

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

Joan Maling

Brandeis University

Sigríður Sigurjónsdóttir

University of Iceland

LSA

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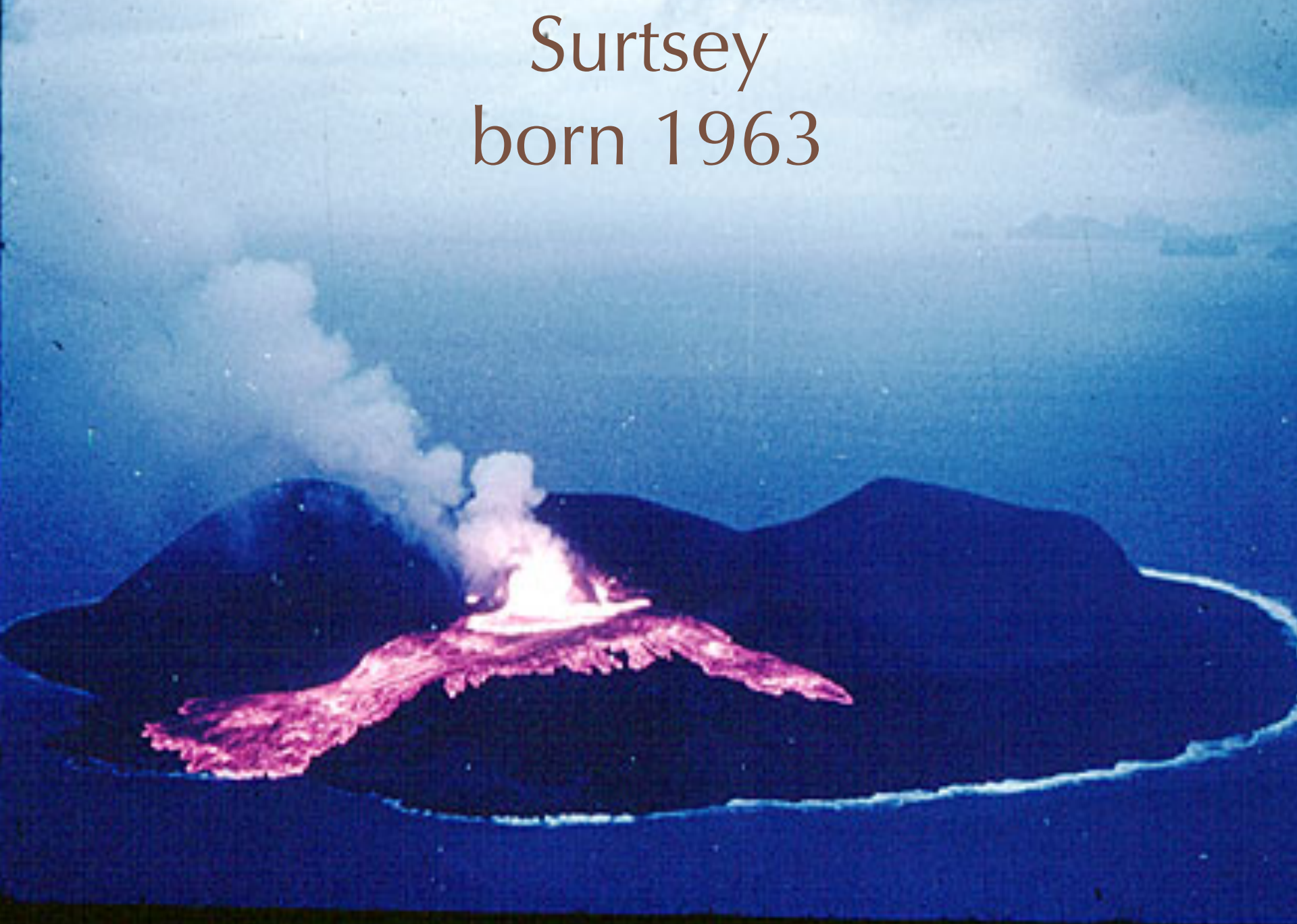
Iceland (103,000 km²; population c. 317,000)



Surtsey

Eyjafjallajökull

Surtsey
born 1963



Spring, 1987 University of Iceland
Maling teaching a class on Icelandic syntax
with a focus on case-marking:

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

A student pipes up: “But there’s another one...”

Pað var beðið mig að vaska upp
it_{EXPL} was asked me-ACC to wash up

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

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

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

A student pipes up: “But there’s another one...”

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”

For now, we will call it the “New 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’

In a 1999 nationwide survey,
93% of surveyed adults found this sentence completely
unacceptable.

73% of adolescents found it completely
acceptable!

Spread of the new construction

1959 Akureyri 8-year old girl

Það var bólusett okkur

it_{EXPL} was inoculated us

‘They inoculated us’ or ‘We were inoculated’

The girl’s mother doesn’t think the construction was common at the time.

Spread of the new construction

1979 Akureyri

The new construction is reported to be common in Akureyri, the “capital of the north.” Another woman recalls being told in 1979 that kids in Akureyri “talk this way.”

Prescriptivists finally begin to respond...

Spread of the new construction

1984, “Usage Error #174”

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

Heyrst hefur:

Heard:

Það var sagt honum að fara

it was told him_{DAT} to leave

RÉTT VÆRI:

CORRECT:

Honum var sagt að fara

he_{DAT} was told to leave

Spread of the new construction

2002, 4-year-old girl

The construction has now been observed in embedded clauses:

Tígri heldur að [það hafi verið rænt honum]

Tigger thinks that it_{EXPL} has been kidnapped him-D

‘Tigger_i thinks that he_j has been kidnapped’

Spread of the new construction

2004 Sign posted at Háskólabío movie theater

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

‘Tickets will be inspected at the door’

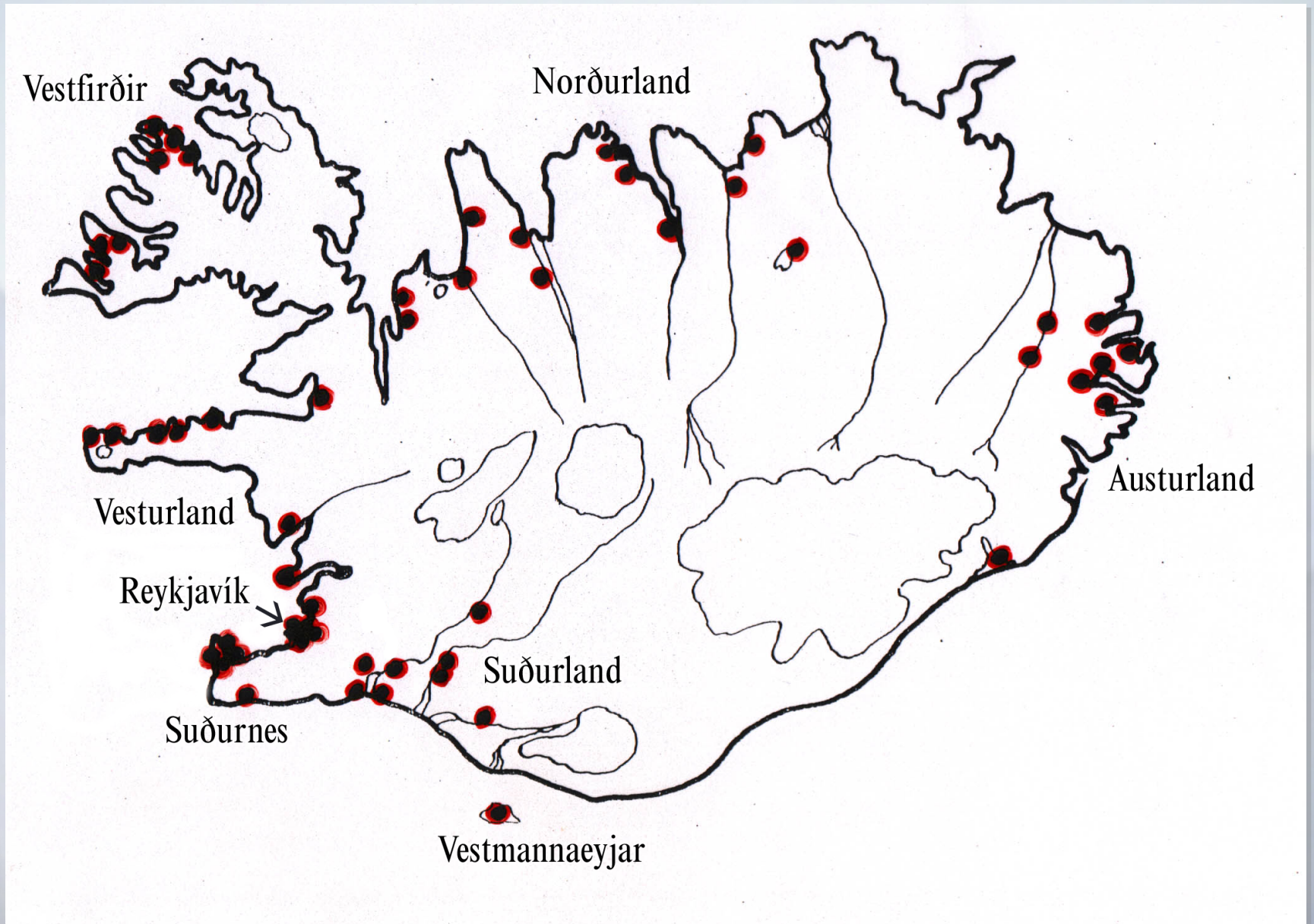
First nationwide study on the New Construction

Study 1 conducted 1999-2000

Sigurjónsdóttir & Maling (2001) and
Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002)

- ❖ Questionnaire distributed to 1,731 tenth graders (age 15-16) in 65 schools throughout Iceland

Location of schools in M&S 2000 survey



First nationwide study on the New Construction

The 1,731 tenth graders (age 15-16) constitute **45% of the children born in Iceland in 1984.**

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)

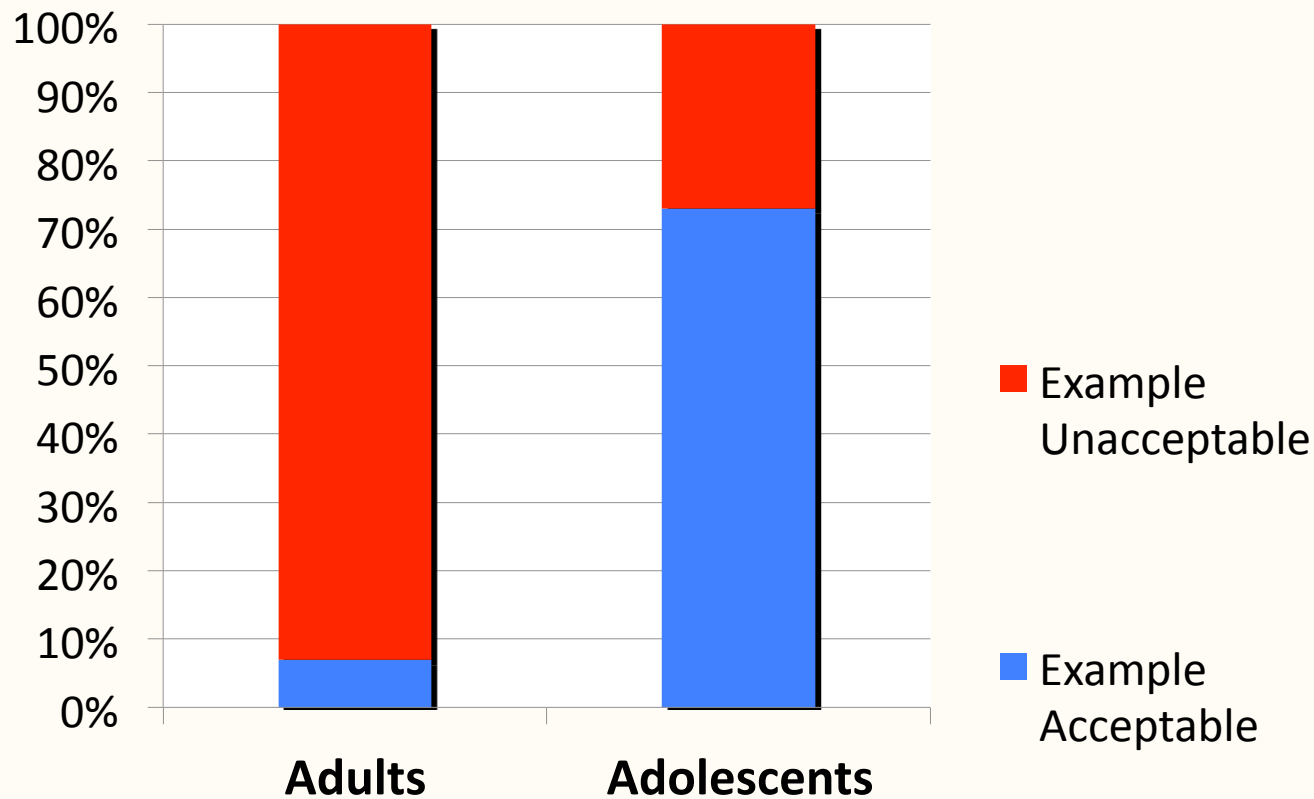
or ‘they asked me to do the dishes’ (active)

Is this sentence acceptable?

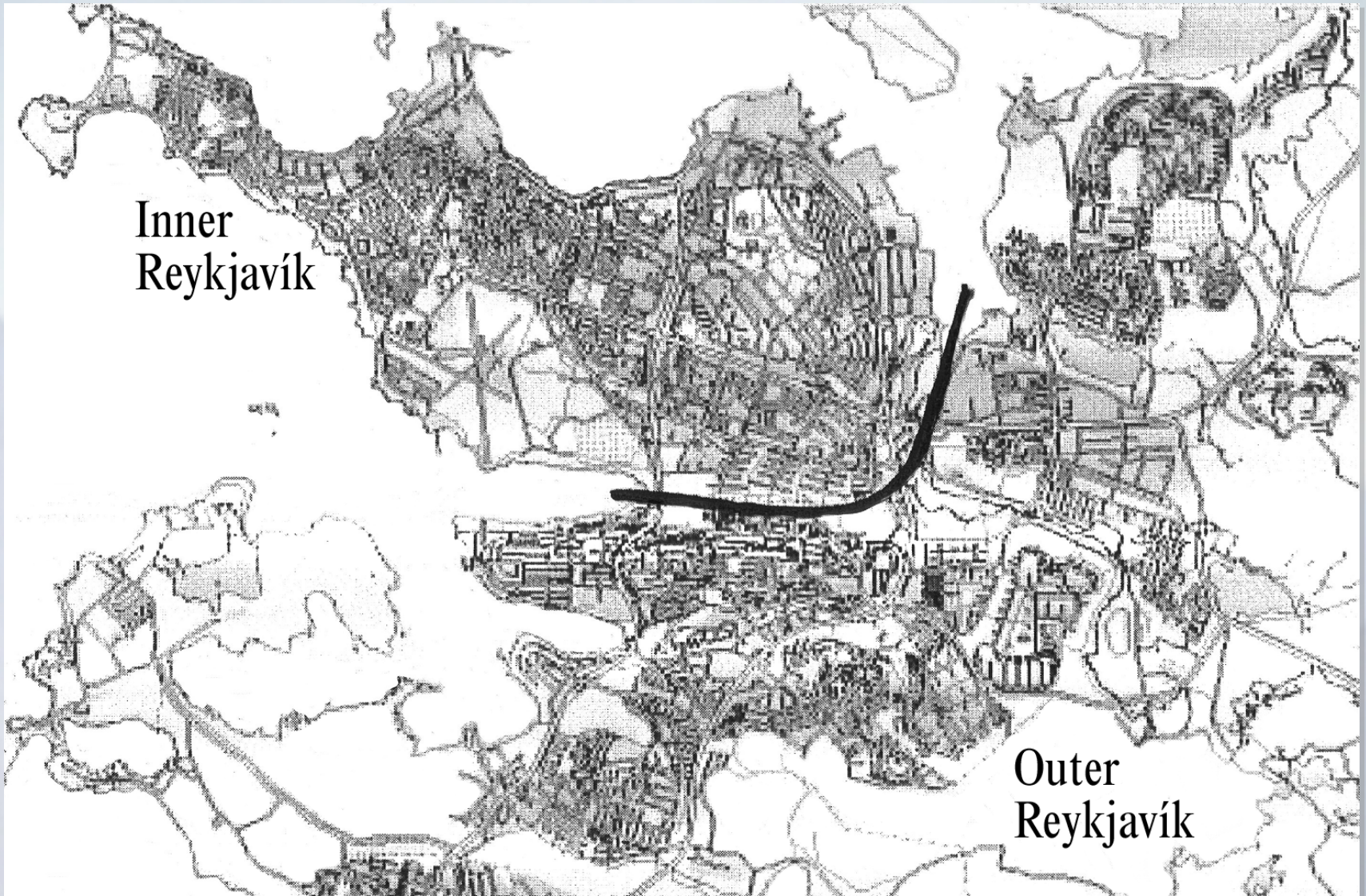
Pað var beðið mig að vaska upp

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

‘it was asked me to do the dishes’

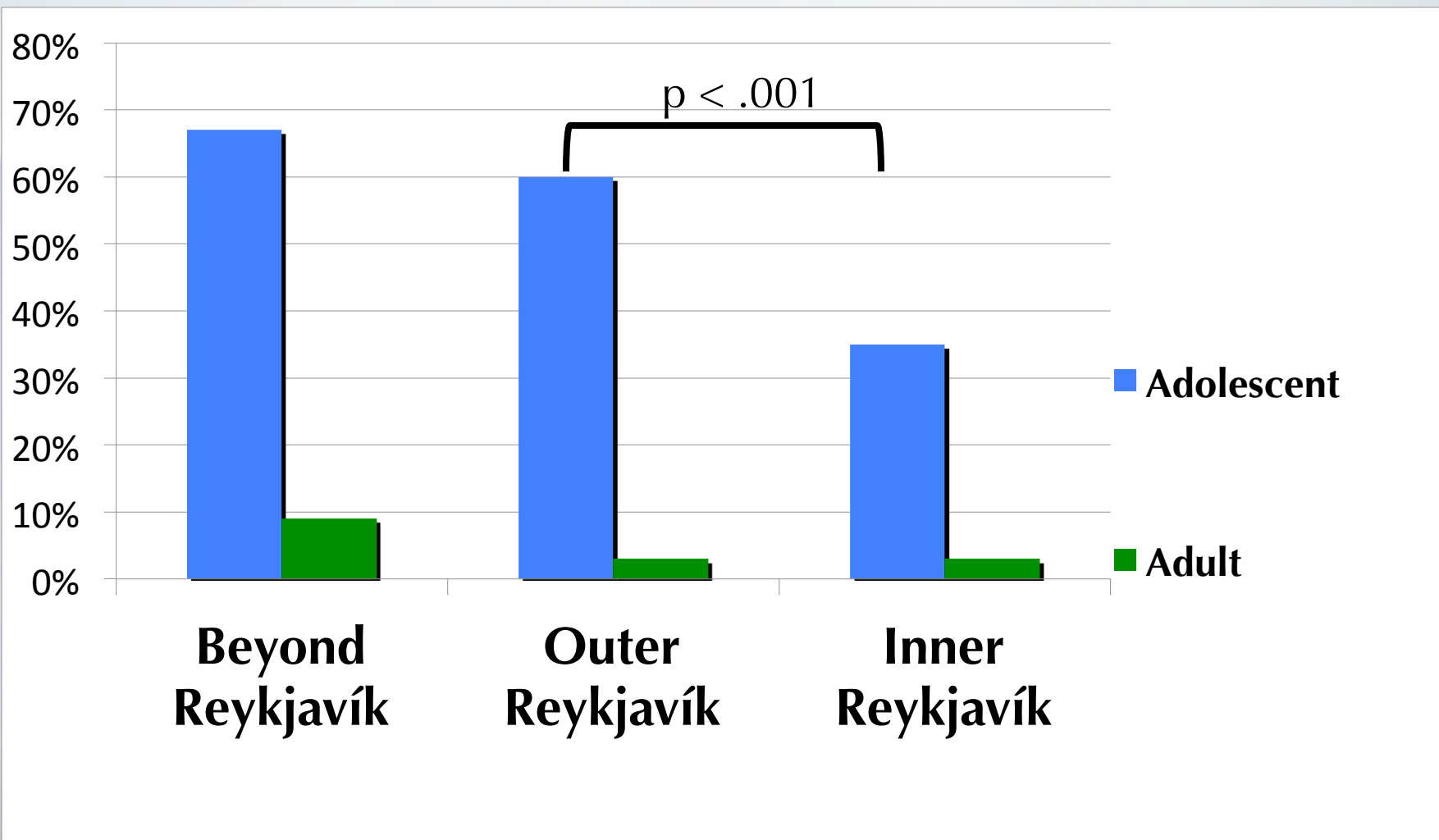


Inner vs. Outer Reykjavík



In the year 2000, Inner Reykjavík had a population of around 67,000; Greater Reykjavík a population of 175,000; the population of Iceland was 286,000.

Study 1 Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir 2002
Geographical variation in acceptance of the New Construction
Adolescents n =1,695; Adults, n =200



Second nationwide study on the New Construction

Study 2 conducted 2005-2007

Thráinsson et al. (2010)

Study conducted on syntactic variation generally modern Icelandic

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

Study 2: Thráinsson et al. (2010) survey question:

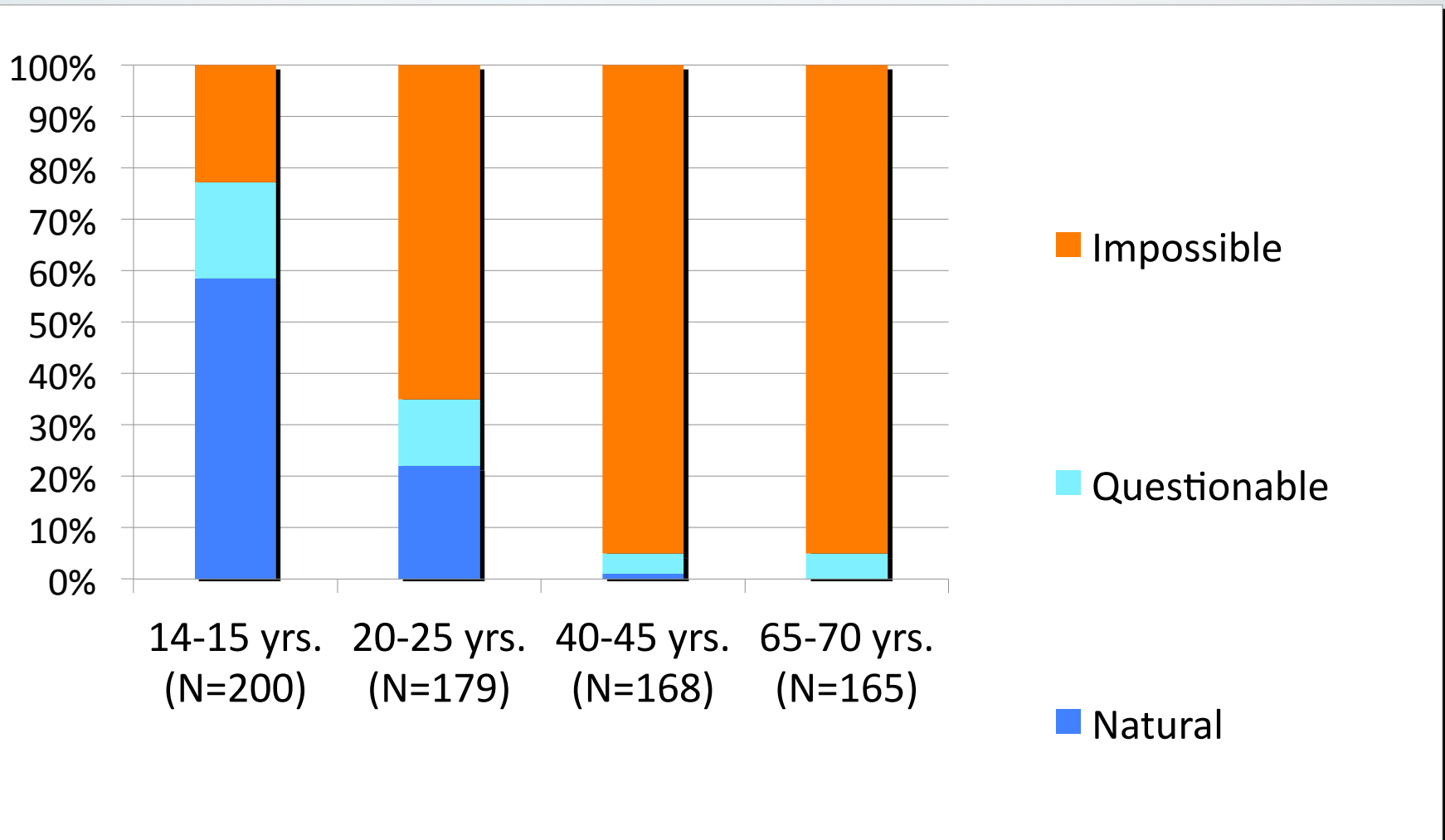
Is this sentence acceptable?

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 New Construction to 712 adolescents and adults in four age groups:

Study 2 (Thráinsson et al. 2010)

Age-related variation: acceptance of New Construction (for this example) N=771



Summary: This change is widespread throughout Iceland; it is not due to contact (e.g. with Danish or English); it is not due to phonological processes. Therefore it must be due to other system-internal factors.



Why does change like this happen? Why don't kids just say what their parents say?

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

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

Specifically, is it **active** or **passive**?

Pađ var beđiđ **mig** ađ 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
impersonal)

And **how can we tell?**

The answer to this question may shed a little light on this particular instance of spontaneous systemic change.

The New Construction vs. other constructions in Icelandic



How is the New Construction different from
the Icelandic **Canonical Passive**?

The background of the slide is a soft-focus photograph of a mountain range. The mountains are layered, with the closest peaks in the foreground and more distant, hazy peaks in the background. The sky is a pale, overcast blue, and the overall lighting is diffused, creating a serene and atmospheric scene.

Morphosyntactic characteristics that distinguish the New Construction from the Canonical Passive

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

Canonical passive:

Ég var beðinn að vaska upp.

I-NOM was asked-masc.sg to wash up

‘I was asked to do the dishes’

New Construction:

Það var beðið **mig** að vaska upp.

*it*_{EXPL} was asked-neut.sg **me-ACC** to wash up

‘They asked me to do the dishes’

Morphosyntactic characteristics that distinguish the New Construction from the Canonical Passive

- The THEME argument is marked with **Accusative** case rather than **Nominative** case
- **Lack of NP-movement** of THEME to **subject** position

Canonical passive (obligatory NP-mvt)

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

‘The boy was pushed’

New Construction

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

‘The boy was pushed’

or ‘Somebody/they pushed the boy.’

Morphosyntactic characteristics that distinguish the New Construction from the Canonical Passive

- The THEME is marked with **Accusative** case rather than **Nominative** case
- **Lack of NP-movement** of THEME to **subject** position
- Yet the New Construction **does** display Passive morphology!

The Canonical Passive:

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

‘the child was asked to do the dishes’

The New Construction:

Það **var beðið** **barnið** að vaska upp
it_{EXPL} *was asked* *child.the* *to wash up*

‘the child was asked to do the dishes’

or ‘they asked the child to do the dishes’

And this morphology is not found in the Active...

Recall that some linguists call the New Construction the “New Passive.” (Eythórsson 2008; Jónsson 2009)

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

The NC is thus assumed by these linguists to be a “non-promotional passive.”

Recall that Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir call it the “New Impersonal” and hypothesize that it is not a passive.

What properties does the New Construction share with Impersonal constructions in Icelandic?



Impersonal Passive of an **Intransitive Verb**

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

‘There was dancing all night’

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

Það var hrint litlum stráki.
it_{EXPL} was pushed-neut.sg. little boy-DAT

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

Impersonal or “Expletive Passive”: Transitive

Það

var hrint

litlum

strák

it_{EXPL}

was pushed-neut.sg.

little-DAT boy-DAT

‘A little boy was pushed’ (Eythórsson 2008)

New Construction

Það

var hrint

litla

stráknum.

it_{EXPL}

was pushed-neut.sg.

little

boy.the-DAT

‘The little boy was pushed’ (Eythórsson 2008)

or ‘Somebody pushed the little boy’

How can a mere non-Icelander tell apart the New Construction from the Impersonal Passive?

Það var hrint **litla stráknnum** / **Tíggra** /honom
it_{EXPL} was pushed-neut.sg. little boy.the-DAT /Tigger / him

“It was pushed the little boy / Tigger / him”

A Definiteness effect:

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

This is how native speakers recognize the New Construction.

New Construction

Það

var hrint

litla stráknúm.

it_{EXPL}

was pushed-neut.sg.

little boy.the-DAT

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

Impersonal “Expletive Passive”

*

Það

var hrint

litla stráknúm

it_{EXPL}

was pushed-neut.sg.

little boy.the-DAT

Intended: ‘The little boy was pushed’

A puzzle:

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

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

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

One hypothesis:

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

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

Sounds reasonable.

Passive Impersonal without NP-movement:

[_S ____ Aux [_{VP} V_{ppart} NP]]

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

Eythórsson (2008)

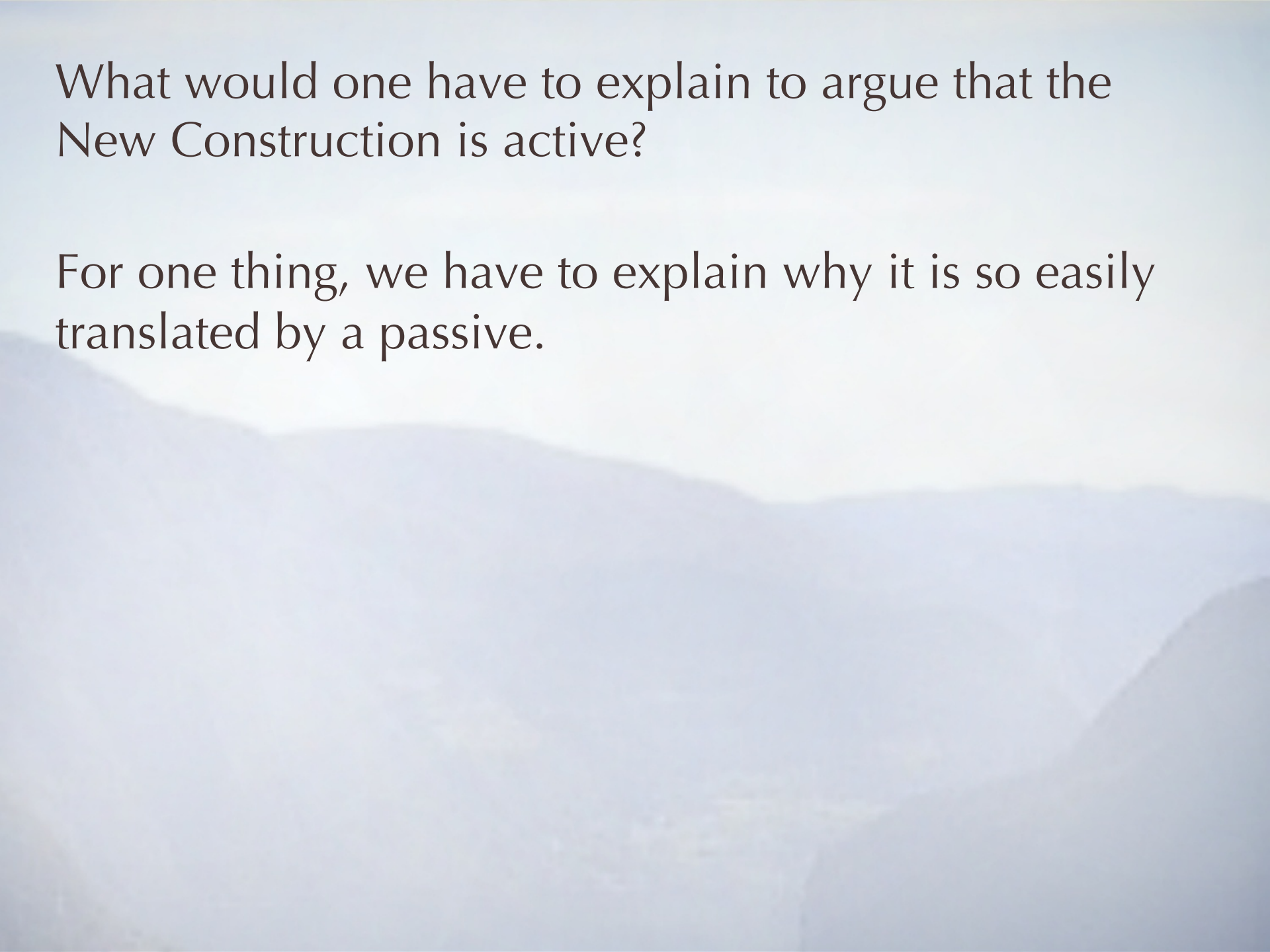
So what's the alternative?

Active Impersonal

$[_S \textit{pro}_{arb} \textit{Aux} [_{VP} \textit{V}_{ppart} \textit{NP}]]$

This is a syntactically **active** construction with a null \textit{pro}_{arb} [+human] pronoun subject

Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002)



What would one have to explain to argue that the New Construction is active?

For one thing, we have to explain why it is so easily translated by a passive.

What discourse properties condition use of the passive?

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

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

(for Icelandic, see Kjartan Ottósson (1986:97))

The New Construction clearly fits (a) below:

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

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

There is never an explicit Agent in the New Construction.

But note that one can achieve the goal of making the Agent anonymous by using **either**

(a) a *passive* voice construction with no *by*-phrase,

or

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

Mistakes were made. (passive)

Someone made mistakes. (active)

English is spoken here. (passive)

They speak English here. (active)

From the point of view of discourse function, we cannot definitively rule in favor of either the Active or the Passive Hypothesis.

Those who support the Passive Hypothesis point to an apparently solid clue: **the morphology**

The Canonical Passive:

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

‘the child was asked to do the dishes’

The New Construction:

Það **var beðið** **barnið** að vaska upp
it_{EXPL} *was asked* *child.the* *to wash up*

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

Recall that this morphology is not found in the Active...

Again, this seems reasonable. Shouldn't you be able to tell by the morphology whether a construction is passive or active?

Our answer, sadly, will be... "No."

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

To see how unreliable morphology can be, let's visit another dramatic syntactic change, this one in the history of English...

Syntactic Change in the English Auxiliary



Syntactic Change in the English Auxiliary System

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

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

“Our garden *is putting* in order, by a Man who bears a remarkably good character, has a very fine complexion & asks something less than the first.”

(February 8, 1807, *letter from Jane Austen to her sister Cassandra*)

Syntactic Change in the English Auxiliary System

Fact: progressive passives that we are familiar with (e.g. “**the trunk was being carried down**” didn’t appear until the late 18th century:

*I have received the speech and address of the House of Lords; probably, that of the House of Commons **was being debated** when the post went out. (1772, First Earl of Malmesbury; cited by Warner (1995)*

Syntactic Change in the English Auxiliary System

The earliest examples of the **progressive passive** (“**the trunks were being carried down**”) appear in letters and private correspondence; this new construction is avoided in anything intended for publication.

1837: “an outrage upon English idiom, to be detested, abhorred, execrated, and given over to six thousand penny-paper editors”
(*North American Review*, vol. 45)

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

(R. Grant White, *Words and their Uses*, p.336; quoted in Visser)

Syntactic Change in the English Auxiliary System

What is going on in this transition:

the trunks were carrying down

the trunks were being carried down

Changing: possible co-occurrences of auxiliaries

Not changing: passive meaning

By looking at the morphology alone, you couldn't tell active from passive.

Syntactic Change in the English Auxiliary System

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

ACTIVE The men **were carrying** the trunks.

(trunks=object, *were carrying* = active;

Agentive subject, Theme object)

PASSIVE The trunks **were carrying** down the stairs.

(trunks=subject, *were carrying* = passive;

Theme subject, no object)

Syntactic Change in Icelandic

In Icelandic, a similar ambiguity prevails:
the New Construction shares verbal morphology with the
Canonical Passive:

The Canonical Passive:

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

‘the child was asked to do the dishes’

The New Construction:

Það var beðið barnið að vaska upp
it_{EXPL} *was asked* *child.the* *to wash up*

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

At this point, some may be tempted to give up and say that the Active/Passive distinction is “fuzzy” with many different components interacting.

We will argue something else:

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

there **are** sharp **syntactic** differences between active and passive constructions.

Active or Passive?

Syntactic properties as diagnostic



It is possible to identify a set of syntactic properties that cross-linguistically tend to have opposite values for active clauses and passive clauses. (Maling 1993; 2006)

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

Syntactic Properties that Distinguish Active from Passive

Syntactic Property	Active Clause	Passive Clause
Agentive by-phrase possible	*	Yes

Agentive *by*-phrase

Active

They arrested the demonstrators (*by the police).

Passive

The demonstrators were arrested (by the police).

Syntactic Properties that Distinguish Active from Passive

Syntactic Property	Active Clause	Passive Clause
Agentive by-phrase possible	*	Yes
Control of subject-oriented adjuncts		

Control of subject-oriented adjuncts

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

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

Others cannot. They want to modify the grammatical subject.

Active

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

Passive

The car was driven through the traffic, **cursing and sweating.**

Syntactic Properties that Distinguish Active from Passive

Syntactic Property	Active Clause	Passive Clause
Agentive by-phrase possible	*	Yes
Control of subject-oriented adjuncts	Yes	*
Bound anaphors in underlying object position		

Binding of anaphors

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

Active

They locked **themselves** out

The CEOs gave **themselves** a large bonus.

Passive

* **Themselves** were locked out.

A large bonus was given (to) them/***themselves**

Syntactic Properties that Distinguish Active from Passive

Syntactic Property	Active Clause	Passive Clause
Agentive by-phrase possible	*	Yes
Control of subject-oriented adjuncts	Yes	*
Bound anaphors in underlying object position	Yes	*
Non-agentive “Unaccusative” verbs are possible	Yes	*

So how can we use these diagnostics to further analyze the Icelandic New Construction?

Syntactic Property	Active Clause	Passive Clause
Agentive by-phrase possible	*	Yes
Control of subject-oriented adjuncts	Yes	*
Bound anaphors in underlying object position	Yes	*
Non-agentive “Unaccusative” verbs are possible	Yes	*

Before we examine the Icelandic New Construction, we'll consider a revealing dichotomy between two closely related languages, Polish and Ukrainian.

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

Polish vs. Ukrainian *-no /-to* construction

Świątynię zbudowano w 1640 roku.
church-ACC build-**no** in 1640 year

Polish
(M& S 2002)

‘The church was built in 1640’

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

Ukrainian
(Sobin 1985)

‘The church was built in 1640’

They are almost identical, except for the optional presence of an auxiliary in Ukrainian:

Świątynię **zbudowano** w 1640 roku.
church-ACC **build-no** in 1640 year

Polish

‘The church was built in 1640’

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

Ukrainian

‘The church was built in 1640’

This construction assigns ACCUSATIVE case to the Patient/ Theme of a Transitive verb. So it looks like an active construction, but has passive-like morphology.

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

Sound familiar?

So how do the Polish and Ukrainian *-no/to* constructions compare on the list of syntactic properties that cluster with actives versus passives?



The –no/-to Construction in Polish and Ukrainian

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

Summary

- Take-home lesson: we cannot tell what the syntactic behavior of a construction is by looking at its superficial morphological properties (e.g. case, agreement)
- Despite their superficial similarity and common historical origin, the Polish and Ukrainian *-no/to* constructions are polar opposites in terms of their syntactic behavior

So which of these two polar opposites does the Icelandic New Construction most resemble?

Researchers differ!

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

(Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir 1997, 2002; Maling 2006)

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

(Eythórsson 2008)

How about the Agentive by-phrase?

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

Next: does the Icelandic New Construction allow control of subject-oriented adjuncts?

Syntactic Property	Polish (active)	Ukrain. (passive)	Icelandic ???
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	*	

Recall the contrast in Polish vs. Ukrainian –*no/to* constructions:
Polish active allows it, Ukrainian passive does not.

Wróciwszy do domu, znaleźiono pieniądze
returned-ANT to house found-IMP money-ACC
'Having returned home, they found the money'

Polish

*Povernuvšys' dodomu, hroši bulo znajdeno.
returning home money was found-PASS.

Ukrain.

Intended: "Having returned home, the money was found"

(=M&S 2002, ex. (12c), from Lavine 2000:90, ex (5b))

Why? Because the Polish active *-no/-to* has a null **Pro_{arb} subject**, whereas in the Ukrainian passive, there is **no thematic subject**.

Wróciwszy do domu, znaleziono pieniądze
returned-ANT to house found-IMP money-ACC
'Having returned home, they found the money'

Polish

*Povernuvšys' dodomu, hroši bulo znajdeno.
returning home money was found-PASS.

Ukrain.

Intended: "Having returned home, the money was found"

(=M&S 2002, ex. (12c), from Lavine 2000:90, ex (5b))

How about control of adjuncts in the New Construction?

Það var lesið **minningargreinina** grátandi

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

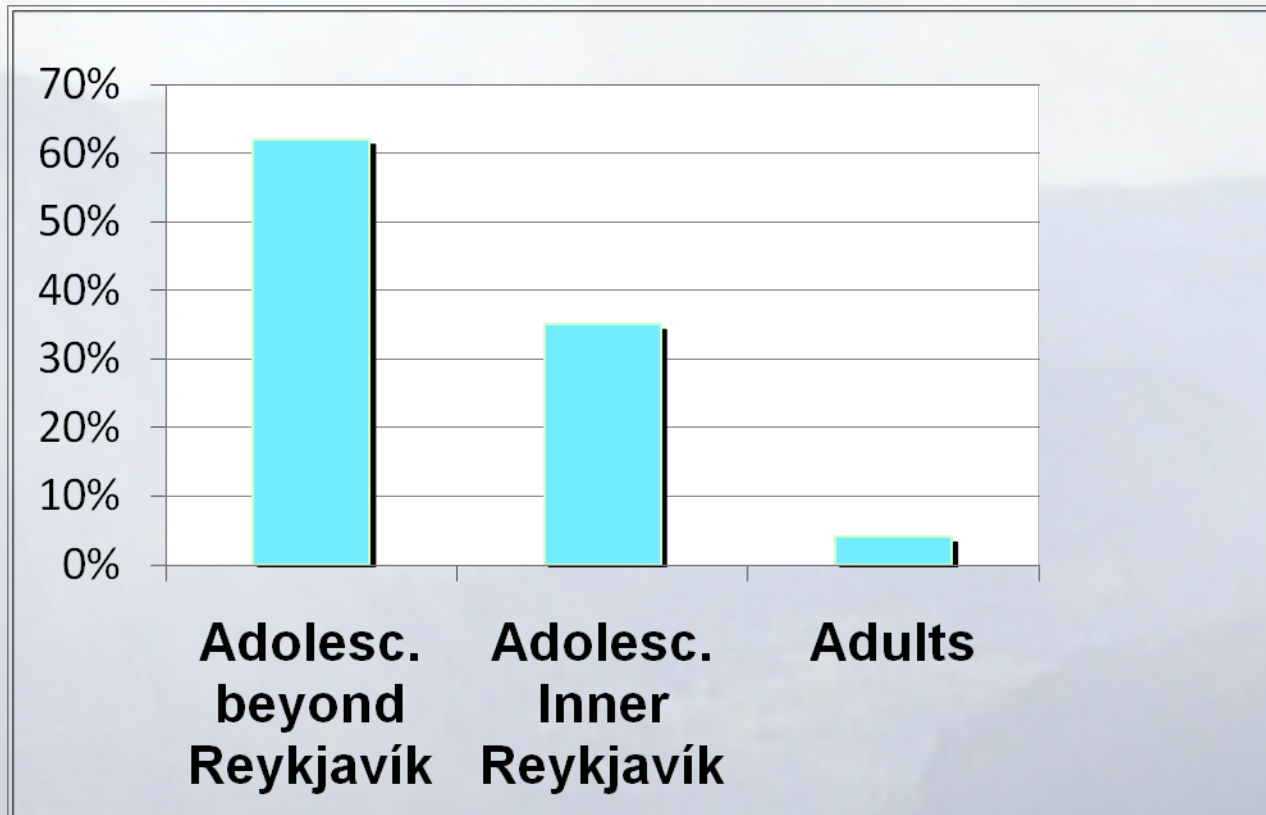
‘They read the memorial article crying’

‘The memorial article was read, crying’

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

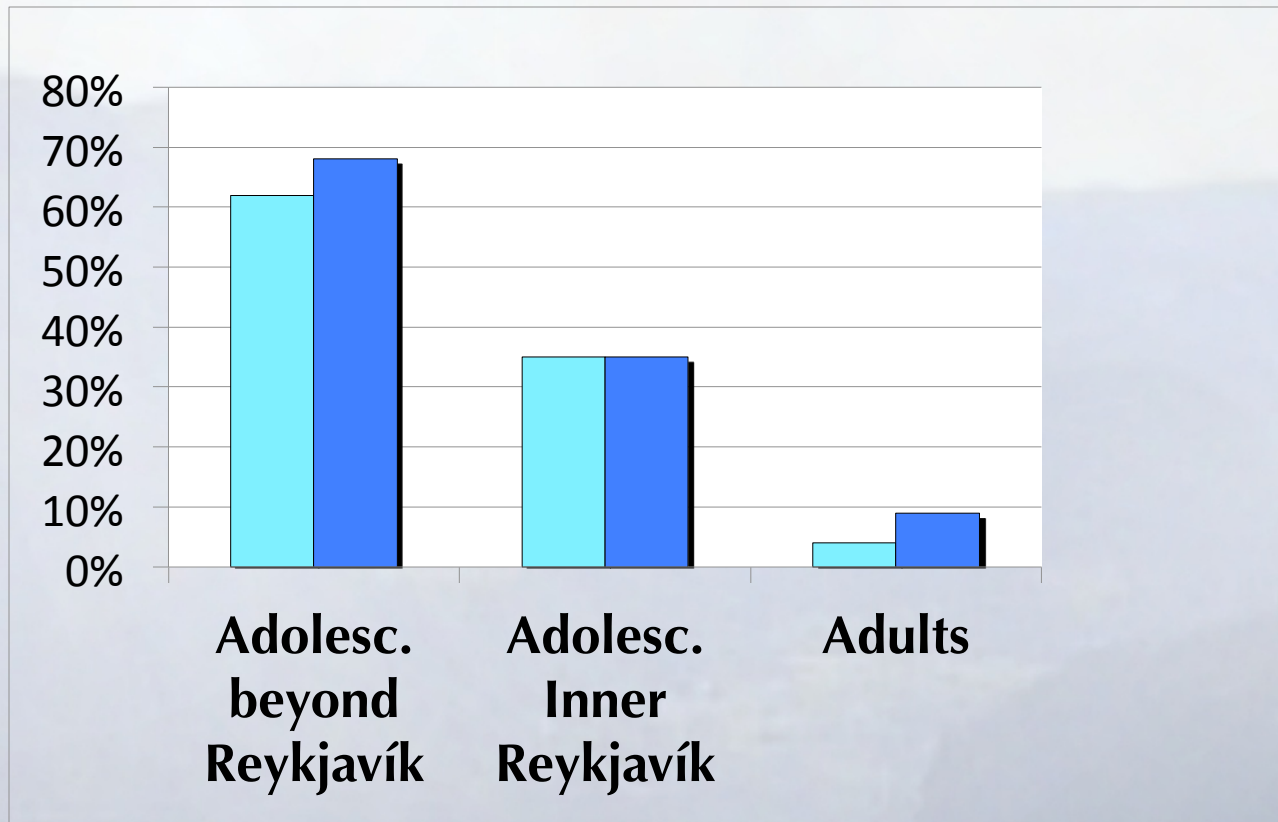
Það var lesið minningargreinina grátandi
it_{EXPL} was read the.memorial.article crying
‘They read the memorial article crying’

% Acceptance for control of adjuncts in New Construction



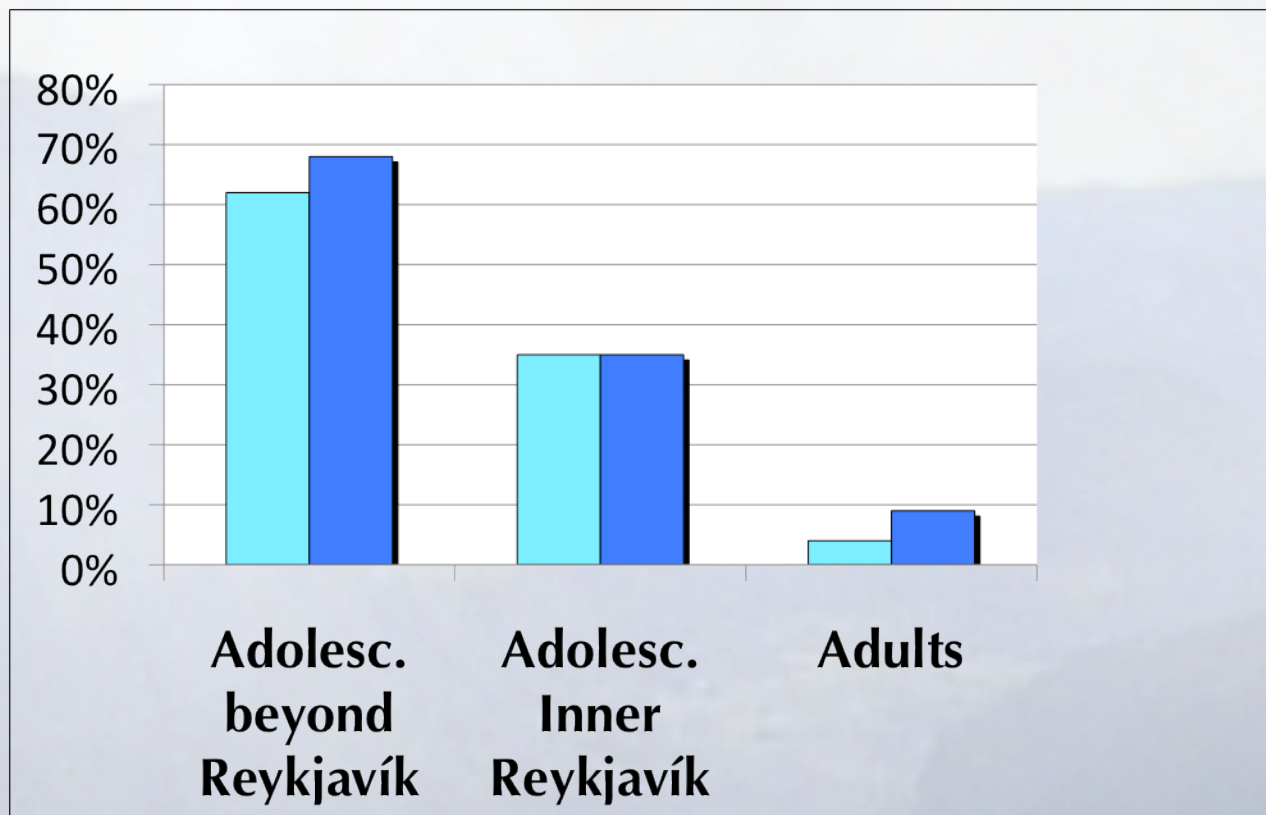
How do these rates compare with *overall* acceptance of the New Construction?

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



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



Yes, control of subject-oriented adjuncts *is* a property of the New Construction.

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

What about Unaccusative verbs?

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

Recall the contrast in Polish vs. Ukrainian *-no/to* constructions: the Polish active allows unaccusative, non-agentive verbs, the Ukrainian passive does not.

Dawniej **umeriano** młodo.

Polish

before died-IMP young

‘In the old days, people **died** at a young age’

Przed wojna **bywano** w Grand Hotelu.

before war be-IMP in Grand Hotel

‘Before the war, people **frequented** the Grand Hotel’

***Umerto** / ***Zaxvorito**/ ***Prijixato**.

Ukrainian

died-PASS /got.sick-PASS/ arrived-PASS

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

Þeir *eiga* hundinn.

they own dog.the-ACC

‘They own the dog’

Active

* Hundurinn er *áttur* (af þeim).

dog.the-NOM is owned (by them)

‘The dog is owned (by them)’

Canonical Passive

(Thráinsson 2007)

Nonagentive verb *eiga* 'own' in the New Construction?

Það var samt alltaf átt marga hesta.

it_{EXPL} was still always had many horses-ACC

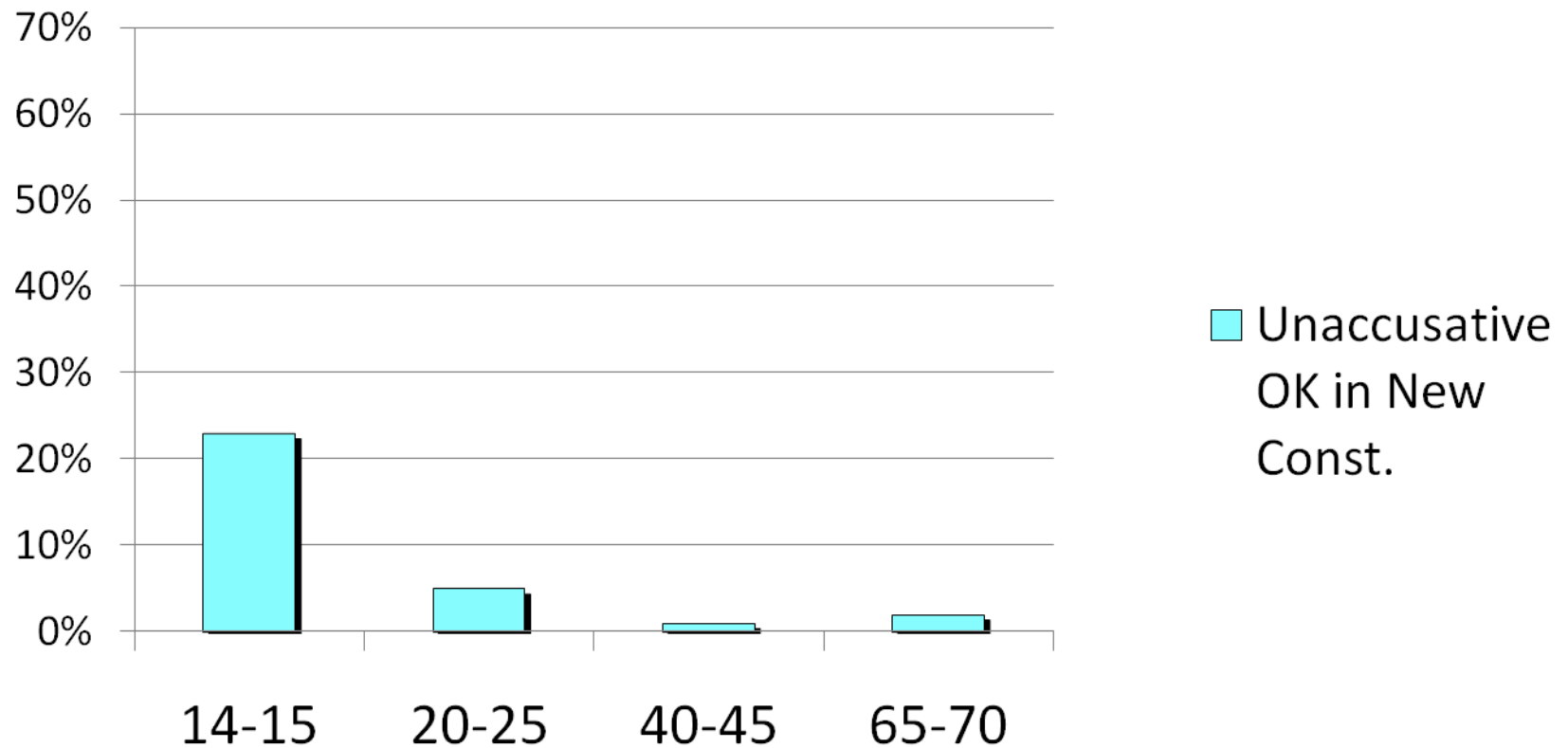
'Still, people/they always owned many horses'

Again, acceptability of non-agentive verbs is dependent upon who is asked:

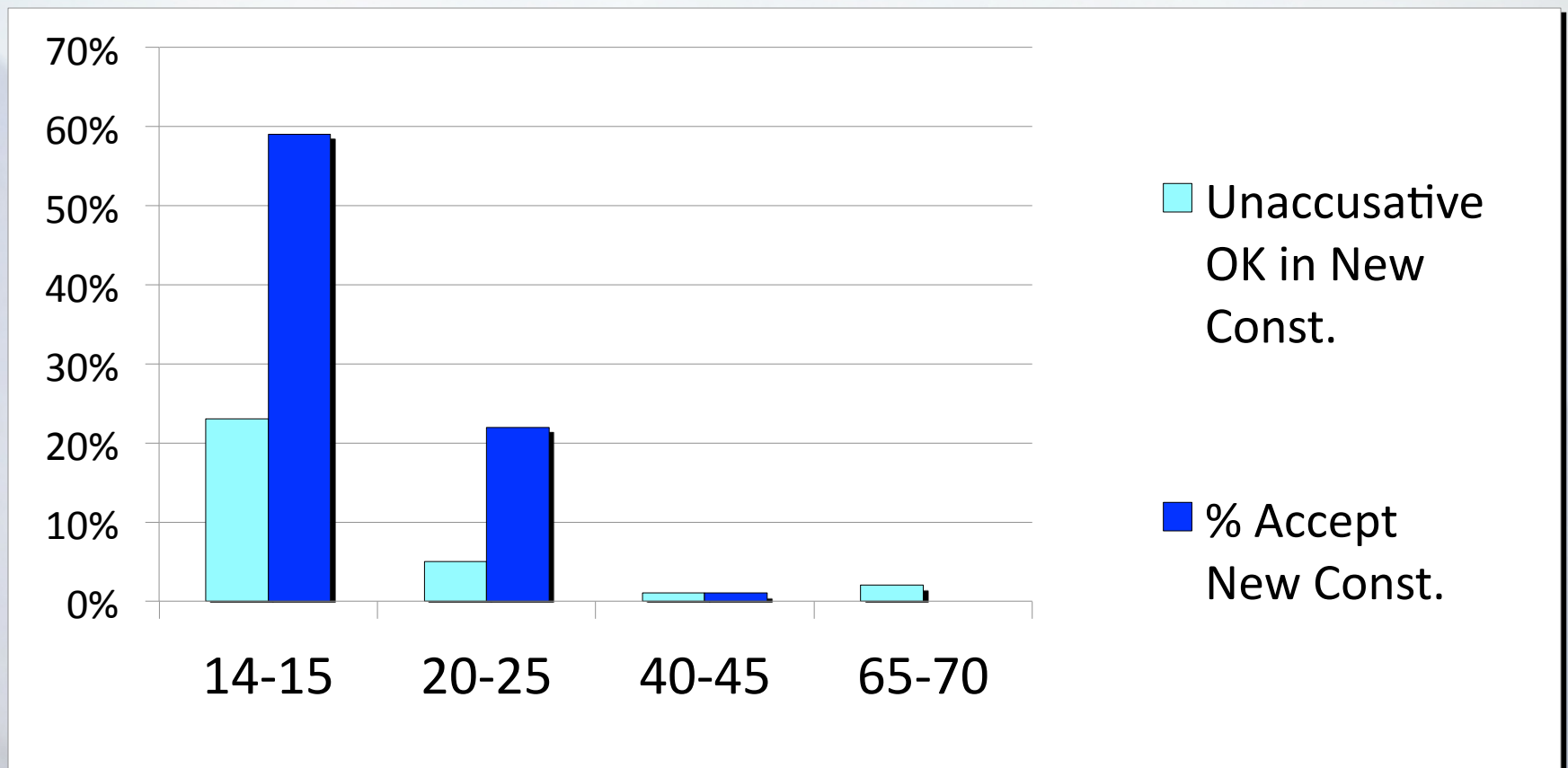
Það var samt alltaf átt marga hesta.

it_{EXPL} was still always had many horses-ACC

‘Still, people/they always owned many horses’



Compare the rate of acceptability of non-agentive verbs with the rate of overall acceptance of the New Construction:



So unaccusative verbs are emerging as a property of the New Construction for some speakers.

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

What about bound anaphors? Can they occur in the NC?

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

Recall that bound anaphors are allowed in the Polish *Active -no/to* construction but not the Ukrainian *Passive -no/-to* construction.

Chwalono **swoją** własną ojczyznę Polish
praised-IMP **self' s** own fatherland-f.sg.ACC
'they praised their own country'



(Po)xvaleno **svoju** vlasnu bat'kivščynu. Ukrainian
praised-PASS **self' s** own fatherland
intended: 'they praised their own country'

What about Icelandic?

The New Construction with a possessive reflexive (M&S 2002)

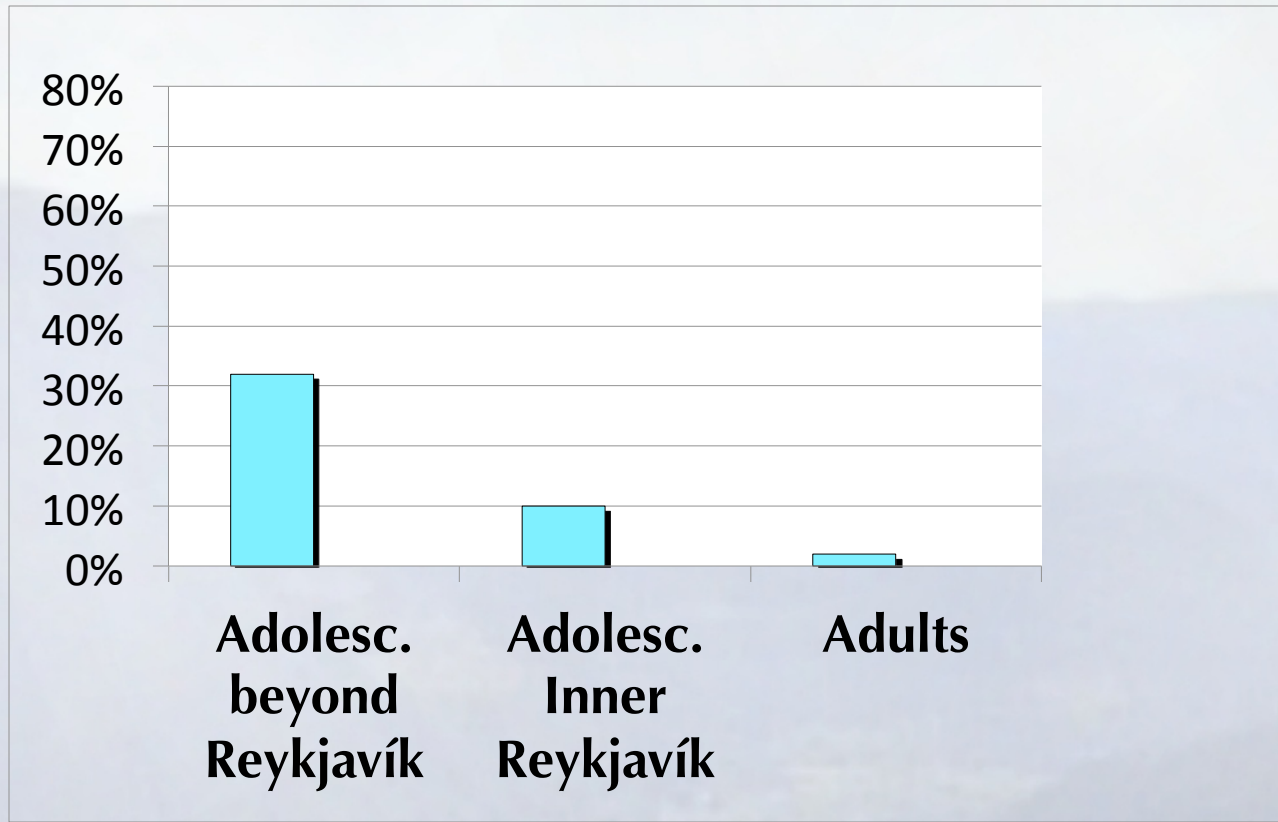
Á kvöldin var skoðað tölvupóstinn **sinn.**
in evenings was viewed e-mail-ACC **refl**
‘In the evenings people checked their own e-mail’
‘In the evenings their own e-mail was checked.’

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

In the evenings their email was checked.

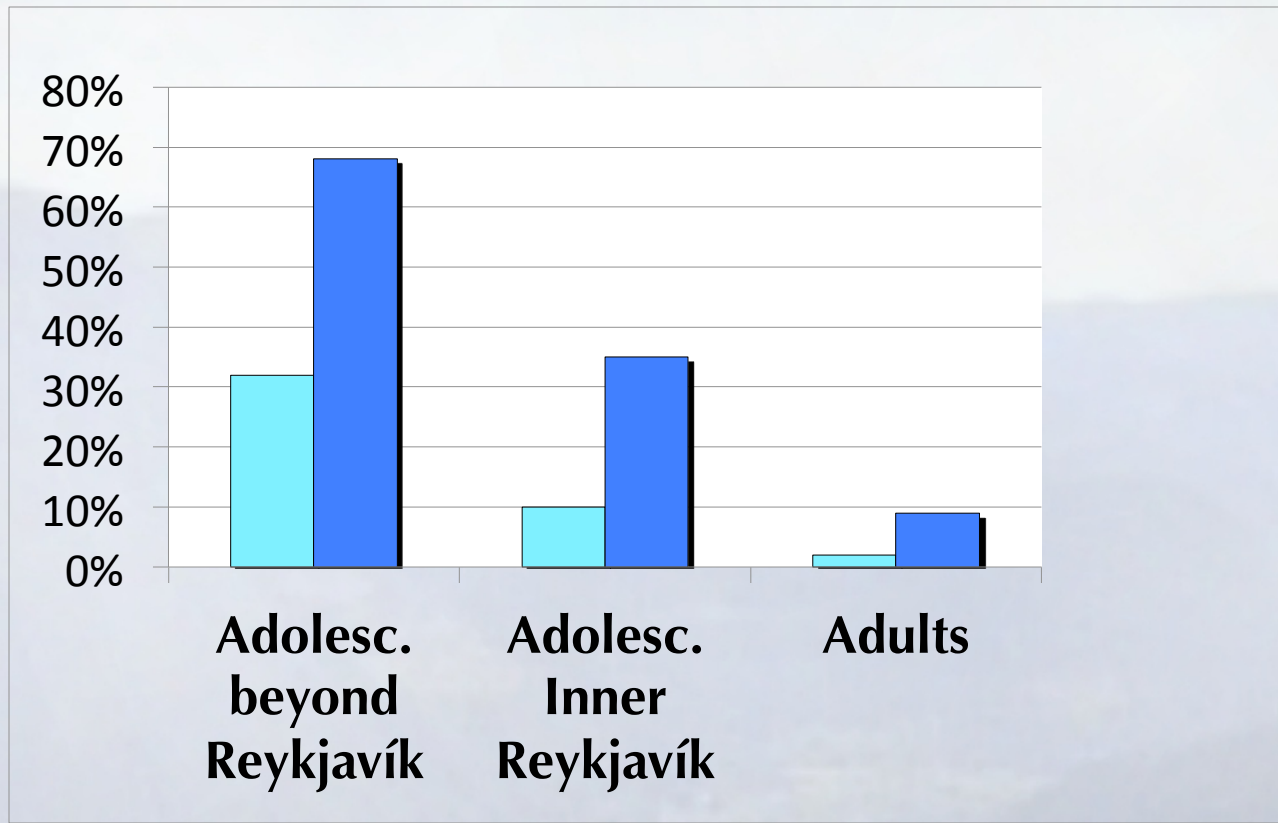
How acceptable is control of reflexives in the New Construction?

% Acceptance for control of reflexives in NC



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

% Acceptance for control of reflexives in New Const., compared with acceptance rates for the New Const. overall



So if acceptance of bound anaphora in the NC is evidence that the NC is *active*, we would predict that speakers will NOT allow bound anaphora in CANONICAL Passives.

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

Tölvupósturinn (***sinn**) var skoðaður á kvöldin.

e-mail-m.sg.NOM (*REFL) was checked-m.sg. in the.evening

‘(*their own) e-mail was checked in the evenings’

No: Canonical passives are bad with reflexives, as expected.

So for speakers who accept the New Construction, about half accept the use of bound anaphora in the (underlying) object position, controlled by the null subject.

And **no** speakers accept bound anaphora in Canonical Passives, not even the young speakers who use the New Construction.

So we can fill in the blank with a “Yes” – the Icelandic New Construction is, like Polish, active.

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

The New Construction: Two Hypotheses

a. Passive Impersonal without NP-movement:

[_S ____ Aux [_{VP} V_{ppart} NP]]

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

Eythórsson (2008)

b. Active Impersonal

[_S *pro*_{arb} Aux [_{VP} V_{ppart} NP]]



This is a syntactically **active** construction with a null *pro*_{arb} [+human] pronoun subject

Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002)

But wait....

There's one more objection to the Active hypothesis, and it involves some surprising data that only came to light during the large surveys.

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

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

‘There was dancing all night’

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

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

‘There was dancing all night’

Consider first control of subject-oriented adjuncts, a property of *actives*. Do we find this syntactic property in the traditional Impersonal Passive?

Það var komið **skellihlæjandi** í tímunn

it_{EXPL} was come **laughing** into class

‘They came into class **laughing**’

Impersonal Passive

Það var komið **skellihlæjandi** í tímann

it_{EXPL} was come **laughing** into class

‘They came into class **laughing**’

New Construction

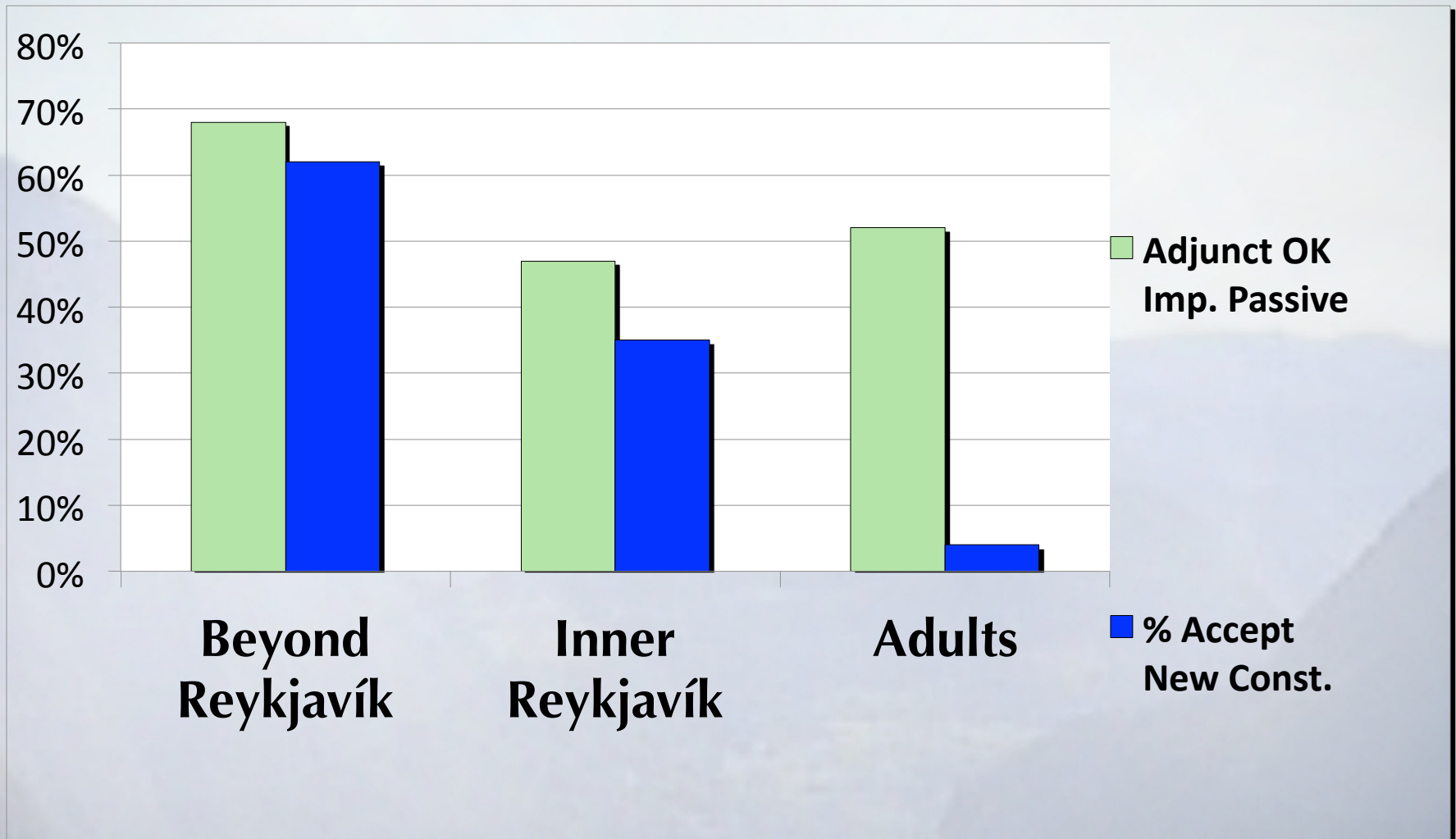
Það var lesið minningargreinina **grátandi**

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

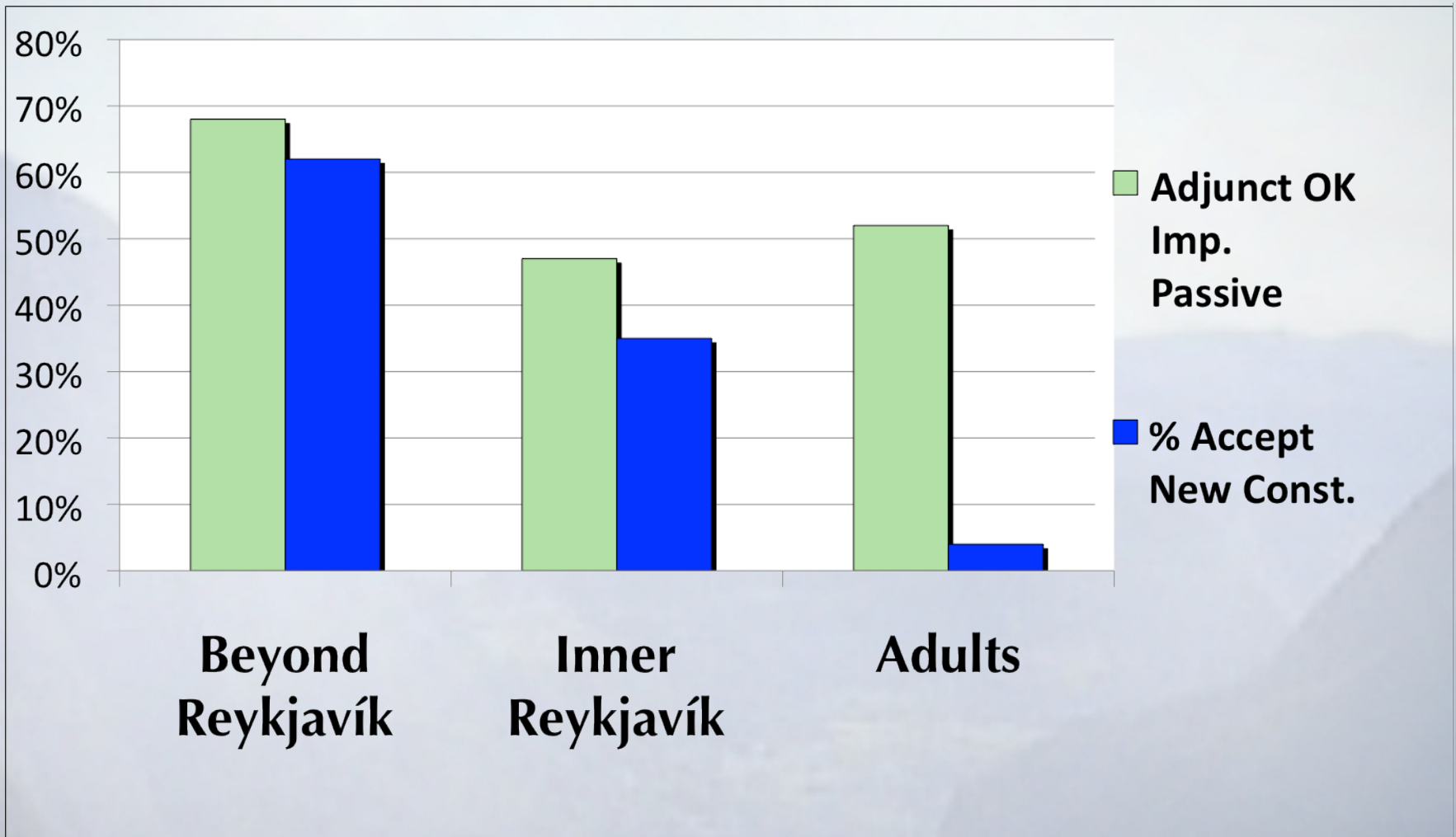
‘They read the memorial article **crying**’

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

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



If control of subject-oriented adjuncts is a syntactic property of *actives*, the Impersonal Passive is at least as “active” as the New Construction.



Now let's consider the control of reflexives, a property of **actives**: surveys showed that for many adults, reflexive verbs could occur in Impersonal **passives**.

Svo var bara drifið sig á ball.

then was just hurried REFL-ACC to dance

‘Then everyone just hurried off to the dance’

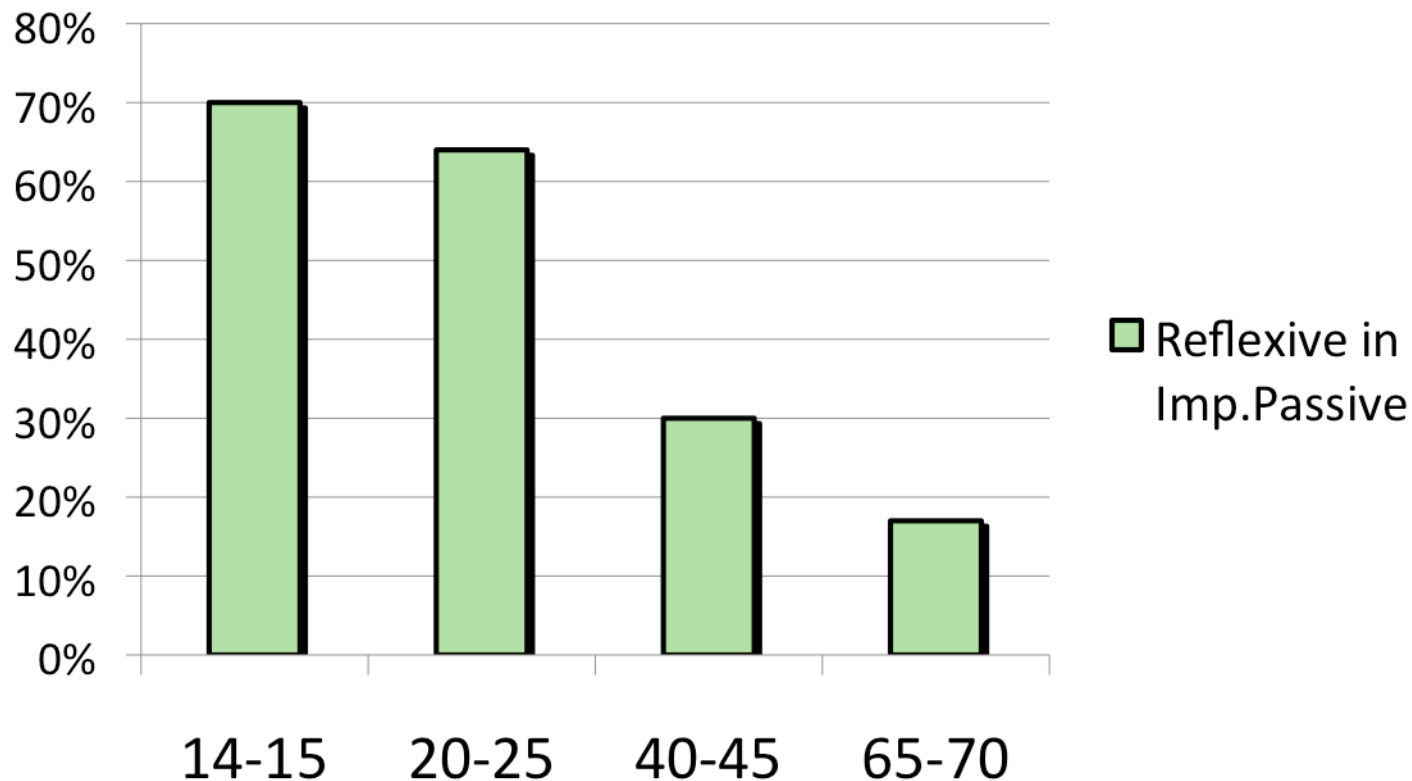
(M&S, included in both surveys)

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

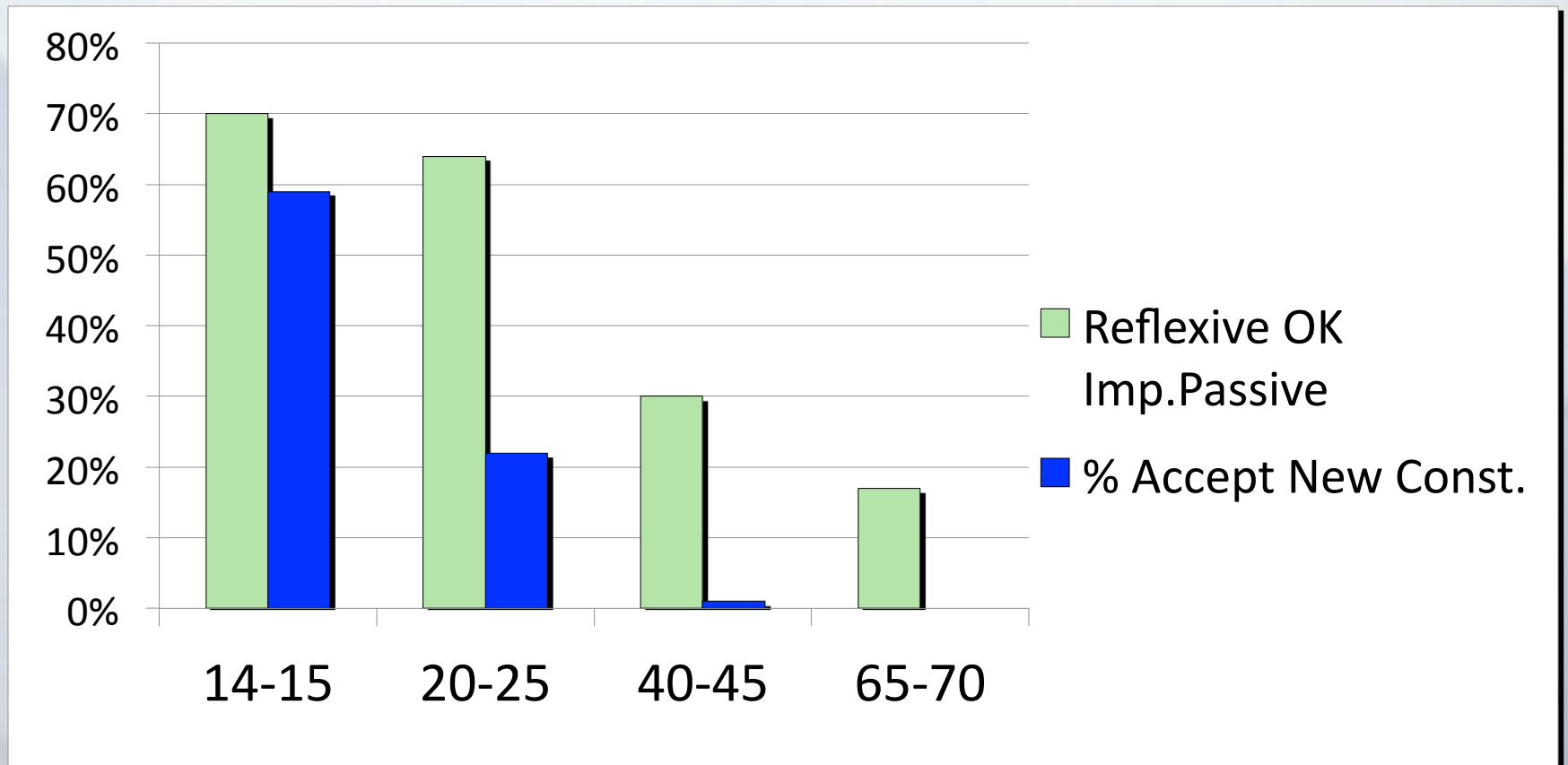
Svo var bara drifið **sig** á ball.
then was just hurried REFL-ACC to dance

‘Then everyone just hurried off to the dance’

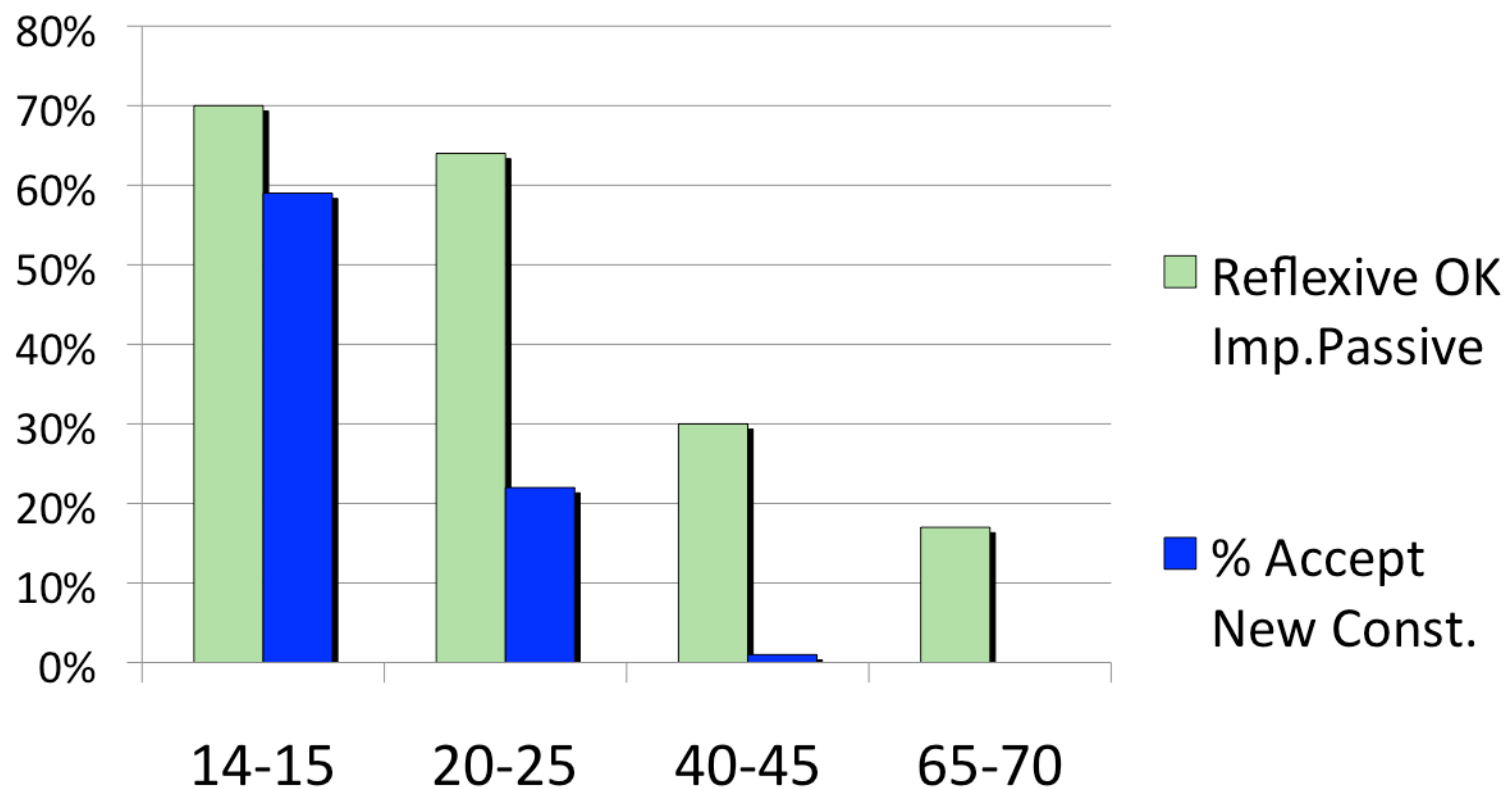
(M&S, included in both surveys)



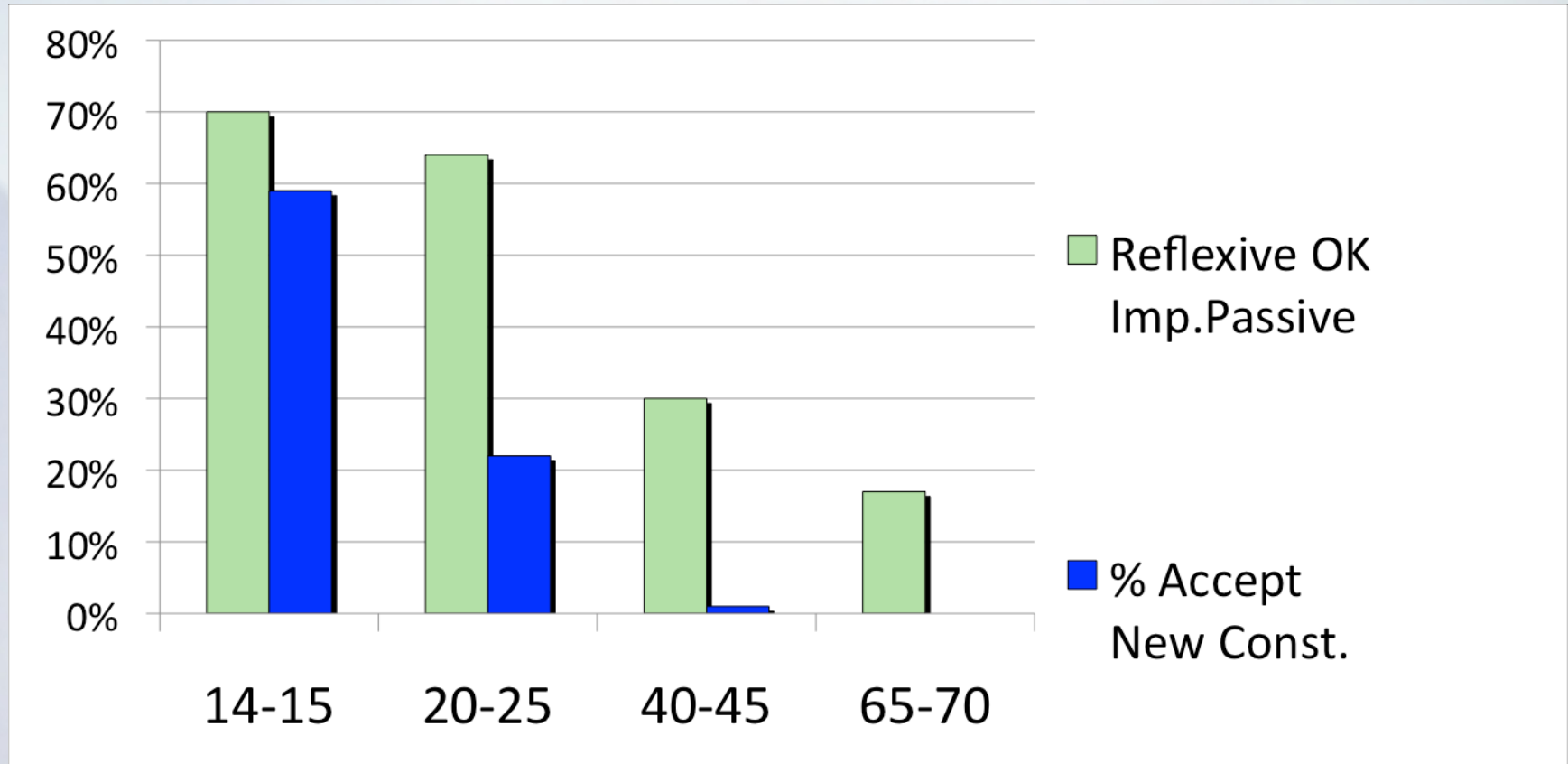
Compare this level of acceptability with the levels of acceptability by age that we saw for the New Construction:



The Impersonal Passive is showing the same *active* syntactic property as the New Construction, but at higher levels of acceptance!



Impersonal passives allow control of adjuncts and control of reflexives at greater rates for younger people, but the shift probably started within the last century.

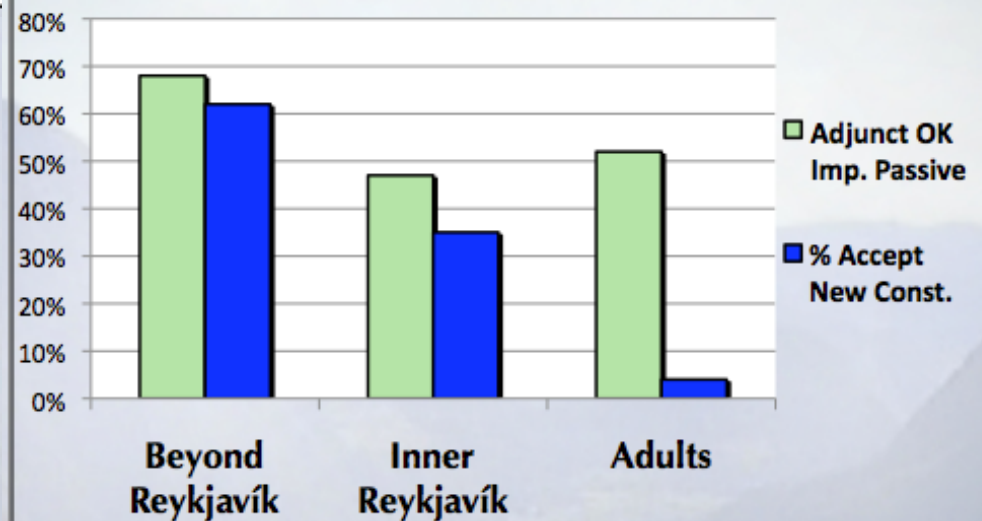
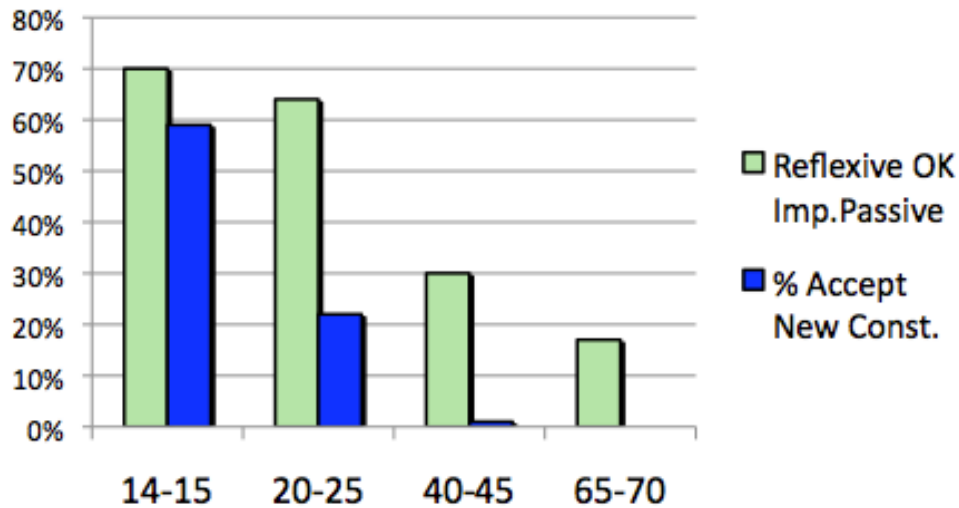


Acceptance of Bound Anaphora in the Impersonal Passive is a 20th Century Phenomenon

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

(Eythórsson 2008:189)

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



Change that had NOT been noticed:



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

What is the nature of this much more subtle change?

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

(Maling & Sigurjónsdóttor 2002)

Impersonal Passive:

[e] [_{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 & Sigurjónsdóttor 2002)

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

The other half analyzed it as **active**, i.e. having a syntactically accessible null subject. This makes bound anaphors and adjuncts possible.

So if a speaker has the Impersonal Passive represented as

[e] [_{VP} **var dansað**]

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

Some anecdotal evidence:

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

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

‘It was come into class **laughing**’

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

[e] [_{VP} **var komið**]

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

(Maling & Sigurjónsdóttor 2002)

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

[pro_{arb}] [_{VP} **var komið**]

This prediction is borne out:

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

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

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

So speakers who accept subject-oriented participles and reflexives may have an *active* representation of the Impersonal Passive, while speakers who reject subject-oriented participles and reflexives may have a *passive* representation of the Impersonal Passive

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)
- 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



The Icelandic Parsed Historical Corpus (IcePaHC)

Wallenberg, Joel C., Anton Karl Ingason, Einar Freyr Sigurðsson and Eiríkur Rögnvaldsson. 2010. Icelandic Parsed Historical Corpus (IcePaHC). Version 0.2.

http://www.linguist.is/icelandic_treebank

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

Supported by:

- ❖ Icelandic Research Fund (RANNÍS) (#090662011)
- ❖ U.S. National Science Foundation (NSF) (#OISE-0853114)
- ❖ University of Iceland Research Fund (Rannsóknasjóður HÍ)

Takk fyrir!
Thank you for listening



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(pilot study in 1997)

Lýðveldissjóður, Republic of Iceland

Vísindasjóður RANNÍS (Icelandic Science Foundation)

Rannsóknasjóður Háskólans (University of Iceland Research Fund)

(43) *Sentences which can be analyzed as either a Canonical Passive or NI (Eythórsson 2008)*

a. *Það var skammað lítið barn. (=ex.73a)*

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

‘A little child was scolded’

b. *Það var hrint litlum strák. (= ex. 73b)*

it_{EXPL} was pushed little-DAT boy

‘A little boy was pushed’

(44) *Sentences are unambiguously instances of the NI – definite object NP (Eythórsson 2008)*

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

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

‘The little child was scolded’

b. *Það var hrint litla stráknunum. (= ex.74b)*

it_{EXPL} was pushed little-DAT boy.the

‘The little boy was pushed’

(47) Eythórsson (2008: 212-213) on the Definiteness Effect

- a. “Once the postverbal NP has been reanalyzed as an object that is assigned structural accusative case, the New Passive emerges.” (Eythórsson (2008:212-213))
- b. “Since the NP is not a subject but an object, the DE no longer applies.”

(48) *Eythórsson: Norwegian ditransitives show the predicted lack of the DE*

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

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

‘The winner was given a cup/*the cup’

(= Eythórsson 2008, ex. (66b))

(50) Syntactic Properties of the Norwegian Impers. Passive – note that the *selv* ‘self’ anaphor in (50b) is not allowed

a. Det ble danset **av alle og enhver** i bygda.

it was danced by one and all in the.village

b. Det ble låst **seg (*selv)** inn i 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

(51) 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....’

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.

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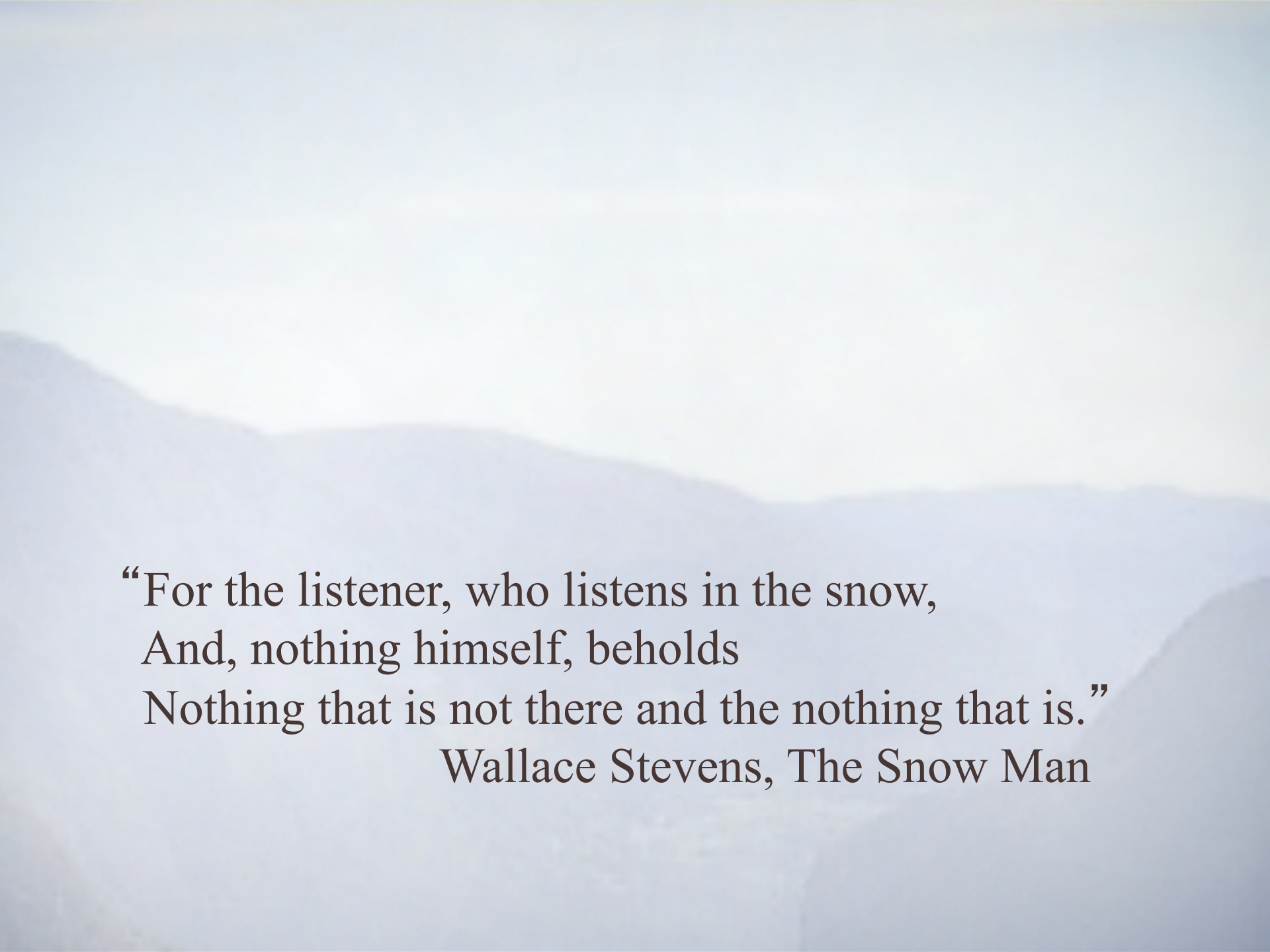
- ❖ Icelandic Research Fund (RANNÍS) (#090662011)
- ❖ U.S. National Science Foundation (NSF) (#OISE-0853114)
- ❖ University of Iceland Research Fund (Rannsóknasjóður HÍ)

Characteristic ‘S’ -shaped curve

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



“For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.”

Wallace Stevens, *The Snow Man*

Reflexive impersonal passive with adjunct *einn* ‘alone’

Acceptability rates for the sentence

Svo var bara 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%)

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)

Canonical Passive

Litlum strákk var hrint.
little boy-DAT was pushed-neut.sg.

‘A little boy was pushed.’

Impersonal “Expletive Passive”: **Transitive**

Það var hrint **litlum strákk**
it_{EXPL} was pushed-neut.sg. little boy-DAT

‘A little boy was pushed’

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