

## Structural and Evolutionary Basis of the Icelandic New Impersonal Passive

We examine the development of a non-canonically case-marked subject into an object, focusing on the Icelandic new impersonal passive. We provide a syntactic analysis, and a quantitative model explaining its rise.

**Background:** A new construction (NC) in Icelandic patterns as passive, while the object remains an object: bears ACC, cannot raise to TP, cannot control; [MS02], [E08], [J09], [S11]. This tension cannot be resolved by allowing assignment of lexical/quirky ACC by the passive verb. This wrongly predicts that the object could raise to subject position. Nor can it be adequately resolved by allowing structural ACC in violation of Burzio’s Generalization: BG otherwise holds for NC speakers ([J09], [S11]).

**Syntactic Analysis:** We propose that the NC places features semantically restricting (in the sense of CL04) the thematic subject position in [spec, *v*] not *v*. Thus, we place the NC in a typology of passive-like constructions:

(i) Canonical Passive (CP): the *v* that introduces the thematic subject is present ([P99], [E04], [C05], [L08], [L09]), but its specifier is empty; the subject position is existentially bound ([H89], [P99], [L08], [L09], [KM99]). *v* bears features restricting the subject position, which may be morphologically overt [L08].

(ii) Impersonal (Polish-type): a null pronoun in [spec, *v*] saturates the subject position.

(iii) NC (and the analogous Ukrainian, [S85]): an XP smaller than a pronoun in [spec, *v*] restricts, rather than saturates, the subject position (see [L10]’s analysis of “weak implicit arguments”). The presence of a subject in [spec, *v*] accounts for ACC licensing. However, the subject not saturating the argument position accounts for: the licensing of *by*-phrases (to the extent permitted in passives without DP-movement, [J09]), the subject’s inability to undergo A-movement (allowing raising across it, [J09]), and its reluctance to license reflexives and depictives ([L10], [J09]).

**Model of Change:** The development of the NC is facilitated by the preponderance of data ambiguous between the CP and NC, notably non-canonically case-marked subjects of the passive–DAT, GEN, syncretic DAT/ACC, syncretic NOM/ACC. The model of language change in [Y02] allows us to predict the directionality of change of competing grammatical variants. The key is to estimate the proportions—dubbed *advantage* in [Y02]—of contexts under which the syntactic realization of NC is incompatible with the CP grammar and vice versa. We estimate these values from the IcePaHC corpus [WISR11], focusing on the data which are an advantage to only one of the two grammars. The advantage of NC is determined by the frequency of *definite-Theme-initial* where the Theme is neutral in interpretation (thus would appear in object position if generated by the NC grammar). The advantage of CP is determined by the frequency of *XP aux indefinite-Theme* (the Theme must be low in NC). These values reveal a sizeable difference in favor of NC which has remained so over time (Figure 1) . Following the results in [Y02], the NC, once becoming an available option, will necessarily rise to complete acceptance. More refined corpus analysis may also predict the speed of change.

Word Count: 500

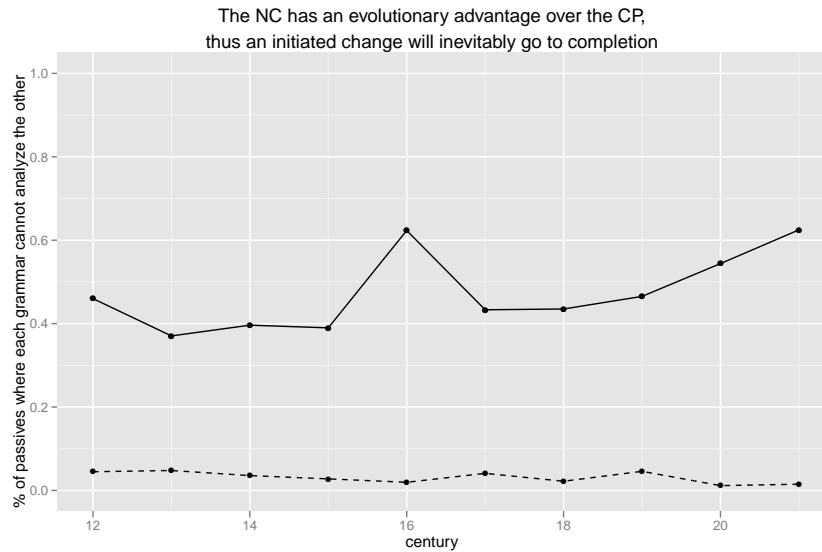


Figure 1. Under competition between the NC and the CP, the distribution of passives in Icelandic favors the NC (passives with subject traces and gapping omitted). The solid line shows the percentage of definite-Theme-initial passives which favor the NC (with neutral interpretation of the Theme; the rate of contrast/focus in this position was estimated at ca. 8% by annotating a subset of the corpus for information structure). The dashed line shows the percentage of XP aux indefinite-Theme passives, which favor the CP. The NC's advantage is present throughout the historical record so that an initiated change will inevitably go to completion.

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