A new syntactic construction has arisen in Icelandic in recent decades and is gaining ground. The innovative construction is illustrated in (1). It seems to have a similar discourse function to that of the standard passive, illustrated in (2). The New Impersonal (NI) appears to have passive morphology but differs from canonical passives in that the verbal object remains in situ and gets assigned accusative case. Scholars differ in their assessment of whether the NI is a passive or an active impersonal construction. Sigurjónsdóttir & Maling (2001) and Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002, 2012) argue that the NI is a syntactically active impersonal which has its roots in the reanalysis and gradual extension of the traditional impersonal passive of intransitive verbs, spreading first to reflexive impersonal passives and then to transitive verbs with non-reflexive objects. Reflexive impersonal passive verbs are an innovation of Modern Icelandic (Eythórsson 2008:189). Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2012) argue that their appearance in the language may have triggered the reanalysis of impersonal passives as active. Eythórsson (2008) and Jónsson (2009), on the other hand, challenge the active analysis of the NI and maintain that the construction is an impersonal passive. Eythórsson (2008) proposes that the NI emerged from a reanalysis of transitive expletive passives (existential passives) with an indefinite postverbal NP.

It is clear that a major syntactic innovation is taking place in the language which seems to represent a significant system-internal change. The NI is significantly more common among young people and there is a clear intergenerational variation, as shown by data collected in two nationwide studies conducted by Sigurjónsdóttir & Maling in 1999-2000 and by Thráinsson et al. in 2005-2007, see (3). In a recent project, part of the 15-16 year olds tested by Sigurjónsdóttir & Maling were retested. The results show that the speakers who accepted the NI as adolescents 12 years ago have not out-grown it and those who did not accept it as adolescents don’t accept it either as young adults. This finding indicates that the NI has to be acquired by children before puberty and does not spread to older generations, i.e. the locus of this change seems to be in language acquisition.

Thus, in order to understand this change better it is important to investigate young Icelandic-speaking children’s production and comprehension of the NI and the standard passive. In this paper, I report the results of a small pilot study where a few children in Reykjavik were tested on these constructions, using an elicited production task and a picture-identification task. The results indicate that at the age of 3;0, Icelandic-speaking children’s comprehension of the NI is far better than of the standard passive and that the NI is also produced earlier by Icelandic-speaking children (see also Valgarðsdóttir 2007; Benediktsdóttir 2008; Garðarsdóttir 2012). The results also provide important information on how different Aktionsarts of the verb and the discourse function of the utterance affect the use of the NI vs. the standard passive and contribute to the current debate regarding the syntactic nature and origin of the construction.
Examples

(1) a. Það var beðið mig að vaska upp. 

\textit{it\textsubscript{EXPL} was\textsubscript{ACC} asked to\textsubscript{ACC} 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'

b. Svo var hrint stráknum.

\textit{Then was pushed-neut.sg the.boy-DAT}

Literally: Then was pushed the boy

Intended: 'The boy was then pushed' or 'they then pushed the boy'

(2) a. Ég var beðinn að vaska upp

\textit{I-NOM was asked-masc.sg. to wash up}

b. Stráknum var hrint.

\textit{the boy-DAT was pushed-neut.sg}

(3) Loks var fundið stelpuna eftir mikla leið.

denally was found girl.the-ACC after great search

‘The girl was finally found after a long search.’

Acceptability rates for the New Impersonal in (3) by age (Thráinsson et al. 2013).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>14-15 yrs</th>
<th>20-25 yrs</th>
<th>40-45 yrs</th>
<th>65-70 yrs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes, a natural sentence</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questionable sentence</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No, impossible sentence</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of subjects</td>
<td>n=200</td>
<td>n=179</td>
<td>n=168</td>
<td>n=165</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References


siggasig@hi.is