

# The Anti-Occam's Razor: The distinction between pronouns and expletives in Icelandic

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**1. Introduction** The expletive element *það* in Icelandic developed from a homophonous pronoun, i.e. the third person neuter singular *það* 'it'. The question dealt with in this paper is whether these are two distinct elements in the lexicon or if we can assume one element and derive the difference in function and distribution from where the element is initially merged in the structure. Adopting a traditional generative approach with the lexicon separate from the syntax, we show that assuming these elements involve a single lexical entry in Modern Icelandic leads to empirical and theoretical complications, whereas an account assuming two separate lexical entries is more feasible in this respect.

**2. Against a single lexical entry** Assuming a single lexical entry for Modern Icelandic *það* is problematic since one needs to stipulate that the difference between the expletive and the pronoun is the result of the elements being merged in different positions in the structure. This forces us to assume that the lexical entry is either referential or non-referential before it enters the syntactic structure and can either gain referentiality (i) or lose it (ii), depending on our assumption about the element. (i) **Gaining referentiality?** In this case the referential properties originate within the syntactic structure and are not directly linked to a specific lexical element. This is, in our view, unfeasible as we would either expect this to apply to all lexical elements or that there is something very special about *það*. (ii) **Losing referentiality?** Suppose that the single item has referential properties in the lexicon and loses them when merged in e.g. Spec-TP or Spec-CP. On this account we should expect other elements/pronouns to be able to show dual nature like *það* and lose referential abilities when merged directly in Spec-TP or Spec-CP. This is, however, not the case.

**3. Conclusion** Making use of two lexical elements allows us to account for the difference in referentiality which is then associated with the lexical element under question and not derived from the syntactic structure. Our approach keeps a distinction between lexical entries, i.e. phonological elements associated with certain semantic properties, and syntactic structure. We acknowledge that other approaches to syntax may give different results. For instance, while Distributed Morphology (DM) partially separates vocabulary items (VIs) from syntax and semantics, allowing for underspecification of VIs (e.g. Harley & Noyer 1999, Harley 2019), Construction Grammar (CxG) gets rid of the lexicon by assuming that everything in the grammar belongs to a single "construct-i-con" (e.g. Goldberg 2003, Hilpert 2014). Needless to say, these approaches are fundamentally different from the one we adopt here.

**References:** Goldberg, A. E. (1995). *Constructions: A Construction Grammar Approach to Argument Structure*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. Harley, H. (2019). *Semantics in Distributed Morphology*. In C. Maienborn, K. von Stechow & P. Portner (Eds.), *Semantics Interfaces*. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Mouton, 143–168. Harley, H. & Noyer, R. (1999). *Distributed Morphology*. *Glott International*, 4(4). Hilpert, M. (2014). *Construction Grammar and its Application to English*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

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