Nothing personal?
The emergence of a new syntactic construction in Icelandic

Joan Maling
Brandeis University

Sigríður Sigurjónsdóttir
University of Iceland

LSA
January 8, 2011
Iceland (103,000 km²; population c. 317,000)

Surtsey
Eyjafjallajökull
Surtsey
born 1963
Active:

Hún bað mig að vaska upp.

‘She asked me to do the dishes’

Passive:

Ég var beðinn að vaska upp.

‘I was asked to do the dishes’
A student pipes up: “But there’s another one…”

Pað var beðið mig að vaska upp

*it* \_EXPL \_was asked *me*-ACC *to wash up*

literally: “it was asked me to do the dishes”

intended: “I was asked to do the dishes” or “they asked me to do the dishes”

This innovative construction has become known as either the “New Passive” or the “New Impersonal.”
A student pipes up: “But there’s another one…”

Það var beðið mig að vaska upp

it$_{EXPL}$ was asked me-ACC to wash up

literally: “it was asked me to do the dishes”

intended: “I was asked to do the dishes” or “they asked me to do the dishes”

For now, we will call it the “New Construction”
In a 1999 nationwide survey, 93% of surveyed adults found this sentence completely unacceptable.

73% of adolescents found it completely acceptable!
Spread of the new construction

1959  Akureyri  8-year old girl

Það var bólusett okkur

\textit{it}_{\text{EXPL}} was inoculated \textit{us}

‘They inoculated us’ or ‘We were inoculated’

The girl’s mother doesn’t think the construction was common at the time.
The new construction is reported to be common in Akureyri, the “capital of the north.” Another woman recalls being told in 1979 that kids in Akureyri “talk this way.”
Spread of the new construction

1984, “Usage Error #174”

A usage manual by Helgi Hálfdanarson, Gætum tungunnar ‘Let’s watch our language,’ urges adults to correct the new construction and change it to the canonical passive.

**Heyrst hefur:** Það var sagt honum að fara

**Heard:** it was told him\textsubscript{DAT} to leave

**RÉTT VÆRI:** Honum var sagt að fara

**CORRECT:** he\textsubscript{DAT} was told to leave
Spread of the new construction

2002, 4-year-old girl

The construction has now been observed in embedded clauses:

\[ \text{Tígrí heldur að } [ \text{ðað hafi verið rænt honum} ] \]

Tigger thinks that it\textsubscript{EXPL} has been kidnapped him-D

‘Tigger\textsubscript{i} thinks that he\textsubscript{j} has been kidnapped’
Sign posted at Háskólabíó movie theater

Skoðað verður miða við innganginn.
Examined will be tickets-ACC at the entrance

‘Tickets will be inspected at the door’
First nationwide study on the New Construction

Study 1 conducted 1999-2000

- Questionnaire distributed to 1,731 tenth graders (age 15-16) in 65 schools throughout Iceland
Location of schools in M&S 2000 survey
First nationwide study on the New Construction

The 1,731 tenth graders (age 15-16) constitute 45% of the children born in Iceland in 1984.
Is this sentence acceptable?

Það var beðið mig að vaska upp

\textit{it}_{EXPL} \textit{was asked me-ACC to wash up}

literally: ‘it was asked me to do the dishes’

intended: ‘I was asked to do the dishes’ (passive)

or ‘they asked me to do the dishes’ (active)
Is this sentence acceptable?

\[ \text{Pað var beðið mig að vaska upp} \]

\[ \text{it}_{\text{EXPL}} \text{ was asked me-ACC to wash up} \]

‘it was asked me to do the dishes’
In the year 2000, Inner Reykjavík had a population of around 67,000; Greater Reykjavík a population of 175,000; the population of Iceland was 286,000.
Study 1 Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir 2002

Geographical variation in acceptance of the New Construction

Adolescents n =1,695; Adults, n =200

Adolescents n =1,695; Adults, n =200

p < .001
Study 2 conducted 2005-2007

Thráinsson et al. (2010)
Study conducted on syntactic variation generally
modern Icelandic

A subset of subjects throughout Iceland (n=772) were tested on the New Construction. The subjects ranged from adolescents to seniors.
Is this sentence acceptable?

Loks var fundið stelpuna eftir mikla leit.
finally was found-neut girl.the-ACC after great search
‘The girl was finally found after a long search’ or
‘They finally found the girl after a long search’

In 2005-2007, Thráinsson et al. presented this example of the New Construction to 712 adolescents and adults in four age groups:
Study 2 (Thráinsson et al. 2010)
Age-related variation: acceptance of New Construction (for this example) N=771

![Bar chart showing age-related variation in acceptance of new construction.](chart.png)
Summary: This change is widespread throughout Iceland; it is not due to contact (e.g. with Danish or English); it is not due to phonological processes. Therefore it must be due to other system-internal factors.
Why does change like this happen? Why don’t kids just say what their parents say?

This is a central mystery of our field. I won’t answer this question.

Instead, I’ll move on to another question. How does this New Construction fit into the ‘constructional ecology’ of Icelandic? Maybe that can help explain where it came from.
Specifically, is it active or passive?

*Pað var beðið mig að vaska upp*

\( i_{EXPL} \) was asked me-ACC to wash up

**literally:** ‘it was asked me to do the dishes’

**intended:** ‘I was asked to do the dishes’ (passive), or ‘they asked me to do the dishes’ (active impersonal)

And **how can we tell?**

The answer to this question may shed a little light on this particular instance of spontaneous systemic change.
The New Construction vs. other constructions in Icelandic
How is the New Construction different from the Icelandic Canonical Passive?
Morphosyntactic characteristics that distinguish the New Construction from the Canonical Passive

- The THEME argument is marked with **Accusative** case rather than **Nominative** case
Canonical passive:

Ég var beðinn að vaska upp.
I-NOM was asked-masc.sg to wash up

‘I was asked to do the dishes’

New Construction:

Pað var beðið mig að vaska upp.
it_EXPL was asked-neut.sg me-ACC to wash up

‘They asked me to do the dishes’
Morphosyntactic characteristics that distinguish the New Construction from the Canonical Passive

- The THEME argument is marked with **Accusative** case rather than **Nominative** case

- **Lack of NP-movement** of THEME to **subject** position
Canonical passive (obligatory NP-mvt)

Stráknum var hrint.
boy.the-DAT was pushed-neut.sg.

‘The boy was pushed’

New Construction

Það var hrint stráknum.
it_{EXPL} was pushed-neut.sg. boy.the-DAT

‘The boy was pushed’

or ‘Somebody/they pushed the boy.’
Morphosyntactic characteristics that distinguish the New Construction from the Canonical Passive

• The THEME is marked with **Accusative** case rather than **Nominative** case

• **Lack of NP-movement** of THEME to **subject** position

• Yet the New Construction **does** display Passive morphology!
The Canonical Passive:

Barnið var beðið að vaska upp
child-the was asked to wash up

‘the child was asked to do the dishes’

The New Construction:

Það var beðið barnið að vaska upp
it_EXP was asked child-the to wash up

‘the child was asked to do the dishes’
or ‘they asked the child to do the dishes’

And this morphology is not found in the Active…
Recall that some linguists call the New Construction the “New Passive.” (Eythórsson 2008; Jónsson 2009)

Although it is syntactically different than the Passive (in terms of case-marking and NP movement), it displays passive morphology and its meaning is consistent with a passive interpretation as shown by one of the natural translation equivalents.

The NC is thus assumed by these linguists to be a “non-promotional passive.”
Recall that Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir call it the “New Impersonal” and hypothesize that it is not a passive.

What properties does the New Construction share with Impersonal constructions in Icelandic?
Impersonal Passive of an **Intransitive Verb**

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{Það} \\
\text{it}
\end{array}
\begin{array}{c}
\text{var dansað alla nóttina.} \\
\text{was danced all night}
\end{array}
\]

‘There was dancing all night’

---

Impersonal or “Expletive Passive” of a **Transitive Verb**

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{Það} \\
\text{it}
\end{array}
\begin{array}{c}
\text{var hrint} \\
\text{was pushed-neut.sg.}
\end{array}
\begin{array}{c}
\text{lilum strák} \\
\text{little boy-DAT}
\end{array}
\]

‘A little boy was pushed’ (Eythórsson 2008, ex. 73b)
Impersonal or “Expletive Passive”: **Transitive**

\[ \text{Pað} \quad \text{var hrint} \quad \text{litlum strák} \]

\[ \text{it}_{\text{EXPL}} \quad \text{was pushed-neut.sg.} \quad \text{little-DAT boy-DAT} \]

‘A little boy was pushed’ (Eythórsson 2008)

**New Construction**

\[ \text{Pað} \quad \text{var hrint} \quad \text{litla stráknum.} \]

\[ \text{it}_{\text{EXPL}} \quad \text{was pushed-neut.sg.} \quad \text{little boy.the-DAT} \]

‘The little boy was pushed’ (Eythórsson 2008)

or ‘Somebody pushed the little boy’
How can a mere non-Icelander tell apart the New Construction from the Impersonal Passive?

In the New Construction, Definite NPs are allowed. In the Impersonal “Expletive Passive”, they are ungrammatical.

This is how native speakers recognize the New Construction.
New Construction

\[ \text{Impersonal “Expletive Passive”} \]

\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
\text{\texttt{Pað}} & \text{var hrint} & \text{litla stráknum.} \\
\text{\texttt{it}}_{\text{EXPL}} & \text{was pushed-neut.sg.} & \text{little boy.the-DAT}
\end{array}
\]

‘The little boy was pushed’
or ‘Somebody pushed the little boy’

Intended: ‘The little boy was pushed’
A puzzle:

The New Construction lacks NP-movement and lacks a Patient/Theme subject, so syntactically it shares certain features with an active—it has the word order and the case-marking of an active clause.

But it can easily be translated as a passive, and it shares passive morphology.

And it looks just like an impersonal “expletive passive” EXCEPT for the Definiteness Effect.
One hypothesis:

Eythórsson (2008): the New Construction is an impersonal “expletive passive” that has lost the definiteness constraint that exists in the standard language.

The direct object is marked ACC because it is a “non-promotional” passive. And it has an empty [e] subject.

Sounds reasonable.

Passive Impersonal without NP-movement:

\[
[S \quad \_ \quad \text{Aux} \quad [\text{VP} \quad \text{V}_{\text{ppart}} \quad \text{NP}]]
\]

This is a syntactically **passive** construction with no thematic subject

Eythórsson (2008)
So what’s the alternative?

Active Impersonal

\[ [S pro_{arb} \text{ Aux } [\text{VP } V_{ppart} \text{ NP}]] \]

This is a syntactically \textbf{active} construction with a null \( pro_{arb} \) [+human] pronoun subject

Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002)
What would one have to explain to argue that the New Construction is active?

For one thing, we have to explain why it is so easily translated by a passive.
What discourse properties condition use of the passive?

(a) desire to avoid naming the agent, e.g. to make the Agent anonymous (Kress 1982:150)

(b) desire to make the Patient (if any) the discourse “theme” of the sentence

(for Icelandic, see Kjartan Ottósson (1986:97))
The New Construction clearly fits (a) below:

(a) desire to avoid naming the agent, e.g. to make the Agent anonymous (Kress 1982:150)

(b) to make the Patient (if any) the discourse “theme” of the sentence

There is never an explicit Agent in the New Construction.
But note that one can achieve the goal of making the Agent anonymous by using **either**
(a) a *passive* voice construction with no *by*-phrase,

*or*

(b) an *active* voice construction with an *impersonal* pronoun subject

Mistakes were made.  (passive)
Someone made mistakes.  (active)

English is spoken here.  (passive)
They speak English here.  (active)
From the point of view of discourse function, we cannot definitively rule in favor of either the Active or the Passive Hypothesis.

Those who support the Passive Hypothesis point to an apparently solid clue: the morphology.
The Canonical Passive:

\[ \text{Barnið var beðið að vaska upp} \]

\[ \text{child-the was asked to wash up} \]

‘the child was asked to do the dishes’

The New Construction:

\[ \text{Það var beðið barnið að vaska upp} \]

\[ \text{it\textsubscript{EXPL} was asked child.the to wash up} \]

‘the child was asked to do the dishes’

or ‘they asked the child to do the dishes’

Recall that this morphology is not found in the Active…
Again, this seems reasonable. Shouldn’t you be able to tell by the morphology whether a construction is passive or active?

Our answer, sadly, will be… “No.”

Morphology is often ambiguous – surface properties of morphological case and agreement aren’t enough to distinguish between different syntactic analyses.

To see how unreliable morphology can be, let’s visit another dramatic syntactic change, this one in the history of English…
Syntactic Change in the English Auxiliary
Syntactic Change in the English Auxiliary System

Ask yourself: are the italicized verb forms active or passive? How can you tell?

“The clock struck ten while the trunks were carrying down.”
(1818, Jane Austen, Northanger Abbey, p.155)

“Our garden is putting in order, by a Man who bears a remarkably good character, has a very fine complexion & asks something less than the first.”
(February 8, 1807, letter from Jane Austen to her sister Cassandra)
Fact: progressive passives that we are familiar with (e.g. “the trunk was being carried down” didn’t appear until the late 18th century:

I have received the speech and address of the House of Lords; probably, that of the House of Commons was being debated when the post went out. (1772, First Earl of Malmesbury; cited by Warner (1995)
The earliest examples of the *progressive passive* ("the trunks were being carried down") appear in letters and private correspondence; this new construction is avoided in anything intended for publication.

1837: "an outrage upon English idiom, to be detested, abhorred, execrated, and given over to six thousand penny-paper editors"

(*North American Review*, vol. 45)

1871: an illogical, confusing, inaccurate and unidiomatic monstrosity. "In fact, it means nothing, and is the most incongruous usage of words and ideas that ever attained respectable usage in any civilized language."

(R. Grant White, *Words and their Uses*, p.336; quoted in Visser)
Syntactic Change in the English Auxiliary System

What is going on in this transition:

the trunks were carrying down

the trunks were being carried down

Changing: possible co-occurrences of auxiliaries

Not changing: passive meaning

By looking at the morphology alone, you couldn’t tell active from passive.
Syntactic Change in the English Auxiliary System

The two constructions co-existed for about a century; during this period the verbal morphology continued to be ambiguous.

**ACTIVE** The men **were carrying** the trunks.
(trunks = object, were carrying = active; Agentive subject, Theme object)

**PASSIVE** The trunks **were carrying** down the stairs.
(trunks = subject, were carrying = passive; Theme subject, no object)
In Icelandic, a similar ambiguity prevails: the New Construction shares verbal morphology with the Canonical Passive:
The Canonical Passive:

\[ \text{Barnið var beðið að vaska upp} \]

\[ \text{child-the was asked to wash up} \]

‘the child was asked to do the dishes’

The New Construction:

\[ \text{Hað var beðið barnið að vaska upp} \]

\[ \text{it\textunderscore EXP\_L was asked child.the to wash up} \]

‘the child was asked to do the dishes’

or ‘they asked the child to do the dishes’
At this point, some may be tempted to give up and say that the Active/Passive distinction is “fuzzy” with many different components interacting.

We will argue something else:

while the semantic/discourse status of the two key arguments may not distinguish between active and passive, and the morphology may not be a reliable cue,

there are sharp syntactic differences between active and passive constructions.
Active or Passive?
Syntactic properties as diagnostic
It is possible to identify a set of syntactic properties that cross-linguistically tend to have opposite values for active clauses and passive clauses. (Maling 1993; 2006)

This is a *heterogeneous* set of properties, that can no doubt be theorized in a variety of ways. But we can use them to get closer to an understanding of the New Impersonal.
Syntactic Properties that Distinguish Active from Passive

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Syntactic Property</th>
<th>Active Clause</th>
<th>Passive Clause</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agentive by-phrase possible</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Active

They arrested the demonstrators (*by the police).

Passive

The demonstrators were arrested (by the police).
Syntactic Properties that Distinguish Active from Passive

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Syntactic Property</th>
<th>Active Clause</th>
<th>Passive Clause</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agentive by-phrase possible</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of subject-oriented adjuncts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Control of subject-oriented adjuncts

Some adjuncts can be controlled by the implicit agent in a passive:

The ship was sunk on purpose / in order to collect the insurance.

Others cannot. They want to modify the grammatical subject.

Active

He drove the car through the traffic, cursing and sweating.

Passive

## The car was driven through the traffic, cursing and sweating.
## Syntactic Properties that Distinguish Active from Passive

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Syntactic Property</th>
<th>Active Clause</th>
<th>Passive Clause</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agentive by-phrase possible</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of subject-oriented adjuncts</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bound anaphors in underlying object position</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Binding of anaphors

Can the implicit Agent serve as an antecedent for a reflexive?

**Active**

They locked *themselves* out

The CEOs gave *themselves* a large bonus.

**Passive**

* *Themselves* were locked out.

A large bonus was given (to) them/*themselves*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Syntactic Property</th>
<th>Active Clause</th>
<th>Passive Clause</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agentive by-phrase possible</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of subject-oriented adjuncts</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bound anaphors in underlying object position</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-agentive “Unaccusative” verbs are possible</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
So how can we use these diagnostics to further analyze the Icelandic New Construction?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Syntactic Property</th>
<th>Active Clause</th>
<th>Passive Clause</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agentive by-phrase possible</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of subject-oriented adjuncts</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bound anaphors in underlying object position</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-agentive “Unaccusative” verbs are possible</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Before we examine the Icelandic New Construction, we’ll consider a revealing dichotomy between two closely related languages, Polish and Ukrainian.

Polish and Ukrainian both display what is called the “-no/to construction” (named for the allomorphs for the past participle morpheme).
Polish vs. Ukrainian – *no* /–*to* construction

Świątynię zbudowano w 1640 roku.  
church-ACC build-*no* in 1640 year  
(M&S 2002)

‘The church was built in 1640’

Cerkvu bulo zbudovano v 1640 roc’ i.  
church-f.ACC was build-*no* in 1640 year  
(Sobin 1985)

‘The church was built in 1640’
They are almost identical, except for the **optional** presence of an auxiliary in Ukrainian:

Polish:

\[
\text{Świątynię } \text{zbudowano } \text{w 1640 roku.}
\]

\text{church-ACC} \quad \text{build-no} \quad \text{in 1640 year}

\text{‘The church was built in 1640’}

Ukrainian:

\[
\text{Cerkvu } \text{bulo zbudovano } \text{v 1640 roc’ i.}
\]

\text{church-f.ACC} \quad \text{was build-no} \quad \text{in 1640 year}

\text{‘The church was built in 1640’}
This construction assigns ACCUSATIVE case to the Patient/Theme of a Transitive verb. So it looks like an active construction, but has passive-like morphology.

In both Polish and Ukrainian, this construction has a past passive translational equivalent.

Sound familiar?
So how do the Polish and Ukrainian –no/to constructions compare on the list of syntactic properties that cluster with actives versus passives?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Syntactic Property</th>
<th>Polish (active)</th>
<th>Ukrainian (passive)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agentive by-phrase possible</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of subject-oriented adjuncts</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bound anaphors in underlying object position</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-agentive “Unaccusative” verbs are possible</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Summary

• Take-home lesson: we cannot tell what the syntactic behavior of a construction is by looking at its superficial morphological properties (e.g. case, agreement)

• Despite their superficial similarity and common historical origin, the Polish and Ukrainian -no/to constructions are polar opposites in terms of their syntactic behavior
So which of these two polar opposites does the Icelandic New Construction most resemble?

Researchers differ!
The New Impersonal is parallel to development of the –no/to-construction in **Polish**, an **active** impersonal with a thematic pro_{arb} subject

(Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir 1997, 2002; Maling 2006)

The New Impersonal is “comparable to the –no/to construction in **Ukrainian**, a **passive** preserving structural accusative case”

(Eythórsson 2008)
How about the Agentive by-phrase?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Syntactic Property</th>
<th>Polish (active)</th>
<th>Ukrain. (passive)</th>
<th>Icelandic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agentive by-phrase possible</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of subject-oriented adjuncts</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bound anaphors in underlying object position</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-agentive “Unaccusative” verbs are possible</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Next: does the Icelandic New Construction allow control of subject-oriented adjuncts?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Syntactic Property</th>
<th>Polish (active)</th>
<th>Ukrain. (passive)</th>
<th>Icelandic ??</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agentive by-phrase possible</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of subject-oriented adjuncts</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-agentive “Unaccusative” verbs are possible</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bound anaphors in underlying object position</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Recall the contrast in Polish vs. Ukrainian –no/to constructions: Polish active allows it, Ukrainian passive does not.

Wróciwszy do domu, znalezione pieniądze

‘Having returned home, they found the money’

* Povernuvšys’ domou, hroši bulo znajdено.

returning home money was found-PASS.

Intended: “Having returned home, the money was found”

(=M&S 2002, ex. (12c), from Lavine 2000:90, ex (5b))
Why? Because the Polish active –no/-to has a null Pro\textsubscript{arb} subject, whereas in the Ukrainian passive, there is no thematic subject.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Wróciwszy do domu, znaleziono pieniądze} & \quad \text{Polish} \\
\text{returned-ANT to house found-IMP money-ACC} & \\
\text{‘Having returned home, they found the money’} & \\
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{* Povernuvšys’ dodomu, hroši bulo znajdeno} & \quad \text{Ukrain.} \\
\text{returning home money was found-PASS} & \\
\text{Intended: “Having returned home, the money was found”} & \\
(=\text{M&S 2002, ex. (12c), from Lavine 2000:90, ex (5b)}) & \\
\end{align*}
\]
How about control of adjuncts in the New Construction?

Það var lesið minningargreinina grátandi

it$_{EXPL}$ was read the.memoir.article crying

‘They read the memorial article crying’

‘The memorial article was read, crying’

Since the New Construction is still in transition, our acceptance rates for this property are dependent on who is being asked!
They read the memorial article crying

% Acceptance for control of adjuncts in New Construction
How do these rates compare with overall acceptance of the New Construction?

% Acceptance for control of adjuncts in NC, compared with acceptance rates for the NC overall

![Bar graph showing acceptance rates for different groups: Adolescents beyond Reykjavík, Adolescents in Inner Reykjavík, and Adults.](image-url)
So control of subject-oriented adjuncts is a property that is acceptable to **most** people who accept the New Construction.

% Acceptance for control of adjuncts in NC, compared with acceptance rates for the NC overall

![Bar chart comparing acceptance rates for control of adjuncts](chart.png)
Yes, control of subject-oriented adjuncts is a property of the New Construction.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Syntactic Property</th>
<th>Polish (active)</th>
<th>Ukrain. (passive)</th>
<th>Icelandic ???</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agentive by-phrase possible</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of subject-oriented adjuncts</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-agentive “Unaccusative” verbs are possible</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bound anaphors in underlying object position</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What about Unaccusative verbs?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Syntactic Property</th>
<th>Polish (active)</th>
<th>Ukrain. (passive)</th>
<th>Icelandic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agentive by-phrase possible</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of subject-oriented adjuncts</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-agentive “Unaccusative” verbs are possible</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bound anaphors in underlying object position</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Recall the contrast in Polish vs. Ukrainian –\textit{no/to} constructions: the Polish active allows unaccusative, non-agentive verbs, the Ukrainian passive does not.

Dawniej \textit{umeriano} młodo.  
before died-IMP young

‘In the old days, people \textit{died} at a young age’

Przed wojna \textit{bywano} w Grand Hotelu.  
before war be-IMP in Grand Hotel

‘Before the war, people \textit{frequented} the Grand Hotel’

\textbf{*Umerto} / \textbf{*Zaxvorito} / \textbf{*Prijixato}.  
died-PASS /got.sick-PASS/ arrived-PASS

\textbf{Ukrainian}
What about Icelandic? Consider the nonagentive verb *eiga* ‘own.’ It’s acceptable in the Active & unacceptable in the Canonical Passive

Þeir *eiga* hundinn.  
they own dog.the-ACC  
‘They own the dog’

* Hundurinn er áttur (af þeim).  
dog.the-NOM is owned (by them)  
‘The dog is owned (by them)’

(Thráinsson 2007)
Nonagentive verb *eiga* ‘own’ in the New Construction?

\[ \text{Það var samt alltaf átt marga hesta.} \]

‘Still, people/they always owned many horses’

Again, acceptability of non-agentive verbs is dependent upon who is asked:
It was still always had many horses.

‘Still, people/they always owned many horses.’
Compare the rate of acceptability of non-agentive verbs with the rate of overall acceptance of the New Construction:
So unaccusative verbs are emerging as a property of the New Construction for some speakers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Syntactic Property</th>
<th>Polish (active)</th>
<th>Ukrainian (passive)</th>
<th>Icelandic ???</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agentive by-phrase possible</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of subject-oriented adjuncts</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-agentive &quot;Unaccusative&quot; verbs are possible</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>(Yes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bound anaphors in underlying object position</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What about bound anaphors? Can they occur in the NC?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Syntactic Property</th>
<th>Polish (active)</th>
<th>Ukran. (passive)</th>
<th>Icelandic ??</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agentive by-phrase possible</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of subject-oriented adjuncts</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-agentive “Unaccusative” verbs are possible</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>(Yes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bound anaphors in underlying object position</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Recall that bound anaphors are allowed in the Polish Active -no/to construction but not the Ukrainian Passive –no/-to construction.

**Chwalo**no  **swoją**  własną ojczyznę  Polish

praised-IMP  self’s  own  fatherland-f.sg.ACC

‘they praised their own country’

***(Po)xvaleno  **svoju**  vlasnu bat'kivščynu.**  Ukrainian

praised-PASS  self’s  own  fatherland

*intended:* ‘they praised their own country’

What about Icelandic?
The New Construction with a possessive reflexive (M&S 2002)

Á kvöldin var skoðað tölvupóstinn sinn.
in evenings was viewed e-mail-ACC refl
‘In the evenings people checked their own e-mail’
‘In the evenings their own e-mail was checked.’

Notice in the analogous passive sentence in English, the bound reading is blocked:

In the evenings their email was checked.
How acceptable is control of reflexives in the New Construction?

% Acceptance for control of reflexives in NC

- Adolesc. beyond Reykjavík
- Adolesc. Inner Reykjavík
- Adults
How do these rates compare to overall acceptance of the New Construction?

% Acceptance for control of reflexives in New Const., compared with acceptance rates for the New Const. overall
So if acceptance of bound anaphora in the NC is evidence that the NC is active, we would predict that speakers will NOT allow bound anaphora in CANONICAL Passives.

**Due diligence:** Can the implicit Agent in a *Canonical Passive* bind a reflexive?

Tölvupósturinn (*sinn*) var skoðaður á kvöldin.
e-mail-m.sg.NOM (*REFL*) was checked-m.sg. in the.evening
‘(*their own) e-mail was checked in the evenings’

**No:** Canonical passives are bad with reflexives, as expected.
So for speakers who accept the New Construction, about half accept the use of bound anaphora in the (underlying) object position, controlled by the null subject.

And no speakers accept bound anaphora in Canonical Passives, not even the young speakers who use the New Construction.
So we can fill in the blank with a “Yes” – the Icelandic New Construction is, like Polish, active.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Syntactic Property</th>
<th>Polish (active)</th>
<th>Ukrainian (passive)</th>
<th>Icelandic ???</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agentive by-phrase possible</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of subject-oriented adjuncts</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-agentive “Unaccusative” verbs are possible</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>(Yes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bound anaphors in underlying object position</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The New Construction: Two Hypotheses

a. Passive Impersonal without NP-movement:

\[
[ S \quad \text{Aux} \quad [VP \quad V_{\text{ppart}} \quad NP]\]
\]

This is a syntactically **passive** construction with no thematic subject

Eythórsson (2008)

b. Active Impersonal

\[
[ S \quad pro_{arb} \quad \text{Aux} \quad [VP \quad V_{\text{ppart}} \quad NP]\]
\]

This is a syntactically **active** construction with a null \(pro_{arb}\) [+human] pronoun subject

Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002)
But wait....
There’s one more objection to the Active hypothesis, and it involves some surprising data that only came to light during the large surveys.

The surveys included examples of the New Construction, and Canonical Passives. But they also included examples of the traditional “Impersonal Passive,” a construction which all linguists (including us) considered to be passive.

Það var dansað alla nóttina.

\( it_{EXPL} \) was danced all night

‘There was dancing all night’
Our survey included 200 adult controls. The most surprising result of our survey was that for many of the adults, the traditional Impersonal Passive displayed two of the syntactic properties that we had identified as being associated with being Active.

Það var dansað alla nóttina.

‘There was dancing all night’
Consider first control of subject-oriented adjuncts, a property of actives. Do we find this syntactic property in the traditional Impersonal Passive?

\[ \text{Það var komið } \textit{skellihlæjandi} \text{ í tímann} \]
\[ \text{it}_{\text{EXPL}} \text{ was come } \text{laughing} \text{ into class} \]

‘They came into class \text{laughing}’
Impersonal Passive

Það var komið skellihlæjandi í tímann
it_{EXPL} was come laughing into class
‘They came into class laughing’

New Construction

Það var lesið minningargreinina grátandi
it_{EXPL} was read the.memorial.article crying
‘They read the memorial article crying’
‘The memorial article was read, crying’
Acceptance of subject-oriented adjuncts in Impersonal Passives vs. overall rates of acceptance for the New Construction (M&S)
If control of subject-oriented adjuncts is a syntactic property of actives, the Impersonal Passive is at least as “active” as the New Construction.
Now let’s consider the control of reflexives, a property of actives: surveys showed that for many adults, reflexive verbs could occur in Impersonal passives.

Svo var bara drifð sig á ball.
then was just hurried REFL-ACC to dance
‘Then everyone just hurried off to the dance’
(M&S, included in both surveys)

This is not the New Construction, it is the traditional Impersonal Passive with a reflexive verb, which in many languages are known to pattern with intransitive verb. Yet many speakers find it acceptable to include an anaphor.
Svo var bara drifið sig á ball.

then was just hurried to dance

‘Then everyone just hurried off to the dance’

(M&S, included in both surveys)
Compare this level of acceptability with the levels of acceptability by age that we saw for the New Construction:
The Impersonal Passive is showing the same *active* syntactic property as the New Construction, but at higher levels of acceptance!
Impersonal passives allow control of adjuncts and control of reflexives at greater rates for younger people, but the shift probably started within the last century.
Acceptance of Bound Anaphora in the Impersonal Passive is a 20th Century Phenomenon

“I have not been able to find any cases of [Impersonal passives] with reflexive verbs in Old Icelandic; ....Thus, the reflexive [Impersonal passive] seems to be an innovation of Modern Icelandic which is increasingly gaining ground and is accepted by many speakers who do not accept the [New Construction] ... (cf. Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir, p.122).”

(Eythórsson 2008:189)
About half of the adult population is accepting *active* syntactic properties as part of the Impersonal Passive. What could explain this?
Change that had NOT been noticed:

Speakers have all noticed the eruption of the New Construction, but they have not noticed the slowly shifting tectonic plates that have led up to the New Construction.

What is the nature of this much more subtle change?
Hypothesis: Impersonal passives of intransitive verbs are in principle syntactically ambiguous between active and passive.

(Maling & Sigurjónsdóttor 2002)

Impersonal Passive:

\[ e \quad [\text{VP} \ var \ dansað] \quad \text{Grammar 1} \]

Impersonal Active:

\[ \text{pro}_\text{arb} \quad [\text{VP} \ var \ dansað] \quad \text{Grammar 2} \]
Hypothesis: Impersonal passives of intransitive verbs are *in principle* syntactically ambiguous between active and passive.  

(Maling & Sigurjónsdóttor 2002)

Hypothesis: roughly half of adult speakers responding to our survey analyzed the traditional Impersonal Passive as a **passive** construction.

The other half analyzed it as **active**, i.e. having a syntactically accessible null subject. This makes bound anaphors and adjuncts possible.
So if a speaker has the Impersonal Passive represented as

\[[e] \ [_{VP \ \text{var dansað}]\]

then they will not accept control of aduncts because there is nothing to control them.

Some anedotal evidence:
One 70-year-old speaker, after considering this example:

Það var komið skelliglæjandi í tímann

\( \text{it}_{\text{EXPL}} \) was come laughing into class

‘It was come into class laughing’

“No, you can’t say that. Someone is missing.”

\[ [e] \quad [\text{VP} \, \text{var komið}] \]
Hypothesis: Impersonal passives of intransitive verbs are \textit{in principle} syntactically ambiguous between active and passive.

(Maling & Sigurjónsdóttor 2002)

This makes an interesting prediction: those adults who accept the adjuncts in the Impersonal Passive should be more likely to accept the bound anaphors in the Impersonal Passive, because their syntactic representation of the construction provides for both.

\[ [\text{pro}_{arb}]\ [\text{VP}\ \text{var}\ \text{komið}] \]
This prediction is borne out:

For both adolescents and adults, acceptance of subject-oriented participles is significantly correlated with acceptance of reflexives.

Adolescents:  \( r = 0.43 \)  \( p< .001 \)  \( (n=1693) \)
Adults:           \( r = 0.53 \)  \( p< .001 \)   \( (n=199) \)

So speakers who accept subject-oriented participles and reflexives may have an active representation of the Impersonal Passive, while speakers who reject subject-oriented participles and reflexives may have a passive representation of the Impersonal Passive
“Notionally, generalized subject constructions are close to the passive, especially in that the agent is backgrounded.” (p. 49)

“The difference between passive and desubjective [active clause with no subject] is of a syntactic rather than a semantic nature.” (p. 58)

“...intransitive desubjectives are indistinguishable from passives of intransitive verbs, so transitive desubjectives are the crucial case.” (Haspelmath 1990:35)

Possible stages of change in the grammatical system:

Stage 1. Impersonal passives occur only with intransitive verbs (e.g. *dansa* ‘dance’) (Icelandic before c. 1900)

Stage 2. Impersonal passives start to occur with reflexive verbs in the 20th century, as some speakers reanalyze the Impersonal Passive as a syntactically active construction with a pro\textsubscript{arb} subject (Grammar 2).

Stage 3. For Grammar 2 speakers, Impersonal “passives” occur with all transitive verbs, with ACC on retained object. This is what we recognize as the “New Construction”
Where do we go from here?

1. Within-subject analysis of survey data to determine grammars of individual speakers
2. Longitudinal studies (in progress)
3. Sociolinguistic studies
4. Discourse context of NI vs. canonical passive
5. Comparative studies of other Germanic languages
6. Corpus studies: annotated corpora under construction
The Icelandic Parsed Historical Corpus (IcePaHC)

Wallenberg, Joel C., Anton Karl Ingason, Einar Freyr Sigurðsson and Eiríkur Rögnvaldsson. 2010. Icelandic Parsed Historical Corpus (IcePaHC). Version 0.2.  
http://www.linguist.is/icelandic_treebank

- Goal: 1 million words by August, 2011
- (currently c. 262,000 words)
- Time period covered: c. 1100-1900

Supported by:
- Icelandic Research Fund (RANNÍS) (#090662011)
- U.S. National Science Foundation (NSF) (#OISE-0853114)
- University of Iceland Research Fund (Rannsóknasjóður HÍ)
Takk fyrir!
Thank you for listening
Acknowledgments:
National Science Foundation, SBR-9223725
(pilot study in 1997)
Lýðveldissjóður, Republic of Iceland
Vísindasjóður RANNÍS (Icelandic Science Foundation)
Rannsóknasjóður Háskólan (University of Iceland Research Fund)
(43) Sentences which can be analyzed as either a Canonical Passive or NI (Eythórsson 2008)

a. það var skammað lítið barn. (=ex.73a)
   it$_{EXPL}$ was scolded-neut. little child-neut
   ‘A little child was scolded’

b. það var hrint litlum strák. (= ex. 73b)
   it$_{EXPL}$ was pushed little-DAT boy
   ‘A little boy was pushed’
(44) Sentences are unambiguously instances of the NI – definite object NP (Eythórsson 2008)

a. Það var skammað litla barnið. (=ex.74a)

  \( \text{it}_{\text{EXPL}} \) was scolded-neut. little child.the

  ‘The little child was scolded’

b. Það var hrint litla stráknum. (= ex.74b)

  \( \text{it}_{\text{EXPL}} \) was pushed little-DAT boy.the

  ‘The little boy was pushed’

a. “Once the postverbal NP has been reanalyzed as an object that is assigned structural accusative case, the New Passive emerges.” (Eythórsson (2008:212-213)

b. “Since the NP is not a subject but an object, the DE no longer applies.”
(48) Eythórsson: Norwegian ditransitives show the predicted lack of the DE

*Det vart overrekt vinnaren ein pokal /*pokalen.  
itEXPL was given the.winner a cup/*the.cup
‘The winner was given a cup/*the cup’
( = Eythórsson 2008, ex. (66b))
(50) Syntactic Properties of the Norwegian Impers. Passive – note that the selv ‘self’ anaphor in (50b) is not allowed

a. Det ble danset av alle og enhver i bygda.
   it was danced by one and all in the village

b. Det ble låst seg (*selv) inn i fabrikken.
   it was locked REFL (self) inside in the factory

   it was danced laughing/crying/drunk

d. *Under krigen ble det forsvunnet ofte uten spor.
   in the war was it disappeared often without a trace
Impersonal passives of aspectual *véra* ‘to be’ are part of the standard language, and may be possible model for the NI

(a. “Í gær þegar það *var* gefið mér lýsi, þá...”
yesterday when it was given me lýsi, then...
(girl, age 4;4)

Standard language:

b. Í gær þegar *var* verið að gefa mér lýsi, þá...
yesterday when was been to give me lýsi, then...
‘Yesterday when they were giving me cod liver oil, then....’


- research supported by grants from Vísin- Íslandsfélaga (VÍSFEL), Rannsóknarráður Háskóla Íslands, Lífveldisráðun, and in part by NSF grant BCS-9223725 to Brandeis University.
The Icelandic Parsed Historical Corpus (IcePaHC)


- Goal: 1 million words by August, 2011
- (currently c. 200,000 words)
- Time period covered: c. 1100-1900

Supported by:
- Icelandic Research Fund (RANNÍS) (#090662011)
- U.S. National Science Foundation (NSF) (#OISE-0853114)
- University of Iceland Research Fund (Rannsóknasjóður HÍ)
Characteristic ‘S’-shaped curve

“A given change begins quite gradually; after reaching a certain point (say, twenty per cent), it picks up momentum and proceeds at a much faster rate; and finally tails off slowly before reaching completion. The result is an ∫-curve…”

“For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.”
Wallace Stevens, The Snow Man
Reflexive impersonal passive with adjunct einn ‘alone’

Acceptability rates for the sentence

*Svo var bara drifíð sig einn á ball.*

so was just gone-neut REFL alone-m.sg. to dance

‘So people just went to the dance alone’

Elsewhere | Inner Rvík | Adults
---|---|---
60% | 48% | 22.5%

(previously unreported results from the Sigurjónsdóttir & Maling 1999-2000 study; the acceptance rate for adolescents in Elsewhere ranged from 52-70%)
Icelandic has an unusual combination of auxiliary *be* + past participle which is not passive but active in meaning:

\[ \text{það var verið [að borða fisk]} \]

*ít_{EXPL} was been to eat fish-ACC*

‘People were eating fish’ Thráinsson (2007:429)
**Canonical Passive**

Litlum strák var hrint.

A little boy-DAT was pushed-neut.sg.

‘A little boy was pushed.

**Impersonal “Expletive Passive”: Transitive**

Pað var hrint

litlum strák was pushed-neut.sg.

itEXPL little boy-DAT

‘A little boy was pushed’

or ‘Somebody pushed a little boy’ (Eythórsson 2008, ex. 73b)