Inversion as Rightward-dative Shift in Icelandic Ditransitives

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This paper builds on previous work which investigates the nature of double object constructions in Icelandic. Icelandic ditransitives display two intriguing patterns with respect to case and complement frames. The first pattern is that while the indirect and direct objects can appear in a variety of case combinations (the subject is always nominative) in the DP-DP variant, the DP-PP variant (in which the PP is headed by til ‘to’) is restricted to constructions in which the direct object undergoes physical (not syntactic) movement. The second pattern is that some verbs allow a surface order in which the direct object precedes the indirect object even though there is no preposition and the DP-PP variant is not available. Collins and Thráinsson (1996) argue that this inversion structure is neither derived via object shift of the direct object nor rightward extraposition of the indirect object. I agree that inversion is not object shift. However, I argue that inversion is a special type of rightward extraposition of the dative. I propose a modified version of Bruening’s (2010) R(rightward)-dative shift operation. In line with Bruening’s (2010) analysis for English, I show that there is a relationship between rightward projection of the specifier of ApplP and A-bar extraction in Icelandic. Building on this proposal, I argue that movement of the Appl head to V projects a higher specifier and that extraction occurs from this higher position. Additionally, I extend this proposal to account for constructions in which extraction occurs from a leftward projected specifier. The motivation for the overall argument is that the distribution of the DP-PP frame illustrates that inversion and DP-PP frames have unique derivations.

With respect to English, there is considerable debate about the degree to which DP-DP frames map to a meaning that is distinct from that of DP-PP frames (Beck and Johnson 2004, Rappaport Hovav and Levin 2008, Harley and Jung 2015, a.o.). For the distinct meanings camp, the DP-PP frame encodes possession and the DP-PP frame encodes motion. Icelandic provides evidence for this approach. While both senda ‘send’ and sýna ‘show’ allow the DP-PP variant, only senda allows the DP-PP variant, shown in (1).


H sent me.Dat cheese.Acc H sent cheese.Acc to me.Gen he showed the boat.Acc to the boys.Gen ‘Harold sent me (some) cheese.’ ‘Harold sent (some) cheese to me.’ ‘He showed the boat to the boys.’

(Thráinsson 2007:173-174)

Even though sýna does not allow the DP-PP variant, it does allow both the standard order in (2)a and the inverted order in (2)b. While the interpretation of (2)b is the same as a DP-PP variant, the unavailability of this frame suggests that (2)b has a derivation distinct from (1)b.

(2)a. Við sýndum foreldrum sínum, krakkana sínan, b. Við sýndum krakkana foreldrum sínum.

we showed the parents.Dat kids.Acc their(refl) we showed the kids.Acc parents.Dat their (refl)

‘We showed the parents their kids.’ ‘We showed the kids to their parents.’ (C&T 1996:416)

Collins and Thráinsson (1996) make four observations about inversion. First, inversion is not object shift (of the accusative DP) since inversion does not depend on verb movement. Second, inversion changes binding whereas standard rightward extraposition does not. The binding facts in (2) suggest that the dative c-commands the accusative in (2)a and that the accusative c-commands the dative in (2)b. Third, only dative-accusative standard orders allow inversion. Fourth, the dative is either phonologically heavy or stressed. Adopting the first observation that inversion is not object shift, I build on work by Jónsson (2000) and Bruening (2010) to illustrate that the second, third, and fourth observations are actually related.

While the direct object of a DP-DP variant can map to accusative, dative, or genitive, the indirect object can only map to accusative or dative. Jónsson (2000) illustrates that the case on indirect objects reflects their thematic properties. Indirect objects that are recipients and benefactives are dative, while indirect objects
that do not have these theta roles can be either dative or accusative. This suggests that a DP which will be spelled out as either dative or accusative can be merged in Spec,ApplP. I propose that when the accusative in a standard Dat-Acc structure is merged in Spec,ApplP, the specifier is projected to the right. This is because the heavy/stressed dative argument requires extraction. Bruening (2010) proposes that ApplP projects a rightward specifier if the DP which occupies that specifier undergoes A-bar extraction. Building on that idea, I argue that the DP which occupies the “highest” rightward specifier of ApplP is A-bar extracted.

The derivation for (2)b is shown below. Contra Bruening’s (2010) analysis for English, I adopt a low applicative structure for the DP-DP variant; both DPs are merged inside ApplP (Wood 2015).

(3) \[ \phi \ldots [VP \ [\text{ApplP} \ \text{DP}_{\text{ACC}} \ [\text{ApplP} \ \text{DAT}] \ [\text{ApplP} \ \text{ApplP} \ \text{DP}_{\text{DAT}}]]] \]

In (3), the dative is first merged as sister to the Appl head and the accusative is merged in the specifier, which is on the right. The accusative c-commands the dative, thereby accounting for the binding relationship in (2)b. Following Wood and Sigurðsson’s (2014) analysis of transitive verbs in Icelandic that can alternate between a dative-nominative and nominative-dative case frame, the Appl head moves to V, making the dative and the accusative equidistant to higher positions. I propose that a consequence of this movement is that ApplP projects another rightward specifier. When the dative is phonologically heavy or stressed, it moves to the higher Spec,ApplP and is available for further extraction. Inversion, therefore, is a special instance of rightward extraposition which is constrained by the conditions on R-dative shift in Icelandic. Rightward projection of Spec,ApplP is the marked structure, since specifiers in Icelandic are normally projected to the left. The marked nature of (3) is confirmed in Dehé 2004, which reports that constructions such as (2)a are strongly preferred. In (2)a, Spec,ApplP is projected to the left and the DP spelled out as dative is merged in the specifier.

The proposal that movement of Appl to V results in the projection of a higher specifier of ApplP can be extended to account for ditransitives in which either object can passivize, as shown in (4).

   the king.Dat were given maidservants.Nom maidservants.Nom were given the king.Dat
   ‘The king was given maidservants.’ ‘Maidservants were given to the king.’ (W&S 2014:276)

Assuming the base structure in which the dative is merged in Spec,ApplP, the Appl head moves to V and projects a higher specifier. Either object can move into that specifier and then move to the subject position. Bruening’s (2010) proposal can, therefore, be generalized such that DPs which undergo either A or A-bar movement are extracted from the edge of ApplP.

Interestingly, the constructions which allow inversion, passivization of either object, or the transitive dative-nominative/nominative-dative alternation all have a common trait. In their basic form, a non-structurally case-marked DP precedes a structurally case-marked DP. It has been well-established that the morphology is sensitive to the non-structural/structural distinction because non-structural case is preserved under movement. The current observation suggests that the syntax also uses the non-structural/structural distinction to restrict the range of available operations.

Selected References