On improper movement of accusative subjects*

Jim Wood

Yale University

Icelandic accusative subjects of the sort shown in (1) played an important role in supporting Sigurðsson’s (1989) promotion analysis of non-nominative subjects, but have received less attention in work on case-marking since.

(1) Ólaf var hvergi að finna __.
    Ólafur.ACC was nowhere to find
    ‘Ólafur was nowhere to be found.’

In this paper, I show that the syntactic properties constructions like (1), which I will refer to as the “Existential Accusative” (EA) construction, have important consequences for the theory of case and movement. First, these constructions show that ordinary, structural accusative DPs can be the subjects of finite clauses; therefore, inherent and structural cases are not “different types” with respect to DP distribution. Second, I will show evidence that in sentences like (1), the accusative moves past PRO\text{NOM} by a step of A′-movement, which feeds A-movement to the subject position. This kind of movement is standardly referred to as “improper” movement, and is thought to banned. Given the evidence that (1) is derived by improper movement, we must prevent such movement from overgenerating, without banning it completely.

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1. Case Connectivity

Accusative subjects of the sort in (1) are somewhat restricted lexically. The construction has an existential-like meaning, and it occurs most frequently with verbs like finna ‘find’, sjá ‘see’, and fá ‘get’, among others, in the embedded infinitive (see boldfaced underlined verbs in the examples below). However, they clearly exhibit case connectivity: if the embedded verb normally assigns dative or genitive, the matrix subject will be dative or genitive (examples from Sigurðsson 1989, 204,219).

(2) a. Ég finn Ólaf hvergi.
   I.NOM found Ólafur.ACC nowhere

   b. Ólaf var hvergi að finna.
      Ólafur.ACC was nowhere to find
   ‘Ólafur was nowhere to be found.’
   (accusative)

(3) a. Ég heilsaði Ólafi.
   I.NOM greeted Ólafur.DAT

   b. Þessu var ekki að heilsa.
      this.DAT was not to greet
   ‘This was (unfortunately) not the case.’
   (dative)

(4) a. Ég vänti skipsins.
   I.NOM expected ship.the.GEN

   b. Skipsins er ekki að vänta fyrr en á morgun.
      ship.the.GEN is not to expect until tomorrow
   ‘The ship is not expected until tomorrow.’
   (genitive)

Sigurðsson (1989) points out that these verbs cannot be unaccusative on their own; it is only in the EA construction that the internal argument may move to the subject position.

(5) a. * Ólaf finn hvergi.
    Ólafur.ACC found nowhere

   b. * því heilsaði ekki.
      it.DAT greeted not

   c. * skipsins væntir ekki nú.
      ship.the.GEN expects not now

Thus, however they are built, it is almost inconceivable that the accusative case is anything other than the ordinary, structural accusative that is assigned to objects. Some attested examples, all with case connectivity (with different verbs), are presented in (6).
In examples (6a–f), the case-marked subject DP is unambiguously accusative, and is thematically the internal argument of the verbs *sækja* ‘get/retrieve’, *sjá* ‘see’, *fá* ‘get’, *segja* ‘tell’, *hafa* ‘have’, and *rekja* ‘trace’. All of these verbs take accusative objects in the ordinary transitive form. (6g), the case-marked subject DP is unambiguously dative, due to the fact that it is the internal argument of the verb *mæta* ‘meet’, which takes a dative direct object in the ordinary transitive form. (6h) shows a neuter DP, which is syncretic for nominative and accusative. It is the internal argument of the disjoined verbs *sjá* ‘see’ and *upplifa* ‘experience’, both of which take accusative objects in the ordinary transitive form.
2. Improper Movement

In EA constructions, an internal argument is able to move to an A-position—the subject position. This can be shown with various subjecthood tests, which will not be repeated here (see Zaenen et al. 1985, Sigurðsson 1989, and Jónsson 1996). For present purposes, it suffices to note that these are not topicalized objects, as seen by the fact that they occur to the right of the finite verb in (6a,b,f,g,h); topicalized DPs may not occur in this position in Icelandic. Moreover, (6c) involves a clause type that normally does not allow topicalization (see Angantýsson 2011 for recent discussion).

Given that the internal argument exhibits case-connectivity and moves to the subject position, the immediate question that arises is how: how is this possible, when A-movement should be blocked by the nominative PROArb?1

(7) * [TP ACCUSATIVE [VP be [InfP to PRO NOM find ⟨ACCUSATIVE⟩]]]

My proposal is that the accusative is moved past PRO by a step of A′-movement, which then feeds A-movement. This proposal is supported by data showing that the gap can be the complement of a preposition. Some—and only some—speakers find (8a) acceptable; this is not surprising, since, as mentioned above, the EA construction generally occurs with a limited set of verbs that are compatible with the existential structure described further below. However, everyone that I have asked finds (8b) to be either perfect or nearly perfect.

(8) a. % Þar var engan; að tala við __.
   there was no.one.ACC to talk to
   ‘There was no one there to be talked to.’

b. Þar var engan; að sjá __ eða tala við __.
   there was no.one.ACC to see or talk to
   ‘There was no one there to be seen or talked to.’

An attested example that is formally parallel to (8b) is given in (9).

(9) Ekki var neina fugla að sjá __ eða heyra í __.
   not was any birds.ACC to see or hear in
   ‘There weren’t any birds to be seen or heard from.’

The data in (8) and (9) strongly suggest that the gap left in the EA construction is an A′-gap. As has been known since Maling & Zaenen (1985) (see also Thoms 2011), prepositions in Icelandic can be stranded by A′-movement, but not by A-movement. Examples

1See Sigurðsson (2008) and references therein for a demonstration that silent PRO can bear morphological nominative case.
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(8b) and (9) therefore involve either ATB movement or parasitic gaps—either way, they involve A′-movement.² ³

3. Constraining “Improper Movement”

We have seen evidence that the lowest gap in the Existential Accusative construction is an A′-gap. Since the accusative ends up in the subject position, we seem to have evidence for A′-movement feeding A-movement, traditionally known as “Improper Movement” (IM).

\[
[TP \text{ SPEC }] [VP \text{ be } [\text{ACC } [\text{InfP to PRONOM find } \langle \text{ACC} \rangle ]]]
\]

\[
\rightarrow [TP \text{ ACC } [VP \text{ be } [\langle \text{ACC} \rangle ] [\text{InfP to PRONOM find } \langle \text{ACC} \rangle ]]]
\]

However, simply allowing A′→A-movement runs the risk of overgenerating. Improper Movement is so called because it is supposed to be illicit (see Bader 2011 for a recent thorough review/analysis). There have been a number of proposals that allow IM under special circumstances. Of these, I will mention three.

11. a. Incorporation (Kayne 1993): If the head of an A′-position incorporates into the head of an A-position, IM is allowed.
   b. L-selection (Bianchi 2000): If an XP in an A′-position is L(exically)-selected by a higher predicate, IM of XP is allowed.
   c. Smuggling (Hicks 2009): If XP is in an A′-position, a YP contained in XP may A-move out of it.

Ideally, we would like to connect whatever it is that allows IM to the special properties of the EA construction, including the existential semantics and the lexical restrictions. A smuggling analysis is tempting on the basis of word order facts such as those seen in (12):

12. a. Ég fann Ólaf hvergi.
    I.NOM found Ólafur ACC nowhere

   b. Ólaf var hvergi að finna.
    Ólafur ACC was nowhere to find

‘Ólafur was nowhere to be found.’

Here, it looks as though the negative quantifier hvergi ‘nowhere’ has moved part of the way with the accusative subject Ólaf, since it appears at the left edge of the infinitive clause. This word order makes sense under smuggling derivation such as that outlined in (13).

²Note that heyra Í, on its own, assigns dative; the case connectivity of (9) thus preserves the case of the lefthand disjunct, which conforms to the pattern in wh-movement, according to Jóhannes Gísli Jónsson (p.c.).

³Note that the parasitic gap analysis is unlikely, however. Many Icelandic speakers find all the standard examples of parasitic gaps quite questionable—at best—but such speakers do accept (8b) and (9). For this reason, I have not been able to use parasitic gaps to independently verify the A′ status of the gap in EA constructions.
Further support for the existence of an intermediate landing site at the edge of the infinitive clause comes from quantifier stranding:

(14) **Summu íslensks tilveruréttar er alla að finna**
    **sum.ACC of.Icelandic existence is all.ACC to find**
    á þjóðveldistímabilinu 872-1262, en ekkert á síðari tínum!
    in commonwealth.period.the 872-1262 but nothing at later time
    ‘The sum of Icelandic existence is all to be found
    in the commonwealth period 872-1262, and not at all in later times.’

However, A'-smuggling, which was adapted from A-smuggling in Collins (2005a,b), has yet to be sufficiently constrained. What is to stop this kind of derivation from applying to almost any kind of construction? There is no shortage of impersonal constructions in Icelandic that leave open an available subject position to move to (see Wood 2015 for numerous examples). Even if A'-smuggling is part of the story, it seems that it cannot be the whole story. In what follows, I will propose that in order to be licit, the movement of the SC to the infinitive edge must be licensed by an additional relation with the superordinate predicate, in line with Bianchi’s (2000) proposal presented in (11b).4

In order to develop this proposal, I will sketch my assumptions about how existential constructions are derived. Building on Richards (2007), Kayne (2008), Deal (2009), and Alexiadou & Schäfer (2009), Irwin (2012) argues that existential constructions involve a null locative/deictic element which can be modified by ‘there’ and by various PPs.

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4It remains to be seen whether incorporation, as proposed by Kayne (1993) and described in (11a), is necessary in this case; see discussion below.
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(15) vP
    / \v
   / \ SC
DP "come into existence" PLACE 'there'

On its way to the subject position, *there* passes through the external argument position (SpecVoiceP).

(16) TP
   / \ 'there' VoiceP
   /  \ ⟨'there'⟩
Voice  vP
   / \ v
   /  'arrived'
   \ SC
      \ DP
      \ 'some hippies'
      \ PLACE ⟨'there'⟩

Suppose this is a necessary step; ‘there’ must enter into a direct selectional relationship with an existential predicate such as the existential copula,\(^5\) and move through the external argument position (SpecVoiceP). With Existential Accusatives, SpecVoiceP is already filled by the thematic external argument (PRO), so ‘there’—which is silent in Icelandic—has to make it to the higher predicate.

(17) VoiceP
   / \ PRONOM
   /  \\Voice vP
   /  \ v
   /  'find'
   \ SC
      \ DP
      \ 'Ólafur.ACC'
      \ PLACE 'THERE'
      \ 'hvergi' 'nowhere'

\(^5\)That the existential copula is a distinct flavor of copula is supported by the fact that various languages (e.g. Russian and other Slavic languages) have a special morphological form that distinguishes existential copulas from other copulas.
This gets to the heart of what these constructions do: they build an existential predicate with its own thematic external argument. Somehow, they do this without violating A-minimality. The successful improper movement, apparent smuggling and existential semantics can be captured by assuming that the null locative is selected by a higher existential copula (Bianchi 2000).

The configuration in (18), which resembles the raising analysis of relative clauses, will allow Ólafur to A-move into the subject position of the higher clause. This analysis also captures the lexical idiosyncrasies of the construction: it is only compatible with transitive verbs under meanings that make sense with an existential small clause.

In sum, the proposed analysis is as follows. First, case marking is computed in the base-generated position, and is not undone by later A′-movement; this derives the case-connectivity of EA constructions. Second, an existential small clause cannot be licensed

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6See Messick (2012) for an analysis where tough-movement is likened to a raising analysis of relative clauses; see also Hornstein (2001, 133, note 92). See the appendix for further discussion of tough-movement.

7If silent ‘there’ moves to the matrix SpecVoiceP, then an issue might arise with respect to locality for moving the accusative DP to the subject position. However, it might also be the case that since the accusative and ‘there’ are subextracting from the same complex structure, they are generally equidistant. Another possibility is that the null ‘there’ cliticized to the matrix verb complex, allowing A-movement around it, as clitics usually do (Anagnostopoulou 2003). This would make the null ‘there’ of Icelandic similar to clitics like Italian ci:

(1) Ci sono molti figli dei fiori nel parco.
   THERE.CL are many sons of the flowers in the park
   ‘There are many hippies in the park.’ (Irwin 2012, 100)

If this is on the right track, then it may be that Kayne’s (1993) proposal, where incorporation plays a role in licensing IM, is relevant to the present construction after all. A final possibility is that ‘there’ in Icelandic does not move into the matrix clause at all, but can be licensed by Agree. I do not choose between these options here.
in situ when it is the complement of a transitive verb with a thematic external argument; it undergoes A’-movement to the edge of the infinitive clause. Third, an existential copula selects the small clause at the edge of the infinitive clause; as in Bianchi (2000), this selection allows the (accusative) DP to be the tail of an A-chain. Possibly, the null ‘there’ is licensed by incorporation into $v_{\text{EXIST}}$—though nothing at present hinges on this step, as far as I have been able to ascertain.

4. Further Issues

4.1 What kind of A’-Movement?

In the analysis proposed, the first step in the derivation of existential accusatives is A’-movement. The natural question is: what kind? Wh-movement? Focus/Topic movement? Quantifier movement? It is overwhelmingly frequent to find existential accusatives involving negation, or some other kind of quantifier, which suggests the possibility that the first step is Quantifier Movement (QM), which is most commonly associated with negative elements (Rögnvaldsson 1987, Jónsson 1996, Svenonius 2000).

(19) Þið þurfið ekkert að segja __.
    you.NOM need nothing.ACC to say
    ‘You don’t need to say anything.’ (Svenonius 2000)

(20) [TP you need [ nothing, to say ⟨nothing⟩i]]
    \[ \overset{A’-movement (QM)}{\uparrow} \]

(21) Jón er engar augabrúnir með __
    John is no eyebrows with
    ‘John has no eyebrows.’ (Rögnvaldsson 1987)

The quantifiers found are frequently the same as those reported as undergoing for QM.

(22) a. Þrátt fyrir það er fáar vísbendingar að finna __ sem...
    despite that is few clues.ACC to find which
    ‘Despite that, there are few clues to be found that...’

b. Jón hefur fáar bækur lesið __.
    John.NOM has few books.ACC read
    ‘John has read few books.’ (Rögnvaldsson 1987)

(23) a. Í greininni [...] er ýmsan fróoleik að finna __
    in article.the is various information.ACC to find
    um lengdarmál á Íslandi fyr rá öldum...
    on measurement in Iceland in centuries past
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‘In the article there is a variety of information to be found on measurement in Iceland in centuries past.’

b. ? Jón hefur ýmsa erfðoleika þurft að þola ___

John has various difficulties had to endure

‘John has had to endure various difficulties.’ (Rögnvaldsson 1987)

However, definite DPs do not undergo QM, and they can be found without any other overt element on occasion.

(24) a. Úr tímaritinu Ægi frá árinu 1909 er þessa tilvitnun að finna __.
    in journal.the Ægi from.year.the 1909 is this quote.ACC to find

   ‘This quote is to be found in the journal Ægi from the year 1909.’

   b. * Strákurinn hefur bjórlöskunni minni hent __ í bílinn.

   boy.the has beer.bottle.the my thrown in.the.car

   INTENDED: ‘The boy’s thrown my beer bottle into the car.’ (Svenonius 2000)

Some examples involve focus particles, which might indicate focus-driven movement (cf. Kayne 1998).

(25) ef til vill er hana einnig að finna __ í bunka af gömlum sendibréfum

   maybe is it.F.ACC also to find __ in pile of old letters

   ‘maybe it is also to be found in a pile of old letters’

However, it is not clear that focus is involved in all cases; for now, I must leave the nature of the A’-movement step for future research, and let it suffice that the preposition stranding diagnostic does strongly suggest that there is some kind of A’-movement, even if we don’t yet understand its nature.

4.2 ‘Tough’-Movement


In Icelandic, tough-movement is generally considered to be quite marked; speakers vary as to whether they accept examples such as the following:

(26) a. % Jóhannes erfiður að tefla við __.

   Jóhannes.NOM is tough to play.chess with

   ‘Jóhannes is tough to play chess with.’ (Thráinsson et al. 2007, 105)
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b. % Þessi dúkur er mjög auðveldur að þrífa __.
   this cloth.use.is very easy to clean
   ‘This cloth is very easy to clean.’
   (Thráinsson 2007, 431)

c. % Hún er erfið að umgangast __.
   she.use.is difficult to get along with
   ‘She is difficult to get along with.’
   (Sigurðsson 2002, 11)

Thráinsson et al. (2007, 105) report that “slightly more speakers of the older generations accepted sentences like [(26a)].” Thráinsson (2007, 431) states that examples with resumptive pronouns in the gap position are “not inconceivable.”

(27) ? Þessi dúkur er auðveldur að þrífa hann.
   this cloth.use.is easy to clean it
   ‘This cloth is easy to clean.’

(28) ? Hinrik var erfiður að búa með honum.
   Henry.use.is difficult to live with him
   ‘Henry was difficult to live with.’

Now, notice that the examples considered so far do not show case-connectivity: all of the subjects are nominative. However, in the present study I have come across examples with predicate adjectives that do show case-connectivity.

(29) a. Það var engan bjór hægt að ná í __.
   EXPL was no beer possible to get to
   ‘No beer was possible to get.’

   b. Pennan misskilning er mikilvægt að forðast __.
   this misunderstanding. is important to avoid
   ‘This misunderstanding is important to avoid.’

   c. Það var engan hægt að blekkja __
   EXPL was no one possible to deceive
   ‘It wasn’t possible to deceive anyone.’

These constructions seem to pass subjecthood tests (judgments from Einar Freyr Sigurðsson p.c.). (30) verifies that the fronted accusative is not fronted by topicalization:

(30) a. Af hverju er pennan misskilning
   why use.is this misunderstanding
   ‘Why is this misunderstanding?’

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*Thanks to Eiríkur Rögnvaldsson (p.c.) for providing (29a); (29b–d) are attested examples.*
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svona mikilvægt að forðast __, að þínu mati?
so important to avoid __, in your opinion
‘Why is this misunderstanding so important to avoid, in your opinion?’

b. Fyrst þennan mann er svona mikilvægt að forðast __.
since this man.ACC is so important to avoid,
avf hverju er þú þá alltaf með honum?
why are you then always with him
‘Since this man is so important to avoid, why are you always with him?’

The examples in (31) show that the fronted accusative raises to the ECM position, and doesn’t remain in some lower, adjoined position. Moreover, the example in (31b) verifies that the accusative case is not coming from the ECM verb.

(31) a. Ég hef alltaf talið þennan mann vera mikilvægt að forðast.
I have always believed this man.ACC be important to avoid
‘I have always believed this man to be important to avoid.’

b. Mér hefur alltaf fundist þennan mann vera mikilvægt að forðast.
me.DAT have always found this man.ACC be important to avoid
‘I have always found this man to be very important to avoid.’

(32) shows that the fronted accusative is subject to the definiteness effect, which would only be expected if the fronted accusative were a derived subject in the matrix clause.

(32) a. * Það er þennan misskilning mikilvægt að forðast __.
EXPL is this misunderstanding.ACC important to avoid

b. Það er suma menn mikilvægara að forðast __ en aðra.
EXPL is some people.ACC more important to avoid __ than others.ACC
‘Some people are more important to avoid than others.’

These constructions involve a wider range of verbs than do the EA construction, and thus may be an important probe into our understanding of accusative subjects and improper movement; see Sigurðsson (2015) for a more detailed study of these constructions.

5. Conclusion

Various details of the analysis, as well as how it connects to cross-linguistic variation, remain to be worked out. But the details of the analysis shouldn’t distract us from the two important things that Existential Accusatives tell us right now:

(a) “Structurally” case marked accusatives can become subjects, if the structural configuration is right.

(b) “Improper movement” is possible. Case connectivity + preposition stranding shows that a DP can leave an A’-gap and make it to an A-position.
Accusative subjects are possible when: (i) a language doesn’t care what case a DP has for the purposes of subjectionhood, (ii) the accusative is somehow able to move past the higher, nominative DP. As for (b), I have proposed that in the case at hand, it is possible because a higher existential predicate selects a small clause that makes a smuggling derivation possible. The more general question of how IM is constrained is a larger question than can be addressed here. But EAs show that it is a question we need to be asking.

References

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jim.wood@yale.edu