

Long-Distance Agreement in Icelandic revisited: An interplay of locality and semantics

Ivona Kučerová (McMaster University)

We argue that instances of long-distance agreement (LDA) with Nominative objects (NOM) in Icelandic are fully reducible to a strictly local operation of Agree with v acting as a single probe. This type of analysis has been refuted in the past because of non-trivial interactions with Dative interveners (DAT) that seem to involve intricate combinations of ϕ -features (Holmberg and Hróarsdóttir, 2003; Sigurðsson and Holmberg, 2008). We argue that the ϕ -feature-based characterization of the pattern is accidental and does not extend beyond a limited set of data. Instead, we propose that v successfully probes NOM only if there is no DAT intervener within the probing domain of v . Such a configuration arises either if there is no DAT to start with, or if DAT underwent an independently motivated movement to Spec,vP. The empirical support for the analysis comes from data involving Object Shift and Quantifier movement, and from d-linked vs. non-d-linked wh-movement.

Puzzle: While agreement with NOM is obligatory in a mono-clausal environment and no intervention effects are attested, (1-a), agreement in a bi-clausal environment is optional, (1-b), and can be blocked by an intervening DAT, (1-c), (Watanabe, 1993; Schütze, 1997):

- (1) a. það *var/voru konugi gefnar ambáttir í vettur.
EXPL was.sg/were.pl king.Dat given slaves.Nom in winter
'A king was given female slaves in winter.'
- b. Einhverjum stúdent finnst/finnast tölvurnar ljótar.
some student.Dat finds.sg/find.pl the-computers.Nom ugly.Nom
'Some student finds the computers ugly.'
- c. Það virðist/*virðast einhverjum manni hestarnir vera seinir.
EXPL seems.sg/seem.pl some man.Dat the-horses.Nom be slow.Nom
'A man finds the horses slow.'

Holmberg and Hróarsdóttir (2003) observed, however, that some DATs are transparent to agreement, (2). They proposed that DAT intervenes only if the ϕ -features of the intervener and the goal don't match (3PL+3PL in (2) but 3PL+3SG in (1-c)).

- (2) a. Það finnst mörgum stúdentum tölvurnar ljótar.
EXPL finds.sg many students.Dat the-computers.Nom ugly.NOM
- b. Það finnst mörgum stúdentum tölvurnar ljótar.
EXPL find.pl many students.Dat the-computers.Nom ugly.Nom
'Many students find the computers ugly.'

LDA can then be formalized as parasitic on DAT (cf. Hiraiwa 2005). Such an analysis assumes non-trivial differences between local agreement and LDA which may yield parallel probing of features originating on a single head (Sigurðsson and Holmberg, 2008). Even though parallel probing and feature valuation have been proposed for Reverse Agree (Adger, 2003; Baker, 2008; Haegeman and Lohndal, 2010; Wurmbrand, 2012, among others), parallel valuation in Reverse Agree differ in its directionality. To our knowledge, the pattern proposed for Icelandic LDA is unprecedented.

Proposal: As observed in Kučerová (2007), the ϕ -feature generalization does not extend to other DPs with the same ϕ -feature properties. She proposed that LDA obtains only if DAT can independently undergo Object Shift (Holmberg, 1986) (OS) to Spec,vP. If OS takes place, v is free to probe NOM. Since adverbs don't block OS (Holmberg, 1999), the correlation can be shown on the word order with respect to adverbs: if DAT precedes a VP adverb, i.e., it underwent OS, the finite verb must agree with NOM. In contrast, if DAT follows such an adverb, agreement with NOM is blocked. This pattern is entirely unexpected under Holmberg and Hróarsdóttir's analysis.

- (3) a. Það finnst alltaf þremur börnum tölvurnar ljótar.
EXPL find.sg. ALWAYS three children.Dat.pl. computer.D.Nom.pl ugly
- b. Það finnast (*alltaf) þremur börnum tölvurnar ljótar.
EXPL find.pl. ALWAYS three children.Dat.pl. computer.D.Nom.pl ugly
'Three children always find the computers ugly.'

We argue that Kučerová's generalization extends to other cases as well, i.e., LDA takes place only if DAT undergoes independently motivated movement to the edge of vP. There are three cases to consider: OS (above), Quantifier movement, and wh-movement. [The data were collected from Icelanders in late 20s and early 30s, originally from Reykjavík. Only data from speakers who shared the judgements reported in Holmberg and Hróarsdóttir (2003) and Kučerová (2007) were considered. Since the data are highly sensitive to semantic distinctions, they were presented in a context using truth-value judgement tasks (Skopeteas et al., 2006; Matthewson, 2004).]

Quantifier Movement: QM targets the edge of the vP phase, even if there is no head-movement (Jónsson, 1996; Svenonius, 2000). If DAT undergoes QM it should no longer act as an intervener for *v*, hence, we predict that the NOM agreement should be obligatory. This prediction is borne out, as witnessed by (4). The pattern holds even for DAT arguments that cannot undergo OS.

- (4) Það *hefur/hafa næstum öllum/fáum köttum fundist fiskarnir góðir.
EXPL *has/have almost all/few cats found fish-the.pl good
'Almost all cats/Few cats have found the fish tasty.'

Wh-movement: Since the lower vP in this type of bi-clausal structure does not have an external argument, vP does not constitute a Spell-out domain, unless Spec,vP needs to be projected for another reason (Richards, 2003; Kučerová, 2012). It follows that vP is a strong phase if DAT moves to Spec,vP, but not otherwise. We argue that only d-linked wh-words must move through spec,vP since they undergo OS. Consequently, vP becomes a Spell-out domain with *v* obligatorily agreeing with NOM. In contrast, if wh-word is not d-linked, it does not undergo OS and consequently, vP is not a strong phase: Since the wh moves only later when the appropriate probe is merged in the structure, DAT is still within the probing domain of *v* at the point when Agree takes place. Consequently, LDA is blocked. These predictions are borne out: if the DAT wh-word is d-linked, LDA is obligatory, (5-a). In contrast, if the DAT wh-word is non-d-linked, LDA is blocked, (5-b).

- (5) a. Hvaða köttum *virðist/virðast mýsnar góðar?
which cat.Dat seems.sg/seem.pl the-mice.Nom tasty
'To which cat do the mice seem to be tasty?'
- b. Hverjum mundi/*mundu hafa virst hestarnir vera seínir?
whom.Dat would.sg/*would.pl have seemed horses to-be slow
'To whom would have seemed the horses to be slow?'

Interestingly, wh-words like *hverjum* are semantically ambiguous: with the appropriate scenario (which becomes semantically plausible if the NOM argument is definite), speakers understand it either as d-linked or as non-d-linked. Crucially, the d-linked interpretation is accompanied by agreement, while the non-d-linked interpretation yields default agreement on the verb, (6).

- (6) Hverjum virðist/virðast mýsnar góðar?
whom.Dat seems.sg/seem.pl the-mice.Nom tasty
'To whom do the mice seem to be tasty?'
virðist (seems.sg) → non-d-linked
virðast (seem.pl) → d-linked