Getting out of the way in Icelandic: a sideward movement approach

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This paper addresses the mixed behaviour of moved interveners in Icelandic. Consider the classic contrast in (1)-(2): in (1), T fails to agree in number with a low nominative, seemingly because there is an intervening dative, and so we get ‘default’ 3S agreement; in (2), the dative is moved ‘out of the way’ above T and number agreement with the nominative is possible.

(1) Það virðist / *virðast einhverri konu myndirnar vera ljótar.

excl seem.3S seem.3P some woman.DAT paintings.the.NOM be ugly

‘It seems to some woman that the paintings are ugly.’ (Sigurðsson and Holmberg 2008; S&H)

(2) Einhverri konu virðast myndirnar vera ljótar.

some woman.DAT seem.3P paintings.the.NOM be ugly

(= (1), S&H)

If (1) is due to the locality of Agree (S&H; Kučerová 2016 a.o.), then movement solves the locality problem; we call this ‘salvation by movement’ (SbM). But there are technical problems: how do we order movement before Agree if move is Agree+copy, and why doesn’t the lower copy intervene? There are also empirical issues, with asymmetries between person and number. Comparing (2) and (3)a indicates that SbM salvages plural but not person agreement, as agreement with a 1/2 low nominative is ruled out. One might appeal to Bejar and Rezac’s (2009) Person Licensing, but this would be troubled by the fact that 1/2 person low nominatives are possible when the 1/2 and 3 inflections are syncratic, (3)b.

(3) a. *Henni líkaðir dū.  b. (?) Henni leiddist dū.

her.DAT like.2S you.S.NOM  her.DAT bored-at.3S/2S/1S you.S.NOM

‘She likes you.’ ‘She found you boring.’ (Schütze 2003)

Schütze (2003) argues that the effect of syncretism obtains because T Agrees with both the dative subject and nominative object for person and syncretism between the agreeing forms allows PF to realize this ‘double agreement’ with a single form; thus, (3)a is out because Agree provides PF with conflicting requirements. Importantly, agreement with the dative cannot result in instructions to realize the verb as third person singular, as (2) shows that syncretism with the singular isn’t a pre-requisite for low nominative agreement generally. But note furthermore that a moved 1/2 dative does not allow 1/2 agreement, (4); rather, third person is required, and the nominative may control plural agreement.

(4) Mig grunaði ekkert

me.DAT suspected.3S nothing.NOM

‘I suspected nothing.’ (Thráinsson 2007)

Descriptively, then, it seems that moving an intervener can get number and local person ‘out of the way,’ but not third person. Why would this obtain? We develop an account which combines the sideward movement approach to SbM in Thoms (2019) with the theory φ-features in Harbour (2016).

Intervention and sideward movement. Regarding SbM, Thoms (2019) addresses the theoretical problems of partially intervening lower copies of movement by reconsidering what syntactic content is present in the base position of movement. On a standard analysis, movement of an intervener ‘out of the way’ involves constructing the DP, merging it in its intervening thematic position (e.g. Spec,VP; simplifying) and then remerging it into its surface position (e.g. Spec,T; see Fig.1). As noted above, all the DP’s features should be present in that thematic position and they must intervene for probes looking down beyond that position. Building on ideas in Johnson (2012), who adopts a multidominance approach, Thoms suggests an alternative: instead of always merging a fully constructed DP into the thematic position, in some cases it is possible to merge only a minimal subpart of the nominal (i.e. the nP) there and then merge the rest of the nominal’s functional structure (D, whichever other FPs there may be) with the nP in a separate subroot, as an instance of sideward movement of the nP; the projection formed in this subroot is then
merged into Spec,TP in the main root. See Fig.2. A significant property of derivations like this, what Thoms calls *layering* derivations, is that they derive distinct sets of c-command relations from standard movement derivations: in the standard derivation in Fig.1, D and F are c-commanded by and thus visible to T, whereas for a layered derivation as in Fig.2, they are not. Layering thus provides a way to evade locality violations: if the features that T is probing for are on D and F but not n, then T will be able to probe into V′ in Fig.2 but not Fig.1. To predict intervention, we thus consider the arrangement of features within nominal interveners, and the independent factors which may restrict merging a non-DP (e.g. nP) in argument positions. We concentrate on predictions from the former.

**Nominal structure.** Our account shares with S&H the idea that asymmetries between person and number should be accounted for in terms of the hierarchical relation between functional projections hosting person and number, but we take the relevant hierarchical relation to be internal to the nominal, with motivation coming from Harbour’s work (2011, 2014, 2016). He argues that number features must be merged in a hierarchically higher position than person features in nominals on heads of distinct functional projections between the core nP and D; see Fig.3. Finally, we make the following independently motivated assumptions about φ-features: (a) number is understood in terms of binary features (Harbour 2014), with no unmarked value in the syntax; (b) person comprises the features [participant] and [author], with third person being the value corresponding to a lack of these features; that is, it’s an unmarked value that is associated with all argumental nominals. The outcome of these assumptions is that if a φ-probe finds an nP with no D, Number or Person, it will acquire a third person value from the nP, but no value for number.

**Deriving the data.** Some preliminaries on Icelandic case and agreement: we assume that all DPs, including datives, are interveners for minimality purposes, and that when T Agrees with a dative DP it gets a ‘default’ 3S value (in the talk we outline an implementation in terms of Abels’ (2003) theory, where the dative is in effect a PP). T probes its domain until it finds a nominative, but failure to find a nominative doesn’t lead to ungrammaticality (Preminger 2014). As for SbM, we adopt a version of Thoms’ analysis of ergative subjects and propose that SbM with dative interveners comes about via a layering derivation, where only a minimal nP is merged in Spec,VP; Person, Num and D are therefore added onto the nP in a separate subroot, and that DP is remerged in Spec,TP. Thus when T probes, it finds only an nP, and in accordance with the above assumptions, this provides a third person value to T probe. But since T has not found a nominative and still lacks a value for number, it continues to probe and then finds the lower nominative DP.

For a case like (2), this means T finds plural on the object and third person on both subject and object, and the correct 3P form is derived (see Fig.4). Thus by merging NumP and PersonP in a sideward fashion (not depicted in Fig.4), these features are in effect gotten ‘out of the way’ by movement. As for (3)a, a layering derivation ensures that T acquires a third person value from the higher nP, and 2S from the nominative object, and we follow Schütze’s analysis by taking this to give rise to a problem at PF, and (3)b is syntactically identical but the syncretism allows the structure to be realized. (4) is possible because a layering derivation puts just an nP in Spec,VP (much like Fig.4), with PersonP and NumP being sideward merged onto it to create a 1S DP; these features would not be visible to T when it probes its c-command domain, but the nP would, and this would give T a third person value.