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The Rise of the Definiteness Effect in Icelandic

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Abstract

This paper looks at the Definiteness Effect (DE) in the history of Icelandic and argues, using the Icelandic Parsed Historical Corpus (IcePaHC), that DE in its current form is relatively recent. This is in line with Ingason et al. (2013) who argued that DE played a crucial role in the development of the so-called New Impersonal Passive in Icelandic.

1 Introduction

The Definiteness Effect (DE) has been argued to play an important role in the development of the New Impersonal Passive (NIP) in Icelandic (Eythórsson, 2008; Ingason et al., 2013). The DE applies in the Canonical Passive (CanP), see (1), whereas it does not in the NIP, see (2). That is, what makes (1) ungrammatical is the fact that the definite noun phrase (NP) stays in situ whereas the accusative case NP in (2) can be definite without affecting the grammaticality of the sentence.¹

- (1) **Það var lamið stúlkan.*
EXPL was beaten.F.NOM the.girl.F.NOM
Intended: ‘The girl was beaten.’ (Eythórsson, 2008, 177)

- (2) %*Það var lamið stúlkuna í klessu.*
EXPL was beaten.DFLT the.girl.F.ACC in a.mess
‘The girl was badly beaten.’ (Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir, 2002, 98)

Eythórsson (2008) suggested, discussing the emergence of the NIP, that a “leakage” in the DE led to reanalysis of the CanP with a definite postverbal NP. Furthermore, Indriðadóttir (2014), interpreting results of her own questionnaire, proposed that the DE is on the decrease in Modern Icelandic. Ingason et al. (2013), on the other hand, argued that the **rise** of the DE was a crucial factor in the spread of the NIP. We take this to be an unresolved issue. The purpose of the current paper is to examine quantitative facts about the DE in the history of Icelandic, using the Icelandic Parsed Historical Corpus (IcePaHC; Wallenberg et al. 2011), to better evaluate different accounts of the evolution of the DE and the NIP.

2 The Definiteness Effect and the NIP

2.1 DE in Modern Icelandic

As discussed by Milsark (1977), English existential constructions are subject to a definiteness restriction.

- (3) There is **a wolf** at the door.
(4) *There is **the wolf** at the door.

This restriction, standardly referred to as the Definiteness Effect (DE), applies to Icelandic as well, as shown in (5)–(6). In the grammatical example (5), the indefinite NP *úlfur* ‘a wolf’ does not move to the subject position. If the NP is definite, as in (6), the sentence is ungrammatical.²

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¹The NIP is rather widespread among younger speakers even though it is strictly ungrammatical for many speakers, especially among the older generations. Therefore we use the ‘%’ sign to indicate that only some speakers accept the NIP.

²It should be noted that the expletive *það* in Icelandic is a first-position element and not a thematic subject.

- (5) *Það er úlfur við dyrnar.*
EXPL is a.wolf.NOM at the.door
'There is a wolf at the door.'
- (6) **Það er úlfurinn við dyrnar.*
EXPL is the.wolf.NOM at the.door
Intended 'The wolf is at the door.'

The DE applies in various constructions, such as the existential construction in (5)–(6) as well as the Canonical Passive (CanP), see (7)–(8).

- (7) *Það var lesin bók.*
EXPL was read.F.NOM a.book.F.NOM
'A book was read.'
- (8) **Það var lesin bókin.*
EXPL was read.F.NOM the.book.F.NOM
Intended: 'The book was read.'

For (6) and (8) to be grammatical, the definite NP must move to subject position, as shown in (9)–(10).

- (9) *Úlfurinn er við dyrnar.*
the.wolf.NOM is at the.door
'The wolf is at the door.'
- (10) *Bókin var lesin.*
the.book.F.NOM was read.F.NOM
'The book was read.'

However, DE does not apply in the New Impersonal Passive, as we will now see.

2.2 The lack of DE in the NIP

The New Impersonal Passive (NIP) is a construction with passive morphology NP without movement to subject position, whether or not the NP is definite. By comparing the NIP in (11) and the CanP in (8) and (10), we can see that the DE does not apply in the NIP but only the CanP (see, e.g., Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir, 2002). This suggests that the status of the theme argument is different in the NIP than in the CanP. It should also be mentioned that the NP is assigned objective case in the NIP, accusative in (11).³ This differs from the CanP, see (10), where a NP that is assigned accusative case in the active is in the nominative case in the passive.

- (11) %*Það var lesið bókina.*
EXPL was read.DFLT the.book.ACC
'The book was read.'

Note that the lack of DE is not a general feature of NIP speakers in other constructions than the NIP (Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir, 2002). However, Indriðadóttir (2014) tested a few constructions with an expected DE violation. 92 adolescents in 10th grade were tested and the results were compared to the responses of 15 speakers at the age 65–75 years. Indriðadóttir comes to the conclusion that the restrictions set by the DE have weakened for some speakers and that it is weaker for the younger speakers than the older speakers. There may be an ongoing change in this direction in Modern Icelandic but it is nonetheless not consistent with the development of the DE in the history of Icelandic, it seems, as discussed in §3.

3 The emergence of the DE

3.1 DE as a factor in the emergence of the NIP

For an account of the emergence of the NIP, Eythórsson (2008) looked at cases where the CanP and the NIP are the same on the surface. He suggests that there may be exceptional DE violations in CanP input in language acquisition, such as in (12) where *litla barnið* is syncretic for nominative and accusative; nominative would reflect a DE violation in the CanP whereas accusative would reflect the NIP.

- (12) %*Það var skammað litla barnið.*
EXPL was scolded little the.child.NOM/ACC
'The little child was scolded.'
- (Eythórsson, 2008, 181)

That is, examples like (12) may occasionally be generated by a CanP grammar, even though it should not be possible given DE. Eythórsson refers to this as a "leakage" in the DE. Attested examples of such

³Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) argued that the NIP contains a projected implicit argument; see also H.Á. Sigurðsson (2011), Ingason et al. (2013), Legate (2014), E.F. Sigurðsson (2017).

leakage are found at various times in the history of Icelandic. Eythórsson (2008, 183) shows the following example of DE leakage with a postverbal definite NP in the dative case from the 13th century *Sturlunga saga* (note that accusative case in structures with passive morphology, as in (2) and (11) above, always reflects the NIP but dative and genitive can be ambiguous between CanP and NIP grammars).

- (13) *Var ýtt skipinu.*
 was pushed the.ship.DAT
 ‘The ship was pushed.’

(Eythórsson, 2008, 183; *Sturlunga saga*)

The crucial leakage has to do with dative and genitive case, rather than nominative case, as only the former (dative, genitive) can be (re-)interpreted as being produced by an NIP grammar.

However, if DE leakage was a necessary factor for the rise of the NIP, the question is why the change did not take place in, say, Old Icelandic. We could expect DE leakage to be more frequent in the 20th century, when the change caught on, than in older stages of Icelandic. Ingason et al. (2013, 98), on the other hand, argue that a leakage in the DE was not the important factor in the emergence of the NIP:

“The NP owes its advantage to the definiteness effect. Therefore, it was the rise of the definiteness effect, not its leakage, that created favorable conditions for the spread of the New Passive. While this does not explain why the first NP speaker acquired the new grammar, it does predict that such an innovation had no chance of spreading before the 20th century.”

Furthermore, Ingason et al. (2013, 97) state that “there was no categorical definiteness effect until the 20th century”. This could mean that the DE was not a part of the grammar of speakers or, alternatively, that a grammar with the DE constraint was applied with a probability lower than 100% at the relevant stages of the history of the Icelandic language, i.e., the DE was non-categorical at the time.

3.2 DE in the history of Icelandic

To evaluate whether there has been any change in the history of the Definiteness Effect in Icelandic, we look at quantitative data from the Icelandic Parsed Historical Corpus (IcePaHC), which contains around 1 million words from the 12th century through the 21st century.

We focus on definite NPs following passive participles and take a look at relative frequencies over the time period covered by IcePaHC. These are shown in Figures 1–2. In our search queries, we looked at definite NPs, annotated as subjects, in the dative and genitive case, on the one hand, and in the nominative case, on the other, following a passive participle out of all passives with definite dative and genitive case subjects and definite nominative subjects, respectively (for more information on querying IcePaHC, see Ingason, 2016). It seems clear that the relative frequency is higher as we go further back in the history of Icelandic. Therefore, it looks like Ingason et al. (2013) are right when they say that there was a rise in the Definiteness Effect (with decreasing relative frequency of apparent DE violations over time). The figures suggest that in earlier Icelandic there may not have been such a phenomenon as DE.

If a DE leakage is relatively infrequent in Modern Icelandic, as Figures 1–2 suggest, it is not clear what kind of circumstances are needed for re-interpretation. We suggest that at a certain point in history, the evidence that children are exposed to during language acquisition with respect to the DE does not warrant exceptions (or a leakage) anymore and thus a categorical DE emerges in the language.

4 Conclusion

Data from IcePaHC support Ingason et al.’s (2013) account regarding the Definiteness Effect and the New Impersonal Passive rather than the leakage hypothesis as proposed in Eythórsson (2008). Furthermore, the results suggest that there was not an active DE rule in earlier periods of Icelandic. We argue that DE leakage is too frequent in Old Icelandic such that there was no actual DE at the time. It is, however, difficult to interpret the results with respect to individual grammars: We do not know why the postverbal definites decreased steadily. We also do not know whether some speakers at earlier periods had a DE in their grammar while others did not. We leave these speculations for future research which should also take into account the change from OV to VO word order and control for weight effects.

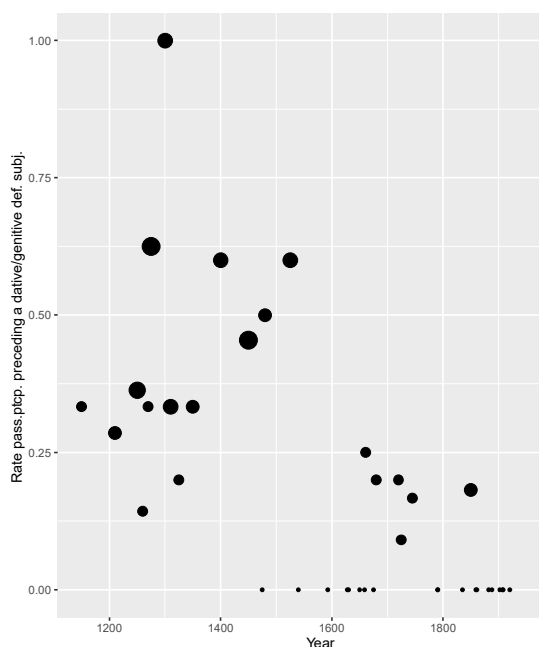


Figure 1: Relative frequency of dative and genitive definite subjects following a passive participle (out of all passives with def. dative and genitive subjects).

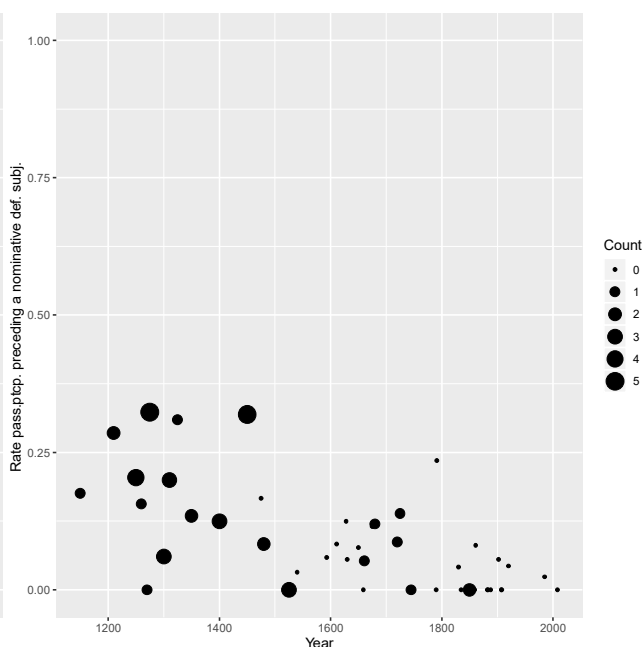


Figure 2: Relative frequency of nominative definite subjects following a passive participle (out of all passives with definite nominative subjects).

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