

Demoting the Agent

Passive, middle and other voice phenomena

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From passive to active*

Syntactic change in progress in Icelandic

Joan Maling

This paper discusses the results of a nationwide study of a syntactic change underway in Iceland. The new construction appears to contain passive morphology, auxiliary *vera* ('to be') and a passive participle which can assign accusative case to a postverbal argument. The study was designed to test the hypothesis that the innovative construction involves the reanalysis of passive morphology as a syntactically active voice construction with a phonologically null impersonal subject. Such a reanalysis parallels the completed development of the *-no/to* construction in Polish and the autonomous form in Irish. I show that verbal morphology can be ambiguous between active and passive voice, and speculate about the reasons why this change is happening in Icelandic but in none of the other Germanic languages.

1. Introduction

In the last half century, a new construction has sprung up spontaneously in various parts of Iceland, giving us a rare opportunity to investigate a major syntactic change at a relatively early stage. I will refer to this innovative construction, illustrated in (1a), as the "new construction." In this paper I discuss the significance of

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the results of a nationwide study conducted together with Sigríður Sigurjónsdóttir (see Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir 2002; Sigurjónsdóttir & Maling 2002) for our understanding of grammatical voice, arguing that despite its historical origins as a morphological passive, the new construction is best analyzed as a syntactically active impersonal.

- (1) a. *Það var beðið mig að vaska upp* New construction
 it_{EXPL} was asked-neut me-ACC to wash up
 "They asked me to do the dishes"
- b. *Ég var beðinn að vaska upp* Canonical Passive
 I-NOM was asked-masc to wash up
 "I was asked to do the dishes"
- c. *Það var dansað í kringum jólatréð* Impersonal Passive
 it_{EXPL} was danced-neut around the.Christmas.tree
 "People danced around the Christmas tree"

Sentence (1a) is widely accepted by adolescents around the country, but sharply ungrammatical in the standard language, as shown by the results of our study, where over 73% of the youngsters ($n = 1695$) judged the sentence to be acceptable, as compared to under 8% of the adults ($n = 200$). Sentence (1b) is the canonical passive, while (1c) exemplifies the so-called "impersonal passive."

1.1 Descriptive background

The "impersonal passive" standardly occurs only with intransitive verbs, including verbs taking PP or clausal complements; the new construction, on the other hand, occurs with transitive and ditransitive verbs as well. For all speakers, expletive *það* is not a grammatical subject; it serves only to satisfy the Verb-Second constraint, which is common to all Germanic languages other than English. Thus *það* does not appear in either yes-no questions or clauses with another constituent in clause-initial position.

- (2) *Var (*það) beðið þig að vaska upp?* New Construction
 was (*it) asked you-ACC to wash up?
 "Did they ask you to do the dishes?"

The standard Icelandic passive has the same basic syntactic properties as its counterparts in other Germanic languages, but adds much richer agreement and a greater variety of morphological case-marking. If the main verb takes an accusative object, that argument will correspond to a nominative subject in the passive voice, which triggers agreement with both the finite verb and the participle. If the verb governs lexical case on its object, e.g. dative, as in (3), that case is preserved in the passive; for definite NPs, movement to subject position is still obligatory (3b),

giving rise to one class of the oblique subjects for which Icelandic is famous (see Zaenen et al. 1985; Sigurðsson 1989; inter alia):

- (3) a. *Það var sagt mér að vaska upp.* New Construction
 it_{EXPL} was told me-DAT to wash up
- b. *Mér var sagt að vaska upp.* Canonical Passive
 I-DAT was told to wash up
 "I was told to do the dishes"

In general, in both passive and active voice sentences, subject NPs can occur in postverbal position only if they are indefinite:

- (4) a. *Það voru seldir margir bílar í gær.*
 it_{EXPL} were sold-MASC.PL many cars-MASC.PL yesterday
 "Many cars were sold yesterday"
- b. **Það voru seldir bílarnir í gær.*
 it_{EXPL} were sold-MASC.PL the.cars-MASC.PL yesterday

Thus the new construction has surface properties of both the standard passive and the active voice: It has the verb forms of the passive, but the accusative case and postverbal position of the pronoun *mig* 'me' in (1a) is like the active. The morphosyntactic innovations of the new construction are listed in (5):

- (5) morphosyntactic innovations in the new construction
- accusative case on underlying object
 - lack of verb agreement with nominal argument
 - postverbal position: no NP-movement to subject position
 - lack of the definiteness effect

The auxiliary and past participle are invariant 3rd person singular, neuter. In standard Icelandic, NP-movement to subject position is obligatory in the passive; only an indefinite subject could occur after the participle.

This syntactic innovation is a system-internal change, and cannot be attributed to borrowing. Although a similar syntactic change took place independently in Polish and Irish several centuries ago, none of the languages commonly spoken by Icelanders have the construction, so the usual scapegoats for linguistic contamination, namely, Danish and English, cannot be blamed. The new construction apparently dates back only a few decades. The oldest known "sighting" is from 1959.

- (6) *Það var bólusettt okkur.* (1959, girl born 1951)
 it_{EXPL} was inoculated us-ACC
 Intended: "They inoculated us"

A teacher recalls having heard her 8-year old niece from Akureyri say this sentence in 1959, but the girl's mother doesn't think the construction was common at the time (Haraldsdóttir 1997:22). Twenty years later, however, the new construction was reported to be common in Akureyri, the "capital of the north". In 1984, Helgi Hálfðanarson's usage manual *Gætum tungunnar* [Let's watch our language] included the new construction as language error #174, a usage to be corrected in children's speech, but in general the new construction has gone either unnoticed or ignored by prescriptivists. Although elementary school teachers certainly recognize and correct this construction, the school system as a whole has not (yet) begun to marshal its forces against the "new impersonal" as they have against the so-called Dative sickness (*hágufallssýki*), which began around the turn of the 20th century (Svavarsdóttir 1982). Dative sickness refers to the substitution of dative case for standard accusative (or in a few instances nominative) on the experiencer subject argument of certain nonagentive verbs.

The new construction is being observed in the usage of both children and some adult speakers, typically in the spoken language but also in writing. The adult speakers born in the 1940's and 1950's who have been observed using the new construction all seem to have grown up outside Reykjavík; this is consistent with our data, which show that the "new impersonal" is more widespread outside of the capital city. The construction is not limited to pronouns, and is also found in embedded clauses, both indicative and subjunctive. In the grammars of both children and adolescents, it co-exists with the canonical passive. Although it is likely that there are discourse differences between the "new impersonal" and the standard passive, they seem to be equivalent in terms of their truth conditions. Particularly interesting is the example in (7), from a sign posted at the Háskólabíó movie theater in Reykjavík in September, 2004.

- (7) *Skoðað verður miða við innganginn.*
 inspected-NEUT will.be tickets-ACC on entrance
 "Tickets will be inspected on entering"

Whoever made the sign combined the innovative (substandard) accusative case on the postverbal patient argument with the (formal) "Stylistic fronting" of the past participle, which occurs only in clauses without a grammatical subject (Maling 1980).

1.2 How to analyze the new construction: Two hypotheses

What are the syntactic properties of the new construction? How should it be analyzed? There are two basic classes of analyses, as sketched in (8).

- (8) a. Passive without NP-movement:
 [_{IP} [_e] Aux [_{VP} V_{part} (NP)]]
 b. Active Impersonal
 [_{IP} *pro*_{arb} Aux [_{VP} V_{part} (NP)]]

Under the first analysis, the new construction is a variant of the standard passive in which NP-movement to subject position fails to apply, and the NP gets assigned accusative in situ, presumably by the verbal participle. This is essentially the analysis that Sobin (1985) gives to the accusative-assigning participial construction in Ukrainian. Under the second analysis, the new construction is a syntactically active construction with a null [+human] pronoun subject. Note that Icelandic is not a null-subject language; personal pronoun subjects are as obligatory as they are in English. However, Icelandic does have null subjects in clauses containing weather verbs and in various impersonal constructions.

2. Syntactic change in the English auxiliary system

Across languages, we find constructions that are clearly active voice, constructions that are clearly passive voice, and constructions where we cannot easily tell. So what is this new construction? The verb form looks like a passive, but the accusative case and the postverbal position of the "undergoer" argument resemble an active voice construction. If the surface properties of morphological case and agreement are not enough to distinguish between the two analyses, how do we decide which is the best analysis? Verbal morphology is often ambiguous. Let me illustrate this point with an example from the history of English. Consider the italicized verb forms in the following sentences:

- (9) a. "The clock struck ten while the trunks *were carrying* down."
 (1818, Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, p. 155)
 b. "She only came on foot, to leave more room for the harp, which *was bringing* in the carriage."
 (1818, Jane Austen, *Persuasion*, p. 50)
 c. "I met a dead corpse of the plague, just *carrying* down a little pair of stairs."
 (Samuel Pepys, diarist, 1633–1703)

The lack of a passive auxiliary in the progressive examples in (9) renders them virtually undecipherable to the modern ear. While we eventually recognize that the italicized verb forms must be passive in meaning, it is clearly not the verbal morphology that provides the necessary clues. A sequence like *were carrying* was ambiguous between active and passive voice:

- (10) a. The trunks *were carrying* down the stairs. (trunks=subject)
 b. The men *were carrying* down the trunks. (trunks=object)

The examples in (9) reflect a relatively recent change in the English auxiliary system; progressive passives didn't appear until the very end of 18th century. The earliest known example is from 1795, cited by Visser (1973: §2158):

- (11) "a fellow whose uttermost upper grinder *is being torn* out by the roots by a mutton-fisted barber" (1795 Robert Southey, *Life & Correspondence*)

The two constructions co-existed for about a century, and an author might use both constructions in a given work.¹ According to Visser, the grammatical subject of the older form was generally inanimate rather than animate, hence clearly not the agent. The change might be understood as simplification of the phrase structure rule for the auxiliary. Prior to the change, English had a templatic syntax which allowed for only one of the two distinct *be*-auxiliaries, one progressive, one passive, in a given verb phrase. If progressive aspect was to be conveyed, then the passive auxiliary was simply not allowed. The innovation consisted of allowing the two *be*-auxiliaries to co-occur. Gradually over the course of the 19th century, the new form took over, largely driving out the older form. What is relevant here is that during the century in which the two forms co-existed, the verbal morphology was ambiguous as to grammatical voice. If the verbal morphology is sometimes ambiguous even in a familiar language like English, how can we possibly tell whether a construction is active or passive just by looking at the verb form in an unfamiliar language like Northern Pomo, or even in Indo-European languages such as Irish or Polish/Ukrainian or Icelandic?

3. Grammatical properties of passive vs. active voice

3.1 Discourse properties of the passive voice

How do speakers choose between using active/passive voice? Grammarians have long noted two distinct discourse properties of the passive voice across languages:²

- (12) Discourse properties of the passive voice
- to make the patient (if any) the discourse "theme" of the sentence;
 - to avoid naming the agent

1. The construction is now so well-established that it is difficult to imagine the depth of feeling that this syntactic innovation engendered among language purists of the day. For example, R. Grant White, in *Words and their Uses* (1871:336) declares that the new idiom "is the most incongruous usage of words and ideas that ever attained respectable usage in any civilized language" (cited by Visser 1973:2427). See Visser for further discussion.

2. For discussion of the discourse properties of the Icelandic passive, see Kress (1982:150) and Ottósson (1986:97).

Since the patient remains in postverbal position, the Icelandic innovative construction cannot plausibly serve the purpose of making this argument the discourse "theme" or "topic". Let us consider the second function of the passive voice. Kress (1982:150) calls this function making the agent "anonymous"; Haspelmath (1990) describes it as backgrounding or desubjectivizing the agent. Using the standard passive is certainly one way of achieving this goal. For example, while a politician might concede that "Mistakes were made" using the passive voice, the same spokesperson would be very unlikely to say "We made mistakes" using the active voice unless talking about the opposition: "My opponent made many mistakes."

However, the same goal of making the agent anonymous can be achieved in other ways, for example, by using an active voice construction with an impersonal pronoun subject, e.g. nonspecific 'they' or 'you' in English:³

- (13) a. English is spoken here. (passive voice)
b. They speak English here, don't they? (active voice)

Space limitations preclude a more detailed discussion; it suffices to note that both the impersonal active and the passive can serve to background the agent (Haspelmath 1990:49). If the line between the two is so nebulous from the point of view of discourse function, does it matter whether we call the new construction passive or not? My answer is that it matters very much. This terminological controversy is important because syntactically, there are sharp differences between the two grammatical voices. As Haspelmath observes, "The difference between passive and desubjective is of a syntactic rather than a semantic nature" (1990:58).

3.2 Syntactic properties of active vs. passive voice clauses

So what are these syntactic differences? Based on her study of the Polish and Ukrainian *-no/to*-construction and the Irish autonomous construction, Maling (1993) selected the four syntactic properties shown in (14) to use as diagnostics.

- (14) Syntactic properties of active construction with impersonal subject
- No agentive *by*-phrase is possible
 - Binding of anaphors (reflexive and reciprocal) is possible
 - Control of subject-oriented adjuncts is possible
 - Nonagentive ("unaccusative") verbs can occur in the construction.

A syntactically active impersonal construction with a grammatical subject, e.g. French *on* or German *man*, has all four of these properties; the standard passive

3. English sentences with *one*, e.g. "One shouldn't tell a lie," are quite formal in register, and therefore will not be cited here. See Huddleston & Payne (2002:427).

Table 1. Syntactic properties of active vs. passive voice clauses

Syntactic property	Active	Passive
agentive <i>by</i> -phrase	*	ok
bound anaphors in object position	ok	*
control of subject-oriented adjuncts	ok	*
nonagentive ("unaccusative") verbs	ok	*

construction lacks all four properties.⁴ Thus we observe the sharply contrasting behavior shown in Table 1.

The hypothesis of Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) was that the new construction in Icelandic is being reanalyzed as an active construction with an impersonal pronoun subject. The impersonal subject in this construction is null, but as a thematic subject, it is syntactically accessible to syntactic rules which refer to the grammatical subject of a clause.

Most of these syntactic properties are well-known enough not to need further discussion. Furthermore, the grammaticality judgments are robust, except for subject-oriented adjuncts. Lack of an appropriate grammatical subject gives rise to the phenomenon known as the "dangling modifier". Although generally considered ungrammatical by both prescriptivists and generative linguists, they do occur with some frequency. Nonetheless, native speakers recognize that there is something odd about sentences like those in (15).

- (15) a. ?*Laughing, the children were silenced by a glance from the teacher.
 b. *Laughing, there was a pillow fight.

Speakers find it difficult to say just who is supposed to be laughing. This intuition is robust enough that it was used as a diagnostic in Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (1997, 2002).

4. Cross-linguistic comparison: Passive morphology reanalyzed as active

As mentioned earlier, a similar syntactic development has occurred independently in a number of languages. As discussed in Maling (1993), the so-called autonomous form in Irish and the *-no/to* construction in Polish each developed from a canonical morphological passive. In both these languages, the innovative construction has the syntactic properties listed in (14) in addition to the overt morphological properties of accusative case-marking and nonagreeing verb

4. As pointed out by Torgrim Solstad (personal communication), unaccusative verbs can form impersonal passives in German. A Google search turns up examples like *Es wurde gestorben auf beiden Seiten* "it was died on both sides." Further investigation is needed.

(cf. Stenson 1989 for Irish; Dziwirek 1991; Lavine 2000; and various references cited in Billings & Maling 1995 for Polish). In Polish, the syntactic behavior of the canonical passive contrasts sharply with that of the accusative-assigning participial *-no/to* construction illustrated in (16a). The canonical passive has all the syntactic properties of a true passive expected if the underlying syntactic representation is something like (8a). An agentive *by*-phrase is allowed, but there's no thematic subject to serve as a binder for bound anaphors, or as a controller for various subject-oriented adjuncts (nor can the underlying agent serve as the controller). The *-no/to* construction has the opposite properties. Finally, the Polish *-no/to* construction does not observe the 1-Advancement Exclusiveness Law (1AEX) of Relational Grammar (Perlmutter & Postal 1984), which rules out passives of unaccusative predicates; the only lexical restriction is a semantic one: The understood subject must be [+human]. To summarize, despite its historical origin as a morphological passive, the innovative *-no/to* construction in Polish now behaves syntactically like German *man*-sentences or French *on*-sentences, the only difference being that the impersonal pronoun subject is null.

Particularly instructive is the contrast between the Polish *-no/to* construction and the superficially similar cognate construction in Ukrainian.⁵

- (16) Two accusative-assigning *-no/to* participial constructions
- a. Polish (Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir 2002, ex. 8b)
Świątynię zbudowano w 1640 roku.
 church-ACC build-no in 1640 year
- b. Ukrainian (Sobin 1985:653)
Cerkvu buło zbudovano v 1640 roc'i.
 church-E.ACC was build-no in 1640 year
 'The church was built in 1640'

The Ukrainian *-no/to* construction discussed by Sobin (1985) differs from its Polish counterpart with respect to all four syntactic properties (cf. Billings & Maling 1995; Lavine 2000, 2001). The contrasting behaviors are summarized in Table 2; Polish and Ukrainian examples illustrating these properties can be found in Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002).

The systematic differences between the canonical passive and the *-no/to* construction in Polish would be unexplained if both constructions are analyzed as passive. The moral of this comparison is that we cannot tell what the syntactic be-

5. The forms *-n-* and *-t-* in Polish and Ukrainian are allomorphs of the past passive morpheme; the *-o*, once the neuter singular inflection, is now invariant. See Lavine (2000: Ch. 3) for discussion of the morphological status of this ending. Lavine attributes the contrasting syntactic behavior to the presence (Ukrainian) vs. absence (Polish) of an auxiliary verb. The innovative Icelandic construction poses a challenge to this account.

Table 2. Syntactic properties of various constructions in Polish and Ukrainian

Syntactic property	Pol/Ukr passive	Polish -no/to	Ukrainian -no/to
agentive <i>by</i> -phrase	ok	*	ok
bound anaphors in object position	*	ok	*
control of subject-oriented adjuncts	*	ok	*
nonagentive ("unaccusative") verbs	*	ok	*

havior of a construction is by looking at its superficial morphological properties (e.g. case, agreement). Despite their common historical origin and superficial similarity (i.e. the shared morphological properties of assigning accusative case and consequent lack of agreement), the Polish and Ukrainian constructions are polar opposites in terms of syntactic behavior. The obvious question, then, is: Which of the two polar opposites does the innovative Icelandic construction most resemble?

5. The nationwide survey

We developed a questionnaire to test the syntactic behavior of the innovative construction. Our questionnaire was a revised version of a pilot study conducted in the spring of 1996 (Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir 1997). An extensive nationwide study was conducted in the fall and winter of 1999–2000; the results are reported in Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) and Sigurjónsdóttir & Maling (2002).⁶ The population of Iceland is approximately 286,000; the population of Greater Reykjavík is approximately 178,000, more than half the population of the country. However, because a major goal of our study was to determine the geographical spread of the change, only about a third (583 of 1695) subjects in our study lived in Greater Reykjavík. The questionnaire was distributed to 1,731 tenth graders (age 15–16) in 65 schools throughout Iceland; this number represents 45% of those born in the country in 1984. Tenth grade is the last year of compulsory education in Iceland. The questionnaire was also given to 205 adult controls in various parts of the country. After excluding subjects who made more than one error on the ungrammatical control sentences, we had results from 1695 students, 845 males and 850 females, and from 200 adults.

Table 3 shows the geographic variation in the acceptability rates for the "new impersonal" in the test sentences containing animate accusative and dative objects, simple examples of the innovative construction like "it was hit me" or "it was

Table 3. Geographical variation in acceptance of the new construction

Geographical region	Accusative Objects	Dative Objects
7 regions outside Reykjavík	51–68%	57–75%
Outer Reykjavík	53%	60%
Inner Reykjavík	28%	35%

told me to do the dishes". As expected, many students judged the new construction as something they might say. Our results revealed a statistically significant relationship between geographical region and the acceptability judgments. There was a clear difference between Reykjavík and the rest of the country; the difference was even more striking once we divided Reykjavík into the two parts, which we called Inner and Outer Reykjavík, based on the location of the schools. Subjects in Outer Reykjavík were nearly twice as likely to accept such examples of the "new impersonal" as subjects in Inner Reykjavík. This effect was highly significant; however, the difference between Outer Reykjavík and the rest of the country excluding Inner Reykjavík was not significant.⁷ This result justified combining the results for adolescents into two groups, Inner Reykjavík vs. the rest of the country, labeled "Elsewhere." For adults, however, there was no significant effect between geographical region and acceptability judgments. In the tables below, the results for adults are reported in the right-most column; in the middle column are the results for adolescents in Inner Reykjavík, where the innovative construction is less advanced; and the results for all other adolescents are in the first column, labeled "Elsewhere."

Inner Reykjavík consists of the old downtown, or city center, and the newer western part of the city, including the independent municipality of Seltjarnarnes. Sociological data from 1999 indicate that the populace of Inner Reykjavík has the highest percentages of university education in the country (*Morgunblaðið*, 20 February, 2001, p. 13), and the students in these schools score the highest on the nationwide exams (*Meðaleinkunnir skóla, Námsmatsstofnun*). Our data showed a highly significant effect for the education levels of both mother and father at all levels (10 years of schooling (compulsory education), 14 years of school (through *framhaldsskóli*), and university level) and for all geographical regions.⁸ The higher the level of education, the lower the acceptance of the new construction. Multiple regression analysis, however, showed that it is geographical region that affects the acceptability the most, independently of parental education. The fact that the

6. See these articles for a more detailed discussion of the results and methods. The 68 test sentences, with glosses and English translations, can be found in the Appendix to Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002).

7. As pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, Reykjavík has expanded enormously in the last 10–15 years, primarily the result of people moving from the countryside to the outskirts of Reykjavík.

8. Detailed documentation and references can be found in Sigurjónsdóttir & Maling (2002).

syntactic change is most advanced outside of Reykjavík is interesting for at least two reasons. First, it shows that this change cannot be attributed to the corrupting influence of the big city, once a common theme in Icelandic literature. Second, it is unexpected given the widespread view among variationists that change is urban. The spread of this Icelandic construction runs counter to the view that "cities have always been at the center of linguistic innovation" (Labov 1994:23).

5.1 Reliability of judgments

It might be questioned whether 15–16 year old adolescents are capable of making reliable grammaticality judgments. Any such objection can be countered by noting that for the control sentences, both grammatical and ungrammatical, adolescents gave similar responses to the adults. For the eleven grammatical control sentences, the mean acceptance rate in the various geographical areas ranges from a low of 89% to high of 94% for adolescents, as compared to between 92% and 96% for adults. There was almost no difference among the different regions of the country, and no difference between Inner and Outer Reykjavík. Our data show that the innovative construction co-exists with canonical passive, just as in Polish, but unlike Irish where the innovative autonomous form eventually drove out the canonical passive.

5.2 Morphological case

One of the well-known properties of Icelandic is that lexically case-marked NPs behave syntactically exactly like NPs bearing syntactic case; they differ only in that lexical case is preserved under NP-movement.⁹ Although we might expect the same to be true of the "new impersonal," morphological case turns out to have a significant effect on acceptability. Kjartansson (1991:18) speculated that the new construction was more common with verbs governing dative than with verbs governing accusative. Our results strongly support this observation. This result is consistent with the observations for Ukrainian/Polish that the change began with those forms where the morphological signs of nonagreement are least obvious. Recall that for verbs governing dative objects, as in (3a), only the violation of the definiteness effect marks a sentence as an example of the new construction; for verbs governing accusative objects, as in (1a), there are in addition the difference in morphological case and the consequent lack of agreement.

9. Case-preservation is usually attributed to the lexical/inherent case-marking associated with the relevant argument in the lexicon (Zaenen & Maling 1984; Zaenen et al. 1985). For a different account, see Svenonius (2005).

Table 4. Acceptance rates for the new construction as function of animacy vs. morphological case on the object

	Elsewhere		Inner Reykjavík	
	Anim	Inanim	Anim	Inanim
ACC	74%	54%	43%	19%
DAT	74%	50%	43%	20%

Although subjects consistently liked dative objects more than accusative ones, morphological case is clearly not always the deciding factor. Examples of the innovative construction were judged more acceptable if the object was animate, or more precisely, [+human]. One might speculate that the higher acceptability of dative objects might be attributed to this preference for [+human] objects. As discussed by Barðdal (1993), many transitive verbs assign either dative or accusative, depending on the animacy of the object (see also Maling 2002). This is illustrated by the following examples taken from Barðdal (1993:4, ex. 6a, b).

- (17) a. *Kristín þvoði handklæðið.*
Christine washed the.towel-ACC
b. *Kristín þvoði barninu.*
Christine washed the.child-DAT

However, our data show a strong preference for animate objects in the new construction regardless of morphological case (Table 4).

It is striking that all of the examples of the innovative construction previously cited in the literature have human objects. It is not the case that inanimate objects are actually disallowed, since as noted earlier, such examples are attested (see example (7)). It may be that the pragmatics of the innovative construction favor affected objects of highly transitive verbs in the sense of Hopper & Thompson (1980). Further research will be needed to determine whether the relevant factor is animacy or a high degree of transitivity.¹⁰

5.3 Testing individual predictions

Our hypothesis was that the innovative construction is in the process of acquiring the syntactic properties listed in (14). First, we included a few sentences to test whether the postverbal NP in the new construction could possibly be analyzed as a grammatical subject. The data showed clearly that the accusative NPs cannot occur in subject position, namely between the finite verb and the participle, either in direct yes-no questions or in declaratives.

10. Engdahl (1999, this volume) reports that the choice between the *s*-passive and the *bli*-passive in Swedish is also sensitive to animacy.

Table 5. Agentive *by*-phrase in grammatical control sentences

Agentive <i>by</i> -phrase in grammatical control sentences	Elsewhere	Inner Rvík	Adults
a. <i>Honum var sagt upp af forstjóranum</i> he-DAT was fired PRT by the.director	87%	93%	90%
b. <i>Það var samþykkt af öllum í bekknum að fara í keilu</i> it was agreed by all in the.class to go bowling	94%	92%	94%

5.3.1 Agentive *by*-phrase

Although overt agentive *by*-phrases are much less common in Icelandic than in English, they are grammatical in the canonical passive. To test whether subjects accept *by*-phrases, we included in the control sentences two canonical passives with an overt *by*-phrase, one sentence containing a transitive verb governing a dative object, the other a verb taking an infinitival complement. The results shown in Table 5 indicate that by and large adolescents accept such sentences as fully grammatical, just like adults.

In a syntactically active sentence, on the other hand, co-occurrence of an agentive *by*-phrase with the thematic subject (either overt or phonologically null) would constitute a Theta-Criterion Violation. Recall that in Polish, agentive *by*-phrases are fine in the canonical passive, but robustly ungrammatical in the *-no/to* construction, where native speakers report that a *by*-phrase is simply “redundant” (see Table 2). Thus if the innovative construction is syntactically active as hypothesized, the presence of a *by*-phrase is predicted to be ungrammatical.¹¹

The questionnaire contained two examples of the new construction designed to test this prediction. The results shown in Table 6 indicate that this prediction is largely confirmed; while not fully ungrammatical among speakers who accept the “new impersonal”, the *by*-phrase significantly lowers the acceptability of the new construction (compare these percentages with the percentages shown in Table 4 for sentences without a *by*-phrase).

The contrast is shown clearly by the minimal pair in Table 7, where (a) is a canonical passive, and (b) is unambiguously the new impersonal construction; both contain overt *by*-phrases. Adolescents in Inner Reykjavík wouldn't be expected to like (b) very much with or without the *by*-phrase, because these sentences are unambiguously instances of the new construction, but even here the

11. The distributional facts can be complicated during language change, especially in language contact situations. Kaiser & Vihman (this volume) compare and contrast the grammatical properties of the Estonian impersonal with the innovative personal passive.

Table 6. Agentive *by*-phrase in the innovative construction

Agentive <i>by</i> -phrase	Elsewhere	Inner Rvík	Adults
a. <i>Það var skoðað bílinn af bifvélavirkjanum</i> itEXPL was inspected the.car by the.mechanic	33%	9%	0%
b. <i>Það var sagt honum upp af forstjóranum</i> itEXPL was fired him PRT by the.director	19%	9%	0%

Table 7. The acceptability of agentive *by*-phrases

Agentive <i>by</i> -phrase	Elsewhere	Inner Rvík	Adults
a. <i>Honum var sagt upp af forstjóranum</i> he-DAT was fired PRT by the.director	87%	93%	90%
b. <i>Það var sagt honum upp af forstjóranum</i> itEXPL was fired him PRT by the.director	19%	9%	0%

presence of an agentive *by*-phrase clearly makes the sentence significantly less acceptable.

5.3.2 Binding of anaphors

If the subject position in the “new impersonal” construction is a theta-position, then binding of anaphors in nonsubject positions should be possible, since there is a thematic subject to bind such an anaphor. The questionnaire contained thirteen sentences designed to test this prediction, 4 with a plain reflexive *sig*, 2 with the compound self-anaphor *sjálfan sig*, 5 with a possessive reflexive, and 2 with a reciprocal. The results for *sig*-anaphors are given in Table 8.

Our results indicated that simple reflexive objects in the “new impersonal” construction are judged highly acceptable, just as acceptable, in fact, as non-reflexive objects. This confirmed Sigurðsson's speculation (1989/1992:235) that the new construction is best with reflexive verbs. This result is not surprising, since in many languages, verbs with reflexive objects behave syntactically like intransitive verbs (Sells, Zaenen, & Zec 1987). As reported in Table 3, only 28% of adolescents in Inner Reykjavík accepted comparable sentences with nonreflexive accusative objects. Even more striking is that between 30–40% of adult subjects accepted the examples with a reflexive object. Adults were four times as likely to accept a sentence with a reflexive object *sig* than to accept a sentence with a non-reflexive accusative object, which would unambiguously be an instance of the new construction. Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) suggested that this represents the first step in the reanalysis of the past participle from passive to syntactically active. As discussed in more detail below, passives of intransitive verbs are syntactically

Table 8. Binding of sig-anaphors

sig-anaphor	Elsewhere	Inner Rvík	Adults
a. <i>Svo var bara drifið sig á ball</i> then was just hurried REFL to the dance	78%	67%	40%
b. <i>Það var haldið sig innan dyra út af</i> itEXPL was kept REFL in doors due to <i>óveðrinu</i> bad.weather	82%	65%	37%
c. <i>Það var skoðað sig um á svæðinu</i> itEXPL was looked REFL around in the.area "People looked around the area"	72%	43%	31%

ambiguous between true passives and syntactically active impersonals. As observed by Haspelmath (1990: 35), "...intransitive desubjectives are indistinguishable from passives of intransitive verbs, so transitive desubjectives are the crucial case."

5.3.3 Subject-oriented adjuncts

Many speakers find it difficult to interpret the understood agent of a passive as the controller of certain subject-oriented adjuncts. The question then is whether subject-oriented participial adjuncts¹² can be used with passives of intransitive verbs, as illustrated in (18).

- (18) *Það var dansað skellihlæjandi á skipinu.*
it was danced laughing uproariously on the ship

Sentence (18) was expected to be ungrammatical in the standard language because there is no thematic agent subject to serve as controller for the participial adjunct *skellihlæjandi*. This was expressed by the intuition of one native speaker that "someone is missing." On the other hand, we predicted that speakers of the "new impersonal" should feel no such lack of an agent, since by hypothesis, the construction has a thematic subject to serve as syntactic controller for the participial adjunct.

The questionnaire contained three sentences designed to test this prediction, two formed from intransitive verbs, one from a transitive verb. The results, shown in Table 9, largely confirmed the expectation. Note that even in Inner Reykjavík, participial adjuncts with intransitive impersonal passives were accepted by ap-

Table 9. Subject-oriented Participial Adjuncts

Participial Adjuncts	Elsewhere	Inner Rvík	Adults
a. <i>Það var farið hágrátandi heim</i> itEXPL was gone crying home "People went home crying"	61%	50%	49%
b. <i>Það var lesið minningargreinina grátandi</i> itEXPL was read the.memorial.article-ACC crying "People read the memorial article crying"	62%	35%	4%

proximately half the subjects. Not surprisingly, the third sentence with a transitive verb was judged much less acceptable in Inner Reykjavík where the innovative construction is less widespread, and by adults.

What is surprising is that approximately 50% of adults also accepted sentences like (a). Barðdal & Molnár consider such sentences grammatical, and suggest that such subject-oriented adjuncts "can be controlled by the underlying agent in impersonal passive sentences which do not contain a thematic subject" (2000:128). Our data suggest that there are actually two different groups of native speakers with different grammars. For both adolescents and adults, there is a highly significant correlation between the results for subject-oriented adjuncts and those for simple reflexives shown in Table 8. The more subject-oriented participles are accepted, the more simple reflexives are accepted. In other words, the similar acceptability rates cannot be explained as an averaging effect. Although it is certainly possible to allow statements in the grammar to the effect that the underlying agent can be a controller for subject-oriented adjuncts, such a constraint would not capture the correlation between this and the acceptance of reflexive objects as our analysis does.

5.3.4 Unaccusative verbs

Passives of unaccusative verbs are sharply ungrammatical in all the Germanic languages that allow intransitive verbs to form passives, including standard Icelandic. To test for changes in lexical restrictions, our questionnaire included five sentences containing unaccusative verbs with nonagent human subjects: *detta* ('to fall'),¹³ *koma* ('to arrive'), *svitna* ('to sweat'), *hverfa* ('to disappear') and *deyja* ('to die').

13. Barðdal & Molnár (2000:129) argue that our *detta*-example in Table 10 (a) is acceptable because speakers interpret it as an agentive and actional verb, i.e. as an unergative. While this is a plausible account for some impersonal passives of unaccusatives (see next footnote), it is dubious for this example since the verb *detta* 'to fall' cannot be used in Icelandic to describe intentional falling, and the semantics of the example we used (slipping on ice) makes an agentive reading implausible.

12. Participial modifiers were used because they are invariant, unlike adjectival modifiers which would have to agree with the controller in gender, number (and case). Crucially these modifiers are subject-oriented, not agent-oriented. As is well known, adverbials of purpose (e.g. *viljandi* 'on purpose') can be controlled by the underlying agent in a passive (Zaenen & Maling 1984).

Table 10. Unaccusative verbs

Lexical restrictions: unaccusative verbs	Elsewhere	Inner Rvík	Adults
a. <i>Það var dottið í hálkunni fyrir framan it_{EXPL} was fallen on the.ice in front of blokkina the.building</i>	55%	45%	25%
b. <i>Í morgun var komið of seint í skólann this morning was arrived too late to school</i>	36%	38%	58%
c. <i>Í nótt var ekkert svitnað í last night was not.at.all sweated in svefnpokanum the.sleeping.bag</i>	31%	29%	31%
d. <i>Það var horfið sporlaust í stjörnustríðinu it_{EXPL} was disappeared traceless in the.star.wars</i>	30%	23%	22%
e. <i>Það var dáið í bílslysinu it_{EXPL} was died in the.car.accident</i>	14%	11%	2%

The range of acceptability rates for individual verbs was extremely wide, from a high of 55% with *detta* ('to fall') to a low of 14% for *deyja* ('to die')¹⁴ for adolescents outside of Inner Reykjavík. There must be some semantic difference among these unaccusative verbs that accounts for the variable behavior. Verbs denoting change of location may be more acceptable as "impersonal passives" than verbs denoting a (bodily) process or a change of state. Further research is needed to determine exactly what factors are relevant, but overall, the results suggest that the innovating construction is indeed beginning to extend its usage to nonagentive verbs which do not form passives in the standard language. One might speculate that changes in the lexical restrictions on a particular morphology are the last stage in the reanalysis from impersonal passive to a syntactically active construction. But in fact, adults liked many of the examples as much as the adolescents do, and crucially, they accept these examples of impersonal passives to a much greater extent than they accept definite postverbal objects.

14. As has frequently been pointed out, such unaccusative verbs may form impersonal passives when they can be interpreted as volitional actions, as in the following example from Ottósson (1988: Fn. 5):

- (i) *Enn er barist og dáið fyrir föðurlandið.*
still is fought and died for the.fatherland

Since such coerced readings do not bear on our hypothesis, we deliberately chose contexts which favor a nonvolitional interpretation, and not, e.g. the falling or dying of an actor on stage.

6. Conclusions

Overall, the results of the nationwide survey support the hypothesis that what looks like a morphological passive is well along the way to being reanalyzed as a syntactically active construction with a phonologically null indefinite subject. Although the absolute numbers in the various geographical regions differ, the relative acceptability judgments are mostly the same for subjects in Inner Reykjavík and elsewhere in the country, as well as for adults. This indicates that we are tapping into psychologically real linguistic intuitions. The obvious questions are: Why is this innovation happening, and when did it start?

6.1 Why in Icelandic?

This syntactic reanalysis is neither unnatural nor unique, since a similar diachronic development has occurred independently in both Polish and Irish. But why is it happening in Icelandic? As noted earlier, it is clearly not foreign influence, since none of the other languages commonly spoken by Icelanders has this construction. I know of no indications that a similar change lies on the horizon in any other Germanic language. Icelandic has a number of grammatical properties which "conspire" to make the reanalysis a natural development. A key factor, I suggest, has to do with how null subjects get interpreted: there's a strong bias to interpret a null subject as referring to a human participant, even if the verb is strongly biased towards a nonhuman subject. Let me illustrate this in English (examples from Maling 1993):

- (19) a. It's all too common to be warped in a lumberyard.
b. It's all too common *for lumber* to be warped.

This interpretative bias isn't an absolute. As illustrated by (19b), an overt subject doesn't have to be [+human], but when we hear "It's common to..."; we expect that the predicate will denote something that a human might do. It is difficult to interpret (19a) as being about lumber; rather we imagine human beings with warped minds. Similarly for the verb *migrate*, the grammatical subject is expected to be birds or animals. Note the commonness of utterances like "It's common to see migrating birds at this time of year" and the uncommonness of utterances like "It's common to migrate at this time of year." A Google search (January, 2003) for the string "common to migrate" yielded 9 hits – all with human subjects. Here are two:

- (20) a. With a zoom move it is **common to migrate** from one type of camera shot to another,
b. It has become **common to migrate** data directly ...

This interpretative preference is expressed in (21):

- (21) Interpretive Rule: In the absence of an overt controller, a null subject will be understood as [+human].

This universal preference for null subjects to refer to humans shows up in Icelandic in a number of constructions involving passive morphology. First, consider the so-called “impersonal passives” of intransitive verbs, which are found in standard Icelandic, as in all Germanic languages except English.

- (22) a. *Það var flautað.*
 it_{EXPL} was whistled
 “People whistled”
 b. *Það var ekki talað um neitt annað*
 it_{EXPL} was not spoken about nothing other
 “People didn’t talk about anything else”

The understood agent of an impersonal passive can only be interpreted as a human. Even though the subject of the verb “whistle” can be many things, including teakettles or trains, the impersonal passive in (22a) can only be understood as describing human whistlers, not trains or teakettles.¹⁵ (Although English lacks impersonal passives, the same interpretive bias holds of the gerund *whistling* in “There was whistling”.) As noted earlier, the morphological passive of an intransitive verb is syntactically ambiguous: It can be analyzed either as a true passive, or as a syntactically active impersonal construction with a human subject. The latter analysis becomes all the more plausible given that *by*-phrases are generally “ungrammatical or infelicitous in impersonal passives” in Icelandic (Sigurðsson 1989: 322, Fn. 48). Recall that our data suggest that perhaps 50% of adult speakers of Icelandic analyze the so-called impersonal passives as impersonal actives with a thematic *pro*_{arb} subject, as shown by the fact that the construction occurs with bound anaphors and with subject-oriented adjuncts.

Impersonal passives in all the Germanic languages show the same interpretive bias towards human subjects. A special property of Icelandic, which does not hold in the mainland Scandinavian languages, is that the same interpretive bias holds true of the personal passive.

- (23) a. *Snjóflóðið eyðilagði húsið* (Active)
 the.avalanche destroyed the.house

15. An anonymous reviewer notes that the most salient reading of (22a) is the honking of a car; another speaker reports that for him, the most salient reading is that of a referee blowing a whistle. Under both readings there must be a human actor. Similarly, the impersonal passive *Það var hringt* “it was rung” cannot be used to refer to the ringing of an alarm clock (Helgi Skúli Kjartansson, personal communication).

- b. *Húsið var eyðilagt (*af snjóflóðinu)* (Passive)
 the.house was destroyed by the.avalanche
 c. *Húsið eyðilagðist í snjóflóðinu.* (Middle)
 the.house got.destroyed in the.avalanche

The understood agent (or implicit argument) in a personal passive like (23b) must be a human, so (b) cannot mean that the avalanche destroyed the house, a meaning rendered by the morphological middle in (c); sentence (23b) can only mean that some human agent destroyed the house during the avalanche. Thus, as with passives of intransitive verbs, passive morphology on transitive verbs is correlated with human agents.^{16,17}

A third Icelandic construction in which passive morphology is associated with human subjects is the class of aspectual modals, including *byrja* (‘begin’), *fara* (‘go’) and *vera* (‘be’) (Sigurðsson 1989: 64).¹⁸ These verbs take infinitival complements, and when used as aspectual modals, they take passive morphology, i.e., the verb occurs in the past participle and takes the passive auxiliary *vera*:

16. As pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, counterexamples can be found on the web.

- (i) *Bærimm var eyðilagður í bruna 1904...*
 the.town was destroyed in the.fire [of] 1904

The example in (i) is from a blog page dated August 1, 2005, written by an Icelander in London describing a visit to Ålesund. The three native speakers I consulted all found this example strange; for them, this example can only be interpreted as involving voluntary burning, which was obviously not the case in Ålesund. It may be that the generalization about human volitional agents is being blurred under external influence, mostly but not exclusively from English.

17. For many speakers, the agent can be a nonhuman animate NP, e.g. cows:

- (i) *Það voru étnir graskögglar í allan dag.*
 it-EXPL were eaten grasspellets all day

18. When used with an overt subject, the understood agent is not restricted to humans, as illustrated by the following example provided by an anonymous reviewer:

- (i) *Turninn var þegar byrjaður að skekkjast.*
 the.tower was then begun to lean
 “By then the tower had begun to lean”

However, when used impersonally, the understood agent is restricted to humans as indicated by the translation provided for (24a). The exception is that weather verbs, which lack an actor altogether, are allowed, as noted by Sigurðson (1989) and the anonymous reviewer:

- (ii) *Það var byrjað að rigna.*
 it-EXPL was begun to rain
 “It had begun to rain”

- (24) a. *Það var byrjað að flauta.*
 it was begun to whistle
 "People began to whistle"
 ≠ The teakettle(s) began to whistle.
 b. *Það var verið að flauta.*
 it was been to whistle
 "There was whistling"

Here there is passive morphology on the auxiliary verb, but no passive meaning whatsoever; the construction passes all the active voice diagnostics (no *by*-phrase is possible, bound anaphors are allowed, subject control of participial adjuncts is possible, and unaccusative verbs are allowed as long as the implicit subject is human). Many examples of the new construction seem to be functionally equivalent to the impersonal passive of aspectual *vera* ('to be'), which is part of the standard language. The example in (25a), uttered by a Reykjavík girl, aged 4;4, might be rendered by an adult as (25b):

- (25) a. *Í gær þegar það var gefið mér lýsi, þá...*
 yesterday when it_{EXPL} was given me cod.liver.oil, then...
 b. *Í gær þegar það var verið að gefa mér lýsi, þá...*
 yesterday when it_{EXPL} was been to give me cod.liver.oil, then...
 "Yesterday when they were giving me cod liver oil, then...."

It seems likely that such constructions in standard Icelandic serve as models for the reanalysis of the impersonal morphological passive as a syntactically active impersonal construction. Such models are absent in the other Germanic languages.

6.2 Reanalysis as simplification of the grammar

It is widely agreed that passive voice involves suppression of the external argument. External arguments include agents and causes (e.g. natural forces). As we have seen, in Icelandic, the things that can be the understood agent of the passive are a proper subset of the things that can be the subject of the corresponding active. The otherwise systematic relationship between active-passive pairs breaks down. The Icelandic restriction to [+human] agents requires an additional stipulation.

Consider the two syntactic representations sketched in (8), repeated here for convenience:¹⁹

19. Thus we have evidence for two kinds of null subjects in Icelandic: one which is not referred to by the rules of the grammar, in other words, an empty category which is really nothing, and another kind of null subject which can be accessed by the grammatical rules, and which is interpreted as referring to humans.

- (8) a. [IP [e] Aux [VP V_{part} NP]] Canonical Passive (before NP-movement)
 b. [IP *pro*_{arb} Aux [VP V_{part} NP]] Impersonal Active

The representation sketched in (b) is an active voice construction with a null impersonal pronoun subject. What kind of element is the *pro* subject in (8b)?

Pronouns can vary for person, number, gender and animacy/human, etc., but thematic role (e.g. agent) is not a classificatory feature for pronouns (whether null or overt). We know that natural language tolerates a high degree of ambiguity. I have suggested that a sentence like *Það var dansað* ('there was danced') can get two very different syntactic analyses, either an impersonal active or a true passive. The results of our survey suggest that nearly 50% of Icelandic adults analyze the so-called impersonal passive construction as having a syntactically accessible null subject. But once a speaker makes this reanalysis for intransitive verbs, it seems natural to extend the construction to all classes of verbs, including transitive ones, provided of course that the verb selects for a [+human] subject.

Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) suggest that the interpretive generalization in (21) sets the stage for the reanalysis of a thematically empty null subject as a fully thematic *pro* external argument. On the other hand, nothing forces this reanalysis. As illustrated in (26) for Norwegian, the impersonal passive in the mainland Scandinavian languages has all four syntactic properties of the canonical passive, and shows none of the signs of the innovative Icelandic construction.²⁰

(26) Impersonal passives in Norwegian

- a. *Det ble danset av alle og enhver i bygda.*²¹
 it_{EXPL} was danced by all and everyone in the.village
 b. **Det ble låst seg (selv) inne i fabrikk.*
 it_{EXPL} was locked REFL (self) inside in the factory
 c. **Det ble danset leende/gråtende/full/fulle/fullt.*
 it_{EXPL} was danced laughing/crying/drunken-sg/pl/neut

20. Hestvik (1986) argued that in Norwegian impersonal passives, the indefinite postverbal NP receives accusative case. The arguments are theory-internal in that there is no morphological case. Note that the "transitive impersonal passive" in Norwegian is subject to the definiteness effect: the postverbal NP must be indefinite.

21. Elisabet Engdahl (personal communication) suggests that the *av*-phrase behaves more like an adverbial quantifier than as an identifier of the agent; the sentence means that there was general/widespread dancing. An agentive *by*-phrase can be used only in this adverbial sense in Swedish impersonal passives (although it can identify the agent in personal passives). In Norwegian, an agentive *by*-phrase is normally not possible with impersonal passives (Faarlund et al. 1997:847), but judgments vary; Hovdhaugen cites some examples, but observes that the agent phrase is rarely expressed and often sounds unnatural (1977:24).

- d. **Under krigen ble det forsvunnet ofte uten spor.*
 during the.war was it_{EXPL} disappeared often without a.trace

What, then, makes Icelandic different from its Scandinavian cousins? The internal pressures are not the same as in the other Germanic languages. The Icelandic personal passive allows only the human-agent reading, whereas in Norwegian and Swedish the agent can also be a non-human agent, e.g. a force of nature.²² And only Icelandic has the aspectual modals – passive morphology associated with the human-subject reading – which can serve as a model.

I cannot emphasize too strongly that this syntactic change is still very much in progress. The results reported here are just the first step in what we hope will be a longitudinal study designed to track the development and spread of this innovative construction. The results of our study suggest that the crucial first step in the reanalysis is the extension of the impersonal passive to inherently reflexive predicates; this then extends to non-inherent reflexives and other bound anaphors. Recall that even adult speakers accept bound anaphors in impersonal passives to a fairly high degree. Moreover, many adults also accept control of participial adjuncts, and many accept impersonal passives of presumably unaccusative verbs with unspecified human subjects. All of these factors indicate that even in the standard language, passive morphology is associated with a human agent reading, which makes possible the reanalysis as an unspecified human subject construction. Given this unexpected variation among adult speakers, it is not surprising that children have started to extend this analysis to all verb classes, including transitive verbs, which take human subjects. We speculate that the process has started with highly agentive verbs (verbs of high transitivity in the sense of Hopper & Thompson 1980), but this is an area for future research. We don't yet know whether this change is proceeding lexical item by lexical item, or verb class by verb class. We are still left with the ultimate mystery of language change: How does the change get started in the first place? What has triggered the apparently spontaneous eruption of the new construction everywhere in the country except inner Reykjavík?

We can understand what is happening only if we recognize that there are both structural factors and sociological factors at play. We haven't even begun to investigate the discourse use of the new construction, or its acquisition by young children. How do children learn the constraints on the interpretation of the various constructions they hear? In particular, how do they learn that the null subject of the impersonal passive and the "new construction" must be interpreted as hu-

22. Lavine (2000: 107f.), citing Wiczorek (1994: 53), notes that unlike the implied human-agent reading in the Polish *-no/to* construction, the Ukrainian construction is ambiguous between an implied human agent (=passive) and a spontaneous "inchoative" (=middle) reading.

man? A Chomskian would say that the bias in favor of the human interpretation must be part of Universal Grammar, i.e. a language universal which children assume holds unless presented with evidence to the contrary. In other words, it's the default setting. I know of no better answer. Language is what makes us human. It is central to everything we do. Understanding language and language change gives us insight into ourselves. It is surely no surprise that humans are at the very center of our universe. What is perhaps more surprising is that this fact, our obsession with ourselves, seems to lie at the center of how syntactic structure is represented in the brain, at the center of mental representations of language.

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