Icelandic

This assignment has to do with certain familiar processes in the syntax of Icelandic. The processes are familiar in broad terms, but Icelandic has a quirky charm which leaves its own very distinctive mark on these otherwise familiar syntactic patterns.

Even less than in most assignments, there is no expected 'right answer' here. Certain things below are reasonably clear. Certain things are far from clear. Your goal should be to engage with the data in a thoughtful and serious way and to integrate it, to the extent possible, into the framework of assumptions that we have gradually been assembling.

Background

Icelandic is a Verb Second language (like all the Germanic languages except modern English), whose Verb Second (v2) structures are built on an svo foundation. In this it is like all the Scandinavian languages. It is unlike the other Scandinavian languages in a number of important ways however:

(i) It has preserved a full system of agreement inflection for finite verbs.
(ii) Like French (and Romance languages in general) it has generalized v-to-t Raising. That is, all verbs raise to t in finite clauses. It has often been speculated that this property is related in some way to property (i).
(iii) It has preserved a full set of case-distinctions in its nominal system, distinguishing among nominative, accusative, genitive and dative.
(iv) Its v2 clauses appear freely in embedded contexts of all kinds. In this it is unlike the generality of v2 languages, but is like Yiddish.
(v) It has overt (optional) Object Shift. That is, objects may undergo A-movement to a position to the left of and above vp. Most Scandinavian languages have Object Shift only for pronouns. In Icelandic, Object Shift is obligatory for pronouns and optional for full dp's (with consequences for interpretation).

You can ignore the v2 character of Icelandic finite clauses in what follows. We will deal only with subject-initial v2 clauses and it will be harmless, for the most part, to pretend for the present that they represent the usual kind of svx pattern (subject in the specifier position of tp, verb raised into the t-position). Similarly, it will do no harm to forget the fact that the language has overt Object Shift and assume that objects are surface complements of v. These are, in fact, the structures which are 'later' transformed into Verb Second Object-Shifted structures. The sentences in (1)–(6) illustrate these properties of the language and also illustrate some fairly routine aspects of its clause structure, along with some familiar a-movement constructions:[1]

(1)   Við   kusum   stelpuna.
      we[NOM] elected[P1] the-girl[ACC]
      'We elected the girl.'

(2)   Stelpan var   kosin.
      the-girl was[FS3] elected[NOM,SG,FEM]
      'The girl was elected.'

(3)   þið   stækkuðuð garðana.
      you[NOM,PL] enlarged[P2] the-gardens[ACC]
      'You enlarged the gardens.'

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[1]Definite articles are suffixes on the noun.

(4)   Garðarnir   stækkuðu.
         the-gardens[NOM] enlarged[P3]
         'The gardens enlarged.'

(5)   þær   eru   kaldar.
         they[NOM,PL,FEM] be[PRES, P3] cold[NOM,PL,FEM]
         'They are cold.'

(6)   þær   virðast   hafa verið kosnar.
         they[NOM,PL,FEM] seem[P3] have been elected[NOM,PL,FEM]
         'They seem to have been elected.'

So far so familiar.

More exotic (from an English perspective at any rate) is the existence of impersonal structures like (7):

(7)   Það   sungu ekki bärn   í kirkjunni í dag.
         there sang   not children in the-church today
         'No children sang in church today.'

And alongside personal passives of a familiar kind, we also have structures such as (8):

(8)   það   voru lesnar   fjórar   bækur.
         there were read[NOM,PL] four[NOM,PL] books[NOM,PL]
         'Four books were read.'

Examples (9) and (10) illustrate how particular predicates can l-select particular cases for their complements:

(9)   Við   hjálpuðum/björguðum/heilsuðum stelpunum.
         we [NOM]   helped/rescued/greeted[P1]   the-girls[DAT,PL]
         'we helped/rescued/greeted the girls.'

(10)   Við   söknuðum/leituðum/gættum   hennar.
         we [NOM]   missed/searched-for/looked-after[P1] her[GEN]
         'We missed/searched-for/looked-after her.'

Many other verbs similarly assign a particular ('inherent') case to an internal argument. The verbs *steal* and *return* (as in a book to a library), for instance, both assign dative case to their theme arguments. Watch out for these verbs in what follows.

Passives

Consider (11)–(12):

(11)   Henni   var hjálpað/bjargað/heilsað.
         her[DAT] was helped/rescued/greeted[MASC,NOM,SG]
         'She was helped/rescued/greeted.'

(12)   Hennar   var söknuðum/leituðum/gættum
         her[GEN] was missed/searched-for/looked-after[MASC,NOM,SG]
         'She was missed/searched-for/looked-after.'

(13)   þeim   virðist hafa verið hjálpað.
         them[DAT] seems have been helped[MASC,NOM,SG]
         'They seem to have been helped.'

The passive participles in (12) and (13) are glossed as 'MASC,NOM,SG'; in fact, this is the default, or citation form (which happens to be identical in form with the MASC,NOM,SG form). We will not gloss every such participle in subsequent examples. If you encounter a passive participle with no such gloss, you should assume that it is in its default form.

(14)   Verkjannat   er talið   ekki gæta
        the-pains[GEN] is believed NEG be-noticeable[–FIN]
        'The pains are believed not to be noticeable.'

(We gloss and translate (14) using an English adjective; in fact, though, *gaeta* is a verb meaning (among other things) 'to be perceptible, noticeable'.) For the case of impersonal passives, we see the pattern in (15):

(15)   a.   það   hafði verið stolið einum   stól.
              there had   been stolen one[DAT]   chair[DAT]
              'One chair had been stolen.'
        b.   það   var skilað   fjórum   bókum.
              there was returned four[DAT,PL] books[DAT,PL]
              'Four books were returned.'
        c.   það   var bjardað nokkrum   strákum   af   fjallinu.
              there was rescued some[DAT] boys[DAT] from the-mountain
              'Some boys were rescued from the mountain.'

It would take too much time and space to document it here, but the dative argument in cases like (15) is subject to the definiteness restriction familiar from, say, English existential constructions. And unsurprisingly, (15c) (for instance) alternates with the equally possible (16):

(16)   nokkrum   strákum   var bjardað af   fjallinu.
        some[DAT] boys[DAT] was rescued from the-mountain
        'Some boys were rescued from the mountain.'

For completeness, we can add (17) and (18):

(17)   a.   Fjórir bílar mundu hafa verið seldir.
              four[NOM,PL] cars[NOM,PL] would have been sold
              'Four cars would have been sold.'
        b.   það mundu fjórir bílar hafa verið seldir.
        c.   það mundu hafa verið seldir fjórir bílar.

(18)   a.   Fjórum   bílum   mundi hafa verið stolið
              four[DAT,PL] cars[DAT,PL] would have been stolen
              'Four cars would have been stolen.'
        b.   það mundi fjórum bílum hafa verið stolið.
        c.   það mundi hafa verið stolið fjórum bílum.

With this much in hand, answer the following two questions:

  (i) To what extent are the properties of this subsystem as laid out so far in accord with theoretical expectation, given the set of theoretical and analytical assumptions we have developed in the course of the quarter?
  (ii) What adjustments, if any, (language-particular or general) would have to be made to that body of hypotheses in order to accommodate the observations made so far?

Quirky Subjects

One of the most celebrated syntactic properties of Icelandic is that it also permits inherently case-marked DP's to occur in subject-position. You have seen this property already, but it is illustrated further and more completely in what follows.

(19)   Okkur   vantaði vinnu.
        us[ACC] lacked   a-job[NOM]
        'We lacked/needed a job.'

(20)   Henni   batnaði.
        her[DAT] recovered
        'She recovered.'

(21)   Henni   áskotnaðist miklir   peningar.
        her[DAT] lucked-into much[NOM] money[NOM]
        'She had the good fortune to get a lot of money.'

(22)   Henni   mistókst allar tilraunirnar.
        her[DAT] failed   all   the-attempts[NOM]
        'All her efforts failed.'

(23)   Henni   skruppu fætur.
        her[DAT] failed   feet[NOM]
        'She stumbled.'

(24)   Henni   leiddust strákarnir.
        her[DAT] bored   the-boys[NOM]
        'She found the boys boring.'

(25)   Henni   líkuðu ekki þessar   athugasemdir.
        her[DAT] liked   NEG these[NOM] comments[NOM]
        'She did not like these comments.'

(26)   Hana   þyrstir.
        her[ACC] thirsts
        'She is thirsty.'

(27)   Henni   var óglatt.
        her[DAT] was nauseous
        'She felt nauseous.'

(28)   Strákunum   hafði verið kalt.
        the-boys[DAT,PL] had   been cold
        'The boys had been (felt) cold.'

(29)   Henni   ógnar   hættan.
        her[DAT] terrifies the-danger[NOM]
        'The danger terrifies her.'

(30)   Barninu   batnaði veikin.
        the-child[DAT] bettered the-disease[NOM]
        'The child recovered from the disease.'

(31)   Vindsins   gætir   ekki.
        the-wind[GEN] matters not
        'The wind doesn't matter.'

(32) Mér   býður   við setningafræði.
      me[DAT] is-nauseated at   syntax
      'I loathe syntax.'

(33) Honum   svipar   til frænda síns.
      him[DAT] resembles to cousin self[GEN]
      'He resembles his cousin.'

(34) Hana   hryllir   við hættuni.
      her[ACC] is-horrified by the-danger
      'The danger horrifies her.'

Assume that the examples in (19)–(34) are representative of the classes of predicates that allow quirky case-marked subjects (this is true). Assume also that the clause-initial DP's in (19)–(34) actually are subjects (rather than fronted topics or whatever). This has also been very well established.

  (i)   What generalizations govern the assignment of inherent case in Icelandic?
  (ii) How can we understand the syntax of (19)–(34)? In thinking about this you should focus especially on the mechanisms of case assignment and on the mechanisms by which 'subject position' gets filled.

It may be useful for you to know that it is systematically impossible to passivize verbs which assign inherent case:

(35) a. Mig   vantar peninga.
          me[ACC] lacks   money
          'I have no money.'
      b. *Peninga   er vantað   af öllum stúdentum.
          money[ACC] is lacked/wanted by all   students
          'Money is needed/lacked by all students.'
      c. *Peningar   er vantað   af öllum stúdentum.
          money[NOM] is lacked/wanted by all   students
          'Money is needed/lacked by all students.'

And a final observation: it should hardly come as a surprise at this point that there are also impersonal versions of these structures:

(36) Það líka   einhverjum   bílarnir.
      there like[PRES,SG,3] someone[DAT] the-cars[NOM]
      'Someone likes the cars.'

Agreement

In this final section we will be explicit about some important facts which have so far been mostly passed over in silence. These facts have to do with the way agreement works. Contrast (37a) with (37b), paying special attention to the way agreement works itself out:

(37) a. Bækurnar   voru   lesnar.
          the-books[NOM,PL] were[P3] read[NOM,PL]
          'The books were read.'
      b. Bókunum   var skilað.
          the-books[DAT,PL] was returned
          'The books were returned.'

(38) a. það voru   lesnar   fjórar   bækur.
          there be[PAST,PL.3] read[NOM,PL] four[NOM,PL] books[NOM,PL]

'Four books were read.'

b. það var skilað fjórum   bókum.
  there was returned four[DAT,PL] books[DAT,PL]
  'Four books were returned.'

c. það virþist   hafe   veriþ stolið þrem   stólum   á uppboðinu.
  there seems[s3] have[–FIN] been stolen three[DAT,PL] chair[DAT,PL] at the-auction
  'Three chairs seem to have stolen at the auction.'

The finite verb in (38c), (38b) and in (37b) appears in a default 3rd sg form. Similarly the participle in (38b) and in (37b). A similar contrast can be seen in (39):

(39) a. Við lásum   bókina.
        we read[P1] the-book
        'We read the book.'

     b. Okkur   vantaði bókina.
        us[DAT,PL] lacked   the-book
        'We lacked/needed the book.'

And now a more dramatic (but similar) pair of cases:

(40) a. Einhverjir   bátar   voru   taldir   hafa verið keyptir.
        some[NOM,PL] boats[NOM,PL] were[P3] believed[NOM,PL] have been bought[NOM,PL]
        'Some boats were believed to have been bought.'

     b. þeim   virðist   hafa   verið hjálpað.
        them[DAT,PL] seems[s3] have[–FIN] been helped[NOM,SG,MASC]
        'They seem to have been helped.'

In (40a), with a surface nominative subject, there is agreement; in (40b), with a surface dative subject, the verb and associated participles appear in the default 3rd sg form.

How far can you go in integrating this observation into the understanding you have built up so far of how the Icelandic system works, and of how it might reflect the operation of general syntactic principles?