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## On the Interaction of Reflexives and Periphrastic Causatives in Icelandic

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### Abstract

Cross-linguistically, reflexive verbs frequently show puzzling behavior when they are embedded under causatives. We focus on two ways that this pattern manifests itself in Icelandic Indirect Causatives, formed with the light verb *láta* 'let/make/have': (i) verbs that normally cannot be embedded are allowed with reflexives, and (ii) a pleonastic use of the causative verb becomes available in imperatives with oblique subjects. We propose that these facts follow from the syntax of long-distance reflexives (which involves a "point-of-view" operator  $OP_{POV}$ ), and a Voice-stacking analysis of indirect causatives, where two Voice heads are added on top of a single vP. The claim is that there is a limited set of ways to interpret the Voice-stacking structure, and reflexives provide one particular way to do this that is not otherwise available. Assuming that either Voice head can introduce a thematic interpretation or be expletive, we propose that in principle, there are four ways to interpret the Voice-stacking structure. Our analysis supports the view that the syntax and semantics of causatives is derived from the interaction of more basic primitives and mechanisms, and is not encoded with a dedicated functional head in the grammar.

# On the Interaction of Reflexives and Periphrastic Causatives in Icelandic

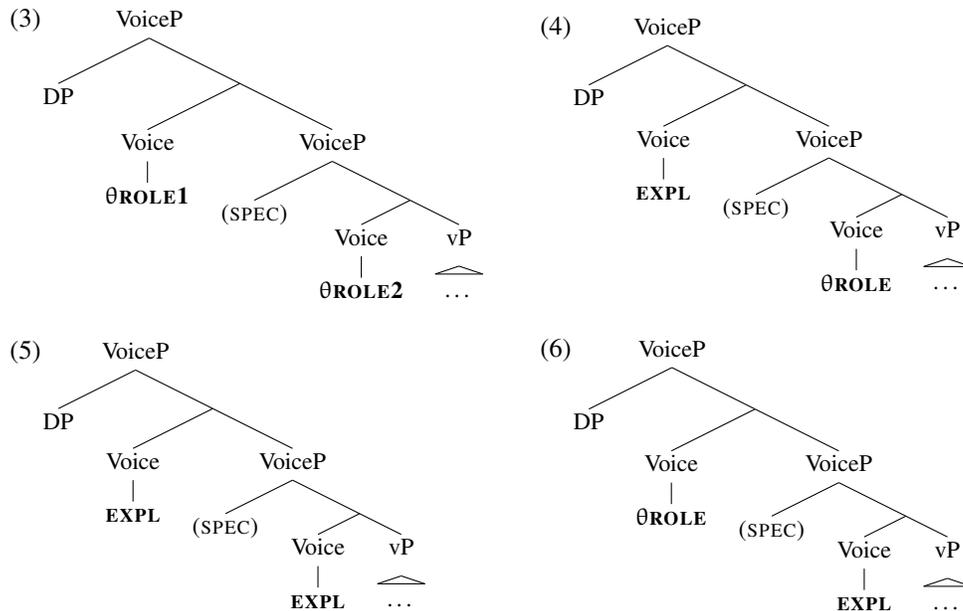
Jim Wood and Einar Freyr Sigurðsson\*

## 1 Introduction

Cross-linguistically, reflexive verbs frequently show puzzling behavior when they are embedded under causatives (Taraldsen 1983, 1984, Loewenthal 2003, Holvoet 2016). In this paper, we focus on two ways that this pattern manifests itself in Icelandic Indirect Causatives, formed with the light verb *láta* ‘let/make/have’: (i) verbs that normally cannot be embedded are allowed with reflexives, as in (1), and (ii) a pleonastic use of the causative verb becomes available in imperatives with oblique subjects, as in (2).<sup>1</sup>

- (1) **Ed Sheeran<sub>i</sub>** vill ekki láta horfa á **sig<sub>i</sub>**.  
 Ed Sheeran wants not let watch on REFL.ACC  
 ‘Ed Sheeran doesn’t want to be watched.’<sup>2</sup>
- (2) **Lát-tu þér batna!**  
 let-you.NOM 2.REFL.DAT get.better  
 ‘Get better!’ (Lit. ‘Let/make yourself get better.’)

We propose that these facts follow from the syntax of long-distance reflexives (which involves a “point-of-view” operator  $OP_{POV}$ ), and a Voice-stacking analysis of indirect causatives (Nash 2017, Nie 2019, E.F. Sigurðsson and Wood 2020, Key 2020), where two Voice heads are added on top of a single vP. The claim is that there is a limited set of ways to interpret the Voice-stacking structure, and reflexives provide one particular way to do this that is not otherwise available. Assuming that either Voice head can introduce a thematic interpretation or be expletive, we propose that in principle, there are four ways to interpret the Voice-stacking structure, schematized in (3)–(6).



\*Thanks to Ásta Svavarsdóttir, Hinrik Hafsteinsson and Hlíf Árnadóttir for discussing some of the data presented in this paper and giving their judgments.

<sup>1</sup>The interpretation of the verb *láta* can seem to correspond to English *let*, *make*, or *have*. We believe that this is ultimately important, but we cannot address it directly in this paper, so we simply gloss it as ‘let’ and choose the translation most appropriate for each case.

<sup>2</sup><https://www.ruv.is/mors/ed-sheeran-vill-ekki-lata-horfa-a-sig>

The structures in (4) and (5), where the higher Voice head is expletive, would normally not be interpretable, since the DP specifier of that Voice head could not be integrated semantically into the denotation of the event. However, the presence of a long-distance reflexive in the vP provides a way to interpret these structures, explaining the two ways that reflexives interact with the causative structure mentioned above. The analysis supports the view that the syntax and semantics of causatives is derived from the interaction of more basic primitives and mechanisms, and is not encoded with a dedicated functional head in the grammar.

The paper is organized as follows. First, we provide some background on the Voice-stacking structure, and the “agent splitting” interpretation of it, which is an example of (3). We then provide some very brief background on Icelandic reflexives, and discuss how they interact with the Voice-stacking structure to derive instances of (4) and (5). Finally, we discuss certain idioms which exemplify (6).

## 2 Causatives as Voice-stacking

Analyses of causatives across languages vary in terms of whether they involve a dedicated causative head in the cartography of the vP, or are derived from the interaction of independent elements (see Harley 2017). Recently, a family of proposals has emerged claiming that causatives may involve Voice-stacking—a Voice head that takes a VoiceP complement directly (Nash 2017, Nie 2019, E.F. Sigurðsson and Wood 2020, Key 2020).

- (7) [VoiceP CAUSER Voice [VoiceP CAUSEE Voice [vP ...event... ]]]

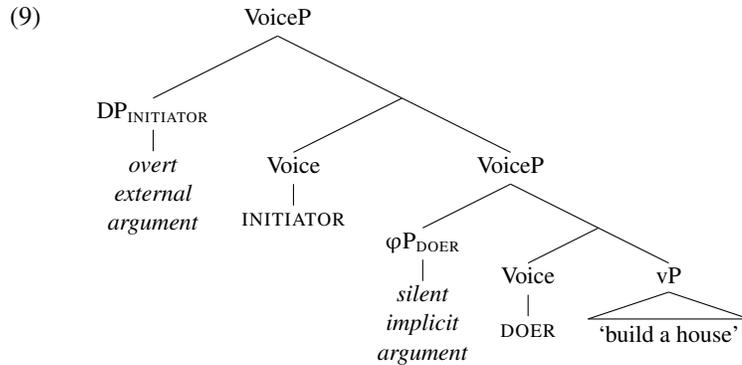
One immediate problem with this view is how to interpret this structure: Voice generally introduces the agent of the event denoted by its complement (without changing the event variable itself, e.g. by Event Identification), but two Voice heads cannot both introduce agent roles for the same event (the “Stratal Uniqueness Law” in Perlmutter and Postal 1983; see also Myler 2016:286 for the same issue). However, Myler (2016) and Wood and Marantz (2017) (among others) have argued that Voice heads in general are underspecified for meaning, are compatible with a variety of thematic roles, and may even be semantically expletive (see also Alexiadou et al. 2015, Schäfer 2017, and De Belder to appear for more general discussion). E.F. Sigurðsson and Wood (2020) argue for a Voice-stacking analysis of Icelandic Indirect Causatives (ICs), where the specifier of the lower VoiceP is a silent  $\varphi$ P; the light verb *láta* ‘let/make/have’ is a realization of the higher Voice head.

- (8) [VoiceP þau Voice(=*láta*) [VoiceP  $\varphi$ P [ Voice [vP byggja hús ]]]  
 they let build house  
 ‘They let/made/had someone build a house.’

Importantly, the lower  $\varphi$ P cannot antecede reflexives, but does define a binding domain: thus, complex reflexives like *sjálfan sig*, which must be locally bound, are ungrammatical, and long-distance simple reflexives like *sig* can only be bound by the higher (overt) subject.

As for interpretation, E.F. Sigurðsson and Wood develop Lundin’s (2003) proposal for Swedish, which is that these constructions involve “agent splitting”. The idea is that a canonical agent is both an INITIATOR, responsible for agentive, sentient aspects of bringing the event about, and a DOER, who is responsible for performing the physical actions that bring the event about. In ICs, these two aspects of agency are split, divided across the Voice heads, with the higher head introducing the INITIATOR and the lower head introducing the DOER. The apparent causative meaning, in this case, does not come from having two separate events related by a cause relation, but rather from having one event with a distinct INITIATOR and DOER (leading to the inference that there must be some kind of relationship between them so that the initiator could control what the doer does); see (9).

However, agent splitting is not the only conceivable way of resolving the issue of how to interpret a Voice-stacking configuration. In what follows, we will show how the presence of a reflexive leads to another possibility.



### 3 Background on Icelandic Simple Reflexives

Icelandic simple reflexives can be bound over an indefinite amount of structure. The reflexive in (10) can be bound by any of the c-commanding DPs in that sentence.

- (10) **Jón<sub>i</sub>** segir að **María<sub>j</sub>** telji að **Haraldur<sub>k</sub>** vilji að **Billi<sub>l</sub>** raki **sig<sub>i/j/k/l</sub>**.  
 John says that Mary believes that Harold wants that Billy shaves REFL.ACC  
 ‘John says that Mary believes that Harold wants Bill to shave / shave him/her.’

The structure generating ICs interacts with long-distance reflexives (LDRs) in an interesting way. It has long been recognized that Icelandic LDRs encode “point of view” (Maling 1984, H.Á. Sigurðsson 1986, 1990, Sells 1987). In (11), *Siggu* in *skoðun Siggu* ‘Sigga’s opinion’ and the reflexive pronoun *sig* are co-indexed even though *Siggu* does not c-command *sig*. The example is grammatical nonetheless.

- (11) **Skoðun Siggu<sub>i</sub>** er að **sig<sub>i</sub>** vanti hæfileika.  
 opinion Sigga’s is that REFL.ACC lacks.SBJV talent  
 ‘Sigga’s opinion is that she lacks talent.’  
 (Maling 1984:222)

The relevant factor that makes *sig* in (11) grammatical is that the clause containing it encodes the antecedent Sigga’s point of view. In (12), we see a parallel example where the embedded clause does not encode Sigga’s point of view, and *sig* is not possible. (13) shows that this is not simply an artifact of the fact that the embedded clause is indicative rather than subjunctive (see also H.Á. Sigurðsson 1986, 1990), because (13) puts that clause in a context where it is subjunctive and, still, *sig* is not possible.

- (12) **Vandamál Siggu<sub>i</sub>** er að { \***sig<sub>i</sub>** / hana<sub>i</sub> } vantar hæfileika.  
 problem Sigga’s is that { \*REFL.ACC / her.ACC } lacks.IND talent  
 ‘Sigga’s problem is that she lacks talent.’ (adapted from Thráinsson 2007:222)
- (13) **Ég held að vandamál Siggu<sub>i</sub>** sé að { \***sig<sub>i</sub>** / hana<sub>i</sub> } vanti hæfileika.  
 I think that problem Sigga’s is that { \*REFL.ACC / her.ACC } lacks.SBJV talent  
 ‘I think that Sigga’s problem is that she lacks talent.’ (adapted from Thráinsson 2007:222)

We propose that the above effects are due to a point-of-view operator (OP<sub>POV</sub>) that may occur in an A’-position at phase edges and bind the pronoun (see Katada 1991, Chou 2012, Loss 2014, Charnavel 2020).<sup>3</sup> However, what is crucial for the present account is that the long-distance reflexive is always a bound variable (see also Koopman and Sportiche 1989).

<sup>3</sup>Katada (1991) proposes that long-distance reflexives in Japanese undergo operator movement to an A’ position, adjoined to VP. Chou (2012) proposes that Mandarin long-distance reflexives contain a point-of-view operator and move to vP and CP phase edges. Loss (2014) proposes that Iron Range English reflexives contain an operator and move to vP and CP phase edges. Charnavel (2020) proposes the possibility of a perspectival LogP in each Spell-Out domain which can host a logophoric operator Op<sub>log</sub> which in turn selects a logophoric pronoun pro<sub>log</sub>.

## 4 The Interaction of Reflexives and Causatives

### 4.1 Reflexives Allow Embedding of Verbs that Normally Cannot be Embedded

Some verbs, such as *horfa á* ‘watch’ and *elska* ‘love’, cannot easily be embedded under ICs.<sup>4</sup>

- (14) % Hættu að horfa á dúkkuna mína<sub>i</sub>, ég<sub>j</sub> vil ekki láta horfa á hana<sub>i</sub>.  
 stop watching on doll mine I want not let watch on her  
 a. ‘Stop watching my doll, I don’t want to let/make anyone watch her.’ (agent splitting)  
 b. ‘Stop watching my doll, I don’t want her to be watched.’ (“passive”)

These verbs become possible when the vP contains a reflexive, but not with the agent splitting reading – rather, they have a special, more passive-like reading.

- (15) Hættu að horfa á dúkkuna mína<sub>i</sub>, hún<sub>i</sub> vill ekki láta horfa á sig<sub>i</sub>.  
 stop watching on doll mine she wants not let watch on REFL.ACC  
 a. % ‘Stop watching my doll, she doesn’t want to make anyone watch her.’ (ag. splitting)  
 b. ✓ ‘Stop watching my doll, she doesn’t want to be watched.’ (“passive”)

When we search Google, using the search strings *láta horfa á* ‘let watch’ and *láta elska* ‘let love’, we find several examples. *Láta* is the infinitival form, meaning that these search queries should catch infinitival clauses, such as in (16b), as well as examples where, e.g. auxiliaries or modal verbs select *láta* in its infinitival form, such as in (16a). Note that *láta* is also the 3rd person plural form in the present tense. Using these queries, the vast majority of the examples we find are ones with reflexives, such as in (16).

- (16) a. **Ed Sheeran**<sub>i</sub> vill ekki láta horfa á sig<sub>i</sub>.  
 Ed Sheeran wants not let watch on REFL.ACC  
 ‘Ed Sheeran doesn’t want to be watched.’<sup>5</sup>  
 b. Og auðvitað er gaman að **PRO**<sub>arb</sub><sub>i</sub> láta elska sig<sub>i</sub>.  
 and of.course is nice to let love REFL.ACC  
 ‘And it’s of course nice to be loved.’<sup>6</sup>

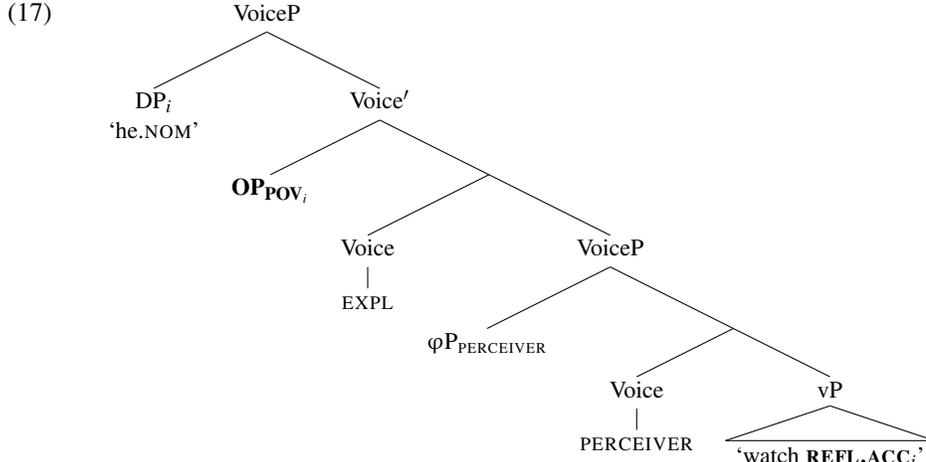
We propose that verbs like these do not allow agent splitting because the external argument is not an AGENT, and thus does not consist of an INITIATOR and a DOER. The verb *horfa á* ‘watch/look at’, for example, takes a PERCEIVER, and *elska* ‘love’ takes an EXPERIENCER. This rules out (14), which is unacceptable for the second author of this paper, as there is no well-formed interpretation of the Voice-over-Voice structure.

In (15) and (16), however, the reflexive allows an alternative path to a well-formed interpretation. The lower Voice head introduces a PERCEIVER (and perhaps an EXPERIENCER for *elska* ‘love’ in (16b)), the ordinary external argument interpretation for ‘watch’. This role is assigned to the implicit argument, represented as a silent  $\phi$ P. The higher Voice head is expletive: it introduces no thematic role at all. Normally, this would not be possible, because the specifier of the higher VoiceP would not be semantically integrated into the structure. But with a reflexive, the higher VoiceP may host OP<sub>POV</sub> to bind the long-distance reflexive. (For now we remain agnostic about whether this is by A’-movement of or from the reflexive, or unselective binding.) This operator lambda-abstracts over the reflexive (cf. Landau 2011:795ff.), turning the higher Voice’ into a predicate of individuals. The result is that the syntactic external argument is interpreted as (i) binding the reflexive, and (ii) the logophoric center of the embedded proposition.

<sup>4</sup>We have encountered some speaker variation in the acceptability and interpretation of examples like (14), which we must for now leave for future research. For present purposes we focus on the contrast between (14), which is quite marked, and (15), which is more widely available under the (b) reading. Also, see below on attested examples. For the second author, (14) is unacceptable, and (15) is acceptable under the (b) reading.

<sup>5</sup><https://www.ruv.is/mors/ed-sheeran-vill-ekki-lata-horfa-a-sig>

<sup>6</sup><https://bland.is/umraeda/umraeda-um-shivu-/6798455/>



(18)  $[_{\text{VoiceP}} \text{DP}_i \text{OP}_{\text{POV}_i} \text{Voice} [_{\text{VoiceP}} \varphi\text{P} (= \text{PERCEIVER}) \text{Voice} [_{\text{VP}} \dots \text{REFL}_i \dots ]]]$   
 $\lambda x$   $x$   
 $\approx (\lambda x \lambda e. \exists y. \text{perceiver}(y)(e) \ \& \ \text{watch}(x)(e) \ \& \ \text{POV}(x)(e)) \text{ (DP)}$

Thus, there is no actual causative meaning in such cases. The meaning derived is rather much closer to a passive: the external argument (PERCEIVER) is existentially bound, and the surface subject is thematically related to the object position (where the reflexive is). The meaning goes beyond a passive in its encoding of “point of view”. (So the meaning is something like “He had the experience of being watched” or “He was watched and this happened from his point of view”.)

The structure above, with an expletive Voice on top of another VoiceP, is, however, also compatible with an agent introduced by the lower Voice. Kjørtansson (2008) shows various examples where *láta* + *sig* (19a) seems to have basically the same meaning as a passive structure (19b).

- (19) a. *Það er vont að PRO<sub>arb</sub> láta lemja sig<sub>i</sub>.*  
 EXPL is bad to let hit REFL.ACC  
 ‘It hurts to be hit.’  
 b. *Það er vont að PRO<sub>arb</sub> vera laminn.*  
 EXPL is bad to be hit  
 ‘It hurts to be hit.’ (cf. Kjørtansson 2008:61)

In (19), the point-of-view operator is compatible with the adjective *vont* ‘bad’; the reading we get is that it is a bad experience (it hurts) to be hit. Even though PRO binds the reflexive pronoun, whoever is teased is not making the agent tease them. Without going into details, it should be noted that  $\varphi$ Ps in Icelandic Indirect Causatives cannot bind a reflexive pronoun, as discussed by E.F. Sigurðsson and Wood (2020) – whether the lower Voice introduces a PERCEIVER, EXPERIENCER or AGENT does not matter. Under Landau’s (2010) account,  $\varphi$ Ps are smaller than DPs, lacking a D-layer, which in turn is needed to bind reflexives.

When we substitute a DP like ‘the kids’ for the reflexive pronoun *sig* in (19a), see (20a), the sentence is still grammatical but the syntactic structure is different.

- (20) a. *Það er vont að PRO<sub>arb</sub> láta lemja krakkana.*  
 EXPL is bad to let hit kids.the  
 ‘It is bad to make someone hit the kids.’  
 b. *Hetjan<sub>i</sub> lét lemja sig<sub>i</sub>.*  
 hero.the let hit REFL.ACC  
 ‘The hero made someone hit him/her.’

The reading we get for (20a) is not that it is a bad experience for the kids to be hit but rather that it is a bad thing to do to (make someone) hit them. (20b) shows that *láta lemja sig* can have a reading that is different from (19a) above; in (20b), the hero makes someone hit him/her. The structure for both of the examples in (20) is a causative structure with agent splitting. The result in (20a) is a

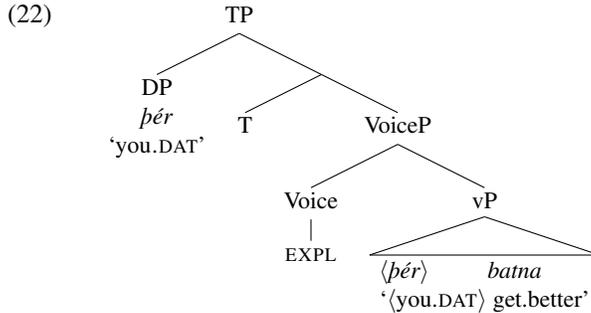
causative reading where the initiator makes the doer hit the kids; in (20b), the initiator, *hetjan* ‘the hero’, makes the doer hit him/her.<sup>7</sup>

#### 4.2 Pleonastic Causatives

It is well-known that Icelandic verbs may take oblique subjects, and that these are never external arguments (Marantz 1984, 1991/2000:79–83, Platzack 1987:392–394, H.Á. Sigurðsson 1989, Holmberg and Platzack 1995, Jónsson 1996, McFadden 2004).

- (21) a. Þér batnaði.  
you.DAT got.better  
‘You got better.’  
b. Þig vantaði aldrei.  
you.ACC were.missing never  
‘You were never missing.’

We assume that such verbs generally occur with an expletive Voice head.<sup>8</sup> The oblique DP moves from inside the vP to the subject position.



Verbs that take oblique subjects cannot form imperatives in the normal way in Icelandic. Instead, to express the intended meaning, a causative is used pleonastically with a reflexive for the oblique subject.

- (23) a. Lát-tu þér batna!  
let-you.NOM 2.REFL.DAT get.better  
‘Get better!’ (Lit. ‘Let/make yourself get better.’)  
b. Lát-tu þig ekki vanta.  
let-you.NOM 2.REFL.ACC not be.missing  
‘Don’t be a stranger!’ (Lit. ‘Don’t let yourself be missing’.)

We may assume, following Portner (2007) and Zanuttini et al. (2012), that imperatives add a property to the addressee’s “to-do” list. In this case, we add ‘getting better’ or ‘not being absent’ to the to-do list. We now have a clearer way of understanding why a pleonastic causative verb is able to accomplish this.

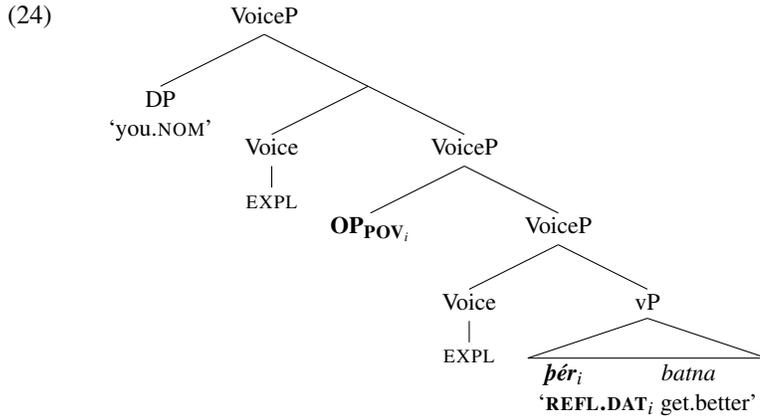
First, we assume that there is a syntactic constraint on the canonical imperative construction that bars oblique subjects. This might have to do with the T-Jussive head that Zanuttini et al. (2012) propose is responsible for case-licensing imperative subjects in the external argument position. Alternatively (or in addition), it could be reduced to the need, in such imperatives, to cliticize the imperative subject in a way that is only possible for 2nd person nominative pronouns (and not oblique pronouns) (E.F. Sigurðsson and Wood 2019). Whatever the reason, we take it as a point of fact that

<sup>7</sup>We assume that the point-of-view operator is not licensed in the VoiceP structure of (20b). We leave to future research the exact characterization of when the POV operator is licensed and when it is not.

<sup>8</sup>Though see Wood (2017) for a different view of accusative subjects, which is still compatible with everything proposed here.

the normal way of forming imperatives does not work for non-nominative subjects, and we take this to be a syntactic (or morphosyntactic) constraint rather than a semantic one.<sup>9</sup>

To express imperative meaning with such subjects, the extra Voice head with its nominative argument is merged, meeting the formal requirement of imperatives. However, unlike above, both the Voice heads are expletive (since oblique subject verbs have no external argument). What the reflexive does here is just license the structure that imperatives need, as well as making it the addressee's point of view.



This effect with oblique subjects is not limited to imperatives; dative subject verbs can also be embedded under causatives in declaratives and get a special reading when the dative is reflexive. Much as we saw in the previous section, this is evident from the fact that in some cases, the dative must be reflexive and cannot be a non-reflexive pronoun.

- (25) a. Henni nægði þetta.  
her.DAT sufficed this.NOM  
'This was sufficient for her.'
- b. Hún lét sér nægja þetta.  
she.NOM let REFL.DAT suffice this  
'She let this be sufficient for her.'
- c. \*Hún lét þér nægja þetta.  
she.NOM let you.DAT suffice this  
INTENDED: 'She let this be sufficient for you.'

Why should this contrast hold? The idea here is that the “causative” structure in this case—the extra Voice head—doesn't add anything thematic, so there is no interpretation for the external argument. Just as we saw above, the reflexive allows the structure to be interpreted. So a more accurate paraphrase would be “From her perspective, this was sufficient for her.” This reading is not possible when there is no reflexive, and thus no binding or POV operator.

## 5 Idioms

So far we have shown how a variety of effects with the causative verb *láta* ‘let/make/have’ are the result of different ways interpreting the Voice-stacking structure that *láta* reflects. In addition to agent splitting, the higher Voice head or even both Voice heads may receive an expletive interpretation, as long as there is an operator present to integrate the higher external argument into the structure semantically. The present approach can also shed light on the domain for idiomatic interpretation, because there we find evidence of another way of interpreting the Voice-stacking structure: the lower Voice head is expletive and the higher one introduces a thematic role.

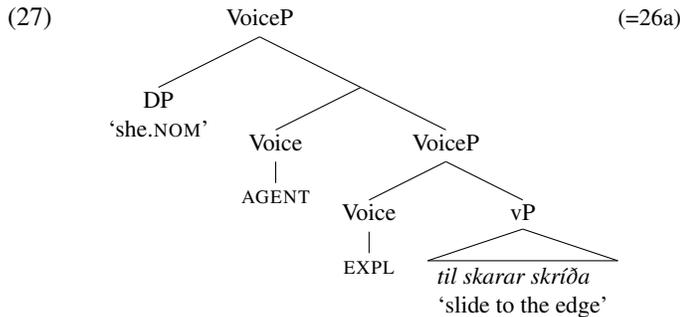
<sup>9</sup>Imperatives are sometimes used as tests for agentivity, but in fact they do not work very well in this function. See, for example, Keyser and Roeper (1984), where imperatives are used on unaccusatives to distinguish them from generic middles.

A sizable body of literature engages with the question of how big an ‘idiom’ can get (see e.g. Marantz 1997, Bruening 2010, Anagnostopoulou 2012, Anagnostopoulou and Samioti 2013). It is frequently proposed that Voice creates a boundary for idiomatic meaning, so that the external argument in SpecVoiceP cannot be part of an idiom. Interestingly, we find idioms based on the IC structure in Icelandic. Many, but not all of the relevant idioms also have a reflexive in them.

- (26) a. Hún lét til skarar skriða.  
 she.NOM let to edge slide  
 ‘She took action.’  
 b. Hún lét sjá sig.  
 she.NOM let see REFL.ACC  
 ‘She showed up / made an appearance.’

However, it appears that the lower Voice head is always expletive in such cases: these idioms are not understood to have an implicit embedded causee, or implicit external argument of any kind. In (26a), there is no silent thematic role that could even be considered an implicit causee (that may have been different for speakers of Old Icelandic, where this idiom originates). In (26b), there is no PERCEIVER, as one might imagine; the sentence does not entail that anyone actually saw her, just that she was there.

The present analysis offers an explanation: it is not necessarily the Voice head itself that introduces a boundary for idiomatic interpretation, but rather the interpretation of the Voice head. If Voice introduces ‘agent’ (or other external argument) as a separate predicate, this cannot be part of an idiomatic interpretation. If Voice introduces no meaning, agentive or otherwise, then that amount of structure *can* be part of idiomatic meaning. (We take no stance here on whether the lower VoiceP takes a specifier of some sort; what is important is that it does not introduce any thematic role.)

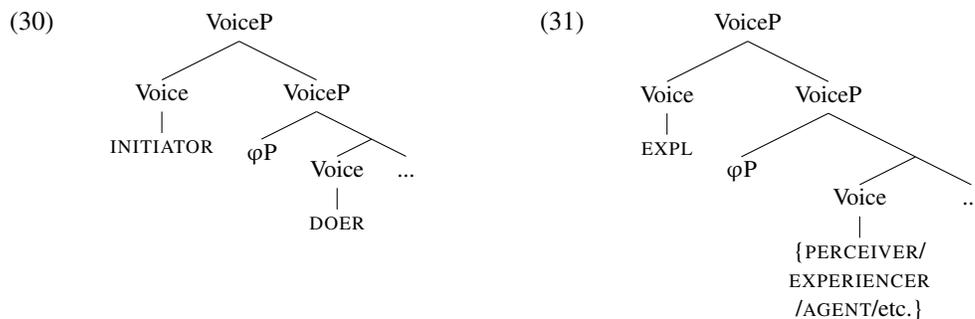


Thus, the boundaries for idiomatic interpretation are not just determined by syntactic structure itself, but in conjunction with the interpretation of that structure.

## 6 Conclusion

The analysis supports the view that the syntax of causatives is derived from the interaction of more basic primitives and mechanisms, and is not encoded in the grammar with a dedicated functional head with a specific, predetermined meaning. Rather, causatives involve Voice-stacking, a structure that can get various interpretations in the semantics. We argued for a four-way typology of Icelandic Indirect Causatives, summarized below (we leave out the external argument of the higher VoiceP and the point-of-view operator).





Canonical indirect causatives involve agent-splitting, in which the canonical agent is split into two theta-roles, see (30). But that is not the only way that a Voice-stacking structure can be interpreted semantically. Reflexives offer a further possibility: the lower Voice head gets its ordinary interpretation (introducing a thematic role that is assigned to the implicit argument), and the higher head hosts an operator which binds the reflexive and is saturated by the visible external argument. This explains why it is possible to embed verbs that otherwise cannot be embedded, see (31), and imperatives can be formed with oblique subject verbs, see (28). Finally, we showed how the proposal can explain the existence and properties of idioms built in the indirect causative structure: idiomatic interpretation is possible as long as the lower Voice head is expletive – so there is no implicit argument of the lower verb, see (29).

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