The New Impersonal/New Passive in Icelandic: The Delay of the S-Curve

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The Icelandic New Impersonal/New Passive (henceforth NIP) has aroused great interest among linguists since it was first discussed from a theoretical point of view (see e.g. Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir 2002; these authors will be referred to below as M&S). One of the reasons for this interest is the fact that the NIP offers a rather unique opportunity to follow the ongoing development of a recent syntactic innovation. In this paper I will mainly concentrate on the question of what the development of the NIP can tell us about the interaction between the acquisition of an innovation and its diffusion. It is typically assumed that the diffusion of linguistic innovations follows the well known S-curve path but we rarely have the opportunity to observe how syntactic innovations begin to spread.

A basic question about the diffusion of syntactic innovations can be formulated as follows:

- Do syntactic innovations immediately “take off” and follow a typical S-curve path?

It will be shown in this paper that in the case of the NIP there is a significant delay in the S-curve and it will be suggested that this phenomenon has to be taken into account when we try to predict the development of linguistic innovations, as Ingason et al. (2012) have done in the case of the NIP.

Important properties of the NIP include the following:

1. The NIP has passive morphology like the Canonical Expletive Passive (CEP):

   a. Pað var rofið eithvert samkomulag.
      there was broken(past part.) some agreement(Asg.n.)  NIP

   b. Pað var rofið eithvert samkomulag.
      there was broken(past part.) some agreement(Nsg.n.)  CEP

   ‘Some agreement was broken.’

2. The relevant argument of the NIP (the associate of the expletive) never shows up in the nominative, whereas in the CEP it does if the main verb takes an accusative object in the active (this cannot be seen in (1) because of case syntcretism so there the NIP and the CEP look exactly the same). As a result, there is no agreement of the finite verb and the past participle with the argument in the NIP, whereas in the CEP there is (this cannot be seen in (1) since the argument is a neuter singular noun):

   a. Pað var rofið einfverja samninga.
      there was broken(sg.) some agreements(Apl.m.)  NIP

   b. Pað voru rofnir einfverjir samningar.
      there were(pl.) broken(pl.m.) some agreements(Npl.m.)  CEP

   ‘Some agreement was broken.’

3. In the NIP the relevant argument can be definite, whereas the CEP typically shows the definiteness effect:

   a. Pað var rofið þá í fyrra.
      there was(sg.) broken(sg.n.) them(Asg.m.) last year.  NIP

      ‘They were broken last year.’

   b. *Pað voru rofnir þeir í fyrra.
      there were(pl.) broken(pl.m.) they(Nsg.m.) last year  CEP

While there has been a considerable controversy about the most explanatory syntactic analysis of the NIP (see e.g. Eythórsson 2008, Jónsson 2009, H. A. Sigurðsson 2011, E. F. Sigurðsson 2012, Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir 2012, Legate 2014), linguists have typically agreed about the following points (but see Friðriksson 2008 for somewhat different claims):

- The NIP is a major syntactic innovation in Icelandic and it is a genuine change of core grammar, resulting from reanalysis during learning.
- Observed generational differences indicate “change in apparent time”.
- The change is recent but it is spreading fast.

In this paper I will, however, present evidence for the following claims:
• Yes, the NIP is an innovation which is a genuine change of core grammar. Hence it does not spread freely across generations.
• No, the generational differences originally reported on by M&S (e.g. 2002) do not simply represent a steady “change in apparent time”. Instead they turn out to have properties of “age grading”, although speakers do not typically outgrow the NIP.
• No, the NIP is not spreading as fast as typically assumed. There is a clear delay in the S-curve. Most of the evidence for these claims comes from two surveys. The first one was an extensive variation study that included four age groups. The youngest participants were around 15 years of age. This age group turned out not to accept the NIP more readily than the 15 year olds originally surveyed by M&S some 6 years earlier, although one might have expected them to do so if the NIP was spreading fast. More importantly (6 years being a very short time in this connection), this survey also included representatives from the same generation that had participated in M&S’s study. Thus the variation study was partly a trend study and it showed a very clear drop in acceptance rate of the NIP by this generation. These results were confirmed in a second project, a panel study resurveying 197 of the subjects that originally participated in M&S’s investigation. This survey included several examples from M&S’s original study where the methodology was the same. Again, there was a significant drop in the acceptance rate: 140 speakers accepted fewer NIP examples than 12 years before, 69 of those who had originally accepted some of the examples rejected all of them 12 years later. Still, 93 speakers accepted some NIP examples in both surveys. These results shed an interesting light on the interaction between the acquisition of an innovation and its diffusion in the linguistic community. This is particularly interesting because the phenomenon in question is arguably a real syntactic innovation involving a grammatical change and not simply some performance issue having to do with relative frequency of different variants. Thus all studies indicate that the NIP is virtually uniformly rejected by older generations (see e.g. Thráinsson et al. 2013:79). Nevertheless, it is clear that post-adolescent speakers are much less likely to accept the NIP than they were when they were adolescents (and this is not simply because adolescents accept more examples than adults in surveys of this kind). This suggests that the results of the initial surveys of the NIP should not simply be interpreted as clear evidence for a fast spreading linguistic change in apparent time. Rather they seem to demonstrate the so-called “adolescent peak” found in several studies of ongoing change (see e.g. Tagliamonte and D’Arcy 2009) — which is then accompanied by a “post-adolescent trough”. This means, then, that the innovation will spread much more slowly than typically assumed and it may take quite a long time for it to start spreading the way the famous S-curve predicts. Contrary to the predictions of Ingason et al. (2012), there is (still) no evidence for an S-curve-type diffusion of the NIP. Whatever the reasons for the observed “post-adolescent trough” may be, it suggests that the NIP will be less common in the input of those acquiring the language than one might have expected based on the acceptance rate of the NIP by adolescents. Interestingly, this is in line with the findings of Friðriksson (2008), who collected data from spontaneous speech.

References