

Reflexive *sig* is an argument*

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Abstract

This paper argues that the simple reflexive pronoun *sig* is unambiguously a thematic argument in Icelandic. This is shown to be true not only of *sig* with naturally reflexive verbs but also of inherently reflexive *sig*. This view is mainly supported by two sets of facts: (i) that *sig* is impossible with verbs that fail to theta-mark their object (middles and anticausatives), and (ii) that case assignment works the same way for *sig* as for non-reflexive DP arguments. Potential counterarguments against my view involving focalization and reflexive passives are argued not to be valid.

1. Introduction

Depending on their distributional properties, simple reflexive pronouns have been analyzed in various ways cross-linguistically. For instance, Grimshaw (1982) argues that French *se* is a reflexive marker and consequently that verbs taking *se* are intransitive (but see Labelle 2008 and Doron and Rappaport Hovav 2009 for a different view). Steinbach (2002, 2004) argues that reflexive verbs in German are always transitive although German *sich* is either thematic (with naturally reflexive verbs) or non-thematic (with inherently reflexive verbs, anticausatives and middles) while Lekakou (2005) claims that Dutch *zich* is restricted to argument positions.

In this paper, the status of the Icelandic reflexive pronoun *sig* with reflexive verbs will be explored.¹ I will argue that *sig* is always an argument receiving a theta-role, even with inherently reflexive verbs, and this entails that reflexive verbs in Icelandic are always transitive. (It is uncontroversial that *sig* in other environments is an argument, e.g. when it is the object of a preposition or has an antecedent in a higher clause.) The main evidence comes from two sets of facts: (i) that *sig* is not found with verbs that fail to assign a theta-role to the object, such as anticausative verbs and middle verbs, and (ii) that *sig* is assigned case in the same way as other DP objects, structural (accusative) as well as lexical case (dative and genitive). The latter is particularly important for my analysis since lexical case assignment is conditioned by theta-role assignment.

The paper is organized as follows. The basic facts about reflexive pronouns and reflexive verbs in Icelandic are reviewed in section 2 and this is followed by a discussion of some syntactic properties of reflexives in section 3. The main

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¹ In this paper, the term (reflexive) *sig* refers to simple reflexives in Icelandic (*sig*, *sér* and *sín*) and first and second person pronouns when they are bound by a local subject.

point of this section is to establish that *sig* is an object and not a mere reflexive marker, and to show that *sig* can be analyzed as an argument despite apparent counterexamples involving focalization and reflexive passives. Section 4 illustrates that *sig* behaves just like argument DPs with respect to theta-marking and case assignment. Finally, the main conclusions of the paper are summarized in section 5.

2. The basic facts

2.1 The two classes of reflexive verbs

Reflexive verbs in Icelandic fall into two classes: (a) inherently reflexive verbs, and (b) naturally reflexive verbs.² With inherently reflexive verbs, the reflexive pronoun is obligatory as exemplified in (1) below:

- (1) a. Strákarnir montuðu **sig** / ***mig** á þessu
the.boys boasted REFL / me.ACC of this
 ‘The boys boasted of this’
- b. Gamla konan kveinkaði **sér** / ***öllum**
old the.woman moaned REFL / everyone.DAT
 ‘The old woman pitied herself’
- c. Enginn skammast **sín** / ***hennar** fyrir þetta
nobody shames REFL / her.GEN for this
 ‘Nobody is ashamed of themselves for this’

Inherently reflexive verbs assign structural (accusative) case to *sig* or lexical (dative or genitive) case. It has been a standard assumption in the literature since Chomsky (1981) that X cannot assign lexical case to Y unless X also theta-marks Y. On this assumption, the examples in (1b) and (1c) clearly indicate that *sig* is an argument. Moreover, the ratio between structural vs. lexical case assigners seems to be roughly the same with inherently reflexive verbs and non-reflexive verbs in Icelandic. Most inherently reflexive verbs take an accusative object, some take a dative object but only a handful select a genitive object and the same is true of non-reflexive verbs. The issue of case assignment with reflexive verbs will be addressed in more detail in section 4 below.

Naturally reflexive verbs denote events that are typically self-directed. Thus, grooming verbs constitute one of the biggest classes of these verbs in Icelandic (e.g. *baða* ‘bathe’, *greiða* ‘comb’, *punta* ‘dress up’, *raka* ‘shave’, and *þvo* ‘wash’) and many other languages. Motion verbs constitute another sizable class of naturally reflexive verbs (e.g. *beygja* ‘bend’, *fleygja* ‘throw’, *hreyfa* ‘move’

² I borrow this term from Schäfer (2010).

and *snúa* ‘turn’). With naturally reflexive verbs, *sig* is not obligatory and can be replaced by other kinds of DP objects:

- (2) a. *María klæddi sig / strákin* í úlpu
Mary dressed REFL / the.boy.ACC in coat
- b. *Gunnar hafði laumað sér / víninu* út
Gunnar had sneaked REFL / the.wine.DAT out
- c. *Sumir hefna sín / annarra* grimmilega
some avenge REFL / others.GEN fiercely

The naturally reflexive *sig* and the DP object bear the same case in all these examples. As far as I know, no verb in Icelandic makes a difference between naturally reflexive *sig* and non-reflexive DP arguments with respect to case assignment. This fact suggests very strongly that naturally reflexive *sig* in Icelandic is an argument (but see section 4 for further discussion).

In a narrow sense, the term ‘inherently reflexive verb’ includes only verbs that require the presence of a reflexive object as in (1). In a broader sense, the class of inherently reflexive verbs also includes verbs that occur with other objects but have an idiomatic meaning when they are reflexive. Some examples of this are shown in (3):

- (3) a. *Ég gleymdi mér*
I forgot me.DAT
 ‘I lost track of the time’
- b. *Þeir gættu sín* mjög vel
they watched REFL.GEN very well
 ‘They were very careful’
- c. *Eiður sparaði sig* í leiknum
Eiður saved REFL.ACC in the.game
 ‘Eiður saved his energy in the game’

The broader sense is justified by the fact that reflexives in examples like (3) pattern with reflexives in examples like (1) with respect to the syntactic phenomena discussed in section 3. However, since the thrust of this paper is to argue that all types of *sig* are arguments, I will stay neutral on the issue of where exactly the line between naturally and inherently reflexive *sig* should be drawn.

All the examples in (1) – (3) above feature a nominative subject. In contrast to non-reflexive two-place verbs, reflexive verbs never take oblique subjects in Icelandic. This is not due to a general ban on reflexive verbs with experiencer

subjects as shown by verbs like *átta sig á* ‘understand, realize’, *furða sig á* ‘be surprised by’ and *hugsa sér* ‘imagine’. Rather, this seems to be a consequence of the fact that most two-place verbs with an oblique subject take a nominative object (cf. verbs like *líka* ‘like’, *sárna* ‘be hurt by’ and *áskotnast* ‘get by accident’) and *sig* does not have a nominative form.

2.2 Simple vs. complex reflexives

In addition to the simple reflexive *sig*, Icelandic has the complex reflexive *sjálfan sig* (literally ‘self’ + *sig*). The complex reflexive differs morphologically from the simple reflexive in that *sjálfur* inflects not only for case but also for gender and number. Since *sjálfan sig* is a SELF-anaphor in the terminology of Reinhart and Reuland (1993), it has a different distribution from *sig* (see Thráinsson 2007 and references cited there for details). The complex reflexive *sjálfan sig* is possible but rarely used with naturally reflexive verbs like *klæða* ‘dress’ and it is excluded with inherently reflexive verbs like *monta sig* ‘boast’ and *kveinka sér* ‘moan’:

- (4) a. *María klæddi sjálfa sig í úlpu, ekki barnið*
Mary dressed SELF.F.SG REFL.ACC in coat not the.child
- b. **Strákarnir montuðu sjálfa sig á þessu*
the.boys boasted SELF.M.PL REFL.ACC of this
- c. **Gamla konan kveinkaði sjálfri sér*
old the.woman moaned SELF.F.SG REFL.DAT

The complex reflexive is used e.g. to express co-reference between the subject and the object of non-reflexive verbs like *elska* ‘love’ and *vorkenna* ‘feel sorry for’, where *sig* is impossible. This is illustrated in (5):

- (5) a. *Helga elskar sjálfa sig*
Helga loves SELF.F.SG REFL.ACC
- b. **Helga elskar sig*
Helga loves REFL.ACC
- (6) a. *Halldór hefur aldrei vorkennt sjálfum sér*
Halldór has never felt.sorry.for SELF.M.SG REFL.DAT
- b. **Halldór hefur aldrei vorkennt sér*
Halldór has never felt.sorry.for REFL.DAT

In languages that have both simple and complex reflexives, the division of labor between the two classes of reflexives is very similar to Icelandic. This can be seen in the following examples from Norwegian (from Hellan 1988:103-109):

- (7) a. Jon vasket **seg**
John washed REFL
 ‘John washed himself’
- b. Jon vasket **seg selv**
John washed REFL SELF
- (8) a. Jon skammer **seg**
John shames REFL
 ‘John is ashamed of himself’
- b. *Jon skammer **seg selv**
John shames REFL SELF
 ‘John is ashamed of himself’
- (9) a. Jon foraktet **seg selv**
John despised REFL SELF
- b. *Jon foraktet **seg**
John despised REFL

Naturally reflexive verbs like *vaske* ‘wash’ are possible with both kinds of reflexives, as shown in (7). An inherently reflexive verb like *skamme* ‘shame’ can only occur with a simple reflexive, as in (8a), and a non-reflexive verb like *forakte* ‘despise’ allows a complex reflexive but not a simple reflexive, as shown in (9).

2.3 Middles and anticausatives

As we have already seen, reflexive verbs in Icelandic divide into two classes, inherently reflexive verbs and naturally reflexive verbs. Reflexive *sig* is never used as a valency-reducing marker with middles or anticausatives. This is illustrated for middles in (10) where Icelandic is contrasted with German (11a) and French (11b):

- (10) a. *Þessi skáldsaga les (**sig**) vel
this novel reads REFL.ACC well

- b. *Flestar úlpur þvo (**sig**) auðveldlega
most coats wash REFL.ACC easily

(11) a. Dieser Roman liest **sich** gut (Steinbach 2004:186)
this novel reads REFL well
 ‘This novel is easy to read’

- b. Ce veston se lave bien (Everaert 1986:63)
the coat REFL washes well

The examples in (10) are ungrammatical even without reflexive *sig*. In fact, Icelandic does not really have a construction that corresponds to the middle of languages like English, German and French. In any case, the important point here is that since middles involve a non-thematic reflexive, the absence of reflexive middles supports the view that Icelandic *sig* is restricted to argument positions.

Turning to anticausatives, Icelandic anticausatives are usually formed by adding the “middle” suffix *-st* to the verb:³

(12) a. Mennirnir opnuðu dyrnar
the.men opened the.doors

- b. Dyrnar opnuðust
the.doors opened

- c. *Dyrnar opnuðu **sig**
the.doors opened REFL.ACC

In contrast to Icelandic, anticausatives in German and French are commonly marked by a reflexive object:

(13) a. Ralf öffnet die Tür
Ralf opens the door

- b. Die Tür öffnet **sich** (Steinbach 2004:186)
the door opens REFL

(14) a. Jean brisera le verre
Jean will.break the glass

³ Note that *opna sig* is possible in Icelandic but only in the sense ‘open up emotionally’ (which is not an anticausative use).

- b. Le verre **se** brisera (Everaert 1986:63)
the glass REFL will.break

Icelandic has some reflexive verbs that denote a change of state and look like anticausatives because the subject is inanimate, but on closer inspection they turn out to be different.⁴ One of these verbs is *seinka* ‘delay, put back in time’:

- (15) a. Ég seinkaði **úrinu** um tvær mínútur
I delayed the.watch.DAT for two minutes
 ‘I put the watch back by two minutes’
- b. **Úrið** seinkaði **sér** um tvær mínútur
the.watch.NOM delayed REFL.DAT for two minutes

Crucially, the event in (15b) expresses internal causation relating to the mechanical properties of the watch. Thus, *seinka* is really a two-place verb in (15b). As a result, examples like (15b) are impossible with DPs denoting entities that do not have an internal property that could cause a delay, e.g. a DP like *leikurinn* ‘the game’:

- (16) a. ***Leikurinn** seinkaði **sér** um tíu mínútur
the.game.NOM delayed REFL.DAT for ten minutes
- b. **Leiknum** seinkaði um tíu mínútur
the.game.DAT delayed for ten minutes

The anticausative variant in (16b) has a dative subject and no suffix on the verb. It is also semantically different in that external causation is involved, e.g. bad weather or poor conditions on the playing field, which is characteristic of true anticausatives. This can also be seen in the anticausative in (12b) which describes an event with external causation, e.g. a gust of wind causing the door to open.⁵

Since the suffix *-st* is historically derived from a free standing reflexive (cf. Old Icelandic *sik*), one could ask if *-st* might be analyzed as a bound variant of *sig*. The answer to this is no as this suffix has developed various uses that are independent of reflexivity, e.g. in deriving verbs from nouns or adjectives (e.g.

⁴ Lekakou (2005:216-219) discusses similar cases in Dutch.

⁵ For a discussion of the contrast between internal and external causation and its relevance to the causative alternation, see Levin and Rappaport Hovav (1995:89-119). For further discussion of Icelandic anticausatives, see Sigurðsson (1989:258-283), Zaenen & Maling (1990), and Svenonius (to appear).

grínast ‘joke’ and *reiðast* ‘get angry’ from *grín* ‘fun’ and *reiður* ‘angry’).⁶ It can also be shown that the suffix *-st* contrasts semantically with *sig* in various cases, e.g. in examples like (17):

- (17) a. Íþróttamenn eru alltaf að meiðast
athletes are always to hurt
 ‘Athletes are constantly sustaining injuries’
- b. Börn eru alltaf að meiða sig
children are always to hurt REFL.ACC
 ‘Children are constantly hurting themselves’

There is an important difference between *meiðast* and *meiða sig* in that the latter signals that the subject has some responsibility for what happened whereas *meiðast* is most naturally used when the event is a true accident. As a result, it would be pragmatically odd to switch the subjects in (17a) and (17b).

3. The syntax of reflexives

This section is divided into three subsections. Section 3.1 illustrates that *sig* behaves syntactically like a weak object pronoun with respect to word order and displacement when it is used with reflexive verbs. This provides further evidence that *sig* cannot be analyzed as a valency-reduction marker. The other two sections discuss phenomena that appear to undermine my claim that *sig* is unambiguously an argument, i.e. semantic/syntactic restrictions on inherently reflexive *sig* and reflexive passives. In both cases, the conclusion is that my analysis can be maintained.

3.1 Reflexive *sig* as a weak object pronoun

That *sig* behaves syntactically like a weak object pronoun is shown by various facts.⁷ First, a weak object pronoun must precede particles in Icelandic, whether the pronoun is *sig* or something else:

- (18) a. Enginn vildi gefa sig / það upp
nobody wanted give REFL/it.ACC up
 ‘Nobody was willing to reveal his opinion /disclose it’

⁶ See also Anderson (1990) for relevant discussion of this point.

⁷ See Steinbach (2002) for a discussion of similar facts in German.

- b. *Enginn vildi gefa upp **sig** / **það**
nobody wanted give up REFL / it.ACC

Second, when reflexive *sig* is an indirect object it must precede the direct object just like other weak object pronouns:

- (19) a. Hreinn útvegaði **sér** / **þeim** það
Hreinn got REFL / them.DAT it.ACC
 ‘Hreinn got this for himself/them’
- b. *Hreinn útvegaði það **sér** / **þeim**
Hreinn got it.ACC REFL / them.DAT
 ‘Hreinn got this for himself/them’

Third, reflexive *sig* undergoes Object Shift across the negation or sentential adverbs like other weak object pronouns if the main verb moves out of VP, in accordance with Holmberg’s Generalization (see Holmberg 1999). This is true whether the main verb is inherently or naturally reflexive. The example in (20) involves the inherently reflexive verb *skammast sín* ‘be ashamed’:

- (20) a. Hann skammast **sín** ekki
he shames REFL.GEN not
 ‘He is not ashamed of himself’
- b. *Hann skammast ekki **sín**
he shames not REFL.GEN
 ‘He is not ashamed of himself’

The contrast between (20a) and (20b) shows that shifting a weak object pronoun is obligatory if the main verb moves out of VP. If the main verb stays inside the VP, e.g. in the presence of a finite auxiliary, Object Shift is excluded. This is shown in (21a) where the placement of *sig* before the negation indicates that Object Shift has taken place:

- (21) a. *Hann mun **sín** ekki skammast
he will REFL.GEN not shame
- b. Hann mun ekki skammast **sín**
he will not shame REFL.GEN

This is exactly parallel to other weak object pronouns in Icelandic. Moreover, Object Shift can move a weak object pronoun across a low (indefinite) subject in Icelandic and this is true of reflexive as well as non-reflexive objects:

- (22) a. Það skammast **sín** margir
there shamed REFL.GEN many
 ‘Many are ashamed of themselves’
- b. Það sáu **hana** allir
there saw her.ACC everyone

The facts about Object Shift illustrated above show that *sig* is an object. However, they do not show that *sig* is an argument since expletive subjects of ECM-clauses behave like thematic objects with respect to Object Shift:

- (23) a. Mér sýnist **það** ekki vera rigning úti
me seems there not be rain outside
 ‘It does not seem to me that it is raining outside’
- b. *Mér sýnist ekki **það** vera rigning úti
me seems not there be rain outside

The matrix scope of the negation in (23a) shows that the expletive preceding the negation must have moved by Object Shift into the matrix clause. The negation can also have embedded scope in (23a), in which case it is impossible to tell if movement has taken place or not.

3.2 Natural vs. inherent reflexives

Steinbach (2002, 2004) illustrates that there is a clear contrast between natural reflexives and inherent reflexives in German in that the latter cannot be focused, modified, coordinated, questioned or fronted. In his view, these differences show that natural reflexives are thematic arguments whereas inherent reflexives are not. As illustrated below, reflexive *sig* works the same way, but I will argue that these facts do not force us to conclude that inherent reflexives are non-arguments. Rather, the observed behavior of inherent reflexives stems from the fact they are necessarily bound by the local subject.

In the interest of space, I will restrict my attention here to a subset of the relevant data but that should nevertheless be enough for our purposes. The facts to be discussed are illustrated for natural reflexives in (24) below:

- (24) a. María þvær **SÉR** (narrow focus)
Mary washes REFL.DAT

- b. *María þvær bara/jafnvel sér* (focus particle)
Mary washes only/even REFL.DAT
- c. *María þvær ekki SÉR heldur Jóni* (contrastive
Mary washes not REFL.DAT but John.DAT negation)
- d. *Hverjum þvær María? Sér!* (questioning)
whom.DAT washes Mary REFL.DAT
- e. *Sér þvoði María fyrr í dag* (fronting)
REFL.DAT washed Mary earlier today

I find all of these examples grammatical, although some of them sound rather stilted. Importantly, there is a clear contrast between natural reflexives and inherent reflexives in that the latter are impossible in examples corresponding to those in (24) above. This is exemplified in (25) below:

- (25) a. **María kveinkar SÉR* (narrow focus)
 **Mary moans REFL.DAT*
- b. **María kveinkar bara/jafnvel sér* (focus particle)
 **Mary moans only/even REFL.DAT*
- c. **María kveinkar ekki SÉR heldur Jóni* (contrastive
 **Mary moans not REFL.DAT but John.DAT* negation)
- d. **Hverjum kveinkar María? Sér!* (questioning)
 **whom.DAT moans Mary REFL.DAT*
- e. **Sér kveinkar María aldrei* (fronting)
 **REFL.DAT moans Mary never*

Leaving aside (24e) and (25e) for the moment, the contrast between (24a-d) and (25a-d) concerns focus. Steinbach (2002) argues that inherent reflexives in German cannot be focused because they do not introduce an argument variable into the semantic representation of the sentence. More specifically, he claims that examples like (25a-d) violate a condition which requires pragmatically plausible and contextually salient alternatives to the interpretation of the focus to be available. This means that inherent reflexives are in his view very much like expletives in failing to introduce a variable and being incompatible with focalization.

In my view, the facts illustrated in (25a-d) do not warrant the conclusion that inherent reflexives are non-arguments. An alternative explanation is that since

inherent reflexives must be bound by the local subject, the variable they introduce will always be incompatible with alternative semantic values.⁸ Hence, the lack of alternative semantic values in examples like (25a-d) is because inherent reflexives are arguments of a very special sort, and not because they are comparable to expletives.

As shown in (24e) and (25e), natural reflexives can be fronted whereas inherent reflexives cannot. Building on Büring (1997), Steinbach (2002) argues that inherent reflexives in German cannot be fronted because any fronting would require focus alternatives, including fronting of inherent reflexives as sentence-internal topics. Assuming that this applies to Icelandic as well, fronting of inherent reflexives can be ruled out on the same grounds as the examples in (25a-d).

3.3 Reflexive passives

As shown in (26a-b) below, impersonal passivization is possible with inherently as well as naturally reflexive *sig* in Icelandic. In this, reflexive verbs pattern with intransitive verbs like *hlæja* ‘laugh’, but differ from regular transitive verbs, as shown in (27):⁹

- (26) a. Það var kveinkað **sér** yfir öllu
there was moaned REFL.DAT over everything
 ‘There was moaning and groaning about everything’
- b. Um helgar var oft baðað **sig** í ánni
on weekends was often bathed REFL.ACC in the.river
 ‘On weekends, people often bathed in the river’
- (27) a. Það var mikið hlegið í veislunni
there was much laughed in the.party
 ‘There was a lot of laughing in the party’
- b. *Um helgar var oft baðað **krakkana** í ánni
on weekends was often bathed the.kids.ACC in the.river

Lekakou (2005) claims that reflexive passives in German show that *sich* is not an object but rather a marker of the externalization of the internal theta-role. By

⁸ Lekakou (2005:224-226) makes a similar point in her discussion of *zich* in Dutch.

⁹ The star in (27b) represents my judgment but examples of this kind are known as the new passive or the new impersonal (see Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir 2002, Eythórsson 2008 and Jónsson 2009a). The new passive is mostly used by young speakers of Icelandic but reflexive passives are widely used by all age groups.

the same reasoning, since reflexive passives are excluded in Dutch, Lekakou (2005) takes this as evidence that *zich* is a true argument.

On the other hand, Schäfer (2010) has developed an analysis of passive reflexives in German and Icelandic that is consistent with my claim that *sig* is always an argument. His analysis is based on the assumption that reflexives have unvalued ϕ -features that must be valued by an antecedent under the syntactic operation Agree. In the absence of a syntactic antecedent, as in reflexive passives, both German and Icelandic have the option of inserting default ϕ -features to the chain containing T(ense) and the reflexive. Schäfer (2010:17) refers to this operation as Default Agreement, “a last resort repair mechanism rescuing unvalued agreement chains”.

Schäfer’s point is that Icelandic *sig* (as well as German *sich*) is a reflexive argument “bound” by T in reflexive passives.¹⁰ Alternatively, we could assume that *sig* is bound by the implicit agent in reflexive passives, but Schäfer argues that his analysis is preferable. For instance, the fact that reflexive passives are restricted to the default third person, even when the implicit agent is first or second person, suggests that T is involved in valuing the features of *sig*. This is shown in (28).

- (28) Við fórum í ána og þar var baðað **sig** / ***okkur**
we went in the.river and there was bathed REFL/us.ACC
 ‘We went into the river and bathed’

The same is true for German, where the reflexive must be third person even in the presence of a *by*-phrase containing a first or second person pronoun (Plank 1993):

- (29) Nur von uns wird **sich** / ***uns** hier täglich gewaschen
only by us is REFL/us.ACC here daily washed

Since impersonal passives in Icelandic do not allow *by*-phrases, examples like (29) cannot be replicated for Icelandic, but (28) suffices for our purposes here.

4. Case assignment and theta-marking

In this section, we will review evidence from the semantics of specific verbs (section 4.1) and case marking (section 4.2) that reflexive *sig* is a thematic argument. With respect to the first issue, the emphasis will be on inherently reflexive *sig* as the data reviewed so far strongly suggest that naturally reflexive *sig* is a thematic argument.

¹⁰ The chain formation between T and the reflexive also makes accusative case assignment possible in an apparent violation of Burzio’s Generalization (see Schäfer 2010 for details).

4.1 Theta-marking

There are various inherently reflexive verbs in Icelandic which seem to theta-mark the reflexive object. It is reasonable to assume e.g. that *fyrirfara* in (30a) means ‘kill’ where *sér* denotes the patient of the killing, and that *barma* in (30b) means ‘pity’, with *sér* adding the information that the content of the pitying is the situation of the subject.

- (30) a. Fanginn reyndi að fyrirfara **sér** / ***verðinum**
the.prisoner tried to kill REFL.DAT/the.guard.DAT
 ‘The prisoner tried to commit suicide/kill the guard’
- b. Kennarinn barmaði **sér** / ***nemendunum**
the.teacher pitied REFL/the.students.DAT
 ‘The teacher pitied himself/the students’

The electronic corpus at lexis.hi.is (Ritmálssafn Orðabókar Háskólans ‘The written corpus for the dictionary project at the University of Iceland’) has many examples of *fyrirfara* with a non-reflexive object, the youngest dating from the middle of the 20th century, as in (31a). The same corpus has examples of non-reflexive objects with *barma*, the youngest from the early 17th century, as in (31b). Thus, it looks like an accident of language history that *fyrirfara* and *barma* have become inherently reflexive verbs.

- (31) a. að fyrirfara svo **unaðslegum dýrum**
to kill such precious.DAT animals.DAT
- b. Marger höfdu medaumkan og börmudu **hönnum**
many had sympathy and pitied him.DAT

A similar point can be made with *hrufla sig* ‘scrape one’s skin’ and *skráma sig* ‘bruise oneself’, exemplified in (32) below:

- (32) a. Jónas hruflaði **sig** / ***hana** á vinstri hendi
Jónas scraped REFL/her.ACC on left hand
- b. Ég skrámaði **mig** / ***þau** í andlitinu
I bruised REFL/them.ACC in the.face

Semantically, these verbs are comparable to naturally reflexive verbs like *meiða* ‘hurt’ and *slasa* ‘injure’. Hence, the reflexive objects of *hrufla* and *skráma* seem

to have a theta-role just like the objects of *meiða* and *slasa*. There is also a clear parallelism in that all these verbs take accusative objects (but see 4.2 below for further discussion).

With some inherently reflexive verbs, etymological relations with other words in Icelandic indicate what they could mean on their own. This can be seen e.g. with *brynja sig gegn* ‘arm oneself against’, *grenna sig* ‘lose weight’ and *sóla sig* ‘sunbathe’, as in (33). The glosses in (34) seem appropriate for these verbs.

- (33) a. Hann brynjaði **sig** / ??**mig** gegn persónulegum árásum
he armed REFL/me.ACC against personal attacks
- b. Margar konur reyna að grenna **sig** / ??**eiginmanninn**
many women try to make.thinner REFL/the.husband.ACC
- c. Við sóluðum **okkur** / ***börnin** í gær
we sunned REFL/the.children.ACC yesterday
- (34) a. *brynja* ‘shield by armor’ (cf. the noun *brynja* ‘armor’)
 b. *grenna* ‘make thinner’ (cf. the adjective *grannur* ‘thin’)
 c. *sóla* ‘expose to sunshine’ (cf. the noun *sól* ‘sun, sunshine’)

If these glosses are correct, all the verbs in (34) are two-place verbs that theta-mark the reflexive object.

4.2 Case assignment

Since lexical case assignment is conditioned by theta-role assignment, all DPs bearing lexical case, including reflexive *sig*, must be arguments of their case assigner. This holds whether the case assigner is assumed to be the verb itself or some designated functional head within the extended VP (see Woolford 2006). This latter possibility is relevant for the present discussion as indirect objects, including benefactives, are often assumed to be introduced by a special applicative head rather than the verb itself (Pylkkänen 2008).

The strongest argument that inherent *sig* is thematic comes from case assignment in Icelandic which patterns the same way for inherent *sig* as for other DP arguments. To put it more concretely, all semantic generalizations about object case in Icelandic hold irrespective of whether the object is inherently reflexive *sig*, naturally reflexive *sig* or a non-reflexive DP.

One of these generalizations relates to indirect objects (IOs). Most ditransitive verbs in Icelandic take dative IOs but accusative IOs are also possible; however, IOs denoting recipients and benefactives are always dative (see Jónsson 2000

for discussion) and this generalization holds across different types of DPs. This is exemplified in (35):

- (35) a. Flestir starfsmennirnir taka sér sumarfrí
most employees take REFL.DAT vacation.ACC
 ‘Most of the employees take a vacation’
- b. Jón og Magga höfðu reddað sér barnfóstru
John and Maggy had gotten REFL.DAT nanny.DAT
 ‘John and Maggy had found a nanny’
- c. Börnin óskuðu sér aldrei dýrra gjafa
the.children wished REFL.DAT never expensive.GEN presents.GEN
 ‘The children never wanted to get expensive presents’

It is only in (35b) that *sér* can easily be replaced by a non-reflexive DP. This is clearly impossible in (35a) and rather marginal in (35c). Benefactive IOs in Icelandic are preferably reflexive with many verbs (see Jónsson 2000) but this need not concern us here. The crucial point is that inherent *sig* patterns with undisputed arguments in that benefactive or recipient IOs must be dative.

There are some semantic generalizations about accusative objects that hold for all types of transitive verbs. For instance, all transitive verbs denoting bodily injury (the “hurt verbs” of Levin 1993:225) take accusative objects in Icelandic. This class includes the following verbs:

- (36) a. Inherently reflexive verbs: *hrufla sig* ‘scrape one’s skin’, *misstíga sig* ‘take a false step’, *skráma sig* ‘bruise oneself’
- b. Naturally reflexive verbs: *brenna* ‘burn’, *fótbrjóta* ‘break a leg’, *meiða* ‘hurt’, *reka í* ‘bump into, stub’, *skaða* ‘hurt’, *skera* ‘cut’, *slasa* ‘injure’, *snúa* ‘twist’, *stinga* ‘prick’
- c. Non-reflexive verb: *bráka* ‘fracture’, *brjóta* ‘break’, *slíta* ‘pull (a muscle)’, *rífa* ‘pull (a muscle)’

The accusative here might be determined by a fairly broad generalization ranging over verbs with physically affected objects since such verbs usually take accusative objects in Icelandic, but this requires further investigation.¹¹ The crucial point here is these verbs obey a semantic restriction on object case in Icelandic, a restriction that applies equally to all kinds of transitive verbs. If reflexive objects were non-arguments, this would be totally unexpected.

¹¹ The main exception is that various verbs of killing and destroying take dative objects (cf. Maling’s 2002 overview of verbs with dative objects in Icelandic).

The view advocated here that reflexive *sig* is always thematic makes an important diachronic prediction: If the object case of a reflexive verb changes, the change should affect reflexive *sig* in the same way as non-reflexive objects. Unfortunately, this is difficult to test for Icelandic where object case has remained remarkably stable throughout the centuries. However, data from Faroese show that this prediction is borne out. For example, genitive has been replaced by accusative in Faroese as an object case and this can be seen with the naturally reflexive verb *hevna* ‘revenge’ in (37a). As shown in (37b), the genitive with this verb is preserved in Icelandic.

- (37) a. Arsenal hevndi **seg / tapið** (Faroese)
Arsenal revenged REFL/the.loss.ACC
 ‘Arsenal got their revenge (for the loss)’
- b. Arsenal hefndi **sín / tapsins**
Arsenal revenged REFL/the.loss.GEN
 ‘Arsenal got their revenge (for the loss)’

Another example involves dative case. As discussed by Jónsson (2009b) and Thráinsson et al. (2004:429-431), many verbs which previously took dative objects have shifted to accusative in Faroese, e.g. the verb *kasta* ‘throw’. This change affects reflexive and non-reflexive objects alike as shown in (38a). In contrast to Faroese, Icelandic has retained the dative, as in (38b).

- (38) a. Jógvan kastaði **seg / bókina** í havið (Faroese)
Jógvan threw REFL/the.book.ACC in the.ocean
 ‘Jógvan threw himself/the book into the ocean’
- b. Jóhann kastaði **sér / bókinni** í sjóinn
Jóhann threw REFL/the.book.DAT in the.ocean
 ‘Jóhann threw himself/the book into the ocean’

Note also that *kasta* is a verb of ballistic motion and all such verbs take dative objects in Icelandic (see Svenonius 2002), whether the object is reflexive *sig* or a non-reflexive DP.

5. Conclusion

I have argued in this paper that the simple reflexive pronoun *sig* is unambiguously a thematic argument in Icelandic. This is true not only of *sig* with naturally reflexive verbs but also inherently reflexive *sig*. The main evidence for this view comes from the fact that *sig* is impossible with verbs that

fail to theta-mark their object (middles and anticausatives) and the strong parallelism in case assignment for *sig* and non-reflexive DP arguments. It has also been shown that various inherently reflexive verbs in Icelandic are semantically like two-place verbs. Potential counterarguments relating to focalization and reflexive passives (discussed in section 3) have been argued not to be valid.

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