Everything out! Evacuating the Icelandic vP

Jim Wood  Yale University

This talk shows that a number of puzzling facts about Icelandic syntax fall into place if we assume that in the general case, all vP-internal material—the verb, its arguments, everything—evacuates the vP, as in (1)

(1) [*vP [vP tekið þær af mér ] hafa þeir ekki t,vP.]

They’ve taken them from me.

Subsequently moves even higher, so that it can precede those arguments. That it does is supported by (3) and (5). In (3) we see that a remnant vP cannot undergo vP-fronting, stranding its arguments, and in (5) we see that a remnant vP cannot undergo vP-ellipsis, stranding its arguments. This is so because the verb itself always leaves the vP to a higher projection, even when it is nonfinite (cf. Kayne 1993). Thus, nothing is left inside the vP—not the verbs, its arguments, or any adjuncts—by the time that vP-ellipsis or vP-topicalization would take place. The analysis explains why even verb-stranding vP-ellipsis is not available in Icelandic, as shown in (6). The reason that (6) is out is that not only has the verb left the vP but all the vP-internal arguments (in this case ‘the book’) have as well. So there is nothing left in the vP to elide.

2. Supporting the evacuation

Various word order facts can be explained as a by-product of the vP evacuation processes. First, as noted by Wood (2015:269), complements of causative láta ‘let’ often allow otherwise impossible OV word orders; see examples in (7)–(8). These constructions have special properties, some of which will be discussed in the talk. In the context of the present proposal, however, we can understand what is going on: láta ‘let’ is selecting an unusually small structure (e.g. WP in (1)), one which is small enough to prevent the verb from moving to the left of its arguments, after the latter have evacuated the vP. Second, the present account allows for a straightforward explanation for a little-discussed fact about Icelandic word order: why argumental PPs can optionally freely precede DP objects, as illustrated in (9). This is because when the PP af mér ‘from me’ and the DP bókina ‘the book’ move out of the vP, they can do so in either order; they are of different categories, (9) Peir hafa tekið af mér bókina. so they do not interfere with each other’s movement. When two they have taken from me the book DP s move, however, they must preserve their underlying order ‘They have taken the book from me.’ (Collins & Thráinsson 1996), and this is arguably due to Relativized Minimality style locality constraints (Wood & H. Sigurðsson 2014). Assuming that the order in (9) cannot be derived by rightward movement of bókina ‘the book’, (9) independently supports the claim that PPs move from their base-generated position. Combined, these three constructions can be explained by
assuming that both DPs and PPs move to the left of the verb at some point in the derivation, by hypothesis out of the vP.

3. The exceptions: Nonevacuation in Stylistic Fronting and Pseudogapping I suggest that in Stylistic Fronting, the verb alone remains inside the vP, and in pseudogapping, the verb and a DP object remain (but a PP object still evacuates). Stylistic Fronting is a well-studied process that moves a nonfinite verb, adjective, adverb, or PP to (what seems to be) SpecTP whenever there is no overt phonological material in SpecTP (Maling 1990; Holmberg 2005). Here we will be concerned only with verbs, which have a somewhat special status: in Ott’s (2016) study, nonfinite verbs are the only frontable category that is not demonstrably phrasal. Ott proposes that appearances are deceiving; in fact, when it looks like verbs are moving, it is a vP whose object has moved out of it. Ott argues that this movement is actually what makes SF of the vP possible (by circumventing what would otherwise be a violation of comp-to-spec antilocality, if a vP were to move directly to SpecTP). Appealing though it is, this explanation is at best incomplete: it incorrectly predicts that two-complement verbs should be able to move one complement out of the vP, and carry the other one under phrasal movement, as in (11). There are a number of possible explanations for this fact, but we will not be concerned with them: the fact is that Ott’s account requires that everything but the verb leave the vP, as in (12).

Why can the verb stay in the vP just in this case? Stylistic Fronting is a special construction, with special properties. I propose that typically, when everything has moved out of the vP, the verb head moves to a higher position; say, Asp (as in 13). In Stylistic Fronting contexts, however, the whole vP moves to AspP, as in (14) (cf. Matushansky 2006 on the equivalence of head-movement and phrasal movement for checking purposes). From there, it will move to its final position in SpecTP. Notice that this needn’t be countercyclic. Whether SpecTP will eventually have an overt subject or not can be determined entirely by examining the vP: if there is no overt subject bound for SpecTP, then SF (i.e., (14)) will be possible. Pseudogapping in Icelandic is only possible with PP remnants (see 15), and only in comparative constructions (see 16) (Gengel 2007). The unacceptability of (16) follows from the present account as the basic case: the vP cannot be elided, because the verb and its object, in addition to the PP, have already moved out by the time ellipsis applies. (15) Hún hefur tekið fleiri bækur af mér en hann hefur vP af þér.

she has taken more books from me than he has vP from you

She’s taken more books from than he has from you.’

What (15) suggests, however, is that vP ellipsis in comparative constructions is available at an earlier stage than in the usual case, and moreover, this stage is crucially after the PP has left the vP, but before the DP or the verb itself have. For present purposes, we can stipulate that when the comparative operator subextracts to the vP edge, it activates a feature/head that simultaneously triggers PP movement (crucially not DP movement) and vP deletion. Obviously we would like a deeper explanation than that, but that should not distract us from the larger point: pseudogapping suggests that Icelandic vP ellipsis is possible in principle, and Stylistic Fronting suggests that remnant vP movement is possible in principle. So we need to derive the absence of these processes as part of the normal course of affairs in Icelandic. The present suggestion is that the normal course of affairs involves the complete evacuation of the vP, and that what these constructions are showing us are the exceptional circumstances where such evacuation is not complete. This explains the absence of vP ellipsis and vP fronting, gives us a way to understand a variety of other constructions, and offers a new set of questions for the study of Stylistic Fronting and pseudogapping.