Addressing the Actuation Problem of the Icelandic New Transitive Impersonal

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22nd Germanic Linguistics Annual Conference
University of Iceland • May 21st 2016
BACKGROUND
### Active:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>subject</th>
<th>verb</th>
<th>object</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Einhver</td>
<td>opnaði</td>
<td>skápinn.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

‘Somebody opened the cupboard.’ (Thráinsson 2007: 10, Ex. 1.22a)

### Canonical Passive:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>subject</th>
<th>verb</th>
<th>object</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Skápurinn</td>
<td>var</td>
<td>opnaður.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

‘The cupboard was opened.’ (Thráinsson 2007: 10, Ex. 1.22b)
Traditional Impersonal Passive:

Það var dansað í kringum jólatréð.

‘People danced around the Christmas tree.’

(Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir 2002: 98, Ex. 1c)

New Transitive Impersonal (NTI):

%Það var lamið stúlkuna í klessa.

‘People badly beat the girl.’

(Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir 2002: 98, Ex. 2a)
New Transitive Impersonal (NTI):

%ðað var lamið stúlkuna í klessa.

`it was hit-neut.sg the.girl-f.sg.Acc in a.mess`

‘People badly beat the girl.’

**Burzio’s Generalization** (1986:178): all and only the verbs that can assign θ-role to the subject can assign accusative Case to an object.


☞ 93% of adults (n=200) found the constructions **unacceptable**.
☞ But, 70% of adolescents (n=1695) found the constructions **acceptable**!
☞ First attested example in 1959 by a girl born in Akureyri (M&S 2002).
This is a topic of considerable debate...
Half the adults accept active properties in impersonal passives of intransitive verbs (i.e. subject-oriented adjuncts and reflexives).

*Subject-oriented adjunct:*  
\[\text{it}_{\text{EXPL}} \quad \text{was} \quad \text{gone} \quad \text{crying} \quad \text{home}\]  
‘People went home crying.’  
(Maling 2006: 213, Tbl. 9a)

The emergence of the NTI appears to be also affecting the traditional passives of intransitive verbs!
In Icelandic, reflexive verbs can also appear in these constructions:

%Það var drifið sig á ball
it\textsubscript{EXPL} \textit{was} hurried REFL.Acc to dance
‘People were hurrying off to dance.’ (Árnadóttir et al. 2011: 40, Ex. 2)

The Icelandic reflexive inflects for case: \textit{sig} (accusative), \textit{sér} (dative), and \textit{sín} (genitive).

Burzio’s Generalization is violated yet again…
First attested example in 1842 (Árnadóttir et al. 2011: 65, Ex.36):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Þókti</th>
<th>og</th>
<th>mönnum</th>
<th>sem</th>
<th>mjög</th>
<th>væri</th>
<th>flýtt</th>
<th>sèr</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>thought</td>
<td>also</td>
<td>men</td>
<td>that</td>
<td>very</td>
<td>was</td>
<td>hurried</td>
<td>REFL.DAT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>með</td>
<td>að</td>
<td>byggja</td>
<td>þau</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with</td>
<td>to</td>
<td>build</td>
<td>them</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

‘People also thought that there was a lot of hurrying to build them’

*Skírnir* 16, 1 January 1842, p.51
M&S (2015): DIACHRONIC STAGES

• Stage 1:
  • Impersonal passives with intransitive verbs.
    • \([_{IP \ var \ [_{VP \ dansað]}]}\]
      was danced

• Stage 2:
  • Extension of impersonal passives to reflexive verbs.
    • \([_{IP \ var \ [_{VP \ baðað \ sig}]}]\]
      was bathed REFL.ACC
  • Reanalysis of traditional impersonal passives to actives.
    • \([_{IP \ pro \ var \ [_{VP \ dansað]}]}\]
      was danced

• Stage 3:
  • Impersonal actives with transitive verbs (circa. 1959).
    • \([_{IP \ pro \ var \ [_{VP \ fundið \ stelpuna}]}]\]
      was found girl.the-ACC
But why is this change happening at this particular moment in time?
GERMAN BORROWING
“This is a system-internal change which is neither the result of borrowing...” (M&S 2015: 36, emphasis ours, see Maling 2006 for similar remarks)

“...the possibility of multiple causation should always be considered (...) [as] it often happens that an internal motivation combines with an external motivation to produce a change” (Thomason 2001: 91)
**HYPOTHESIS #1**

**Hypothesis**: Impersonal reflexives in Icelandic were due to borrowing of an analogous construction in German during the 18th/19th century.
Cross-linguistically, reflexive verbs do not passivize.

German is a language that has passives of reflexive verbs:

Hier wurde sich (von den Römern) gewaschen.
Here became REFLEX (by the Romans) washed
‘Here, the Romans washed’ (Schäfer 2012: 215, Ex. 3b)

Why hasn’t German developed the New Transitive Impersonal?
Schäfer (2013) concludes that German Impersonal Reflexives “does not have any DP as its syntactic antecedent at all”. In other words, they’re passives!

- By-phrases: completely grammatical among speakers.
- No agreement between by-phrase and anaphor: anaphor must be 3rd person even if the by-phrase introduces a 1st and 2nd person pronoun.
① Icelandic Impersonal Reflexives and New Transitive Impersonal are both actives.
② Icelandic Impersonal Reflexives first appeared around the 18\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th} century.
③ Icelandic New Transitive Impersonal emerged around the mid-20\textsuperscript{th} century.
④ German Impersonal Reflexives are passives.
ASSUMPTIONS

1. **Icelandic Impersonal Reflexives** and New Transitive Impersonal are both actives.

2. Icelandic Impersonal Reflexives first appeared around the 18th and 19th century.

3. Icelandic New Transitive Impersonal emerged around the mid-20th century.

4. **German Impersonal Reflexives** are passives.

*This might explain why Icelandic has developed the New Transitive Impersonal, whereas German has not.*
• Iceland is over 2,000 km (or 1,400 miles) away from Germany.

• Few accounts of direct contact between Iceland and Germany in the 19th century.
  • There was a small colony of Icelanders residing in Copenhagen with a strong German community (Senner 1985).

Image source: http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/europe1815_1905.jpg
Hypothesis: Impersonal reflexives in Icelandic was due to borrowing of an analogous construction in German during the 18th and 19th century through German literature or/and their translations into Icelandic.
SOCIOHISTORICAL CONTEXT
Iceland ruled by Denmark from 1380 to 1918.

Danish had a large influence on Icelandic.

- Danish served as official language in administrative positions and half-Danish markets (Óskarsson 2006).
- In the Latin school, all textbooks were in Danish (Thórarinsdóttir 1999).
ICELAND DURING 18TH AND 19TH CENTURY

- Eggert Ólafsson described language of East and North as free from foreign influences, while South has many German and Danish words due to merchants and government officials.
  - Iceland was in contact with German (and English) merchants during the 16th/17th century until the Danish had a monopoly over the trading.

- Rasmus Christian Rask predicted that Icelandic would decline within next few centuries to the point of extinction.
  - In 1815, he founded Icelandic Literary Society to promote the language.
  - Its annual journal Skírnir was based in Copenhagen, where the first attested Impersonal Reflexive was found.
Enlightenment and Romantic movements were catalysts for new ideas that affected literary culture, as well as political and intellectual activities across Europe.

- Emphasized the relationship between “nation”, culture, language and race.

- Linguistic and cultural purity were common themes among Icelandic nationalists (Thórarinsdóttir 1999).

- Efforts to purify the Icelandic language especially against Danish influence, which was used as a political tool (Leonard and Árnason 2011).

- Icelandic writers looked towards German and other Scandinavian literature for inspiration.
In mid-18th century, Ludvig Harboe went around Iceland to investigate the standard of education. He then made the policy whereby “obligatory education, which consisted only of reading a basic knowledge of Christianity, was the responsibility of the parents, under the supervision of the local pastor” (Karlsson 2000: 170).

A decade after Harboe’s visit, literacy rates were reported to increase from 36% to 63%.

By end of 18th century, most people could read.

Between late 18th and mid-19th century, writing became more popular among men (Karlsson 2000).
University education was in Copenhagen and many ideas arrived in Iceland with Icelandic scholars who studied in there.

Óskarsson (2006: 257): “Nearly all the most important Icelandic writers and intellectuals stayed [in Denmark] for long or short periods of time to study and work”.

• Before 1773, there was one printing press in Iceland which was controlled by the church and printed mostly religious works (Eggertsdóttir 2006).

• A printing press was established on the island of Hrappsey, and then secular works proliferated.

• Karlsson (2000: 204): “an annual with a print-run of 300 copies would have had more influence than a widely circulated daily newspaper does nowadays.”

• In 1844, printing press in Reykjavík, and another printing press established in Akureyri in 1852.
Senner (1985: 2): “the major source for translations into Icelandic during the Enlightenment was German literature”.
  - Approximately 60% of all translated works during this period came from German.

Translation style in the early 18th century: “translators preserved the content of the originals at the cost of structural unity, idiomatic speech, grammaticality, and clear style” (Senner 1985: 6).

Works by Ludwig Tieck (1773-1853), Heinrich Heine (1797-1856), Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805), Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) among those whose works were translated into German.

Even English works like Alexander Pope’s (1711) *Temple of Fame* were supposedly translated into Icelandic by way of a German translation (Eggerts dóttir 2006).
CORPUS STUDIES
ICELANDIC TRANSLATOR: JÓNAS HALLGRÍMSSON

Icelandic translators of German works included:
- Benedikt Gröndal (1826-1907)
- Hannes Finsson (1739-1796)
- Magnús Stephensen (1762-1833)
- Þorvaldur Böðvarsson (1758-1836)
- Jón Þorláksson (1744-1819)
- Jónas Hallgrímsson (1807-1845)

Data: Selected Poetry and Prose of fifty works by Jónas Hallgrímsson compiled by Dick Ringler stored online at: http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/Jonas.
- 44 verse, 6 prose.
- Around 18,000 words.

Methodology: We extracted sentences with reflexive pronouns sig and sér, inflected for accusative and dative respectively.

Results: No occurrences found.
Data from Project Gutenberg and consist of 250,000+ words from over 400+ individual works.

We included a diverse range of authors whose works were published from 1746-1873.

Works by Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock, Christian Fürchtegott Gellert (1715-1769), Friedrich Schiller, Ludwig Tieck, Heinrich Heine made a significant impact on the history if Icelandic literature (Senner 1985, Neijmann 2006).
• Extracted all sentences containing the German reflexive pronoun *sich*.

• Lemmatized, tagged, parsed (with Mate Tools), and automatically filtered based two criteria:

**Criterion ①**: past participle of main verb (VVPP) is linked to the reflexive pronoun *sich* as an accusative object (OA).

**Criterion ②**: contains a form of *werden* ‘become’.

• Manually checked the results and discarded false positives.
In their 2013 study, Zarrieß et al. found 901 candidate Impersonal Reflexive sentences in an 880 million word German web corpus (sdeWav).

...assuming a similar word:sentence ratio, we might predict one Impersonal Reflexive for every million words!

This prediction is borne out so far as we found no instance of Impersonal Reflexives in the German texts we have analyzed.
LIMITATIONS
While the sociohistorical context provides evidence for the hypothesis, the results suggest otherwise.

If Impersonal Reflexives are rare in German texts, it would be unlikely for Icelanders (including translators) to be exposed to these constructions via literature.

The next step might be to look directly at Icelandic translations.
The influence of the Enlightenment and Romantic eras have been noted by historians (Danish: Eaton 2015; Norwegian: Næss 1993; Swedish: Warme 1996).

Exception: Faroese was still a largely oral language in the early 20th century (Barnes 2005).

Why haven’t other Scandinavian languages such as Danish, Swedish or Norwegian developed the Impersonal Reflexive construction as well?
M&S (2002) find significant effects of geography and education levels of both parents on the acceptance of the New Transitive Impersonal:

- The higher the education level of the parents, the less likely the NTI is accepted.
- Inner Reykjavík accept the New Transitive Impersonal significantly less than speakers Outer Reykjavík and elsewhere.

If Impersonal Reflexives were first used by educated, upper-class men in the 18th and 19th century, then why do we see an opposite effect today whereby residents of Inner Reykjavík seem to be the ones more likely to reject these constructions?
Writers of the journal *Skírnir* were mainly upper-class men residing in Copenhagen where the journal was based.

Reykjavík did not become an urban center until later in the 19th century – signs of urbanization began in the 18th century (Óskarsson 2006).

- At the beginning of the 19th century, 300 inhabitants which increased to 1,150 by 1850, and by 1880, around 2,600. Today, most of the populace of Iceland resides in Reykjavík.

- Growth of Reykjavík may have coincided with the growth of linguistic conservatism of the country.

Image source (Reykjavík in 1860s): https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c3/Reykjavik_1860s.jpg
Image source (Reykjavík in 1904): http://lemurinn.is/wp-content/uploads/Reykjav%C3%ADk_City_scape_1904.jpg
CONCLUSION
CONCLUDING REMARKS

• It is not until the socio-historical and sociolinguistic context has been investigated that it can reveal new lines of inquiry for alternative models of change, specifically those that include external factors.

• Rickford (2011: 252-3): “careful socio-historical research” can elucidate variation and change, but “sociohistory can and often is neglected”.

• Most, if not all, models of the Icelandic New Transitive Impersonal attributes the change to ‘system-internal’ force.
  • Iceland is culturally and geographically isolated, and well-known to be linguistically conservative.
CONCLUDING REMARKS

• Not always possible to address the actuation problem, but the change in Icelandic is during a time where we have access to many records from a variety of disciplines.

• In our view, a greater understanding of the socio-historical and sociolinguistic context is crucial to address the actuation problem even if due to some kind of system-internal factor.
  • Why now?
  • Why not Faroese or Norwegian?
  • Who were the users of this innovation?
  • Where was it first used?
  • How did it spread?

• In short, what were the conditions for change and how do they reflect the social attitudes and linguistic behaviors today?

• All of these contributes to the nature of the processes and mechanisms by which changes emerge.
THANK YOU FOR LISTENING!
Special thanks to Joan Maling, Cathy O’Connor, David Lightfoot, and Akitaka Yamada on various stages of this project.


“Þessu er, held ég, betur snúið," sagði ég þá, "og þú hefur náð bragarhættinum dável; það hef ég séð, þó ég skilji ekki sjálft kvæðið. Þú átt gott að geta skilið þjóðverskuna, og það væri vel gert af þér, að kenna mér dálítið líka. Mér er kvöl í að skilja ekkert af því, sem þeir hafa gert, hann Schiller og ærir á þjóðverjalandi.”

"Now that's been rather more skilfully translated, I think," I said. "You've managed to imitate the meter pretty well, too, I can see that, even though I don't understand a word of the original. — You're so lucky to know German, Hildur! Wouldn't it be nice if you could teach me a little? It's real torture for me, not being able to understand a thing they've done — Schiller and those others in Germany!"

- Excerpt from Jónas Hallgrímsson’s (1847) *Grasaferð*, translation by Dick Ringler (2002).
Stage 1:
- Impersonal passives with intransitive verbs.
  - \[\text{IP var} \ [\text{VP dansað}]\]
  - was danced

Stage 2:
- Emergence of impersonal reflexives due to borrowing from German (circa. 1842).
  - \[\text{IP pro var} \ [\text{VP baðað sig}]\]
  - was bathed REFL.ACC
- Reanalysis of traditional impersonal passives to actives.
  - \[\text{IP pro var} \ [\text{VP dansað}]\]
  - was danced

Stage 3:
- Impersonal actives with transitive verbs (circa. 1959).
  - \[\text{IP pro var} \ [\text{VP fundið stelpuna}]\]
  - was found girl.the-ACC
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SYNTACTIC PROPERTY</th>
<th>ACTIVE</th>
<th>PASSIVE</th>
<th>ICELANDIC NTI/NIC (M&amp;S 2002)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AGENTIVE BY-PHRASE POSSIBLE</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>? (individual variation, see Sigurðsson &amp; Stefánsson 2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONTROL OF SUBJECT-ORIENTED ADJUNCTS</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BOUND ANAPHORS IN UNDERLYING OBJECT POSITION</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NON-AGENTIVE “UNACCUSATIVE” VERBS POSSIBLE</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✗</td>
<td>? (varies with the verb)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• First attested example in 1959 by a girl born in Akureyri (M&S 2002).
• From M&S (2011): The new construction is reported to be common in Akureyri, the “capital of the north.” Another woman recalls being told in 1979 that kids in Akureyri “talk this way.”
• Printing press was established in Akureyri in 1852.
• The change is said to be more widespread in rural than in urban areas (Maling 2006, Sigurðsson 2011).
Before 1832
- Dalabóndinn í óþurrknum
- Skipkoma, 1830

September 1832 - May 1837
- Ísland
- Um eðli og uppruna jarðarinnar
- Grasaferð
- Summer 1837
- Gunnarshólmi

Alheimsvíðáttan (based on Schiller's Die Größe der Welt)

November 1842-May 1845
- Úr gamanbréfi frá Jónasi til kunningja sinna í Kaupmannahöfn
- Sláttuvísa
- Dalvisa (Inspired by Adelbert von Chamisso's Küssen will ich, ich will küssen (1831))
- Efter Assembléen
- Ég bíð að heilsa!
- Leggur og skel
- Öhræsið!
- Bósi
- Ferðalok
- Stókur
- Svo rís um aldir árið hvurt um sig, 1845
- Að vaði liggur leiðin
- þar sem háir hólar
- Nihilisme Feuerbachs
- Mér finnst það vera fólkugys
- Ólafsvíkurenni (Stanza derived from Heinrich Heine)
- Hornbjarg
- Drangey
- Kolbeinsey
- Ég uni mér ekki' út í Máney
- Suðursveit er þó betri
- Efst á Arnarvatnshæðum
- Upp undir Arnarfelli
- Við Sogið sat eg í vindi
- Tindrar úr Tungnajökli
- Einbúinn
- Vorið góða, grænt og hlýtt
- Strit (Adapatanion of Heinrich Heine's Deutschland. Ein Wintermärchen (1844))
- Suður fórumk um ver
Friedrich Schiller:
• Einige Gedichte Und Reden (1742)
• Die Größe der Welt (1780)

Christian Fürchtegott Gellert:
• Fabeln und Erzählungen (1746-48)
• Die zärtlichen Schwestern (1747)
• C. F. Gellerts Sämtliche Schriften Zweyter Theil (1772)

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe:
• Die Leiden des jungen Werther (1774)
• Die Wahlverwandtschaften (1774)
• Italienische Reise (1816-17)
• West–östlicher Divan (1819)

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing:
• Nathan Der Weise (1779)

Heinrich Heine:
• Die Harzreise (1824)
• Buch der Lieder (1827)
• Deutschland (1844)
• Neue Gedichte (1844)
• Romanzero (1851)

Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock:
• Der Messias (1748-73)

Ludwig Tieck:
• Der Blonde Eckbert (1797)
• Der Getreue Eckart und der Tannenhäuser (1799)
• Der Runenberg (1802)

Among many others...
Joan Maling (via p.c.) mentions that there is variation in Norwegian today regarding the Impersonal Reflexive constructions – some speakers accept them, whereas others completely reject them:

%Det vart rulla seg i graset av gjestane.

‘It was rolled seg in the grass by the guests.’ (Åfarli 1992: 128, Ex.85a)

Much like Iceland, nationalistic views were prevalent in Norway:

- Norway was in a union with Sweden under the Swedish monarch from 1814 to 1905.
- Before this, it was in a union with Denmark.