

# Wiggly Lifespan Change in a Crisis: Contrasting Reactive and Proactive Identity Construction

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## 1 Introduction

In the present study, we analyze the speech of two individuals, each of whom goes through a crisis while serving as a member of the Icelandic Parliament. We connect our analysis to our previous case study (Stefánsdóttir and Ingason 2018) where we found that a member of parliament (MP) who assumes a **proactive** leadership role during a crisis style-shifts toward a more formal style while the crisis is ongoing. In contrast, the present study looks at new data from another MP, whose crisis is more personal and characterized by his lack of control. We find that his **reactive** response to this situation leads to his shifting toward an informal style until the crisis has passed. We hypothesize that these findings are linked to a more general pattern, such that a proactive response to crisis is linked to formal style whereas a reactive response is linked to informal style.

As we track the two MPs over the course of several years, this is a type of lifespan-change study. The focus of previous work on lifespan change (see below) has often been on generalizations that relate individual behavior to community-specific patterns, such as detecting characteristics of specific age groups in general or systematic reactions to ongoing change in the community. In contrast, our study emphasizes the role of personal histories and how individuals change their behavior as they assume individual-specific roles throughout their lifetime.

The variable of interest in the study is Icelandic stylistic fronting (SF), which is the optional movement of an element into a phonological subject gap. We focus on cases where a non-finite main verb is fronted ahead of a finite auxiliary, as illustrated by the minimal pair (1). In (1a), which is an example from a parliamentary speech, we see the default, unmarked word order, contrasting with (1b) in which the non-finite verb *sagt* ‘said’ has been stylistically fronted. The fronted variant is more formal.

- (1) a. Varðandi það [CP sem **var sagt** hér] kvöldið fyrir kosningar.  
regarding it [CP that **was said** here] the.night before elections  
‘Regarding what was said here the night before the elections.’  
b. Varðandi það [CP sem **sagt var** hér] kvöldið fyrir kosningar.  
regarding it [CP that **said was** here] the.night before elections  
‘Regarding what was said here the night before the elections.’

In our study, we examine individual lifespan change in Icelandic when a crisis hits the personal history of the speaker. We see “wiggly” (MacKenzie forthcoming) or “spaghetti-shaped” (Ingason 2017) curves, evidence of a temporary change. We argue that style-shifting during a personal crisis is crucially tied to the agency of the individual involved. We will describe one case in which a reactive response to a crisis leads to a stylistic downshift, and another where a proactive response leads to a stylistic upshift.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 offers some background on lifespan change studies. Section 3 describes our methods and the envelope of variation in our studies. Sections 4 and 5 present findings from two case studies, one on a proactive response to a crisis and one on a reactive response to a crisis. Section 6 concludes.

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## 2 Background

There has been considerable growth in research on changes in how individuals speak over the course of their lives. Some changes are age-graded, meaning that they are associated with certain age groups within stable communities (Wagner 2012:373) while others demonstrate how speakers either participate in an ongoing community change or go against it, generally referred to as lifespan change (Sankoff and Blondeau 2007, Wagner 2012, MacKenzie 2017, Sankoff 2004, Kwon 2014, 2018, Sankoff 2018). However, recent research has suggested that lifespan trajectories can be very individual-specific, and here, we focus on two individuals whose lifespan change is tied to their personal history rather than the behavior of the community as a whole.

Previous studies have, to a greater degree, focused on community-specific lifespan changes rather than those that are individual-specific. Research has shown that such change, when individuals follow a trajectory that systematically relates to the linguistic change around them, can either manifest in individuals by having them participating in the community change or, alternatively, by having them going against it (Sankoff and Blondeau 2007, Wagner 2012, MacKenzie 2017). These changes are, therefore, rather regular, although they may evolve in different directions. However, the nature of individual-specific lifespan changes is sometimes more difficult to capture. Instead of a mathematically neat time series, the evolution of an individual's language manifests in curves that are “wiggly” (MacKenzie forthcoming) or “spaghetti-shaped” (Ingason 2017) – i.e., the change is not appropriately modeled with some simple, mathematically ideal function. This is because individual-specific lifespan changes are, to an important extent, determined by facts about the individual and their personal histories, thus requiring careful research, preferably based on extensive and continuous linguistic data.

Various methods have been used to study individual lifespan change. One such method is the apparent-time method, which involves data being collected at one time-point from groups of speakers who are at different stages of their lives and interpreted in context. The apparent-time method has been rather prominent in research on lifespan change and provides important information regarding age-graded phenomena in languages, in addition to generational change (see Trudgill 1997, Labov 2006). This approach, however, is not well suited for studying individual lifespan change as it focuses on speech communities rather than individual speakers and, therefore, lacks informative value on the development of each speaker. Another method is to use real-time data – that is, collecting speech data from the same speaker(s) at multiple time points, to observe change directly by comparing their language use at different time points. Many fundamental studies have been implemented using this method (see Douglas-Cowie 1978, Sankoff and Blondeau 2007, Wagner and Sankoff 2011, Rickford and Price 2013), revealing patterns in how individuals change their linguistic behavior. However, since most studies are based on comparisons between only two or three periods in the speakers' lives, they lack the fine-grained view needed to capture when exactly changes occur and how they develop.

The use of a dynamic panel corpus is another recently introduced approach, implemented by Grama et al. (2023) in their study on the development of (ing) among speakers in Tyneside, England. In that study, they used data from speakers between the ages of 19 and 78, with each speaker having been recorded two or three times. This method provided an overall picture that covers the entire adult lifespan, making it possible to gain insight into lifespan trajectories of individuals as well as a large section of the lifespan as a whole.

Even as methods have improved, however, it remains challenging to make broad generalizations about individual lifespan change because of how difficult it is to combine high time resolution with a large number of speakers in the same corpus study. Ideally, studies should be high-definition, with continuous observations along the time axis, and they should include enough speakers so that similar individual-specific trajectories are repeated often enough for us to make generalizations about the mechanisms at work. Our ongoing project, Explaining Individual Lifespan Change (EILisCh), aims to hit both of these targets. For the MPs in this project, we use a high-definition time series to examine their changing language use, extracting a style measure for every year of their career in parliament. However, we have only looked at a few individuals in detail, and so it remains to be seen what we will learn by looking at a greater number of subjects. Here, we focus on two individual MPs

in the project, each undergoing a crisis under different circumstances, and comparing the effects of crisis on their individual styles.

### 3 Methods and Envelope of Variation

Our study measures the level of formality in a corpus of parliamentary speeches and combines this quantitative measure with qualitative interpretation of the stylistic metric in question. Consider the pair (1), repeated in (2).

- (2) a. Varðandi það [CP sem **var sagt** hér] kvöldið fyrir kosningar.  
 regarding it [CP that **was said** here] the.night before elections  
 ‘Regarding what was said here the night before the elections.’  
 b. Varðandi það [CP sem **sagt var** hér] kvöldið fyrir kosningar.  
 regarding it [CP that **said was** here] the.night before elections  
 ‘Regarding what was said here the night before the elections.’

These examples illustrate the envelope of variation for the variable of interest, which is SF of non-finite main verbs in relative clauses with a subject gap.<sup>1</sup> While SF is found in various other contexts, we limit our observations to this context because it allows for accurate automatic coding while controlling for other variables that may affect the rate of SF (Wood 2011). The examples mean the same thing in the sense that they have identical truth conditions, but there is a stylistic difference between them because the fronted variant is perceived as more formal.

The relevant tokens were extracted from the Icelandic Parliament Corpus, a subsection of the Icelandic Gigaword Corpus (Steingrímsson et al. 2020). We used a Python script to calculate the rate of SF every year for each subject. For one of the two subjects, we listened to every token to verify the accuracy of the transcriptions from the parliament and concluded that the difference between the automatic coding and the manually corrected coding was not significant (Stefánsdóttir and Ingason forthcoming), as shown by the very similar curves produced by corrected and uncorrected coding in Figure 3. The interpretation of this graph is discussed below in Section 5.

Furthermore, we find that the wiggly curves of individual-specific lifespan change are, at least for the time being, not easily captured in full by quantitative analysis because of how idiosyncratic events and situations shape the trajectory. This means that qualitative analysis of any events that took place during the production of the tokens must also be carried out. In our case, this includes considering any aspect of Icelandic political history that influences the status of the speakers within the speech community.

### 4 Proactive Link to Formal Style

In the case of Iceland’s former Minister of Finance, Steingrímur Sigfússon, our previous case study (Stefánsdóttir and Ingason 2018) showed that he acquired a more formal style during the 2008–2011 Icelandic economic crisis, as the rate of SF takes an upward shift and peaks during that period (Fig. 1). This change is interesting because Sigfússon’s use of SF had been slowly but gradually declining in the years prior, a change we attribute to his experiencing less pressure from the linguistic marketplace (Sankoff and Laberge 1978) as he was getting older and more relaxed in his position as an MP. However, after serving as an opposition MP for 18 years, Sigfússon became Iceland’s Minister of Finance in early 2009, following the collapse of the Icelandic banking system. Sigfússon, therefore, suddenly found himself in a position of great responsibility as he was publicly responsible for the fate of the Icelandic economy as well as being a key figure on the Icelandic side of a legal dispute between Iceland and the United Kingdom over savings accounts in the collapsed Icelandic banking system. These dramatic changes in Sigfússon’s social status as well as his position within the parliament increased his linguistic market value (LMV), resulting in his speech becoming more formal.

<sup>1</sup>For more details on the syntax of SF, see Maling (1980), Holmberg (2000, 2006), Thráinsson (2007), Angantýsson (2017), Ingason and Wood (2017).

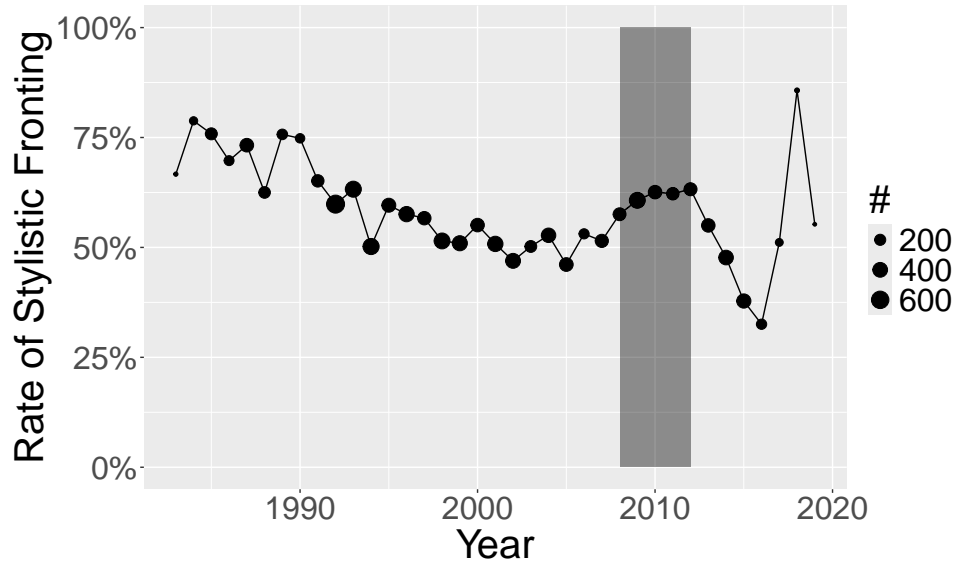


Figure 1: Sigfússon's rate of SF over time. Years 2008–2012 highlighted.

If we look at Sigfússon's case as a response to a crisis, it is important to keep in mind that he stepped into a crisis as a leader with rich agency who had, at least to some degree, control over the outcome. Sigfússon, therefore, manifested a proactive response, where he shifted his style upwards until the crisis had passed. At the end of the crisis, he did indeed return to a more informal style, as can be seen in Figure 2, where the rate of SF suddenly drops in 2013 and the subsequent years, after Sigfússon had stepped down from his leadership role and resigned from his position as a foreman of his party. The upward shift in his use of SF was only a temporary change – a response to a crisis.

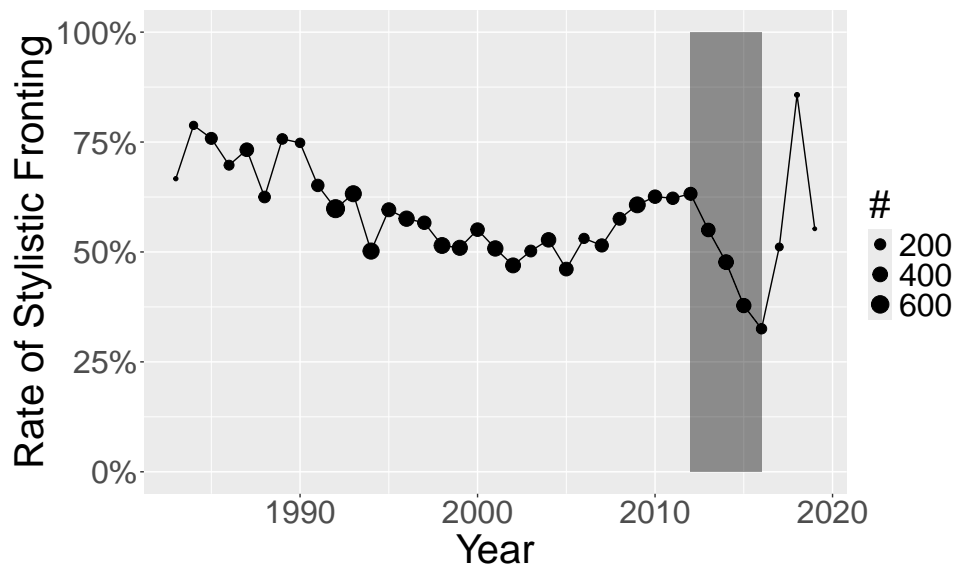


Figure 2: Sigfússon's rate of SF over time. Years 2012–2016 highlighted.

In the last three years of his career in parliament, there is an apparent return to a more formal style, but the facts here are obscured by how much less data there is and by the fact that he became the Speaker of the parliament. He gave few speeches and when he did speak, it was often part of the formalities and logistics of daily parliamentary operations.

## 5 Reactive Link to Informal style

In our current study, we track the use of SF in the speeches of another Icelandic MP, Ásmundur Daðason, who shows a different reaction to a different type of crisis. Daðason has experienced dramatic highs and lows in his career, starting as a member of the Left-Green Movement, then distancing himself from the party, and eventually joining the Progressive Party in late 2011. This led to claims of his resignation from the parliament as well as negative backlash from the media. Daðason tried to wait out the backlash but news coverage from the period clearly shows that he was very unpopular at the time and during the first two years with his new party. Figure 3 shows that Daðason's use of SF dropped between 2012 and 2013, a change that we might expect to happen a year sooner, but which lags behind. However, we do see from coverage in the media that Daðason was actively trying to push through the crisis, which might explain this lag. Also, in the period of 2012 to 2013, Daðason was sometimes painted as the epitome of everything that was wrong with Icelandic democracy in the media, possibly resulting in the change we see in 2013. We analyze this change as a reactive response where he lays low and waits until the crisis is over, the outcome being a stylistic downshift.

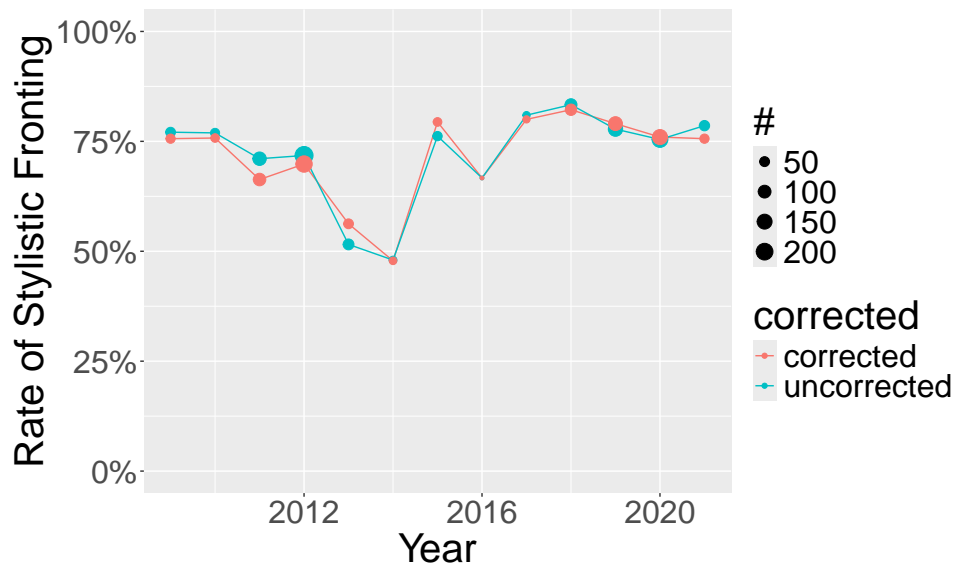


Figure 3: Daðason's rate of SF over time.

After gaining some redemption, Daðason returned to the spotlight in 2015 when news broke of his being intoxicated on a commercial airplane, where he supposedly vomited on another passenger. This resulted in a media storm where Daðason was heavily criticized for his behavior and claims of his resignation became prominent again. Daðason was also mocked on social media, and the hashtag #ásiaðfásér ('Ási having some drinks') was trending for several weeks. As seen in Figure 3, the rate of SF in Daðason's speeches drops again from 2015 to 2016, going from 76.7% to 66.7%, a decline similar to that seen in the aftermath of his party switch. So, again, we see Daðason reacting to a crisis with a stylistic downshift, a reaction that differs from Sigfússon's response to the financial crisis. Here, it is important to consider the different agencies these MPs had during their crises. Sigfússon assumed a proactive leadership role during his crisis, with rich agency, and shifted his style upwards until the crisis had passed. Daðason, however, lacked agency as both of his crises were of a personal nature and therefore, his response was reactive, resulting in a downward style shift.

After laying low and even leaving parliament for a short period, Daðason got back on track and assumed the role of Minister of Social Affairs and Equality in 2017. He was later appointed Minister of Education and Children in 2021, reflecting his focus on the welfare of children. At the beginning of his ministry, polls showed him to be unpopular, but as time went by, and as he opened up about his

troubled childhood in an interview, Daðason's popularity began to rise. In the period that followed, every poll showed him to be the MP in whom the public put the most trust. Our interpretation of these findings is that Daðason's use of SF seems to correspond to the highs and lows of his political career, with the low points notably corresponding to his lowest use of SF.

## 6 Implications and Future Work

We have presented two studies on individual lifespan change in Icelandic, and we have argued that style shift during a personal crisis is crucially tied to the agency of the individual involved. The former Minister of Finance, Steingrímur Sigfússon, had rich agency during his crisis because he had stepped into the situation as a leader that had an impact on the outcome. His reaction was of a proactive kind, where he shifted his style upwards until the crisis had passed. Daðason, however, lacked agency because he did not voluntarily step into his crises; they were merely a result of his own actions and a reaction to negative media coverage. He had little to no control over the outcome, which resulted in a reactive response, where he shifted his style downwards until the crisis had passed.

Our studies underscore the importance of a high-definition approach, as a lot of information would have been lost if we only had the first and the last years of the two MPs political careers. Therefore, we do believe our findings show that studies on individual lifespan change should emphasize high time resolution due to the ways in which individual speakers can rapidly change their linguistic performance in response to idiosyncratic events in their lives.

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