

Getting (Im)personal: On-Going Syntactic Change in Icelandic

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Although Icelandic syntax is more conservative than the syntax of most other Germanic languages, it has a new transitive impersonal construction (NTI) which does not exist in the other Germanic languages (Laszakovits 2017). The NTI is an innovative syntactic construction which seems to have surfaced in Icelandic in the first part of the 20th century in collocations (E. F. Sigurðsson 2012). There is anecdotal evidence in the spoken language since the 1950's (Sigurjónsdóttir & Maling 2001) and the construction was first noted in the linguistic literature in 1979 as an innovation characterizing the language of children and adolescents (G. Jónsson 1979). The first nationwide study on the NTI was conducted in 1999–2000, reported in Sigurjónsdóttir & Maling (2001) and Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002). The study obtained judgments from 1,731 Icelandic teenagers in 65 schools all around the country (amounting to 45% of the birth cohort for 1984) and from 205 adult controls. The results revealed striking age-related variation in acceptance of the NTI, as 50–70% of the 15–16-year-old adolescents, in most parts of the country, judged NTI sentences to be grammatical, whereas very few (3–5%) of the adult controls (40-years and older) accepted the new construction. A second nationwide study was conducted in 2005–2007 by Thráinsson et al. (2013, 2015, 2017) and a third one in 2017–2019 by Sigurjónsdóttir & Rögnvaldsson (2018). Those studies confirmed the striking generational difference found in the first study.

Thus, a change in apparent time is well-established, but a change in real time has also been established. A subset of the 15–16-year-olds tested by Sigurjónsdóttir & Maling in 1999–2000 was retested in 2010–2012, at the age of 26–28 (as a part of a study led by Thráinsson et al.). The results show that there is a strong statistical correlation between individual judgments then and now, i.e. subjects who rejected the NTI in Sigurjónsdóttir & Maling's 1999–2000 study also rejected it 12 years later, and those who accepted it in 1999–2000 still accepted it in 2010–2012 (Sigurjónsdóttir 2017). These results indicate that the NTI is acquired by children and not adopted by adults. Thus, the locus of this morphosyntactic change seems to lie in child language acquisition.

The NTI takes the form in (2); compare the standard passive illustrated in (1):

- (1) *Að lokum var stelpun valin í aðalhlutverkið* (Standard passive)
at end was girl.the-NOM chosen-FEM in lead.role.the
(2) *Að lokum var valið stelpuna í aðalhlutverkið* (NTI)
at end was chosen-NEUT girl.the-ACC in lead.role.the

Note that the NTI in (2) could be translated either as (3a) a passive, or (3b) an active with a null unspecified human (hence “impersonal”) subject.

- (3) a. In the end, the girl was chosen for the lead role
b. In the end, they chose the girl for the lead role

Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) argued that so-called “impersonal passives” are in principle syntactically ambiguous and can be interpreted either as canonical passives or as impersonal actives with a null, typically human subject that is the null counterpart to overt impersonal pronouns like French *on* (see also Haspelmath 1990). Transitive “non-promotional” passives are a key example of syntactic ambiguity; the syntactic behavior of the Ukrainian *-no/to*-construction shows that even constructions in which transitive verbs govern accusative objects may be categorized as a passive (contra Haspelmath (1990:35) and Blevins (2003), *inter alia*). The historical dimension is significant: the syntactic behavior of such constructions can change over time because of this ambiguity, as shown by the development of the Irish autonomous form (Maling & O'Connor 2015), the Polish *-no/to* construction, and the Icelandic NTI (Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir 2002, 2012, 2015; Sigurjónsdóttir & Maling 2001, 2019). Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir claim

that all three are accusative-assigning participial constructions which developed from canonical passives but now display the syntactic properties of an active impersonal construction.

The proper analysis of the NTI has been the subject of lively debate in recent years: Is it a passive or an active impersonal construction? (see e.g. Barðdal & Molnár 2003; Eythórsson 2008; Ingason's et al. 2013; J. G. Jónsson 2009; H. Á. Sigurðsson 2011; E. F. Sigurðsson 2012; Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir 2002, 2012, 2015; Sigurjónsdóttir & Maling 2001, 2019). However, there is no disagreement that a major syntactic innovation is taking place, and that the construction is rapidly gaining ground. This system-internal change is not the result of borrowing, nor is it the result of phonological change or morphological weakening. The new variant does not replace the canonical passive but co-exists alongside it.

Sigurjónsdóttir & Maling (2019) suggest that the crucial first step in the reanalysis of the impersonal passive as an active construction is its extension to reflexive predicates. Impersonal passives of reflexive verbs are an innovation of Modern Icelandic, first appearing in the mid-19th century, becoming more frequent in the 20th century (Eythórsson 2008; Árnadóttir et al. 2011). They suggest that the reflexive passive is syntactically ambiguous, depending on whether the reflexive pronoun is analyzed as an intransitivizing "affix" or as an independent argument which needs a binder. The reanalysis then extends to other bound anaphors, and finally to all transitive verbs. Non-reflexive accusative objects first surface in the early 20th century in collocations, see (4) (E. F. Sigurðsson 2012).

- (4) ... *sem tekið er þátt í af leikköppum*... (from the year 1908)
... which taken is part-ACC in by players...

Sigurjónsdóttir & Maling (2019) suggest the following three stages in the diachronic development of the NTI:

- Stage 1. (Icelandic before mid-19th century): Impersonal passives occur only with true intransitive verbs (e.g. *dansa* 'dance')
- Stage 2. (Icelandic mid-19th–20th century, transitional period): Impersonal passives start to occur with reflexive verbs, becoming more frequent in the 20th century
- Stage 3. (Icelandic mid/late-20th–21st century): Transitive Impersonal occurs with all transitive verbs and becomes increasingly active. Recognized as the NTI

In this talk, we discuss what features of Icelandic make this change possible, focusing on the on-going development and the syntactic properties of the NTI in Icelandic, as well as outlining the results of language acquisition studies on 3–9-year-old Icelandic children's comprehension, production, and pragmatic interpretation of the NTI (Sigurjónsdóttir 2015; Sigurjónsdóttir & Nowenstein 2016). The acquisition studies shed light on the construction's future evolutionary trajectory and cast doubt on Ingason's et al. (2013) prediction that by 2050, the NTI will have ousted the canonical passive in Icelandic.

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