

We show how a novel rescue-by-syncretism effect in Icelandic supports a view of case assignment in which both syntax and morphology each play a role in valuing a decomposed set of case features. The syncretism effect stems from a repair-by-deletion strategy when one of the case features cannot be valued at PF. The resulting analysis provides a unified approach to two distinct “sources” for ameliorative syncretism: structures where case assignment fails, and structures where too many cases are assigned to the same DP. This is accomplished without the syntax having any direct access to phonological forms.

**The syncretism effect** of primary interest comes from ditransitive passives (Eythórsson 2008) where both internal arguments are left in situ, and the dative indirect object is reflexive. Our survey data reveal four judgment patterns: speakers reject the construction entirely (D), accept it with nominative (A) or accusative (B), or accept it only when the noun happens to be syncretic between the two (C).

(1)	A	B	C	D
a. Það var fengið sér öllari. EXPL was gotten.DFLT REFL.DAT beer.NOM	✓	*	*	*
b. Það var fengið sér öllara. EXPL was gotten.DFLT REFL.DAT beer.ACC	*	✓	*	*
c. Það var fengið sér bjór. EXPL was gotten.DFLT REFL.DAT beer.NOM/ACC 'People got themselves a beer.'	✓	✓	✓	*

The effect in C-speakers is reminiscent of “Rescue by Syncretism” effects found in argument-sharing constructions, such as ATB-movement (Citko 2005, Asarina 2013, Bjorkman 2021). In this case, however, there is no argument sharing or clear source for multiple-case assignment.

### Proposal

→ **The structural problem** is that the DP gets only a subset of its case features valued.

→ **Speaker variation** stems from distinct PF-repair mechanisms.

- |     |              |       |
|-----|--------------|-------|
| (2) | [-n,-v,-obl] | (NOM) |
|     | [-n,+v,-obl] | (ACC) |
|     | [-n,+v,+obl] | (DAT) |
|     | [+n,+v,-obl] | (GEN) |

**Case features** We assume that morphological cases are decomposed into the bivalent primitive features  $[\pm n, \pm v, \pm obl]$  (Müller 2005), corresponding to traditional labels in (2). We adopt Harbour’s (2008) conception of feature valuation: A feature F on a head H is unvalued if that head contains both  $[+F]$  and  $[-F]$ . Assigning a value then amounts to

reducing the set until there are no contradictory features. In the syntax, DPs initially have unvalued case features, which in this view means a full set of case-features:  $\{[+n, -n][+v, -v][+obl, -obl]\}$ .

**Case assignment** We make a distinction between syntactic and morphological case. E.F. Sigurðsson (2017) argues that a general case feature [STR] is assigned to DPs that bear a structural case. [STR] is translated into [NOM] or [ACC] at PF, according to a modified Dependent Case algorithm (Marantz 1991, McFadden 2004, Baker 2015). We propose that assigning [STR] amounts to assigning the features shared by NOM and ACC, namely  $[-obl, -n]$ , leaving  $[+v, -v]$  unspecified. As in Harbour’s (2008) theory, case

### (3) v assigns structural case

- |   |
|---|
| $[vP V[-obl, -n] \dots DP_{[+v, -v, +n, -n, +obl, -obl]} ] \rightarrow$ |
| $[vP V[-obl, -n] \dots DP_{[+v, -v, -n, -obl]} ]$                       |

feature valuation under Agree involves an intersection of the features in question (see (3)).

**NOM vs. ACC** As in traditional dependent case theory, a DP without oblique case gets dependent accusative if it is c-commanded by another DP without oblique case within a given domain. Otherwise, it is assigned environment-sensitive unmarked case, nominative in the context of T (for NOM-ACC languages). These are disjunctive: (4) applies before (5).

- |     |  |  |
|-----|--|--|
| (4) | $DP_{[+v, -v]} \rightarrow DP_{[+v]} / [XP DP_{[+v, -v]} [ \dots \_ ] ]$ | <b>=Dependent accusative</b>             |
| (5) | $DP_{[+v, -v]} \rightarrow DP_{[-v]} / [TP T [ \dots \_ ] ]$             | <b>=Environment-sensitive nominative</b> |

We depart slightly from traditional dependent case theory in that environment *insensitive* elsewhere case is only available if no case features have been valued at all, e.g., in left-dislocation structures. In the present case, once  $[-obl, -n]$  have been assigned to a DP, a value for  $[+v, -v]$  must be determined or the structure will be ungrammatical. This assumption is crucial for accounting for the variation in (1).

**Case Domains** We propose that case domains are derived from phases, and that C, Voice and low Appl are generally phase heads in Icelandic (which has no high Appl head (Wood 2015)). Adopting the second

PIC from Chomsky 2001, a phase is spelled out when the next phase head is merged. However, a phase can also be extended if a phase head moves to a higher head (Den Dikken 2006, 2007). Usually, Appl moves to v, which moves to Voice, so the DP direct object is easily able to get [+v] in active ditransitives. We assume that when C triggers spellout of VoiceP, the material being spelled out can also be sensitive to the presence of material between C and the phase. Both unmarked DPs are thus local to T, but the case rules are ordered and disjunctive: since the lower DP meets the structural description for [+v], it is marked accusative; the higher DP meets the structural description only for [-v], so it is nominative. In

(6) **Active ditransitive**

- a.  $[_{CP} C_{\Phi 3} [_{TP} T [_{VoiceP} DP Voice_{\Phi 2} [_{VP} v [_{AppIP} DATIVE Appl_{\Phi 1} DP ] ] ] ] ] ] ] \rightarrow$  Phase-Extension  
 b.  $[_{CP} C_{\Phi 3} [_{TP} T [_{VoiceP} DP Appl_{+v} Voice_{\Phi 1=\Phi 2} [_{VP} \langle v \rangle [_{AppIP} DATIVE \langle Appl_{\Phi 1} \rangle DP ] ] ] ] ] ] ]$

passives of reflexive ditransitives, however, this movement doesn't occur (see below), so the ApplP phase is not extended. The result of this is that the DP direct object does not qualify for [+v], because there is

(7) **Passive of reflexive ditransitive**

- $[_{CP} C_{\Phi 3} [_{TP} T [_{VoicePassP} Voice_{\Phi 2} [_{VP} v [_{AppIP} REFL.DAT Appl_{\Phi 1} DP ] ] ] ] ] ] ] \rightarrow$  No Phase-Extension

no local DP that is unmarked for [+v, -v], but it doesn't qualify for [-v], because it is not local to T. Moreover, the DP in (7) cannot raise out of ApplP, because the reflexive dative blocks it; to avoid this, Appl would have to head-move to v (H.Á. Sigurðsson & Wood 2014), which it does not. Therefore, the DP is spelled out with the contradictory feature bundle, [+v, -v][-n][-obl].

**PF repair** We propose that the speaker variation in (1) is accounted for by exhausting the logical options for deleting the contradictory features; see (8). In Grammar C, both [+v] and [-v] are deleted, and when

(8) *Input:* DP<sub>[+v, -v, -n, -obl]</sub>

	Delete	Result
A	[+v]	[-n, -v, -obl] (NOM)
B	[-v]	[-n, +v, -obl] (ACC)
C	[+v, -v]	[-n, -obl] (NOM/ACC)
D	Nothing	Ungrammatical

Vocabulary Insertion tries to realize the features, it will only be possible if the DP in question is morphologically syncretic for NOM/ACC, because for these DPs, the morphology is not specified for [+v] or [-v]. The analysis is similar to Hein & Murphy's (2019) account of syncretism effects in ATB constructions.

**Prediction 1** The account correctly predicts that the

syncretism repair found in Grammar C only works for ditransitives. Some Icelandic speakers accept passives with accusative direct objects in the so-called "New Impersonal Passive" construction, but this is almost certainly a different construction entirely. Crucially, we do not find speakers who accept such sentences only with DPs that are syncretic for NOM/ACC. This is because there is no ApplP that "cuts off" the DP from higher structure, so it always gets a specification for [ $\pm v$ ]. Repair is never an issue, and syncretism repair is not among the options for "saving" the structure. **Prediction 2** The account correctly predicts similar variation in passives of non-reflexive ditransitives. In (9)-(10), the finite verb and participle do not agree with the object in phi-features, as they would in the standard form of these constructions.

- (9) %Mér var boðið **milljarða.**  
 I.DAT was offered.DFLT billions.ACC  
 (10) %Mér var boðið **milljónir.**  
 I.DAT was offered.DFLT millions.NOM/ACC  
 'I was offered {billions/millions}.'

Some speakers only allow this when the object is syncretic for NOM/ACC, as in (10), while others allow unambiguous accusative, as in (9). In our account, for most speakers, Appl undergoes phase-extending head movement in these constructions. However, in some grammars, non-

reflexive Appl can fail to undergo such movement. The result is the same set of options as above: some grammars delete either [+v] and [-v] (giving NOM or ACC), while others delete both, and thus allow the structure only with NOM/ACC-syncretic objects. In our talk we will discuss why it is more common for reflexive ditransitives. Essentially, they are introduced by a separate kind of Appl head with special properties (see Wood 2023), and head movement creates problems for the interpretation of the reflexive in passive contexts (where there is no syntactic antecedent). Nevertheless, the existence of this effect in passives of non-reflexive ditransitives shows that it is the extra domain introduced by Appl that leads to the configuration where syncretism repair comes in to play.