

The Icelandic NIP: Why Isn't It Evolving as Predicted?

Reviewing basic properties of the NIP

First studied extensively by Sigríður Sigurjónsdóttir and Joan Maling (henceforth S&M or S&M, cf. S&M 2001, M&S 2002). Acceptability judgment study, using written questionnaires. Properties include:

• No case conversion and no agreement

An active Acc object shows up as a Nom argument in the Expletive Passive and thus triggers agreement (cf. (1a)). In the NIP (**N**ew **I**mpers. (**P**assive)) the corresponding argument "stays accusative" (cf. (1b)), hence no agreement:

- (1) a. Það **voru seldir hestar** til Noregs.
there were(pl.) sold(m.pl.) horses(N.m.pl.) to Norway
b. Það **var selt hesta** til Noregs.
there was(sg.) sold(n.sg.) horses(A.m.pl.) to Norway

• No Definiteness Effect

Expletive constructions in Icelandic typically show the Definiteness Effect, cf. (2a). The NIP does not, cf. (2b):

- (2) a. Það **voru seldir ?*hestarnir/*þeir** til Noregs.
there were sold the-horses(N.)/they(N.) to Norway
b. Það **var selt hestana/þá** til Noregs.
there was sold the-horses(A.)/them(A.) to Norway

An interesting (probably false) prediction

Anton Karl Ingason, Legate and Yang (2012, ALY) recently made the following prediction:

• By 2050 the NIP will have ousted the Canonical Passive

Their premisses include the following:

- The NIP is **spreading very fast**.
- The NIP and the CanPass are **"functionally equivalent"**
- "there is a reason to believe that the [NIP ...] is **not sensitive to social evaluation**"

Given this, ALY predict, using Yang's variational model (2002), an evolution of the NIP along the lines of a steep S-curve.

A less interesting (probably true) prediction

• By 2050 the NIP will **not** have ousted the Canonical Passive by 2050 because:

- A: there are problems with premisses i–iii above
B: new evidence from a real time study suggests this

Problems with ALY's premisses

i. The NIP is spreading very fast

Apparent evidence

- Acceptance by adolescents (15–16) vs. adults (40–80)** in S&M's study (S&M 2001, M&S 2002): Adolescents typically accepted \approx **60%** of the NIP examples on the average, the **adults 4–5%** (many of them none at all). Highly significant difference, could be indicative of **change in apparent time**.
- Acceptance by adolescents vs. adults** in the project **IceDiaSyn** (Icelandic Dialect Syntax) 2005 (Thráinsson et al. (eds) 2013), cf. *figure 1*:

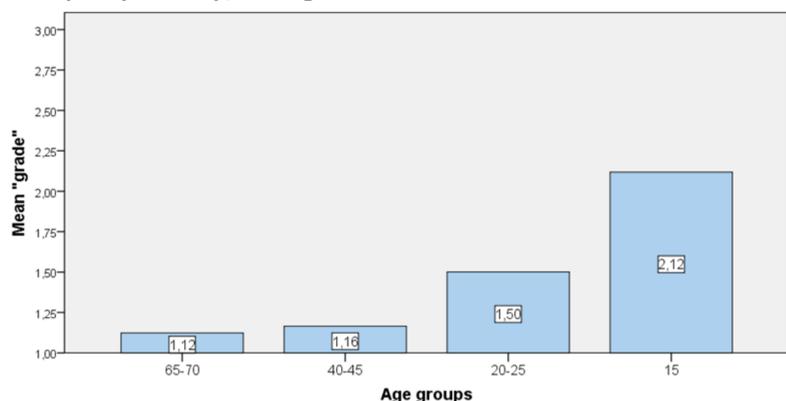


Figure 1: Mean "grade" of the different age groups for the NIP examples. 1 = everybody in the group rejects all NIP examples, 3 = everybody accepts all NIP examples. Highly significant diff.

Counterevidence

- Results of a **spontaneous speech study** by Finnur Friðriksson (2008, data collected shortly after 2000): **Out of a total of 494 passives in a corpus of 30 hours, only 2.6% are the NIP** (13 examples, most of them from his adolescent subjects).
- A more detailed **comparison of the results of S&M and IceDiaSyn**, cf. *fig. 2*:

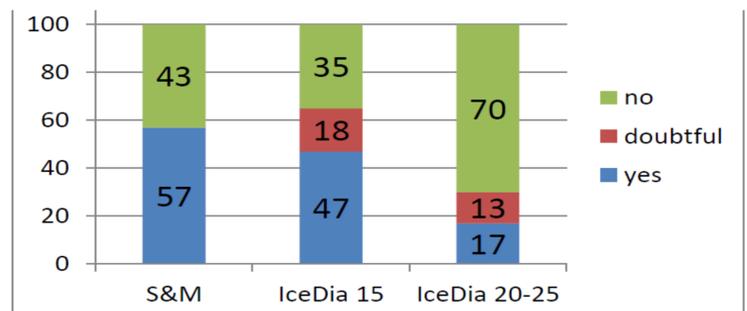


Figure 2: Proportion (%) of positive and negative evaluations of NIP examples by the adolescents in S&M's study and adolescents and post-adolescents in IceDiaSyn. **IceDia 20-25 is (partly) S&M's generation some 6 years later.**

ii. The NIP and the Canonical Passive are functionally equivalent, e.g. (1a,b):

- a. **Strákurinn var laminn.** Canonical Passive
the-boy(N.m.sg.) was beaten(m.sg.)
- b. Það var **lamið strákin.**
there was beaten(n.sg.) the boy(A m.sg.)

A reason to doubt this:

It is not so clear that these alternatives are "functionally equivalent". This has not been studied in any detail. As pointed out by S&M, speakers who accept the NIP also accept canonical passive sentences.

iii. The NIP is not sensitive to social evaluation

Reasons to doubt this:

- The NIP was **first noticed by "language preservers"** (around 1980) and **schoolteachers try to fight against it** and point it out in textbooks (although they may not understand it in any detail).
- In the interviews taken by Finnur Friðriksson (2008) the participants were **more negative towards the NIP** than the other innovation he discussed with them (including the infamous Dative Sickness).

Results of a real time study of the NIP

197 of S&M's subjects were retested some 12 years later in the same fashion, using the same examples:

- 73% of the subjects accepted fewer examples than before**
 - 23% gave similar judgments, 6% more positive ones
- So what S&M and IceDiaSyn found included "adolescent peaks", not pure indications of change in apparent time. These will be followed by "post-adolescent troughs", leading to a much flatter S-curve than predicted by ALY (cf. *fig. 3*):

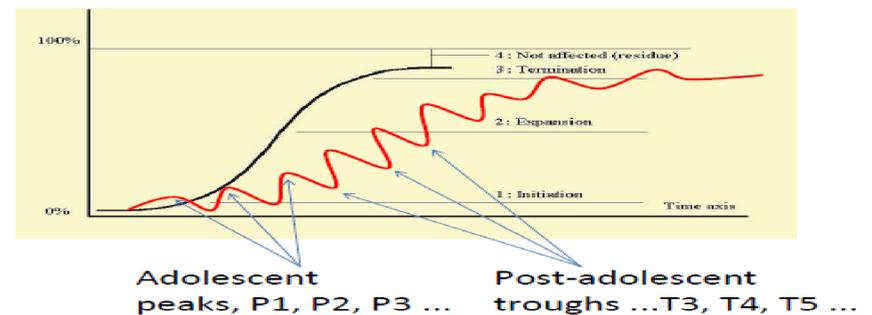


Figure 3: The ideal (black) vs. the probable (red) NIP S-curve.