

Icelandic Passive and Case, p. 1

based on Annie Zaenen, Joan Maling, and Höskuldur Thráinsson (1990) "Case and Grammatical Functions: The Icelandic Passive." in Joan Maling and Annie Zaenen, ed., *Modern Icelandic Syntax*. New York: Academic Press. 95–136 and on Avery Andrews (1982) "The Representation of Case in Modern Icelandic." in Joan Bresnan, ed., *The Mental Representation of Grammatical Relations*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press. 427–503.

A further argument against characterizing passive in terms of Case comes from the facts of Icelandic.

Icelandic pronoun paradigm:

	Singular			Plural		
	Masc.	Fem.	Neut.	Masc.	Fem.	Neut.
nominative	hann	hún	það	þeir	þær	þau
accusative	hann	hana	það	þá	þær	þau
dative	honum	henni	því	þeim	þeim	þeim
genitive	hans	hennar	þess	þeirra	þeirra	þeirra

Usually, the subject is nominative and the object is accusative. If a verb with an accusative object is passivized, the object becomes the subject and is put in the nominative form.

- (2) a. Lögreglan tók Sigu fasta.
 the.police took Siga.ACC fast.ACC
 'The police arrested Siga.'
- b. Siga var tekin föst af lögreglunni.
 Siga.NOM was taken fast.NOM by the.police.DAT
 'Siga was arrested by the police.'

Some verbs take a dative or genitive object.

- (8) a. Ég hjálpaði honum.
 I helped him.DAT
 'I helped him.'
- b. Ég mun sakna hans.
 I will miss him.GEN
 'I will miss him.'

Notice what happens when a verb with an accusative or genitive object is passivized:

- (11) a. Þeim var hjálpað.
 them.DAT was helped
 'They were helped.'
- b. Hennar var saknað.
 her.GEN was missed
 'She was missed.'

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Note also:

- (42) a. Ég skilaði henni peningunum.
I returned her.DAT the.money.DAT
'I gave her back the money.'
- b. Henni var skilað peningunum.
her.DAT was returned the.money.DAT
'She was given back the money.'
- (44) a. Koningunum voru gefnar ambáttir.
the.king.DAT were given(F.PL) slaves.NOM(F)
'The king was given maidservants.'
- b. Ambáttin var gefin koningunum.
the.slave.NOM was given the.king.DAT
'The slave was given (to) the king.'

The “derived subject” of the passive verb retains the Case that it has as object of the active. This is not what we would expect if passive were defined in terms of Case marking. Under current theories, the element that becomes the subject does so because it cannot be assigned Case as an object. But that is clearly not the case here: the dative and genitive NPs are assigned the same Case by the verb as when they are objects.

Subjects in Icelandic are normally nominative, but some verbs select accusative, dative, or genitive subjects. Note the following set of sentences, taken primarily from Andrews. (The first one is not in Andrews in this form.)

- (no number) Mig vantar peninga.
me.ACC lacks money.ACC
'I lack money.'
- (52) a. Han telur mig vanta peninga
he believes me.ACC to.lack money.ACC
'He believes me to lack money.'
- (61) a. Mig er talið vanta peninga
me.ACC is believed to.lack money.ACC
'I am believed to lack money.'

Even though an accusative object ordinarily becomes a nominative subject when the verb is passivized, that does not happen here. This is because the object of *telur* in (52a) is accusative not because it is an object, but rather because it is the subject of *vanta*, which governs accusative Case on its subject. The moral is that a Case-based account of passive won't work even if we restrict our attention to accusative Case.

Icelandic is a North Germanic (Scandinavian) language spoken in Iceland, which was originally settled by Vikings, primarily from Norway. According to Ethnologue, it is spoken by approximately 230,000 people in Iceland, and another nearly 10,000 elsewhere