

THE IMPERSONAL VERB  
IN OLD ICELANDIC

A thesis presented for the  
degree of M.A. (and Honours) in English  
in the University of Canterbury,  
Christchurch, New Zealand.

by  
Anthony Desmond Barnett  
1964.

THESIS  
VPD  
2297  
B261

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### SUBDIVISIONS FOR EACH CLASS EXCEPT VI

- (a) with a modal verb
- (b) with the passive
- (c) with a past participle not part of a passive  
        or of a tense
- (d) with a direct (usually second) object
- (e) with an indirect (usually second) object.

## INTRODUCTION

This thesis is a study of the impersonal construction in Old Icelandic; that is, a study of verbs which have no personal subject. In various Old Icelandic texts, which the author was studying for his Honours course in 1963, the frequency and typicality of impersonal constructions was striking. They even appeared sometimes when the sense, at any rate to an English speaker, seemed to demand a personal subject. They seemed of sufficient individuality and interest to merit a formal study. Since the passive is often an alternative form for the impersonal, it was decided to include it in the study as well.

For the orderly survey of these expressions a classification was necessary. At first sight a formal system with reference only to Icelandic appeared best, because it would appeal only to the Icelandic meaning without reference to English translation, and would thus not be subject to the vagaries of different translations. But on closer examination this course showed itself to be impracticable, since there is very little readily available knowledge about precise Icelandic meanings and fine nuances of overtone.

So the first classification was made, appealing to both Icelandic and English idiom, in other words, with reference

to English translation. The subtle overtones and fine nuances of meaning possible in different English translations in order to render the Icelandic accurately, despite the greater complexity and difficulty involved, seemed an interesting field to study. This first classification was very intricate, following what seemed the most idiomatic English translation of the impersonal and passive examples; it was very much from the English language standpoint. There were also separate sections according to topic, e.g. natural phenomena and time, which are usually expressed impersonally in both Icelandic and English. Thirteen headings emerged, but these were eventually cut down to six, since many of them were dealing with topics with very few examples. All the examples of the impersonal and passive in the selections under study, a list of which is given in the Notes, No.1, were numbered and listed. All the appropriate bibliographies that Canterbury University possessed were scanned; out of all the books and articles on record there was reference to only thirteen articles which could have had some bearing on the topic in hand; when these thirteen articles were checked only one was relevant. This was "The Passive Voice in Old Icelandic" by Joseph Benjamin Wilson, a doctoral thesis from Stanford University, U.S.A., in 1960-1. The synopsis of this work revealed that while the passive was treated thoroughly, the impersonal was only mentioned when it was also passive.

This was the only work on the proposed topic of this

thesis, then. But seeing this was a doctoral thesis of 218 pages, and American scholarship of this nature has the reputation for being thorough, the passive was excluded from the study. So the topic of this thesis became the impersonal alone. This meant five headings instead of six, since the sixth one was the passive.

However, this classification proved to be equivocal; some might not agree on the most idiomatic English translation for a particular phrase, and some of the impersonal examples could in this system belong to more than one category. A cut-and-dried, unequivocal foundation to the arguments here now seemed best, since it was necessary to direct the attention of the readers of this chiefly to the comments on the translation, not to divert it with a subjective classification of the Icelandic. These comments contained the author's reflections on the topic of the two languages compared, which were his chief interest in this field and were closely bound up with form. So a return to the original plan of a purely formal classification of all the impersonal examples was necessary, one according to the Icelandic form of the phrase, but this time appealing to English translation as well, and one that was formally demonstrable and objective.

This reclassification of impersonal types was done according as they appeared combined with other grammatical phenomena appearing most frequently with the impersonal. The

types were divided into five main classes thus:

Class I. The impersonal appearing alone, that is without any significant accompanying grammatical feature.

Class II. The impersonal with a direct object (of the impersonal verb).

Class III. The impersonal with an indirect object.

Class IV. The impersonal with a genitive appended to the construction.

Class V. The impersonal with a prepositional phrase dependent on it.

There were some expressions which were not certainly impersonal, but it was decided to include them in the classification after the certain ones had been dealt with.

Five classes only seemed much too broad and simple a classification for the basis of a thesis, so it was decided to classify further. There were other obvious prominent grammatical features to classify by. These were modal verbs, the passive, a past participle not part of a passive or of a tense but akin to a passive construction, two objects dependent on the same impersonal verb. But if four further main categories were made for these, the classification would not show the similarity between, say, an impersonal construction with a direct object and an active verb and one with direct object and passive verb, or between an impersonal with one indirect object and one with two indirect objects. So it was decided to show such similarities in the manner described

below. Exactly the same subdivisions were made in each Class and labelled exactly the same. These were (a) constructions with a modal verb, (b) those with a passive verb, (c) those with a past participle not part of a tense or of the passive, (d) constructions with a direct object in addition to some other feature specified in the main classes, such as another direct object or a prepositional phrase, (e) those with an indirect object as well as one of the main class features.

This (a) (b) (c) (d) (e) classification was really just about as important as the main Classes; so the classification was made with reference to two axes, one being the main Classes I to V, indicated by Roman numbers, the other being the subdivisions of each class, (a) to (e), indicated by letters within brackets. This was analogous to the specification of points on an algebraic graph with the two axes. The advantage of this cross-classification was, as mentioned earlier, to show similarities of grammatical construction, also to have a system easily committed to the memory, for the benefit of both author and readers, and at the same time to provide sufficient pigeon-holes, namely twenty-five, to fit and closely define the large majority of impersonal examples.

Then there were the expressions which by form could have been impersonal but were not certainly so. Such ambiguity occurred when a word had the same form for subject

and object, therefore could be subject of the verb or object of an impersonal verb. Sometimes the ambiguity could be cleared up by analogy with other expressions where there was an unambiguous word similar in function to the one in question. Sometimes it was debatable whether an adverb could function as subject of the verb or not. These ambiguous expressions have been collected as Class VI. There seemed little point in subdividing this into sections (a) to (e), as the examples were doubtful.

Part of the original object of this thesis was to see if dating, or authorship, or both, could be determined on stylistic grounds by the frequency of the impersonal, or of any particular class of impersonal in this classification, in different works. But nothing significant offered itself.

The object of the survey then is confined to how often the Modern English impersonal is or is not used to render the Old Icelandic impersonal, and to weigh up the implications of the different nuances of meaning in the two renderings of the same ideas. It is hoped to throw some light on the functionings of the impersonal peculiar to Icelandic and on those common to Icelandic and English, and thereby to reach down to the languages' and peoples' respective cultural backgrounds. By the comparison and contrast of the two languages in their use or not of such a distinctive linguistic feature as the impersonal it is hoped to bring a deeper understanding of the Norse people and of our own.



## NOTES

1. The selections are from E.V. Gordon's "An Introduction to Old Norse", published by Oxford at the Clarendon Press, second edition, 1957. They are from the following and are presented in this order for every class:

1. "Snorra Edda".
13. "Þrymskviða".
2. "Völsunga saga".
4. Ari's "Libellus Islandorum", line 51 on.
- 5c. Leif's Voyage according to "Flateyjarbók".
6. "Hrafnkels saga".
7. "Brennu-Njáls saga".
8. "Grettis saga".
12. "Þáttur Auðunar vestfirzka".
16. Miscellanea.
- G. From "Laxdoela saga".
- L. Verses by Earl Rögnvald Kali (from "Orkneyingar saga").

2. Abbreviations. P. = Page, l = line, cf. = compare, f. = and following, q.v. = which see.

THE IMPERSONAL VERB  
IN OLD ICELANDIC

The impersonal verb is a notable feature of Old Icelandic. From a selection of texts in E.V. Gordon's Introduction to Old Norse these examples have been collected and classified.

CLASS I

CLASS I: Impersonal alone.

Snorra Edda:

pat var einn dag at . . . (p.6, 1.54)

pat er upphaf þessa máls, at . . . (p.8, 1.110)

The fact that three out of the five episodes of "Snorra Edda" selected in Gordon, A,B, and D, begin with a temporal reference reminds us that it is hard to start a story without one. Cf. "Once upon a time" !

þá er myrkt var orðit . . . (p.9, 1.144)

Cf. Class I (b). "Myrkt" with its final -t is not a noun, but a neuter adjective or past participle; therefore "var orðit" has no expressed subject and is impersonal.

. . at ekki var þá óttalaust at sofa.(p.10, 1.186)

The fear belonged to the people, so in English "they" would be the subject.

. . en nu mun reyna . . . (p.13, 1.263)

Compare "Laxdoela saga", Chap.81: " . . ef reyna skal" Class I.

"Skal" implies more of modality than "mun".

. . at nú sé lægra í horninu en áðr.(p.13,1.283)

An English translation would supply "it". The general meaning of the suppressed subject is, of course, "the level of the drink".

En at morni þegar dagaði. . . (p.15, 1.343)

Cf. p.105, 1.118.

Volsunga saga:

Nú líör eigi langt. . . (p.23, 1.57)

Cf. p.15, 1. 340.

. . ef svá vildi takask. (p.23, 1. 58)

"Vildi" has an impersonal object which is the subject of "takask".

Leif's Voyage (Flateyjarbók):

Ok var þá skamt at fara til skipsins. . . (p.45, 1.122)

This is in Class I because the prepositional phrase "til skipsins" is dependent not on the impersonal "var" but on "fara". Compare "Laxdœla saga", Chap. 3 ". . var þar skamt í milli fjalls ok fjöru" Class V. The prepositional phrase beginning "í milli" is dependent on the verb "var".

English would supply "it" to render the quotation above.

. . ok er v́árar. . . (p.47, 1. 202)

Cf. p.133, 1.133. Here the spring "v́árar" is contained in the verb, i.e. the verb is formed from the noun "v́árar".

Hrafnkels saga:

.. verðr sauðvant . . . (p.62, 1.106)

Literally this is ". . it became sheep-lacking", or "sheep were missing". Cf. p.59,1.10: "Er sauðvant" = "Er vant ásauðar". Perhaps the first stresses more the loss of the sheep, the second more the number of sheep lost.

þat var einn morgin. . . (p.62, 1.109)

þat var einn morgin snimma. . . (p.68, 1.309)

Cf. p.62, 1.109.

. . hversu horfir. . . (p.73, 1.460)

This is equivalent to "how it turns" (literally) or "which way the wind blows". The English equivalent idiom, as is common, supplies a definite subject.

. . hversu sem ferr. . . (p.73,1.462)

Compare English "however it goes".

. . þó at þann veg hafi at borizk. . . (p.74, 1.510)

Compare the English equivalent "that it had turned out this way". "þann veg" is adverbial, not a direct object.

. . er vel nú. . . (p.76, 1.569)

. . af því at vant er við vándum at sjá. (p.78, 1.643)

"Vant er" = "it is difficult"; this proverbial expression is impersonal also in the English rendering.

Er nú vel. . . (p.81, 1.740)

. . ok er vel. . . (p.82,1.768)

. . ok mun nálægt verða. . . (p.83,1.808)

"Mun" is taken here as an auxiliary verb for tense rather

than as a modal verb; hence this example not in Class I (a).  
The English translation is also impersonal, using as subject  
"it".

Brennu-Njáls saga:

. . en þó kom þar at. . . (p.91, 1.99)

"þar" is of course an adverb so could not be the subject.

Then the subject is unexpressed and the verb is impersonal.

The English translation is "and then it came about there that..."

. . þó at her gangi eigi. (p.98, 1.334)

"Gangi" equals "it come(-s) about" (subjunctive).

Grettis saga:

. . sjá hversu ferr. . . (p.101, 1.20)

. . hvar þá var komit. . . (p.101, 1. 27)

The suppressed subject means "the signs of Glam's presence  
having been there". The Icelandic impersonal form is less  
explicit than the English translation would be but is more  
succinct, direct and mysterious: what manner of creature is  
this who has been there, the Icelandic seems to ask.

því gekk lengi. . . (p.103, 1.47)

"því" is a dative used as an adverb.

. . hratt stundum fyrir, en stundum dró frá.(p.104, 1.86)

"Hratt" and "dró frá" are both impersonal verbs, from "hrinda"  
and "draga frá". The general idea of the subject is "clouds"  
which would be the subject in an English translation. The  
impersonal allows full attention to be given to the moonlight,  
without distraction by mention of the clouds: line 86, just

before the quotation: "Tunglskin var mikit úti. . ."

. . hversu farit hafði. (p.105, 1.121)

Þáttur Auðunar vestfirzka:

. . hversu farit hafði. . . (p.131, 1.67)

Cf. p.105, 1.121; p.36, 1.72.

. . jók nú miklu á . . . (p.132, 1.105)

The English literal translation is ". . it increased now by much to it . . ." or "he was now much more reluctant to (meet the king). . ." The "jók" ("increased") is appropriate in view of the preceding idiom ". . svá mikit sem honum þótti fyrr fyrir. . ." where "mikit" already expresses largeness, something which seems a great obstacle to Auðun (see p.132, 1.103 f.) and which he is reluctant to undertake.

þó at svá illa verði at. . . (p.133, 1.152)

"Svá" and "illa" are both adverbs, so the subject is suppressed and the verb impersonal.

. . ok sér þá at. . . (p.134, 1.154)

Cf. p.133, 1.145.

Verses by Earl Rognvald Kali:

. . svát nýtir = svá at nýtir. . . (p.155, 1.149)

. . en hykk at þó þykki. . . (p.156, 1.176)

"Hykk" = "hygg ek", so "þykki" is the only impersonal verb here.

CLASS I (a): Impersonal with a modal verb.

Snorra Edda:

. . eigi matti á þat leita. (p.5, 1.24)

English would supply "no-one" as subject.

Eigi þarf langt frá því at segja. . . (p.9, 1.126)

En svá er at segja. . . (p.10, 1.177)

The subject is unexpressed, so the verb "er" is impersonally used; English would supply "it" as a subject in a literal translation.

Sjá má. . . (p.14, 1.306)

This equals English "It may be seen". The active is rendered passive in English.

#### Völsunga saga:

Ok er náttá tekr. . . (p.24, 1.101)

"Náttá" is an infinitive dependent on "tekr", not its subject.

"Tekr" is then impersonal. Cf. p.105, 1.138.

#### Hrafnkels saga:

Mátti svá at kveða. . . (p.78, 1.628)

This corresponds to the English "It might just about be said" or "You might just about say", both also impersonal expressions. Compare "Laxdoela saga", Chap.4: "Má af því marka". Class I (a).

#### Brennu-Njáls saga:

Nú er þar til máls at taka at. . . (p.92, 1.110)

This is Class I (a) because "til máls" is dependent on "taka", not the impersonal "er". Cf. Class V.

. . kalla má. (p.92, 1.122)

This equals English "it may be said". Active is rendered by an English passive.

. . svá skal vera. (p.97, 1.296)

. . at svá skyldi vera. (p.97, 1.303)

The auxiliaries in these two, "skal" and "skyldi", imply modality, whereas "mun" does not.

CLASS I (b): Impersonal with the passive.

Snorra Edda:

. . varð ekki svá smíðat. . . (p.6, 1.41)

English would replace this impersonal passive construction with a personal gerundial one: ". . no such building was done. . ." Notice that the past participle "smíðat" is in neuter form, in concord with its impersonal subject.

En er soðit var. . . (p.8, 1.114)

The subject is really "goats" or "meal". An English equivalent with the equivalent of the impersonal subject could be "When the cooking was done".

En þá er sagt at. . . (p.10, 1.160)

Impersonal is combined with passive.

Vel er drukkit. . . (p.13, 1.284)

Cf. p.13, 1.275 (Class V).

Volsunga saga:

. . ok létta eigi fyrr en lokit er at rísta. . . (p.24, 1.109)

In the subordinate clause the action focus, or the actual agent of the verb is really the cutting. Icelandic expresses this as an infinitive phrase added to the construction; English would form the gerund "cutting" and make it subject.

Note. This is Class I (b) because the following phrase is infinitive, not prepositional.

Libellus Islandorum: (51 on):

.. svá er sagt. . . (p.37, 1.94)



Leif's Voyage (Flateyjarbok):

Svá er sagt at. . . (p.47, 1.201)

Hrafnkels saga:

Er nu sét. . . (p.68, 1.314)

"Sét" is the neuter past participle of "sja".

Brennu-Njáls saga:

. . . búit svá sé til ætlat. . . (p.88, 1.23)

"Sé" is the impersonal verb. The English would be "It may be considered so ordained. . ." - "búit" = "prepared" or "ordained".

Þáttur Auðunar vestfirzka:

Vel er mælt. . . (p.133, 1.128)

CLASS I (c): Impersonal with a past participle not part of a passive or of a tense.

Snorra Edda:

Af horni þessu þykkir þá vel drukkit. . . (p.13, 1.274)

"þykkir" is often used impersonally. An English translator would probably use a personal construction.

## CLASS II

CLASS II: Impersonal with direct object or accusative.

Snorra Edda:

. . hvat sem hann kostaði til. (p.6, 1.34)

Here the construction is paralleled by the English equivalent, for the "hann" is accusative: "whatever it cost him".

Mik grunaði. . . (p.11, 1.202)

Many Icelandic verbs are constructed idiomatically impersonally with the accusative, or dative, of the pronoun.

. . sem mik varði. (p.14, 1.322)

Cf. 1.202 above. Compare "Laxdoela saga", Chap. 84: "Sem mik varði" Class II.

Leif's Voyage (Flateyjarbók):

. . er hvárki skorti vínvið né vínber. (p.47, 1.195)

Cf. p.46, 1.163. "Vínvið" and "vínber" are accusatives; "vínviðr" would be the nominative form of the first. Compare "Laxdoela saga", Chap. 6: "skortir oss" Class II.

Hrafnkels saga:

Ok eina nótt dreymði hann. . . (p.59, 1.11)

The "Hann" here is actually accusative, as one might suspect from its position after the verb. This is literally "it dreamt him" or "a dream came to him" rather than "he dreamt". It is a linguistic feature of Icelandic, perhaps unconsciously used here, which throws the dream into agent prominence which suggests a mysterious or even supernatural origin for it.

. . at hann mundi fljóttara yfir bera. . . (p.62, l.116)

Literally this is ". . that him it might more swiftly over bear". "Hann" by its form and position before "mundi" could be nominative; but "bera" used personally means its cognate "bear", "bring", or "carry", which would be the wrong meaning in the context. "He" was travelling, as the next clause "ef hann riði heldr en gengi" tells us. So he was not bearing something, something was bearing him. Hence the impersonal use of "bera".

Hina þar skjótt eptir. (p.82, l.777)

"Hina" is masculine accusative plural, so "þar" is impersonal. The suppressed subject, seeming as "it" does to aid the pursuers, again foreshadows the dark fate awaiting Eyvindr and companions. The dark Nemesis is now helping the pursuers and hindering the pursued. For Hrafnkel the boot is on the other foot now. Hrafnkel and party now have the upper hand over Sám and party. This is good narrative technique; it reveals the irony that the scales have swung. But the writer may have just unconsciously used his natural idiom.

. . . er daga lengði . . . (p.85, l.862)

"Lengði" is impersonal, since "daga" is accusative plural by its form.

Brennu-Njáls saga:

. . ef oss dregr undan. (p.94, l.180)

Literally it is ". . if it draws us away", i.e. if we escape. Escape is seen here as equivalent to our mysterious power "it" being benevolent.

. . svá at þegar tók af hofuðit. (p.97, 1.278)

"Tók af" cannot have a personal subject in Icelandic idiom, so it is impersonal. "Hofuðit" must be an accusative.

. . því at hingat leggr allan reykin. (p.98, 1.330)

"Allan reykin" is accusative by form and also the action focus, so the verb is impersonal. The smoke appears wafted not of its own will but by something else's. Cf. p.93, 1.146. Class V (e).

Þáttur Auðunar vestfirzka:

Braut fýsir mik nú . . . (p.131, 1.81).

CLASS II (b). Impersonal with direct object and passive.

Hrafnkels saga:

Konur ok börn var rekit í eitt hús. (p.76, 1.560)

This is impersonal because the singular "var" is used. Also "rekit" is neuter singular, agreeing with the impersonal subject. If there were no impersonal it would be neuter plural accusative "rekin", in concord with "konur ok börn", accusatives.

This quotation could also be Class V (q.v.).

CLASS II (d). Impersonal with two direct objects.

Snorra Edda:

. . er hann þraut þrindit. . . (p.13, 1.281)

"Hann" is not nominative but accusative; "þraut" is an impersonal verb taking two objects here, both in accusative form.

## CLASS III

CLASS III: Impersonal with indirect object or dative.

Snorra Edda:

. . Sýndisk nú þllum sem Loki hefði látit leikinn. (p.12, l.244)

The unexpressed subject of "sýndisk" is in apposition with the following noun clause "sem. . leikinn". Compare p.46, l.164: "at því er þeim sýndisk" where "því" equalling "so much" or "as far" is the subject.

. . lízk honum svá sem. . . (p.13, l.282)

"Lízk" is similar in meaning to "þykkir" and is used correspondingly as often as that verb. The two verbs are often found with a dative object, thus "honum" here.

. . sem honum líkar. (p.13, l.291)

The most idiomatic English translation is ". . as he liked (would have liked)." But the translation could be ". . as (it) pleased him".

. . lízk honum nú svá sem. . . (p.13, l.292)

Cf. l.282, l.291 above.

. . meira en þér mun hagr á vera? (p.14, l.295)

The suppressed subject of the verb "mun vera" indicates "the amount of drink". The English translation suppresses the subject likewise: "more than (it) will be well for you?"

Svá lízk mér. . . (p.14, l.296)

Here is the familiar pattern of impersonal "lízk" plus dative. Compare "Laxdoela saga", Chap. 84: ". . at svá sé. . ."

. . en mér lízk sem um þenna mun vera. (p.14, 1.299)

Here the suppressed subject anticipates and is in apposition with the noun clause beginning "sem".

. . undarlíga myndi mér þykkja. . . (p.14, 1.309)

This is the familiar pattern of a part of "þykkja" being used impersonally with a dative.

. . ok var þjálfafa eigi vant at . . . (p.16, 1.372).

"þjálfafa" is in oblique case form, probably dative; the literal English rendering is ". . and it was not expected to (of) þjálfafi that. . ." But the best English for this is "þjálfafi was not (to be) expected to. . ."

. . geisar eimi ok aldrnari. (p.20, 1.506)

"Eimi" and "aldrnari" are the agents here. Both the forms quoted could be nominative from their form, but then the verb would have to be plural to agree with the plural subject. So "eimi" and "aldrnari" are datives, which fact stresses their instrumentality rather than their agency in the final inferno. The use of the impersonal here thus suggests a more indefinable and therefore more sinister originator of the flames, because the smoke and fire are mere instruments in its hands.

#### Þrymskviða:

. . einnar mér Freyju ávant þykkir. (p.139, 1.95)

#### Völsunga saga:

Eigi er mér grunlaust. . . (p.22, 1.39)

Compare p.11, 1.202 "Mik grunaði" Class II. Here the suspecting is made adjectival, whereas in "Mik grunaði" it is contained in the verb.

. . eigi hlyddi honum at eta þat né drekka.(p.23, 1.46)  
 "He" is the real agent. In Icelandic it is attached to the verb as a dative.

Libellus Islandorum:

. . ef vátum of kvæmi við. (p.38, 1.130)  
 "Vátum" in dative form is the action focus here, with the verb "kvæmi".

Leif's Voyage (Flateyjarbok):

En þeim var svá mikit forvitni á. . . (p.45, 1.155)  
 Here the focus has been transferred from the persons, which it would be in English, to the quality "curiosity" (forvitni").

. . at fóstura hans var skapgott. (p.46, 1.185)  
 "Fóstura" here is dative, not nominative. Its position next to the possessive "hans" and before "var" makes it easily mistaken as a nominative.

Hrafnkels saga:

. . en þér mun verða gott til vista. . . (p.61, 1.69)  
 Literally this is ". . and to you it will become well to (for) service" or "you will be well off for work". A better translation would be "there will be plenty of work for you" as this throws the emphasis on the work rather than the person, which the Icelandic does.

Mun þér þó verða betra til vista en þeim.(p.61, 1.73)  
 Cf. 1.69 above.

. . mér þykkir þó illt. . . (p.61, 1.75)  
 This is impersonal because our usual pattern þykkja plus

dative occurs, and also because an adverb like "illt" does not usually function as a noun, this being the only other possible subject besides the suppressed one. Compare "Laxdoela saga", Chap. 3: "Honum þótti þar byggiligt" Class III.

. . at honum mundi mál heim . . . (p.63, 1.129)

Here "vera" (to be) and "ganga" (to go) are omitted. The full impersonal verb is "mundi vera".

Illa þykkir mér, at. . . (p.63, 1.154)

"Illa" is an adverb and so does not function as a subject. So the subject is suppressed, and anticipates the "at" clause. In Icelandic a noun or pronoun, whether expressed or not, often anticipates and introduces an "at" clause which is apposite with it.

. . hversu þeim fœri at. (p.64, 1.165)

Cf. 1.166 below. English is "how it was going for them there". "Fœri" from "fara" is impersonal past subjunctive. There is also a parallel English construction: "how it had gone between him and Hrafnkel". "Hrafnkel" and "he" are the "þeim".

Illa hefir mér at farit. . . (p.64, 1.166)

Cf. 1.165 above.

. . er þér leiðisk. (p.65, 1.205)

Mun honum nokkurn vegg vel fara. (p.66, 1.244)

The English is "He is sure to behave well in some way".

Perhaps the impersonal (literally "it will go to him well in some way") suggests that behaviour is dictated or at least initiated by some force outside the person. Determinism ?



Mun þér verða ámalissamt. . . (p.66, 1.255)

Ok fórsk honum því seinna. . . (p.67, 1.288)

Literally this is "And it (i.e. the journey) went (to itself) to him by this much slower". Compare p.129, 1.8: ". . ok fersk þeim vel". Class III. There is an exact English equivalent for the latter: "it went well for them".

. . var þeim frændum þungt í skapi. . . (p.68, 1.303)

Þá fær Þorbirni svá mjök. . . (p.69, 1.322)

Literally translated it is "Then went (turned out) for Thorbjorn so greatly" or "This affected Thorbjorn so greatly." "Thorbirni" is the dative form of "Thorbjorn".

En morgum teksk verr en vill. . . (p.71, 1.412)

The verb is literally "(it) takes", or "(it) happens"; thus "And for many it happens worse than it (he?) wills." This suggests that not man but an undefined impersonal force has control over his actions. Determinism? Pagan? The idiomatic English translation suggests simply that man is responsible for his own actions. In the light of the Icelandic, is there more a Free Will or orthodox Christian attitude in the English people as a whole, because in the realm of conduct the impersonal has been excluded from the English language?

Cf. p.66, 1.244 (Class III); p.72, 1.448 (Class III (b))

. . er honum er mikit í skapi. (p.71, 1.413)

The English subject is "a great deal", corresponding with the Icelandic adverb "mikit". The translation would be ". . when there is a great deal on his mind." It could also run ". . when he has. . ." However, the stress is on the great deal, which

is accordingly better translated as the subject.

Svá mun mér fara sem qðrum. . . (p.72, 1.434)

. . at svá foeri mér at . . . (p.72, 1.441)

. . at mér þoetti illt at deila við Hrafnkel, en  
eigi sýnisk mér svá . . . (p.72, 1.442) (two examples).

"Illt" is of course the adverb "bad". It does not function as a noun, therefore is not the subject. So the verb "þoetti" is impersonal.

. . fyrir því at mér þoetti við þann best at eiga.(p.72, 1.443)

Cf. L.442 above.

. . þó at mér foeri sem qðrum. . . (p.72, 1.446)

. . at þér mislíkar. . . (p.73, 1.460)

Compare "líka" as an impersonal verb, e.g. "Laxdoela saga", Chap.13: ". . en þér líkar" Class III.

. . at mér þykkir betr. . . (p.73, 1.463)

"þykkir" meaning "seems" is usually impersonal.

En mér þykkir sem þorkell vili. . . (p.73, 1.470)

Var honum því óhægt at. . . (p.74, 1.501)

English would be "So it was difficult for him to. . ."

Morgum monnum þykkir vel. . . (p.74, 1.510)

. . ok þykki mér sem þorkell. . . (p.75, 1.533)

. . Svá er komit nú kosti yðrum. . . (p.76, 1.576)

. . sem mér líkar. . . (p.77, 1.593)

Cf. L.460 above.

. . en mér mun fara sem morgum qðrum. . . (p.77, 1.602)

Compare p.72, 1.434, which has the same construction. It is worth noting that Thorgeirr uses the construction in line 434

when deciding on his own choice of action, and Hrafnkel uses very similar words in line 602 when deciding on a choice imposed on him. This similarity perhaps indicates the undemonstrativeness of the Icelanders, whose mode of utterance is not affected by circumstances.

The unexpressed subject in the quotation amounts to "the course of action".

Nú er svá komit kosti þínum. . . (p.84, 1.830)

Cf. p.76, 1.576: ". . Svá er komit nú kosti yðrum. . .", where Thorgeirr is speaking to Hrafnkel who is in his power. But when the writer makes Hrafnkel use practically the same words when he has the whip hand and has Sám in his power, he is showing the irony in the story that the wheel has turned full circle, the tables have completely turned.

. . Svá at þér hefði höegt verit at halda. (p.85, 1.873)

"Hefði verit" is the verb, with suppressed subject; "þér" is merely a dative pronoun "for you".

#### Brennu-Njáls saga:

Er þér sjálfrátt at. . . (p.89, 1.61)

Illa ferr þér. . . (p.91, 1.93)

Compare "Laxdœla saga", Chap. 21. "Fannsk þeim Írum nú mikit um. . ." Class III. English would be "All were greatly disturbed". The action focus "all" ("öllum") is in the dative, and precedes the verb, which is not common.

. . at þeim muni illa sækjask. . . (p.94, 1.169)

The literal translation is "that they will find it hard work".

"þeim", a dative, is the action focus.

Vel mun þér fara. (p.96, 1.263)

The idiomatic English translation would supply the subject "things": "Things will go well for you".

En mér þykkir miklu betra. . . (p.97, 1.296)

Here is the familiar impersonal "þykkja" plus dative object.

Grettis saga:

. . en fám þykkir slægr til at gista. . . (p.100, 1.4)

Here again is the familiar pattern of "þykkir" plus dative (fám).

. . því at honum þótti ærit um. . . (p.103, 1.55)

. . at honum brygði við. (p.104, 1.89)

. . ella mun þér slysgjarnt verða. (p.105, 1.133)

The English transcription is ".. or it will become unlucky for you". The "it" again suggests destiny. Compare p.88, 1.31 (Class V (d), p.91, 1.96 (Class V(e))).

Þattr Auðunar vestfirzka:

. . fersk þeim vel. . . (p.129, 1.8)

Compare p.36, 1.72: ". . hafði alt farizk vel at" Class VI, also p.67, 1.288: "Ok fórsk honum því seinna". Class III.

. . þá myndi mér fyrir þykkja í. . . (p.131, 1.84)

The verb construction is "þykkir fyrir í" plus a dative, which is highly idiomatic. The dative is the focus "one" (I); the translation is "one is (I would be) displeasē". The "myndi" suggests tense rather than modality here. However, there is something of mood in the verb, so the quotation could be classified Class III (a).

. . Ok svá mikít sem honum þótti fyrr fyrir. . (p.132, 1.104)

Compare the continuation of the quotation "jók nú miklu á," q.v., where the English equivalent subject "it" refers to the same thing.

. . at mér myndi eigi mislíka at. . . (p.133, 1.130)

Compare "líka" which is always used impersonally. The "myndi", as in line 84 above, appears to indicate tense rather than modality.

. . því at tignum monnum somir at þiggja. (p.134, 1.158)

CLASS III (a): Impersonal with indirect object and a modal verb.

Snorra Edda:

. . þótti þér seint líða. (p.16, 1.374)

The English subject would be "time".

Hrafnkels saga:

. . at mér þykkir þar heimskum manni at duga. (p.67, 1.262)

The familiar pattern of "þykkja" plus dative is followed by an infinitive phrase "at duga"; which would be rendered in English by a noun clause beginning "that I am helping".

Brennu-Njáls saga:

. . svá at þótti þeim með ódœmum miklum vera. (p.88, 1.21)

Parts of "þykkja" are often used impersonally, as has been said before. (p.96, 1.257)

Nú er þeim út at ganga öllum er leyft er. Classes

III (a) and III (b).(q.v.)

The first "er" is modal here; it implies compulsion.

Grettis saga:

Öllum þótti mikils um þetta verk,

þeim er heyrðu. (p.105, 1.121) Class IV and V also.

"Mikils", a genitive, is used adverbially, therefore is not a subject. The impersonal construction plus dative is repeated in "þeim er heyrðu"; the dative only is repeated since the impersonal verb "þótti" is understood here. Compare line 139: ". . at þeim ljái Glámr augna. . ." where the verb has a dative object "þeim" yet has a subject "Glámr" which follows the verb. CLASS III (b): Impersonal with indirect object and the passive.

Snorra Edda:

. . at eigi mun lokit verða verkinu. . . (p.6, 1.42)

Compare Class III (a): the verb "mun lokit verða" is not modal but is like one in form. The action or sense focus, or actual agent of the verb, or "doer of the action", is "verkit"(work). But "verkit" is put in its dative form "verkinu" and attached to an impersonal construction with a suppressed subject. This arrangement, and the one in p.5, 1.29 (Class VI), has the effect of putting the weight of meaning onto the action and off the agent. This tightens the narrative and makes it more fluent and vivid. Cf. p.75, 1.556. (Class V).

. . ef mér væri frá sagt. . . (p.13, 1.285)

Volsunga saga:

. . er þá lokit aptr hauginum. (p.24, 1.100)

Compare "Laxdoela saga", Chap. 84: ". . ok er því var lokit". Class III (b).

Leif's Voyage (Flateyjarbók):

. . var honum vel fagnat. (p.46, 1.184)

Hrafnkels saga:

. . ok er þá létt af allri sunnanþokunni  
ok úrinu. (p.62, 1.109)

"Er létt af" is the verb, a passive form indicating the state, not the action, of the weather. "Sunnanþokunni" and "úrinu" by their forms are datives, but are also the foci of the verb.

. . hversu þér er gefit. . . (p.72, 1.448)

The literal rendering is ". . how to you it is given", which suggests this mysterious force controlling man's behaviour again. Cf. p.66, 1.244. (Class III); p.71, 1.412 (Class III). Idiomatic English could be "which way you are inclined", where "you" can be an active subject, the real doer of the action. But "you" could be taken as a passive subject which is acted on by something or someone else undefined. This translation has the merit that it can reflect the Icelandic mood.

Var honum þröngt frá í brottu. . . (p.74, 1.499)

The impersonal here stresses the throng and thronging rather than the people who made it.

. . at slitit er þinginu. (p.74, 1.513)

Compare "Laxdoela saga", Chap. 12: ". . var slitit fundi þessum". (Class III (b)). Chap. 40: "En síðan var slitit þinginu". (Class III (b)). Literally the quotation is "that it is finished with the assembly", i.e. "all proceedings at the assembly were finished." It is to be noted that the

present tense "er" is used; this is in line with the principal clause and the context.

Af því ok heim á skálavegginn var skotit  
váðási einum. (p.76, 1.562) Also Class V.

This impersonal construction, with focus in the dative, gives the emphasis in meaning to the space between the shed and the wall of the house being spanned by the beam, rather than to the beam itself.

Brennu-Njáls saga:

. . ok mun oss vandara gort en çorum. . . (p.93, 1.143)

The full verb is "mun vera". "Oss" is a dative. "Gort" is used as the past participle of "göra".

Nú er þeim út at ganga çllum er leyft er. (p.96, 1.257).

Compare "Laxdoela saga", Chap. 33: ". . ek okkr er þá leyft at talask við". (Class III (b) ).

Uxa einum hafði slátrat verit. (p.97, 1.303)

"Uxa einum", the focus, is dative.

Grettis saga:

Var þá færit upp á húsin ok riðit skálanum

ok barit hælunum, . . . . þá var farit ofan af

húsunum ok til dura gengit. (p.103, 1.46) Also Class V (b)  
in three places. Q.v.

Cf. p.101, 1.27 (Class I). The impersonal expresses the mysteriousness of the goings-on and of their source: what manner of elf can be making such noises? The impersonal also allows full attention to be paid to the noises, because there is not



the distraction of a definite doer in the syntax. The nearest equivalent to the impersonal English could get would be "There were sounds of going up on to the roof. . . ", which conveys something of the mystery surrounding the author of the sounds, yet loses much of the vividness and drama and fluency of the Icelandic. This is because the English verb equivalent "There were sounds of going up" is much less concise and much weaker in force than the Icelandic verb "var farit upp". On the other hand, if English wanted conciseness it would have to sacrifice the impersonal: "Someone was going up on to the roof. . . ." This would completely dispel the mystery which is supposed to enshroud the miscreant climber; it would reduce him to merely an unknown human person. Another fairly concise English rendering would be by the passive: "The roof was being climbed up. . . ." This has the merit of being reasonably impersonal in sense; but it puts the stress in the wrong place. The roof being mentioned first in the sentence stresses the fact that the roof was being climbed on rather than that someone (or thing!) was doing the climbing, when the latter is much more important.

Ok er upp var lokit hurðunni. . . (p.103, 1.49)

The focus "hurðunni" is dative. The door was opened by a mysterious indefinable thing. Cf. 1. 46 above.

Þáttur Auðunar vestfirzka:

Haraldi konungi var sagt. . . (p.130, 1.19)

Note that "Haraldi konungi" is a dative dependent on the verb

"var sagt". Compare "Laxdoela saga", Chap. 5: "var henni veitt". (Class III (b) ).

CLASS III (c). Impersonal with indirect object and a past participle not part of a passive or of a tense.

Hrafnkels saga:

Sýnisk mér slíkum mönnum illa farit sem þér, er . . . (p. 66, 1.252)

The subject, which is of the verb "sýnisk", is suppressed. The English equivalent of the expression would be: "It seems to me that. . ." Thus in the Icelandic the noun equivalent apposite to the subject is the noun participial phrase "illa farit (slíkum mönnum) sem þér", whereas in the English idiomatic translation the corresponding noun equivalent would be the noun clause beginning "that".

. . en mér þykkir fyrir ván komit. (p.68, 1.320)

This is also Class III (a). The suppressed subject "it", as in the English equivalent, means "the condition of the case".

CLASS III (d): Impersonal with indirect and direct objects.

Snorra Edda:

. . Sva hefndi honum þat mikillæti. . . (p.6, 1.59)

"Honum" is dative and "þat mikillæti" accusative; many impersonal verbs in Icelandic take two objects.

Þrymskviða:

. . Áss es stolinn hamri. (p.136, 1.8)

"Hamri" is dative and "Áss" accusative; the sense centre or focus of this clause, otherwise its agent, could be either "hamarr"

or "Áss" according as "Fancy the Hammer being stolen from the God!" or "Fancy the God being robbed of a hammer!" is implied. It seems the "hamarr" is the sense focus since the first implication is more probable. The Icelanders seemed determined to keep many of their constructions and therefore accompanying verbs impersonal come what may. Here is an impersonal verb which takes not only one but two objects. The verb seems too heavily loaded - the literal English would be "It is robbed (to) the God by a hammer". It appears that the advantage of the construction is as usual to stress the importance of the verb and in this case the enormity of the action. It is a world-shattering event that Thor's hammer has been stolen!.

Hrafnkels saga:

En honum varð þareptir geit ok hafr. (p.59, l.16).

This is an idiom expressing an omission or unintentional behaviour.

CLASS III (e): Impersonal with two indirect objects.

Leif's Voyage (Flateyjarbók):

. . gaf þeim vel byri. . . (p.47, l.204)

Here "þeim" and "byri" are both dative. Either could be the focus, though it is probably the former in the context.

Thus "they got a good wind." Compare "Laxdœla saga",

Chap. 13: "þeim byrjaði vel" (Class III).

## CLASS IV.

CLASS IV: Impersonal with a genitive.

Snorra Edda:

. . freista skal þá þessar íþróttar. (p.48, 1.238)

Literally this is ". . it shall try then of this feat". or ". . this feat will be tested then". The real agent is the "íþrótt" which is presented here as a genitive following the impersonal. Compare p.13, 1.266 (Class V (b) ), which may not be construed in English idiomatically and fully accurately using a noun in an oblique case or in a phrase, as the agent of the verb.

. . ekki nýtr sólar. (p.53, 1.405)

This is literally in English "it shall enjoy not the sun" or "the sun will give no light". "Sun" is the focus; the Icelandic attaches it as a genitive to the impersonal verb "njóta", which takes a genitive object.

Leif's Voyage (Flateyjarbók):

. . at manns var vant. . . (p.46, 1.178)

"Man" is the focus here; in the idiomatic expression ". . var vant. . ." any focus is always put in the genitive. The English rendering would be "A man was missing". Compare p.155, 1.161 (Class IV). ". . saurs vara vant. . viðr. . ."; this is the same construction. The focus here is much more

vague than the focus "man" in the above.

Hrafnkels saga:

. . því at vant varð þriggja tuga ásauðar nær viku. (p.64, l.166) Also Class V.

Compare p.62, l.106 ". . en þá var vant nær þremr tígum ásauðar eina nótt." Class V. Here the action focus is not a phrase containing a partitive as in line 106, but a simple partitive. Hence the genitive form of "þriggja tuga", for "er vant" and its variants take a genitive focus; "ásauðar" of course is genitive because it is the partitive part of the focus "þriggja tuga ásauðar". The close verbal parallel with lines 106 and 108 (Class V (e)) is probably intentional; lines 106 and 108 initiate the fateful act of Einar, line 166 introduces the reckoning or consequences of the act. And at line 166 the readers or hearers of the Saga know full well the impending drama. The verbal echo is an excellent literary device.

. . at fjárins hafi vant verit. (p.64, l.169)

Cf. p.64, l.166 above, p.62, l.106 (Class V), p.62, l.108 (Class V (e)). "Fjárins", a genitive, is the focus. Compare the note to line 166 - this line 169 strengthens the feeling of foreboding.

En þess var nú eigi kostr. (p.74, l.498)

"þess" is of course a genitive therefore cannot be the subject of the verb.

. . var þar drjúgt komit manna. (p.84, l.825)

The English transcription would be ". . it was there greatly come of men". This "manna" has a strongly partitive flavour; it suggests that this crowd of men was drawn from all men in the environment, rather than that the group was disparate and suddenly "appeared" in the story. So the partitive makes the conception of the men more down-to-earth and realistic, in keeping with the general tone of the saga.

Verses by Earl Rognvald Kali:

. . saurs vara vant..viðr. . . (p.155, l.161)

This equals literally ". . with mud it lacked not. . ."

The impersonal verb is "vara vant" = "it was not lacking".

The -a in "vara" indicates a negative; "var" plus "a" equals "was" plus "not". The adjective "vanr" (lacking) of course takes its neuter form "vant" when constructed with an impersonal subject. "Er vant" and its variations according to tense take a genitive to show what is (was) lacking. The addition of "viðr" to the construction suggests the great quantity of mud surrounding the explorers. The translation "there was no lack of mud" stresses no thing in particular as the focus; rather it indicates just a background for more important events.

CLASS IV (b): Impersonal with a genitive and the passive.

Snorra Edda:

. . þá es hefnt föður. (p.20, l.499)

Literally in English this is "then it is avenged of his father" or "then is his father avenged". "Father" is what "undergoes"

the action of the passive verb or is its agent, but in Icelandic it is subordinated grammatically to the impersonal verb and put in the genitive case.

Hrafnkels saga:

Er þá alls gætt, ef þín er. . . (p.82, 1.767)

Literally this is "It is then taken care of all, if of you". The focus is genitive. The use of the impersonal here perhaps raises into prominence the timeless, permanent harmony of life, with all things ordered and in the right place, rather than that a human or humans create this harmony.

Brennu-Njáls saga:

. . en ef annars verður auðit. . . (p.94, 1.193)

The subject is not "annars", for this is a genitive and used adverbially; but it is unexpressed, making "verður" an impersonal verb. The impersonal is combined with the passive here, as frequently.

CLASS IV (e): Impersonal with a genitive and an indirect object.

From Laxdoela saga:

. . þess batnar þér, en þeygi mér. (p.152, 1.71)

## CLASS V

CLASS V: Impersonal with a prepositional phrase.

Snorra Edda:

þat var snimma í qndverða byggð goðanna. . . (p.5, 1.1)  
 Compare p.16, 1.374 (Class III (a) ): ". . þótti þér seint líða". The subject is not explicit but vaguely indicates time. Time is generally expressed impersonally in Icelandic, as in English.

En er á leið vetrinn. . . (p.5, 1.22)  
 "Líða" is usually conceived of as impersonal in Icelandic; so "vetrinn" is accusative.

. . þá lysti af höndum hennar bæði. . . (p.6, 1.57)  
 The best English translation would be "her hands shone both. . ."  
 It seems that the fact of her hands shining rather than that of the light shining from them is to be emphasized, for the writer is portraying the lady's (Frey's love's) beauty. So it is best not to add "with a light" to the rendering above.

. . en til vista var eigi gott. (p.9, 1.144)  
 The literal translation would be "concerning food and lodging it was not good". The best English equivalent is "and they were badly off for lodgings"; the English has supplied a definite subject.

En er kom at dagan. . . (p.9, 1.155)  
 . . ef í einum drykk gengr af. . . (p.13, 1.275)  
 English would supply the subject "drink", and would probably



make the verb passive.

Var þá ok liðit á nótt. . . (p.15, 1.340)

Cf. p.5, 1.22.

Svá var ok of leikana. . . (p.16, 1.367)

The idiomatic translation would be "So it was with the games".

Svá segir í Völuspá. . . (p.17, 1.409)

. . hart's með holdum. . . (p.17, 1.412)

The verb is "es", abbreviated as "'s"; which is an older form of "er".

. . af því skinn bjartara en af sólu. (p.18, 1.436)

#### Þrymskviða:

Vas þar at kveldi of komit snimma. . . (p.140, 1.96)

The English subject would be "guests". The verb "vas komit" is singular, agreeing with the impersonal suppressed subject, which takes a third person singular verb and a neuter past participle. (This quotation is not type (c) because the past participle is part of a tense, the perfect tense of "koma".) The Icelandic construction with "guests" as subject would be "boðsmenn váru komnir", with a third person plural auxiliary verb and masculine plural past participle agreeing with the third person masculine plural subject.

#### Völsunga saga:

. . er myrkt var í hauginum. . . (p.24, 1.105)

"Myrkt" is taken to be an adjective here. Cf. p.9, 1.144. (Class I).

#### Libellus Islandorum:

. . at eigi of sa á miðli. (p.37, 1.91)

The English subject would be "one" or "a person"; or perhaps

the negative would be combined to make "no-one".

Leif's Voyage (Flateyjarbók):

. . var þá langt til sjávar. . . (p.45, 1.154)

Compare p.45, 1.122. (Class I): "Ok var þá skamt at fara til skipsins. . ."

Hrafnkels saga:

þat var á dögum Haralds konungs ins hárfagra. . .(p.59,1.1)

Cf. p.8, 1.110 (Class I).

. . en þá var vant nær þremr tígum ásauðar eina nótt. (p.62, 1.106)

"Var vant" is normally constructed with a genitive which is the real doer of the action, or focus. But here the focus is a phrase "nær þremr tígum ásauðar". "þremr tígum" is dative after the preposition "nær"; "ásauðar" is not genitive because constructed with "var vant", but because it is partitive after "þremr tígum". Cf. p.46, 1.178 (Class IV), p.155, 1.161 (Class IV), p.62, 1.108 (Class V (e)), p.64, 1.166 (Class IV).

Var þar til dura gengit. (p.66, 1.229)

Compare "Laxdœla saga", Chap. 14: "Er þar tekit vel við þeim". Class V (b). The "gengit" of course is neuter agreeing with the impersonal subject. Cf. p.140, 1.96 (Class V). English would turn the sentence by supplying the subject "someone", or by changing to passive construction and making "door" subject: "Someone went to the door" or "The door was answered."

. . hversu farit hafði með þeim Hrafnkeli. (p.66, 1.239)

Leið nú á vetrinn. En at vári, þá er komit

var at stefnuðögum. . . (p.67, 1.269) (two examples).

The two impersonal verbs of time are "leið" and "komit var".

Cf. p.5, 1.22 (Class V), p. 23, 1.57 (Class I).

. . þar til er ór slítr með ykkur Hrafnkeli. . . (p.75, 1.535)

The impersonal verb is "slítr ór" meaning literally "breaks away" or "concludes". So the translation runs ". . until it concludes. . ." or ". . until all is concluded. . ." "All"

is the best subject for the English translation as the conclusion of the business has greater weight in the sense than the people, Sám and Hrafnkel.

þá bar skjótt at bænum. (p.75, 1.556)

English has the equivalent sense and use of "bera" ("bear"):

"Then it bore swiftly to the farm" (literally) or "Then they bore swiftly on the farm". The impersonal construction

increases the relative importance of the bearing swiftly to the men who did it; the removal of the mention of the doers of the action throws full focus on the action. This is good story technique for it makes the progress of the story fluent, vivid, terse and tight-drawn. It is a pity there is no

equivalent English impersonal mode of expression; the nearest

we can get to the sense, with the emphasis in the right place, is: "There was a rush towards the farm". This removes the

agents as in the Icelandic, so the focus is wholly on the action,

but some of the tight-drawnness is lost through our having to

convert the action into a noun to suit our English idiom.

Þá var jafnnær rismálum ok dagnálum. (p.80, 1.719)

The phrase "jafnnær rismálum ok dagnálum" tells the time. It is interesting to note that the Icelanders reckoned their time in relation to periodic points of time when they did something essential, like rising or eating. This is the mark of a simpler society than ours.

Lá þá drjúgum í fyrir þeim. (p.82, 1.776)

The impersonal verb is "lá í" from "liggja í" meaning "to lie in" or "to sink in". So the literal translation is "It lay in greatly for them"; with reference to the bog it means they were held up by sinking into the bog. Since they were on horseback, it would be really the horses which sank in rather than the men. So the best English translation is "Their horses sank deep in the swamp."

Dvalðisk þá ímjök fyrir þeim. (p.82, 1.777)

The focus "they" is in a prepositional phrase added to the impersonal construction. The impersonal hints that a mysterious force is holding "them", Eyvind(r) and his party of riders, back; the fates are playing a part in the drama which is to culminate in Eyvind(r)'s death. However, the force holding the party back could be just the mud. Cf. p.82, 1.777 (Class II).

. . er langt í milli vár. . . (p.85, 1.872)

The English rendering is "It is a long way between us", which is also impersonal. Many corresponding expressions are impersonal in both Icelandic and English.

Ok lýkr þar frá Hrafnkeli at segja. (p.86, 1.898)

This is a usual saga ending. The English would supply a subject "story" to render this impersonal construction. The effect of the respective renderings of the sentence would be to stress the fact of the ending of Hrafnkel's tale in the Icelandic, and the fact that it was the story which had ended in the English. Just a fine nuance but worth noting.

Brennu-Njáls saga:

. . fór svá fram um hrið. (p.89, 1.42)

Compare "Laxdœla saga", Chap. 84: "Nú fór. . ." Class I.

. . til þess er mjök leið á kveldit. (p.93, 1.152)

Cf. p.15, 1.340 (Class V). Compare "Laxdœla saga", Chap.14

". . til þess er á leið nóttina" Class V.

. . ok skyldi langt til annars slíks. (p.96, 1.244)

The full verb is "skyldi vera"; "vera" is often idiomatically omitted.

. . skal nú yfir lúka með oss ok eigi frá ganga.(p.96,1.254)

The focus is in the phrase "með oss".

. . ok gekk því um hrið. (p.98, 1.318)

Cf. line 42 above.

Grettis saga:

Vel hefir brugðit við þína kvámu. . . (p.101, 1.15)

The English would supply a subject "things" or "matters";

"Things have taken a good turn. . ."

. . svá at brakaði í hverju tré. (p.103, 1.47)

In this impersonal expression, attention is drawn only to the creaking rather than to what was making the creaking as well, which would have been the case if the expression had been personally constructed.

þá sigaði svá at honum. . . (p.104, 1.90)

Here the focus "honum" is in an "at" phrase "at honum", which is unusual.

. . var þá mjök komit at degi. (p.105, 1.118)

Compare "Laxdoela saga", Chap. 14: ". . ok var stund til dags" Class V. Compare (VI, 269) Class V. "It was almost dawn" is the English rendering. This reference to dawn, coming as it does just after the formerly "undead" Glám's ashes have been buried, symbolises the dispelling of the gloom of Glám's presence. This is a clever literary device.

#### Þáttur Auðunar vestfirzka:

. . er á leið v́arit. . . (p.133, 1.133)

"Leið á" equals "it passed by"; "er á leið v́arit" equals "when spring was passing by", i.e. "when spring was almost over". Cf. p.5, 1.22 (Class V).

CLASS V (b): Impersonal with a prepositional phrase and the passive.

#### Snorra Edda:

. . þá var komit mjök at borghliði. (p.5, 1.25)

The subject is really "the building process" though this is

unexpressed. Cf. p.13, 1.283 (Class I). "Var komit" is classed as a passive because "koma at" seems to have more a transitive sense here, equalling "to bring to" or "to reach".

. . at reynt er um þenna leik. (p.13, 1.266)

English would turn the impersonal verb into a noun which would act as subject: ". . trial had been made in that contest". In English the word with the greatest sense-weight should be made subject of a clause, as here.

Svá er sagt í Vqluspá. . . (p.19, 1.471)

The impersonal is often combined with the passive, as here. Cf. p.17, 1.409 (Class V), where an active construction is used.

Vqlsungu saga:

. . er frá því sagt, þá er. . . , at. . . (p.21, 1.1)

The suppressed subject is in apposition to the at-clause.

Libellus Islandorum:

. . at hér yrði enn við Kristninni tekit. . . (p.36, 1.68)

"Kristni" equals "Christianity; it is the sense focus and therefore the real agent. It is in a phrase governed by "við" because the verb is really "taka við".

Hrafnkels saga:

Síðan var foert í sel fram. . . (p.62, 1.104)

This means simply "he went" - "var foert" is the impersonal verb, which means literally "it was sent".

Er þar tekit vel við honum. (p.85, l.866)

The literal rendering is "It is there welcomed to him."

This impersonal is interesting because it uses a present tense amid other verbs in past tense. Perhaps the writer did this for immediacy, though why immediacy is necessary just here is hard to see. Perhaps he meant to imply that the welcome at the brothers' farm(s) was always there for Sám any time he cared to accept it.

Grettis saga:

Var þá farit upp á húsinn ok riðit skálanum  
ok barit hælunum, . . . þá var farit ofan af  
húsunum ok til dura gengit. (p.103, l.46) (three examples,  
also two of Class III (b), q.v. for notes).

Þáttur Auðunar vestfirzka:

. . ok nú er þó á orðit mikit fyrir mér. . . (p.131, l.66)

CLASS V (d): Impersonal with a prepositional phrase and a direct object.

Leif's Voyage (Flateyjarbók):

Hvárki skorti þar lax í ánni né í vatninu. . . (p.46, l. 163)  
"Skorti" is an impersonal verb; "hvárki. . né" are an adverb pair meaning "neither..nor", therefore could not be the subject(s).  
"Lax" is the direct object. English would use the introductory particle "there" with accompanying inversion of subject and verb: "There was no lack of salmon. . ." Cf. p.47, l.195(Class II).



Brennu-Njáls saga:

. . at rauðan kyrtil bar við glugginum. . . (p.88, l.31)

"Bar" is impersonal since "rauðan kyrtil", the action focus, is accusative by its form. Literally the clause is "that it bore the red tunic against (in contrast with, i.e. in front of) the window." "It" here appears to be "chance".

CLASS V (e): Impersonal with a prepositional phrase and an indirect object.

Snorra Edda:

. . sem honum vannsk til þrindi. . . (p.13, l.289)

Compare p.13, l.281 ". . er hann þraut þrindit. . ." Class II(d).

This time the "þrindit" is in a phrase instead of an oblique case. This comparison illustrates the similarity of function of the two. It is noteworthy also that for "him" the accusative "hann" has become the dative "honum" according as the different verb is constructed with its object(s).

Hrafnkels saga:

Honum var vant nær viku. (p.62, l.108)

Cf. p.62, l.106: ". . en þá var vant nær þremr tígum ásauðar eina nótt". Class V. The genitive that "var vant" usually takes is, despite its function as the focus of the action, the object of this verb. But here this object is not expressed (although it is implicit). So the focus must be "honum", a dative. The nearest English rendering cannot leave out what was missing as the Icelandic can: "He had them missing nearly

a week." An exact English translation would be this:

"To him was "missingness" nearly a week" !

En þeim Sámi varð ekki at orði. (p.71, 1.409)

Here the real agent is the curious Icelandic dual construction, here in the dative "þeim Sámi", which equals "(to) Sámi and his companion". This is a very idiomatic Icelandic expression. Cf. p.66, 1.239 (Class V), p.75, 1.535 (Class V).

. . því at mér sýnisk nú óvandleikit við hann.(p.76,1.590)

Compare "Laxdoela saga", Chap. 13: ". . en þó þykkir oss vandfengit manns í rúm þitt". Class V(e), cf. Class IV.

"Óvandleikit", a past participle as a neuter adjective, cannot be the subject of "sýnisk". So "sýnisk" must be impersonal. But cf. line 584: "Sýnisk mér þetta starfaminna", where "þetta" could be either an accusative after the impersonally used "sýnisk" or a nominative and the subject of "sýnisk". If the infinitive were present, thus: "Sýnisk mér þetta vera starfaminna", we could be more sure that this "þetta" was an accusative. Nominatives apparently can stand after the verbs they govern, as is evidenced by p.74, 1.518: "Beðit þykki mér Hrafnkell hafa sneypu", where the nominative is "Hrafnkell" and the finite verb "þykki". If "Hrafnkell" were in accusative form it would have only one "l".

#### Brennu-Njáls saga:

. . at mörgum lá við bana. (p.91, 1.96)

Literally it is ". . that for many it lay with death". The impersonal "it" again denotes "chance" or an inscrutable, mysterious force. Cf. Class V(d), p.88, 1.31.

. . brá monnum mjök við þat. (p.93, 1.146)

The subject "it" again appears to denote a mysterious, perhaps supernatural force, as often.

## CLASS VI

CLASS VI: Impersonal perhaps - ambiguous cases.

Snorra Edda:

. . en þat kom ásamt með öllum. . . (p.5, 1.29)

"þat" is the subject of "kom", but is it an impersonal subject corresponding with English "it"? Here the real doer of the action is "allr" - "all"(the gods); but this is put in a phrase "með öllum" dependent on a verb, perhaps impersonally constructed. This is a typical Icelandic construction.

. . ok enn vari mál at sofa. (p.11, 1.194)

Is "mál" the subject or merely apposite to an impersonal one?

Eigi þótti mér hitt minna vera vert. . .(p.16, 1.379)

"Hitt" is obviously the subject: is it impersonally used here, corresponding to the English impersonal "it"?

. . ok vansk honum verliga lengðin til. . . (p.16, 1.383)

Is "lengðin" subject or object? If subject, the construction is not impersonal; if object, the subject and construction must be impersonal.

. . at eigi hefir sá orðit. . . (p.16, 1.387)

Is "sá" an impersonal or personal subject?

. . þykkir monnum þat mikit mein.(p.17, 1.416)

We are not sure whether "þat" is the subject of "þykkir"

or the article for "mein". It is probably the former, on the analogy of p.45, l.148: ". . varð þeim þat fyrir at. . .", which also has verb plus dative plus "þat". However, the analogy is not close, because in this last quotation there is no noun near which could have an article. "þat" could also be an object, apposite with "mikit mein".

Völsunga saga:

Sigmundi þykkir hann mjök í ætt Völsunga...(p.23, l.50)

Is "hann" subject or object? If object, the expression must be impersonal as there is no other word which could be the stated subject.

Libellus Islandorum:

. . hafði alt farizk vel at. (p.36, l.72)

The most idiomatic English translation would make "all" subject: "all had gone well with their journey". "Alt" is an adverb here, a parallel form to the usual oblique case or phrase for the focus of the action. "Alt" could even be the subject here. So the expression might not be impersonal.

Leif's Voyage (Flateyjarbók):

. . þótti monnum hann verit hafa óforvitinn.(p.44, l.110)

It is uncertain whether "hann" is nominative or accusative. It is probably not nominative because it appears thus just before the infinitive, in the manner of an accusative and infinitive construction.

. . varð þeim þat fyrir at. . . (p.45, 1.148)

"Varð" used in this way is normally impersonal, but it is uncertain whether "þat" is the subject or the object of the verb. Cf. Class VI, p.5, 1.29; p.17, 1.416.

þar var grunnsævi mikit. . . (p.45, 1.153)

Is "grunnsævi" subject or object? Cf. p.45, 1.154 (Class V):

" . . var þá langt til sjávar. . ." (q.v.), where the verb is impersonal.

. . bar þat til tíðenda at. . . (p.46, 1.178)

Is "þat" subject or object? Cf. 1.148 above; p.63, 1.129 below.

#### Hrafnkels saga:

. . er þér leiðisk. (p.61, 1.65)

The English equivalent is "when you grow tired of it".

Is "it" a definite pronoun or impersonal?

Einari kom þat í hug, at. . . (p.63, 1.129)

Is the neuter "þat" subject or object? Cf. Class VI, p.17, 1.416; p.45, 1.148; p.46, 1.178.

Mundi okkr Einari ekki hafa annat smátt til orðit. (p.65, 1.193)

Is the subject impersonal or "annat smátt"? Literally the translation is "It would with us, me and Einar, not have import another small matter" or "No other small matter would have come between Einar and me." The English replaces the Icelandic construction with a construction with a definite subject, which replacement causes certain inversion in word order. The verb in the Icelandic is "Mundi til orðit"; it

is interesting to note that while the auxiliary "mundi" begins the clause, the rest of the verb is not found till the end. Infinitives and past participles in Icelandic are often found at the end of a clause or phrase, compare Modern German. Cf. Class VI, p.36, 1.72.

. . at oss vill ekki annat en svívirðing. (p.68, 1.314)  
 "Ekki" and "annat" could both be either adverbs or subjects of the verb. If they are adverbs, there is no other possible stated subject, so the expression would be impersonal. The full verb is "vill vera", the "vera" having been omitted. This is not uncommon in Old Icelandic cf. Old English. The English translation would run ". . there will be nothing for us but humiliation". It could also run ". . we will get nothing else but humiliation". So in English "nothing" ("ekki") could be subject or object. Perhaps this is so in Icelandic too. Cf. 1.193 above, which also has words which could be either adverbs or nouns as subject(s) or object(s).

. . verðr þat morgun, at. . . (p.71, 1.412)

The verb is used in an impersonal sense; but is the subject impersonal or "þat"? Cf. Class VI, p.5, 1.29; p.17, 1.416; p.45, 1.148; p.46, 1.178; p.63, 1.129.

. . skorti hvetvetna sjálfr. (p.71, 1.417)

"Skorti" with objects is nearly always impersonally constructed. However, "sjálfr" with its nominative termination could be the subject.

þykki mér hann einn veg fara... (p.72, 1.436)

Is "hann" nominative or accusative? Compare Class VI, p.44, 1.110, which also has "þykkir" plus a dative plus "hann". Compare Class VI, p.23, 1.50, which has the same.

Ok þœtti mér mikit vaxa mín virðing. . . (p.72, 1.444)

"Virðing" is an ambiguous neuter; it could be subject or object of "þœtti". If object, the expression is impersonal.

. . fyrir því at má mér þat, sem. . . (p.72, 1.446)

Is "þat" the subject or not? Cf. 1.412 above. If not, the subject must be impersonal.

. . at þér gangi gott til. (p.87, 1.740)

Is "gott" an adverb used as subject, or is the subject impersonal? Cf. Class VI, p.36, 1.72; p.65, 1.193; p.68, 1.314.

#### Brennu-Njáls saga:

. . ekki verður af oss. (p.89, 1.45)

"Ekki" could be the pronoun subject.

. . at nú sé alt á fgr ok flaugun. (p.92, 1.123)

The adverb "alt" could act as a pronoun here, the subject of the verb. Cf. Class VI, p.36, 1.72.

þik skal út bera. . . (p.97, 1.293)

Is "skal" first person (personal verb) or third person (impersonal verb)?

#### Grettis saga:

. . rak skýit frá tunglinu. . . (p.104, 1.87)

"Rak frá", compare line 86 "dró frá"; they are probably



impersonal and synonyms. "Skýit" is probably an accusative, direct object of "rak frá". However, it could be a nominative too.

Þáttur Auðunar vestfirzka:

. . lítt sér þat þá á, at. . . (p.133, l.145)

"þat" anticipates the "at"-clause, which may be the subject of "sér".

Verða má svá enn. . at. . . (p.133, l.149)

The "at" - clause may be the subject of "má verða", compare l. 145 above, but this seems unlikely. In Icelandic a noun-clause is often anticipated by another noun-equivalent, a pronoun suppressed or not, which is the subject of the verb in the clause which precedes the noun-clause. But there is no such pronoun here.

Ambiguity arises when it is not clear from form whether a word is subject or object, e.g. "hann", or whether an adverb can function as a subject, e.g. "gott".

## CONCLUSION

The impersonal, as its name implies, is a construction where the grammatical subject is not a person either in the grammatical or literal sense, but is something which is hinted at but not defined. Icelandic is fond of this construction. Some Icelandic impersonal expressions are parallel to English ones, such as:

- . . hvat sem hann kostaði til. (p.6, l.34) Class II.
- . . whatever it cost him.

But many are not, as will be seen from the body of the thesis. The main implications of the Icelandic impersonal idiom are examined below.

First, seeing the impersonal subject is not delimited by grammatical person and therefore neither by number, it is much less explicit than a personal subject; so the impersonal idiom tends to be less concerned with material objects than with setting a background or tone for events.

- . . eigi mátti á þat leita. (p.5, l.24) Class I (a).

This suggests more strongly than any personal expression could have done that this fortress was to be beyond attack, no matter who or what made the attack.

- . . at ekki var þá óttalaust at sofa. (p.10, l.186) Class I.

This suggests the whole atmosphere of fear around the party.

- . . saurs vara vant. . viðr. . . (p.155, l.161) Class IV.

This suggests, and the understatement stresses, that the

explorers had for a setting muð as far as the eye could see.

The lack of personal subject in the impersonal gives a different emphasis in the sentence. The sense-weight is shifted from the person to the quality, e.g.

En þeim var svá mikit forvitni á. . . (p.45, l.155) Class III.  
where the focus is transferred from the explorers to the curiosity; or it is shifted from the agent to the action, e.g.

þá bar skjótt at boenum. (p.75, l.556) Class V.  
where the focus is on the rush towards the farm rather than the rushers. This device makes narrative and description more fluent, vivid, and tight-drawn.

The transfer of focus from agent to action in the impersonal is sometimes brought about by a dative object most commonly, or else a prepositional phrase, which contains the focus, being appended to the verb and heightening its meaning by its very subordinate grammatical position to it. This classification shows whether the transfer of focus from agent to action has been made. In Class I it is not, in Classes II-V it is, in the manner shown. In the classification impersonal constructions with a dative object are Class III, those with prepositional phrases are Class V. This dative focus would usually be translated in English as the focus and subject, since the focus is normally also subject in English.

. . at eigi mun lokið verða verkinu. . . (p.6, l.42)  
Class III (b).

"Verkinu" is the focus; the stress is not on the work itself but that the work would not be completed.

. . geisar eimi ok aldrnari. (p.20, 1.506) Class III.  
 "Eimi ok aldrnari" is the focus; the dative forms of these two nouns suggests their instrumentality rather than agency in this holocaust. The smoke and fire are not raging of their own accord, some thing is making them rage.

Dvalðisk þá mjök fyrir þeim. (p.82, 1.777) Class V.  
 Here the focus "þeir" is in a prepositional phrase "fyrir þeim". The focus thus in a phrase transfers the weight of meaning from the party being delayed to the delay for the party. A fine nuance but significant in the context.(q.v. below).

Sometimes instead of a dative focus we have an accusative one. The type impersonal plus direct object or accusative is my Class II, e.g.

Mik grunaði. . . (p.11, 1.202) Class II.

The genitive can also appear, adverbially or as focus. This is Class IV, e.g.

. . freista skal þá þessar lífróttar. (p.12, 1.238) Class IV.

The lack of explicitness of the impersonal subject sometimes makes it suggest a mysterious, perhaps supernatural, source of the action. Take the quotation mentioned above, and a little more.

Dvalðisk þá mjök fyrir þeim. Hina bar skjótt  
 eptir. (p.82, 1.777) Class V, Class II.

Here the impersonal idiom suggests a dark, mysterious Power which is hindering the pursued and helping the pursuers. The scales have swung for Hrafnkel now. (Q.v. body of thesis).

Var þá farit upp á húsin ok riðit skála -  
 num ok barit hælunum, . . . . þá var farit  
 ofan af húsunum ok til dura gengit. (p.103, 1.46)

Classes V(b), III(b), III(b), V(b), V(b).

Here again an undefined, mysterious thing is the agent: what manner of elf can be acting so? Yet "it" is real enough - witness all the activity. There are difficulties in conveying the spirit of this in English, v. the body of the thesis.

. . geisar eimi ok aldrnari. (p.20, 1.506) Class III.

The dative forms of the nouns, as mentioned above, suggest their instrumentality rather than agency. So Something Else is impelling them to act - what? Final Chaos?

. . ef oss dregr undan. (p.94, 1.180) Class II.

Our mysterious, supernatural force shows itself potentially benevolent here; escape is conceived here as "it" leading "us" to safety.

. . at rauðan kyrtíl bar við glugginum. . . (p.88, 1.31)  
 Class V(d).

"It" appears in a slightly different light here, more definitely as "chance". It is only chance that Þorgrím's red tunic appeared in front of the window, seeing presumably he tried to avoid the window, which position would be obvious, in his roof attack on Gunnar's home.

Er þá alls gætt, ef þín er. . . (p.82, 1.767) Class IV(b).

"It" as the subject of a passive verb appears acted upon rather than acting. So "it" is neither the All-Powerful One nor chance here, but something quite different, more the harmony

of an ordered life. However, it is implied that the source of this harmony of life is hidden in mystery.

The frequent occurrence of the impersonal in Icelandic with the weight on the verb suggests that Icelanders placed a premium on action and evaluated a person very much by his conduct; while the impersonal reference to the All-High, be He for them God or Fate, seems to suggest that Icelanders stood in great awe of the Supernatural and regarded Him as hidden in lofty mystery.