

Accounting for Variation in Number Agreement in Icelandic Dative-Nominative Constructions

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1. Introduction

1.1. Icelandic dative-nominative constructions and the Person Restriction

Normally, Icelandic verbs agree with their subjects, which show nominative case, as indicated in (1).

(1) $\overbrace{\text{SUBJ.3SG.NOM} \quad \text{VERB.3SG} \quad \text{OBJ.3PL.ACC}}^{\checkmark}$

However, there are some verbs for which the subject shows dative case, and the object nominative. In these constructions, only the nominative object may control agreement, as in (2a).¹ These dative-nominative constructions also demonstrate an effect called **the Person Restriction**: 1st/2nd person nominatives can't control agreement, as indicated in (2b).

(2) a. $\overbrace{\boxed{\text{SUBJ.3SG.DAT}} \quad \text{VERB.3PL} \quad \text{OBJ.3PL.NOM}}^{\checkmark}$ (Icelandic A)
 b. $\overbrace{\boxed{\text{SUBJ.3SG.DAT}} \quad \text{VERB.2PL} \quad \text{OBJ.2PL.NOM}}^{\times}$

As a result of the Person Restriction, in dative-nominative constructions, the verb only ever shows 3rd person morphology, so agreement with the nominative object is most apparent in agreement for number.

1.2. Variation in number agreement and the dative intervention effect

In such constructions with 3rd person nominative objects, there is variation between speakers of Icelandic in whether number agreement is allowed, required, or neither. The variation depends on the position of the dative (whether or not it intervenes between the verb and the nominative). Sigurðsson & Holmberg (2008) first documented the pattern of this variation in detail, explaining it as three different varieties: Icelandic **A**, **B** and **C**.² These varieties pattern as follows (modulo some reported gradability of judgments).

(3) $\boxed{\text{SUBJ.DAT}} \quad \text{VERB.} \left\{ \begin{array}{ll} 3\text{PL} & \text{Icelandic A} \\ 3\text{SG or 3PL} & \text{Icelandic B} \\ 3\text{SG} & \text{Icelandic C} \end{array} \right. \quad \text{OBJ.3PL.NOM}$

(4) $\text{VERB.} \left\{ \begin{array}{ll} 3\text{PL} & \text{Icelandic A} \\ 3\text{SG} & \text{Icelandic B,C} \end{array} \right. \quad \boxed{\text{SUBJ.DAT}} \quad \text{OBJ.3PL.NOM}$

As illustrated above in (3), when the dative subject is in the canonical preverbal subject position, Icelandic **A** requires number agreement, Icelandic **C** disallows it (requiring the verb to take the singular form regardless of the number feature of the nominative argument), and Icelandic **B** shows optional agreement.

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¹ Throughout this paper, dative subjects will be highlighted in grey for visual contrast.

² See also Taraldsen (1995), Holmberg & Hróarsdóttir (2003), and Ussery (2017).

This optionality disappears—as illustrated in (4)— when the dative subject ‘intervenes’ between the verb and the nominative argument, so for such constructions Icelandic **B**, like **C**, does not allow number agreement. Icelandic **A** still requires agreement even across an intervening dative. This pattern of variation in number-agreement with 3rd person nominatives is summarized in Table 1, for the three described varieties, showing the difference in Icelandic **B** between when the dative in the canonical subject position (**DAT-V-NOM**), or in the intervening position (**EXPL-V-DAT-NOM**).

	DAT-V-NOM	EXPL-V-DAT-NOM
Icelandic A	yes	yes
Icelandic B	optional	no
Icelandic C	no	no

Table 1: Number agreement with third person nominatives for the three Icelandic varieties. For a construction with a plural nominative, “yes” means a plural verb form is required, “no” means a singular verb form is required, and “optional” means that either option is allowed.

The goal of this paper is to demonstrate that the observed differences between varieties can be explained by two independent parameters: 1) the order of probing and movement operations, and 2) the visibility of dative DPs to the number probe. This proposal makes use of the ‘feature gluttony’ agreement framework of Coon & Keine 2020, to provide a principled explanation of the syntactic variation. Importantly, it accounts for the **syncretism fix**, wherein derivations which are expected to crash due to competition in fact become acceptable if and only if competing agreement forms happen to be phonologically identical.

This paper is organized as follows. Section 2 will lay out the Icelandic data to illustrate the patterns of variation sketched above, with additional details. Section 3 will introduce the main ingredients of the proposed framework, including assumptions about the nature of probes and goals, φ -feature geometry, the (in)visibility of dative arguments to probes, and the mechanism of feature gluttony. Section 4 will illustrate how the proposed mechanism and parameters work to predict the observed variation. Section 5 will summarize the account and discuss predictions.

2. The data: agreement in Icelandic dative-nominative constructions

As outlined above, there is variation in whether or not the verb agrees for number, but when there is agreement, it is with the nominative object, as exemplified in (5), never with the dative subject. There is significant evidence in the literature establishing that dative subjects are indeed subjects in these constructions and likewise that nominative objects are indeed objects (as discussed in Zaenen et al. (1985) and others; see Bobaljik (2008) for a summary).

- (5)

Honum

líka

þeir

him.DAT like.3PL they.NOM

‘He likes them’

(Icelandic **A**) Sigurðsson & Holmberg 2008³

In all three varieties, such agreement is subject to the Person Restriction (6), as demonstrated in (7).

- (6)
- The Person Restriction:** a 1st or 2nd person nominative object cannot control agreement.

- (7)

a.

**Honum*

líkum

við

him.DAT like.1PL we.NOM

intended: ‘He likes us’

b.

**Honum*

líkið

þið

him.DAT like.2PL you.NOM.PL

intended: ‘He likes you(pl)’

³ Icelandic examples are from this source, unless otherwise stated.

Importantly, simple dative-nominative constructions are reported to be **ineffable** with 1st/2nd person nominatives. As demonstrated in (8) they cannot be saved by resorting to a 3SG form.⁴

- (8) **[Honum] líkar við/þið.*
him.DAT like.3SG us/you.NOM.PL
intended: ‘He likes us/you(pl)’

The Person Restriction is in effect for all three varieties, singular and plural, independent of word order. That is, whether the dative is high (**DAT+V-NOM**) or low (**EXPL-V-DAT+NOM**), agreement with non-3rd person nominatives is unacceptable.

2.1. *Illustrating the variation*

The pattern of variation which was described above (and summarized in Table 1) is illustrated in (9) and (10) for a 3rd person plural nominative. Icelandic **A** requires plural agreement on the verb, Icelandic **C** disallows it (requiring the singular form of the verb), and Icelandic **B** shows the dative intervention effect, with agreement being optional when the dative subject has moved above the verb (as in 9b), but blocked if there is a dative *intervening* between the verb and the nominative (this occurs when there is an expletive in the subject position, allowing the dative to remain low), as in (10b).

- (9) **DAT+V-NOM** constructions⁵
- a. *að henni líkuðu þeir*
that her.DAT liked.3PL they.NOM (Icelandic **A**: agree required)
 - b. *að henni líkaði/líkuðu þeir*
that her.DAT liked.3SG/liked.3PL they.NOM (Icelandic **B**: agree optional)
 - c. *að henni líkaði þeir*
that her.DAT liked.3SG they.NOM (Icelandic **C**: no agree)
‘that she liked them’

- (10) **EXPL-V-DAT+NOM** constructions
- a. *Það líkuðu einum málfræðingi þessar hugmyndir.*
EXPL liked.3PL one linguist.DAT these ideas.NOM (A: agree required)
 - b. *Það líkaði/*líkuðu einum málfræðingi þessar hugmyndir.*
EXPL liked.3SG/*liked.3PL one linguist.DAT these ideas.NOM (B, C: no agree)
‘One linguist liked these ideas.’

2.2. *The syncretism fix: an exception to the Person Restriction*

One last important piece of attested judgment data that is crucial to a full account is the fact that an accidental syncretism can lead to unexpected grammaticality of a non-third-person nominative. The Person Restriction is circumvented whenever the verb form that would agree with that nominative is *syncretic* with an acceptable form. That is, whenever the 1st or 2nd person form is phonologically identical to the 3rd person form (due to syncretism in a particular verb’s paradigm), the Person Restriction is lifted. For example, the sentences in (11) violate the Person Restriction and should therefore be ineffable. However, grammaticality is rescued by syncretism in the paradigm for the verb *leiðast* (given in Table 2): the 1sg and 2sg forms happen to be phonologically identical to the 3sg form.

⁴ A 3sg verb form *is* available in complex ECM constructions, when the verbal complement is an entire phrase (see §A.1). This option is generally reported to not be available in simplex constructions like (8). The situation is somewhat muddled by Sigurðsson (1996)’s mention of speakers for whom such default agreement may be available.
⁵ The examples in (9), taken from Sigurðsson & Holmberg 2008, are of embedded clauses, but this detail is not important: similar examples in matrix clauses are reported in the literature, for instance see Hartmann & Heycock 2016.

- (11) a. ✓ *Henni* leiddist ég
her.DAT bored.1+2+3SG I.NOM
‘She found me boring.’
- b. ✓ *Henni* leiddist þú
her.DAT bored.1+2+3SG you.SG.NOM
‘She found you(sg) boring.’

	SG	PL
1		leiddumst
2	leiddist	
3		leiddust

Table 2: Agreement paradigm for *leiðast* ‘find boring’ (PAST), syncretism highlighted.

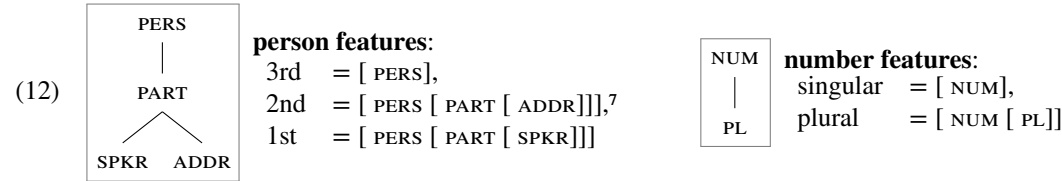
This behaviour in cases of syncretism was first documented by Sigurðsson 1996, who described it as a way for speakers to “both eat their cake and have it too”: not overtly disobeying the Person Restriction, while getting to use a 1st or 2nd person nominative. As explored below, this phenomenon provides useful evidence as to the nature of the underlying agreement mechanism for agreement.

3. Framework

3.1. Probes and goals

I propose to explain the Icelandic data with a mechanism involving φ -feature probing that is split into two independent probes: a person probe (π), and a number probe ($\#$), which probe separately, and in that order. This assumption follows previous work on the mechanism of Agree (see, e.g., Béjar & Rezac 2009, Preminger 2011, 2014, Coon & Keine 2020), literature which is supported by examples from a number of languages, with Icelandic agreement patterns in particular often being given as evidence in support of a split probe—which was originally proposed by Taraldsen 1995.⁶

Following Coon & Keine 2020, I assume a hierarchical structure for unvalued features on probes and for valued features on goals (after Harley & Ritter 2002). In particular, the mechanism used here assumes that the feature geometries for DPs are organized as in (12), with unvalued features on person and number probes organized in an equivalent hierarchy.



Within this framework, the specification of unvalued features on probes is a parameter of variation between languages, and I propose here that the observed phenomena in Icelandic can be captured with the unvalued features on probes parametrized as in (13).

- (13) **person probe** (π): [*u*PERS [*u*PART]],
- number probe** ($\#$): [*u*NUM],

That is, the person probe will be satisfied by a goal bearing first or second person features, and the number goal will be satisfied by a goal bearing any number features at all (either singular or plural). Thus the general structure of a TP for an Icelandic dative nominative construction will look like (14).

⁶ The original description had number probing before person, but all more recent work supports the other order.
⁷ Either 1st or 2nd person may alternatively be unspecified beyond PART (i.e. so that either 1st or 2nd = [PERS [PART]]). The details do not affect the current analysis. All that is important here: first or second person features entail the presence of those of third person, and likewise for number: plural features are a superset of singular.

$$(14) \quad [_{TP} \dots \#_{[UNUM]} \pi_{[UPERS[UPART]]} \dots [\dots \boxed{\text{SUBJ.DAT}} \dots [\dots \text{OBJ.NOM} \dots]]]$$

3.2. Agreement mechanism: feature gluttony

I adopt the ‘feature gluttony’ mechanism for agreement proposed in Coon & Keine 2020, wherein probes are voracious. In this account of Agree (defined in 15, and illustrated in 16), a probe may become over-valued, having entered into agreement relations with multiple goals.

$$(15) \quad \textbf{Agree (feature gluttony)} \qquad \qquad \qquad (\text{Coon \& Keine 2020: (14)})$$

A probe segment [*u*F] agrees with the closest accessible DP in its domain that bears [F]. If Agree is established, the hierarchy containing [F] is copied over to the probe, valuing and thus removing [*u*F].

$$(16) \quad [\textit{probe} \begin{matrix} \begin{matrix} \text{uX} \\ \text{uY} \end{matrix} \end{matrix} \begin{matrix} \xrightarrow{\dots} [\text{DP} \begin{matrix} \text{X} \end{matrix}] \dots [\text{DP} \begin{matrix} \text{X} \\ \text{Y} \end{matrix}]]] \end{matrix} \Rightarrow \{ [X], [X[Y]] \} \text{ copied back}$$

After probing finishes, spell-out is accomplished according to the Subset Principle (given in 17), defined by Atlamaz & Baker 2018, after Halle & Marantz (1994).

$$(17) \quad \textbf{spellout: The Subset Principle} \qquad \qquad \qquad (\text{Atlamaz \& Baker 2018: (61)})$$

A vocabulary item’s identifying features must be a subset of the features present at the node where it is to be spelled out.

Note that in this account an unvalued feature’s remaining unsatisfied (as will happen for Icelandic when there are no goals with a [PART] feature) does not break a derivation. Note also that a ‘gluttonous’ probe does not itself lead to any issue. A crash during spell-out is predicted only if there are competing possible phonological forms for the collected bundle of features. Consider the toy example in (18), illustrating just the person probe, for a construction with a 3rd person argument above a 1st person argument.

$$(18) \quad [_{TP} \pi_{[UPERS[UPART]]} [\text{DP} \begin{matrix} \text{PERS} \end{matrix}] [\text{DP} \begin{matrix} \text{PERS} \\ \text{PART[SPKR]} \end{matrix}]]] \Rightarrow \{ [PERS], [PERS[PART[SPKR]]] \}$$

After gluttonous agree, the features of both DPs have been copied back. Then, by the Subset Principle, two feature bundles are eligible for spellout: (a) [PERS], the 3rd person form; and, (b) [PERS[PART[SPKR]]], the 1st person form. With no way to choose, there is a crash. However, if forms *a* and *b* are phonologically identical, then there is no competition for spellout, predicting the syncretism fix (11).

4. Proposal

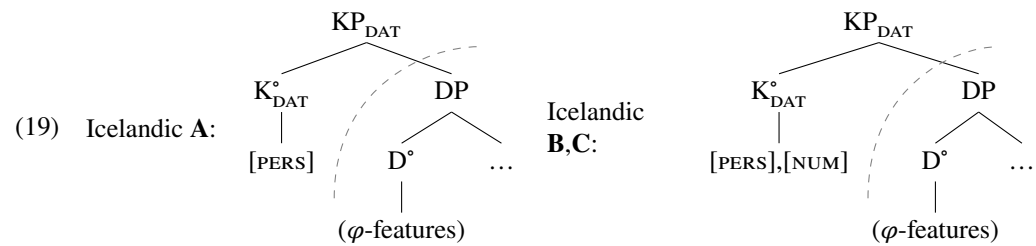
In this section I will show how the general behaviour of these dative-nominative constructions can be explained within the framework outlined above, and how the observed differences in number agreement between the varieties can be explained by the variation of two independent parameters.

4.1. Two proposed parameters of variation

In Icelandic, dative subject DPs seem to generally behave externally like 3rd person, regardless of intrinsic person or number features (as previously argued by Boeckx 2000, Sigurðsson & Holmberg 2008). Crosslinguistically, agreement with dative nominals is often limited (e.g., Rezac 2008, Alexiadou et al. 2014). However, as noted by Anagnostopoulou (2003) and Danon (2006) datives sometimes seem to intercept person-agree through their own [PERS] feature. As an explanation of the opacity of datives for Agree, following Preminger (2014: §8.3.2) and Atlamaz & Baker (2018), I will treat the dative DP as being wrapped in an KP shell (which may be thought of as somewhat intermediate between a PP and

bare DP), the head of which carries φ -feature(s), inherited from D° , with only these outer features being visible to probes.

I propose here that these **outer visible features** of dative arguments differ by variety. For Icelandic **A** there is a [PERS] feature on this shell, making it visible to the π -probe (so datives appear to be 3rd person, unspecified for number), while for varieties **B** and **C**, a [NUM] feature has become visible as well (so datives appear like 3sg)—as illustrated in (19).⁸



The second parameter of variability I propose is the **order of number-probing and EPP movement**, with order in Icelandic **A** and **B** being unspecified, and Icelandic **C** having a fixed order with number probing always preceding subject movement. Table 3 summarizes the variation of the two proposed parameters.

	DAT's visible φ -features	ordering at TP boundary
Icelandic A	[PERS]	π -probe \triangleright {#-probe, EPP mvmt}
Icelandic B	[PERS], [NUM]	π -probe \triangleright {#-probe, EPP mvmt}
Icelandic C	[PERS], [NUM]	π -probe \triangleright #-probe \triangleright EPP mvmt

Table 3: Proposed differences between varieties, the symbol \triangleright meaning ‘precedes’.

4.2. Predicting the Person Restriction, syncretism exception, and dative intervention

Using the framework described above, the Person Restriction is predicted via unresolvable competition resulting from gluttony, as follows. The π -probe has unvalued features [$u_{\text{PERS}}[u_{\text{PART}}]$], so, for example, in (7b), repeated in (20), it copies back features from both the dative and the nominative. Ultimately, with two possible forms and no way to choose, there is a crash at spell-out, as indicated in the derivation below.

(20) *Honum líkið þið
him.DAT like.2PL you.NOM.PL

Icelandic A

π DAT[PERS] NOM[PERS[PART]],[NUM[PL]]

↑

↑

↑

DAT[PERS] DAT_[PERS]

1. copy back: [PERS]
and [PERS[PART]]

2. copy back: [NUM[PL]]

3. move (EPP)

result: {[PERS],[PERS[PART]],[NUM[PL]]}

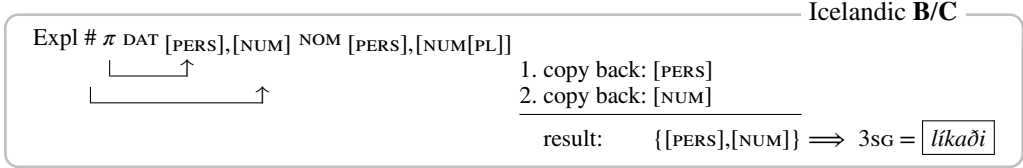
⇒ 3PL and 2PL =

If, however, the two possible forms have identical phonology, this mechanism correctly predicts the Person Restriction to be circumvented (as in 11). In the interest of space, syncretism examples are not illustrated, but the mechanism will be very similar to that above.

⁸ The current proposal is agnostic as to whether the features on K° should be thought of as being inherited from D° or as generated in place, or indeed if the KP shell should be called a PP shell. It is only important that these outer least-specified features are visible for agreement, while the full inherent features of a dative DP are hidden.

For **EXPL-V-DAT-NOM** constructions with a 3rd person nominative, the observed pattern of agreement is predicted similarly. Dative intervention blocks agreement in Icelandic **B/C**, as illustrated in (21)=(10b), since the dative will intervene during #-probing if and only if it has a [NUM] feature (which it does only in Icelandic **B, C**).

- (21) *Það líkaði einum málfræðingi þessar hugmyndir.*
 EXPL liked.3SG [one linguist].DAT [these ideas].NOM



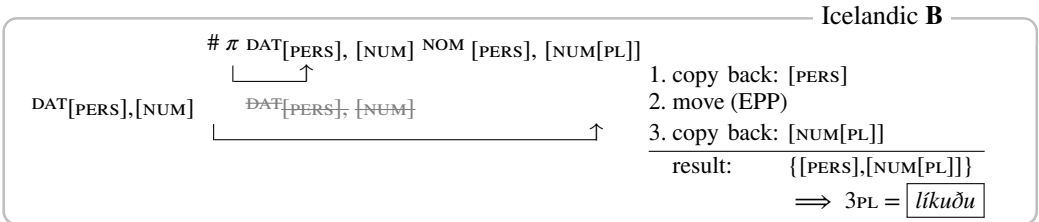
Note that in all three varieties the π -probe will only ever agree with the dative (since the lower argument is not more specified), and with no dative intervention, this leads to simple agreement across the dative in Icelandic **A** (not illustrated).

4.2.1. Predicting optional agreement in Icelandic **B**

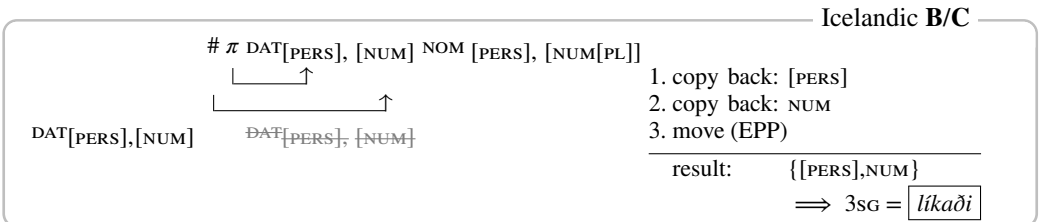
The optionality which is attested in Icelandic **B** for **DAT-V-NOM** constructions, when the dative moves above the verb, is something which previous proposals have struggled to capture.⁹ In this account optionality is explained by the order ambiguity (indicated {#-probe, EPP mvmt} in Table 3). That is, for Icelandic **B** there are two possible derivations, explaining the two possible verb forms, as illustrated for (22)=(9b).

- (22) *að henni líkaði/líkuðu þeir*
 that her.DAT liked.3SG/liked.3PL they.NOM

i. EPP preceding number probing results in the number agreeing form *líkuðu*:



ii. Number probing preceding EPP movement results in the singular form *líkaði*:



The first of these two derivations is similar to what happens in Icelandic **A** (EPP subject movement does not disrupt agreement, and the 3rd person plural form *líkuðu* is spelled out), and the second is identical to Icelandic **C** (both person and number probes agree with the features visible on the dative, and the 3rd person singular form *líkaði* is spelled out).

⁹ Sigurðsson & Holmberg 2008 model Icelandic **B** as “a kind of a hybrid..., most commonly applying Icelandic **C** grammar but resorting to Icelandic **A** grammar in [DAT-V-NOM constructions]”, admitting that “we do not have any obvious account of the agreeing alternative *líkuðu*”, referring to the sentence given here as (9b)=(22).

(24) Henni leidd
 She.DAT bored

{

-ist	*	✓	✓
1+2+3SG			
-ust	✓	✓	*
2+3PL			
A	B	C	

þið
 you.PL

There may in fact be evidence to support this prediction in the data given by (Sigurðsson 1996: (70)), which shows a bimodal distribution of judgments for this sentence, but these judgments were not broken down by variety. Sigurðsson & Holmberg 2008 discuss this very phenomenon, but don't use a simplex example, instead, their example is a complex ECM construction, where 3sg form is available as an alternative for all varieties (see §A.1). Unfortunately, Ussery (2017), who did a detailed study of judgments in these constructions, does not specifically investigate cases of syncretism. So these predictions need testing.

To summarize, the predictions are as follows. Icelandic **A** should pattern as described in previous literature: the Person Restriction should be lifted only when there is syncretism with the 3rd person form of matching number (plural for plural nominatives, singular for singular). For Icelandic **C**, however, the Person Restriction should be lifted if and only if there is syncretism between 3rd person and non-3rd person in the singular (even for plural nominatives). For Icelandic **B**, both versions of the syncretism fix should be available. These predictions should be examined in future work.

5.2. Conclusion

The goal of this paper has been to show that a feature gluttony approach to agreement can be used for Icelandic to predict the observed patterns of agreement in dative-nominative constructions, and do so more completely than previous treatments. This includes explaining the Person Restriction, and the syncretism fix with which speakers can “both eat their cake and have it too.”¹⁰ As demonstrated, the mechanism can explain the reported variation in number agreement between the varieties **A**, **B**, and **C** as described by Sigurðsson & Holmberg 2008, if the varieties vary in 1) the visibility of a number feature on dative subjects, and 2) the relative order of number probing and EPP subject movement.

This account makes a set of concrete and falsifiable predictions about differences between varieties in how the syncretism fix applies. An investigation into these predictions should allow this already well-studied area of Icelandic grammar to continue to be a useful test-case for crosslinguistic assumptions about the mechanism of Agree, and the status of dative arguments.

A. Appendix

A.1. Complex exceptional case marking constructions in Icelandic

Icelandic also has a complex ECM dative-nominative construction, with raising verbs.¹¹ The Person Restriction applies equally to such constructions (25). However, 3sg agreement is also possible (as in 26). This has been explained as optional agreement of the verb with the infinitival complement (Sigurðsson & Holmberg 2008). Preminger 2011 captures this with a relativized person licensing constraint (PLC), saying that non-third person pronouns needing to be licensed, but only within a clause.

- (25) a. Honum mundu virðast [þeir vera hæfir.]
 him.DAT would.3PL seem they.NOM be competent
 ‘They would seem competent to him’ (**Icelandic A**)
- b. *Honum mundum virðast [við vera hæfir.]
 him.DAT would.1PL seem we.NOM be competent

¹⁰ So, gluttony seems an appropriate mechanism.

¹¹ Such verbs are: *finnast* ‘think, feel, find, consider’; *virðast* ‘seem’; *heyrast* ‘(seem to) hear’, ‘sound as if’; *skiljast* ‘(get to) understand’; *sýnast* ‘seem (to see/look)’; *þykja* ‘find, seem, think (that)’; *reynast* ‘prove (to be ...)’ (Sigurðsson & Holmberg 2008).

- c. ***Honum** munduð virðast [þið vera hæfir.]
him.DAT would.2PL seem you.NOM be competent
- (26) **Honum** mundi virðast [við/þið/þeir vera hæfir.]
him.DAT would.3SG seem we/you/they.NOM.PL be competent
‘We/you/they would seem competent to him’

A further investigation of these constructions may be necessary to determine the extent to which they fit within the current account. This proposal focuses on simplex constructions only.

A.1.1. *Syncretism in the plural with complex ECM*

The examples given by Sigurðsson & Holmberg 2008 for syncretism in the plural are given in a complex ECM setting—e.g. their (53), given here as (27). The current proposal’s prediction of disagreement between varieties **A** and **C** is rather obscured in these examples by the availability of the 3sg form, so such multiclausal examples are not the most useful for the current proposal, but are given here for reference.

- (27) a. **Henni** virtist/virtust þið eitthvað einkennilegir
her.DAT seemed.1+2+3SG/2+3PL you.NOM.PL somewhat strange
You seemed somewhat strange to her.
- b. **Henni** virtist/*virtumst við eitthvað einkennilegir.
her.DAT seemed.1+2+3SG/1PL us.NOM.PL somewhat strange
‘We seemed somewhat strange to her.’

A.2. *Long Distance Agreement via object shift*

Holmberg & Hróarsdóttir 2003 describe a phenomenon of long distance agreement that (with a plural nominative across a dative intervener) is possible *if dative intervener is plural* (as in 28a), in Icelandic **B** (which normally would disallow agreement across a dative intervener, as in 10b). However, only certain dative interveners may be agreed across and not others (cf. 28b, (Kučerová 2016)). Kučerová explains this apparent puzzle in detail, and resolves it as resulting from object shift: those datives which always block agreement are precisely those which can’t undergo object shift.

- (28) a. Það finnst/finnast mörgum stúdentum tölvurnar ljótar.
EXPL find.3SG/.3PL many students.DAT computers.DEF.NOM ugly.NOM
‘Many students find the computers ugly’
- b. Það finnst/*finnast fáum börnum tölvurnar ljótar.
EXPL find.3SG/.3PL few children.DAT computers.DEF.NOM ugly.NOM
‘Few children find the computers ugly’

A.3. *Syncretism fix in other languages*

The syncretism fix phenomenon seen only in Icelandic. Another famous example is that of German free relatives, in which the *wh*-word must show the case selected for by the matrix verb, as well as the embedded verb. If the two cases being selected for differ, the sentence is ungrammatical, but can be saved by syncretism:

- (29) Syncretism fix in German free relatives (subscript is case verb selects for) Schütze 2003: 300
- a. *Ich zerstöre_{ACC} [wer/wen mich ärgert_{NOM}]
I destroy who.NOM/who.ACC me.ACC annoys

- b. *Ich zerstöre_{ACC} [was mich ärgert_{NOM}]*
 I destroy what.NOM+ACC me.ACC annoys
 ‘I destroy who(ever) annoys me.’

See also examples from Polish in Schütze 2003, and discussion of German copular constructions in Coon & Keine 2020.

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