Grammatical Change in Real Time?  
The New Impersonal/Passive in Icelandic

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Analysis of the New Passive (Kjartansson 1991; Eythórsson 2008; Jónsson 2009) or 'New Impersonal' (Sigurjónsdóttir and Maling 2001; Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir 2002) in Icelandic (hereafter New Impersonal/Passive or NIP) has provoked fierce controversy in the literature. However, there is general agreement that it is a major syntactic innovation in contemporary Icelandic, which cannot be explained away in terms of borrowing, phonological change or morphological weakening but rather represents a significant system-internal change. Change in apparent time is well-established, the construction being significantly more common amongst the young. This paper reports on results from the RAUN project (Linguistic Change in Real Time in the Phonology and Syntax of Icelandic, 2010–2012), showing that there are changes in real time affecting the construction, though the move is away from the innovation toward the standard.

The NIP (1) resembles the active (2) and differs from the canonical passive (3) in that the active object remains in situ, marked with accusative case, and fails to trigger agreement morphology on the participle, whereas in the canonical passive, the active object appears as the passive subject in the nominative case and triggers agreement. Unlike the standard expletive passive (5), there is no definiteness effect on the NIP: the post-verbal DP in the expletive passive is nominative, triggers agreement and must be indefinite; the post-verbal DP in the NIP is accusative, fails to trigger agreement and can be definite or indefinite.

The NIP represents a strong candidate for a change in core grammar which is the result of reanalysis during learning (cf. Kroch 2001), implying that changes in the judgements of individual speakers would be limited. The RAUN project tested this hypothesis by re-surveying 142 speakers included in the original Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir study of 15–16 year olds (data collected 1999–2000). 71% of the speakers now judge the NIP less positively than they did in 1999; 27% judge it the same way; and 2% judge it more positively. Nevertheless there is a strong statistical correlation between the original judgements and the new ones ($r = 0.549$, $p < 0.001$); furthermore, there is a statistically significant correlation with education ($r = 0.356$, $p< 0.001$).

Change in real time is therefore possible. However, the change is away from the innovation towards the standard and the correlation with education implies that this is the acquisition of an interfering standard grammar, rather than a change in the original grammar per se, a point reinforced by the correlation with original judgements.
Examples

(1) **New Impersonal/Passive (NIP):**
   Það var skammað strákinn.
   there was scolded(sg.n) the-boy(A.sg.m.)

(2) **Active:**
   Einhver skammaði strákinn.
   somebody scolded the-boy(A)

(3) **Canonical passive (definite subject):**
   Strákurinn var skammaður.
   the-boy(N.sg.m.) was scolded(sg.m.)

(4) **Canonical passive (indefinite subject):**
   Einhver strákur var skammaður.
   some boy(N.sg.m.) was scolded(sg.m.)

(5) **Expletive passive:**
   Það var skammaður einhver strákur.
   there was scolded(sg.m.) some boy(N.sg.m.)

References
Sigurjónsdóttir, Sigríður, and Joan Maling. 2001. Það var hrint mér á leiðinni í skólann: þolmynd eða ekki þolmynd? [There was pushed me on the way to school: passive or not passive?]. Íslenskt mál 23:123–180.