

Multivaluation (or not) in Icelandic

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In this talk I will discuss joint work with Jutta Hartmann (Bielefeld) on two cases of (potential) multivaluation in Icelandic: “dative-nominative” clauses where the higher, subject argument is dative and a lower argument nominative, as in (1a,b), and specificational copular clauses where both nominals are nominative, as in (2):

- (1) a. Henni líkaðu/líkaði þeir.
her.DAT liked.3.PL/3SG they.M.NOM
‘She liked them.’
- b. Honum mundu virðast þeir (vera) hæfir.
him.DAT would.3.PL seem they.M.NOM (be.INF) competent.M.PL
‘They would seem competent to him.’ (Sigurðsson & Holmberg 2008)
- (2) Aðalvandamálið er/eru foreldrnir
main problem.DEF be.3.SG/3.PL parents.DEF
‘The main problem is the parents.’

As has been much discussed in the literature on Icelandic morphosyntax and on agreement more generally, while number agreement with the “low nominative” argument in the dative-nominative construction is often possible, as indicated in (1), there appear to be much stricter constraints on person—rather than number—agreement. In particular, low nominatives in the dative-nominative construction are blocked from controlling person agreement:

- (3) a. *Henni líkaðir þú.
her.DAT liked.2.SG you.SG.NOM
Intended: ‘She liked you.’
- b. *Henni virtumst við vera duglegar.
she.DAT seemed.1.PL we.NOM be industrious
Intended: ‘We seemed to her to be industrious.’ (Sigurðsson 1996: (76b))

Where the low nominative is the subject of a small or nonfinite clause, as in the (b) examples, there is a grammatical alternative: default 3rd singular agreement. In the case of the “simplex” (monoclausal) construction in the (a) examples, however, this is also ungrammatical. Thus there is no type of agreement that will make this construction grammatical with a non-3rd person nominative: a much-cited instance of ineffability:

- (4) a. *Henni líkaði þú.
her.DAT liked.3SG you.SG.NOM
Intended: ‘She liked you.’
- b. Henni virtist við vera duglegar.
she.DAT seem.3.SG we.NOM be industrious
‘We seemed to her to be industrious.’ (Sigurðsson 1996: (76b))

One type of account of this person effect ties it to the intervention of the dative argument blocking agreement with the nominative, together with a special licensing requirement peculiar to first and second person pronouns. An alternative account, due originally to Schütze (2003) and

argued for recently in Coon & Keine (2020) instead takes the problem to result from multivaluation: the problem is not that the dative blocks agreement with the nominative, but rather that the finite verb attempts to agree with both, giving rise to a conflict in morphological realization.

The most crucial data for deciding between these two approaches lies in the effect of syncretism: the claim is that when the person agreement morphology happens to be syncretic with third person, non-3rd person nominative arguments become grammatical even in the simplex construction. This effect is easily explained only in the multivaluation account.

A major difficulty for theorizing in this area, however, is that the empirical data on person agreement is scarce and conflicting, particularly concerning the effect of syncretism. In this talk I'll report on experimental studies carried out together with Jutta Hartmann on these Icelandic cases, including minimal contrasts between syncretic and non-syncretic agreement. I'll further compare these results to those from a companion study of Icelandic copular sentences of the type illustrated in (2)—another, much less well-studied, potential case of agreement with a low nominative, and another potential case of multivaluation. I'll argue that our results show that these two sets of data provide evidence in favour of an account of the person effect in the dative-nominative construction in terms of morphological conflict arising from multivaluation, although they also show that the ameliorating effect of morphological syncretism, while real, is limited. I'll also argue that we did not find evidence for multivaluation in the copular clauses investigated, and argue that this follows from the syntactic structure, but also requires the assumption that in this language nominative DPs, unlike datives, cause the search of the agreement probe to terminate.

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