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 (New Impers. Passive) 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 hestan til Noregs.
  
  there was sold(n.sg.) horse(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 þ*hestarnir*/þeir til Noregs.
  
  there were sold-the-horses(N.)/them(N.) to Norway
  
  b. það var selt hestan/það til Noregs.
  
  there was sold-the-horse(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 premises include the following:

i. The NIP is spreading very fast.

ii. The NIP and the CanPass are “functionally equivalent”

iii. “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 premises i–iii above
  
  B: new evidence from a real time study suggests this

Problems with ALY’s premises

i. The NIP is spreading very fast

*Apparent evidence*

(1) **Acceptance by adolescents (15–16) vs. adults (40–80) in S&M’s study (S&M 2001, M&S 2002):** Adolescents typically accepted ≈ 60% of the NIP examples on the average, the adults 4–5% (many of them none at all).

Highly significant difference, which could be indicative of change in apparent time.

(2) **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

(1) **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).

(2) 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):

(1) a. Strákurinn var laminn.

Canonical Passive

the-boy(m.sg.) was eaten(m.sg.)

b. það var það strákkinn.

there was eaten(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:

(1) 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).

(2) 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 SBJ 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.*