

Nothing personal?
A system-internal syntactic change in Icelandic

Joan Maling

Brandeis University

Anthony Kroch

University of Pennsylvania

Sigríður Sigurjónsdóttir

University of Iceland

Comparative Germanic Syntax
and the Challenge from Icelandic

February 24, 2011

Iceland (103,000 km²; population c. 317,000)



Eyjafjallajökull

The Icelandic New Construction



Canonical Passive – verb governing ACC

Active:

Hún bað **mig** að vaska upp.
she-NOM asked me-ACC to wash up

‘She asked me to do the dishes’

Theme/Patient
marked ACC

Passive:

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

‘I was asked to do the dishes’

Theme/Patient
marked NOM

The Innovative Construction

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”

This innovative construction has become known as either the “New Passive”

(Kjartansson 1991; Barðdal & Molnár 2003; Eythórsson 2008; Jónsson 2009)

or the “New Construction” / “New Impersonal”

(Sigurjónsdóttir & Maling 2001, Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir 2002, Maling 2006, etc.)

Age-related variation

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’

In a 1999-2000 nationwide survey (M&S 2002),
93% of surveyed adults found this sentence
completely **unacceptable**.

73% of adolescents found it completely
acceptable!

Spread of the New Construction

Earliest known report with unambiguous object case:

1959, 8-year old girl in Akureyri

Það var bólusett okkur

it_{EXPL} was inoculated us

‘They inoculated us’ or ‘We were inoculated’

Another woman reported that the construction was common in Akranes in the late sixties.

(cf. Sigurjónsdóttir & Maling 2001; M&S 2002)

Spread of the New Construction

The NC is gaining ground, and can now be found not only in the spoken language, but also in student papers and in informal written registers of the language.

2004 Sign posted at Háskólabío movie theater

Skoðað verður **miða** við innganginn.

checked will.be tickets-ACC at the.entrance

‘Tickets will be inspected at the door’

(Maling 2006:200, ex. (7))

This example combines formal “Stylistic Fronting” of the past participle with the informal, nonstandard NC.

First nationwide study on the New Construction

Study 1: conducted 1999-2000, reported in Sigurjónsdóttir & Maling (2001) and Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002)

- ❖ Questionnaire distributed to 1,731 tenth graders (age 15-16) in 65 schools throughout Iceland, and 205 adult controls.
- ❖ The 1,731 tenth graders (age 15-16) constitute 45% of the children born in Iceland in 1984.

Sigurjónsdóttir & Maling (2001) survey question:

Is this sentence acceptable?

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’ (passive)

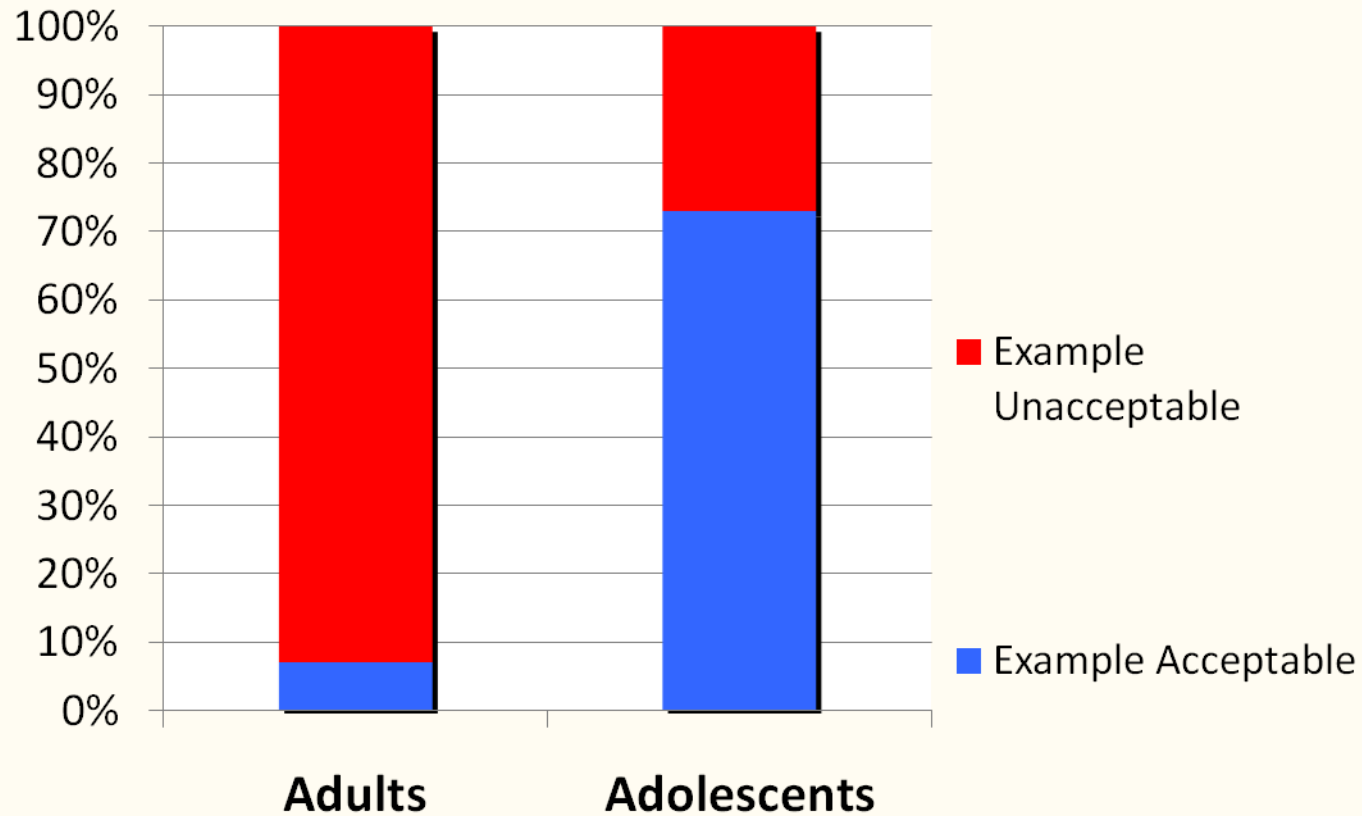
or ‘they asked me to do the dishes’ (active)

Is this sentence acceptable?

Pað var beðið mig að vaska upp

it_{EXPL} was asked me-ACC to wash up

‘it was asked me to do the dishes’



N=200

N=1695

Second nationwide study on the New Construction

Study 2: conducted 2005-2007, and reported in Thráinsson et al. (to appear)

Study conducted on variation in a number of syntactic constructions in modern Icelandic

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

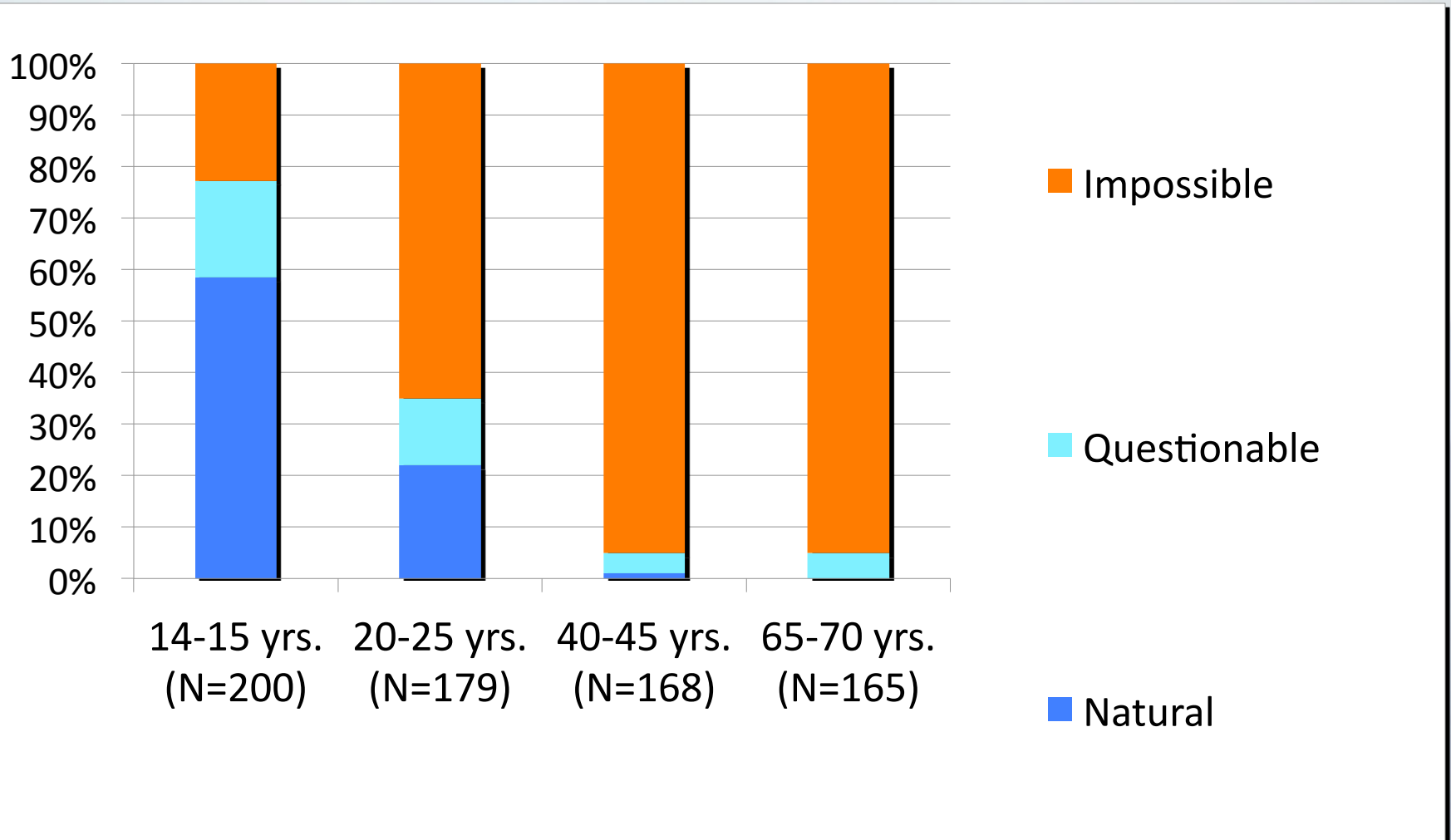
Study 2: Thráinsson et al. (to appear) survey question:

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 NC to 712 adolescents and adults in four age groups:

Study 2 (Thráinsson et al. to appear)
Age-related variation in acceptance of New Construction
for this example; N=712



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 or morphological changes.

Therefore, it must be due to other system-internal factors.



Counterexample to Principle of Inertia

The New Construction seems to be a counter-example to the principle of “inertia” proposed by Keenan (1994, 2003) and developed by Longobardi (2001):

Syntax does not change on its own; syntactic change is triggered either by:

- (i) external forces (i.e., language contact), or**
- (ii) some prior change in another domain, e.g. phonology or morphology.**

Neither of these apply to the Icelandic NC

Counterexample to Principle of Inertia

A marked option of Universal Grammar, namely a construction which assigns ACC without any (apparent) NOM, seems to have arisen spontaneously in the language without any prior relevant change in morphology or phonology.

We know that UG provides this marked option, cf. Polish & Ukrainian *–no/to* construction, Irish autonomous form, etc. (see M&S 2002, Maling 2006, *inter alia*)

Counterexample to Principle of Inertia

The principle of inertia has considerable appeal because it reconciles the undoubted occurrence of syntactic change with the great accuracy with which children learn their native language syntax. It seems plausible that the output of acquisition could change only in reaction to a change in the information available to the first-language learner.

Counterexample to Principle of Inertia

Survey data on the acceptability of the NC show that the change is accepted by young people, but rejected by adults, strongly suggesting that the innovation is associated with language acquisition.

On-going research supports the hypothesis that the NC is acquired by young children and not adopted by adults. 46 of the subjects tested by M&S in 1999-2000 were retested in 2010; kids who acquire the NC do not seem to outgrow it (Thráinsson, Sigurjónsdóttir & Eythórsson, in progress).

Counterexample to Principle of Inertia

- ❖ Something must have happened c. 1950
- ❖ What could it have been? Just an accident?
- ❖ Or were there properties of Icelandic before 1950 that might have led children to reanalyze some existing construction?

We may no longer have access to the necessary information about the state of the language in the middle of the last century, when the NC first surfaced.

Some things we would like to know about the diachrony of the NC

1. **Actuation problem:** why did the NC surface in the mid-twentieth century and not earlier or later?
2. Why did it arise in Icelandic, but not apparently in the other Germanic languages, especially Faroese and Norwegian, its closest relatives?
3. Is there anything about the preconditions for the change that supports one or another grammatical analysis of the NC?

Possible models for the Icelandic New Construction



Two possible sources for the emerging NC:

A. Impersonal or “Expletive Passive” of a Transitive Verb

Það

var hrint

litlum stráák

it_{EXPL}

was pushed-neut.sg.

little-DAT boy-DAT

‘A little boy was pushed’

(Eythórssón 2008, ex. 73b)

B. Impersonal Passive of an Intransitive Verb

Það

var dansað alla nóttina.

it_{EXPL}

was danced all night

‘People danced all night’ (Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir 2002)

Syntactic ambiguity of Expletive Passives

Some passive clauses with a postverbal NP can only be analyzed as a Canonical Passive

Note: masculine nouns and feminine singular nouns have distinct NOM/ACC forms.

a. *Það var barinn strákur.*
it_{EXPL} was hit-m.sg. boy-m.sg.NOM
‘A boy was hit’

b. *Það var barin stelpa.*
it_{EXPL} was hit-f.sg. girl-f.sg.NOM
‘A girl was hit’

Syntactic ambiguity of Expletive Passives

But many sentences in standard Icelandic can be analyzed as either the Canonical Passive or the NC (Sigurjónsdóttir & Maling 2001:128; Thráinsson 2007:276; Eythórsson 2008)

Note: neuter nouns have the same form for NOM/ACC in both singular and plural; feminine nouns are nondistinct in the plural.

a. *Það var skammað lítið barn.*

it_{EXPL} was scolded-neut. little child-neut.sg

‘A little child was scolded’ (Eythórsson 2008, ex.73a)

b. *Það var hrint litlum strák.*

it_{EXPL} was pushed-neut little-DAT boy-m.sg.DAT

‘A little boy was pushed’ (Eythórsson 2008, ex.73b)

Fact: neuter nouns have the same form for NOM/ACC in both singular and plural; feminine forms are nondistinct in the plural.

What are the implications of this fact for language acquisition?

- ❖ For such clauses, the child cannot tell that the postverbal NP is NOM
- ❖ As a result, she may hypothesize that the postverbal NP is actually an object, not a postposed subject.

We have a case of ‘misanalysis’ or ‘reanalysis.’

Default rule: a postverbal NP gets marked ACC

Implications for language acquisition

“...there is considerable overlap between the two dialects. That means, of course, that in the primary linguistic data (PLD) available to a child acquiring the language there is a lot of ambiguity even if the data all come from speakers of the standard dialect. That is a typical situation for ‘misanalysis’ by children, an important source of language change” (Thráinsson 2007:276)

Implications for language acquisition

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

- 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.”

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

Syntactic ambiguity of Expletive Passives

Neuter nouns have the same form for NOM/ACC in both singular and plural; feminine forms are nondistinct in the plural. Only feminine sg. and masculine nouns have distinct NOM/ACC forms.

Frequency data from the IcePaHC corpus supports the suggestion that morphological nondistinctness is a source of syntactic misanalysis.

(data provided by Joel Wallenberg (p.c.))

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. 341,000 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)

Ambiguity of postverbal NP in passive

A search for BE > passive-participle > subject, regardless of what occupied the first position in the clause, using CorpusSearch, found 24 subordinate passive clauses with a post-participle NP. (Joel Wallenberg, p.c., Jan. 2011)

Results:

- **7/24 are clearly NOM; two of them are definite**
- **11/24 are ambiguous between NOM/ACC**
- **6/24 are Dative; all six are definite**

- **only about ¼ of the postverbal NPs in passive clauses were unambiguously NOM**
- **roughly half were ambiguous between NOM/ACC**

Syntactic ambiguity of Expletive Passives

2 examples of unambiguous nominative NPs:

a. úr er tekinn raddarstafur
out is taken letter-m.sg.NOM

‘a letter is taken out’ (c.1100, *First Grammatical Treatise*)

b. þegar frá eru teknir biskupsstólarnir
when from are taken-m.pl. bishop.seats-m.pl-NOM

‘when the bishoprics are excluded’

(*Sturlunga Saga*, mid-13th century)

Assumption: in an expletive passive clause, an NP in post-participle position is unambiguously a subject only if it is marked NOM (we exclude ditransitives from discussion)

Syntactic ambiguity of Expletive Passives

Search for BE > passive-participle > subject, regardless of what occupied the first position in the clause, using CorpusSearch, found 24 subordinate passive clauses with a post-participle NP

og er þó minnkað atkvæði nafns þeirra
and is though reduced-n.sg syllable-n.sg. name-G their-G

‘and one syllable of their name is however reduced’

(c. 1100, *First Grammatical Treatise*)

Assumption: in an expletive passive clause, an NP in post-participle position is unambiguously a subject only if it is marked NOM (we exclude ditransitives from discussion)

Syntactic ambiguity of Expletive Passives

many expletive passives open to ‘misanalysis’

Search for BE > passive-participle > subject, regardless of what occupied the first position in the clause, using CorpusSearch, found 24 subordinate passive clauses with a post-participle NP.

upp var lokið

up was locked-3sg.neut

myrkvastofunni

prison.the-DAT

(1525, *Erasmus Saga*)

Assumption: in an expletive passive clause, an NP in post-participle position is unambiguously a subject only if it is marked NOM (we exclude ditransitives from discussion)

Syntactic ambiguity of Expletive Passives

- **only about $\frac{1}{4}$ of the postverbal NPs in passive clauses were unambiguously NOM**
- **roughly half were ambiguous between NOM/ACC**

If this data is representative of the data available to the language learner, then the expletive passive construction is a possible source of misanalysis.

BUT, we do not yet see the New Construction; there is only one unambiguous example of an ACC NP with a passive participle in the IcePaHC corpus.

Earliest attested example of NC?

En **þá kvöl,** ...verður ei af mér **útmálað**
but the-ACC torment-fem, ...becomes not by me out.painted-neut.sg
“The torment ...will not be described by me.”

(1791, Jón Steingrímsson, diary/autobiography)

En **þá kvöl,** sem eg hafði að bera af kitlum, sem eg hafði í yljum og tám, verður ei af mér **útmálað**.

“But the torment which I had to endure from the tickling that I had in the soles of my feet and toes will not be described by me”

Plausible story for reanalysis – but...

Problem #1: Actuation Problem: why now?

this morphosyntactic ambiguity has been true throughout the history of Icelandic, yet...

“The fact remains that there do not seem to be any unambiguous examples of the New Passive containing either full NPs in the accusative or pronouns until the mid-20th century (Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir 2002:129)”

(Eythórsson 2008:212)

Plausible story for reanalysis – but...

Problem #2: why in Icelandic but not Faroese or Norwegian?

Eythórsson claims that “the Norwegian *det*-passive is a close parallel to the New Passive in Icelandic in that the postverbal argument is an object rather than a subject ... the difference is that the direct object NP must generally be indefinite in Norwegian” (Eythórsson 2008:206)

The claimed parallelism is not convincing: The argument that the postverbal NP receives ACC case in Norwegian is theory-internal.

In the Norwegian *det*-passive, the postverbal NP is a postposed indefinite subject. Personal pronouns are excluded in Norwegian, whereas they are common in the Icelandic NC.

Plausible story for reanalysis – but...

Because the Indirect Object of a ditransitive verb can be definite, Eythórsson (2008) claims that Norwegian ditransitives show the predicted lack of the DE ; note however, that only the Indirect Object can be definite, the direct object must be indefinite.

*Det vart overrekt vinnaren ein pokal /*pokalen.*

it_{EXPL} was given the.winner a cup/ *the.cup

‘The winner was given a cup/*the cup’ (= Eythórsson 2008, ex. (66b))

*Det var lagt eit document/*det framfor oss.*

it was placed a document/ *it before us

‘A document was placed before us’ (=Eythórsson 2008, ex. 66a)

Plausible story for reanalysis – but...

The *det*-passive construction is an existential with a (personal) passive base. The construction targets the Direct Object, the theme, and the definiteness Effect follows. The Indirect Object is inert.

CONCLUSION: it is misleading to describe the Icelandic NC as a “parallel development” to the Norwegian *det*-construction. We know of no evidence that Norwegian is extending it along the same lines to transitive verbs, apart from the simple reflexive *seg*.

Another possible model for the Icelandic New Construction



Another possible model: Impersonal Passive of Intransitive Verbs

Það var dansað alla nóttina.
it_{EXPL} was danced all night

‘People danced all night’

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.

(Sigurjónsdóttir & Maling 2001; Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir 2002, etc.)

Another possible model: Impersonal Passive of Intransitive Verbs

Það var dansað alla nóttina.
*it*_{EXPL} was danced all night

‘People danced all night’

Our survey (M&S 2002) 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 as opposed to Passive:

- (i) control of subject oriented participles, and**
- (ii) bound anaphors**

Control of subject-oriented adjuncts is a property of *actives*. Do we find this syntactic property in the traditional Impersonal Passive?

Það var komið **skellihlæjandi** í tímunn
it_{EXPL} was come **laughing** into class
'People came into class **laughing**'

(=Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir 2002, ex. (37a))

Note: these participial adjuncts are verbal and not simple adverbs; they can take complements.

Control of subject-oriented adjuncts is a property of *actives*.

These participial adjuncts can take complements:

Active – subject-oriented participial adjunct

a. **Ég** vakti börnin kl. 7, **raulandi lítinn lagstúf**

I woke the.children at 7a.m., humming little song.bit

“I woke the children at 7a.m., humming a little piece of a song”

Canonical Passive – implicit agent cannot control these adjuncts

b. *Börnin voru vakin kl. 7, **raulandi lítinn lagstúf.**

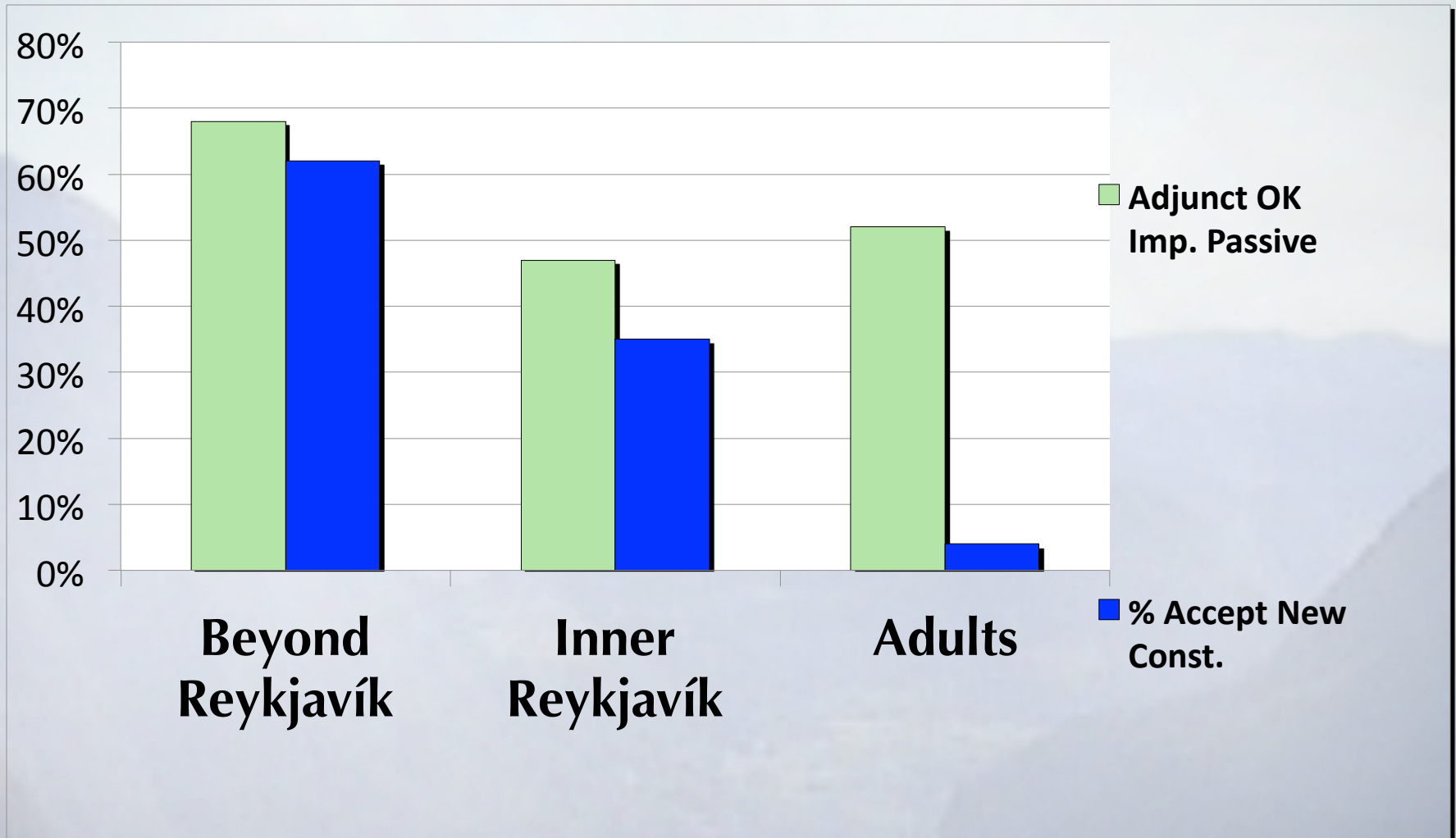
the.children were awakened at 7, humming little song.bit

New Construction – allows subject-oriented participial adjuncts

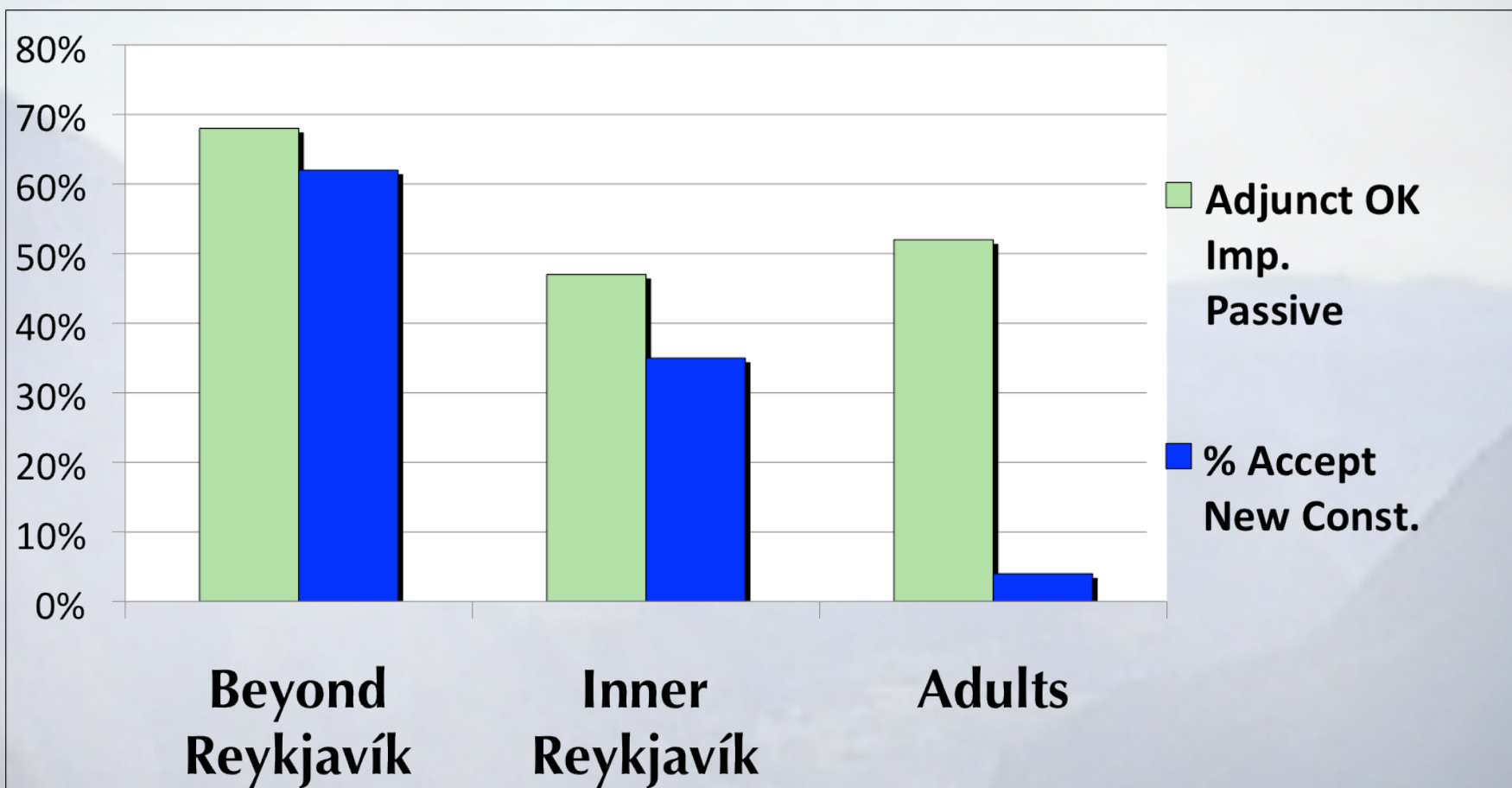
c. Það var vakið börnin kl. 7, **raulandi lítinn lagstúf.**

it_{EXPL} was awakened the.children at 7, humming little song.bit

Acceptance of subject-oriented adjuncts in Impersonal Passives vs. overall rates of acceptance for the New Construction (M&S 2002)



The Impersonal Passive is showing the same *active* syntactic property as the New Construction, but at higher levels of acceptance! So it is leading the innovation, not following. (See also Barðdal & Molnár 2003; Sigurðsson & Egerland 2009)



B. Control of bound anaphors is a property of actives

The nationwide surveys showed that for many adults, reflexive verbs can occur in Impersonal **passives**.

Svo var bara drifið sig á ball.

then was just hurried REFL-ACC to dance

‘Then everyone just hurried off to the dance’

(Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir 2002, ex. 30a)

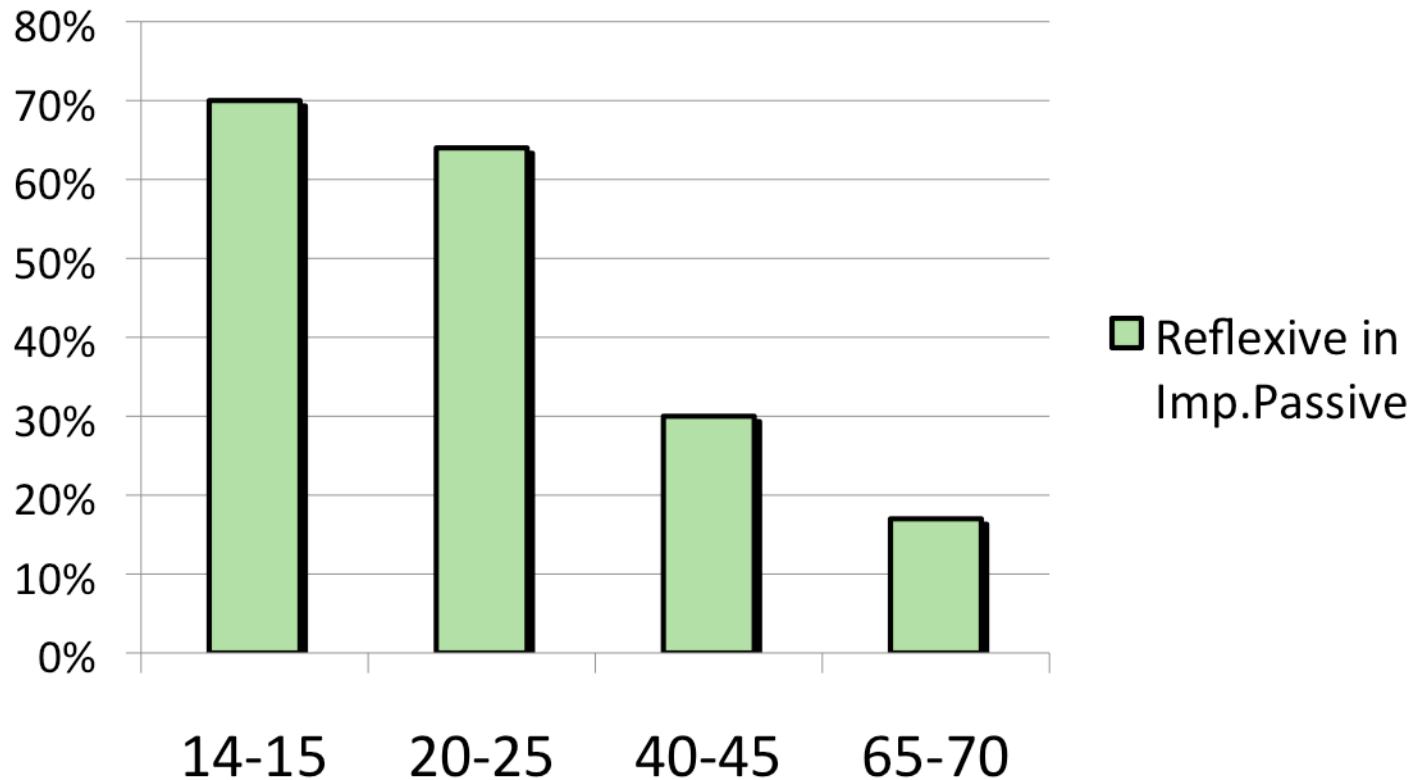
This is not the New Construction, it is the traditional Impersonal Passive with a reflexive verb. Reflexive verbs are known to pattern with intransitive verbs in many languages. Many Icelandic speakers find it acceptable to include a reflexive or other bound anaphor.

See also Sigurðsson (1989:355, fn. 60); Barðdal & Molnár (2003)

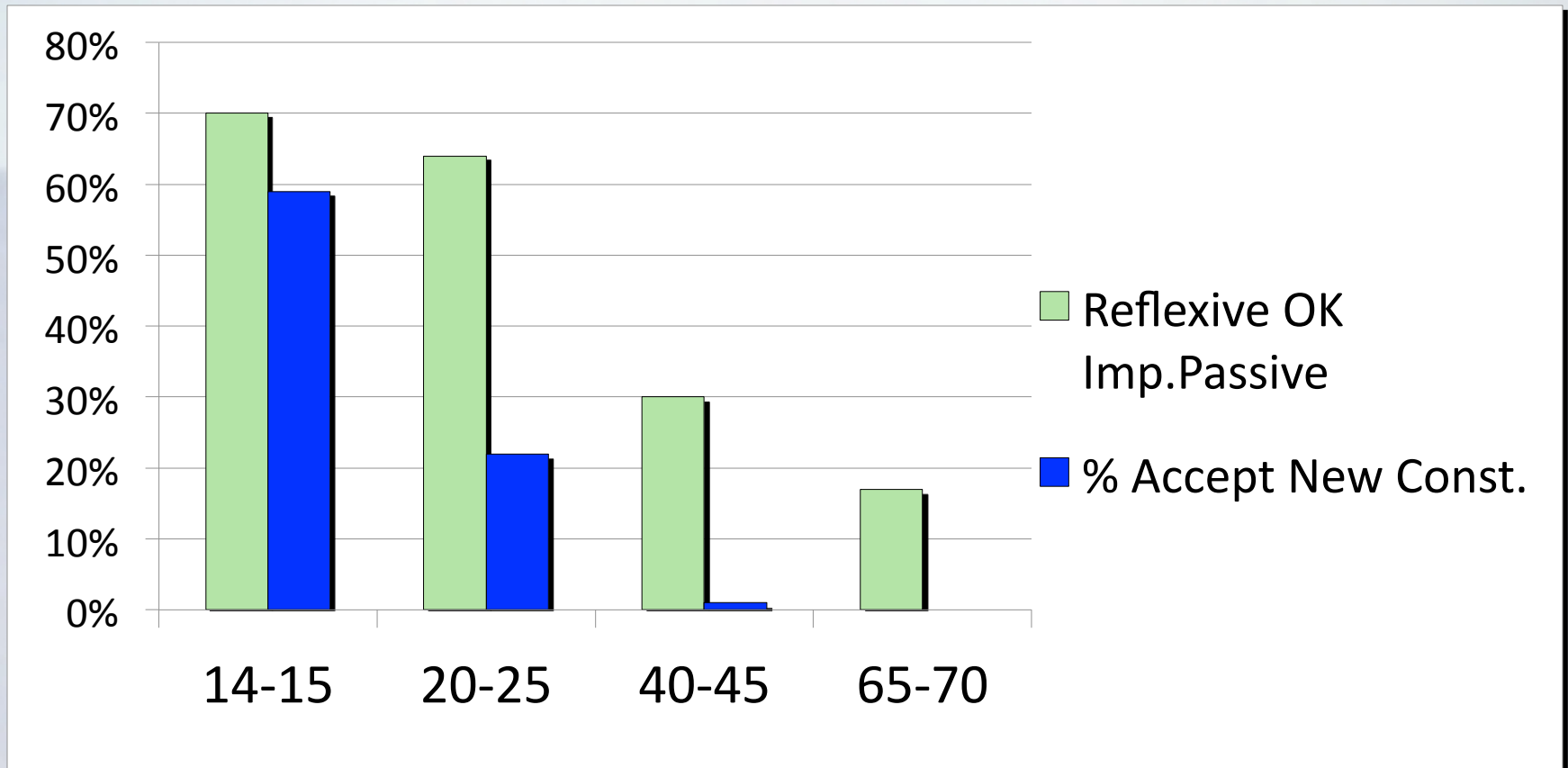
Svo var bara drifið **sig** á ball.
then was just hurried **REFL-ACC** to dance

‘Then everyone just hurried off to the dance’ (M&S 2002, ex 30a)

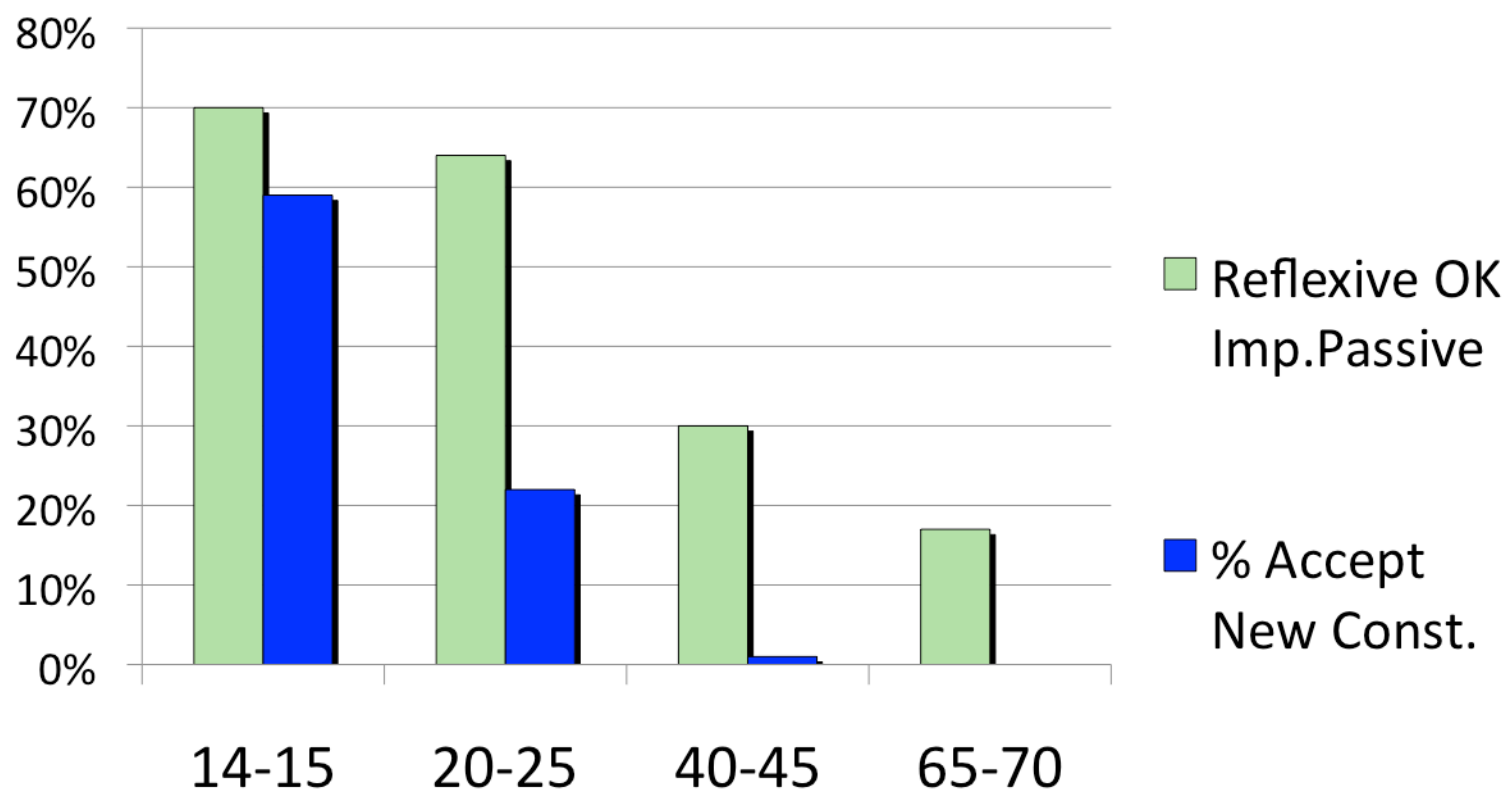
This sentence was included in both surveys; data below from Thráinsson et al. show the age-related variation clearly.



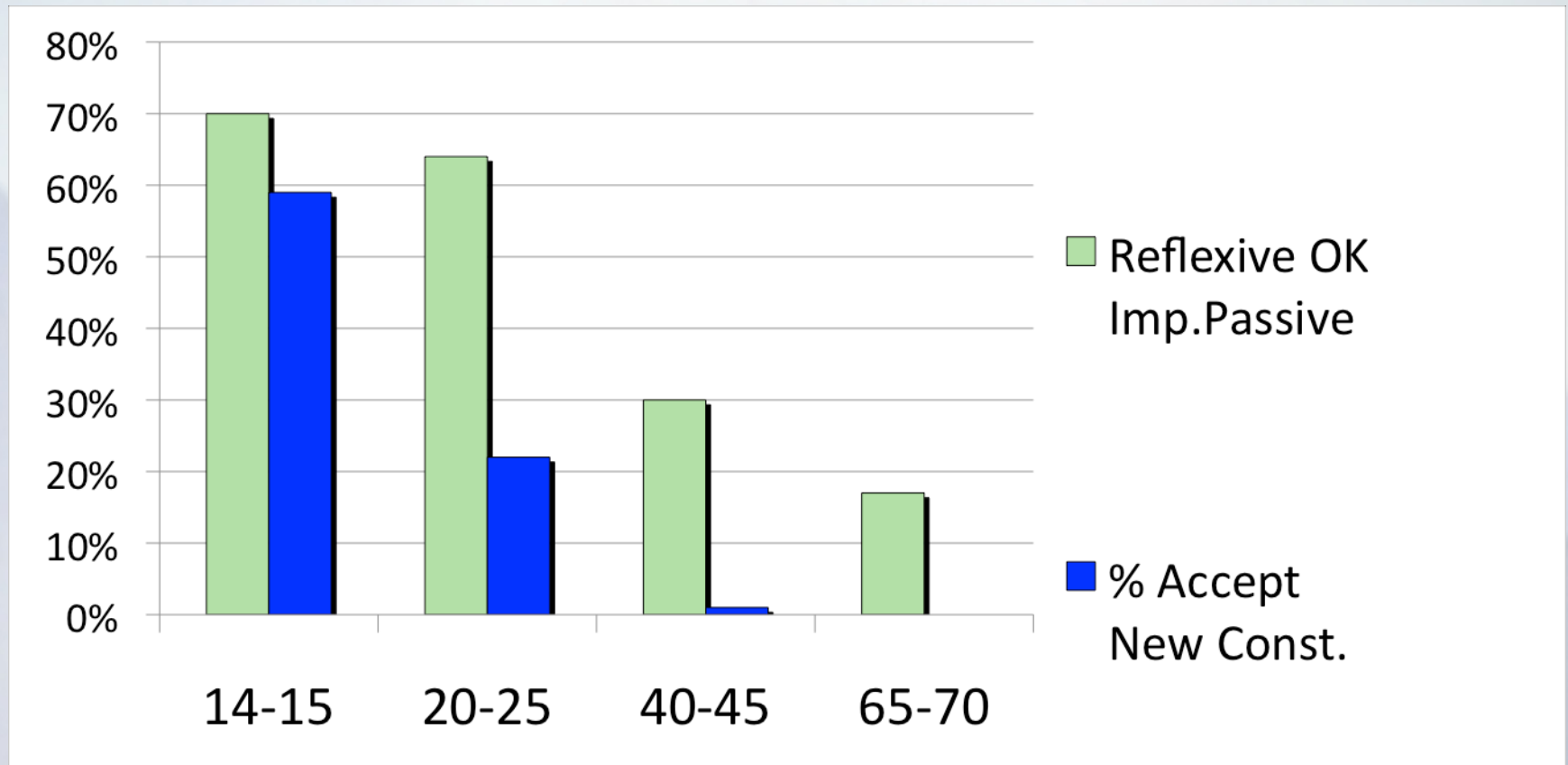
Compare this level of acceptability with the levels of acceptability by age that we saw for the New Construction:



Again, 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)

Acceptance of Bound Anaphora in the Impersonal Passive is a 20th Century Phenomenon.

Based on a corpus search on an open-access digital library (**timarit.is**) which hosts digital editions of newspapers and magazines from the 17th century to the early 21st century, Einar Freyr Sigurðsson observed that “you only get sporadic examples of reflexive impersonal passives in the earlier periods, but after about 1960 or so ... the number of examples increases significantly.”

(p.c., Einar Freyr Sigurðsson, August, 2010)

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 S-curve...”

C.-J. Bailey, *Variation and Linguistic Theory*,
(1973:77)

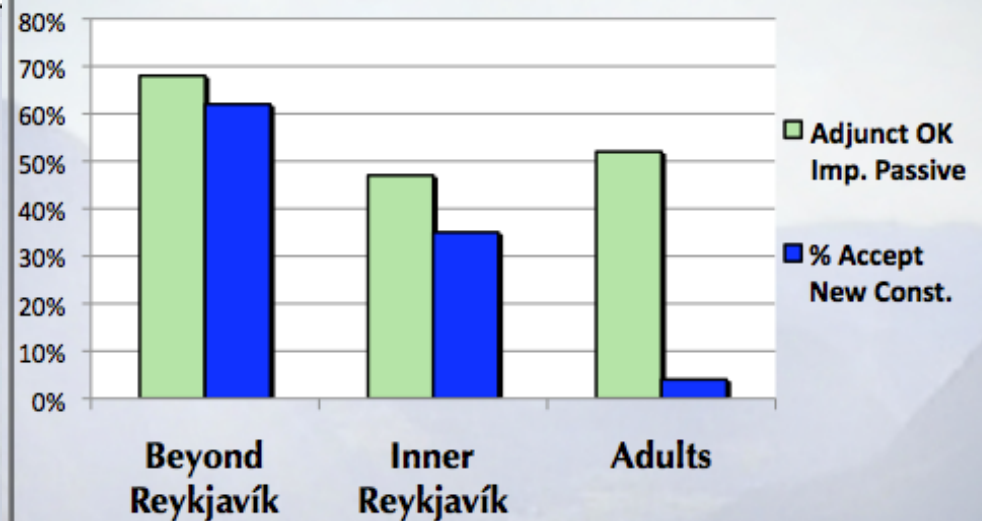
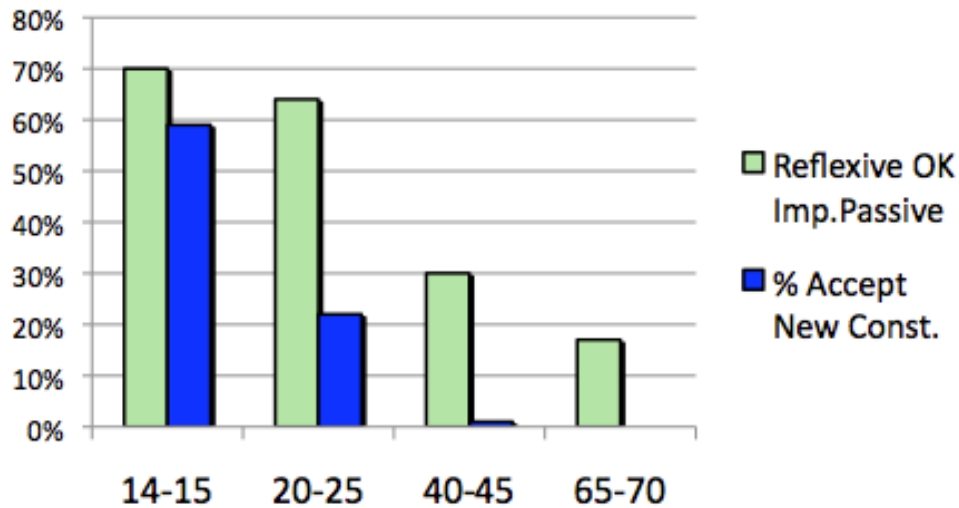
See Kroch (1989) “Reflexes of Grammar in Patterns of Language Change,” *Language Variation and Change* 1:199-244.

Impersonal Passive of Reflexive verbs is a 20th C. phenomenon

Passives of reflexive verbs have been considered marginal by some researchers, e.g. Halldór Ármann Sigurðsson (1989:355, fn. 60); Eythórsson asserts that “the ImpC with reflexives (‘reflexive passive’) is *rather marginal* and is hardly robust enough to be a model for the NC transitives” (Eythórsson (2008:215, emphasis added).

But elsewhere in that same paper, Eythórsson says that he himself and most speakers he consulted find them acceptable. See also Barðal & Molnár 2003. Linguists who are now in their fifties tell us that they have noticed an increase in the occurrence of reflexive impersonal passives over the last two decades or so, and believe that their acceptability judgments may have changed (Eiríkur Rögnvaldsson, p.c.).

About half of the adult population is accepting *active* syntactic properties as part of the Impersonal Passive. What could explain this?



This is a syntactic change that had NOT been noticed.



Native speakers of Icelandic have all noticed the eruption of the New Construction, but they had 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.

(Sigurjónsdóttir & Maling 2001; Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir 2002)

i.e. the data underdetermines the analyses

Impersonal Passive:

[e] [_{VP} **var dansað**]

Grammar 1

Impersonal Active:

[pro_{arb}] [_{VP} **var dansað**]

Grammar 2

Hypothesis: Impersonal passives of intransitive verbs are *in principle* syntactically ambiguous between active and passive.

(Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir 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} **var dansað**]

then she will not accept control of adjuncts because there is nothing to control them.

Some anecdotal evidence supports this claim:

When asked to consider this example:

Það var komið **skellihlæjandi** í tímunn
it_{EXPL} was come laughing into class

‘People came into class **laughing**’

one speaker in her 70s said:

“Það vantar einhvern.”

Someone is missing.

[e] [_{VP} **var komið í timunn**]

Hypothesis: Impersonal passives of intransitive verbs are *in principle* syntactically ambiguous between active and passive.

(Sigurjónsdóttir & Maling 2001; Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir 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.

[pro_{arb}] [_{VP} **var dansað**]

This prediction is borne out:

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

Adolescents: $r = 0.43$ $p < .001$ (n=1693)

Adults: $r = 0.53$ $p < .001$ (n=199)

Hypothesis: speakers who *accept* subject-oriented participles and reflexives have an *active* representation of the “Impersonal Passive,” while speakers who *reject* subject-oriented participles and reflexives have a *passive* representation of the “Impersonal Passive.”

Haspelmath: Syntactic ambiguity of “impersonal passives” of intransitive verbs

“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)

Haspelmath, Martin: 1990, “The grammaticization of passive morphology,” *Studies in Language* 14.1, 25-72

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) (Grammar 1)
- 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_{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



Takk fyrir!
Thank you for listening



Acknowledgments:

U.S. National Science Foundation, SBR-9223725
(pilot study in 1997)

Lýðveldissjóður, Republic of Iceland

Vísindasjóður RANNÍS (Icelandic Science Foundation)

Rannsóknasjóður Háskólans (University of Iceland
Research Fund)

Apparent German parallel?

See M&S 2002:131, fn.20

²⁰ As Martin Haspelmath and Hans Hock (p.c.) have pointed out to us, there does exist a non-standard construction in German:

- (i) Es wird Bücher gelesen.
 it_{EXPL} was books-ACC read

Note that the construction seems to allow only determinerless nouns; since plural nouns don't distinguish NOM from ACC in German, the claim that the nominal argument is ACC is based on the lack of agreement and the theoretical knowledge that NOM and agreement are strongly correlated. Although this resembles the new Icelandic construction in that the finite verb fails to agree with the nominal argument, it differs in that the NP tends to be indefinite and inanimate. Native speakers feel that this resembles noun-incorporation, a process which creates an intransitive verb which could then form an impersonal passive.

Syntactic Properties of the Norwegian Impersonal Passive – the *selv* ‘self’ anaphor in (b) 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 fabrikk.

it was locked REFL (self) inside in the.factory

c. *Det ble danset **leende/gråtende/full/fulle/fullt**.

it was danced laughing/crying/drunken

d. *Under krigen **ble** det **forsvunnet** ofte uten spor.

in the.war was it disappeared often without a.trace

Another possible model in Icelandic for the reanalysis

Icelandic has an unusual combination of auxiliary *be* + past participle which is not passive but active in meaning:

Það var verið [að borða fisk]

it_{EXPL} was been to eat fish-ACC

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

verið – passive participle? perfect participle? supine?

These impersonal passives of aspectual *vera* ‘to be’ are part of the standard language, and may be a possible model for the NC (M&S 2002:134; Maling 2006:218)

Impersonal passives of aspectual *vera*
'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....’

Impersonal passives are relatively frequent

- ❖ „In passing, it is worth pointing out that the impersonal passive is extremely common in Icelandic (cf. Friðjónsson 1987), for example much more common than in German, I believe (German very typically replacing it by an active **man-** ‚one‘ construction).“ (Sigurðsson 1989:162)

- ❖ Note:

Sigurðsson includes verbs with PP-complements in this category:

Stundum var [e] hlegið að ráðherranum. (= Sigurðsson 1989:162, ex.2a)

sometimes was laughed at the.minister

- ❖ Barðdal & Molnár (2003:243f) categorize them separately as a “prepositional passive”

Það var hlegið að skemmtikraftinum. (=Barðdal & Molnár 2003:244, ex. 26b)

it_{EXPL} was laughed at the.comedian

Agentive *by*-phrases are infrequent in Icelandic

Insert quote from Tolli or JGJ??

by-phrases are infrequent in Icelandic
data from Joel

“In the active voice, the subject of a transitive verb like *eyðileggja* ‘destroy’ can be a natural force such as fire, storm, flood or avalanche. However, in a personal passive..., the understood agent must be a human.”
(Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir 2002:132)

“...the thematic restrictions on Icelandic passive are more strict than those of the English passive”
(Thráinsson 2007:257)

Passives are relatively infrequent in Icelandic

Joel Wallenberg compared the frequency of passive vs. active for transitive verbs in the translations of the New Testament Book of John by Oddur Gottskálksson, Luther, and Tyndale.

Language:	Ice	Ger	Eng
Voice:			
passive	84	97	190
active	1100	1071	976
frequency	0.071	0.083	0.163

The difference between Icelandic and German is not statistically significant, but the difference between English and the others is.

(Joel Wallenberg, p.c. 4 February, 2011)

Note: passives of transitive or ditransitive verbs; excludes impersonal passives of intransitive verbs

Passives are relatively infrequent in Icelandic

Wallenberg compared the frequency of passive vs. active for the Icelandic and English translations of Acts 1-17, corresponding samples.

Lang	Ice	Eng
Voice		
passive	95	145
active	714	570
Freq.	0.117	0.203

The same effect holds: the frequency of passive voice is roughly twice as high in English as in Icelandic

Note: passives of transitive or ditransitive verbs; excludes impersonal passives of intransitive verbs

Passives are relatively infrequent in Icelandic

Wallenberg then checked to see if this effect held between the full corpora of Early Modern English and the IcePaHC.

PPCEME and IcePaHC:

Language	Ice	Eng
Voice		
passive	1621	17273
active	9851	40096
Freq.	0.141	0.301

The same effect holds: the frequency of passive voice is roughly twice as high in English as in Icelandic

Note: count includes passives of transitive or ditransitive verbs; excludes impersonal passives of intransitive verbs

Syntactic behavior of *-no/to* construction in Polish vs. Ukrainian (Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir 2002)

Syntactic Property	Polish (active)	Ukrain. (passive)
Agentive by-phrase possible	*	Yes
Control of subject-oriented adjuncts	Yes	*
Non-agentive “Unaccusative” verbs are possible	Yes	*
Bound anaphors in underlying object position	Yes	*

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 2008:173)

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**

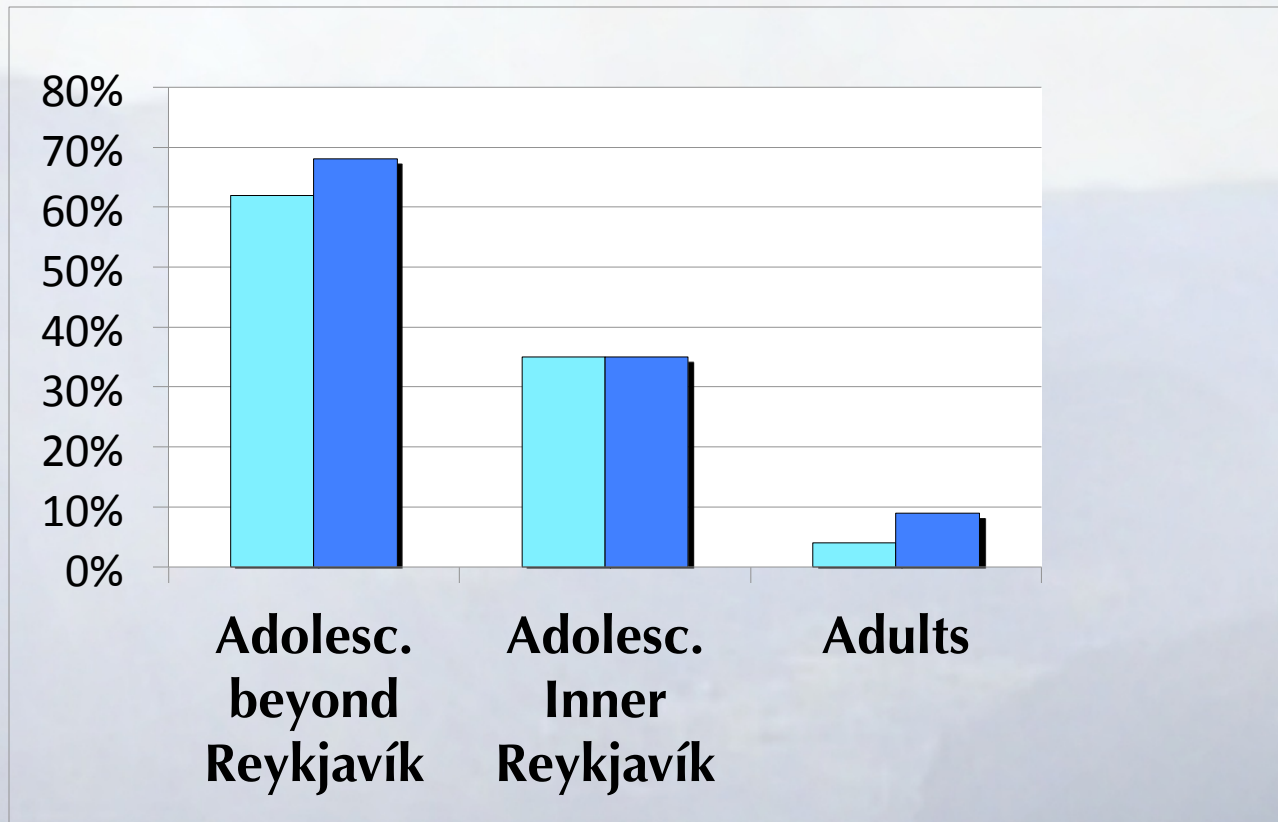
it_{EXPL} was read the.memorial.article **crying**

‘They read the memorial article **crying**’

‘The memorial article was read, **crying**’

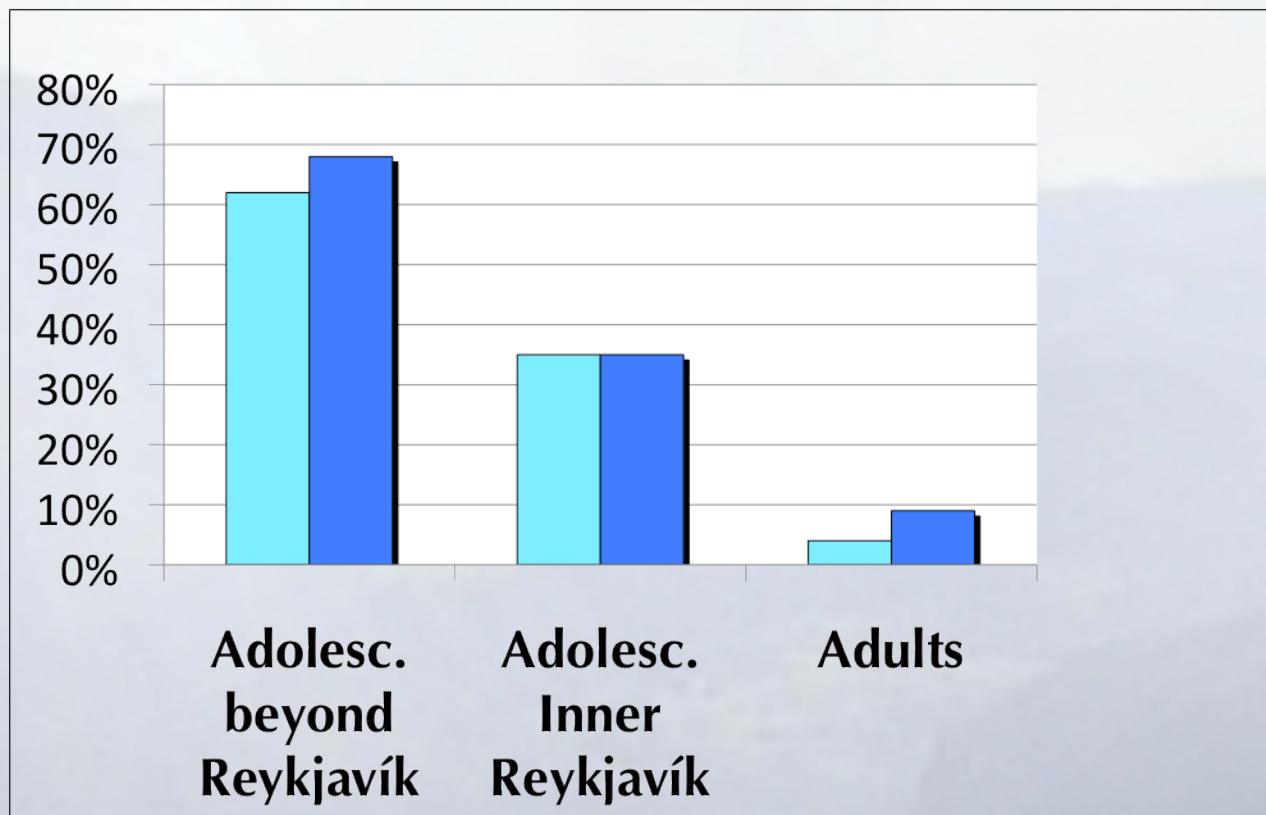
How do these rates compare with *overall* acceptance of the New Construction?

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



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



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 e-mail was checked.

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.

Maling, Joan & Sigríður Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) “The New Impersonal Construction in Icelandic,” *Journal of Comparative Germanic Linguistics* 5:97-142.

Maling, Joan (2006) “From passive to active: syntactic change in progress in Icelandic,” in Lyngfelt & Solstad (eds.) *Demoting the Agent: Passive, middle and other voice phenomena*, John Benjamins, pp. 197-223.

- ❖ research supported by grants from Vísindasjóður Rannsóknarráðs Íslands (RANNÍS), Rannsóknarsjóður Háskóla Íslands, Lýðveldisjóður and in part by NSF grant BCS-9223725 to Brandeis University.

Reflexive impersonal passive with adjunct *einn* ‘alone’

Acceptability rates for the sentence

Svo var bara drifið 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%)