walkden 2012: 178–179). We will argue that our data show that null subjects in verb-initial clauses are not direct parallels to instances of Modern Germanic topic drop. Thus, early Icelandic null subjects are more fruitfully analysed as a unified phenomenon, requiring only one syntactic identification strategy. Incorporating systematic data for person and number features, we also hope to be able to demonstrate that the Modern stage – where a more general argument drop has yielded to (predominantly first person) topic drop – does not arise in Icelandic until the early twentieth century.

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