The New Passive Construction in Icelandic

In this paper we report the results of an extensive study on a new passive construction that is developing in the language of young Icelandic speakers. The traditional passive in Icelandic can be categorized into the three types illustrated in (1), i.e. the Icelandic passive shows the typical difference between structural and inherent case, and intransitive verbs may passivize. In addition, as shown in (2), the underlying object of a transitive verb may remain in postverbal position, provided it is indefinite. The new passive takes the form in (3).

(1) a. **Nominative passive:**
   Stúlkán var lámí
   The girl-NOM was hit
b. **Oblique passive:**
   Honum var hjálpað/Hans var saknað
   He-DAT was helped/ He-GEN was missed
c. **Impersonal passive:**
   Pað var sungið hátt
   It/there was sung loudly

(2) **The Definiteness Effect**
   a. Pað voru seldar margar bækur
      There were-pl. sold-f.pl. many books-f.pl
   b. *Pað voru seldar bækurnar
      There were sold the books

(3) **New passive:**
   a. Pað var lamíð stúlkuna
      There was hit the girl-ACC
   b. Pað vor hjálpað honum/Pað var saknað hans
      "The girl was hit"
      "He was helped"/"He was missed"
   The new passive is consistent with two competing hypotheses within the GB-framework: (i) the canonical passive, with an empty category e in subject position, but without NP-movement, or (ii) an active impersonal construction, with a phonologically null pro-subject. The crucial difference between the two hypotheses is whether or not a theta role is assigned to subject position. If hypothesis (ii) is correct, the pro-subject is assigned both a thematic role and nominative Case, and the appearance of accusative case on the postverbal object is entirely expected, as is the observed lack of the Definiteness Effect. Under hypothesis (ii), we make the further predictions listed in (4):

(4) a. No agentive by-phrase should be possible, as this would violate the Theta-Criterion.
   b. Binding of anaphors should be possible, as there is a thematic subject.
   c. Subject control of participial adjuncts should be possible.
   d. The "new passive" should not be restricted to "unergative verbs".

We asked 1,731 youngsters in 65 schools (45% of 14-15 year olds in the country) and 75 adult controls to judge various syntactic constructions with the new passive. Our results show that many young Icelandic speakers judge these sentences as grammatical. For example 61-82% of the youngsters judged the new passive sentence in (3a) as grammatical (as compared to 0-6% of adults). Furthermore, the judgements are coherent with the predictions listed in (4). Thus, our study supports the hypothesis that the new passive is a syntactically active construction, with a phonologically null pro-subject.

Our results also reveal a different geographical spread of this construction throughout Iceland. Fewer youngsters in the capital city of Reykjavik accept sentences in the new passive than in other parts of the country. Thus in Reykjavik 49-59% of 14-15 year olds accept new passive sentences with an NP and infinitival complement (e.g. (5) Pað var sagt mér að taka til "It was told me-DAT to clean up") whereas this percentage is 50-71% in the Northern and Eastern part of Iceland and 65-86% in the Southern and Western part, where this syntactic innovation seems to be most widespread. The complement structure of the verb seems to affect the acceptability of the sentences, as does the gender of the subjects and level of parental education (i.e. in some "better to do" school districts in Reykjavik the acceptability of sentences like (5) is as low as 24%). In short, in this study we have documented a syntactic change in progress at a relatively early stage. Thus, our results should be of interest for both linguistic theory and language change.