By-phrases in the new passive

The nature of the so-called new passive (NP) (1) in Icelandic has been debated. Some claim that it is not actually a passive but rather an active (Sigurjónsdóttir & Maling 2001) while others believe that it truly is a passive (Eyþórsson 2008, Jónsson 2009). Recently it has been suggested that NP lies somewhere between an active voice and a passive (E.F. Sigurðsson 2012, H.Á. Sigurðsson 2011, Ingason et al. 2012), that it has some key elements of an active voice but also elements of a passive, e.g. by-phrases.

There is a disagreement whether by-phrases are accepted in NP (e.g. Sigurjónsdóttir & Maling 2001, Eyþórsson 2008). By-phrases are marginal in that-passive (2) and that may also be the case in NP. E.F. Sigurðsson (2012: 61) has developed a test which is intended to determine if by-phrases are in fact accepted in NP. In the test participants are presented with a story about a man. One version included a sentence with a traditional passive and an ambiguous af-phrase (3a). The other version contained a similar sentence but with NP (3b).

The aim of the study was to see if these af-phrases could either be interpreted as a by-phrase (and therefore contain an agent) or that they contained a patient. In Icelandic, by-phrases (af-phrases) can be ambiguous, the DP Gunna in (4) can be interpreted either as an agent or a patient. E.F. Sigurðsson (2012:69) comes to the conclusion that by-phrases are not unacceptable in NP but believes that his study is inconclusive in determining if they are accepted. The results of my study suggest that by-phrases are in fact acceptable and therefore support Sigurðsson’s claim.

I used the questionnaire developed by Sigurðsson and presented it to 110 students in the 7th and 8th grade (age 11-13). The data shows that these af-phrases in NP are in fact ambiguous. Of the 18 students who have NP in their speech, four interpreted the noun as an agent but 14 as a patient. That means that just over 20% interpreted the preposition phrase as a bonafide by-phrase (Table 1). 33 students who got the version with the traditional passive answered the question in a usable manner, 18 (55%) interpreted the noun in the preposition phrase as an agent but 15 did not (45%) (Table 2).

The results support the claim Sigurðsson puts forth in his thesis, 20% of students with NP in their speech interpret the af-phrase as a true by-phrase which suggests that by-phrases are in fact accepted in NP. This then supports the hypothesis that NP lies somewhere between an active and a passive voice, it has clear characteristics of an active but also has by-phrases which only a passive has. The results also suggest that there is a clear difference between the traditional passive and NP which might imply that there is a structural difference between the two as some have claimed (e.g. E.F. Sigurðsson 2012, H.Á. Sigurðsson 2011, Ingason et al. 2012).
Examples:
1. Það var sagt mér að fara
   there was told me.DAT to go
   ‘I was told to go’

2. Það var sagt upp mörugu fólki (??af forstjóranum).
   There were laid off many.people.DAT by the.director.DAT
   ‘There were many people laid off by the director’
   (Eyþórsson 2008:198)

3. a) Nýlega var keyptur mikill kvóti af útgerðarmanninum Aðalsteini
    recently was bough a large.NOM quota.NOM of/by ship.owner.DAT Aðalsteinn.DAT
    ‘Recently a large quota was bought by the ship owner Aðalsteinn’
    OR
    ‘Recently a large quota was bought of the ship owner Aðalsteinn’

    b) Nýlega var keypt mikinn kvóta af útgerðarmanninum Aðalsteini
    recently was bough a large.ACC quota.ACC of/by ship.owner.DAT Aðalsteinn.DAT
    ‘Recently a large quota was bought by the ship owner Aðalsteinn’
    OR
    ‘Recently a large quota was bought of the ship owner Aðalsteinn’

4. Bókin var tekin af Gunnu
   the book.NOM was taken by/from Gunna.DAT
   ‘The book was taken by Gunna’ OR ‘The book was taken from Gunna’

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>New Passive</th>
<th>Passive</th>
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<tr>
<td>He bought the quota</td>
<td>He sold the quota</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 (22%)</td>
<td>14 (78%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 (55%)</td>
<td>15 (45%)</td>
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References: