

**Grammatik i fokus**  
*Festskrift till Christer Platzack*  
*den 18 november 2003*

Volym 1

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**Redaktörer/Editors**

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Omslag/Cover: Lars Emilsson, Malmö

Översättning av förord/Translation of foreword: Alan Crozier, Skatteberga

Foto/Photo: Kennet Ruona, Lund

Porträtt/Portrait: Siri Ekberg, Lund

ISBN 91-631-4570-7

Institutionen för nordiska språk, Lunds universitet, Lund

<http://www.nordlund.lu.se>

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Wallin & Dalholm, Lund 2003

# Case and argument structure of novel verbs of communication in Icelandic

Jóhanna Barðdal

## 1. Introduction

The availability of argument structure constructions to new verbs in a language has recently been the subject of increasing research within syntax. The partial productivity of the Ditransitive construction in English has, for instance, been studied by Goldberg (1995), amongst others. Michaelis and Ruppenhofer (2001:93-94) discuss the partial productivity of the Applicative *be*-construction in German, and Barðdal (2001, ch. 5) reports on the productivity of the Dative object construction in Icelandic. An historical account of syntactic productivity is presented in, for instance, Israel (1996) and Barðdal (2001:196-208). These studies have all focused on the structural and semantic prerequisites for syntactic productivity. The goal of the present paper is to add a social dimension to this discussion and point out the role of the language community in contributing to increased productivity of syntactic constructions. However, I will argue that this social dimension is closely connected with language use, and thus that there is a relation, albeit an indirect one, between language use and the diversity of constructions a new verb can occur in.

The linguistic objects under investigation are two new verbs of instrument of communication in Icelandic, i.e. *(e)meila* ‘e-mail’ and *SMSa* ‘send text message’ and their acceptability in the Ditransitive, Transfer and the Caused-Motion construction.<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this research a questionnaire survey was carried out, designed to measure the acceptability of these novel verbs in the relevant constructions. The results are compared with the acceptability of another fairly recent verb of communication, *faxa* ‘fax’, which entered Icelandic earlier and is not as generally accepted in the same constructions as *(e)meila* and *SMSa* (see below). I begin with a short presentation of the three constructions in Icelandic that are semantically compatible with verbs of communication, i.e. the Ditransitive, Transfer and the Caused-Motion construction. Then, I report on the questionnaire survey, its conduction and the

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<sup>1</sup> The acronym *SMS* stands for ‘Short Message System’ and was originally used as a noun for the kind of text messages sent with cell phones. The pronunciation of the noun is [esemes] in Icelandic, while two pronunciations for the verb have been encountered, i.e. [esemesa] and [smesa].

findings resulting from it. I finalize the paper with a summary of my conclusions.

## 2. The Transfer, the Caused-Motion and the Ditransitive construction

Syntactic objects in Icelandic can be case marked as nominative, accusative, dative or genitive, thereby making it necessary to distinguish between various subconstructions of the Transitive construction. Verbs of movement can instantiate two such, i.e. the Transfer and the Caused-Motion construction (cf. Barðdal 2001:151-156). The Transfer construction selects for an accusative object, whereas the Caused-Motion construction selects for a dative object.

Novel verbs of instrument of communication, such as (*e*)*meila* ‘e-mail’ and *SMSa* ‘send text message’, are semantically very close to verbs of sending, which traditionally occur in the Transfer construction with an accusative object, and alternatively in the Ditransitive construction. Existing verbs of sending, however, are excluded from the Caused-Motion construction in Icelandic by convention:

- |     |    |   |                            |
|-----|----|---|----------------------------|
| (1) | a. | Ég sendi þetta til þín.<br>I.nom send this.acc to you.gen<br>‘I’ll send this to you.’ | Transfer construction      |
|     | b. | Ég sendi þér þetta.<br>I.nom send you.dat this.acc<br>‘I’ll send you this.’           | Ditransitive construction  |
|     | c. | *Ég sendi þessu til þín.<br>I.nom send this.dat to you.gen                            | Caused-Motion construction |

It is, therefore, expected that new verbs of instrument of communication may behave similarly to verbs of sending, and be restricted to the Transfer and the Ditransitive construction. The verbs *faxa* and (*e*)*meila*, for instance, originally only occurred in the Transfer construction in Icelandic, but are fairly recently being attested in the Caused-Motion construction in Icelandic with a dative object:

- |     |    |  |                     |
|-----|----|--|---------------------|
| (2) | a. | Hann faxaði samningnum til þín.<br>he.nom faxed contract-the.dat to you<br>‘He faxed the contract to you.’ | (Maling 2002:10)    |
|     | b. | Ég emeila þessu til þín.<br>I.nom e-mail this.dat to you.gen<br>‘I’ll e-mail this to you.’                 | (overheard in 2001) |

Verbs of instrument of communication are semantically compatible with the Caused-Motion construction in Icelandic, presumably because when they are used (di)transitively they entail sending, and verbs of sending can be regarded as a subcategory of caused-motion, specifying the manner of motion.

Moreover, the verb (*e*)*meila* is also attested in the Transfer and the Ditransitive construction, and instances of the verb *SMSa* in both the Transfer and the Caused-Motion constructions can be elicited from Icelandic speakers:

- (3) a. Ég *emeila* þetta til þín.  
I.nom e-mail this.acc to you.gen  
'I'll e-mail this to you.'
- b. Hún hefur *e-meilað* mér myndina.  
she.nom has e-mailed me.dat picture-the.acc  
'She e-mailed me the picture.'
- (4) a. Ég *SMSa* þetta til þín.  
I.nom SMS this.acc to you.gen  
'I'll send it to you as a text message.'
- b. Ég *SMSa* þessu til þín.  
I.nom SMS this.dat to you.gen  
'I'll send it to you as a text message.'
- (Maling 2002:14)

This situation gives rise to the following questions: Which of these three constructions, the Transitive, the Caused-Motion and/or the Ditransitive construction, will be activated when new verbs of sending enter Icelandic, and which factors interfere with that choice for Icelandic speakers?

### 3. The questionnaire

With recent telecommunication technology, new verbs of instrument of communication are entering Icelandic, such as (*e*)*meila* 'e-mail' and *SMSa* 'send text message'. According to polls made by Gallup, almost 90% of all Icelanders at the age 16-75yr own or have access to a cell phone,<sup>2</sup> and approximately 70% of the population have access to the Internet in their homes.<sup>3</sup> Since the distribution of computers and cell phones across the population is among the highest in the world in Iceland, the situation presents the perfect opportunity to investigate whether speakers accept/use (*e*)*meila* and *SMSa* in the Ditransitive construction, the Transfer construction and/or the Caused-Motion construction.

The questionnaire survey was carried out in Iceland in December 2001. The sample was a convenience sample, with the participants ranging in age from 13 to 55. A clear majority of the participants was between 30-38yr in age, and both the mode and the median age was 34yr. An English version of the questionnaire is presented in Appendix. I invented example sentences with *senda tölvupóst* 'send e-mail', *senda SMS* 'send text message', (*e*)*meila* and

<sup>2</sup> See [www.landssiminn.is/control/wb-view-news?id\\_news=764&cid\\_type=82&pid=8398](http://www.landssiminn.is/control/wb-view-news?id_news=764&cid_type=82&pid=8398)

<sup>3</sup> See [forsætisraduneyti.is/interpro/for/for.nsf/Files/utsamfelaglokaskyrsla2002.doc/\\$file/utsamfelag-lokaskyrsla2002.doc](http://forsætisraduneyti.is/interpro/for/for.nsf/Files/utsamfelaglokaskyrsla2002.doc/$file/utsamfelag-lokaskyrsla2002.doc)

*SMSa*, with the latter two occurring in the Transfer, Caused-Motion and the Ditransitive construction. The participants were to judge the acceptability of the sentences on a 7-point scale, with 1 as completely unacceptable and 7 as highly acceptable. The three types of example sentences, together with fillers and control sentences, were randomly distributed in the questionnaire, with one section on *(e)meila* and another on *SMSa*. The number of speakers was 19 for *(e)meila* but only 17 for *SMSa* due to the fact that two participants left out the latter part of the questionnaire which contained the examples with *SMSa*. The participants were also asked whether they used e-mail and/or cell phones on a regular basis.

Table 1 shows the distribution of judgments for all the participants. The sentence in a) exemplifies the Caused-Motion construction, b) the Transfer construction and c) the Ditransitive Dat-Acc construction. It turns out that the judgments on *(e)meila* in the three constructions cover the whole acceptability scale. For the Caused-Motion construction, the judgments range from 5 participants judging it completely unacceptable to 7 participants judging it highly acceptable. The judgments for the Transfer construction are as varied but fewer participants placed their judgments at the extreme ends of the scale. The Ditransitive construction is generally perceived as not so unacceptable. It is also noteworthy in Table 1 that the participants rated *SMSa* overall as better than *(e)meila* in the Caused-Motion construction, while the rates were very similar for the two verbs in the other constructions.

Table 1: Distribution of judgments across the acceptability scale - Raw scores.

19 participants		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<b>A</b>								
a.	Ég <i>(e)meila</i> þessu til þín	5	1		2		4	7
b.	Ég <i>(e)meila</i> þetta til þín	4		3	1	2	4	5
c.	Ég <i>(e)meila</i> þér þetta	1	2	4	3		3	6
17 participants		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<b>B</b>								
a.	Ég <i>SMSa</i> þessu til þín		1	5	3		3	6
b.	Ég <i>SMSa</i> þetta til þín	3	2	1	1	2	3	5
c.	Ég <i>SMSa</i> þér þetta	2	2	2	1	1	3	6

In order to calculate the overall acceptability rates for the two verbs in all three constructions I assigned a grade to each judgment: 0 for judgment 4 and -1, -2 and -3 for judgments 3, 2 and 1. In the same way, I graded judgments 5, 6 and 7 as +1, +2 and +3. Calculating the multiplied negative and the multiplied positive scores for themselves, subtracting the lower from the higher provides a

measurement of the general acceptability of these sentence types, i.e. whether they are judged more or less acceptable with the particular verbs. This measurement also gives a normed score for both *(e)meila* and *SMSa* since the number of judgments is not the same for the two verbs.

Table 2: Distribution of judgments across the acceptability scale - Normed scores.

	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3	
<b>A</b>								
a. Ég <i>(e)meila</i> þessu til þín	15	2		0		8	14	= +5
b. Ég <i>(e)meila</i> þetta til þín	12		3	0	2	8	15	= +10
c. Ég <i>(e)meila</i> þér þetta	3	4	4	0		6	18	= +13
<b>B</b>								
a. Ég <i>SMSa</i> þessu til þín		2	5	0		6	15	= +14
b. Ég <i>SMSa</i> þetta til þín	9	4	1	0	2	6	15	= +9
c. Ég <i>SMSa</i> þér þetta	6	4	2	0	1	6	18	= +13

The plus-marked figures in the last column illustrate that the negative judgments were generally outranked by positive judgments of the Icelandic speakers filling out the questionnaire. These figures can be compared with the figures for the lexical verb *senda* ‘send’ together with either the object *tölvupóst* ‘e-mail’ or *SMS* ‘text message’, and with the figures for the control verb *kasta* ‘throw’ which is ungrammatical in both the Transfer and the Ditransitive construction in Icelandic:

Table 3: Normed scores for the five predicates.

	<i>(e)meila</i>	<i>SMSa</i>	<i>senda tölvupóst</i>	<i>senda SMS</i>	<i>kasta</i>
a. Caused-Motion	+5	+14			
b. Transfer	+10	+9	+43	+7	-44
c. Ditransitive Dat-Acc	+13	+13	+36	+12	-45

Beginning with a comparison between *(e)meila*, *SMSa* and *kasta*, the ungrammaticality of *kasta* in the Ditransitive and the Transfer construction in Icelandic is clearly manifested in the high negative acceptability rates of -44 and -45, shown in the last column in Table 3. There is, thus, a clear consensus among the participants that *kasta* is ungrammatical in these constructions. The acceptability rates of *(e)meila* and *SMSa*, ranging from +5 to +14, therefore establish that *(e)meila* and *SMSa* are located on the ‘grammatical’ side of the acceptability scale in Icelandic in all three constructions.

It is interesting that the original ‘send’ construction is rated much higher in acceptability for an e-mailing event than the lexical verb *(e)meila* in the three constructions, even though the latter are also judged acceptable overall. In fact, the original ‘send’ construction with an object *tölvupóst* ‘e-mail’ is rated highest in acceptability of all, with the Transfer construction being rated

slightly more acceptable than the Ditransitive construction. In comparison, the highest obtainable scores for *(e)meila* ‘e-mail’ and *senda tölvupóst* ‘send an e-mail’ are +57, and for *SMSa* and *senda SMS* it is +51. These figures, therefore, show that the original ‘send’ construction is an entrenched construction for an e-mailing event, suggesting that it may have been a default option when e-mail was introduced in Iceland approximately ten to fifteen years ago. The lexical verb *(e)meila* is also an accepted alternative in Modern Icelandic in all three constructions, with the Transfer and the Ditransitive construction being judged more acceptable than the Caused-Motion construction.

However, for the verb *SMSa*, the three constructions were judged as acceptable as the ‘send’ construction. The verb *SMSa* is a brand-new addition to the Icelandic vocabulary, thus it cannot be expected that it has become entrenched in any particular syntactic construction. Note also that either the ‘send’ construction is not a default constructional alternative in Modern Icelandic, as it probably was when e-mail was introduced in Iceland, or the Ditransitive, the Transfer and the Caused-Motion construction are gaining in productivity. The fact that the acceptability rate for *SMSa* in the Caused-Motion construction is higher than for *(e)meila* (+14 vs. +5), in fact, supports the assumption that at least the Caused-Motion construction is becoming more productive.

As evident from Table 4, there is also a correlation between the acceptance/rejection of the Transfer and the Caused-Motion construction and age, in that the mean (average) age of the speakers who accepted the Transfer and the Caused-Motion construction is 30.5yr for *SMSa* and 30.6yr for *(e)meila*, whereas the mean age of the speakers who rejected the two constructions is 38.1yr for *SMSa* and 37.5yr for *(e)meila*. For the speakers who did not judge both constructions as equally acceptable, which most of them did, there was a clear tendency for older speakers to judge the Caused-Motion construction as worse, whereas younger speakers judged the Transfer construction as worse. Overall, these figures suggest that older speakers are more conservative than younger speakers.

Table 4: Negative and positive judgments across age.

	<i>(e)meila</i>		<i>SMSa</i>	
	Acceptance	Rejection	Acceptance	Rejection
Caused-Motion+Transfer	30.6yr	37.5yr	30.5yr	38.1yr
Ditransitive	32.2yr	34.8yr	29.5yr	40.4yr

For the Ditransitive construction, there is not only a correlation between the age of the participants and the acceptance/rejection of the construction, but the strength of the correlation is not the same for the two verbs. The mean age of the speakers accepting the Ditransitive with *(e)meila* was 32.2yr, and of the

speakers who rejected the Ditransitive it was only 34.8yr. Therefore, for the verb *(e)meila*, there is not much difference in age between the two groups of speakers, whereas the age difference is much greater for *SMSa*. The mean age of the speakers who accepted *SMSa* used ditransitively was 29.5yr, while the mean age of the speakers who rejected *SMSa* used ditransitively was 40.4yr. These findings show that in spite of the similar overall acceptability rates of the Ditransitive construction with the two verbs (+13 for both according to Table 3 above), there seems to be a stronger correlation with age and the acceptance/rejection of *SMSa* in the Ditransitive construction, whereas age does not seem to be a variable contributing to the acceptance/rejection of *(e)meila* in this construction. Other measurements of the central tendency, such as the age range and the median age (the center of distribution) of the two groups of participants, confirm this correlation between age and the acceptance/rejection of a construction for all constellations except for *(e)meila* in the Ditransitive construction. A closer investigation of the judgments of this particular group reveals that some of the younger participants, who accept the Ditransitive with *SMSa*, do not accept it with *(e)meila*.

This correlation of age found with the acceptance/rejections of *SMSa* in all constructions also correlates with the use of cell phones for these participants. All 17 participants use cell phones on a regular basis, whereas only 11 of 19 use e-mail regularly. By the same token, for *(e)meila* there is not a strong correlation between the participants' age and the acceptance/rejection of *(e)meila* in the Ditransitive construction, which again correlates with a lesser use of e-mail. The fact that the use of cell phones is evenly distributed across age groups in Iceland, confirmed by the figures obtained by the Gallup poll cited earlier, shows that the use of cell phones is also distributed across different professional and social groups. This, in turn, raises the question whether there is a correlation between language use and the diversity of constructions a new verb can occur in, in that the more wide-spread the use of a new verb is across the population in a community, the more constructions it can occur in.

In order to evaluate the hypothesis that the more wide-spread the use of a new verb is across the population in a community, the more constructions it can occur in, consider the following facts: The verb *faxa* was borrowed into Icelandic more than twenty years ago, it has been restricted to the Transfer construction and only recently has its use in the Caused-Motion construction been documented (example 2a above). The verb *faxa* has always been confined to company use and not entered the daily life and private sphere of the common Icelander. E-mail, on the other hand, was launched through the university, approximately ten to fifteen years ago, and spread from there to the community in general, through an increase in computer use in business and corporation, as

well as in an increase in general public possession of computers. For an e-mailing event the original ‘send’ construction is the most widely accepted alternative, and with the lexical verb (*e*)*meila* the Caused-Motion construction is judged worse than with *SMSa* (+5 vs. +14). The verb *SMSa* is equally well accepted in all constructions, concomitant with the fact that cell phones are used by a wide age group and across professional/social classes. To summarize, faxing is restricted to company use, e-mailing is both a professional and a personal activity, however, not as wide-spread as the use of cell phones, whereas cell-phone usage is a part of the daily life of an overwhelming majority of the Icelandic population. There is, thus, a compelling correlation between the degree of productivity of these constructions and the distribution of judgments across lexical verbs according to their usage domains and, consequently, according to their distribution across the population. This is shown in Table 5 below.

Table 5: Acceptability of communication verbs in constructions according to usage domains.

	business use	business/personal use	general use
	<i>faxa</i>	( <i>e</i> ) <i>meila</i>	<i>SMSa</i>
a. Caused-Motion	√	√	√
b. Transfer	√	√	√
c. Ditransitive Dat-Acc	*	√	√

Finally, Table 6 shows that 70% of the speakers judged the Transfer and the Caused-Motion constructions as acceptable together with (*e*)*meila*, whereas the corresponding figure for *SMSa* is only 64%. This is presumably a consequence of the fact that e-mail is an older phenomenon than SMS, and hence the terminology connected with it has existed in Icelandic for a longer time. Similar figures emerge for the Ditransitive construction: 71.5% of the participants accepted the Ditransitive with (*e*)*meila*, whereas only 64.7% accepted *SMSa* used ditransitively. The similarities in the figures for the Transfer/Caused-Motion and the Ditransitive construction suggest that it is the same group of speakers who accepts/rejects the Ditransitive and the Transfer/Caused-Motion constructions with each verb.

Table 6: Proportions between negative and positive judgments.

	(e) <i>meila</i>		<i>SMSa</i>	
	Acceptance	Rejection	Acceptance	Rejection
Caused-Motion+Transfer	70.0%	30.0%	64.0%	36.0%
Ditransitive	71.5%	28.5%	64.7%	35.3%

The main conclusion to draw from this investigation is that there is a correlation between language use and the diversity of constructions a new verb can occur in, in that the more the usage of a verb is spread across usage domains, and hence across different social/professional groups of the popu-

lation, the more constructions it is accepted in. The verb *faxa* entered Icelandic first of the three verbs, it has always been restricted to business and corporation use, and is generally only accepted in the Transfer construction and the original ‘send’ construction. The verb *(e)meila* entered the language later, it is used by a larger proportion of the population in more contexts, it is most widely accepted in the original ‘send’ construction but it is also accepted in the Ditransitive, the Transfer and the Caused-Motion construction. Finally, the verb *SMSa* is a recent innovation in Icelandic. It is connected with cell phones which are used by an overwhelming majority of the Icelandic population, and it is equally well accepted in all three constructions.

This investigation also shows that new verbs of communication are accepted in the Ditransitive construction, thereby suggesting a mild degree of productivity of the Ditransitive. Moreover, the fact that new verbs of instrument of communication in Icelandic are accepted in both the Transfer and the Caused-Motion construction, even by the same speakers, entails that the moved object can either be case marked as accusative or dative. It is not surprising that new verbs of communication can occur in the Transfer construction, since verbs of sending in Icelandic typically show a variation between the Ditransitive and the Transfer construction (examples 1 above), as is well known from the Germanic languages (cf. Croft, Barðdal, Hollmann, Nilsen, Sotirova and Taoki, in prep.). However, verbs of sending are conventionally not associated with the Caused-Motion construction in Icelandic with a dative object. Yet, new verbs of communication are accepted in the Caused-Motion construction. The results of this investigation, therefore, confirm my earlier claims (Barðdal 2001:ch. 5) that the Dative object construction is a productive construction in Icelandic. It also shows that more verb classes can instantiate the Caused-Motion construction in Icelandic than earlier, since verbs of sending have hitherto been confined to the Transfer construction. Certainly, *(e)meila* and *SMSa* are verbs of instrument of communication, but they entail sending when used (di)transitively. This increase in type frequency may, in turn, contribute to an even greater productivity of the Caused-Motion construction with a dative object in the future, as verbs of communication may serve as a gateway for other semantically-related verb classes into the category of verbs instantiating the Caused-Motion construction.

#### 4. Summary

This paper reports on a questionnaire survey designed to measure the acceptability of two new verbs of communication in Icelandic, i.e. *(e)meila* and *SMSa*, in the Ditransitive, the Transfer and the Caused-Motion construction, which all are semantically compatible with the lexical meaning of verbs of instrument of communication. This research has shown the following: 1) There

seems to be a correlation between the diversity of constructions a new verb can occur in and the usage of that particular verb across societal domains. In other words, the more a verb has spread to different age groups and different social/professional groups across the population the more constructions it is accepted in. This is confirmed by the different status of the three verbs, *faxa*, *(e)meila* and *SMSa*, in Icelandic. 2) The Ditransitive, Transfer and the Caused-Motion construction are all accepted with new verbs of communication in Icelandic. However, the Caused-Motion construction is judged more acceptable with *SMSa* than *(e)meila*, suggesting an increase in the degree of productivity of the Caused-Motion construction in Icelandic.

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## Appendix: The questionnaire

Age \_\_\_\_\_

F [ ]      M [ ]

Do you use email on a regular basis? \_\_\_\_\_

Do you use a cell phone on a regular basis? \_\_\_\_\_

Below are some examples of how people talk about email and cell phones. I am interested in finding out what YOU say when you talk about these things. Read the examples below and choose between the seven possible judgments. Choose the judgment that you feel is the most appropriate and draw a ring around the corresponding number.

- 1 This is impossible in Icelandic
- 2 This is hardly possible in Icelandic
- 3 It is possible to say this but I would never do it
- 4 I could say this but normally I wouldn't
- 5 I might perhaps say this
- 6 I could very well use this formulation
- 7 This is exactly how I would say it

Finally, here are the examples:

<b>A</b>	Ég (e)meila þessu til þín	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	Ég sendi tölvupóst um þetta til þín	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	Ég sendi þetta í tölvupósti til þín	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	Ég (e)meila þetta til þín	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	Ég sendi þér þetta í tölvupósti	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	Ég sendi þér tölvupóst um þetta	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	Ég (e)meila þér þetta	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<b>B</b>	Ég SMSa þessu til þín	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	Ég sendi þér þetta sem SMS	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	Ég sendi þetta sem SMS til þín	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	Ég sendi SMS um þetta til þín	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	Ég SMSa þetta til þín	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	Ég sendi þér SMS um þetta	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	Ég SMSa þér þetta	1	2	3	4	5	6	7