

‘By’-phrases in the Icelandic New Impersonal Passive

Einar Freyr Sigurðsson • University of Pennsylvania

Brynhildur Stefánsdóttir • University of Iceland

Summary. We present a study intended to test and compare the grammaticality of ‘by’-phrases in the Icelandic New Impersonal Passive (NIP) (1a) and the Low Canonical Passive (LCP) (1b). We argue that our data support an analysis involving a weak implicit argument along the lines of Ingason et al. (2012).

Background. Analysing the NIP is not straightforward, some claim that it’s an active with a *pro* subject patterning with the Polish *no/to*-construction (e.g. Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir 2002) whereas others state that it’s a passive (e.g. Eythórsson 2008, Jónsson 2009). Even though the NIP shows passive morphology and there is no overt external argument, A-movement is impossible, objects are assigned structural accusative case, they are bound (2), and secondary predicates are ungrammatical (3).

‘By’-phrases are important for any analysis of the NIP: If they are ungrammatical, then that poses a problem for the Passive Analysis; if they are grammatical, then the Active Analysis cannot be correct. The results in the grammaticality judgment task Jónsson (2009) reports on suggest that ‘by’-phrases are grammatical and therefore, according to him, the NIP is a passive. We claim, however, that the only thing the results suggest is that the Active Analysis should be abandoned—they are neither evidence in favor of the Passive Analysis nor alternative accounts, such as the one Ingason et al. (2012) propose (see below). Furthermore, although judgment tasks can be a good method to study grammaticality, there may be an inherent difficulty in asking non-linguists whether something is grammatical in a construction ungrammatical to many (Cornips and Poletto 2005). Therefore, a different kind of a study is needed.

Data. We present a new study, following a method proposed in E.F. Sigurðsson (2012). In Icelandic, a few verbs optionally take a PP complement headed by *af* ‘from’ (cf. the active sentence in (4)). Morphologically, that is the same P as heads Icelandic ‘by’-phrases. Thus, when such verbs are passivized, the *af*-phrases are ambiguous. As Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir’s (2002) study reveals, all speakers seem to have the canonical passive but only a small subset, mainly younger speakers, are also NIP speakers. Therefore, we conducted our study among 12- and 13-year-olds.

We began by asking the passive question in (5), ‘What language is spoken in Estonia?’ The *wh*-phrase is morphologically syncretic for nominative and accusative. Also, since participles in the NIP have by default neuter form, it’s not transparent whether the neuter *wh*-phrase agrees with the participle or not. For non-NIP speakers, given that an answer is provided with one word (‘Estonian’), only the nominative is possible. *Wh*-movement is grammatical in the NIP (E.F. Sigurðsson 2012) and therefore some NIP speakers will answer with accusative (= NIP), others with nominative (= canonical passive). This way we were able to divide the group into NIP speakers and other speakers.

Next, all speakers were to read a very short made-up news story. There were two versions of it, one, presented to the NIP speakers, contained an NIP sentence and an ambiguous *af*-phrase, the other, presented to “other speakers”, contained the same sentence except it was in the LCP (see (6a) and (6b), respectively, which form a minimal pair since subjects in the LCP stay low). The task for the speakers was then to write about the fishing vessel owner in the story, including how the quota could be linked to him (if, for example, a speaker wrote ‘He bought the quota’, we know that s/he interprets the PP as a ‘by’-phrase). The results, see Table 1, show a statistically significant difference between interpretation of *af*-phrases in the NIP and the LCP ($\chi^2 = 4.96$, $p = .026$).

Analysis. Jónsson’s (2009) data suggest that ‘by’-phrases are indeed grammatical in the NIP. That would mean that the Active Analysis does not hold. However, our study shows that we cannot jump to the conclusion that the NIP is simply a passive construction—if we do that the difference in Table 1 is left unexplained: Why is *af* less likely to be interpreted as ‘by’ in the NIP than the LCP? We agree with Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir’s original insight that the NIP differs in fundamental ways from the canonical passive and propose that the results of our study, see Table 1, reflect a structural difference between the NIP and the LCP. This is captured by Ingason et al.’s (2012) analysis who build on Landau’s (2010) division of null subjects into strong (PRO, *pro*) and weak (e.g. passive agent) implicit arguments. Ingason et al. propose, for the NIP, that there is a weak implicit argument (WIA; φ), smaller than a pronoun, in spec,*v*P that restricts, but does not saturate, the subject position. Under their account ‘by’-phrases are grammatical (cf. also H.Á. Sigurðsson 2011, E.F. Sigurðsson 2012 for similar accounts). In Landau’s system an implicit argument must be strong to license a secondary predicate. Thus the WIA Analysis of the NIP, like the Passive Analysis, runs into no trouble when accounting for examples like (3). However, whereas the Passive Analysis cannot explain binding (2), the WIA Analysis successfully accounts for it. A φ subject in spec,*v*P makes the NIP “an unusually “active passive”” (H.Á. Sigurðsson 2011:13), and thus wherever there arises ambiguity such as in (6a), the ‘by’-phrase reading becomes less salient.

- (1) a. %Það var barið lítinn strákur.
EXPL was beaten.N.SG little.M.ACC boy.M.ACC
b. Það var barinn lítill strákur.
EXPL was beaten.M.SG little.M.NOM boy.M.NOM
‘A little boy was beaten.’ (Eythórsson 2008:174)
- (2) %[...] það er drepið sjálfan sig.
EXPL is killed self.ACC REFL.ACC
‘There is taking of one’s life.’ (Árnadóttir et al. 2011:48)
- (3) %Það er alltaf borðað morgunmat (*nakinn).
EXPL is always eaten breakfast.ACC naked
‘Breakfast is always eaten nude.’ (Jónsson 2009:297)
- (4) María keypti bílinn (af Jóni).
Mary bought car.the.ACC from John
‘Mary bought John’s car.’
- (5) Hvaða mál er talað í Eistlandi?
what language.N.NOM/ACC is spoken.N.SG in Estonia
‘What language is spoken in Estonia?’
- (6) a. Nýlega var **keypt mikinn kvóta** af útgerðarmanninum
recently was bought.N.SG much.M.ACC quota.M.ACC by/from fishing.vessel.owner.the
Aðalsteini Guðmundssyni.
Aðalsteinn Guðmundsson
b. Nýlega var **keyptur mikill kvóti** af útgerðarmanninum
recently was bought.M.SG much.M.NOM quota.M.NOM by/from fishing.vessel.owner.the
Aðalsteini Guðmundssyni.
Aðalsteinn Guðmundsson
‘Recently, the fishing vessel owner bought a lot of quota /
Recently, the fishing vessel owner sold a lot of quota.’

	‘by’	‘from’
New Impersonal Passive	4	14
Low Canonical Passive	18	15

Table 1: Interpretation of *af*-phrases.

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