“Alternative facts”
in Icelandic syntax

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Outline of the talk

Introduction

- The age of the ideal speaker(s) of Icelandic
- Growing interest in (syntactic) variation between languages
- Growing interest in “alternative facts” within languages: ASIS, SAND, ScanDiaSyn (IceDiaSyn, FarDiaSyn ...), Edisyn ... Yale Grammatical Diversity Project ...

What have we learned about methodology?

- Some considerations when deciding on the methodology
- Avoiding the Forrest Gump Effect
- Further methodological issues

What have we learned about grammars and change?

- What could one learn?
- Learning from the “alternative facts”: The New Impersonal/Passive (NIP), Sports Progressive (SportsProg), LDRs and mood

Concluding remarks

The age of the ideal speaker(s) of Icelandic

Early work on Modern Icelandic syntax (1970s, 1980s):

- Mostly reliance on the intuitions of a couple of "ideal speakers"

... sort of in the spirits of *Aspects*:

- "Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech-community, who knows its language perfectly ..." (Chomsky 1965:4)

Variation and the P&P framework

The Principles and Parameters (P&P) approach:

- Variation can be interesting: Human languages are all fundamentally alike because they obey certain universal **principles** (UG) but a a finite set of **parameters** determines (syntactic) variability among them (macro or micro … cf. Chomsky 1981 and much later work).

The P&P effect in Scandinavia

Holmberg and Platzack's work (e.g. 1995):

- Syntactic differences between the Insular and Mainland Scandinavian languages (ISc and MSc) can to a large extent be attributed to different values of two main parameters, the Agr-parameter and the Case-parameter.

Holmberg's revision (2010:13–14):

- (At least) seven differences between the ISc and MSc languages can be attributed to the Agr-parameter:

		Isc	MSc
1.	Rich subject-verb agreement	+	–
2.	Oblique subjects	+	–
3.	Stylistic Fronting	+	–
4.	Null expletives	+	–
5.	Null generic subject pronoun	+	–
6.	Transitive expletives	+	–
7.	Heavy subject postposing	+	–

Growing interest in "alternative facts"

The development of comparative syntax in Europe:

- Much of the work on comparative syntax in Europe in the 1980s and 1990s was based on the "standard languages"
- Sociolinguists and dialectologists had described various dialectal differences within the European languages but largely ignored syntactic differences.
- So syntacticians in Europe turned their attention to dialectal variation within the European languages, cf. e.g.
  - ASIS: *Atlante Sintattico dell'Italia Settentrionale* ('Syntactic Atlas of Northern Italy', began in the 1990s)
  - SAND: *Syntactische Atlas van de Nederlandse Dialecten*
  - ScanDiaSyn: *Scandinavian Dialect Syntax* (including NorDiaSyn, SweDiaSyn, DanDiaSyn, IceDiaSyn, FarDiaSyn ...)
  - Edisyn: *European Dialect Syntax* ("which attempts to establish a documentation and research infrastructure ...")
  - ...
  - Yale Grammatical Diversity Project: English in North America

What have we learned about methodology?

The choice of method obviously depends to some extent on **the goal of the study**:

- Documentation of the (sociolinguistic) **distribution** of **different** (phonological, syntactic ...) **variants** within a given language
- Investigation of **how innovations arise and spread** (nature of change and diffusion)
- (Micro) **comparison of dialects** and (closely) **related** languages, including testing for parametric variation: which phenomena go together/exclude each other
- Evidence for different **types of individual grammars**
- **…**

Variation and methodology, 2

The choice of method also depends on the **type of variation** investigated and the linguistic situation within the relevant communities:

- Are there (believed to be) clear regional dialect boundaries?
- Are the varieties very different from a “standard” variant, e.g. in phonology or syntax?
- Are some of the varieties considered substandard or stigmatized?
- Is there a commonly accepted way of representing the variants in writing?

...

Differences of this kind make it difficult to standardize methodology or elicitation procedures (cf. e.g. Cornips and Poletto 2005, Barbiers 2015).

Some variation projects

Sigíður Sigurjónsdóttir & Joan Maling (S&J):

- Testing 1695 teenagers and 200 adult controls for the New Impersonal/Passive (NIP, cf. Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir 2002. Supported by the IRF, NSF ...)

IceDiaSyn:

- 3 large scale overviews (3 x 700+), four age groups, different parts of the country, written questionnaires + some interviews. (Supported by the IRF 2005–2007.)

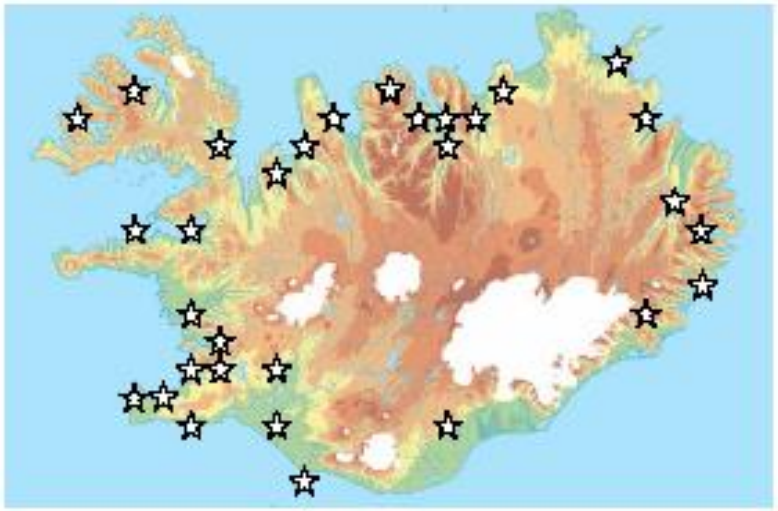
FarDiaSyn:

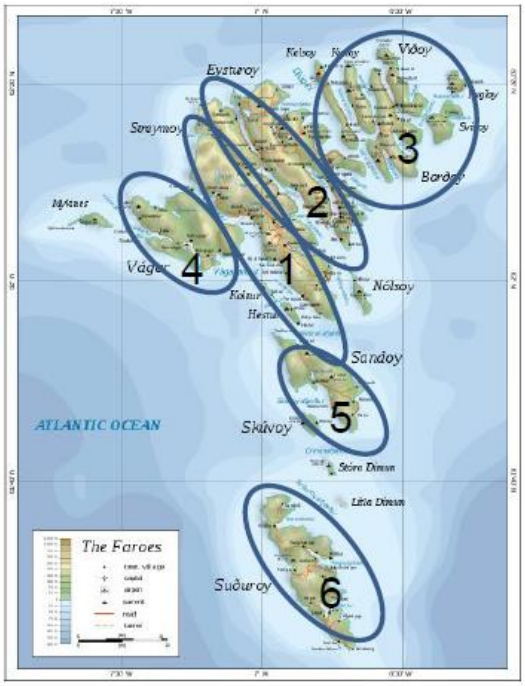
- 2 large scale overviews (2 x 300+), four age groups, different parts of the country, written questionnaires + some interviews. (Supported by the IRF 2008–2009.)

RealTimeIce:

- Re-testing of 197 speakers from S&J's study. (Supported by the IRF 2010–2012.)

IceDiaSyn and FarDiaSyn





Map 1: Places visited in Iceland

Map 2: Areas visited in the Faroes

Selecting the methodology

The **kind of syntactic variation** expected in Icelandic and Faroese (based on pilot studies and previous studies, including e.g. Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir 2002) determined the methodology used to a large extent:

- no clear-cut regional variation
- very little awareness of syntactic variation
- stigmatization very limited
- no problems related to writing or orthographic representation of variants
- considerable generational differences
- some evidence for correlation with education

Hence: relatively large number of speakers in each location, four age groups, no restriction on social class or education, possible to use written questionnaires to reach a large number of speakers, not possible to find “speakers of the local dialect” as assistants ...

Avoiding the Forrest Gump Effect

- One of the goals of many syntactic variation projects in Europe has been to collect data for “syntactic atlases”.
- Where there are clear-cut regional boundaries between variants/dialects, it may be sufficient to interview/test just 2–4 speakers for each “measure point”.
- This is not possible in Iceland or on the Faroes because of the Forrest Gump Effect.

Tom Hanks (as Forrest Gump) on life in general:

- “[it’s] like a box of chocolates, **you never know what you’re gonna get**”.

Illustrating the Forrest Gump Effect

Embedded Topicalization in Scandinavian:

(1) a. *Han sa at* ***denne sangen*** *kunne han ikke synge i bryllupet.* (No)
he said that this song-the could he not sing in wedding-the
'He said that this song he couldn't sing in the wedding.'

b. *Hann sagði að* ***þjóðsönginn*** *gæti hann ekki sungið.* (Ic)
he said that national anthem-the could he not sing
'He said that the national anthem he couldn't sing.'

"This word order is accepted in asserted complements [like the complement of 'say'] all over Norway (except in Røros) [...] It is also accepted in various places in Iceland, although it mostly receives a medium score here (and is rejected in Vestmannaeyjar)" (Bentzen 2014).

Scores used in NALS (Nordic Atlas of Language Structures Online):

[1	2]	3	[4	5]
Unacceptable		Doubtful		Natural

Illustrating the Forrest Gump Effect

Map 3: Acceptance of Embedded Topicalization in Icelandic according to Bentzen 2014:
white pins = high score, grey = medium score, black = low score

Illustrating the Forrest Gump Effect

	subject #	gender	age group	judgment
actual selection from IceDiaSyn in NALS	A5	f	50+	3
possible alternative from IceDiaSyn	B21	f	50+	5
actual selection from IceDiaSyn in NALS	A15	f	15–30	1
possible alternative from IceDiaSyn	A17	f	15–30	3
actual selection from IceDiaSyn in NALS	B22	m	50+	1
possible alternative from IceDiaSyn	A22	m	50+	5
actual selection from IceDiaSyn in NALS	A15	m	15–30	1
possible alternative from IceDiaSyn	A7	m	15–30	5
actual average from IceDiaSyn in NALS				**1,5**
possible average from IceDiaSyn				**4,5**

Table 1: Actual and possible scores for EmbTop in Vestmannaeyjar (cf. Thráinsson 2017a:22–24).

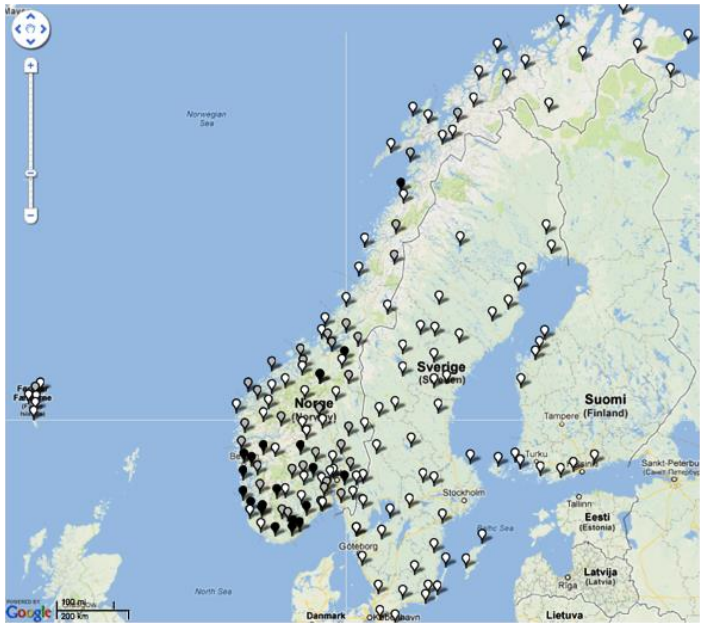
Illustrating the Forrest Gump Effect

Imp-Neg vs. Neg-Imp in Scandinavian, where Neg-Imp is (presumably) an innovation, e.g. in Faroese:

(1) a. ***Far*** ***ikki*** *avstað við ongum píkadekkum.* (Imp-Neg)
go.IMP. not off with no studded-tires
'Don't head off without studded tires!'

b. ***Ikki*** ***far*** *til Mykines í morgin.* (Neg-Imp)
not go.IMP to Mykines tomorrow
'Don't go to Mykines tomorrow.'

Illustrating the Forrest Gump Effect



Map 4: Imp-Neg

Map 5: Neg-Imp

- **Imp-Neg** order is the generally accepted variant in Sweden and on the Faroe Islands (with a medium score in Fuglafjørður), more limited distribution in Norway
- **Neg-Imp** order is generally accepted in Norway, basically rejected in Sweden and in the Faroes (although with a medium score in Vágar)

(Garbacz and Johannessen 2013)

Illustrating the Forrest Gump Effect

What is really going on with Neg-Imp in Faroese:

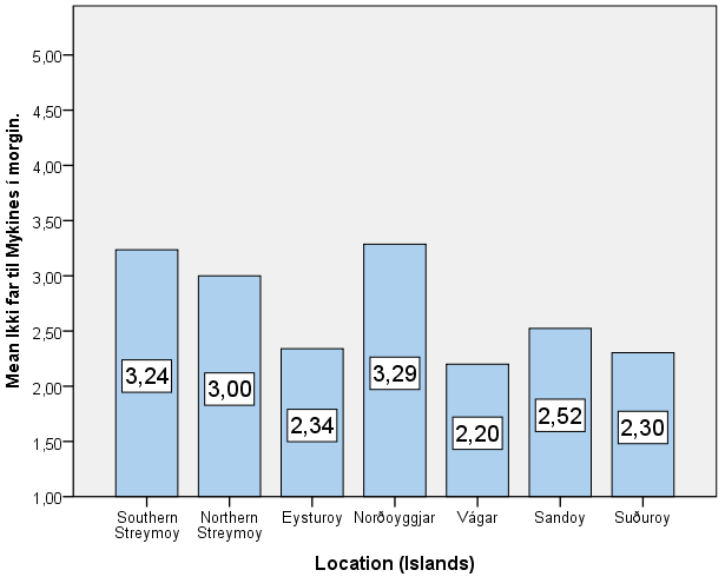


Fig. 1: Mean evaluation of Imp-Neg in different areas in the Faroes.

(Cf. Thráinsson 2017a.)

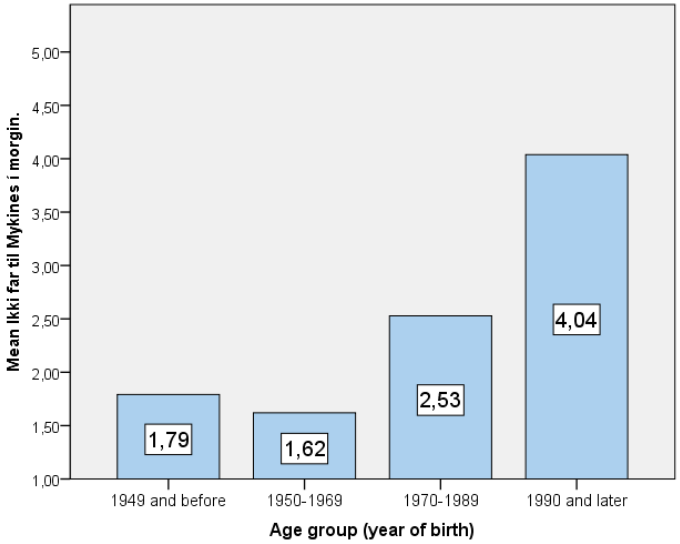


Fig. 2: Mean evaluation of Imp-Neg by different age groups.

Relative vs. absolute judgments

It is sometimes maintained that relative judgments are easier for speakers to make than absolute ones.

In IceDiaSyn and FarDiaSyn we used both methods, e.g.:

(1) a. *Byggingarnar voru ónýtar eftir árásina*.
the buildings were ruined after the attack.
Herinn hafði **rústað** **þeim**
the army had demolished them.DAT

yes	?	no	comments

b. *Eigendunum brá í brún þegar þeir komu heim*
the owners were taken aback when they came home
Leigjendurnir höfðu **rústað** ☐ **íbúðina** ☐ **íbúðinni**
the tenants had ruined the apartment ACC / DAT

Relative vs. absolute ...

Possible problem with relative judgments:

- When speakers select alternative A, you don't know whether they would also accept alternative B.

This may vary, as in the examples below (cf. Thráinsson 2017a:31):

Type of argument	Dat selected	N	Dat accepted	N
Object case with *rústa* 'demolish'	88.1%	772	83.5%	752
Subject case with *hlakka til* 'look forward to'	**29.6%**	747	**44.2%**	747

Table 2: Selection (= relative) vs. acceptance (= absolute) of Dat object with *rústa* 'demolish' and Dat subject with *hlakka til* 'look forward to'

Hence: The two methods can complement each other.

Relative vs. absolute ...

A different way of asking for relative judgments (cf. Cornips and Poletto 2005:948):

- Which variant do you consider to be the most common one in your local dialect?

Possible advantage:

- Putting the question in this indirect fashion may make it easier for speakers to admit that their local dialect has non-standard (and possibly stigmatized) traits.

But there are several disadvantages (cf. the next slide)

Relative vs. absolute ...

Some reasons why this “indirect questioning” was not used in IceDiaSyn and FarDiaSyn:

- There is no concept of one’s “local (syntactic) dialect” in Icelandic and Faroese.
- There was no reason to worry about stigmatization (with a couple of possible exceptions that turned out not to be problematic)

Some reasons why this “indirect questioning” should be avoided (cf. Thráinsson 2017a:29):

- Asking about the assumed frequency of a variant in the language of others is a metalinguistic question that cannot be used to get at the subjects’ intuition or internal grammar, even if the local dialect is their own.
- There is no reason to believe that naive speakers have a better feeling about other speakers’ language than about their own intuition.
- Perfectly natural variants may very well be infrequent.

What have we learned about grammars and change?

What could one learn? Linguists may be interested in variation for different reasons (cf. also above):

- **Sociolinguists**:
  - Linguistic difference between any definable groups of speakers is interesting in and of itself.
- (Some) **historical linguists** and **generativists:**
  - Variation can tell you something about the nature and types of linguistic change and acquisition. (To what extent is it true, for instance, that "whatever is in place by puberty is what we are "stuck with"", cf. Anderson and Lightfoot 2002:209?)
  - Variation can tell you something about the nature of individual grammars (e.g. what is "possible" and what is "probable" (☺), what is the nature of intra-speaker variation ...)

Alternative facts I: The NIP

Expletive Canonical Passive in Icelandic ("ideal" and otherwise):

(1) a. Það var rekinn maður út af staðnum.
there was driven(m.) man(Nom.m.) out of the place
'A man was thrown out of the place.'

b. *Það var rekinn maðurinn/ég út af staðnum.
there was thrown(m.) the-man/I(Nom.m.) out of the place

Typical NIP examples (cf. Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir 2002, Thráinsson, Sigurjónsdóttir et al. 2015; attested expls. mostly after the middle of the 20th century):

(2) a. %Það var **rekið** **manninn** út af staðnum.
there was driven(n.) the-man(Acc.m.) out of the place
'The man was thrown out.'

b. %Það var **beðið mig** að vaska upp.
there was asked me(Acc) to wash up
'I was asked to do the dishes (wash up).'

Distribution of the NIP

Sigríður Sigurjónsdóttir and Joan Maling (S&J): The adult control group rejected the NIP examples. Similar results in IceDiaSyn.

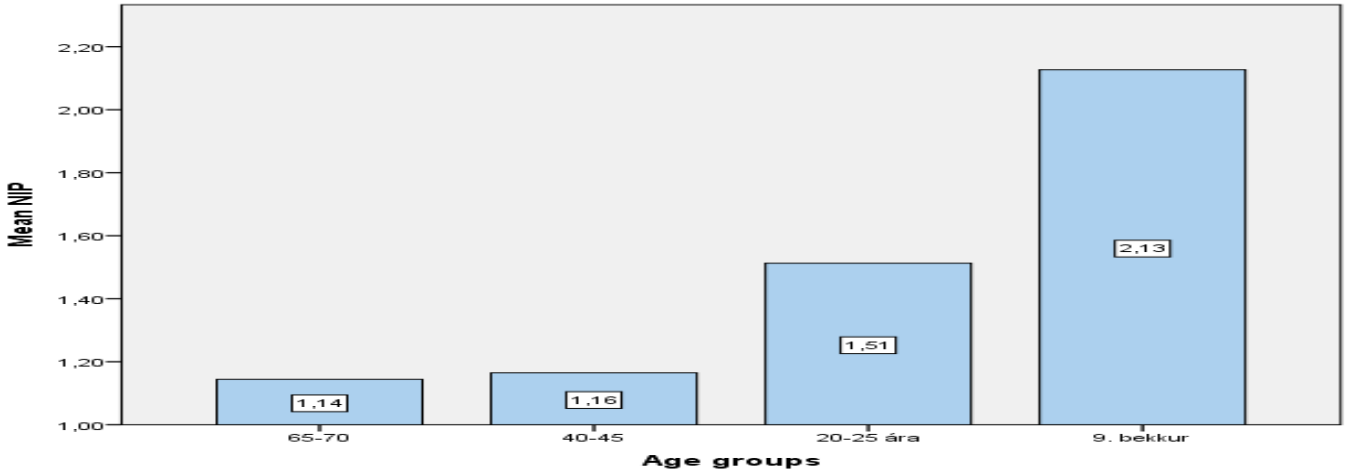


Fig. 3: Generational differences for the NIP in IceDiaSyn
(Mean evaluation on a scale 1–3: unacceptale – doubtful - natural.)

Strong and highly significant correlation w. age ($r = .598$, $p < .001$)
Does not spread across generations. = The older generations are "stuck with" what they acquired as children?

Alternative facts II: The SportsProgr

A different kind of innovation: The Sports Progressive

Icelandic Progressive:

(1) a. Steve **er að lesa** málfræðibók.
Steve is to read(inf.) grammar-book
'Steve is reading a grammar book.'

b. Steve les vel.
'Steve reads well.' [= 'Steve is a good reader.']

c. *Steve **er að lesa** **vel**.
Steve is to read(inf.) well [* in the sense 'Steve is a good reader.']

Icelandic Sports Progressive:

(2) a. Við spiluðum vel.
we played(past) well

b. %Við **vorum að spila** vel.
we were to play(inf.) well
'We were playing well.'

The rise of the SportsProgr

The SportsProgr seems to be quite recent in Icelandic, judging from Icelandic newspapers (cf. also Sverrisdóttir 2001): Compare the frequency of *spiluðum/spiluðu vel* ‘played(1pl/3pl) well’ and *vorum/voru að spila vel* ‘were(1pl/3pl) playing well’(data from *timarit.is*):

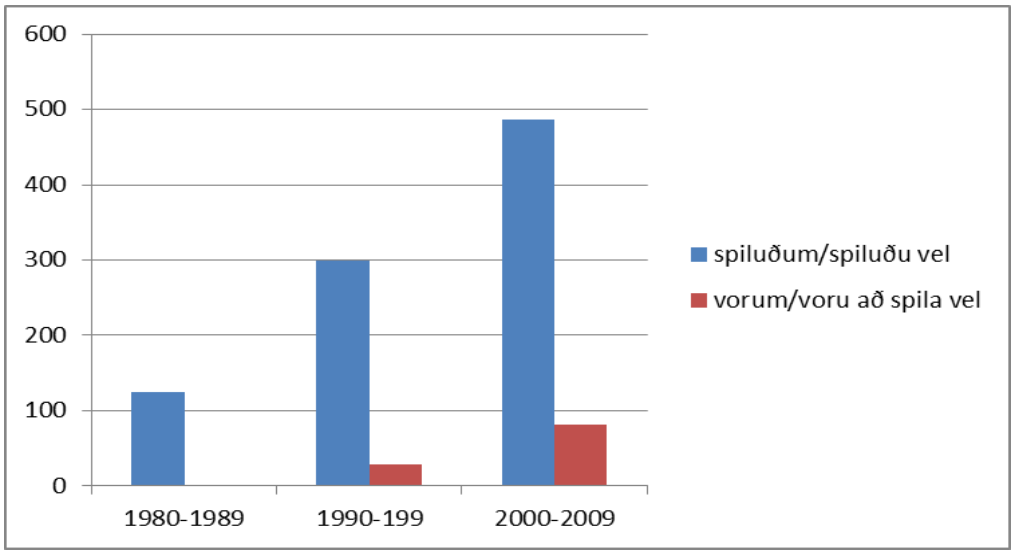


Fig. 4: Frequency of simple past vs. past progressive in newspapers

[Extended use of the progressive is sometimes called **Infinitive Sickness**.]

Comparing the NIP and the SportsProgr

Both the NIP and the SportsProgr have been complained about in the newspapers and elsewhere, e.g. by the former president of Iceland, Vigdís Finnbogadóttir (*Morgunblaðið* August 15, 2005, p. 21, boldface added):

> En ég hef áhyggjur af nýjum áhrifum enskunnar í setningum og notkun óþarfra aukasagna til að styðja við sagnir [...] sagði Vigdís og nefndi sem dæmi setningar eins og [...] það **var boðið mér** í veislu, þeir **voru að spila vel** í gær
> 'But I am worried about new influence of English in sentences and in the use of unnecessary auxiliaries to support verbs [...], Vigdís said, and mentioned examples like "there was invited me to a party [the NIP]" and "they were playing well [the SportsProgr] yesterday"'

But do these recent innovations spread the same way within the linguistic community? If not, what might be the reason?

Acceptance of the SportsProgr in IceDiaSyn

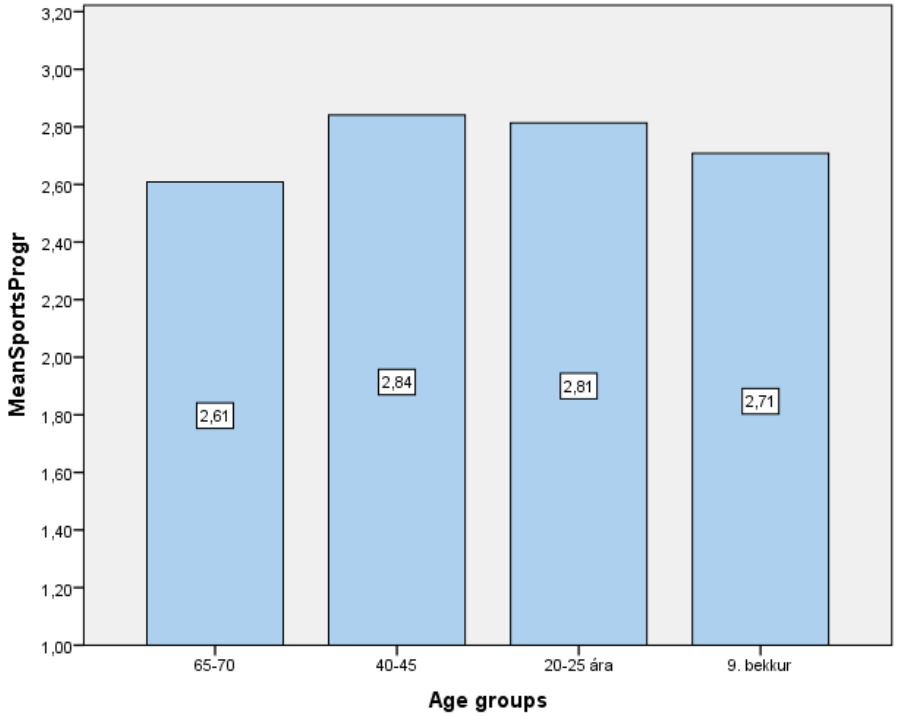


Fig. 4: Generational differences for the SportsProgr

Clearly no correlation with age. Has spread across generations.
Possible reason: Not really a "grammatical change."

Back to the NIP

Two possible interpretations of “uneven bargraphs”like *Fig. 3* (see e.g. the discussion in Sankoff and Blondeau 2007):

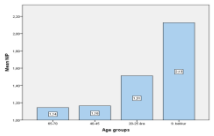


Fig. 3

A: Linguistic **change in apparent time**: More and more speakers are acquiring a particular grammar with every new generation (after a certain point in time).

B: **Age grading**: When a particular linguistic trait decreases or increases with age and this development repeats itself with new generations.

One way to find out: Do a “Real Time” study.

RealTimeIce

RealTimeIce:

- Linguistic Change in Real Time in the Phonology and Syntax of Icelandic.

The syntactic part of RealTimeIce:

- Re-testing of 197 speakers that S&J had tested some 10+ years earlier:

  - Inner Reykjavík: 24
  - Outer Reykjavík: 34
  - Other areas: 139

One reason for RealTimeIce

While the ≈15 year olds in IceDiaSyn (2005–2007) accepted the NIP-examples to almost the same extent as the ≈ 15 year olds Sigga Sigurjónsdóttir and Joan Maling (S&J) tested 6-8 years earlier (1999–2000), the 20–25 year olds in IceDiaSyn were much less positive, despite being basically the same generation as the one S&Jtested. = Age grading?

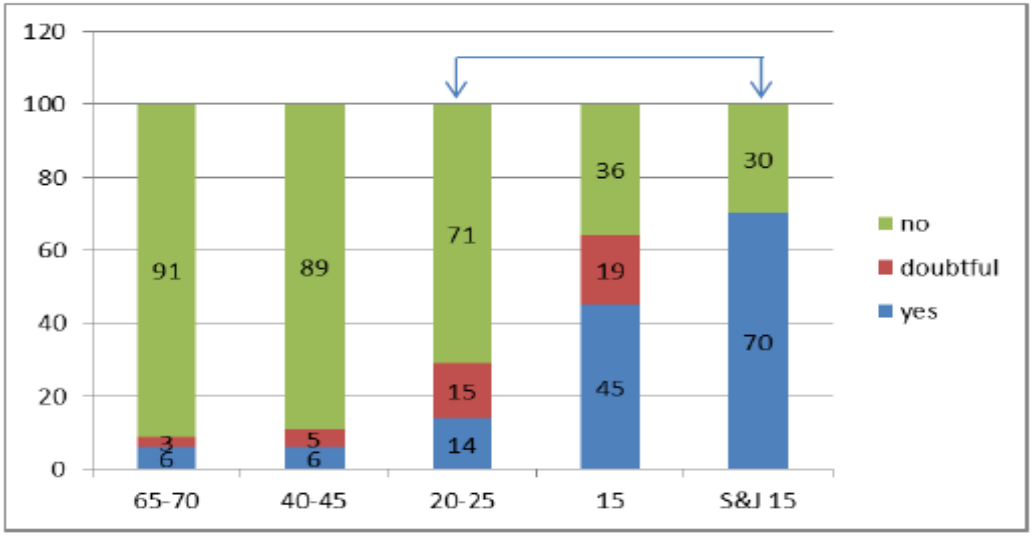


Fig. 6: Evaluation of a typical NIP-example in IceDiaSyn and by S&J (percentages)

[*Það var beðið mig að vaska upp* "There was asked me to wash up."]

IceDiaSyn, S&J and RealTimeIce

Differences between IceDiaSyn and S&J:

- Not the same number of choices (3 vs. 2, cf. *Fig. 6*)
- Not the same regional distribution of speakers (there are some geographical differences in the acceptance of the NIP).

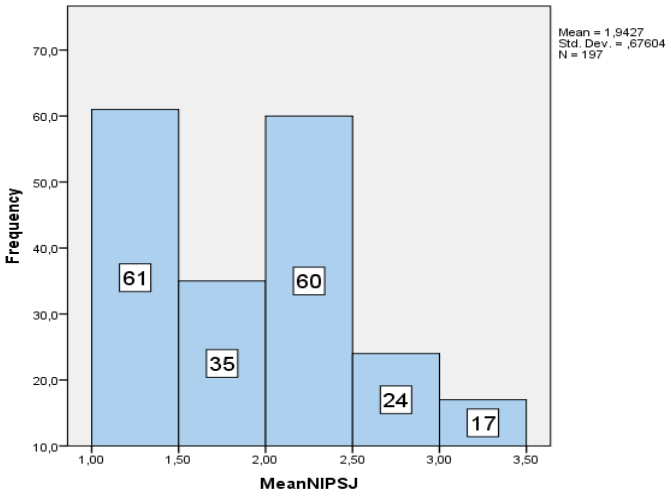
Similarities between S&J and RealTimeIce:

- Below we will be comparing evaluation of the **exact same examples**.*
- Speakers got the **same number of choices** (*yes* = acceptable, *no* = unacceptable).
- We are comparing answers from the **same speakers** (= a panel study).

*One difference: Context sentences were used in RealTimeIce.

RealTimeIce and the NIP

Comparing the evaluation of 7 exact same sentences:



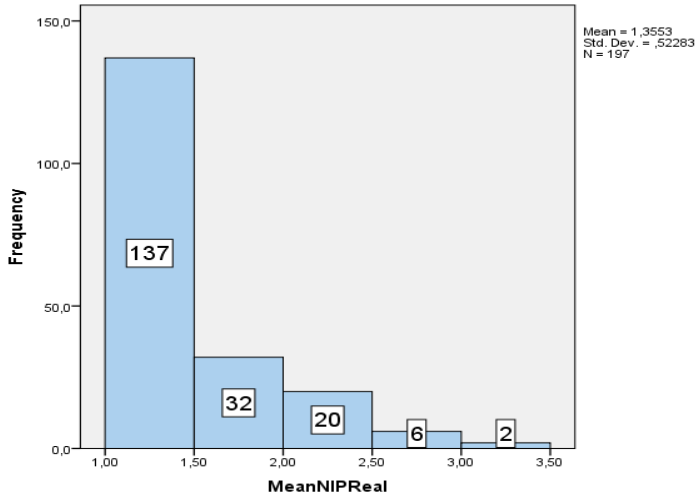


Fig. 7: Mean evaluation of NIP:S&J.

Fig. 8: Mean evaluation of NIP:RealTime

[1 = rejects all examples, 3 = accepts all examples.]

Acceptance of all 7 examples: S&J 17 RealTimeIce 2

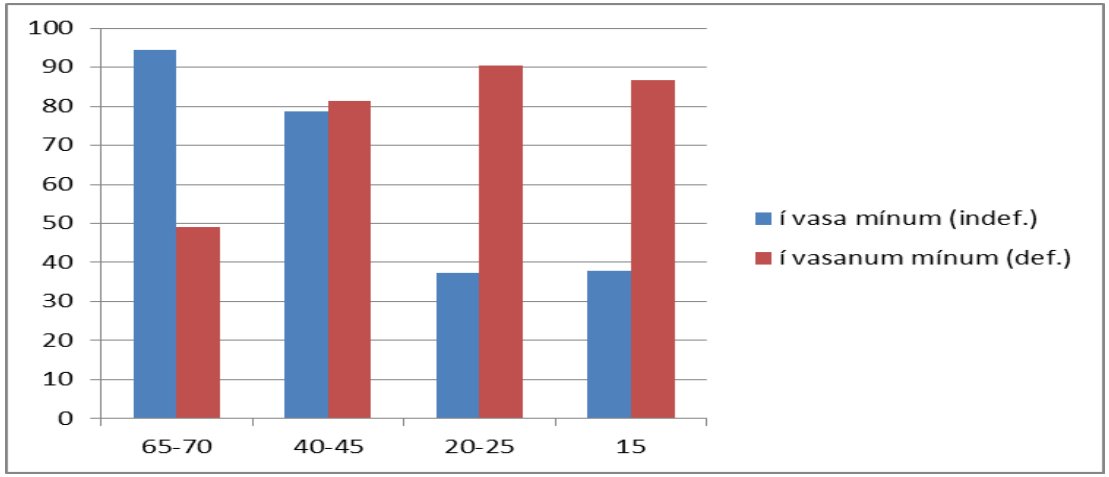
- Rejection of all 7 examples: S&J 61 RealTimeIce 137
- 60 out of 197 participants in RealTimeIce (≈25 year old) accepted some NIP expls.

Possible reasons for the difference

A methodological reson?

- Perhaps teenagers are more likely than others to give positive evaluations when asked for judgments (and 25 year olds least likely)?

Doesn't seem to be the case, cf. *Figs. 4* (above) and *9*:



í vasa mínum
in pocket my
í vasanum mínum
in pocket-the my
'in my pocket'

Fig. 9: Evaluation of indef. vs. def. nouns in possessive constructions (cf. Thráinsson, Sigurðsson and Rögnvaldsson 2015).

Linguistic change and diffusion

Adolescent peaks?

- It has often been observed that linguistic innovations are "most popular" among **adolscents** (age range varies somewhat), i.e. more popular than among both younger speakers and older speakers (cf. e.g. Labov 2001:169ff. and passim, Tagliamonte and D'Arcy 2009, etc.). This is commonly referred to as the **adolescent peak**.

This is easy to say if you are sociolinguist thinking about "language in the community" (one type of E-language).

But how should this be interpreted in generative terms? That speakers somehow "revert" to more standard language as they grow up, not only in usage but also w.r.t. judgments?

Possible evolution of the NIP

An interesting and bold prediction made by Ingason, Legate and Yang (2012):
By 2050 the NIP **will have ousted the Canonical Passive** because (they claim):

- the NIP and the Canonical Passive (or the Expletive Passive?) are "functionally equivalent"
- the NIP is **spreading very fast** (witness the clear generational differences found by S&J and in IceDiaSyn)
- there is a reason to believe that the NIP is "**not sensitive to social evaluation**" (cf. Labov and Harris 1986, and Ingason, Sigurðsson and Wallenberg 2012: not all types of linguistic structure are equal in terms of social impact)
- Hence Yang's variational model (2002) predicts an evolution along the lines of **a steep S-curve** (cf. e.g. Kroch 2001:719ff., Blythe and Croft 2012).

But ...

The NIP is apparently **not spreading as fast** as Ingason, Legate and Yang assumed (2012):

- Cf. the results of RealTimeIce described above.
- The findings of Finnur Friðriksson (2008) in his spontaneous speech material:

Distribution of the spoken NIP examples by age groups:

percentages	16–20	21–65	66+	total
% NIP out of all passive examples	6.3	2.9	0	2.6% (13 out of 494)
% of speakers producing some NIP	26.7	10	0	

Table 1: Frequency of spoken NIP examples in Friðriksson's data.

But ...

Not so clear that the NIP is insensitive to social pressure:

- 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 don't understand it in any detail) – and former presidents complain about it (cf. above).
- In interviews taken by Finnur Friðriksson (2008) the participants were **more negative towards the NIP** than the other innovations he discussed with them (including the infamous Dative Sickness).

Could this slow down the evolution?

Alternative facts III: LDRs, mood and tense

"Ideal Icelandic" (cf. e.g. Thráinsson 1976 and much later work):

(1) a.	Jón$_i$	segir/heldur	[að	María	**elski**	sig$_i$]
	John	says/believes	that	Mary	love(sbjv.)	REFL
	'John says/believes that Mary loves him.'					
b.	*Jón$_i$	veit/sér	[að	María	**elskar**	sig$_i$]
	John	knows/sees	that	Mary	loves(ind.)	REFL

Many theoretical accounts of LDRs in Icelandic have been based on facts of this sort, including Anderson's (1986 (1982)), which basically says:

> Reflexives can be long distance bound in subjunctive complement clauses because these do not have an independent tense (due to a tense agreement rule), whereas indicative complement clauses do.

Icelandic LDRs and mood

The tense agreement (sequence of tenses) referred to by Anderson: It only holds for subjunctive complements, not for indicative ones:

(1) Jón **sagði** [að María ***komi/kæmi** á hverjum degi]
John said(past) that Mary comes(sbjv.pres)/came(sbv.past) every day

(2) a. Jón **veit** [að María **kemur/kom** á hverjum degi]
John knows(pres) that Mary comes(ind.pres.)/came(ind.past) every day
b. Jón **vissi** [að María **kemur/kom** á hverjum degi]
John knew(past) that Mary comes(ind.pres.)/came(ind.past) every day

But it has been claimed that there is also "alternative Icelandic" allowing LDRs in (some) **indicative complements** (cf. e.g. Sigurðsson 1990:333):

(3) Jón$_i$ veit/sér [að María **elskar** sig$_i$]
John knows/sees that Mary loves(ind.) REFL
'John knows/sees that Mary loves him.'

LDRs and mood in IceDiaSyn

How widespread are these “alternative LDR facts”?

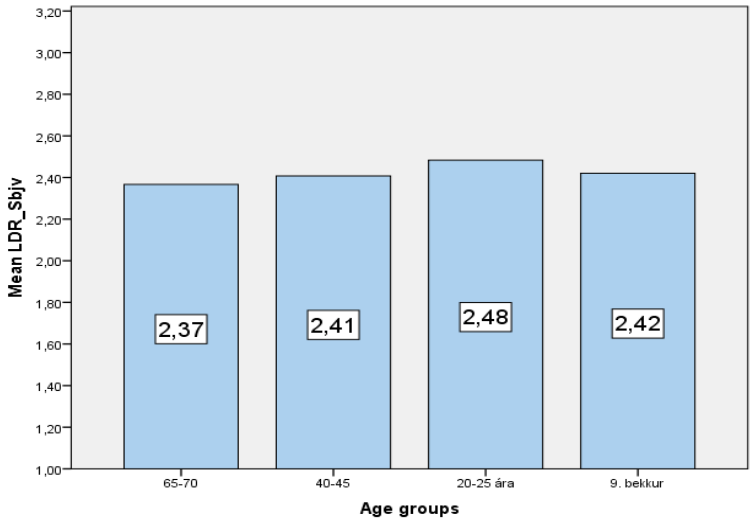


Fig. 10: Mean acceptance of LDR in subjunctive complements.

No significant correlation w. age.

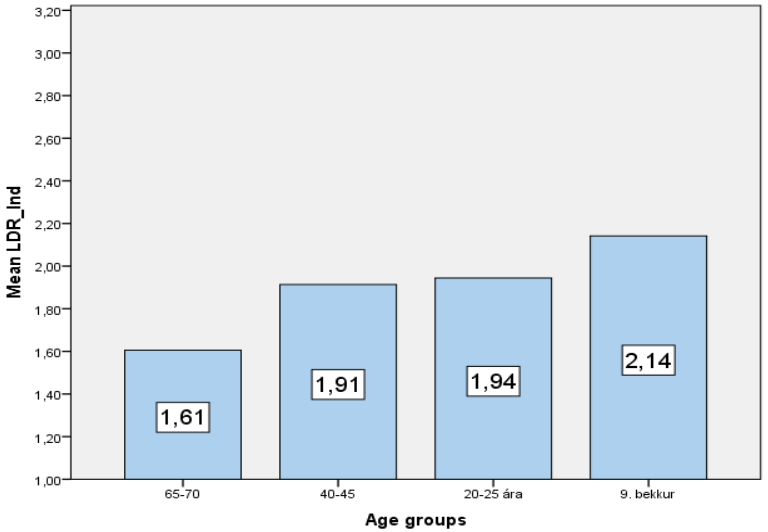


Fig. 11: Mean acceptance of LDR in indicative complements.

Significant correlation w. age: $r = .248$, $p < .001$

Concluding remarks

Variation data of the sort considered can be used e.g.:

- to compare data elicitation methods and their usefulness (large/small scale, relative/absolute judgments ... can also be tested against corpus data ...)
- to compare the diffusion of different types of change (some spread across generations, others don't ...)
- to determine the rate of linguistic diffusion (especially with the help of Real Time studies)
- test predictions about the diffusion of linguistic change
- to investigate the types of individual grammars possible (cf. also intra-speaker variation, correlations between variables etc. not discussed here, but see e.g. Thráinsson 2013, 2017a,b)
- to test linguistic analyses (see also the discussion in Wasow and Arnold 2005 vs. Schütze and Sprouse 2013).

...

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