

# Topicality in Icelandic: Null arguments and Narrative Inversion

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This paper discusses topicality in Icelandic grammar as realized in several phenomena: referential third person *pro* drop in Old Icelandic, diverse types of topic drop in Old and Modern Icelandic and Narrative Inversion (declarative VS clauses), also in both Old and Modern Icelandic. These phenomena all involve aboutness topics, given topics or both, thus showing that distinct types of topicality are active in Icelandic. However, in contrast to Italian, Icelandic does not provide evidence that different topic types have different structural correlates, a fact that suggests that topicality types are not generally structuralized in language (while not excluding that a topicality hierarchy may be PF-licensed by externalization properties specific to languages like Italian). Topicality is presumably a universally available category or phenomenon, but it is plausibly an interface third factor phenomenon (in the sense of Chomsky 2005), not provided by Universal Grammar but interacting with it in the shaping of externalized grammar, differently so in different languages.\*

## 1. Introduction: types of topicality

A multiple left edge topic approach is developed in several works by Frascarelli, Hinterhölzl, and Bianchi (Frascarelli 2007, Frascarelli & Hinterhölzl 2007, Bianchi & Frascarelli 2009, Bianchi & Frascarelli 2010, Frascarelli 2011). When no further specification is called for, I will here take the liberty to refer jointly to these works as *Frascarelli et al.* and to the approach as the *Frascarelli et al. approach*. At the core of the approach is the claim that the clausal (CP) left edge contains distinct topic positions that are located between the Force and the Fin categories postulated in Rizzi (1997). The topic categories are labeled somewhat differently in the different works of Frascarelli et al.; (1) shows the categories and their order as presented in Frascarelli (2011: 4).<sup>1</sup>

(1) AS-Topic > C-Topic > AG-Topic > FamG-Topic

[= Aboutness-Shift topic, Contrastive Topic, Aboutness-Given Topic, Familiar-Given Topic]

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<sup>1</sup> Hanging topics (as in highest Left Dislocation in Germanic, see Grohmann 1997) are not part of the hierarchy; they “have distinct formal and discourse properties with respect to the Aboutness-shift Topic and are located in a specific (higher) position in the C-domain” (Frascarelli 2007:698, fn. 13). “Topicalization” or movement (of arguments) to Spec,CP and Left Dislocation (and Contrastive Dislocation) in Icelandic (see Thráinsson 1979) commonly relate to contrast. I set these constructions aside here.

If each of the topic categories head their own projection (as argued in Frascarelli 2007), we get roughly the hierarchy in (2) (see Frascarelli 2007:701, with slightly different labels, though).

(2) [ForceP [ ASiftP ... [ContrP [FocP [AGivP [FGivP [FinP ...

A striking result of Frascarelli et al. is that Italian third person null-subjects are always coreferential with a newly established or a maintained AS-Topic. Thus, these subjects are given topics at the narrow clausal level, simultaneously as being coreferential with an AS-Topic at the local discourse level. The term Aboutness-Given Topics in Frascarelli (2011) seems to be coined to capture this double nature. However, to the extent possible, I will try to keep the clausal and discourse levels apart.

The Frascarelli et al. approach makes some non-innocent claims. One claim, explicitly stated by Bianchi & Frascarelli (2010: 54; cf. also Frascarelli & Hinterhölzl 2007: 89), is that “there is a systematic correlation between the formal properties of topics and their function in the discourse, which is encoded in a strict hierarchy in the C-domain (*contra* a free recursion analysis of TopP projections, cf. Rizzi 1997)” – remarkable, if true. Another claim, implicit, is that the different topic categories are heads in the sense of X-bar theory, taking overt topics as specifiers (in the spirit of Rizzi 1997, Cinque 1999). A third claim, also implicit, is that there is a one-to-one correlation between the linear order of elements in the C-edge and their hierarchical relations: if  $\text{Top}_\alpha$  c-commands  $\text{Top}_\beta$  then  $\text{Top}_\alpha$  also precedes  $\text{Top}_\beta$ .

These claims are not easily reconciled with recent development of minimalist thinking (Chomsky 2013 and related work), where there is a growing consensus that there is no ordering in deep narrow syntax and also that X-bar theory, with its notion of specifiers, was on the wrong track and should be given up in favor of a simple Agree, Merge and Labeling approach. If that is a step in the right direction, as I believe it is, then the structural claims of Frascarelli et al. cannot be maintained as claims about Universal Grammar (UG) or even narrow syntax (while they can presumably be upheld as claims about Italian externalized grammar). Rather than being distinct heads in the X-bar theoretic sense, phase edges are plausibly *fuzzy* (cf. Sigurðsson 2004 et seq.), containing an “array of functional categories” (Chomsky 2001: 43n8) that are each below the level of materialization but may be jointly materialized (or not materialized at all, as for example C in regular English declarative subordinate vs main clauses: *that* vs  $\emptyset$ ). Chomsky (2008: 9) remarks that “C is shorthand for the region that Rizzi (1997) calls the “left periphery,” possibly involving feature spread from fewer functional heads (maybe only one) ...”

Regardless of the configurational details of the C-edge (if any), it seems that we need to assume a number of sub-lexical or non-lexical topic categories, in the spirit of Frascarelli et al. The correlations between phonology and topic types laid out in Frascarelli & Hinterhölzl (2007) and Frascarelli (2007) provide compelling evidence in favor of this conclusion, and so

do multiple topic constructions, such as the ones in (3) and (4), from Frascarelli & Hinterhölzl (2007: 96).

(3) ***Io***, *inglese* *non l' avevo mai fatto.*  
I English not it have never done  
'I never studied English before.'

(4) ***Io***, *una cosa che ho trovato positiva*, *è stata la comprensione.*  
I one thing that have found positive is been the comprehension  
'As for me, something that I considered as positive was the comprehension part.'

In the analysis of Frascarelli & Hinterhölzl (2007) the boldfaced *Io* is an Aboutness-Shift topic in both examples, whereas the underlined constituents are a familiar topic in (3) (*inglese*) vs a contrastive one in (4) (*una cosa che ho trovato positiva*). – According to Frascarelli & Hinterhölzl (2007: 97) “shifting topics occupy the highest topic position in the left periphery.”

I take it that multiple topic constructions are PF-licensed by externalization properties specific to Italian (and some other languages), thus not justifying conclusions about putative universal configurational characteristics of the C-edge while at the same time providing evidence that we need to distinguish between diverse types of topics. Plausibly, topicality is a universally available category or property, but not everything that is universal or universally available to language comes with UG.<sup>2</sup>

Icelandic bears in an interesting way, different from that of Italian, on the status of topicality in grammar. Being a rather strict verb-second language, it does not generally allow multiple overt C edge topics, thus presumably having only a single general Top feature in its C edge.<sup>3</sup> However, it has other constructions that are sensitive to topicality and givenness. First, Old Icelandic/Old Norse had *referential pro drop* of both subjects and objects. Second, Icelandic, old and modern, has the Germanic type of *topic drop* (Sigurðsson 1989, 1993, 2011a). Third, Icelandic has verb-initial (Verb-Subject, VS) declarative order, *Narrative Inversion*, NI (Sigurðsson 1990, 1994, see also Braune 1894, Nygaard 1900 and many others

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<sup>2</sup> Given a minimalist biological view of the language faculty (Berwick & Chomsky 2011), the natural assumption is that UG is not only computationally minimal but also item minimal (where functional categories count as items), providing the general premises for item building rather than the items themselves (Sigurðsson 2011b, 2012; see also the concluding discussion in section 4).

<sup>3</sup> Possibly, TP-, VoiceP- and vP-internal given, familiar and contrastive topics each enter an Agree relation with a distinct silent Top(ic) feature in the C edge (unordered in the Icelandic type of languages, but presumably ordered at spell-out in Italian). Alternatively, low phases have silent edge Top features of their own, these lower Top features being “coordinated” with the C Top feature at CP spell-out (see the discussion of multiple Person computation in Sigurðsson 2017). I do not take a stand on this moot issue here.

before and after). These constructions are exemplified in (5)–(9). As will be discussed in section 2, the distinction between *pro* drop and topic drop is not trivially obvious, but for the present I adopt the understanding in Sigurðsson (1993) without discussion; the Old Icelandic texts are from the 13th and the 14th centuries (preserved in younger copies).

(5) *Referential pro* (Old Icelandic):<sup>4</sup>

- a. *þá skar Rognvaldr [hár hans], en áðr var \_\_\_i úskorit*  
 then cut R hair his but before was uncut  
 ‘Then Rognvaldr cut *his hair*, but (*it*) had ben uncut before.’  
 (Heimskringla; Nygaard 1906: 10)
- b. *ok kom hann; þangat ok var Hoskuldr uti, er \_\_\_i reið í tún*  
 and came he there and was H. out when rode in field  
 ‘And *he* came there and Hoskuldr was outdoors when (*he*) rode into the heyfield.’  
 (Njals saga/Reykjabók; Sigurðsson 1989: 154)
- c. *dvergrinn mælti, at sá baugr; skyldi vera hverjum*  
 dwarf-the said that that ring should be (to) anybody  
*höfuðsbani, er atti \_\_\_i*  
 headbane who possessed  
 ‘The dwarf said that *that ring* should bring death to anybody who possessed (*it*).’  
 (Snorra-Edda; Nygaard 1906: 17)
- d. *ætla ek, at þú nýtir eigi boga minni*  
 believe I that you (can-)use not bow my  
*þóttu spyrnir fótum í \_\_\_i*  
 even-if-you push with-feet in  
 ‘I believe that you cannot use *my bow* even if you push with your feet in (*it*).’ (i.e., use your feet to stretch it)  
 (Heimskringla; Nygaard 1906: 20)

(6) *Topic drop* (Old Icelandic):

- a. *setnaði þá kurrinn, ok \_\_\_ slitu við þat þingit*  
 abated then grumbling-the and ended.3PL at that gathering-the  
 ‘Then the grumbling diminished and (*the involved*) ended the gathering at that.’  
 (Flateyjarbók; Nygaard 1906: 12)
- b. *Herra biskup; vaknar ... \_\_\_i hefir [sik] upp til kirkju*  
 sire bishop wakens takes [self] up to church  
*ok \_\_\_i tekr skrýddr heilaga dóma, \_\_\_i gengr svá ...*

<sup>4</sup> (5a): Subject drop (from Spec,TP or Spec,vP) in a main clause with a filled Spec,CP.

(5b): Subject drop in an adverbial clause.

(5c): Direct object drop in a relative clause.

(5d): Prepositional object drop in an adverbial clause.

and takes in canonicals sacred things walks so  
 ‘Sire bishop wakens, (he) takes himself to the church and (he) takes “sacred things” (dressed) in canonicals, (he) walks like that ...’

(Saga Guðmundar Arasonar, Hóla-Biskups; Hjartardóttir 1993: 52)

(7) *Topic drop* (Modern Icelandic):

a. — *Sé þig á morgun.*

see.1SG you on morrow

‘(I’ll) see you tomorrow.’

b. *Kemur hún? — Veit’ég) ekki.*

comes she know-I not

‘Will she come? I don’t know (that) / (That.) I don’t know.’

c. *Hún; kom seint heim. —; Opnaði dyrnar. —; Læddist inn.*

she came late home opened.3SG door-the sneaked.3SG in

‘She came home late. (She) opened the door. (She) sneaked in.

(8) *Narrative Inversion* (Old Icelandic):

*Þjóstólfr hafði barit húskarl Hǫskulds; rekr hann; Þjóstólfr í braut*

Þ. had beaten houscarl H.’s drives he Þ. in way

‘Þjóstólfr had beaten Hoskuldr’s servant. He drives Þjóstólfr away.’

(Njals saga/Reykjabók; Sigurðsson 1994: 131)

(9) *Narrative Inversion* (Modern Icelandic):

*Johan Cryuffi... Fyrsti leikur hans; fyrir Barcelona var í október 1973*

J.C. first game his for B. was in October 1973

*og skoraði hann; strax tvö mörk í 4-0 sigri á Granada.*

and scored he immediately two goals in 4-0 victory on Granada

‘Johan Cryuff ... His first game for Barcelona was in October 1973 and he immediately scored two goals in a 4-0 victory over Granada.’

([https://is.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johan\\_Cryuff](https://is.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johan_Cryuff), 2016-08-24)

The subject in Narrative Inversion is a given topic at the clausal level, typically with a preceding coreferential AS-Topic at the discourse level. I will consider this further in section 3. In the next section, I discuss argument drop, distinguishing, first, between drop from argument positions (*pro*) and topic drop, and, second, between three different types of topic drop.

## 2. Argument drop

Icelandic (old and modern) has non-referential *pro* of several sorts, not considered here (Sigurðsson & Egerland 2009). In addition, Old Norse had the following *referential* argument drop types (Nygaard 1906, Hjartardóttir 1993, Sigurðsson 1993):

Old Norse referential argument drop types – Type A vs Type B:

(10) **Type A** (analyzed as *pro* drop in Sigurðsson 1993):

General but not highly frequent drop of (mainly third person) subjects and objects *from argument positions* in both main and subordinate clauses. It seems that this type of drop was only possible *under coreference* with a preceding DP (Hjartardóttir 1993; Sigurðsson 1993).<sup>5</sup>

(11) **Type B** (analyzed as topic drop in Sigurðsson 1993):

Argument drop of subjects and objects *from Spec,CP in verb-initial root clauses* (commonly conjoined *ok* ‘and’ clauses) – *with or without* a coreferential antecedent in discourse.

Notice that the types overlap when subjects that have a coreferential antecedent are dropped in verb-initial root clauses; such examples can either be analyzed as topic drop from Spec,CP or as a direct drop from Spec,TP (or Spec,vP) in a V1 Narrative Inversion clause.<sup>6</sup>

Due to its distributional properties (being confined to Spec,CP in verb-initial root clauses) Sigurðsson (1993) analyzed Type B as involving topic drop, common to many Germanic varieties. Type A, in contrast, involved drop from argument positions and could be found in both root and non-root clauses, which lead Sigurðsson (1993) to the conclusion that it involved *pro* drop. However, if Sigurðsson (2011a) is right in his minimalist criticism of Government and Binding (GB) approaches to null arguments, there is no inherent or “lexical” difference between “distinct types” of null arguments. Nulls must be interpretable (recoverable), but their interpretability depends on their environment and not on their putative “lexical” or inherent properties. However, for expository ease, I will occasionally refer to Type A and Type B drop as *pro* drop and topic drop, respectively.

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<sup>5</sup> Kinn et al. (2016) argue that this is an incorrect characterization and that there are some cases of referential *pro* without a coreferential antecedent. However, the nulls in question are either arbitrary/generic or expletive or found in idiomatic expressions, and nulls of these sorts are also found in Modern Icelandic texts, in contrast to clearly referential nulls like the ones in (5a–d). Kinn et al. base their conclusions on statistics drawn from the historical IcePaHC corpus. However, one cannot rely on the IcePaHC tagging when it comes to analyzing the many types of argument nulls in Old Norse; one must read the texts word by word to develop reliable intuitions about the nature of the examples being studied.

<sup>6</sup> As will be discussed in section 3, topic drop and Narrative Inversion are partly functionally different but also partly interchangeable. In subject topic drop there are silent copies of the subject in both Spec,CP and Spec,TP (as well as in Spec,vP). One could speculate that NI also has a silent subject copy in Spec,CP, only differing (syntactically) from subject topic drop in spelling out a lower copy of the subject in Spec,TP. Alternatively, Spec,CP contains an operator in NI clauses, the subject being blocked by it from moving to Spec,CP. I do not take a stand on this issue here (it is unimportant for my present purposes).

The question of recoverability or interpretability is indeed the central problem related to null-arguments (and other systematic silence patterns in language). Simply and very generally stated: Does “meaningful silence” require some sort of licensing or is it the other way around, such that silence is the unmarked and expected strategy, prevailing unless blocked by some extra factors? The licensing approach has been standard in generative syntax for many decades (Chomsky 1981, Rizzi 1986, etc.), but I adopt the opposite approach, where arguments are null unless their silence is blocked by some structural or contextual hindrance (commonly some type of intervention). This general idea, call it the *Happy Null Generalization*, HNG, is stated as follows in Sigurðsson (2004: 254, n. 27):

Lexicalization is arguably the last resort whenever a meaningful feature cannot be conveyed in a message by any other means than the costly means of overtly expressing some item that carries the feature. Thus, instead of looking for a “license” to stay empty a category is “happy” with whatever “excuse” it has not to get lexicalized.

Given HNG there are no inherent differences between the nulls themselves in types A and B (such as that between variables and *pro* in GB-theoretic approaches). That is also the natural minimalist (and minimal) assumption (see Sigurðsson 2011a, Kinn et al. 2016), expected if language developed as a tool of thought and if externalization for communicative and other social purposes is ancillary (Berwick & Chomsky 2011). Nevertheless, it is clear that Types A and B reflect different interpretative or recoverability strategies: Type A nulls (*pro*) are excused under coreference, while type B nulls are excused when as close to the context as possible, namely in Spec,CP in root clauses. And that is not all there is to this – a more fine-grained analysis is required, as I will discuss in the following.

### **2.1. Type A: Pro drop**

Type A, as stated in (10), involved general drop of arguments from *argument positions* in both main and subordinate clauses *under coreference* with a preceding DP in discourse. That is to say: under control, loosely speaking. This type has disappeared from the language, examples like (5a–d) thus being ungrammatical in Modern Icelandic. As pointed out by Hjartardóttir (1993) and also in Sigurðsson (1993) this kind of argument drop was evidently not recovered by agreement, as suggested, first, by the fact that it applied to objects (no agreement) as well as subjects (verb agreement), and, second, by the fact that verb agreement is about equally as rich in Modern Icelandic as it was in Old Norse (with 4-6 distinct forms in the present indicative, depending on conjugations). – Identification of *pro* under control across finite C-T boundaries is blocked in Modern Icelandic, presumably by an intervention effect that was absent in Old Norse (see the general analysis in Sigurðsson 2011a).

Examples such as the ones in (5) show that Old Norse, like Italian, could operate with two topics simultaneously. Consider this for (5b), repeated here as (12), with an added immediately preceding context.

(12) *Referential pro* (Old Icelandic):

[En snemma um morguninn sendir Hoskuldr eptir Hríti]

[and early in morning-the sent H. for Hr.]

ok kom **hann**<sub>i</sub> þangat ok var Hoskuldr uti, er \_\_\_\_<sub>i</sub> reið í tún  
and came he there and was H. out when rode in field

‘And *he* came there and Hoskuldr was outdoors when (*he*) rode into the heyfield.’


(Njals saga/Reykjabók)

*Hoskuldr* is an aboutness topic in the wider discourse preceding (12) and a given topic within it. The pronoun *hann* ‘he’ is a reestablished AS-Topic, referred to by the null-subject across the given topic. This is further illustrated in (13).

(13) [Hoskuldr sent for Hríti; and]

**he**<sub>i</sub> came there and *Hoskuldr* was outdoors when \_\_\_\_<sub>i</sub> rode into the heyfield

AS    Given    Ø



As seen, the null refers to the closest preceding AS-Topic, other types of topics not interfering with or disrupting the AS-Topic chain (as expected, under the Frascarelli et al. approach).

As indicated by (13), Type A nulls are sometimes found in passages with two overt topics in Old Norse.<sup>7</sup> The two topics are not clause mates, so the Icelandic facts do not bear on the structural claims of Frascarelli et al. However, like the data discussed by Frascarelli et al., they show that grammar distinguishes between different types of topics. In addition, Type A nulls (*pro*) in Old Norse are like Italian third person null subjects in Frascarelli’s analysis (2007) in usually being coreferential with a preceding AS-Topic (maintained or reestablished).

It has been repeatedly observed that null arguments in Old Norse were predominately in the third person (see, most recently, Kinn et al. 2016 and the references there, including Nygaard 1906). As for referential *pro* or Type A nulls, this is precisely what we expect if such nulls had to be anteceded by an AS-Topic.<sup>8</sup> First and second person arguments are typically

<sup>7</sup> As one would expect, Type A nulls are most commonly found in Old Norse structures with only a single overt topic (an AS-Topic anteceding the null).

<sup>8</sup> For a rather different suggestion, see Kinn (2016). Following Déchaine & Wiltschko (2002), Kinn argues that first and second person pronouns are “bigger” than third person pronouns (the former being full-fledged DPs, while the latter are argued to be mere “phi-Ps”, lacking a D edge) – hence resisting drop, in contrast to the “smaller” third person pronouns. One of the arguments that have been taken to support this is that first and



non-topics or given topics rather than AS-Topics, thus not usually counting as proper or “excusing” antecedents for *pro*.<sup>9</sup> When anteceded or controlled by an AS-Topic, Old Norse *pro* gets a topical referential reading, otherwise getting a non-referential (arbitrary, generic or expletive) interpretation. This latter, impersonal strategy is still widely applicable in Modern Icelandic (Sigurðsson & Egerland 2009).

## 2.2. Type B: Topic drop from Spec,CP

All instances of Type B topic drop are structurally uniform in that they cannot normally contain any overt items in Spec,CP (the pre-verbal initial position), as has been repeatedly illustrated (Sigurðsson 1993, 2011a, Sigurðsson & Maling 2010). Consider (14a–b) in comparison with (7a, c), repeated here.

(7) *Topic drop* (Modern Icelandic):

a. — *Sé þig á morgun.*  
 see.1SG you on morrow  
 ‘(I’ll) see you tomorrow.’

c. *Húni kom seint heim. —<sub>i</sub> Opnaði dyrnar. —<sub>i</sub> Læddist inn.*  
 she came late home opened.3SG door-the.PL sneaked.3SG in  
 ‘She came home late. (*She*) opened the door(s). (*She*) sneaked in.’

(14) a. \**Þig sé — á morgun.*  
 you see.1SG on morrow  
 Intended: ‘(I’ll) see you tomorrow.’

b. *Húni kom seint heim.*  
 she came late home  
 \**Dyrnar opnaði —<sub>i</sub>.*  
 door-the.PL opened.3SG

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second person pronouns often head full DPs more easily (*we linguists, you linguists*) than do third person pronouns (\**they linguists, %them linguists*). However, this argument does not carry over to Icelandic, neither old nor modern (e.g., *þeir Gunnar*, lit. ‘they Gunnar’, roughly ‘Gunnar and his (male) companion(s)’, *þær systur(nar)*, ‘they sisters(-the)’, i.e., ‘the sisters; they, the sisters’; see also the criticism in Stausland Johnsen 2016). Third person pronouns are in fact commonly “bigger” than first and second person pronouns in that they express gender distinctions, and in Icelandic this applies in the plural as well as the singular (see masc. *þeir* vs. fem. *þær* in the preceding examples). One could counter this argument by saying that first and second pronouns are “big” in the sense that they positively match the logophoric agent/patient linkers in the edge linking approach in Sigurðsson (2011a, 2014) and related work. Crucially, though, third person pronouns corefer with full DPs. I adopt the standard view that all nonreduced pronouns are DPs (see further Sigurðsson 2017).

<sup>9</sup> With some sporadic exceptions. Obviously, though, first and second person pronouns *can* be AS-topics, in Italian (see (3)–(4)) and Icelandic as well as more generally. Given the approach in Sigurðsson (2011a), first and second person pronouns match Top in addition to the logophoric edge linkers in the absence of another more prominent Top matcher.

Intended: ‘She came home late (and *she*) opened the door(s).’

In other words: Not only the argument position of the null-argument but also Spec,CP must be empty.

Despite this structural uniformity of Type B null constructions, they are functionally disparate. At least three distinct types can be discerned: constructions 1) with unspecified discourse topics, 2) with specified conjunction reduction type topics, 3) with speech event topics, commonly but not exclusively referring to the speaker.

Type 1, with *unspecified discourse topics*, is exemplified in the Old Icelandic (6a), illustrated again in (15) (with added context).<sup>10</sup>

- (15) (Sigurðr ... the farmers ...)  
then the grumbling abated and \_\_ ended.3PL at that the gathering  
(i.e. the involved, Sigurðr, the farmers, and others at the gathering, ended it at that)

This type has no clearly coreferential antecedent but the third person plural form of the verb indicates that the null stands for some group of people. The type has disappeared from the language; to my knowledge, no examples of this sort have ever been reported for any Modern Icelandic texts or discourse.

Type 2, with *specified conjunction reduction type topics*, is exemplified in the Old Icelandic (6b), illustrated again in (16).

- (16) **sire bishop**<sub>i</sub> wakens, \_\_<sub>i</sub> takes [self] up to (the) church  
and \_\_<sub>i</sub> takes ... sacred things \_\_<sub>i</sub> walks so

This type plainly involves regular conjunction reduction, with or without an overt conjunction. It is cross-linguistically widespread, perhaps universal.<sup>11</sup> It is exemplified for Modern Icelandic in (7c), and it is easily found in various kinds of modern texts. See (17) and (18), from a 2015 novel (*Tvöfalt gler* by Halldóra Thoroddsen, pp. 6, 7).

- (17) **Hún**<sub>i</sub> ... \_\_<sub>i</sub> Vaknar um miðja nótt ... \_\_<sub>i</sub> Sest við suðurgluggann ...  
she wakens in middle night sits\_down at south\_window  
\_\_<sub>i</sub> Horfir yfir sofandi borgina.  
looks over sleeping city-the  
‘She ... (*She*) wakens in the middle of the night. (*She*) sits down at the southern window  
... (*She*) looks over the sleeping city.’

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<sup>10</sup> For more examples of this sort, see Hjartardóttir (1993: 54–55).

<sup>11</sup> Regular conjunction reduction in Scandinavian is subject to much the same structural conditions as other types of Germanic Type B drop (as distinct from Type A *pro* drop), as illustrated in Sigurðsson & Maling (2010).

- (18) *Hún<sub>i</sub> hefði átt að bjóða honum inn ...    <sub>i</sub> Hefði ekki átt að ...*  
 she had ought to invite him in had not ought to  
 ‘She should have invited him in ... (She) should not have ...’

The type applies to AS-Topics, in the early as well as the modern language. However, in contrast to Type A nulls (*pro*), it cannot usually refer to its antecedent across another topic, i.e. the antecedent-null relation is subject to strict minimality, violated by intervention of another overt topic (AS or given). This is illustrated for Modern Icelandic in (19), where the first person subject is an intervening given topic (to the best of my knowledge the same is true of all earlier stages of the language).<sup>12</sup>

- (19) *Hún<sub>i</sub> ...    <sub>i</sub> Vaknar um miðja nótt ...    <sub>i</sub> Sest við suðurluggann ...*  
 she wakens in middle night sits\_down at south\_window-the  
*Ég er við norðurluggann.*  
 I am at northern\_window-the  
*??   <sub>i</sub> Horfir yfir sofandi borgina.*  
 looks.3SG over sleeping city-the  
 Intended: ‘She ... (She) wakens in the middle of the night. (She) sits down at the southern window ... I am at the northern window. (She) looks over the sleeping city.’

Type 3, with *speech event null topics*, is exemplified for Modern Icelandic in (7a–b) and illustrated again in (20).

- (20) a.     see.1SG you on morrow (= ‘I’ll see you tomorrow.’)  
 b. comes she?     know-I not (= ‘I don’t know (that) / (That.) I don’t know.’)

This type is widespread across most colloquial (and informal written) modern Germanic varieties (see Sigurðsson 1989, Haegeman 1990, Mörnjö 2002, Thráinsson 2007, Sigurðsson & Maling 2010, Sigurðsson 2011a, Nygård 2013). It has not been observed in Old Norse texts. It may have been non-existent in the language, but I doubt that very much. Rather, I believe, it is absent from the preserved texts because it is not compatible with the formal style of saga dialogues; these dialogues are of course not recorded spoken language, instead involving fictive scene settings of verbal events that supposedly took place two or three

<sup>12</sup> Thus, coreference in Spec,CP (Type B, in Old as well as Modern Icelandic) cannot easily circumvent strict Topic minimality, whereas coreference in an argument position could do so in Old Icelandic (Type A). Presumably, being in an A-position facilitated argument interpretation over distance in Old Icelandic (across subordinate C as well as intervening given topics). It is unclear why this property has gone lost (but see the discussion of Chinese, Finnish and Germanic null arguments in Sigurðsson 2011a).

centuries before they were first shaped in writing, in the style of formally trained and educated scribes.

Speech event null topics are typical of informal spoken language answers (i.e., speaker shift contexts), while the other types of null-topics we have been looking at are confined to speaker (or writer) bounded contexts (“monologues”). So, despite being structurally uniform in V2 Germanic, Type B null-topics are functionally disparate. As we have seen, at least three types can be discerned for Icelandic, as explicitly stated in (21).

- (21) a. Unspecified discourse topics in Old Icelandic, without a clearly coreferential antecedent but usually with roughly the plural reading ‘those involved in the situation or the event’ (distinct from generic readings).  
 b. Specified conjunction reduction type topics, with or without an overt conjunction but with a clearly coreferential antecedent.  
 c. Speech event topics, typical of informal spoken language answers.

While type (21a) has disappeared, types (21b–c) seem to be getting more frequent in the written language (cf. Kinn et al. 2016), presumably as a side effect of much increased use of informal written style. These drop types cannot always be easily distinguished from one another when the null argument is a subject. For objects, however, they are clearly distinct. Type (21b), the conjunction reduction type, cannot apply to objects in Modern Icelandic, while type (21c) with null objects, as in (7b)/(20b), is natural, provided that the null object is in the third person.<sup>13</sup>

In Modern Icelandic, the conjunction reduction type behaves much like conjunction reduction in English and other related languages – being largely confined to subjects that are dropped or non-lexicalized under identity with a preceding coreferential subject. This subject-subject symmetry requirement did not apply in Old Norse, where subjects could be dropped under identity with a preceding object and vice versa (see Nygaard 1906: 10–11). This is illustrated for an object/null-subject chain in (22); similar chains have been documented for Old Italian, in contrast to Modern Italian (Poletto 2017).

- (22) Síðan fekk hon **honom**<sub>i</sub> hit sœmilegsta sæti  
 then gave she him a respectable seat  
 ok   <sub>i</sub> var með konungi um vetrinn vel metinn  
 and was with king through winter well appreciated.MASC  
 ‘Then she allotted him a respectable seat and (*he*) stayed at the King’s in the winter, well appreciated.’  
 (14<sup>th</sup> century, Njals saga/Reykjabók, Sigurðsson 1994:46)

<sup>13</sup> Commonly corresponding to a *það* ‘it’ or a *þetta* ‘that, this’ that refers to a proposition rather than to an argument; see the discussion of the Cardinaletti Puzzle in Sigurðsson (2011a).

In general, third person DPs of all sorts could be dropped rather freely in Old Norse, suggesting, as mentioned above, that null DPs do not require any special formal “licensing”, nevertheless being recovered in various structural positions under various conditions in various languages. The recovering conditions have changed in the history of Icelandic, such that the Type A strategy (referential drop from argument positions under coreference) has disappeared, in contrast to the Type B strategy (referential drop from Spec,CP). A similar development seems to be partly taking place in present-day colloquial Chinese (see Sigurðsson 2011a: 298).

### 3. Narrative Inversion (and other V1 declaratives)

The clausal word order typology of Icelandic is in many ways similar to that of other Scandinavian languages (see Thráinsson 2007), the major differences being that Icelandic is a semi-null-subject language, with non-referential (expletive/impersonal) subject drop, and usually has verb raising (to T) in subordinate clauses (and infinitives).<sup>14</sup> **SVX** is the neutral order in declarative clauses, fronting of non-subjects yields a verb-second “inversion”, typically **XVSY** for definite subjects, with the subject next to the finite verb, **XVYS** for indefinite subjects, with the subject in a low or late position, and **XVY** in impersonal subjectless clauses. In addition, however, Icelandic has *declarative V1* orders: VS, VXS and subjectless VX. See (9), repeated here, and (23).

- (9) *Johan Cryuffi ... Fyrsti leikur hans; fyrir Barcelona var í október 1973*  
 J.C. first game his for B. was in October 1973  
*og skoraði hann; strax tvö mörk í 4-0 sigri á Granada.*  
 and scored he immediately two goals in 4-0 victory on Granada  
 ‘Johan Cryuff ... His first game for Barcelona was in October 1973 and he immediately scored two goals in a 4-0 victory over Granada.’  
 ([https://is.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johan\\_Cruyff](https://is.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johan_Cruyff), 2016-08-24)

- (23) *Enginn dómari var mættur kl. 4, þegar leikurinn átti að hefjast.*  
 no referee was arrived clock 4 when match-the ought to begin  
**Var** *beðið eftir dómara til kl. 5.30.*  
 was waited after referee till clock 5.30

<sup>14</sup> SVX thus being the canonical order in declarative subordinate clauses. XV(Y)S (V2 type) orders (“then left she”, “then left probably some of the guests”) are infrequent and often ungrammatical in subordinate clauses, as opposed to main clauses, and subordinate interrogatives have *wh*-SV order (“when she left”), whereas main clause interrogatives have the V2 type *wh*-VS order (“When left she?”). The common assumption that Icelandic is a symmetric V2 language is thus incorrect.

*Voru þá nokkrir drengjanna farnir í burtu.*

were then some boys-the gone in way

‘No referee had arrived at 4, when the match was supposed to begin. The involved waited for a referee until 5.30. Some of the boys had then left.’

([http://timarit.is/view\\_page\\_init.jsp?pageId=3260235](http://timarit.is/view_page_init.jsp?pageId=3260235))

I specifically refer to the VS type in (9) as *Narrative Inversion*, NI (distinguishing it from the other V1 types, following Sigurðsson 1990, 1994). It has a number of typical traits, as listed in (24).

- (24) a. The subject follows immediately after the initial finite verb: VS.  
b. The subject is a given topic at the clausal level, commonly referring to an already established aboutness topic at the discourse level.  
c. It is most frequent for first person subjects, then for pronominal third person subjects and least frequent for non-pronominal subjects (second person arguments are rare in narrative texts and disregarded here). Thus, in the narrative text counts in Sigurðsson (1990: 45), 47% of the relevant clauses (VS and SV root clauses) with a first person subject had VS order, while that ratio was 22% for pronominal third person subjects and 10% for non-pronominal DP subjects (overwhelmingly most of these, in turn, had a definite DP subject).  
d. It is almost exclusively confined to root clauses, being all but nonexistent in non-root environments.<sup>15</sup>  
e. It is common in *og*- ‘and’ conjuncts (as in (22)), but virtually nonexistent in adversative *en*- ‘but’ conjuncts.

The other two declarative V1 types differ from NI, first, in being incompatible with pronominal subjects (i.e., they either contain no subject or only a non-topical subject), and, second, in being grammatical in many non-root contexts. One trait all three V1 types have in common is (24e): they are all frequent in *og*- ‘and’ conjuncts but almost nonexistent in *en*- ‘but’ conjuncts. The common denominator for all three types is that V1 declaratives involve discourse continuity and cannot usually contain any unexpected or adversative information (in relation to previous discourse). V1 declaratives are thus typical of certain narrative texts (including, e.g., sports reports) and some reasoning texts (scientific, political). As for NI, the subject is a given topic, regardless of person; a third person NI subject, in turn, typically refers to an already established aboutness topic at the discourse level, either a maintained aboutness topic, as in (9) above, or a reestablished aboutness topic, as in the Old Icelandic (8). Consider also the Old Icelandic (25), with two subsequent NI clauses with distinct reestablished topics.

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<sup>15</sup> A few examples of embedded NI are reported in Sigurðsson (1994:74–75, 154; see also Thráinsson 2007:29).

The broad context is that Hallgerda marries Glum, brother of Thorarin. The immediate context is given in English within square brackets (from the 1861 translation by George W. Dasent).

- (25) [Hallgerda kept her temper down that winter, and they liked her well enough. But when the spring came, the brothers talked about their property, and Thorarin said – “I will give up to you the house at Varmalek, for that is readiest to your hand, and I will go down south to Laugarness and live there, but Engey we will have both of us in common”. Glum was willing enough to do that.]

*Fór Þórarinn suðr byggðum en þau bjoggu þar eptir. Réð Hallgerðr*  
went Þ. south district but they stayed there behind hired H.  
*sér hjón ...*  
herself servants

‘So Thorarin went down to the south of that district, and they [Hallgerda and Glum] stayed behind there. Hallgerda hired servants.’

(Njals saga/Reykjabók; Sigurðsson 1994: 139)

In Old High German, in contrast, “V1-clauses serve to introduce a new discourse referent ... and therefore are typically used in presentational sentences, foremost in the beginning of texts or episodes” (Hinterhölzl & Petrova 2010:316).<sup>16</sup> This is orthogonal to Icelandic, where declarative V1 never initiates an episode, neither in longer narratives nor in short jokes and anecdotes. In view of this sharp contrast between German and Icelandic declarative V1, it is tempting to speculate that the Icelandic type is part of the Celtic heritage in Iceland, Celtic languages generally being VSX.<sup>17</sup> After all around 65% of the original female population in the country is believed to have come from Ireland and other Celtic parts of the British Islands (Helgason et al. 2009) and Early and Medieval Irish culture is renowned for its strong narrative tradition. The tellers or creators of the Old Icelandic sagas are all anonymous, while Scandinavian skaldic poetry is crowded with hundreds of names of male scalds. That is perhaps not a coincidence. It does not imply that the scribes of the sagas were women, but it might suggest that the saga tradition was considered to have “unmanly” roots and thus less prestigious than the highly esteemed skaldic tradition.

NI is almost exclusively a root phenomenon, like Type B topic drop. The conjunction reduction type of Type B and NI are partly interchangeable. However, this only holds when the subject refers to an aboutness topic (overt or silent) in an immediately preceding clause

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<sup>16</sup> This characterization is taken to hold for Modern German as well, to the extent that it applies declarative V1 (see Önnarfors 1997, Hinterhölzl & Petrova 2010:316, fn. 1). However, the “Icelandic” type *und haben wir* (‘and have we’, i.e., ‘and (thus) we have’) does occur, albeit rarely (Gisbert Fanselow, perc. comm.).

<sup>17</sup> This idea might seem to be undermined by the fact that NI occurs in texts that are usually taken to be Old Norwegian rather than Old Icelandic (see examples in Kinn 2016). However, the Old Norse saga genre is overwhelmingly Icelandic, so the saga style in Old Norwegian texts might very well be strongly influenced by the Icelandic narrative tradition.

(the topic drop construction being subject to strict minimality, violated by intervention of an overt topic, AS or given, cf. (19)). Consider the example in (26).

- (26) *Maximus hélt með her sinn til Ítalíu árið 387*  
 M. went with army his to Italy year 387  
*og neyddist Valentinianus þá að flýja til Theodosiusar.*  
 and was\_forced V. then to flee to Th.  
*Theodosius; leit á Valentinianus sem bandamann sinn*  
 Th. looked at V. as ally his  
*og fór hann; því með her til Ítalíu*  
 and went he thus with army to Italy  
*og \_\_\_i mætti Maximusi í orrustu*  
 and met M. in battle  
*og \_\_\_i sigraði hann*  
 and defeated him

‘Maximus went with his army to Italy in the year 387 and then Valentinian was forced to flee to Theodosius. Theodosius considered Valentinian to be an ally of his, and therefore he went with an army to Italy and (*he*) met Maximus in a battle and (*he*) defeated him.’

([https://is.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theodosius\\_1](https://is.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theodosius_1), December 29, 2016)

Here we have two cases of NI (“and was\_forced Valentinian”, “and went he”) followed by two cases of topic drop. The first NI case is not interchangeable with topic drop (as a dropped subject would have to be coreferential with ‘Maximus’), but the second one is and both the topic drop cases are interchangeable with NI (which would yield the types “and met he Maximus” and “and defeated he him”).

As seen in “and was\_forced Valentinian” in (26) and in the Old Icelandic examples in (25), NI subjects (like subjects in regular subject-initial clauses) *can* be coreferential with a non-local antecedent. More commonly, however, NI subjects are coreferential with the closest possible antecedent. Consider (27) and (28).

- (27) *Narrative Inversion:*

*Ólafur Jónsson ... Bróðir Ólafs er Jón Jónsson háskólanemi*  
 Ó. J. brother Olaf’s is J. J. student  
*og er unnusta hans María Pálsdóttir.*  
 and is fiancé his M. P.

‘O. J. ... O’s brother is **J. J. student**; and his; fiancé is M.P.’

- (28) *Subject-initial order:*



Ólafur Jónsson ... Bróðir Ólafs er Jón Jónsson háskólanemi  
 Ó. J. brother Olaf's is J. J. student  
 og unnusta hans er María Pálsdóttir.  
 and fiancé his is M. P.  
 'O. J.<sub>i</sub> ... O's<sub>i</sub> brother is J. J. student and his<sub>i</sub> fiancé is M.P.'

As seen, the subject ('his fiancé') in the NI example in (27) refers to an immediately preceding AS-Topic, *Jón Jónsson*, whereas the subject in the subject-initial order in (28) refers to a prominent discourse topic, across the potential topic *Jón Jónsson*.<sup>18</sup> Overt subjects in clause-initial position (Spec,CP on standard accounts) thus have a stronger context scanning capacity than both null subjects in Spec,CP and overt subjects in NI.

#### 4. Concluding discussion

Icelandic does not provide evidence for distinct structural positions for different topic types (disregarding hanging topics). However, referential third person *pro* drop in Old Icelandic (Type A), various types of topic drop (Type B) in Old and Modern Icelandic and Narrative Inversion, also in both Old and Modern Icelandic, are all phenomena that are sensitive to topicality, either involving Aboutness-Shift topics or given topics or both, thus showing that different types of topicality are active in this language.

Topicality has effects at the clausal level, but it is contextually preconditioned, reflecting relations between discourse (the common ground) and the C edge (plus the inner CP phase). It is thus a category of *broad syntax* (in the sense of Sigurðsson 2014), rather than merely of narrow CP-internal syntax. If Universal Grammar is defined as narrowly as in recent minimalist work topicality is plausibly not part of it or provided by it. Nevertheless, it seems uncontroversial that topicality is a universally available category or phenomenon, suggesting that it is an interface third factor phenomenon (see Chomsky 2005). That is: A phenomenon stemming from some universal capacity that is distinct from Universal Grammar but interacts with it in the shaping of externalized grammar, differently so in different languages. Thus, while the work of Frascarelli et al. suggests that Italian has developed distinct structural C edge correlates with distinct topic types, this has not happened in Icelandic. The fact that different types of topicality are nevertheless operative in Icelandic grammar is one of many facts that raise the central question of what principles steer the molding processes that build

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<sup>18</sup> The opposite coreference relations are much degraded, but the appropriate marking would be # (semantically or pragmatically infelicitous) rather than \* (ungrammatical). The example in (27) is modelled on a parallel example in an obituary in *Morgunblaðið* 11 February 2017 (with different names).

individual grammars from the scratch of Universal Grammar and other conceptual/biological subsystems.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> I intentionally disregard linguistic input here (the second factor in Chomsky 2005). As argued in Sigurðsson (2011b) and related work, linguistic input is secondary in the development of language.

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