The new impersonal as a true passive*

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This paper discusses a new impersonal construction in Icelandic. This construction has passive morphology but differs from canonical passives of transitive verbs in that the DP complement of the passive participle stays in situ and displays object properties. Contra Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002), I argue that this is a true passive, not an active construction with a thematic null subject. As illustrated in the paper, there are some clear similarities between canonical passives and new impersonals that support a passive analysis of the latter construction but no clear differences to justify an active analysis.

0. Introduction

The topic of this paper is an innovative syntactic construction in Icelandic that has been subject to some controversy in recent years, a construction that I will refer to as the new impersonal. I will present arguments that the new impersonal is a true passive with an understood agent, as the passive morphology of this construction suggests. In doing so, I will argue against the view of Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) that the new impersonal is an active construction with a thematic null argument in subject position. In addition to arguments in favor of a passive analysis of the new impersonal, it will be shown that there are no clear differences between new impersonals and passives in Icelandic to support an active analysis. For concreteness, the analysis advocated here will be referred to as the Passive Analysis, in contrast to the Active Analysis of Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002).

Although the Passive Analysis and the Active Analysis are two contrasting analyses of new impersonals, it is still quite possible that each analysis is correct for a certain class of speakers; the new impersonal may be an active construction for some speakers but a passive construction for others. In this paper, I will argue that the Passive Analysis holds for all speakers using the new impersonal as I take this to be the strongest hypothesis consistent with the data.

The paper is organized as follows. Section one is a brief introduction to Icelandic passives and the new impersonal construction. This is followed by a discussion of some theoretical issues concerning the new impersonal in section two, in particular the properties of the understood agent and checking of accusative case. After a brief review of comparative data from the -no/to construction in Polish and Ukrainian, a critical evaluation of the Active Analysis of Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) for Icelandic is presented in section three. Some further arguments against the Active

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1 Since the understood argument of Icelandic passives is usually an agent, I will use the term agent to refer to this argument even if it may bear other theta-roles.
Analysis are presented in section four, based on a new study of the new impersonal. Finally, the main points of the paper are summarized in section five.

1. Icelandic passives and the new impersonal

Icelandic has a personal passive with DP-movement, as shown in (2). In such passives, structural accusative case disappears, as seen in (1a) vs. (2a), whereas lexical (dative or genitive) case is preserved, as shown in (1b) vs. (2b).²

(1) a. Einhver barði mig
someone hit me.ACC

b. Einhver hjálpaði stelpunum
someone helped the.girls.DAT

(2) a. Ég var barinn
I.NOM was hit.M.NOM.SG.

b. Stelpunum var hjálpað
the.girls.DAT was.3.SG helped.DEF
‘The girls were helped’

Nominative subjects of passives trigger agreement with the finite verb and the passive participle but default features appear in the presence of a dative subject, i.e. third person singular on the finite verb and neuter singular nominative on the passive participle. I will use the term personal passive to refer to canonical passives of transitive verbs, irrespective of whether the finite verb agrees with the structural subject or not.

DP-movement is not obligatory in personal passives if the DP complement of the passive participle is indefinite. In such passives, expletive það is inserted, as in (3a), unless the clause-initial position is occupied, e.g. by a null operator, as in (3b). As shown in (4), definite DPs must undergo DP-movement:

(3) a. það voru keyptir stólar
there were bought.M.NOM.PL chairs.M.NOM.PL
‘Some chairs were bought’

b. Var kastað tómötum í söngvarann?
was thrown.DEF tomatoes.DAT at the.singer
‘Were tomatoes thrown at the singer?’

(4) a. * það voru keyptir stólarnir
there were bought.M.NOM.PL the.chairs.M.NOM.PL
‘The chairs were bought’

² The following abbreviations are used in the glosses: 3 = third person, ACC = accusative case, DAT = dative case, DEF = default agreement (nominative, neuter, singular), F = feminine, IMP = impersonal, INST = instrumental case, M = masculine, N = neuter, NOM = nominative case, PL = plural, PASS = passive, PRT = particle, REFL = reflexive, and SG = singular.
b. * Var kastād tómōtunum í söngvarann?
   was thrown.DEF the.tomatoes.DAT at the.singer
   ‘Were the tomatoes thrown at the singer?’

Like most other Germanic languages, Icelandic has impersonal passives of unergative verbs. This is illustrated below with the verbs dansa ‘dance’ and horfa ‘look’:

(5) a. það var dansað í allt kvöld
   there was danced.DEF in all evening
   ‘There was dancing all evening’

b. í kvöld verður horft á leikinn
   tonight will.be looked.DEF on the.match
   ‘Tonight, we will watch the match’

In addition to personal and impersonal passives, Icelandic has an impersonal construction where the DP complement of the passive verb stays in situ and behaves like an object. Thus, accusative and definite DPs are possible in this construction, as shown in (6). There is no agreement in these examples since only nominative DPs trigger agreement.

(6) a. það var barið mig
   there was hit.DEF me.ACC
   ‘I was hit’

b. þess vegna var hjálpað stelpunum
   therefore was helped.DEF the.girls.DAT
   ‘Therefore the girls were helped’

This construction uses the auxiliaries vera ‘be’ or verða ‘become’ and a passive participle just like a regular passive. Examples like (6a) e.g. are ungrammatical without passive morphology:

(7) * það barði mig
    there hit me.ACC
    ‘I was hit’

In view of its affinity with canonical passives, this construction is often referred to as the new passive. However, I will continue to use the more theory-neutral term new impersonal (construction) in this paper in order not to prejudge the contentious issue of how this construction should be analysed.

The new impersonal seems to be a relatively recent phenomenon in Icelandic as the oldest attested examples are from the middle of the 20th century. It is a substandard construction and mostly used by children and adolescents. By contrast, the personal passive is accepted by all speakers, including those who use the new impersonal

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3 This example is grammatical in the irrelevant reading where það is interpreted as an argument.
4 A few examples with a definite dative DP like (6b) are actually attested in Old Icelandic. However, since Old Icelandic had a relatively free word order compared to Modern Icelandic, these examples should probably be analysed as regular passives (see Eythórsson 2008 for further discussion).
(Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir 2002). As far as I know, impersonal passives of unergative verbs are also accepted by all speakers of Icelandic.

Examples like (6a) display two characteristics of the postverbal DP in new impersonals: accusative case and definiteness. By contrast, examples with dative DPs like (6b) are new impersonals only by virtue of the definiteness of the DP. Examples with a postverbal indefinite dative like (3b) are therefore ambiguous between a personal passive without DP-movement and the new impersonal. No such ambiguity arises with indefinite accusative DPs; for instance, (8) below is clearly a new impersonal:

(8) Það var keypt stóla
    there was bought.DEF chairs.ACC
    ‘(Some) chairs were bought’

The DP complement in the new impersonal is an object. This is shown not only by the possibility of accusative case but also by control facts. As shown in (9c), the DP complement cannot control PRO in infinitival adjuncts in contrast to true subjects, as in (9a). An unmoved DP complement in personal passives can also control PRO, as in (9b), although such examples are less acceptable than examples with DP-movement like (9a).

(9) a. Tveir menn voru ráðnir án þess að
    two.NOM men.NOM were hired.M.NOM.PL without it to
    hafa næga menntun
    have enough education
    ‘Two men were hired without having enough education’

b. ?þá voru ráðnir tveir menn án þess að
    then were hired.M.NOM.PL two.NOM men.NOM without it to
    hafa næga menntun
    have enough education
    ‘Then, two men were hired without having enough education’

c. *þá var ráðið tvo menn án þess að
    then was hired.DEF two.ACC men.ACC without it to
    hafa næga menntun
    have enough education
    ‘Then, two men were hired without having enough education’

Another object property is that an accusative argument in new impersonals cannot undergo DP-movement (Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir 2002). Moreover, the postverbal argument is exempt from the definiteness restriction, which only affects subjects below the canonical subject position in Icelandic, as in (10):5

5 As Thráinsson (2007:277) points out, this particular example is not ideal for testing the definiteness restriction since various indefinite DPs are not acceptable either in the postverbal position here.
This example was tested by Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) and rejected by nearly all the participants. Thus, it seems that the definiteness restriction holds for all speakers, including those who use the new impersonal. If the definiteness restriction in Icelandic is indeed restricted to subjects, we do not expect to find any speakers that systematically obey a definiteness restriction in new impersonals by accepting only indefinite (accusative) DPs. As far as I know, this is correct, although it is probably true that indefinite accusative DPs are generally more acceptable in new impersonals than definite accusative DPs.

In this paper, I will focus on the syntax of new impersonals and leave aside the pragmatics of the new impersonal. The pragmatics of the new impersonal have never been investigated but it seems to me that new impersonals are primarily used in “bare happenings”, a situation type characterized by low topicality of both agent and patient. Sansò (2006) claims that this is also the main function of the Polish –nolto construction discussed in 3.1 below. As Sansò (2006:242) explains, this situation type involves “events in which the agent is conceptualised as sufficiently unimportant to be backgrounded even though the patients in these clauses are not particularly topical.” Personal passives in Icelandic have a wider range of uses since they cannot only be used in bare happenings; they also serve the function of highlighting the patient argument by moving it to subject position.

2. Some theoretical issues

2.1 Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002)

In the most detailed study of the new impersonal to date, Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) argue that it is an active impersonal construction with a thematic null subject as shown in (11):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{(11)} & \quad \text{það} \quad \text{var} \quad [IP \ pro \ [VP \ barið \ mig \ ] ] \\
& \quad \text{there was} \quad \text{hit} \quad \text{me.ACC}
\end{align*}
\]

This structure makes use of two important facts about Icelandic syntax: (i) Icelandic is a V2 language, and (ii) the expletive það must precede the finite verb. In my view, there are various problems associated with treating expletive það as a left-peripheral element, as in (11) above, rather than a structural subject, but this need not concern us here (see Jónsson 1996:46-50 and references cited there).

On the Active Analysis of Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002), the new impersonal contrasts with true passives in that the former construction has a thematic null subject but passives only have an understood agent. On the Passive Analysis, both constructions have an understood agent but no thematic subject. The presence of an understood or “implicit” agent in passives in Icelandic and many other languages is shown by the fact that the agent can license rationale clauses, as in (12a). By contrast, unaccusative verbs are incompatible with such clauses since they do not have any understood agent, as shown in (12b):

\[6\quad \text{On the possibility of expressing the agent of both constructions in a by-phrase, see 3.3.1 and 4.1 below.}\]
The understood agent of passives can be analyzed in at least two different ways: (i) as part of the lexical-semantic representation of the passive verb but bound in the argument structure (Grimshaw 1990), or (ii) represented by the passives morpheme itself (Jaeggli 1986 and Baker, Johnson & Roberts 1989). I will leave the issue open here since nothing crucial hinges on the choice between these two approaches.

Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) present various arguments in favor of their analysis and these will be reviewed in section 3.3 below. In the following two subsections some theoretical issues concerning the understood agent and accusative case checking in new impersonals will be discussed. The main point of this discussion is to show that the properties of the understood agent raise various questions for the Active Analysis whereas the preservation of accusative case presents a challenge to the Passive Analysis.

2.2 The agent

An important property of the new impersonal construction is that the agent cannot be overtly expressed in subject position:

(13) *Einhver var barið mig
   someone was hit me.ACC
   ‘Someone hit me’

In this respect, new impersonals are like regular passives in Icelandic. For example, the agent of impersonal passives cannot be overtly realized in subject position:

(14) *Einhver var dansað
    someone was danced
    ‘Someone danced’

The overt agent in (13) and (14) is the weak quantifier einhver ‘someone’, which is semantically suitable when new impersonals and impersonal passives denote a particular event with an unknown agent. Still, this word is impossible in the subject position of (13) and (14) just like any other lexical item.

The agent in both canonical passives and new impersonals in Icelandic must be animate. As discussed by Maling (2006) and Sigurðsson & Egerland (to appear), the animate agent of Icelandic passives is usually human as the use of non-human animate agents is heavily restricted.
b. *Það var bjargað uppskerunni
   there was saved the.crop.DAT

The parallels between new impersonals and canonical passives illustrated in (13) – (15) above look like strong arguments for the Passive Analysis of the new impersonal. However, since the active -nolto construction in Polish is restricted in the same way (Kibort 2004:252-253), these facts should be compatible with the Active Analysis of new impersonals. For arguments that the Polish -nolto construction is an active construction despite its passive origins, see section 3.1 below.

Nevertheless, the Active Analysis raises the question why the null argument of new impersonals cannot be overtly expressed in subject position and why it can only be animate. Moreover, the licensing of the null argument must be accounted for under the Active Analysis, especially since Icelandic generally disallows referential null subjects (see Sigurðsson 1989:123-196). Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) do not address these important issues and in that respect their analysis is clearly incomplete.

2.3 Accusative case

Under the Active Analysis of Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002), accusative case is preserved in the new impersonal due to the presence of a null external argument bearing nominative case. Thus, new impersonals are just like active clauses with overt nominative subjects in this respect.

The preservation of accusative case in new impersonals is potentially problematic for the Passive Analysis which does not postulate any nominative argument in subject position. This runs counter to Burzio’s Generalization which rules out structural accusative case checking unless the verb has an external argument. However, as many scholars have observed, this link between an external argument and structural accusative case is theoretically problematic since these two phenomena should be independent of one another. I will assume, therefore, that Burzio’s Generalization should be replaced by a requirement that nominative case take priority over structural accusative case (see Yip, Maling & Jackendoff 1987, Haider 2000 and Woolford 2003, 2007 among many others). For convenience, this will be referred to as the Nominative First Requirement (NFR).

The NFR entails that the “absorption” of accusative case in canonical passives is due to the absence of a nominative DP. It could be argued under this view that new impersonals differ from canonical passives in having a (null or overt) nominative expletive in subject position, thereby making accusative case checking possible. However, this predicts incorrectly that accusative case on the complement of unaccusative verbs should be possible for those who accept the new impersonal. As shown in (16b) below, this is excluded for all speakers.

(16) a. Pað höfðu komið gestir í heimsókn
   there had come guests.NOM in visit
   ‘Guests had come for a visit’

b. *Pað höfðu komið gesti í heimsókn
   there had come guests.ACC in visit

For discussion of the null subject in the autonomous construction in Irish, see Stenson (1989) and McCloskey (2007). Note that Irish allows referential null subjects quite freely and this may have facilitated the reanalysis of the autonomous construction from a passive to an active construction.
This suggests that the crucial difference between new impersonals and canonical passives concerns passive participles rather than the subject position. To capture this difference, we can modify the NFR by assuming that it is actually about case checking by functional heads. More specifically, the functional head \( \nu \) (taking VP as its complement) cannot check accusative case unless \( \mathsf{T} \) checks nominative case. This is a very natural approach if we assume that these two heads are always present and form the core of the functional architecture of finite clauses. The new impersonal can now be analysed as a construction where accusative case on the DP object is checked by some functional head other than \( \nu \), e.g. a head associated with participial morphology. Another possibility is to assume that accusative case in new impersonals is checked by the passive verb itself without the involvement of any functional head. The plausibility of this option is strengthened by the fact that this would not be the only example of “lexical” accusative case on objects in Icelandic (see Yip, Maling & Jackendoff 1987 for relevant discussion).

There are other analyses of how accusative case can be checked in passives (see Baker, Johnson and Roberts (1989), Bowers (2002) and Lavine (2005)), and these analyses have been proposed to account for the fact that preservation of accusative case is compatible with passivization in some languages. As illustrated in 3.2 below, accusative case is preserved in the passive -\textit{nolt}o construction in Ukranian and the same is true of passives in Kannada and Nepali (Goodall 1993). Finnish may be yet another example (Manninen & Nelson 2004), although the accusative there is restricted to human pronouns. Accusative case also occurs in double object passives in Norwegian, Swedish and some dialects of English (Woolford 1993). In view of this, it is fair to conclude that the Passive Analysis of new impersonals cannot be rejected on the grounds that accusative case is excluded in true passives.


On the basis of comparative data from Polish and Ukranian, Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) identify the following syntactic properties of impersonal constructions with a null thematic subject:

(17) a. No agentive by-phrase is possible.
    b. Binding of anaphors (reflexive and reciprocal) is possible.
    c. Control of subject-oriented adjuncts is possible.
    d. Nonagentive (“unaccusative”) verbs can occur in the construction.

These properties are supposed to distinguish active impersonal constructions from true passives, which do not have these properties. The Active Analysis predicts that new impersonals will show all these properties, at least to the extent that new impersonals have been reanalyzed as actives. As discussed in more detail in 3.3 below, none of the properties listed in (17) distinguish new impersonals from personal passives in Icelandic and thus they fail to provide evidence for the Active Analysis. The same conclusion is also reached by Eythórsson (2008); see also Barðdal & Molnar (2003) for a critique of the Active Analysis.

The properties listed in (17) are based on evidence from Polish and Ukranian, especially the so called -\textit{nolt}o construction, which is historically a passive construction. Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) illustrate quite clearly that there is a contrast between the two languages in that Polish -\textit{nolt}o has become an active construction, whereas Ukranian -\textit{nolt}o is still a passive. This will be shown in 3.1 and
3.2 below where all the Polish and Ukranian examples as well as the glosses are taken from Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002).

3.1 Polish

Example (18a) below illustrates the personal passive in Polish whereas (18b) exemplifies the impersonal construction formed by the suffix –nolto:

(18) a. Świątynia była zbudowana w 1640 roku
   church.NOM was built.F.SG in 1640 year

   b. Świątynię zbudowano w 1640 roku
      church.ACC built.IMP in 1640 year

The personal passive in Polish is a true passive with respect to all the tests in (17). The passive allows a by-phrase, as in (19a), and disallows binding of anaphors, as in (19b). Moreover, the subject-oriented adjunct in (19c) must predicate over the structural subject. It cannot refer to the implicit agent, i.e. (19c) cannot mean that the robbers were drunk. Finally, (19e) shows that the Polish personal passive is incompatible with unaccusative verbs:

(19) a. Jan był obrabowany przez nich
      John.NOM was robbed.3.M by them

   b. *Swoja własna ojczyzna była chawalona
      REF. own fatherland.NOM was praised.F.SG

   c. Jan był obrabowany po pijanemu
      John.NOM was robbed.3.M.SG while drunk
      ‘John was robbed while drunk’ [John was drunk]

   d. *Ważdzie było tańczone
      everywhere was.N.SG danced.N.SG
      Intended: There was dancing everywhere

   e. *Dawniej było umierane młodo
      before was.N.SG died.N.SG young
      Intended: In the old days, people died young

The -nolto construction in Polish contrasts with the personal passive as it behaves like an active impersonal with respect to all the tests in (17). By-phrases are excluded, the understood agent can bind anaphors and control a subject-oriented adjunct and unaccusative verbs are possible:

(20) a. Jana obrabowano (*przez nich)
      John.ACC robbed.IMP (*by them)
      ‘They robbed John (*by them)’

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9 Passives of unergative verbs are also excluded as shown by the ungrammaticality of (19d).
b. **Zamknięto się w fabryce**  
locked.IMP REFL in factory  
‘They locked themselves in the factory’

c. **Chwalił swoją własną ojczyznę**  
praised.IMP REFL own fatherland.F.ACC.SG  
‘They praised their own fatherland’

d. **Jana obrabowano po pijanemu**  
John.ACC robbed.IMP while drunk  
‘They robbed John while (they were) drunk’

e. **Tańczono wszędzie**  
danced.IMP everywhere  
‘There was dancing everywhere’

f. **Dawniej umeriano młodo**  
before died.IMP young  
‘In the old days, people died at a young age’

The status of Polish –*nolto* as an active construction is further supported by the fact that it can combine with the regular passive in Polish (see Kibort 2004:260-261 and references cited there). According to Frajzyngier (1982:273-4), there are two additional differences between passives in Polish and the –*nolto* construction: (i) passives are incompatible with agent-oriented adverbs like ‘unwillingly’ in contrast to the –*nolto* construction, and (ii) passives are compatible with non-human causers whereas –*nolto* is not. While these differences do not necessarily show that –*nolto* is an active construction, they illustrate that there is a very clear distinction between canonical passives and –*nolto* in Polish.

### 3.2 Ukrainian

As Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) observe, the –*nolto* construction in Ukrainian behaves like a passive construction (see also Sobin 1985 and Lavine 2005). As exemplified below, the agent can be expressed in an instrumental phrase, corresponding to an English *by*-phrase, the understood agent cannot bind anaphors or control a subject-oriented adjunct and unaccusative verbs are excluded in this construction:

(21) a. **Mojim mylym mene zradženo**  
my.INST beloved.INST me.ACC betrayed.PASS  
‘I was betrayed by my beloved’

b. *Svoju žinku bulo obmaneno*  
self’s wife.ACC was deceived.PASS  
Intended: Someone deceived his wife

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10 Ukrainian also has a regular periphrastic passive which patterns like the Polish periphrastic passive but this is not illustrated here.
c. *Povernuvšys’ domou, hroši bulo znajdeno
   returning home money was found.PASS
   Intended: Having returned home, the money was found.

d. *Umerto*Zaxvorito*Priixjato
   died.PASS/got.sick. PASS /arrived.PASS

The passive auxiliary bulo ‘was’ is possible in the Ukrainian –nolto construction. This is not the case in Polish where the –nolto forms are finite. The morphology of –nolto thus provides further evidence that it is a passive construction in Ukrainian but an active construction in Polish.

3.3 Icelandic

The Active Analysis of Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) entails that the new impersonal in Icelandic is quite similar to the –nolto construction in Polish, despite the clear morphological differences between the two constructions. Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) base their claims on a written survey that was carried out in 1999-2000. The participants in this survey were 1731 tenth graders (age 15-16) in 65 schools in Iceland and 205 adult controls across the country. Results from 1695 students (845 males and 850 females) and 200 adults were used.

The tenth graders were divided into two classes: those who live in “Inner Reykjavík” and those who live outside of that area, i.e. in the suburbs of Reykjavík and outside of Reykjavík. For convenience, the two groups of tenth graders will be referred to as the IR-group (Inner Reykjavík) and the E-group (elsewhere group). The justification for this division is that students in the latter group were much more likely to accept the new impersonal. This is exemplified in (22), where the percentages show the acceptability scores for these sentences:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Triadic verbs with ACC or DAT indirect object</th>
<th>Else-</th>
<th>Inner</th>
<th>Adults</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(22) a. Pað var bedið mig að vaska upp</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>it was asked me.ACC to wash up</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘I was asked to do the dishes’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Pað var sagt mér að taka til</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>it was told me.DAT to clean up</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘I was told to clean up’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These numbers show a clear difference between the E-group and the IR-group and also between the these two groups and the adults. In the following subsections, results from all these groups will be shown although the E-group is clearly the most important group in the study of Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002).

3.3.1 By-phrases

The Active Analysis predicts that by-phrases should be impossible in the new impersonal since by-phrases are the hallmarks of passive constructions. However, this is not borne out by the data. Let us first consider by-phrases in personal passives:
Agentive *by*-phrase in grammatical control sentences

Else- Inner Adults

(23) a. *Honum var sagt upp af forstjóranum*  
he.DAT was fired PRT by the.director  
87% 93% 90%

b. *Það var samþykkt af öllum í bekknum*  
it was agreed by all in the.class  
að fara í keilu  
to go bowling  
95% 92% 94%

The acceptability rate is quite high here in all the groups and only slightly lower than one would expect in personal passives without a *by*-phrase. A rather different picture emerges with *by*-phrases in the new impersonal:

Agentive *by*-phrase in the new impersonal

Else- Inner Adults

(24) a. *Það var skoðað bílinn*  
it was inspected the.car.ACC  
af bifvélavirkjanum  
by the.car.mechanic  
33% 9% 1%

b. *Það var sagt honum upp af forstjóranum*  
it was fired him.DAT PRT by the.director  
19% 9% 0%

The results for the E-group are boldfaced to emphasize the fact that *by*-phrases in the new impersonal are much more acceptable than the Active Analysis predicts. Since agentive *by*-phrases are only possible in passives in Icelandic, we can conclude e.g. that at least 33% of speakers in the E-group analyse the new impersonal in (24a) as a passive. The average number for new impersonals with inanimate accusatives given by Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002:113) suggest that (24a) without a *by*-phrase would have scored about 55% in the E-group. Thus, the presence of a *by*-phrase seems to reduce the acceptability rate of (24a) only by a half or even less in that group.

It is worth emphasizing that agentive *by*-phrases are restricted to passives in Icelandic. They cannot e.g. be used to refer to the understood agents of causative complements or the impersonal modal construction:

(25) a. *Ég lét gera við tölvuna (*af Jóni*)*  
I let repair the.computer by John

b. *Það þarf að þvo gólfið (*af einhverjum)*  
there must to clean the.floor by someone

Returning to the results in (24), the numbers for the IR-group and the adults are very low and this could be taken as an argument for the Active Analysis. In my view, these numbers only show that the presence of a *by*-phrase sharply reduces the acceptability of the new impersonal among speakers who generally reject this construction. Presumably, this drop in acceptability is due to the fact that *by*-phrases in Icelandic
passives are usually bad if there is no DP-movement. For instance, by-phrases are excluded in impersonal passives like (26):

(26)  *það var sungið af tveimur kórum
      there was sung by two choirs

This suggests that there are two problems with examples like (24) for many speakers: (a) they are new impersonals, and (b) they have a by-phrase but no DP-movement. For those who accept the new impersonal it is only the latter problem that leads to a decline in acceptability. 11 Hence, the acceptability rate for by-phrases in new impersonals is what we would expect in a passive construction that does not have DP-movement. Further support for this conclusion can be seen in the results of a new study of the new impersonal discussed in section 4 below.

3.3.2 Binding of anaphors

Another prediction of the Active Analysis is that binding of anaphors by the null subject should be quite free in the new impersonal. However, the results reported by Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) show that this is quite restricted. This is exemplified in (27):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Binding of possessive reflexives</th>
<th>Elsewhere</th>
<th>Inner Adults</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(27) a. Á kvöldin var skoðað tölupóstinn</td>
<td>32% 10% 2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in the evenings was checked the e-mail. ACC sinn SELF’s</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Í morgun var hrint systur sinni</td>
<td>13% 7% 2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>this morning was pushed sister. DAT SELF’s af hjólinu</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>off the bike</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Það var klippt hárið á dúkkunni</td>
<td>5% 2% 2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>it was cut the hair. ACC on the doll sinni SELF’s</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Það var oft kaffert bróður sinn</td>
<td>5% 3% 1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>it was often dunked brother. ACC SELF’s í sundlauginni</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in the swimming pool</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I leave out of consideration all the examples of simple reflexives tested by Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) since these reflexives may not be true anaphors. I also ignore 11 We cannot test whether DP-movement improves by-phrases in new impersonals with monotransitive verbs since DP-movement is excluded in such cases. For discussion of DP-movement in new impersonals with ditransitive verbs, see 4.3 below.
examples of anaphor binding in impersonal passives because they are not directly relevant to the issue at hand (but see Eythórsson 2008 for further discussion).

All the numbers in (27) are very low, except for (27a), but this is because the examples in (27b-d) are pragmatically odd. Still, the example in (27a) is fine and it shows that a reflexive possessive reduces the acceptability of new impersonals considerably, suggesting that they are passives rather than actives.

Another problem for the Active Analysis is that anaphor binding is not a very reliable test for the presence of a null thematic subject because binding of anaphors by the implicit agent of personal passives is possible:

(28)
(a) Á kvöldin var skoðaður tölupóstur frá börnunum sínum
    in the.evening was checked e-mail.NOM from the.children SELF’s
(b) Sumt er bara gert fyrir sjálfan sig
    some is just done for oneself
    ‘Some things you only do for yourself’

Examples like (28) were not tested by Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) but in my judgment they are acceptable. Similar examples from other languages can also be found in the literature, e.g. Norwegian (Lødrup 2007) and English:

(29) Such privileges should be kept to oneself (Baker, Johnson & Roberts 1989)

Apparently, the best examples of this kind in English involve generic sentences with the anaphor oneself like (29) (Ken Safir p.c.). Icelandic is slightly more liberal than English here by allowing reflexive binding both in examples with an habitual reading like (28a) and generic sentences like (28b).

3.3.3 Subject-oriented adjuncts

Implicit agents of canonical passives in Icelandic license various agent-oriented adjuncts, e.g. adverbs like viljandi ‘deliberately’ and rationale clauses:

(30)
(a) Stóllinn var eyðilagður viljandi
    the.chair was destroyed deliberately
(b) Málverkið verður selt til að afla fjár
    the.painting will.be sold to raise money

Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) maintain that certain adjuncts require a syntactic (subject) controller. As an argument they provide an example of a personal passive and a participial adjunct which they give two question marks:

---

12 The problem with the examples in (27b-d) seems to be that they are incompatible with the agent defocusing that is characteristic of new impersonals as well as passives. Thus, the presence of the reflexive possessive necessarily calls the hearer’s attention to the understood agent, the antecedent of the possessive, as it is difficult to make sense of these examples without knowing the identity of the agent. No such problem arises in (27a) where the possessive is essentially made redundant by real-world knowledge (i.e. people check their own e-mails rather than other people’s e-mails).
(31)  \textit{Valsinn var dansaður skellihlæjandi}  
the.waltz was danced laughing.uproariously

This example is claimed to be bad because there is no syntactic controller here, only an understood agent. The numbers from the survey of Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) also seem to support their claim that the new impersonal contains a syntactic subject capable of licensing an adjunct:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participial adjuncts</th>
<th>Else-</th>
<th>Inner</th>
<th>Adults</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(32) \textit{Pað var lesið minningargreinina grátandi}</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>it was read the.obituary.{ACC crying}</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The acceptability rate for (32) is quite high in the E-group and the IR-group, suggesting that participial adjuncts are perfectly fine in the new impersonal. However, the problem is that there is no clear contrast with personal passives. Examples like (31) above are acceptable in the right context, and the same is true of (33) below, which is the passive equivalent of (32):

(33)  \textit{Minningargreinin var lesin grátandi}  
the.obituary.{NOM was read crying}

Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) did not test examples like (33) and this is rather surprising since similar examples are acceptable for many speakers in other languages, e.g. English:

(34) a. \textit{At the commune, breakfast is usually eaten nude} (Collins 2005:101) 
   b. \textit{This song must not be sung drunk} (Baker 1988:318)

All the adjuncts tested by Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) were uninflected adjuncts with the present participle suffix \textit{–andi}. The Active Analysis is further undermined by the fact that depictives cannot be used in passives or the new impersonal in Icelandic if they are predicated of the understood agent. This is illustrated in (35) below:\(^{13}\)

(35) a. *\textit{Morgunmatur er alltaf bordaður nakinn} 
breakfast.{NOM is always eaten naked}

b. *\textit{Pað er alltaf bordað nakinn} 
there is always eaten naked

c. *\textit{Pað er alltaf bordað morgunmat nakinn} 
there is always eaten breakfast.{ACC naked}

The adjective here is masculine singular nominative, just like adjectives predicated of arbitrary PRO in infinitival clauses, but this makes no difference here as other inflectional features on the adjective would make examples like (35) even worse.

Under the Active Analysis, new impersonals like (35c) should be fully acceptable, contrary to fact. In this way, new impersonals contrast with the active \textit{-noto}

\(^{13}\)Although (35c) has not been tested in a survey, I am fairly sure it is impossible for most speakers.
construction in Polish where inflected adjectives can be predicated of the unexpressed agent. Interestingly, such adjectives in Polish must be virile (plural) rather than masculine singular as in control infinitivals (Kibort 2004:254-255).

To salvage the Active Analysis, one could argue that depictives are incompatible with the understood agent of new impersonals because the agent does not have any gender or number features to control agreement on the depictive. However, this would not explain the contrast between the new impersonal and the Polish -nolto construction. A null subject lacking number and gender features would also be very different from overt DPs in Icelandic and attributing unique properties to the null subject of new impersonals would simply undermine the hypothesized presence of a such a subject.

3.3.4 Unaccusative verbs

One prediction of the Active Analysis is that the new impersonal should be possible with all kinds of verbs, including unaccusative verbs, since an active construction should not be subject to any lexical semantic restrictions on the main verb. Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) tested this prediction with the verbs detta ‘fall’, hverfa ‘disappear’, svitna ‘sweat’ and deyja ‘die’. The results are shown in (36) below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unaccusative verbs</th>
<th>Elsewhere</th>
<th>Inner Adults</th>
<th>Adults</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Það var dottið í hálkunni fyrir framan</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Það var horfið sporlaust í stjörnustríðinu</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Í nótt var ekkert svitnað í svefnpanum</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Það var dáið í bílslysínú</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The examples above look exactly like impersonal passives but since impersonal passives are generally impossible with unaccusative verbs, one could argue that these examples are acceptable to the extent that they can be analyzed as new impersonals. Hence, the prediction is that speakers of the E-group accept these examples more readily than speakers of the other two groups.

14 McCloskey (2007) makes a similar point regarding the fact that the understood agent of the autonomous construction in Irish cannot bind reflexives.
15 They also tested the verb koma ‘come’ which was accepted by 58% of the adults, presumably since koma is fully acceptable in impersonal passives in Icelandic.
It is certainly true that the E-group has the highest acceptability rate with all these unaccusative verbs except for *svitna* ‘sweat’ where there is a tie between the E-group and the adults.\(^{16}\) According to Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002:127), these results support the Active Analysis as they indicate that the new impersonal is “beginning to extend its usage to nonagentive verbs which do not form passives in the standard language”. In my view, this conclusion is not warranted because the difference between the three groups of speakers is much smaller than in examples of the new impersonal, especially the difference between the two groups of adolescents.

There are clear differences between individual examples in (36). For instance, (36d) has the lowest acceptability rate in all the groups. A possible explanation is that the event denoted by the verb *deyja* ‘die’ involves the greatest degree of affectedness of the understood argument, a drastic change of state that is nearly always irreversible. This makes *deyja* ‘die’ quite different from the agentive verbs that work best in impersonal passives. On the other hand, *detta* ‘fall’ has the highest acceptability rate among the adolescents. The reason may be that this verb usually entails an agentive activity (e.g. walking or running) prior to the actual event. Another potential factor is that (36a) is well-suited for agent defocusing as the implicit argument of (36a) is naturally understood as referring to an unspecified group of people rather than particular individuals.

4. A new study of the new impersonal

This section presents results from a recent survey of the new impersonal. This survey included 808 speakers in 26 locations across Iceland and four age groups (14-15 years, 20-25 years, 40-45 years and 65-70 years).\(^{17}\) The results of the survey corroborate the basic findings of Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) that the new impersonal is mostly used by young speakers whereas the personal passive is accepted by virtually everyone.

A written questionnaire with 125 test sentences was used in the survey, including 30 examples of new impersonals and 12 examples of canonical passives. The other sentences, as well as 24 sentence pairs, were designed to test various other syntactic phenomena in Icelandic. To offset potential ordering effects, half of the participants answered one version of the questionnaire and the other half answered another version that had the opposite order of the test sentences.

The participants in the survey were instructed to judge the examples according to their own intuitions and they were given three choices, i.e. they could judge each example as acceptable, dubious or impossible. Each test sentence was preceded by an introductory sentence to provide a natural context for the test sentence. An example of this is shown in (37) below:

(37) a. *Anna hrekti á markmanninn* (introductory sentence)  
Anna spat at the.goal.keeper

\(^{16}\) The example with *svitna* differs from the other examples here by the absence of the expletive *það*, which is rarely used in formal registers. Therefore, this example sounds more formal than the other examples and this may have increased the acceptability rate for *svitna* among the adults.

\(^{17}\) The survey was administered to almost 1200 speakers but to keep a proper balance between the different age groups, results from many 9\(^{th}\) graders were not calculated. A very small number of participants were excluded for other reasons, such as giving too many “wrong” answers to control questions.
There are two methodological differences between this survey and that of Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) that should be noted. First, the participants in the survey of Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) had only two options, i.e. they had to either accept or reject the test sentences. To facilitate comparison between the two surveys, the number for the option “dubious” in the new survey will be evenly divided between “acceptable” and “impossible”. Using this method, the acceptability rate for (37b) above was 56% among the 9th graders (14-15 years) and 13% among the three adult groups combined. Treating all the adults as one group makes the numbers for this survey comparable to the adult group in the survey of Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002). Moreover, since more than 90% of the 9th graders in the new survey live outside of central Reykjavik, the 9th graders are roughly comparable to the E-group in the old survey.

The second difference is that all the test sentences in the survey of Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) were given without context and this may have affected the acceptability rate for the test sentences in some cases. In general, the acceptability scores for new impersonals were lower in the new survey among the 9th graders. For example, the average score for dative animate DPs was 74% in the survey of Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) but 57% in the new survey. It is not clear how to explain this contrast but one possible factor is an increased awareness of the substandard status of new impersonals in recent years. As a result, the adolescents may have been more reluctant to accept new impersonals in the new survey.

Due to limitations of space, we can only discuss those results from the new survey that are directly relevant for the choice between the two competing analyses of the new impersonal. This is done in the following three subsections on by-phrases (4.1), non-agentive verbs (4.2) and ditransitive verbs (4.3).

4.1 By-phrases

The new survey had four test sentences with by-phrases, three with canonical passives and one with a new impersonal. These examples are shown in (38) below. The upper number after each example is the acceptability score for the youngest group in the survey, the 9th graders, but the number in brackets is for the adults:

(38) a. Hann var smíðaður af færeyska bátasmiðnum 79%
he.NOM was built by the.Faroese boatbuilder (89%)
‘It was built by the Faroese boatbuilder’

b. Áður var þó önnur þyrla skóduð 63%
earlier was still another helicopter inspected
af viðgerðarmanninum (70%)
by the.repair.man

\[18\] However, this also obscures the fact that the new impersonal is more acceptable among the youngest group of adults (20-25 year olds) than the two older groups.
c. * Fyrst var þó skoðuð önnur flugvél 60%
   first was yet inspected another plane (52%)
   af flugvirkjanum
   by the.air.mechanic
   ‘Still, another plane was first inspected by the air mechanic’

   d. Pað var strax lagað bílinn 38%
      there was immediately fixed the.car.ACC (6%)
      af bifvélavirkjanum
      by the.mechanic
      ‘The car was immediately fixed by the car mechanic’

The crucial example here is the new impersonal in (38d) which shows a much higher acceptability rate for a by-phrase than one would expect under the Active Analysis. Note that new impersonals with a definite accusative DP but no by-phrase had an average acceptability score of 57% among 9th graders in the new survey. This suggest that the presence of a by-phrase reduces the acceptability rate of new impersonals by 1/3 in this group. This drop in acceptability is hardly surprising since by-phrases also seem to reduce the acceptability rate of regular passives, especially passives without DP-movement, as in (38c).

4.2 Non-agentive verbs

As discussed in section 3.3.4, one clear prediction of the Active Analysis is that new impersonals should be spreading their use to non-agenteive verbs that are excluded from canonical passives. Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) tested this prediction with unaccusative verbs but three non-agentive transitive verbs were tested in the new survey, eignast ‘acquire’, eiga ‘own’ and líka ‘like’. The results are shown in (39):

(39) a. Um daginn var loksins eignast nýjan bíl 28%
     on the.day was finally acquired new.ACC car.ACC (5%)
     ‘They got a new car the other day’

b. Pað var samt alltaf átt marga hesta 33%
   there was still always owned many.ACC horses.ACC (6%)
   ‘People still kept owning many horses’

c. Pað er bara ekki líkað svona fólk 16%
   there is just not liked such people.NOM (1%)
   ‘Such people are just not liked’

The corresponding personal passives, as in (40), are ungrammatical. Note that (40a,b) are passives without DP-movement but these examples would be equally bad with DP-movement.

(40) a. * Um daginn var loksins eignastur nýr bíll
     on the.day was finally acquired new.NOM car.NOM
     ‘They got a new car the other day’
b. * það voru samt alltaf áttir margir hestar
   there were still always owned many.NOM horses.NOM
   ‘People still kept owning many horses’

c. * Svona fólk er bara ekki líkað
   such people.NOM are just not liked
   ‘Such people are just not liked’

The results in (39) display a striking contrast between the 9th graders and the adults. Presumably, this is because adults strongly reject new impersonals if there is some further factor to reduce their acceptability, e.g. the presence of a by-phrase, as in (38d).

The crucial issue here is whether the examples in (39) provide evidence for the Active Analysis of new impersonals. It is not clear to me that they do since these examples are significantly less acceptable than new impersonals with agentive verbs. This is especially clear in (39c) which features a verb taking a dative subject. To evaluate the acceptability scores in (39a-b), these examples can be compared to examples of the new impersonal with an indefinite accusative DP and an agentive monotransitive verb. There were seven such test sentences in the new survey and the acceptability rate for them varied between 46% – 72% among the adolescents and 11% – 33% among the adults. The average rate for these examples was 63% in the first group and 21% in the second group. Thus, the reduction in the acceptability rate for (39a,b) is approximately one half.

4.3 Ditransitives

New impersonals are possible with ditransitive verbs, just as personal passives. New impersonals with ditransitive verbs come in two varieties; either both objects stay in situ following the passive verb, as in (41a), or the indirect object moves by DP-movement to the subject position, as in (41b).19

(41) a. það var sýnt þeim bæklinga áður en þau fóru 52%
   there was shown them.DAT brochures.ACC before they left (12%)
   ‘They were shown brochures before they left’

   b. Var þeim ekki einu sinni sýnt íbúðina fyrst? 59%
   was them.DAT not even shown the.apartment.ACC first (19%)
   ‘Were they not even shown the apartment first?’

The high acceptability rate for (41b) is very interesting because the presence of the indirect object in subject position rules out the possibility of a null thematic subject in the same position. Thus, examples like (41b) provide a very strong argument against the Active Analysis.20

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19 Recall that DP-movement of an accusative DP is excluded in new impersonals.

20 It is quite clear that the dative DP in (41b) is in subject position, immediately following the finite verb.
In view of examples like (41b), the Active Analysis of Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) could be modified by assuming that the null subject is in a lower subject position. Such a position is indeed available for indefinite subjects like einhver ‘somebody’ in active clauses in Icelandic, as shown in (42):

(42) \( \text{Það hafði einhver sínt þeim íbúðina} \)
    there had somebody.NOM shown them.DAT the.apartment.ACC

Still, this will not help for two reasons. First, DP-movement of the indirect object to the lower subject position is quite possible in new impersonals, as shown in (43), suggesting that this position is not occupied by a null subject:

(43) \( \text{Það var einhverjum sínt íbúðina} \)
    there was somebody.DAT shown the.apartment.ACC

The other problem is that movement of the indirect object across the lower subject position would violate well-known locality restrictions on movement, e.g. Shortest Move (Chomsky 1995) or Relativized Minimality (Rizzi 1990). The effect of these restrictions can be seen when an indirect object is moved across an overt subject, as in (44):

(44) *\( \text{Hafði þeim einhver sínt íbúðina?} \)
    had them.DAT somebody.NOM shown the.apartment.ACC

The analysis of Collins (2005) offers a possible solution to the problem that examples like (41b) pose for the Active Analysis of new impersonals. The basic idea is that the complement of a passive verb can be “smuggled” across a null subject by moving it as part of a bigger phrase and then moving it independently to the highest subject position. The problem is that this approach seems to require that the null subject is in a fairly low position where overt subjects are impossible. Moreover, smuggling is theoretically spurious since it it not clear what the driving force behind smuggling really is and how smuggling can be constrained so that it does not generate ill-formed structures of various kinds.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed the new impersonal construction in Icelandic, a construction that displays passive morphology and host a DP complement that behaves like the object of a transitive verb. Contra Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002), I have argued that the new impersonal is not an active construction with a thematic null subject. The new impersonal should rather be analysed as a true passive with an understood agent. Whereas some arguments concerning the status of the new impersonal are inconclusive and require further study, all the arguments that are reasonably clear suggest that the new impersonal is a passive construction. These arguments involve three important facts about the new impersonal: (i) the possibility of using an agentive by-phrase, (ii) the ban against depictives (inflected adjuncts), and (iii) the possibility of DP-movement of an indirect object. The first point can already be seen in the survey of Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) and is further corroborated by the results of a new survey of the new impersonal but the second and the third point are novel arguments.
References


