

Syntactic configurationality and discourse configurationality in Old Icelandic: evidence from distributional differences across clause types

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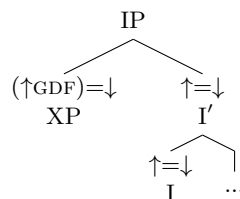
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Syntactic configurationality and discourse configurationality are two gradient properties of languages. Syntactic configurationality refers to how endocentric/exocentric a language's c-structure is (Nordlinger 1998; Bresnan et al. 2015); discourse configurationality concerns to what extent specific discourse functions are associated with particular structural positions (Kiss 1995). Typologically, there is often a trade-off between the two – the less syntactically configurational a language is, the more likely it is to be discourse-configurational, and vice versa.

In this paper, I discuss these properties in relation to Old Icelandic (c.1150-1350). This language stage presents an interesting case study for two reasons. Firstly, Old Norse/Icelandic has been claimed to be (syntactically) non-configurational (Faarlund 1990), though this claim has been criticised (Platzack 1991; Stockwell & King 1995; Rögnvaldsson 1995). Secondly, more recent examinations of word order in Old Icelandic – and early Germanic more broadly – have indicated that information structure is a key factor driving word patterns, and some have claimed early Germanic languages to be at least partially discourse-configurational (e.g. Trips & Fuß 2009; Petrova & Hinterhölzl 2010). I show that LFG's parallel architecture is well suited for tackling this issue, since information structure is handled in its own dimension (i-structure, e.g. Butt et al. 2016), separate to c-structure. Thus, discourse configurationality – in terms of c- to i-structure correspondences – can be handled independently to syntactic configurationality, captured purely at c-structure. Moreover, I show that the flexibility of LFG's c-structure allows for a more nuanced approach to the Old Icelandic data, which indicates a mixture of exocentric and endocentric structures. I claim that Old Icelandic can at least to some extent be considered syntactically configurational, and also claim that much of the word order patterns one finds is driven by information structure and its partial discourse-configurational status. The relevant evidence for this claim concerns distributional differences across clause types and draws on the assumption that the internal information structure of matrix clauses is inherently different to that of subordinate clauses (Cristofaro 2003; Matic' et al. 2014).

With respect to syntactic configurationality, in the original discussion the criteria for (non-)configurationality were fuzzy and not clearly defined. Faarlund's (1990) evidence for Old Icelandic being non-configurational included, for instance, constituency tests which indicate the lack of a VP-constituent (absence of VP-fronting, clefting and pronominalisation), but also wider evidence such as the possibility for null arguments, the absence of expletive elements, as well as rare instances of discontinuous noun phrases and prepositional phrases. Furthermore, no distinction was made with respect to configurationality at clause-level versus at phrase-level. Since syntactic configurationality in LFG relates to levels of endocentricity/exocentricity, it is based on evidence from constituency tests and observed word order patterns alone. In line with this view, I claim that Old Icelandic is at least somewhat configurational at clause-level, in that an endocentric IP projection is already obligatorily present, cf. (1), headed by the finite verb in I and with an optional SpecIP position which is information-structurally privileged (see also Booth & Schätzle 2019). The obligatoriness of I gives rise to V1 and V2 orders and rules out V3/V-later orders which are present in other early Germanic languages, as previously shown (e.g. Rögnvaldsson 1995).

(1)



Lower down in the c-structure, I show that part of the original claim – that the verb and its object(s) do not form a constituent (Faarlund 1990) – is strongly supported by both constituency tests and word order phenomena. As well as the original evidence, I claim that this is further evidenced by the phenomenon known as ‘Stylistic Fronting’ (Maling 1990), whereby various parts of the verbal complex (nonfinite verbs and verbal particles), as well as certain other categories, can be fronted to the prefield, e.g. (2).

(2)

- a. **Svikið** hefir þú oss Egill.
betray.PST.PTCP have.PRS you.NOM we.ACC Egill
‘You have betrayed us, Egill.’ (1350, Bandamenn.103)
- b. **Vera** munu þar nokkurir óvíglegri en þú.
be.INF may there some.NOM more-unwarrior-like.NOM than you.NOM
‘There may be some more unwarrior-like than you.’ (1450, Vilhjalmur.99.2040)
- c. **Upp** mun nú gefin sökin við þig, Halli.
PTCL may now give.PASS.PTCP case.DEF with you, Halli

‘One must now declare the case against you, Halli.’ (1275, Morkin.1158)

I also claim that the flexible order of the verb and its object(s) which is well known for Old Icelandic (Hróarsdóttir 2000) e.g. (3), is further evidence for the absence of an endocentric VP.

- (3) a. Eg mun þiggja hrossin.
 I will accept.INF horses.DEF
 ‘I will accept the horses.’ (V-O)
- b. Faðir minn mun því ráða.
 father my will that decide.INF
 ‘My father will decide that.’ (O-V)

Further exocentricity is found within noun phrases, which have been claimed to be non-configurational to some degree (Börjars et al. 2016), as evidenced by the fact that noun-phrase-internal word order is largely free.

As well as in relation to syntactic configurationality, I also examine Old Icelandic in terms of the interaction between word order and information structure, which can inform its status with respect to discourse configurationality. I claim that many word order patterns do not result from exclusively structural constraints, but are also motivated by information structure. My evidence for this comes from observed distributional differences across clause types in data from the Icelandic Parsed Historical Corpus (‘IcePaHC’, Wallenberg et al. 2011), as well as additional data from MICEPaHC, an extended Penn-style treebank of Old Icelandic saga texts currently under development.¹ I restrict the study to clauses which contain a finite verb and an overt subject, in order to abstract away from e.g. conjunction reduction or pronoun incorporation. The evidence rests on the assumption that there are inherent differences in information-structural properties between matrix and subordinate clauses. Specifically, since subordinate clauses typically constitute presupposed background information, they have been claimed to play an information-structural role in the overall matrix sentence but not to have internal information structure of their own (Cristofaro 2003; Matić et al. 2014). As such, word order patterns which are motivated by information structure in matrix clauses are predicted to be absent or marginal in subordinate clauses.

The corpus findings show some clear differences between matrix and subordinate clauses with respect to verb position, subject position and the prefield, despite the standard claim that Old Icelandic is a ‘symmetric V2 language’ (Faarlund 2004). The first relates to verb position and V1, which here refers to a particular type of V1 with a postfinite overt subject (‘narrative inversion’), e.g. (4).

- (4) Þórir hann þá eigi að stefna til gatnanna.
 dare.PRS he.NOM then NEG to go.INF to paths.DEF
 ‘He then dares not make for the paths.’ (1250, Sturlunga.445.2015)

The findings show that this type of V1 is decidedly a root phenomenon, being very marginal in subordinate clauses (0.9%), compared to matrix clauses (16.9%), see Table 1. There is also a clear difference with respect to subject position: whereas matrix clauses show a roughly 50/50 split for prefinite/postfinite subjects, in subordinate clauses the preference is overwhelmingly for prefinite subjects (86.8%), see Table 2.

Clause type	V1	V2	Total	%V1
Matrix	1547	7594	9141	16.9%
Subordinate	49	5426	5475	0.9%

Table 1: Verb position by clause type in IcePaHC (1150-1350)

Clause type	Prefinite	Postfinite	Total	% Prefinite
Matrix	4427	4908	9335	47.4%
Subordinate	4860	737	5597	86.8%

Table 2: Subject position by clause type in IcePaHC (1150-1350)

The marginal nature of V1 and the strong preference for prefinite subjects in subordinate clauses are clearly related: less V1 means fewer subjects which are postfinite. But the two observations can in turn be attributed to how information structure motivates word order in matrix clauses, and how these motivations are relaxed in subordinate clauses. Firstly, the lack of V1 can be attributed to the fact that this type of V1 is an information-structural device used to signal continuity in contexts where the same scene is maintained (Booth & Schätzle 2019), and is thus motivated in sequences of independent matrix clauses but not in subordinate clauses which are already inherently dependent. Secondly, if we remove V1 from the equation altogether and just look at what occupies the prefield in V2 clauses, we find that still the preference for a subject in the prefield is higher in subordinate clauses (85.7%) than in matrix clauses (58.7%), see Table 3.

¹<https://github.com/antonkarl/micepahc>

Clause type	SUBJ		OBJ		ADJ		Left Dislocation		Stylistic Fronting	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
matrix	4427	58.7%	359	4.8%	2200	29.2%	159	2.1%	400	5.3%
subordinate	5378	85.7%	73	1.2%	548	8.7%	23	0.4%	256	4.1%

Table 3: Prefield categories by clause type in IcePaHC (1150-1350)

This patterns with the observation that the frequency of an adjunct in the prefield is greater in matrix (29.2%) than in subordinate clauses (8.7%). Again, I attribute this distinction to differing strengths in information structure motivations. A closer examination of the data reveals that a lot of these adjuncts are temporal-spatial adverbs which can be considered discourse-linkers, such as *þá* ‘then’, *þar* ‘there’, *nú* ‘now’, e.g. (5).

- (5) **Þá** hafði hann hálf annað hundrað skipa.
 then have.PST he.NOM half other hundred ships.GEN
 ‘Then he had half of another hundred ships.’ (1275, Morkin.268)

As a cohesion device, the presence of a discourse-linker in the prefield can be expected in sequences of independent matrix clauses, but is less strongly motivated in subordinate clauses, which are within the context of a single matrix clause.

In sum, I approach an old issue in the literature on Old Icelandic – the (syntactic) configurationality debate – from a novel perspective, leveraging LFG’s c-structure and i-structure, considering information structural differences across clause types, and supporting the claims with quantitative corpus evidence.

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