

On Mood Shift in Icelandic Conditionals

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Abstract. Ordinarily, the finite verb of Icelandic conditional *ef*-protases occurs in the indicative. However, subjunctive finite verbs are obligatory under "conditional inversion," i.e., in V1-protases, and they may show up as an option for some speakers in present tense *ef*-protases. In this squib, interpretive consequences of these two types of "conditional mood shift" – referred to as CMS_1 and CMS_2, respectively – are described and analyzed. Thus, CMS_1 may lead to "neutralization" of perfectivity, where a perfect subjunctive has to go proxy for a past indicative, and to outright unacceptability if the main verb is a reportively used form of *kveða* ("say", "speak"). CMS_2 is interpretively neutral in some instances but may trigger "potentialis" uses like its historical precursor in Old Norse. Analyses are sketched for both types of CMS, drawing on standard temporal and modal semantics as well as building blocks from optimality theory.

1. CMS_1

In a plea for terminological clarity, Iatridou (2021:125) calls attention to the paradigm from Icelandic in (1) to argue that the subjunctive marking of conditionals does not necessarily lead to counterfactual construal (cf. von Stechow and Iatridou 2023:4).

- (1) a. *Ef hann hefur farið, kem ég*
if he have.PRS.IND gone, come I
"If he has left, I will come"
b. *Hafi hann farið, kem ég*
have.PRS.SUBJ he gone come I
"If he has left, I will come"
c. **Ef hann hafi farið ...*
if he have.PRS.SUBJ gone
d. **Hefur hann farið ...*
have.PRS.IND he gone

Thus, in Icelandic, "conditional inversion," i.e., $V^{\circ}_{\text{fin}}\text{-to-}C^{\circ}$ (via I°) in the conditional protasis, requires the finite verb to be realized as subjunctive. In the following, this kind of conversion involved in relating indicative *ef*-conditionals to subjunctive V1-conditionals will be called "Conditional Mood Shift_1" (CMS_1).

Interestingly, Iatridou (ibid.) comments on the apparent semantic vacuity of CMS_1, noting that "[i]t is unclear what the difference in meaning is between [(1a)] and [(1b)], or even if there is one to begin with." And indeed, absence of interpretive effects is confirmed by the matter-of-course description of and lack of further comments on CMS_1 in the literature (cf. Friðjónsson 1978:240; Kress 1982:257; Thráinsson 1986:173).¹ Since, however, illustrations have tended to use present indicative *ef*-clauses as "input," a number of striking complications brought into play by past indicatives have gone unnoticed. Concretely, CMS_1 may necessitate "collateral" semantic adjustments in order to be meaning preserving or even result in outright unacceptability. Two examples of the former and one of the latter kind will be provided in the following.

First, consider the pair of sentences in (2).²

¹ There are differences between *if*-conditionals and V1-conditionals that arise independently of verbal mood. The relevant phenomena documented for Icelandic by Iatridou (ibid.:fn.8; citing Iatridou and Embick 1994) can in large part also be found in German (cf. Reis and Wöllstein 2010), a language lacking CMS_1.

² Verbal morphology is only made explicit for relevant items. In the remaining cases, it can, however, be straightforwardly recovered from unanalyzed English glosses. The linear ordering of protasis and apodosis is immaterial for the purposes at hand.

- (2) a. *Ef María var í Danmörku í gær, er hún í dag á Íslandi.*
 if Mary be.PST.IND in Denmark yesterday is she today on Iceland
 "If Mary was in Denmark yesterday, she is in Iceland today."
 b. **Væri María í Danmörku í gær, er hún í dag á Íslandi.*
 be.PST.SUBJ Mary in Denmark yesterday is she today on Iceland
 (*) "Were Mary in Denmark yesterday, she is in Iceland today."

Due to familiar "tense transposition," morphologically past subjunctives like *væri* ("were") are not interpreted as semantic pasts, which in the case of (2b) leads to a clash with the past time adverbial *í gær* ("yesterday"). The literal English translation directly replicates this effect. Instead, to turn (2a) into a V1-conditional, Icelandic has to resort to the (present) perfect, (3a), given that CMS_1 cannot be suspended, (3b).

- (3) a. *Hafi María verið í Danmörku í gær, er hún í dag á Íslandi.*
 have.PRS.SUBJ Mary been in Denmark yesterday is she today on Iceland
 "If Mary was in Denmark yesterday, she is in Iceland today."
 b. **Var María í Danmörku í gær, er hún í dag á Íslandi.*
 be.PST.IND Mary in Denmark yesterday is she today on Iceland

Now, importantly, the Icelandic perfect – like the English present perfect – cannot combine with past time adverbials (Larsson 2008:57), except when receiving an inferential evidential interpretation (ibid.:56,fn.5; cf. Thráinsson 2017:128). The latter is illustrated in (4).

- (4) *María hefur [PRS.IND] verið í Danmörku í gær.*
 "Mary seems to have been in Denmark yesterday."

Yet no such constraint applies in the case of V1-conditionals, as shown in (3a). Replacing the past by the perfect under CMS_1 preserves the meaning of the former.³

Second, the Icelandic past and perfect (tend to) differ regarding perfective aspect in ways again similar to English. Thus, in order to strictly locate an eventuality in the past one has to use past tense, while the perfect serves to convey continuation up to utterance time (cf. Friðjónsson 1978:81). This effect can be brought out with the help of durative adverbials such as *í mörg ár* ("for many years") in (5).

- (5) a. *Ef Sigurður var veikur í mörg ár,*
 if Sigurð be.PST.IND ill in many years
hvernig stendur á því að hann er fullkomlega frískur núna?
 how stands on it that he is entirely healthy now
 "If Sigurð was ill for many years, how come he is in perfect health now?"
 b. #*Ef Sigurður hefur [PRS.IND] verið veikur í mörg ár,*
hvernig stendur á því að hann er fullkomlega frískur núna?

The conditional protasis in (5b) implies that Sigurð has been ill for many years (up to utterance time), which is inconsistent with the presupposition of the consequent question. But once more, strikingly, this semantic contribution of the perfect gets obliterated under CMS_1, as evidenced by the fact that (6) preserves the pragmatic felicity of (5a).⁴

³ The standard *ef*-counterpart of (3b) (*Ef María hefur verið í Danmörku í gær, ...*) behaves like (4) in inducing the evidential reading.

⁴ An analogous argument can be made in terms of a suspended "life-time effect" (cf. Schaden 2009:118), which is shown by the contrast between the infelicitous #*Einstein hefur heimsótt Princeton* (# "Einstein has visited Princeton.") and its unobjectionable V1-counterpart *Hafi Einstein heimsótt Princeton, ...*

- (6) *Hafi Sigurður verið veikur í mörg ár,
hvernig stendur á því að hann er fullkomlega frískur núna?*

Third, as pointed out by Thráinsson (2019:627,fn.11), the Icelandic verb *kveða* ("say", "speak") can be used as a semantically present tense reportive marker ("is said", "is alleged"), but only if it is formally realized as past. This is exemplified in (7).

- (7) *Ef sjálfur bréfberinn kvað vera ríkur,
hvað segir það okkur um áreiðanleika sögusagna?*
if self postman say.PST.IND be rich
what says it us about reliability rumor.GEN.PL
"If even the postman is said to be rich, what does that tell us about the reliability of rumors?"

However, remarkably, this time CMS_1 stands in the way of producing any kind of V1-counterpart, as the unacceptability of both variants in (8) shows.⁵

- (8) a. **Hafi sjálfur bréfberinn kveðið vera ríkur,*
have.PRS.SUBJ self postman said be rich
hvað segir það okkur um áreiðanleika sögusagna?
"If even the postman is said to be rich, what does that tell us about the reliability of rumors?"
b. **Kvæði* [PST.SUBJ] *sjálfur bréfberinn vera ríkur,*...

Since no past interpretation is involved in (8), the perfect in (8a) may not be called for in the first place. This would bring in the simple past subjunctive as preferable, but still, (8b) is ruled out.⁶ The reportive reading of *kveða* is strictly bound to a past indicative form.

2. CMS_2

Further light can be cast on the paradigm in (1) and the vagaries of mood choice in Icelandic conditionals by noting that the unacceptability of (1c) holds for Standard Icelandic only. As observed in the literature (e.g. Thórðardóttir 2006; 2012; Thráinsson 2007:405), replacing present indicatives by present subjunctives in such cases has become increasingly more common, particularly among younger speakers. A corpus example (stemming from a user manual) is given in (9).⁷

⁵ To get acceptable non-reportive versions of *kveða* in (8), one has to change the bare infinitival complements into AcIs. (i) illustrates this for the protasis in (8a).

(i) *Hafi sjálfur bréfberinn kveðið sig vera ríkan, ...*
have.PRS.SUBJ self postman said REFL be rich.ACC.SG.M
"If even the postman has claimed to be rich, ..."

⁶ Thráinsson (ibid.) makes the interesting observation that colloquially, reportive *kveða* can be replaced by invariant *ku*. This expression equally resists conditional inversion (**Ku sjálfur bréfberinn vera ríkur, ...*).

⁷ Following Thráinsson (ibid.), we mark such "innovative" uses by %. For related facts showing up in the historical record of English, see Moessner (2020).

- (9) % *Ef það sé gulbrúnt, þá er rafhlaðan að hlaðast.*
 if it be.PRS.SUBJ yellow.brown then is battery.the to charge
 "If it [the light] is amber, then the battery is charging."

Thus, given that in the standard language, the protasis in (9) requires *er* instead of *sé*, one can speak of a(n optional) [PRS.IND]>[PRS.SUBJ]-shift affecting Modern Icelandic *ef*-conditionals. This will be called "Conditional Mood Shift_2" (CMS_2).

Importantly, the protasis in (9) seems to provide an entirely neutral description of a "suppositional" state of affairs, i.e., there is no noticeable difference in meaning wrt its Standard Icelandic indicative counterpart. This is in contrast with historical precursors of CMS_2, a small number of which has been noted for Old Norse (cf. Hildebrand 1871:59). Consider (10).⁸

- (10) *Nálgastu mik, ef þú megir*
 come.near.IMP.you me if you can.PRS.SUBJ
 "Approach me, if you can!"

Here, *megir* can be considered a "potentialis" use of the present subjunctive: the speaker avoids more neutral expression of the protasis proposition via the indicative, choosing to signal non-standard possibility or diminished likelihood instead. More concretely, in a context of antagonistic verbal exchange (cf. Bax and Padmos 1983), the protagonist Odin amplifies an act of provocation, threat, and intimidation by casting doubt on his addressee's, King Geirrøðr's, capabilities to defend his own life.

Now, arguably, similar kinds of potentialis construal motivate at least some instances of CMS_2 (cf. Thráinsson 2007:405,fn.7). (11), taken over from Thórðardóttir (2006:58), is a case in point.

- (11) % *Ef ég sé með hattinn kemst ég örugglega í stuð.*
 if I be.PRS.SUBJ with hat.the get I surely in excellent.mood
 "If I'm wearing the hat, I'm surely going to feel great."

Through the use of present subjunctive *sé*, the speaker would be able to signal being uncertain or undecided as to whether or not to wear the hat in the first place.

3. Analysis

Although a full-fledged analysis is beyond this squib, some remarks are in order on how to approach CMS_1 and CMS_2 formally. This is sketched in sections 3.1 and 3.2, respectively.

3.1 CMS_1

Regarding CMS_1, both the syntax and its semantic ramifications have to be considered. Icelandic conditional inversion, to begin with, minimally requires the finite verb-attracting C° to be specified as in (12a).⁹ (12b) shows the featural make-up of Standard Icelandic *ef*.

- (12) a. Ø: [COND]>[SUBJ]
 b. *ef*: [COND]>_d[IND]

⁸ (10) stems from Grímnismál (stanza 53) of the Poetic Edda (cf. von See, La Farge and Schulz 2019:1468). See Larrington (2014) for a contemporary English translation.

⁹ See Biberauer and Roberts (2017) for a more detailed analysis of related facts from English.

(12a) strictly enforces CMS_1 for all V1-conditionals, while the indicative requirement of *ef* in (12b) is only a default (" $>_d$ "). Thus, [IND] in *ef*-conditionals turns into [SUBJ] under "x-marking" (von Fintel and Iatridou 2023) or when embedded into reportive environments.¹⁰ By contrast, operations that otherwise may flip subjunctives into indicatives, like "commitment-flagging" (cf. Gärtner and Eythórsson 2020; Sigurðsson 1990; 2010), have no effect on [SUBJ] in (12a).¹¹

As for the replacement of (2b) by (3), useful building blocks can, for example, be found in the analysis of conditionals by Grønn and von Stechow (2011a; 2011b) and Grønn (2021), which combines a Kratzer-style semantics with a mechanism of feature licensing. The three following assumptions are essential here: (a) conditional protases restrict a modal operator via "modal modification." (b) Tense and temporal interpretation in conditional protases are "controlled" by outside binding of and feature transmission to their "T-center." (c) Past indicatives and perfects are, but past subjunctives aren't, "time shifters," the latter due to "tense transposition." (13) provides a skeletal view of (2a) along these lines.

(13) $N \lambda_1 [M](t_1) [\lambda_2 P(t_2) \lambda_3 BE.IN.D.(t_3) YESTERDAY(t_3)] [\lambda_4 BE.IN.I.(t_4) TODAY(t_4)]$

Pronominal N ("now") deictically introduces the utterance time s^* , which gets transferred to the temporal variables t_1 (to anchor modal accessibility), t_2 , and t_4 via binding. Past tense *var* introduces a local past (P) shift such that $[[t_3]] < s^*$.

By contrast, as sketched in (14), past subjunctive *væri* in (2b) does not introduce a local past. Therefore, the time adverbial has to be anchored to the utterance time ($s^* \subseteq [[YESTERDAY]]$), which results in a semantic clash.¹²

¹⁰ The latter so-called "domino-effect" (cf. Thráinsson 2007:398) can be seen in (i), which is built on a variant of (1a).

(i) *María segir að [ef hann hafí farið, komi hún]*
 Mary say.PRS.IND that if he have.PRS.SUBJ gone, come.PRS.SUBJ she
 "Mary says that if he has left, she will come"

¹¹ This can be illustrated by means of "premise conditionals" (cf. Haegeman 2003), which, in spite of the speaker being committed to the truth of the protasis proposition, obey CMS_1.

(ii) *Sértu/*Ertu svona gáfaður, af hverju lærirðu þá ekki stærðfræði?*
 be.PRS.SUBJ/IND.you so gifted why learn.you then not mathematics
 "If you are so gifted, why don't you study mathematics then?"

At the same time, it is possible to further specify [SUBJ] in (12a) as reportive, potentialis, or irrealis in relevant contexts.

¹² Past subjunctives like *væri* can acquire past time reference anaphorically, as the following illustration of CMS_1 by Einarsson (1949:153) shows.

(i) a. *Hann fór alltaf, ef honum var boðið.*
 he go.PST.IND always if he.DAT be.PST.IND invited
 "He always went, if he was invited."
 b. *Væri honum boðið, fór hann alltaf.*
 be.PST.SUBJ he.DAT invited go.PST.IND he always
 "If he was invited, he always went."

Here, a past shift has occurred in the (narrative) context. On the possibility of "tense agreement" in Icelandic, see Sigurðsson (2010:52f.; 2016). As shown in (ii) (Thráinsson 2005:153), this finds clear instantiation in concessives introduced by *þó að* ("although"), another environment where Standard Icelandic requires finite verb realization by subjunctive (cf. Sigurðsson 2010:46; Thráinsson 2007:404).

(ii) *María kom alltaf, þó að hún væri ekki lengur í félaginu.*
 Mary came always although she be.PST.SUBJ not longer in club.the
 "Mary always came although she was no longer a member of the club."

Given this obligatoriness, replacement of subjunctive pasts by subjunctive perfects has to happen in concessives as well, as illustrated in (iii).

(iii) *María kemur í dag, þó að hún hafí verið / *væri í Danmörku í gær.*
 Mary comes today although she have.PRS.SUBJ been be.PST.SUBJ in Denmark yesterday
 "Mary is coming today although she was in Denmark yesterday."

(14) $N \lambda_1 [M](t_1) [\lambda_2 BE.IN.D.(t_2) YESTERDAY(t_2)] [\lambda_3 BE.IN.I.(t_3) TODAY(t_3)]$

Finally, perfect *hafi verið* behaves like a past tense in being able to introduce P, so (3a) may be represented by (13) too.

What is still missing, though, is a proper account of how to suspend the effects of perfect choice in (3a) and (6) and how to achieve blocking in the case of (8). Of the tools that come with obvious initial appeal, OT-style competition and violation of interpretive faithfulness allow fairly transparent modeling and are therefore adopted here.¹³ Consider the following hierarchy of constraints as an initial stab at a solution.¹⁴

(15) $\{ *V1[COND][IND], *ef[COND][SUBJ] \} \gg past.sem \leftrightarrow (I-PST \vee PFV) \gg perf.sem \leftrightarrow PFV$

(3b) (*var ...*) violates the highest ranked constraint $*V1[COND][IND]$, which enforces CMS_1. And, among the CMS_1-compliant candidates (2b) (*væri ...*) and (3a) (*hafi ... verið ...*), the former loses out due to violating the higher ranked constraint requiring that past semantics be expressed by a past indicative or perfective form. In the absence of further competitors, (3a) is allowed not to introduce any specifically perfective semantics, i.e., it can violate the lowest ranked constraint.

Among *ef*-conditionals, (2a) wins against *ef ... væri ...* and *ef ... hafi ... verið ...* due to the latter not complying with highest ranked default indicativity ($*ef[COND][SUBJ]$). Importantly, *ef ... hefur ... verið ...* is blocked because it would needlessly introduce perfective interpretation, i.e., be in conflict with the lowest ranked requirement $perf.sem \leftrightarrow PFV$.¹⁵

For the cases in (7) and (8), the constraint in (16) has to be added on top of the hierarchy in (15), outranking all others.

(16) $report.sem \leftrightarrow KVAÐ$

At the same time, *ef*- and V1-protases have to enter the same competition. Then, among the only two candidates in compliance with (16) – both cases in (8) being ruled out by that constraint – *ef ... kvað ...*, (7), beats *kvað ...* due to the former satisfying but the latter violating the next highest tied $\{ *V1[COND][IND], *ef[COND][SUBJ] \}$.

3.2 CMS_2

The effect of mood choice in (10) can be captured with the tools of mainstream modal semantics by assimilating Old Norse potentialis subjunctives to German "deliberative" *sollte* ("should") as analyzed by Sode and Sugawara (2019). According to these authors, *sollte*, when it occurs in conditional protases (without its otherwise standard deontic or epistemic

¹³ An interesting alternative approach to (3a)/(6) could take Icelandic verbal paradigms to possess two slots for past tense subjunctives, one with and one without a semantic shifter. The former slot would have to be occupied by what looks like the perfect at the surface but lacks "perfectivity." For some of the relevant background, see Kiparsky (2005). DM-style "best fit" choice of candidates under late insertion seems to be inapplicable as long as the candidates may not be "overspecified" but have to meet the subset constraint wrt their target position (cf. Harley 2012:2153). As for (8), reportive *kvað* may alternatively be considered subject to some form of idiom licensing.

¹⁴ This is inspired by Mulder et al. (2022), who crucially employ a mixture of standard avoidance and bi-directional form-meaning constraints. Multiple constraints enclosed in curly brackets are "tied." *past.sem* and *perf.sem* are shorthands for interpretive components, with the former minimally covering the earlier described "past shift" and the latter responsible for the evidentiality and "continuativity" effects in (4) and (5b), respectively. I-PST stands for past indicatives and PFV for perfects.

¹⁵ The same applies mutatis mutandis in the case of (5) and (6).

construal), contributes a use condition saying that the protasis proposition is a "truly open possibility."¹⁶ This is defined such (ibid.:353,fn.13) that *IF(SOLLTE(p))* requires a context where neither *p* nor $\neg p$ is part of the common ground and some among the "best" (e.g., most probable) worlds under consideration, are $\neg p$ -worlds.¹⁷ On the assumption, then, that the same use conditions hold for the Old Norse present subjunctive in (10),¹⁸ the earlier described interpretation can be derived. Signaling that *p*, i.e., King Geirrøðr being able to attack him, is neither a given nor necessarily what is most likely, Odin makes his opponent draw the desired uncanny conclusion.

Clearly, such an account can be made to carry over (*mutatis mutandis*) to cases of CMS_2 like (11). The effect in (9), however, may be due to a more comprehensive ongoing reorganization of the Icelandic mood system (Gärtner and Eythórsson 2020).¹⁹

4. Conclusion

This squib has concerned itself with the marking of verbal mood in conditional protases of Icelandic. In particular, two kinds of deviation from the indicative default in *ef*-protases have been focused on: (i) Obligatory subjunctives under "conditional inversion," i.e., in V1-protases, and (ii) subjunctives arising as an option for some speakers in present tense *ef*-protases. Interpretive consequences of these two types of "conditional mood shift" – referred to as CMS_1 and CMS_2, respectively – have been described and analyzed. Thus, CMS_1 has been shown to lead to "neutralization" of perfectivity, where a perfect subjunctive has to go proxy for a past indicative, and to outright unacceptability if the main verb is a reportively used form of *kveða* ("say", "speak"). It has further been pointed out that CMS_2 is interpretively neutral in some instances but may trigger "potentialis" uses like its historical precursor in Old Norse.

Analyses have been sketched for both types of CMS, drawing on standard temporal and modal semantics – instrumental in capturing the ability of introducing a "past shift" in the case of past indicatives and perfects and of signaling "uncertainty" or reduced likelihood in the case of present subjunctives – as well as on optimality theory to bring about the blocking of interpretive components under competitive form/meaning selection. It goes without saying that these have been "proof-of-concept"-like forays into an exciting and largely understudied corner of Icelandic and the grammar of conditionals. It is hoped that more comprehensive descriptions and more sophisticated analyses will emerge further down the line.

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¹⁶ The idea of considering the contribution of present subjunctives to conditional protases as belonging to "expressive meaning" rather than truth-conditions has already been put forward by von Kutschera (1974:259). He briefly mentions traditional grammar and states that the "Latin *potentialis* [...] expresses the speaker's opinion that the antecedent is improbable or uncertain" (ibid.:258).

¹⁷ The latter is a paraphrase of what it means for *p* not to be a "human necessity" in the sense of Kratzer (1981:47f.).

¹⁸ Gering and Sijmons (1927:215) employ *sollte* in their German translation of (10). They also render *ef* by *falls* ("in case"), which has use conditions very similar to those of *sollte* (cf. Sode and Sugawara 2019).

¹⁹ This would be consistent with considering the (default) indicative requirement of *ef* a matter of lexical idiosyncrasy (cf. Sigurðsson 2010:47), similar to what has been argued for Catalan *si* by Quer (2001:102,fn.23).

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