The new passive is a true passive

1. Introduction

Icelandic has a canonical passive with DP-movement, where accusative objects of active verbs correspond to nominative subjects (1a) but lexical case (dative and genitive) is preserved (1b):

(1) a. Einhver barði mig
     someone hit me-Acc
     ‘Someone hit me’

     b. Einhver hjálpaði stelpunum
        someone helped the.girls-Dat

(2) a. Ég var barinn
     I-Nom was hit-MsNom
     ‘I was hit’

     b. Stelpunum var hjálpað
        the.girls-Dat was-3s. helped
        ‘The girls were helped’

DP-movement is not obligatory in the canonical passive if the unmoved DP is indefinite, in which case expletive það is inserted (3a) unless some (possibly null) phrase occupies the initial position:

(3) a. Það var keyptur stóll
     there was bought-MsNom chair-MsNom
     ‘A chair was bought’

     b. Var kastað tómótum í söngvarann?
        was thrown tomatoes-Dat at the.singer
        ‘Were tomatoes thrown at the singer?’

Icelandic also has an impersonal passive of intransitive verbs, like most other Germanic languages:

(4) a. Það var sungið í allt kvöld
     there was sung in all evening
     ‘There was singing all evening’

     b. Þess vegna er mælt með þessu
        therefore is spoken for this
        ‘Therefore this is recommended’
In addition to the canonical passive and the impersonal passive, Icelandic also has a “new passive” where the complement of the passive verb stays in situ and behaves like an object of a transitive verb. Thus, it can get accusative case and be definite:

(5) a. Það var barið mig
    there was hit me-Acc
    ‘I was hit’

b. Það var hjálpað stelpunum
    there was helped the.girls-Dat
    ‘The girls were helped’

The new passive seems to be a relatively recent phenomenon in Icelandic (the oldest attested examples are from the middle of the 20th century) and it is mostly used by children and adolescents.


In the most detailed study of the new passive to date, Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) claim that the new passive is an active impersonal construction with pro in subject position. For convenience, we can refer to this as the Active Impersonal Hypothesis (AIH):

(6) Það var [IP pro [VP barið mig ]]
    there was hit me-Acc

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

(7) 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.

By contrast, true passives do not display these properties according to Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002).

2.1 Polish and Ukranian

Polish has two passives, a canonical passive (8a) and a “new passive” formed by the suffix –no/to (8b):

(8) a. Świątynia była zbudowana w 1640 roku
    Church-Nom was built-Fs in 1640 year

b. Świątynię zbudowano w 1640 roku
    Church-Acc built-IMP in 1640 year
The canonical passive in Polish is a true passive by all the tests in (7):

(9) a. Jan był obrabowany przez nich
    John-Nom was robbed-3Ms by them

b. *Swoja własna ojczyna była chwalona
   REFL own fatherland-Nom was praised-Fs

c. Jan był obrabowany po pijanemu
   John-Nom was robbed-3Ms while drunk
   ‘John was robbed while drunk’ [John was drunk]

d. i. *Wazęducie było tańczone.
    everywhere was-Ns danced-Ns
   ii. *Dawniej było umeriane młodo
       before was-Ns died-Ns young

The no/to-construction in Polish contrasts with the canonical passive in all these respects, i.e. it seems to be an active impersonal:

(10) a. Jana obrabowano (*przez nich)
    John-Acc robbed-Imp (*by them)
    ‘They robbed John (*by them)’

b. i. Zamknięto się w fabryce
    locked-Imp REFL in factory
    ‘They locked themselves in the factory’
   ii. Chawalono swoją własną ojczynę
       praised-Imp REFL own fatherland-FsAcc
       ‘They praised their own fatherland’

c. Jana obrabowano po pijanemu
    John-Acc robbed-Imp while drunk
    ‘They robbed John while (they were) drunk’

d. i. Tańczono waszędzie
    danced-Imp everywhere
    ‘There was dancing everywhere’
   ii. Dawniej umeriano młodo
       before died-Imp young
       ‘In the old days, people died at a young age’

By contrast, the no/to-construction in Ukrainian behaves like a passive construction (cf. Sobin 1985 and Lavine 2005):
(11) a. Mojim mylym mene zradženo
   my-Inst beloved-Inst me-Acc betrayed-Pass
   I was betrayed by my beloved.

b. *Svoju žinku bulo obmanenob
   self’s wife-Acc was deceived-Pass
   Intended: Someone deceived his wife

c. *Povernuvšys’ domu, hroši bulo znajdenob
   returning home money was found-Pass
   Intended: Having returned home, the money was found.

d. *Umer/*Zaxvoir/*Prijixatob
   died-Pass/got.sick-Pass/arrived-Pass

2.2 Icelandic

Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) based their claim about Icelandic on a written survey that was carried out in 1999-2000:

- 1731 tenth graders (age 15-16) in 65 schools in Iceland
- 205 adult controls across the country
- results from 1695 students were used (845 males and 850 females)
- results from 200 adults were used

Note that the participants in the survey had only two options, i.e. they had to accept or reject the test sentences.

2.2.1 By-phrases

The Active Impersonal Hypothesis predicts that by-phrases should be excluded in the new passive, but this is not really borne out by the data:

**Agentive by-phrase in grammatical control sentences**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Elsewhere</th>
<th>Inner Adults</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Honum var sagt upp af forstjóranum</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>he-Dat was fired PRT by the.director</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Það var samþykkt af öllum í bekknum</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>it was agreed by all in the.class</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>að fara í keilu to go bowling</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

**Agentive by-phrase in the new passive**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Elsewhere</th>
<th>Inner Adults</th>
<th>Adults</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Það var skoðað bílinn af bífvélagurkjanum</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>it was inspected the.car-Acc by the.mechanic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Það var sagt honum upp af forstjóranum</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>it was fired him-Dat PRT by the.director</td>
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</table>
In view of the numbers given by Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002:113), it is likely that (13a) without a *by*-phrase would have scored about 55% in the area outside of Inner Reykjavík. Thus, the presence of a *by*-phrase seems to reduce the acceptability rate of (13a) only by a half or even less.

Moreover, there are good reasons to believe that *by*-phrases in Icelandic passives are much less acceptable if there is no DP-movement. Thus, *by*-phrases are generally bad in impersonal passives:

(14) ??Pað var sungið af öllum í kirkjunni
    there was sung by all in the church

This is further supported by results from a recent survey of the new passive, a part of the syntactic variation project in Reykjavík. The numbers presented here are based on almost 650 speakers in four age groups and 23 locations across Iceland; the higher number is from 9th graders (ages 14-15) but the lower number is from all age groups combined. Note that speakers were given three choices in their judgments of the written test sentences (i.e. they could mark a sentence as dubious).

(15) a. Hann var smíðaður af færeyska bátasmiðnum 68,1%
    he-Nom was built-MsNom by the.Faroese boatbuilder 80,8%)
    ‘It was built by the Faroese boatbuilder’

b. Fyrst var þó skoðuð önnur flugvél 48,5%
    first was yet inspected-FsNom another-FsNom plane-FsNom (40,1%)
    af flugvirkjanum
    by the.air.mechanic
    ‘Still, another plane was first inspected by the air mechanic’

(16) Það var strax lagað bílinn 26,5%
    there was immediately fixed the.car-Acc 8,7%
    af bifvélavirkjanum
    by the.mechanic
    ‘The car was immediately fixed by the car mechanic’

As in the study of Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002), other results from this survey suggest that the presence of a *by*-phrase as in (16) reduces the acceptability of the new passive by a half. The same is probably also true of canonical passives without DP-movement as in (15b) although more evidence is needed.

### 2.2.2 Binding of anaphors

Another prediction of the Active Impersonal Hypothesis is that binding of anaphors by the agent should be quite free in the new passive. However, despite certain complexities in the data, the results of the survey show that this is rather restricted:
Binding of anaphors

(17) a. Svo var bara drifið sig á ball then was just hurried REFL to the dance
b. Það var horft á sjálfan sig í speglinum it was looked at SELF in the.mirror
c. Það var bent á sjálfan sig á myndinni it was pointed at SELF in the.picture

Binding of possessive reflexives

(18) a. Það var haldið með sínu liði it was held with SELF’s team
b. Á kvöldin var skoðað tölvupóstinn sinn in the.evening was checked the.e-mail-Acc SELF’s
    ‘People supported their (own) team’
c. Það var klippt hárið á dúkkunni sinni it was cut the.hair-Acc on the.doll SELF’s

Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) provide no contrast here with the canonical passive as this was not tested by them. In fact, binding of anaphors by the implicit agent is not impossible in the canonical passive:

(19) a. ?Á kvöldin var skoðaður tölvupóstur frá börnunum sínun 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’

Similar examples from English can also be found in the literature (see also Lødrup 2007 for examples where the implicit agent binds reciprocals in Norwegian):

(20) a. Such privileges should be kept to oneself (Baker, Johnson & Roberts 1989)

b. Damaging testimony is always given about oneself in secret trials (Roberts 1987)

2.2.3 Subject-oriented adjuncts

Implicit agents of passives license various agent-oriented adjuncts as shown in (21):

(21) 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) claim that certain adjuncts require a syntactic (subject) controller. In support of this they provide examples like (22):

(22) ??Valsinn var dansaður skellihlæjandi
the.waltz was danced laughing.uproariously

The numbers from their survey also seem to support their claim that the new passive contains a syntactic subject capable of licensing an adjunct:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participial adjuncts</th>
<th>Else-</th>
<th>Inner. Adults</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(23) a. Það var komið skellihlæjandi í tímann</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>47% 52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>it was come laughing into class</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Það var lesið minningargreinina grátandi</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>35% 4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>it was read the.obituary-Acc crying</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

However, the problem is that examples like (22) are acceptable in the right context (as Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) seem to admit in a footnote), and sometimes no context seems to be needed:

(24) Minningargreinar eru oft lesnar grátandi
obituaries are often read crying

Similar examples from English can also be found:

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

The Active Impersonal Hypothesis is also undermined by the fact that inflected adjuncts cannot be used in any kind of passive in Icelandic if they are predicated of the agent:

(26) a. *Morgunmatur er alltaf borðaður nakinn
    breakfast-Nom is always eaten naked.MsN
    b. *Það er alltaf borðað nakinn
    there is always eaten naked.MsN
    c. *Það er alltaf borðað morgunmat nakinn
    there is always eaten breakfast.Acc naked.MsN

3. A true passive

A proper analysis of the new passive must take into account the fact that the new and the canonical passive share many important properties, e.g. the presence of the auxiliaries vera ‘be’ or verða ‘become’ and passive morphology on the main verb. Without this, the new passive is excluded:
(27)  *Það barði mig
    there hit me-Acc ‘I was hit’

Another common property is that that the agent cannot be overt in the subject position. This is shown for the new passive in (28):

(28)  *Jón var barið mig
    John was hit me-Acc
    ‘John hit me’

In this way the new passive differs from the impersonal modal construction in Icelandic (Sigurðsson 1989):

(29) a. Það þarf að kaupa nýjan síma
    there needs to buy new phone
    ‘A new phone needs to be bought’

b. Ég þarf að kaupa nýjan síma
    I need to buy new phone

In addition, both kinds of passives in Icelandic seem to have the same interpretation of the unexpressed agent, cf. the fact that it must be human. Thus, (30) cannot be understood such that natural forces were involved (e.g. the sun or the rain):

(30) a. Uppskerunni var bjargað
    the.crop-Dat was saved

b. Það var bjargað uppskerunni
    there was saved the.crop-Dat

Note also that verbs which are excluded from the traditional passive do not work very well in the new passive:

(31) a. Um daginn var loksins eignast nýjan bíl 20,5%
    on the.day was finally acquired new-Acc car-Acc (6,9%)
    ‘They got a new car the other day’

b. Það er bara ekki líkað svona fólk 10,8%
    there is just not liked such people-Nom (3,1%)
    ‘Such people are just not liked’

c. Það var samt alltaf átt marga hesta 22,2%
    there was still always owned many-Acc horses-Acc (8,1%)
    ‘People still kept owning many horses’

(32) a. *Um daginn var nýr bíll loksins eignastur
    on the.day was new-Nom car-Nom finally acquired-MsNom.
    ‘They got a new car the other day’

b. *Svona fólk er bara ekki líkað
    such people-Nom are just not liked
    ‘Such people are just not liked’
As a final fact to be noted, ditransitive verbs are just as good in the new passive as monotransitive verbs. Moreover, the new passive is possible even when there is DP-movement of the indirect dative object (33b), suggesting that the subject position is not occupied by pro.

(33) a. Það var sýnt þeim þeim bæklinga áður en þau fóru 47,3%
there was showed them-Dat brochures-Acc before they left (18,8%)
‘They were shown brochures before they left’

b. Var þeim ekki einu sinni sýnt þeim bæklinga fyrst? 51,5%
was them-Dat not even showed the apartment-Acc first (23,4%)
‘Were they not even shown the apartment first?’

It seems to me that the crucial property that separates the new passive from the traditional passive is accusative case checking on the internal argument and all other properties of the new passive should follow from that (e.g. the absence of the Definiteness Restriction and the impossibility of DP-movement). The task, then, is to explain how accusative case checking can be compatible with passives, given the fact that accusative case is usually absent in passives cross-linguistically.

The lack of accusative case in passives is often attributed to the properties of the vP selected by the (passive) Voice head, i.e. the v-head is incapable of assigning a theta-role to the external argument and checking accusative case on the internal argument. In this way, Burzio’s Generalization is supposedly derived. However, there is no principled reason why we could not have a vP headed by a v which checks accusative case and yet fails to assign a theta-role to the external argument. Thus, the internal argument of the new passive can get accusative case even if the clause is like a true passive in most other respects; see also Lavine’s (2005) analysis of the no-/to-construction in Ukrainian.

References


Sigurjónsdóttir, Sigríður & 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.