The Alternating Predicate Puzzle: Comparing Icelandic and German

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One of the peculiarities of Icelandic syntax is the existence of the so-called ALTERNATING PREDICATES, i.e. Dat-Nom/Nom-Dat predicates where the arguments of the argument structure seem to "swap" places with each other, not always with any apparent change in lexical semantics (cf. Jónsson 1997–98, Barðdal 2001, Eythórsson & Barðdal 2005):

(1)a. ***Mér*** *fellur* ***þessi bók*** *vel í geð.* Dat-Nom
me.DAT falls this.NOM book.NOM well in liking
'I like this book.'

   b. ***Þessi bók*** *fellur* ***mér*** *vel í geð.* Nom-Dat
this.NOM book.NOM falls me.DAT well in liking
'This book pleases me.'

These predicates are thus different from other canonically and non-canonically case-marked predicates in Icelandic in that they show up with two default word orders, both equally "neutral." This stands in a stark contrast with predicates where such word order variation always coincides with a change in information structure, as in topicalization, in which the two word orders are not equally "neutral". Alternating predicates are an understudied phenomenon, both synchronically and diachronically, and in fact few researchers are even aware of their existence. Consequently, the fact that the nominative can behave as a subject in this construction often prevents scholars from investigating the potential subject behavior of the dative argument and from taking it seriously.

An investigation of the syntactic behavior of alternating predicate constructions in Modern Icelandic reveals that either argument, i.e. the nominative stimulus and the dative experiencer, can behave syntactically as a subject with regard to a number of subject tests. In this respect, both arguments behave syntactically different from canonical objects. One test in particular, control, has been shown to be crosslinguistically valid and is generally regarded as absolutely indisputable by the linguistic community. In control infinitives all and only subjects must be left unexpressed, as shown for either argument in (2) below, the Dat in (2a) and the Nom in (2b):

(2)a. *að maður þurfi að vera haldinn þrælslund til að* ___ Dat-Nom
that one.NOM needs to be held severe.servility for to PRO.DAT
falla í geð ***slík fásinna***
fall.INF in liking such.NOM craziness.NOM
'that one needs to be equipped with severe servility to like such craziness'

   b. *Umræður um þrætuefni geta verið erfiðar vegna löngunar til að* ___ Nom-Dat
discussions about disputes can be difficult because.of longing for to PRO.NOM
falla ***félögunum*** *í geð*
fall.INF friends-the.DAT in liking
'Discussions about disputes can be difficult because of their need to be to their peers' liking'

Alternating predicates of this type have been observed in a number of other Germanic languages, such as Faroese (Barnes 1986), Old and Middle English (Allen 1995), and older Mainland Scandinavian languages (Barðdal 1998), and their apposite existence in German has also been suggested in passing (Eythórsson & Barðdal 2005). This talk further explores that hypothesis, specifically for German.

An earlier comparison between Icelandic and German (Eythórsson & Barðdal 2005, Barðdal 2006) reveals that the difference between the two languages with

respect to oblique subjects is gradient and not categorical; in fact, oblique subject-like arguments in German pass all the subject tests of that language, with some restrictions, in contrast to what has been claimed in Zaenen, Maling & Thráinsson (1985) and much subsequent work. In the present study, a systematic comparison between Icelandic and German is undertaken concerning the behavior of these alternating predicates and their arguments with regard to the major tests for subjecthood which have been used to establish the existence of oblique subjects in Icelandic: neutral word order, subject-verb inversion, clause-bound reflexivization, raising-to-object, raising-to-subject, conjunction reduction and control infinitives.

The comparison entails, first, a presentation of alternating Dat-Nom/Nom-Dat predicates like *falla í geð* 'like, please' and non-alternating Dat-Nom predicates like *líka* 'like' in Icelandic. This comparison has revealed a systematic asymmetry between the two types of dative subject predicates in Icelandic. Second, we compare alternating Dat-Nom/Nom-Dat predicates in Icelandic with so-called Dat-Nom predicates in German, like *gefallen* 'like, please'. Finally, this comparison reveals exactly the same syntactic behavior for German *gefallen* as is found with the alternating *falla í geð* 'like, please', as opposed to the behavior of the non-alternating *líka* 'like' in Icelandic. That is, exactly the same kind of asymmetry manifested between *falla í geð* and *líka* in Icelandic is also found between *gefallen* in German and *líka* in Icelandic, confirming the analysis that either argument of *gefallen* in German can behave syntactically as a subject, although of course not simultaneously. This comparative analysis explains why the German data, relevant for the debate on oblique subjects in that language (cf. Fanselow 2002, Bayer 2004, Haider 2005, Wunderlich 2009), are ambiguous and hence the confusion and seemingly contradictory behavior of verbs like *gefallen* in German. Without granting the possibility of an ALTERNATING PREDICATE analysis, the German data will most likely continue to create a state of dubiety in the field.

There is little consensus in the linguistic literature on how to analyze alternating predicates of this type theoretically, i.e. how to implement this behavior into theoretical models of grammar (cf. Barðdal 2001). We aim to present two such analyses here, a Construction Grammar analysis and a Minimalist analysis, in order to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of each approach.

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