

### Syntactic Change in Progress:

#### The Icelandic “New Construction” as an Active Impersonal

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**Background:** Icelandic is developing a new syntactic construction that takes the form in (1) and seems to have a similar discourse function to that of the standard passive illustrated in (2). Note that the verbs in these examples are transitive verbs; the expletive *það* in (1a,b) is not a grammatical subject but merely a place-holder to satisfy V2.

- (1) a. *Það var beðið mig að vaska upp.*      b. *Það var hrint stráknum.*  
*it<sub>EXPL</sub> was asked me-ACC to wash up*      *it<sub>EXPL</sub> was pushed-neut.sg. the.boy-DAT*  
I was asked to do the dishes.      The boy was pushed.      New Construction
- (2) a. *Ég var beðinn að vaska upp*      b. *Stráknum var hrint.*      Canonical Passive  
*I-NOM was asked-masc.sg. to wash up*      *the boy-DAT was pushed-neut.sg.*

Three syntactic innovations characterize the new impersonal as compared to the canonical passive:

(i) the lack of NP-movement to subject position, (ii) an object marked accusative in the active voice continues to be marked accusative in the innovative construction, and consequently the auxiliary and the past participle do not agree with it, and (iii) the lack of any Definiteness Effect (see Safir 1985). Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) [henceforth M&S], who were the first to study this syntactic innovation in detail, conducted a nation-wide study of 10<sup>th</sup> graders (n=1695) in 1999-2000. Their data showed that in most parts of the country, 74% of adolescents accepted the sentence in (1a), but only 47% of adolescents in Inner Reykjavík, and 8% of the adult controls (n=200).

**The “New Construction”: active or passive?** The proper analysis of this construction has been the subject of lively debate in recent years. M&S hypothesized that the construction is in the early stages of being reanalyzed as an active impersonal; Barðdal & Molnár (2003), Eythórsson (2008) and Jónsson (2008) on the other hand argue that the new construction is a true passive. M&S argue that the transitive examples in (1) are syntactically active; they also report data from the adult controls to show that some adults, even those who do not accept the transitive examples in (1), are beginning to show signs of active syntax with so-called “impersonal passives” of intransitive verbs like *Það var dansað* ‘it was danced.’

The claim that the new construction is syntactically active entails that the construction has a null thematic subject. It predicts that for those speakers who analyze the impersonal as an active construction, the null thematic subject can serve as a binder for reflexives, and as a controller for subject-oriented adjuncts. The data from M&S provides evidence that this is in fact the case, as shown in (3). M&S reported a 40% acceptance rate for the New Construction with a simple reflexive in (3a), and a 36% acceptance rate for the possessive reflexive in (3b).

- (3) a. *Svo var bara drifið sig á ball.*      (M&S, ex. 30a)  
then was just hurried REFL to [the]dance
- b. *Það var haldið með sínu liði*      (M&S, ex. 33a)  
*it<sub>EXPL</sub> was held with SELF’s team*  
‘People supported their (own) team’

In many languages, verbs with reflexive objects behave syntactically like intransitive verbs (Sells, Zaenen & Zec 1987), but examples like (3b) with a possessive reflexive require a syntactic binder. We build on the evidence in M&S to make the strong claim that the intransitive versions like *Það var dansað* are in principle syntactically ambiguous, since as observed by Haspelmath, “...intransitive desubjectives are indistinguishable from passives of intransitive verbs” (Haspelmath 1990:35). Two syntactic representations are available to speakers:

- (4) a. [e] [<sub>VP</sub> var dansað]      Passive  
b. [pro] [<sub>VP</sub> var dansað]      Active

We are positing two kinds of empty subject, one thematic, and one not. The crucial feature of the active representation in (4b) is that the null subject is a thematic [+human] subject.

M&S reported that 52% of adult speakers accepted subject-oriented adjuncts in (5):

- (5) *Það var komið skellihlæjandi í tímann.*      (M&S, ex. 37a)  
*it<sub>EXPL</sub> was come laughing.out.loud into class*      Subject-oriented adjunct

As pointed out by M&S, “the more subject-oriented participles are accepted, the more simple reflexives are accepted” (p. 126). For adolescents, the correlation was highly significant ( $r=0.433$ ,  $n = 1693$ ,  $p = 0.000$ , 2-tailed); for adults the correlation was also highly significant ( $r=0.532$ ,  $n=199$ ,  $p=0.000$ , 2-tailed) (M&S, p.126, fn. 15). This is evidence that these speakers have a syntactically active representation for so-called “impersonal passives.” There are other speakers who in contrast allow neither reflexives nor subject-oriented adjuncts; these judgments reflect a passive analysis. (We take no position on whether the grammar of an individual speaker can have both or only one of the representations in (4); in the aggregate, there is evidence for both grammatical analyses.)

Once the active analysis for intransitive verbs becomes established, the extension to transitive and ditransitive verbs with non-reflexive objects is a natural development. We will examine the current status of the innovative construction, focusing on the age-related variation in adults as shown by data collected in two nationwide studies, the one conducted in 1999-2000 and reported in M&S, and a recent study conducted in 2006-2007 (Syntactic Variation in Modern Icelandic, project leader: Höskuldur Thráinsson). Eythórsson and Jónsson interpret the observed degree of variation in responses of adults as indicating that the syntactic properties of the canonical passive are “fuzzy”, and thus that the diagnostic tests used by M&S to distinguish between an active vs. passive analysis of the new construction are inconclusive. We argue that the grammar of Icelandic is in flux. We claim that an active impersonal is emerging from a passive construction, and the language is currently passing through a stage when the “impersonal passive” is open to both grammatical analyses.

**How did this innovation happen?** Why is this change happening in Icelandic? Researchers have suggested different constructions as the model for the change: impersonal passives with PP complements (Kjartansson 1991, Barðdal & Molnár 2003, Sigurðsson 2008); impersonal passives of reflexive verbs (M&S 2002, Maling 2006); expletive passives with postverbal indefinite NPs (Eythórsson 2008, Thráinsson 2007); impersonal ditransitive reflexive construction (Eythórsson 2008). Eythórsson looks for parallels in other Scandinavian languages, and points to the expletive passive, or “transitive existential passive,” as a possible “parallel” for the Icelandic innovation, since when a postverbal indefinite object NP is either a neuter singular noun, or marked with an oblique case (Dative or Genitive), the clause can be analyzed either as a canonical passive, or as an instance of the new impersonal. Note that such expletive transitive passives have been in the language for its entire recorded history, and they also occur in the other Scandinavian languages, including Norwegian. Thus on Eythórsson’s account, it is mysterious why the New Impersonal construction is developing only in Icelandic and not in, e.g. Norwegian. We argue that there are (at least) two relevant syntactic differences between Icelandic and Norwegian which explain why the syntactic innovation is occurring in Icelandic but not in the other Scandinavian languages: (i) reflexive impersonal passives, and (ii) aspectual modals with apparently passive morphology. The development of reflexive impersonal passives in the last century seems likely to have been the tipping point, and to have served as the model for the extension to transitive verbs.

### **Selected References**

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