

Passives and the “New Impersonal” Construction in Icelandic Language Acquisition

Sigríður Sigurjónsdóttir and Iris Nowenstein

1. Introduction

This paper reports the results of a study on Icelandic-speaking children’s production of various types of passives and the so-called New Impersonal transitive construction (NI), a syntactic change which is now underway in Icelandic. Thirty elementary school children, age 6-9, were tested on two types of elicitation tasks: patient-focused versus action-focused; and a forced choice judgment task. The main objective of the study was to develop methods to elicit both passives and the New Impersonal, and to shed light on the question of whether the various types of passives and the New Impersonal are functionally equivalent or not. Previous pilot studies aimed at eliciting these sentence types had not proved successful, since most of the children produced actives instead of the New Impersonal and passives (Benediktsdóttir 2008; Garðarsdóttir 2012). However, the methodology used in this study worked very well and the children produced both canonical passives and the New Impersonal. The results indicate that there is a pragmatic difference between passives and the New Impersonal in Icelandic, as the children produce more passives in the patient-focused task and more New Impersonals in the action-focused task. An interesting correlation with age emerged in the action-focused elicitation task, where the younger children produced more New Impersonals and the older children more passives.

The New Impersonal is an innovative syntactic construction which seems to have surfaced in Icelandic in the first part of the 20th century in collocations (Einar Freyr Sigurðsson 2012:10-11). There is anecdotal evidence in the spoken language since the 1950’s (Sigurjónsdóttir & Maling 2001:145-46) and the construction was first noted in the linguistic literature in 1979 as an innovation characterizing the language of children and adolescents (Einar Freyr Sigurðsson 2012:7-8). The first nationwide study on the New Impersonal was conducted in 1999-2000, reported in Sigurjónsdóttir & Maling (2001) and Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002).¹ The study revealed striking age-related variation in acceptance of the New Impersonal, as more than half of the 15-16 year old adolescents in most parts of the country judged New Impersonal sentences to be grammatical, whereas very few of the adult controls (forty years and older) accepted the new construction. A second nationwide study was conducted in 2005-2007 by Thráinsson et al. (in press). That study confirmed the striking generational difference found in the first study. Thus a change in apparent time is well-established, but a change in real time has also been established. A subset of the 15-16 year olds tested by Sigurjónsdóttir & Maling in 1999-2000 were retested in 2010-2012, at the age of 26-28; see Whelpton et al. (2013) and Sigurjónsdóttir (to appear). The results show that there is a strong statistical correlation between individual judgments then and now, i.e. subjects who rejected the New Impersonal in Sigurjónsdóttir & Maling study also rejected it 12 years later, and those who accepted it in 1999-2000 still accepted it in 2010-2012. These

* Sigríður Sigurjónsdóttir, University of Iceland, siggasig@hi.is. Iris Nowenstein, University of Iceland, ien1@hi.is. We would like to thank the children in Háaleitisskóli-Hvassaleiti for participating in the study and the teachers and staff in Krakkakot for their help. We are also grateful to Auður Ýr Elísabetardóttir, who drew the pictures for one of the tasks, and to Joan Maling, William J. Badecker, Cecile McKee, and the audience at GALANA 6 for helpful comments. This research was supported by grants from the University of Iceland Research Fund and the Institute of Linguistics at the University of Iceland, awarded to the first author.

¹ Note that Sigurjónsdóttir & Maling (2001) and Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) are essentially the same paper, the former written in Icelandic, the latter in English.

results indicate that the New Impersonal is acquired by children and not adopted by adults. Thus the locus of this morphosyntactic change seems to lie in child language acquisition.

2. Passives and the New Impersonal Construction in Icelandic

2.1. Syntax

The canonical passive in Icelandic has the same basic syntactic properties as the English or German passive, but adds richer agreement and a greater variety of morphological case-marking. If the matrix verb takes an accusative object in the active, as in example (1a), that argument will correspond to a nominative subject in the passive, which triggers agreement with both the finite auxiliary and the past participle of the main verb, see (1b). The morphosyntactic innovations which characterize the New Impersonal are that an object marked accusative in the active continues to be marked accusative and remains in situ in object position, as illustrated in (1c). The verb takes the same form as in the passive, since the main verb shows up in the past participle form and is preceded by a finite auxiliary. The finite verb and the participle show up in the default 3rd person neuter singular since there is no nominative argument to agree with. Note that the expletive *það* ‘it’ is not a grammatical subject, but merely a place-holder confined to initial position in finite clauses.

- (1) a. *Einhver batt hundinn.* (Active)
somebody-NOM tied the.dog-masc.sg.ACC
 ‘Somebody tied the dog up.’
- b. *Hundurinn var bundinn.* (Passive)
the.dog-masc.sg.NOM was tied-masc.sg.
 ‘The dog was tied up.’
- c. *Það var bundið hundinn.* (New Impersonal)
it_{EXPL} was tied-neut.sg. the.dog-masc.sg.ACC
 ‘The dog was tied up’ or ‘They tied the dog up.’

If the matrix verb assigns lexical case (dative or genitive) to its object, that case is preserved in the passive, but NP-movement to subject position is still obligatory. In this case the auxiliary and participle do not agree with the oblique subject, since only nominative arguments trigger agreement, but occur in the default 3rd person neuter singular, see (2b). The characteristics of the New Impersonal are the same as before, see (2c).

- (2) a. *Einhver klappaði hundinum.* (Active)
somebody-NOM patted the.dog-masc.sg.DAT
 ‘Somebody patted the dog.’
- b. *Hundinum var klappað.* (Passive)
the.dog-masc.sg.DAT was patted-neut.sg.
 ‘The dog was patted.’
- c. *Það var klappað hundinum.* (New Impersonal)
it_{EXPL} was patted-neut.sg. the.dog-masc.sg.DAT
 ‘The dog was patted’ or ‘They patted the dog.’

In addition to the canonical passive, Icelandic has an expletive passive, i.e. a passive with an indefinite subject in post-verbal position. When the verb assigns accusative case, the post-verbal subject occurs in the nominative and consequently the auxiliary and participle agree with it, see (3a). When the post-verbal NP in the expletive passive is marked with an oblique case, and is indefinite, the clause is syntactically ambiguous, see (3c). It can be analyzed either as a canonical expletive passive

with a post-verbal indefinite subject, or as the New Impersonal, in which case the post-verbal NP is an object.

- (3) a. Það var bundinn hundur. (Expletive Passive with indefinite subject)
it_{EXPL} was tied-masc.sg. dog-masc.sg.NOM
 ‘A dog was tied up.’
- b. *Það var bundinn hundurinn (Expletive Passive with definite subject)
it_{EXPL} was tied-masc.sg. the.dog-masc.sg.NOM
 ‘The dog was tied up.’
- c. Það var klappað hundi. (Expletive Passive with indefinite subject
 or New Impersonal with indef. object)
it_{EXPL} was patted-neut.sg. dog-masc.sg.DAT
 ‘A dog was patted’ or ‘They patted a dog.’
- d. Það var klappað hundinum. (New Impersonal with definite object)
it_{EXPL} was patted-neut.sg. the.dog- masc.sg.DAT
 ‘The dog was patted’ or ‘They patted the dog.’

Note that sentence (3a) would be ungrammatical if the post-verbal subject were definite, see (3b). This can be explained by Safir’s (1985) Definiteness Effect, which rules out post-verbal definite subjects. However, if the post-verbal NP in sentence (3c) was definite, it would look like example (2c) and be an unambiguous example of the New Impersonal, see (3d). In the New Impersonal, it does not matter whether the post-verbal NP is indefinite or definite since it is an object, and not a subject, so the Definiteness Effect does not apply. For a more thorough description of passive formation in Icelandic see Thráinsson (2007:249-283).

Examples (1)-(3) show that the New Impersonal shares some surface properties with actives and some with passives: The verb takes the same form as in the passive (auxiliary and past participle form of the verb), but the accusative case and post-verbal position of the object is like in the active. The proper syntactic analysis of the new construction has been the subject of lively debate in recent years, i.e. is it syntactically passive or active? The disagreement really lies in what is assumed to occupy the subject position. If the subject is an empty category, it is a passive, as has been argued by Barðdal & Molnár (2003), Eythórsson (2008), and Jónsson (2009), for example, but if there is a phonologically null thematic subject, it is an impersonal active, as Sigurjónsdóttir & Maling (2001), Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002, 2012, 2015), and Maling (2006) have maintained. Other scholars take an intermediate position, e.g. Halldór Ármann Sigurðsson (2011), Einar Freyr Sigurðsson (2012), and Ingason et al. (2013).

2.2. Pragmatics

The pragmatics of the New Impersonal construction have not been studied per se, and the two nationwide studies that have been conducted on it have not shed light on whether there is a pragmatic difference between passives and the New Impersonal. Results from both surveys show that speakers who accept the New Impersonal also accept the canonical passive, and younger speakers seem to use it in contexts where older speakers would use the canonical passive (Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir 2002:114, 128-131, Thráinsson et al. in press). Because of this, some researchers, e.g. Ingason et al. (2013), have assumed that the two constructions are functionally equivalent, whereas others, e.g. Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2015:38) and Thráinsson (2015), have stated that it is not clear whether the discourse function of the New Impersonal differs from that of the canonical passive.

Jónsson (2009) and Benediktsdóttir (2008), however, have argued that there is a pragmatic difference between the New Impersonal and passives. Jónsson (2009:285-286) claims that the New Impersonal construction is primarily used in situations which are characterized by low topicality of both agent and patient, so-called “bare happenings”. He cites Sansò (2006:242), who states that this situation type involves “events in which the agent is conceptualized as sufficiently unimportant to be

backgrounded even though the patients in these clauses are not particularly topical.” Passives, on the other hand, have a wider range of uses, since in the canonical passive the patient argument is highlighted by moving it to subject position. Benediktsdóttir (2008:30) makes a similar comment. She argues that the New Impersonal involves focus on the action, and if this is so, it explains why there is no NP-movement of the patient object to subject position: the object is not promoted to focus position since the focus is on the verb and not on its patient. Eythórssón (2008:195, fn.27) also mentions other *það*-constructions in this context, e.g. expletive passives, and suggests that the New Impersonal and *það*-constructions “involve defocusing of the postverbal NP, placing the focus on the verbal action instead”; see also Thráinsson (2007:chapter 6.1).

One objective of the present study was to shed light on this question: Are the various types of passives and the New Impersonal functionally equivalent or not? The exchange in (4), from Haraldsdóttir (1997:23), between a 3;2 year old girl and her mother, who are discussing a picture of a thief in a storybook, may indicate that there is indeed a pragmatic difference between the two constructions, see also Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002:130-131).

- (4) Child: *Það er bundið honum.* (New Impersonal)
 it_{EXPL} is tied-neut.sg. him-DAT
 ‘He is tied up.’
 ...
 Mother: *Hvernig er þetta með karlinn?*
 how is this with the.guy
 ‘What is it with this guy?’
 ...
 Child: *Hann er bindaður.* (Passive)
 he-NOM is tied [up]
 ‘He is tied up.’

The child’s first sentence, which she utters after looking at a picture of the thief being arrested and handcuffed, could probably be described as a “bare happening” in the sense described by Sansò (2006) and Jónsson (2009). However, if the child’s second sentence is indeed a canonical passive, and not an active with predicate adjective, then the child answers the mother’s question, which focuses on the guy or thief, with a canonical passive. This discourse then shows that both constructions co-exist in the grammar of the child but are not used in the same pragmatic context.

The question of the functional equivalence of the New Impersonal and canonical passive is crucial for predicting the evolutionary trajectory of the New Impersonal as attempted by Ingason et al. (2013) using Yang’s (2002) Variational Model (VM). Ingason et al. (2013) predicted that by 2050, the New Impersonal will have ousted the canonical passive. One of the assumptions underlying this prediction is that the New Impersonal and canonical passive are functionally equivalent, and hence in competition. This competition consists of the child learner making binary choices between different analyses (grammars) based on the linguistic input she receives. Every sentence is analyzed with a particular grammar which is selected with a certain probability. If the grammar is compatible with the analyzed sentence, it is rewarded, and its probability of being selected for further interaction rises. If it is not compatible, it is penalized, and its probability therefore lowered. Using this kind of model, it becomes possible to predict the trajectory of change based on the presence of sentences in the input which the different competing grammars can and cannot analyze. If one grammar has an advantage in this respect, and Ingason et al (2013) establish that the New Impersonal does, it will gradually replace the other one.

3. Participants and Methods

3.1. Participants

Based on previous studies which show the late acquisition of passives in English (e.g. Hirsch and Wexler 2006) and on Sigurjónsdóttir’s (2015) results, which show that Icelandic-speaking preschool children, age 3;0-5;6, have difficulties comprehending passives, we decided to elicit passives and the New Impersonal from 6-9 year old Icelandic-speaking children. Thirty elementary school children

from the first three grades of Háaleitisskóli-Hvassaleiti in Inner Reykjavík (see Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir 2002:110) were tested in this study. Table 1 shows the number of subjects in each age group.² The children were tested using two types of elicitation tasks where they had to respond to questions which were patient-focused versus action-focused. Judgment data were also collected using a forced choice judgment task.

Table 1. Participants.

Age groups	N
1 st grade: 6-7 year olds	10
2 nd grade: 7-8 year olds	10
3 rd grade: 8-9 year olds	10

The procedure for each task is described in the following subsections in the order that the tasks were administered to the children; the results for each task are reported in section 4. Although we should be careful in interpreting the results, since they are based on data from only thirty children, they give some indication as to what the trend might be in a bigger study. As mentioned in the Introduction, the results indicate that there does exist a pragmatic difference between passives and the New Impersonal. Additionally, an interesting correlation with age emerged in the action-focused elicitation task, where the proportion of passive answers increased (and answers using the New Impersonal decreased) as a function of the children's age.

3.2. Patient-focused elicitation

The first part of the test consisted of a few patient-focused questions which elicited fragment answers. Einar Freyr Sigurðsson (2012) invented this method and proved it to be successful with adult speakers. The child was presented with a scenario where for example a toy elephant and a toy monkey were playing together. Then a lion appeared and took away either the elephant or the monkey. The children were then asked the morphosyntactically ambiguous question shown in (5).

- (5) Hvaða dýr var tekið? (Passive/NI answer)
which animal-neut.sg.NOM/ACC was taken-neut.sg.NOM/ACC
 'Which animal was taken?'

This question is ambiguous because of the case syncretism between nominative and accusative on indefinite neuter nouns in Icelandic; thus there is no morphological distinction between the nominative and accusative forms of the neuter noun *dýr* 'animal'. If the argument in (5) is assumed to bear nominative case, the construction is a short passive, i.e. a passive without a *by*-phrase. However, if the argument in (5) is assumed to bear accusative case, this must be the New Impersonal construction. Thus the child can interpret the question as either a short passive or as the New Impersonal; and consequently answer using either construction. The nouns which would appear in the answer, however, were not neuter, and do not exhibit case syncretism. The single-word response to the question in (5) will be either nominative or accusative. If the answer is nominative, we can assume that the child is using a short passive. If, however, the answer is in the accusative, we can assume that the child is using the New Impersonal, see (6).

- (6) a. Nominative answer: e.g. *api*-NOM 'monkey' → Short Passive.
 b. Accusative answer: e.g. *apa*-ACC 'monkey' → New Impersonal.

² Children in Iceland start elementary school in the fall of the calendar year that they turn six years old. Since the children were tested in January, most of the children in 1st grade were six years old, in 2nd grade seven years old, and in 3rd grade eight years old.

Unambiguous questions with an interrogative pronoun in the nominative, see (7a), and in the accusative, see (7b), were also tested to confirm the validity of this method.

- (7) a. Hver var kitlaður? (NOM active answer)
who-masc.sg.NOM was tickled-masc.sg.NOM
 ‘Who was tickled?’
- b. Hvern kitlaði ljónið? (ACC active answer)
who-masc.sg.ACC tickled the.lion-neut.sg.NOM
 ‘Who did the lion tickle?’

The question in (7a) should only yield nominative answers, whereas the question in (7b) should only yield accusative answers. Einar Freyr Sigurðsson’s (2012) method proved applicable to children, and the children mostly responded as expected to the unambiguous questions in (7). The results for the patient-focused questions, e.g. (5), are reported in Figure 2 in section 4.1.

3.3. Forced choice judgments

The next part of the study consisted of a forced choice judgment task through play, as developed by Nowenstein (2014). The procedure was as follows: The children were asked to help a hedgehog puppet choose between two different syntactic constructions. They were told that since the hedgehog had been travelling all over the world learning new languages, it often got confused when speaking Icelandic. Pictures designed for a previous comprehension study (Sigurjónsdóttir, 2015) were used for this part of the study, each depicting a dog and a horse participating (as agent and patient) in an action of a resultative or forceful contact. Figure 1 shows the pictures for the resultative verb *binda* ‘tie up’ and the forceful contact verb *hrinda* ‘push/shove’.

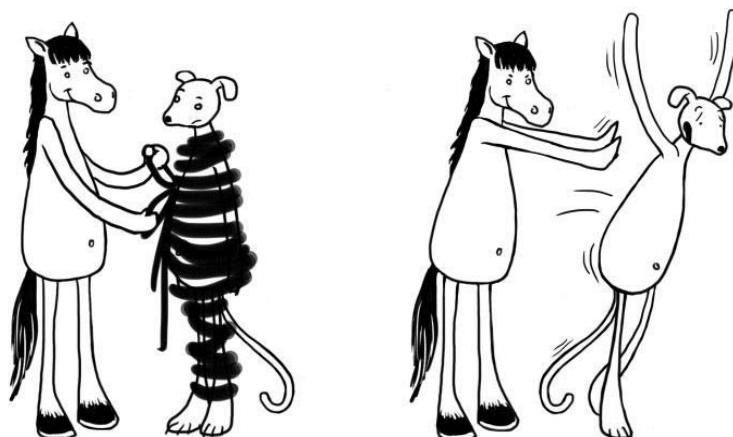


Figure 1. Examples of pictures used in the task.

Five action verbs of resultative and forceful contact from Sigurjónsdóttir’s (2015) comprehension task were tested; the resultative verbs: *binda* ‘tie up’, *mála* ‘paint’, and *þurrka* ‘dry’ and the forceful contact verbs: *lemja* ‘hit’ and *hrinda* ‘push/shove’. For each verb two syntactic constructions at a time were contrasted: either a short passive, i.e. a passive without a *by*-phrase, versus the New Impersonal, or a short passive versus an expletive passive. A picture matching the event described was presented to the child, and the hedgehog puppet asked for the child’s advice when

describing it. This is shown in (8a,b), where the child was shown the latter picture in Figure 1 and had to choose between either a passive versus the New Impersonal, or a passive versus an expletive passive.

- (8) a. “Should I say:
 Hundinum var hrint (Passive)
the.dog-masc.sg.DAT was pushed-neut.sg.
 ‘The dog was pushed’
 or
 Það var hrint hundinum?” (New Impersonal)
it_{EXPL} was pushed-neut.sg. the.dog-masc.sg.DAT
 ‘The dog was pushed’ or ‘They pushed the dog’
- b. “Should I say:
 Hundinum var hrint (Passive)
the.dog-masc.sg.DAT was pushed-neut.sg.
 ‘The dog was pushed’
 or
 Það var hrint hundi?” (Expletive Passive)³
it_{EXPL} was pushed-neut.sg. dog-masc.sg.DAT
 ‘A dog was pushed’

Since the elicitation techniques used in previous studies on the New Impersonal in child acquisition (Benediktsdóttir 2008; Garðarsdóttir 2012) had not proved very successful, as most of the children produced actives instead of the New Impersonal and passives, we decided to try out this forced choice method to get an idea of the children’s preferences. This method does not provide information on what the children think of the grammaticality of the sentences, but it is a useful tool to see the effects of the different variables tested (Schütze & Sprouse 2014). Also it makes it possible to compare the results of a forced choice judgment task to the results of the elicitation tasks. The results for the forced choice judgment task are reported in Figure 3 in section 4.1.

3.4. Action-focused elicitation

The last part of the study was an elicitation task, like the first part reported in 3.2, except that in this second elicitation task, an action-focused question was used to elicit passives and the New Impersonal. The children were shown the same pictures with the horse and the dog, exemplified in Figure 1, depicting the same five actions of resultative and forced contact as in the forced choice judgment task, reported in 3.3. When a child was presented with each picture, the researcher asked the question in (9).

- (9) Hvað var gert við hundinn? (Passive/NI answer)
what.NOM/ACC was done-neut.sg. with the.dog-masc.sg.ACC
 ‘What was done to the dog?’

³ Note that since the post-verbal subject in the expletive passive in (8b) is marked with an oblique case (dative), the sentence is syntactically ambiguous. It can be analyzed either as an expletive passive with a post-verbal indefinite subject, or as the New Impersonal, in which case the post-verbal NP is an object. As mentioned in section 2.1, this ambiguity only shows up when the subject in the expletive passive is marked with an oblique case, i.e. compare examples (3a) and (3c).

The question in (9), just like the patient-focused question in (5), is syntactically ambiguous because of the syncretism between nominative and accusative case on the neuter singular interrogative pronoun *hvað* ‘what’. There is no morphological distinction between the nominative and accusative forms. If the interrogative pronoun in (9) is assumed to bear nominative case, the construction is a short passive; if it is assumed to bear accusative case, this must be the New Impersonal.

In this task, the priming effect of the first two components of the study, the patient-focused elicitation task and the forced choice judgment task, seems to have facilitated the elicitation of passives and the New Impersonal. As the results of this task show, see Figure 4 in section 4.1, 83% of the answers to the action-focused questions consisted of the New Impersonal and short passives, a much larger proportion than in previous studies which only elicited 11%-27% of New Impersonals and passives from 6-9 year old children (Benediktsdóttir 2008; Garðarsdóttir 2012).

4. Results

4.1. Contrast between tasks

The results from the patient-focused elicitation task are summarized in Figure 2. Based on the results, we can establish that at least 27% of the participants have the New Impersonal in their grammar, since their elicited fragment answers to questions like the one in (5) were in the accusative (see the first set of columns in Figure 2). Most of the children, or 73%, gave an answer in the nominative, which indicates that they interpret the question in (5) as a short passive which yields a passive answer. The proportion of answers in the New Impersonal is rather small, but the test is very specific but not very sensitive. As discussed in section 2.2, the results from both nationwide surveys show that speakers who accept the New Impersonal also accept the canonical passive. Thus based on the results from this task only, we cannot rule out the possibility that children who responded in the nominative, i.e. with a short passive, also have the New Impersonal in their grammar.

The children’s answers to the unambiguous questions in (7), which were tested to confirm the validity of the method, were mostly as expected. All the children responded with a nominative answer to question (7a), which is as was expected (see the second set of columns in Figure 2). However, some children, or 17%, also produced nominative answers to the question in (7b), which should yield only accusative answers (see the last set of columns in Figure 2). These children might be using the citation form, which in Icelandic is nominative. This could also account for a part of the nominative answers (passive responses) to the ambiguous question in (5), which as has already been discussed are summarized in the first set of columns in Figure 2.

The important fact to retain from these results is that when offered a patient-focused context, the majority of the children produced a canonical passive rather than the New Impersonal.

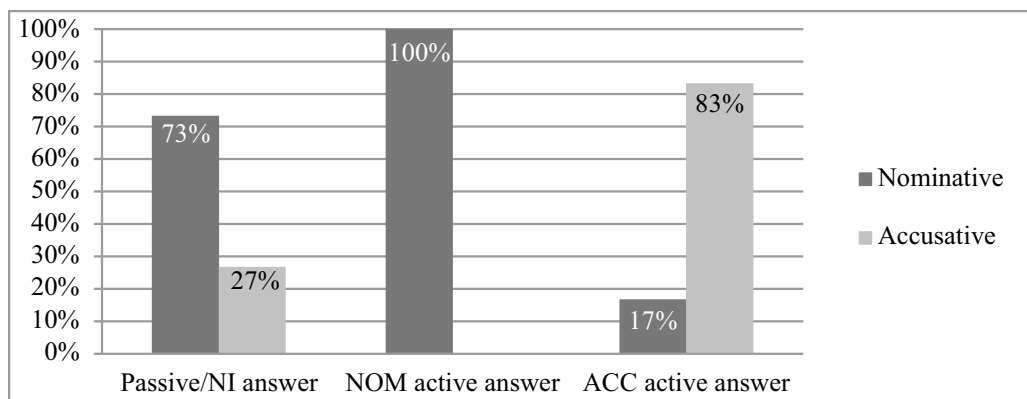


Figure 2. Patient-focused questions. N = 30.

Moving on to the results from the forced choice judgment task summarized in Figure 3, we see that most children preferred short passives over either of the proposed alternatives: the New Impersonal or the expletive passive. They chose it not only when a short passive was contrasted with a

New Impersonal, as in (8a), see the first set of columns in Figure 3, but also when the alternative was an expletive passive, as in (8b), see the latter set of columns in Figure 3. When compared to the results of the patient-focused elicitation task, we thus see a similar pattern of a preference for the canonical passive.

The proportions of New Impersonal answers, in the first set of columns in Figure 3, and expletive passive answers, in the second set of columns, are the same, 29%. The fact that the children chose the expletive passive as often as the New Impersonal in this task can probably in part be explained by the fact exemplified in example (3c) in section 2.1 and discussed in footnote 3, that the expletive passive construction with an indefinite subject is ambiguous when used with dative verbs, and the children might have interpreted it as the New Impersonal. It is also interesting to note that a small number of participants (7%) chose the New Impersonal when only given the option to choose between a short passive and an expletive one. This indicates that the New Impersonal is particularly strong in their grammar.

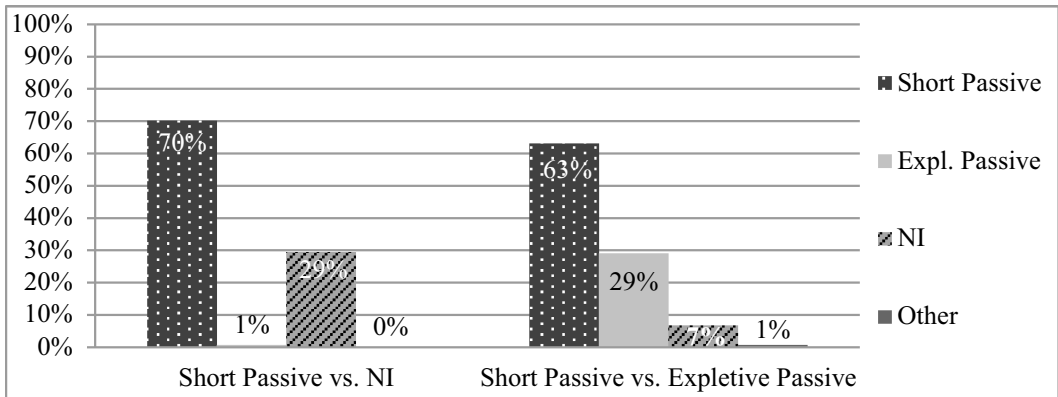


Figure 3. Forced choice judgments. N = 30.

Finally, let us turn to the results of the action-focused elicitation task. The results of this task, summarized in Figure 4, show that the proportion between short passives and the New Impersonal is inverted when compared to the results of the previous two tasks. In this task, the children use the New Impersonal more than short passives, since 48% of their answers to questions like the one in (9) were New Impersonals, whereas 35% of their answers were short passives. Only one child replied once to an action-focused question using an expletive passive, but a few children used actives or simply gave ambiguous answers (“Other” in Figure 4). Thus the children preferred the New Impersonal when given an action-focused context in this last task of the study. Contrasting the two elicitation tasks, the results indicate that the pragmatic properties of the context play a role in the children’s choice of using a New Impersonal construction rather than a short passive.

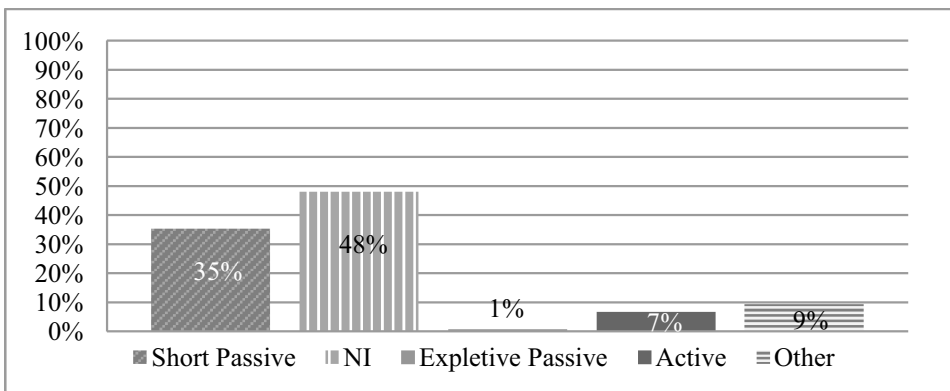


Figure 4. Action-focused elicitation. N = 30.

Additionally, an interesting correlation with age emerged in this elicitation task, as discussed in the next section.

4.2. Age grading in the action-focused elicitation task

Figure 5 shows the percentage of each sentence type that the children in each age group (see Table 1) replied with in the action-focused elicitation task.

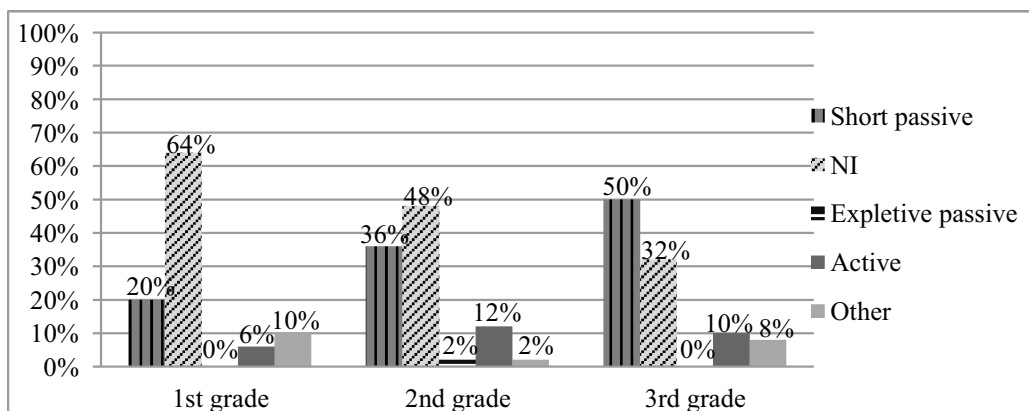


Figure 5. Age grading in the action-focused elicitation task.

The figure shows that the younger children produced more New Impersonals and the older children produced more passives. In the youngest group of children, the New Impersonal is used much more often than short passives, or 64% of the time compared to 20% use of the short passive. In contrast, the oldest children produce short passives more often than the New Impersonal, or 50% of the time compared to 32% use of the New Impersonal. Thus the rate of the New Impersonal in this task decreases with age, since it goes from 64% in 1st grade, to 48% in 2nd grade, and to 32% in 3rd grade, whereas the short passives increase with age, and go from 20% in 1st grade, to 36% in 2nd grade, and to 50% in 3rd grade.

The extent of this difference is striking, but we have to bear in mind that this is a very small sample since only 30 children were tested. More children need to be tested to confirm this pattern. Nonetheless, this difference between 1st and 3rd grade of elementary school is quite dramatic. For now, we can only speculate on the reasons for it. What we can say is that this pattern is compatible with the results from the comprehension task described by Sigurjónsdóttir (2015), which showed that children understand the New Impersonal earlier than the various types of passives tested in the study (short, long, and expletive). Thus, short passives are understood later, and presumably acquired later, than the New Impersonal. Bearing this in mind, we also know that older children use a wider range of syntactic constructions, which might in part explain this age effect. Although the data indicate a form of age-grading, research in real time shows that children do not outgrow the New Impersonal. As mentioned in the Introduction, results reported in Whelpton et al. (2013) and Sigurjónsdóttir (to appear) show that there is a strong statistical correlation between individual judgments in the Sigurjónsdóttir & Maling (2001) study which took place in 1999-2000 and a study conducted 12 years later, in 2010-2012. In order to understand this age correlation better, we might want to look at child-directed speech and also consider the fact that the pedagogical materials, e.g. books and other published material, that these children encounter in school and at home contain only canonical passives and not the New Impersonal.⁴

⁴ Note that in the last decade, the New Impersonal can be found not only in the spoken language but also in informal written registers of the language, e.g. in blogs. However, it still has not made its way into edited written material.

5. Conclusion

As mentioned in the Introduction, the present study was a continuation of previous efforts to elicit and obtain judgments on the New Impersonal (Benediktsdóttir 2008 and Garðarsdóttir 2012) in the context of language acquisition. For this purpose, data were collected using a forced choice judgment task and two types of elicitation questions (patient-focused and action-focused). This yielded the raw results presented in section 4. We found a contrast between patient-focused elicitation, where the children produced short passives more often, and action-focus elicitation, where the children responded with more of the New Impersonal. There also was a higher rate of the New Impersonal in the action-focused elicitation task as compared to the forced choice task. These patterns would need to be confirmed in a larger experiment with more participants and an inverted order of the elicitation tasks. However, the results provide clues to the understudied pragmatic difference between the two constructions. Additionally, an interesting correlation with age emerged in the proportion of short passives against the New Impersonal in the action-focused elicitation task.

Overall, our results indicate that the assumption of the functional equivalence of the New Impersonal and canonical passive, which underlies the predictions in Ingason et al. (2013), may not be justified. Instead, children acquiring the New Impersonal and the canonical passive seem to make functional distinctions between the two constructions; a form of specialization appears to take place. The age grading which emerged in the action-focused elicitation task raises interesting questions in this regard. If we assume that children specialize the canonical passive for patient-focused contexts and the New Impersonal for action-focused ones, we need to establish whether this distinction prevails or if it is only made in the process of learning and later disappears. The case of the New Impersonal in Icelandic therefore offers interesting insights into the mechanism of language acquisition when syntactic variation exists in the input, yielding information on how children react to this kind of variation. The trajectory of the change will be influenced by whether the children specialize the variants for different contexts or accept that they are functionally equivalent. The specialization of the New Impersonal and canonical passive does not necessarily constitute an argument against the Variational Model approach in Ingason et al. (2013), but it requires an additional level to the predictive model. Indeed, we consider the variants to be in competition. The fact that they are not functionally equivalent simply entails that this competition takes place in both contexts under different conditions. The specialization could therefore be integrated into a predictive variational model, where the New Impersonal has an additional advantage in action-focused contexts, while canonical passives are more successful than they would otherwise be in patient-focused contexts. A quantification of this advantage through e.g. experimental work could result in a more fine-grained prediction of the evolutionary trajectory of the New Impersonal.

References

- Barðdal, Jóhanna & Valéria Molnár. 2003. The Passive in Icelandic Compared to Mainland Scandinavian. In Jorunn Hetland & Valéria Molnár (eds.): *Structures of Focus and Grammatical Relations*, pp. 231-260. Max Niemeyer Verlag, Tübingen.
- Benediktsdóttir, Ásbjörg. 2008. Nýja þolmyndin: Fyrsta þolmyndun barna? [The New Passive: Children's First Passivizing?] BA thesis, University of Iceland, Reykjavík.
- Eythórsson, Thórhallur. 2008. The New Passive in Icelandic Really is a Passive. In Thórhallur Eythórsson (ed.): *Grammatical Change and Linguistic Theory: The Rosendal papers*, pp. 173-219. John Benjamins, Amsterdam.
- Garðarsdóttir, Iðunn. 2012. *Það var rosa mikið hrósað henni*. Virkni nýju setningagerðarinnar í máli barna á yngsta stigi grunnskóla. [“It was very much praised her.” Productivity of the New Construction in the language of children in the earliest grades of elementary school.] BA thesis, University of Iceland, Reykjavík.
- Haraldsdóttir, Aðalheiður Þ. 1997. *Það var sagt mér að skrifa ritgerð*. Þolmynd eða ekki þolmynd? [“It was told me to write a thesis.” Passive or not Passive?] BA thesis, University of Iceland, Reykjavík.
- Hirsch, Christopher & Ken Wexler. 2006. Children's Passives and Their Resulting Interpretation. In Kamil U. Deen, et al. (eds.): *The Proceedings of the Inaugural Conference on Generative Approaches to Language Acquisition-North America, University of Connecticut Occasional Papers in Linguistics* 4: 125-136.

- Ingason, Anton Karl, Julie Anne Legate, & Charles Yang. 2013. The Evolutionary Trajectory of the Icelandic New Passive. In *University of Pennsylvania Working Papers in Linguistics* 19(2): 91-100.
- Jónsson, Jóhannes Gíslí. 2009. The New Impersonal as a True Passive. In Artemis Alexiadou, et al. (eds.): *Advances in Comparative Germanic Syntax*, pp. 281-306. John Benjamins, Amsterdam.
- Maling, Joan. 2006. From Passive to Active. In Benjamin Lyngfelt & Torgrim Solstad (eds.): *Demoting the Agent: Passive, Middle, and Other Voice Phenomena*, pp. 197-223. John Benjamins, Amsterdam.
- Maling, Joan & Sigríður Sigurjónsdóttir. 2002. The “New Impersonal” Construction in Icelandic. *Journal of Comparative Germanic Linguistics* 5 (1): 97-142.
- Maling, Joan & Sigríður Sigurjónsdóttir. 2012. Syntactic Change in Progress: The Icelandic “New Construction” as an Active Impersonal. In Ackema, Alcorn, Heycock, Jaspers, van Craenenbroeck & Vanden Wyngaerd (eds.): *Comparative Germanic Syntax: The State of the Art*, pp. 249-278. John Benjamins, Amsterdam.
- Maling, Joan & Sigríður Sigurjónsdóttir. 2015. From Passive to Active: Stages in the Icelandic New Impersonal. In Theresa Biberauer & George Walkden (eds.): *Syntax over Time: Lexical, Morphological, and Information-Structural Interactions*, pp. 36-53. [Oxford Studies in Diachronic & Historical Linguistics.] Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Nowenstein, Iris. 2014. Tilbrigði í frumlagsfalli á máltökuskeiði. Þágufallshneigð og innri breytileiki. [Variation in subject case during the language acquisition stage. Dative substitution and intra-speaker variation.] MA thesis, University of Iceland, Reykjavík.
- Safir, Ken. 1985. *Syntactic Chains*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Sansò, Andrea. 2006. Agent Defocusing Revisited. Passive and Impersonal Constructions in Some European Languages. In Werner Abraham & Larisa Leisiö (eds): *Passivization and Typology: Form and Function*, pp. 232-273. John Benjamins, Amsterdam
- Schütze, Carston & Jon Sproue,. 2014. Judgment data. In Robert Podesva & Devyani Sharma (eds.): *Research Methods in Linguistics*, pp. 27-51. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Sigurðsson, Einar Freyr. 2012. Germynd en samt þolmynd: Um nýju þolmyndina í íslensku. [Active but still Passive: On the New Passive in Icelandic.] M.A.-thesis, University of Iceland, Reykjavík.
- Sigurðsson, Halldór Ármann. 2011. On the New Passive. *Syntax* 14: 148-178.
- Sigurjónsdóttir, Sigríður. 2015. Acquisition of the New Impersonal Construction in Icelandic. In Elizabeth Grillo & Kyle Jepson (eds.): *Proceedings of the 39th annual Boston University Conference on Language Development*, pp. 385-397. Cascadilla Press, Massachusetts.
- Sigurjónsdóttir, Sigríður. To appear. Nýja þolmyndin nú og þá: Samanburður tveggja kannana. [The New Passive now and then: A Comparison of Two Studies.] In Höskuldur Þráinsson, Ásgrímur Angantýsson, & Einar Freyr Sigurðsson (eds.): *Tilbrigði í íslenskri setningagerð* III, kafli 26. [Variation in Icelandic Syntax III, chapter 26.] Háskólaútgáfan, Reykjavík.
- Sigurjónsdóttir, Sigríður & Joan Maling. 2001. *Það var hrint mér á leiðinni í skólann: Þolmynd eða ekki þolmynd?* [“It was pushed me on my way to school:” Passive or not Passive?] *Íslenskt mál* 23: 123-180.
- Þráinsson, Höskuldur. 2007. *The Syntax of Icelandic*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Þráinsson, Höskuldur. 2015. The Icelandic NIP: Why isn't it evolving as predicted? Unpublished poster presented at The 17th Diachronic Generative Syntax conference in Reykjavík, Iceland, May 29th.
- Þráinsson, Höskuldur, Sigríður Sigurjónsdóttir, Hlíf Árnadóttir, & Thórhallur Eythórsson. In press. Um þolmynd, germynd og það. [On Passive, Active, and there/it.] In Höskuldur Þráinsson, Ásgrímur Angantýsson, & Einar Freyr Sigurðsson (eds.): *Tilbrigði í íslenskri setningagerð* II, kafli 8. [Variation in Icelandic Syntax II, chapter 8.] Háskólaútgáfan, Reykjavík.
- Whelpton, Matthew, Sigríður Sigurjónsdóttir, & Thórhallur Eythórsson. 2013. Grammatical Change in Real Time? *The New Impersonal/Passive in Icelandic*, talk given at the 25th Scandinavian Conference of Linguistics, May 13-15. University of Iceland, Reykjavík.
- Yang, Charles. 2002. *Knowledge and Learning in Natural Language*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Proceedings of the 6th Conference on Generative Approaches to Language Acquisition North America (GALANA 2015)

edited by Laurel Perkins, Rachel Dudley,
Juliana Gerard, and Kasia Hitczenko

Cascadilla Proceedings Project Somerville, MA 2016

Copyright information

Proceedings of the 6th Conference on Generative Approaches
to Language Acquisition North America (GALANA 2015)
© 2016 Cascadilla Proceedings Project, Somerville, MA. All rights reserved

ISBN 978-1-57473-468-3 library binding

A copyright notice for each paper is located at the bottom of the first page of the paper.
Reprints for course packs can be authorized by Cascadilla Proceedings Project.

Ordering information

Orders for the library binding edition are handled by Cascadilla Press.
To place an order, go to www.lingref.com or contact:

Cascadilla Press, P.O. Box 440355, Somerville, MA 02144, USA
phone: 1-617-776-2370, fax: 1-617-776-2271, sales@cascadilla.com

Web access and citation information

This entire proceedings can also be viewed on the web at www.lingref.com. Each paper has a unique document # which can be added to citations to facilitate access. The document # should not replace the full citation.

This paper can be cited as:

Sigurjónsdóttir, Sigríður and Iris Nowenstein. 2016. Passives and the “New Impersonal” Construction in Icelandic Language Acquisition. In *Proceedings of the 6th Conference on Generative Approaches to Language Acquisition North America (GALANA 2015)*, ed. Laurel Perkins et al., 110-121. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Proceedings Project. www.lingref.com, document #3211.