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## 'By'-Phrases in the Icelandic New Impersonal Passive

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## 'By'-Phrases in the Icelandic New Impersonal Passive

### Abstract

This paper focuses on the grammaticality of 'by'-phrases in the Icelandic New Impersonal Passive (NIP), a construction that exhibits both passive morphology and properties that are characteristic of the active. The analysis of the NIP is debated, including whether or not 'by'-phrases are grammatical, which is one of the most important questions for the syntactic analysis of the NIP. In the paper, we focus on this particular question and compare the NIP to the Low Canonical Passive (LCP). We review two judgment tasks in which the NIP was extensively studied, one conducted by Joan Maling and Sigríður Sigurjónsdóttir and another conducted in the Variation in Syntax project at the University of Iceland. As Jónsson (2009) argues, the results indicate that 'by'-phrases are indeed grammatical in the NIP but the results are not clear-cut. To gain a better understanding of the problem, we conducted a different kind of a study among 12-16-year-olds (n=309) and adults (n=38). We used fragment answers to the question 'What language is spoken in Norway?' to categorize NIP speakers (the construction is ungrammatical for many speakers) and Other speakers. The *wh*-phrase is syncretic for nominative and accusative and here a Canonical Passive participle is identical to a NIP participle. The answer (Norwegian) is not syncretic for both cases and therefore reveals the speaker's analysis of the question. We compared these results to how speakers answered a similar question that contained a 'by'-phrase, 'What language is spoken by Finns?' If the NIP were an active construction, we would not expect any speakers to produce accusative when answering the latter question. Still, a few speakers did, indicating that 'by'-phrases are grammatical in the NIP. Accusative was, however, produced significantly more often when speakers answered the first question. We also tested a) how NIP speakers understood a NIP sentence with a PP that should be ambiguous between meaning 'by' and 'from', and b) how LCP speakers understand an identical LCP sentence. Our results suggest that 'by'-phrases are grammatical in the NIP but the possibility remains that they are only grammatical for some NIP speakers but ungrammatical for other NIP speakers.

# ‘By’-Phrases in the Icelandic New Impersonal Passive

Einar Freyr Sigurðsson and Brynhildur Stefánsdóttir\*

## 1 Introduction

This paper discusses the grammaticality of ‘by’-phrases in the New Impersonal Passive (NIP).<sup>1</sup> It is usually described as a recent phenomenon in Icelandic, accepted and used mainly by younger speakers. The nature of the construction is debated: Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) argue that it is on the way to becoming a syntactically active construction (the Active Analysis; see also, e.g., Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir 2012) whereas, e.g., Eythórsson (2008), Jónsson (2009) and Barðdal and Molnár (2003) argue it is a passive construction. For different analyses, see Ingason et al. (2013), Legate (2013), H.Á. Sigurðsson (2011), E.F. Sigurðsson (2012) and Schäfer (2012).

The NIP differs in fundamental ways from the Canonical Passive. An object of a transitive verb that bears accusative case in the active (1a) retains its case in the NIP (1b) whereas it bears nominative case in the Canonical Passive (1c).<sup>2,3</sup>

- (1) a. Lamdi einhver **stúlkuna** í klessu?  
beat someone.NOM girl.the.ACC in a.mess  
‘Did someone beat the girl badly?’ ((1a) based on Eythórsson’s 2008:176 example)
- b. Var lamið **stúlkuna** í klessu?  
was beaten.DFLT girl.the.ACC in a.mess  
‘Was the girl beaten badly?’
- c. Var **stúlkan** lamin í klessu?  
was girl.the.F.NOM beaten.F.NOM.SG in a.mess  
((1b–c) based on Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir’s 2002:98 examples)

Interestingly, the accusative case DP in (1b) cannot A-move to subject position as shown in (2) (Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir 2002:117, Eythórsson 2008:213, and Jónsson 2009:284–285) even though oblique subjects are allowed in Icelandic. Thus, there is not an overt subject in the NIP.

- (2) \*Var **stúlkuna** lamið í klessu?  
was girl.the.ACC beaten.DFLT in a.mess  
Intended: ‘Was the girl beaten badly?’ (Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir 2002:117)

One of the most important questions regarding the nature of the NIP is whether or not agentive *af*-phrases (‘by’-phrases) are grammatical. Even though Jónsson (2009) (see also Thráinsson et al. to appear) gives evidence from a judgment task that they are grammatical, the problem has remained unresolved. In order to answer the question, we conducted a different kind of a study of which we report the results from 309 adolescents (12–16 year-olds) and 38 adults. The results indicate that

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<sup>1</sup>Ingason et al. (2012) use this term. The construction has also been termed the New Construction, the New Impersonal, and the New Passive (originally so called by Kjartansson 1991).

<sup>2</sup>Due to limited space, we only discuss NIP examples with main verbs that assign accusative case to an object in the active and the NIP (in the (Low) Canonical Passive, these arguments are in the nominative). It should be pointed out that examples of definite dative and genitive case arguments in situ are usually ungrammatical in standard Icelandic, due to the Definiteness Effect. Such examples are considered to be cases of the NIP.

<sup>3</sup>Canonical Passive participles show agreement with nominative arguments as shown in the glosses for (1c). NIP participles, however, do not—they always show up with default morphology (marked as DFLT in the glosses) which is the same as for participles that agree with nominative arguments in the neuter singular.

‘by’-phrases in the NIP are indeed grammatical. However, they also suggest that the situation is not that simple: It is possible that for some NIP speakers, ‘by’-phrases are grammatical but ungrammatical for other NIP speakers. We do not give our own analysis of the NIP in this paper as we only focus on one particular property of it which is important for any analysis of the construction.

The paper is organized as follows. We start by looking at results for the NIP in two recent judgment tasks, one conducted by Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir and the other in the project Variation in Syntax, led by Höskuldur Thráinsson at the University of Iceland. In Section 3 we discuss the properties of the Low Canonical Passive (LCP) in Icelandic and compare it to the NIP. In Section 4 we describe the study we conducted and report our results in Section 5. Section 6 concludes.

## 2 ‘By’-Phrases in Two Judgment Tasks

Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) argue that if the NIP is an active impersonal, it should have the following properties in common with other impersonal constructions with a thematic subject:

- (3) a. No agentive ‘by’-phrase is possible.
- b. Binding of anaphors (reflexive and reciprocal) is possible.
- c. Control of subject-oriented adjuncts is possible.
- d. Non-agentive (“unaccusative”) verbs can occur in the construction.

(Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir 2002:102)

To test whether these properties hold for the NIP, Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir administered a written questionnaire in 1999–2000 all over Iceland among 15–16 year old adolescents (i.e., 10th graders, b. 1984; n=1695) and an adult control group (n=200). Furthermore, Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) compared the Icelandic NIP to the so-called *-no/to-*constructions in Polish (4a) and Ukrainian (4b) in which objective case is preserved even though there is no overt subject.

- (4) a. Jana obrabowa-**no** (\*przez nich).    b. Mojim mylym mene zradže-**no**  
       John.ACC robbed-NO by them        my.INST beloved.INST me.ACC betrayed-NO  
       ‘They robbed John.’                    ‘I was betrayed by my beloved.’

(Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir 2002:104, 105)

With the properties in (3) in mind, Polish is an active construction: Agentive ‘by’-phrases are impossible, as shown in (4a), binding of anaphors is possible as well as control of subject-oriented adjuncts, and non-agentive verbs can occur in the construction. The Ukrainian construction is the opposite, including ‘by’-phrases being possible, as shown in (4b). It is a passive construction according to the definitions in (3) (see discussion in Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir 2002 and subsequent papers). Our focus in this paper is on (3a) and we will therefore not discuss (3b–d).

In Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir’s (2002) study, speakers were given two choices when judging sentences: *yes* ‘this is something one can say’ and *no* ‘this is something one cannot say’. Their results showed a very clear distinction between adolescents and adults in that adolescents accepted the NIP to much more degree than the adults. They also found a difference among adolescents based on where they lived: Speakers in “Inner Reykjavík” accepted the NIP significantly less than speakers living “Elsewhere”. In Table 1, results for two sentences in their study are shown (the numbers show percentages of speakers in each group who accepted each sentence). In the first NIP sentence, the accusative DP is an indirect object whereas the accusative DP in the second sentence is a direct object. It is striking how much higher a percentage of speakers accept the first one, which does not have an agentive ‘by’-phrase, than the second one, which contains a ‘by’-phrase.

Another judgment task was conducted in the Variation in Syntax project. Three large-scale surveys were conducted all around Iceland. Speakers were divided into four age groups: 15-year-olds (9th graders, b. 1991), 20–25, 40–45 and 65–70-year-old speakers. They were given three choices: *yes* ‘I could easily say this’, ? ‘I would hardly say this’ and *no* ‘I could not say this’. Table 2 shows results from the first survey (n=772) in which the NIP was extensively studied (the first number in each column shows number of speakers who accepted each sentence, the one below shows the percentage of acceptance within each age group).

	Adolescents		Adults
	Elsewhere	Inner Rvík	
Það var beðið mig að vaska upp. EXPL was asked.DFLT me.ACC to wash up ‘I was asked to do the dishes.’	74%	47%	8%
Það var skoðað bílinn af bifvélavirkjanum. EXPL was inspected.DFLT car.the.ACC by mechanic.the ‘The car was inspected by the car mechanic.’	33%	9%	1%

Table 1: Two NIP sentences in Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir’s (2002:112, 119) judgment task.

	15	20–25	40–45	65–70
Það var rekið manninn út af staðnum. EXPL was driven.away.DFLT man.the.ACC out of place.the ‘The man was thrown out of the place.’	95 47%	32 16%	7 4%	4 2%
Það var strax lagað bílinn af bifvélavirkjanum. EXPL was immediately fixed.DFLT car.the.ACC by mechanic.the ‘The car was immediately fixed by the car mechanic.’	57 28%	8 4%	2 1%	3 2%

Table 2: Two NIP sentences in Variation in Syntax judgment task (Thráinsson et al. to appear).

The numbers for the first sentence in Table 2 are rather typical for the acceptance rate of the NIP on the whole in the Variation in Syntax study (see Thráinsson et al. to appear for further results; see also Árnadóttir et al. 2011). However, the second example was the only NIP sentence tested with accusative object and a ‘by’-phrase. The percentage of young speakers who accept a ‘by’-phrase in the NIP, compared to the percentage of the same group of speakers who accept the NIP without a ‘by’-phrase, may be interpreted as an indication of ‘by’-phrases being grammatical in the NIP—we would not expect such high acceptance if they were ungrammatical (see discussion in Jónsson 2009:301–302). That is, though, not at all obvious.

There are a few possible explanations for why NIP sentences with ‘by’-phrases are so much less accepted than the NIP without a ‘by’-phrase. We will name two: First of all, Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir (2002, 2012) emphasize that the NIP is a change in progress and argue that the NIP is on the way of being reanalysed as an impersonal active construction. That would presumably mean that for some NIP speakers ‘by’-phrases are grammatical but not for others. Therefore, some NIP speakers should analyse the NIP as an active constructon (like the Polish *-no/to*-construction) whereas others would analyse it as passive (like the Ukrainian *-no/to*-construction). Second, as pointed out by Jónsson (2009:302), ‘by’-phrases in the Variation in Syntax survey also “seem to reduce the acceptability rate of regular passives, especially passives without DP-movement.” We will look at that in Section 3.

### 3 The Low Canonical Passive

Before we discuss our study on ‘by’-phrases, it is important to discuss the Low Canonical Passive (LCP; the term was suggested to us by Julie Legate, p.c.). In the LCP, the DP, which is the subject, is indefinite (otherwise it violates the Definiteness Effect) and stays low, as shown in (5). The NIP looks like the LCP in that the argument stays low. However, when we compare (5) to (1b) *Var lamið stúlkuna í klessu?* above we see that the participle shows agreement with the *nominative* argument in the LCP whereas in the NIP, the participle has default morphology and does not show agreement with the *accusative* argument. Also, a DP in the NIP can be definite as it is the object of the verb.

- (5) Var lamin **stúlka** í klessu?  
was beaten.F.NOM.SG girl.F.NOM in a.mess  
‘Was a girl beaten badly?’

(based on Eythórsson’s 2008:177 example)

According to Thráinsson (2007:272–273) and Eythórsson (2008:198), ‘by’-phrases in the LCP are much worse than in passive with DP-movement (Eythórsson marks LCP ‘by’-phrases with ??).

- (6) Það var gripinn einhver nemandi (?\*af kennaranum).  
 EXPL was caught.M.NOM.SG some.M.NOM.SG student.M.NOM by teacher.the  
 ‘Some student was caught.’ (Thráinsson 2007:272)

What the LCP and the NIP have in common is that the DP stays low. If ‘by’-phrases are in general dispreferred in the LCP (but not ungrammatical), then we might expect that they are also dispreferred in the NIP even though they might be grammatical. Therefore we would not expect that a high percentage of NIP speakers would accept agentive ‘by’-phrases in the NIP (see Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir 2002:fn. 10, p. 120, Thráinsson 2007:272–273, 279, Eythórsson 2008:197–198).

The first example in Table 3 shows results for an LCP sentence with a ‘by’-phrase from the Variation in Syntax project (both sentences are from the first survey). The second one shows results for a Canonical Passive sentence, also with a ‘by’-phrase. We see that the second sentence, which has DP-movement, is accepted much more than the first one, where the DP does not move. Even though this patterns to a certain degree with Thráinsson’s (2007:272–273) and Eythórsson’s (2008:198) judgments (see above), we do not know the reason for ‘by’-phrases being less accepted in the LCP.<sup>4</sup>

	15	20–25	40–45	65–70
Fyrst var þó skoðuð önnur flugvél af flugvirkjanum. first was though inspected another airplane by air.mechanic.the ‘Still, another plane was inspected first by the air mechanic.’	98 48%	71 36%	67 35%	72 41%
Hann var smíðaður af færeyska bátasmiðnum. it.M was built by Faroese boat.builder.the ‘It was built by the Faroese boat builder.’	147 72%	172 87%	164 85%	144 82%

Table 3: The LCP and the Canonical Passive with a ‘by’-phrase (Thráinsson et al. to appear).

The two judgment tasks discussed in Sections 2–3 have led to a much deeper understanding of the NIP. We do not yet, however, understand how ‘by’-phrases in the NIP (and the LCP) work. Are they grammatical for some speakers but not others or are they just dispreferred? To gain a better understanding of the problem, we conducted a different kind of a study, discussed in Sections 4–5.

## 4 A Study on ‘By’-Phrases

E.F. Sigurðsson (2012) came up with a different method to study ‘by’-phrases. He only tested a few speakers, though, and we decided to follow up on his idea. In this section we describe the study we did on ‘by’-phrases in the NIP among 12–16 year olds (adolescents in 7th–10th grade, b. 1997–2000) and 35 year old speakers or older (adults). The results are reported in Section 5.

A crucial part of the study was how speakers responded to the question ‘What language is spoken in Norway?’. We were not interested in the answer itself, Norwegian, but the morphological case of it. We defined those who answered in the accusative case as NIP speakers. Now the reader might think that when answering a question in, say, the passive, the structure of the fragment answer might just as well be in the active. As we discuss in Section 4.1, this is not so.

### 4.1 Fragment Answers

First of all, we wanted a group of speakers who definitely have the NIP. All speakers seem to have the Canonical Passive. We did not have any evidence indicating that some NIP speakers do not have the LCP although that would be important to look at further. To group people as either NIP speakers

<sup>4</sup>Although not shown in the glosses in Table 3, the passive participle agrees in number, gender and case with the subject in both sentences.

or Other speakers, i.e., speakers that have the Canonical Passive (and may or may not have the NIP), we asked the following question (we started by asking what language is spoken in Estonia, but when we noticed how difficult some speakers found the question, we changed it to Norway).

- (7) Hvaða tungumál er talað í Noregi?  
 what language.N.NOM/ACC is spoken.N.SG/DFLT in Norway  
 ‘What language is spoken in Norway?’

Importantly, neuter passive participles are identical to NIP participles (DFLT in glosses). *Hvaða tungumál* ‘what language’ is the same in the nominative and accusative case: *Tungumál* ‘language’ is neuter and syncretic for both cases; and *hvaða* ‘what’ does not inflect for case. Names of languages, however, are feminine and different between the two cases. This is shown in Table 4.

nom.	hvaða	tungumál	eistnesk-a	finnsk-a	norsk-a
acc.	hvaða	tungumál	eistnesk-u	finnsk-u	norsk-u

Table 4: Declension of ‘which’, ‘language’, ‘Estonian’, ‘Finnish’ and ‘Norwegian’, respectively.

Therefore, by asking the question in (7) we did not give speakers any information about the case but their answers reveal how they interpret it. If a speaker’s answer to (7) is accusative *norsku* ‘Norwegian’, we conclude that she is an NIP speaker. If her answer is nominative *norska*, we conclude that she interprets the question as Canonical Passive and therefore we add her to the category of Other speakers, a group of speakers who may consist of NIP speakers as well as of non-NIP speakers. The important part here was that the group of NIP speakers would not consist of any non-NIP speakers and this was a very quick and easy way to get such a group.

All of our speakers were asked the question in (7) and most speakers also got the question in (8), which has a ‘by’-phrase in it and is ambiguous, just like (7), between the NIP and the LCP. However, the fact that it contains a ‘by’-phrase should rule out the NIP if the NIP is an active construction. The Active Analysis therefore predicts that accusative answers to the question in (8) are out.

- (8) Hvaða tungumál er talað af Finnum?  
 what language.N.NOM/ACC is spoken.N.SG/DFLT by Finns  
 ‘What language is spoken by Finns?’

When a speaker interprets the question in (7) as, e.g., passive, it is crucial for our distinction that her fragment answer reflects (her interpretation of) the structure of the question. A brief discussion is therefore in order of why we argue that the structure of the fragment answer is the same as that of the question. What we are arguing is that when a speaker answers with a fragment (here, a DP) in the accusative case, it tells us that she is an NIP speaker and not that the answer can be a fragment of an active sentence like <Í Noregi talar fólk> *norsku* ‘<In Norway, people speak> Norwegian’. Merchant (2013) argues that whereas Voice mismatches are possible in low/little ellipsis (VP-ellipsis), they are impossible in high/big ellipsis. Relevant English examples are shown in (9) for low ellipsis and in (10) for high ellipsis.

- (9) a. **Active antecedent, passive ellipsis**  
 The janitor must remove the trash whenever it is apparent that it should be. <removed>  
 b. **Passive antecedent, active ellipsis**  
 The system can be used by anyone who wants to. <use it> (Merchant 2013:78–79)
- (10) a. **Active antecedent, passive ellipsis**  
 \*Someone murdered Joe, but we don’t know who by.  
 b. **Passive antecedent, active ellipsis**  
 \*Joe was murdered, but we don’t know who. (Merchant 2013:81)

These facts can also be shown with fragment answers (Merchant 2013). In (11), the fragment answer is a *by*-phrase, which indicates passive voice, but the question is in the active. Since this is high ellipsis, the fragment answer is ungrammatical.

- (11) Q: Who is sending you to Iraq? A: \*By Bush. (Merchant 2013:82)

The same facts hold in Icelandic, which, unlike English, has rich case morphology. In the passive voice question in (12), the *wh*-phrase is in the nominative. Therefore, the fragment answer must be in the nominative—an accusative case answer would reflect an active answer (Voice mismatch; Merchant discusses similar German examples, which show clear contrasts between active and passive with case marking on DPs, unlike English).

- (12) Q: Hver var myrtur? A: Guðmundur / \*Guðmund.  
 who.M.NOM.SG was murdered.M.NOM.SG G.NOM / G.ACC  
 Q: ‘Who was murdered?’ A: ‘Guðmundur.’ (all speakers, since *hver* = nom.)

Similarly, in the active voice question in (13), the *wh*-phrase (the patient) is in the accusative and therefore the fragment answer must be in the accusative. If it were in the nominative, it would reflect passive voice (cf. (12) above) and would therefore be a Voice mismatch in a high ellipsis. That is ungrammatical, as we have already seen.

- (13) Q: Hvern myrti Páll? A: \*Guðmundur / Guðmund.  
 who.ACC murdered P.NOM G.NOM / G.ACC  
 Q: ‘Who did Páll murder?’ A: ‘Guðmundur.’

Finally, for the NIP question in (14), where the *wh*-phrase is in the accusative, the fragment answer obligatorily is in the accusative as well.

- (14) Q: Hvern var myrt? A: \*Guðmundur / Guðmund.  
 who.ACC was murdered.DFLT G.NOM / G.ACC  
 Q: ‘Who was murdered?’ A: ‘Guðmundur.’

Therefore, for a question like (7) *Hvaða tungumál er talað í Noregi?* ‘What language is spoken in Norway?’, the fragment answer will tell us how the speaker interprets the construction: If she gives an answer in the nominative, it is the passive; if the answer is in the accusative, it is the NIP.

#### 4.2 Ambiguous *Af*-Phrases

The preposition *af* is not only used as an agentive ‘by’-phrase. Consider the following sentence:

- (15) Páll keypti bókina af Guðmundi.  
 Páll.NOM bought book.the.ACC from/\*by Guðmundur  
 ‘Páll bought the book from Guðmundur.’

Here, *af* means ‘from’ and cannot mean ‘by’. It is crucial that the PP in (15) is optional. That means that when a sentence like (15) is passivized, the *af*-phrase is ambiguous; *af* can then either mean ‘by’ or ‘from’.<sup>5</sup> In (16), *Páll* is either the buyer (if *af* means ‘by’) or the seller (if *af* means ‘from’).

- (16) Bókin var keypt af Páli.  
 book.the.F.NOM was bought.F.NOM.SG from/by Páll  
 ‘The book was bought from/by Páll.’

We included an ambiguous *af*-phrase in our study. The main purpose was to see whether some NIP speakers would interpret it as a ‘by’-phrase. Based on answers to the question in (7) ‘What language is spoken in Norway?’, we presented our speakers with a story of which there were two almost identical versions: LCP version (boldfaced in (17)) which Other speakers got and NIP version (underlined) presented to NIP speakers.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Other verbs that take an optional *af*-phrase include *stela* (*af*) ‘steal (from)’ and *taka* (*af*) ‘take (from)’.

<sup>6</sup>Some of the younger speakers did not know what a fishing quota was and were confused, even though we explained it on the assignment (see (17)). Using something else that everyone understands might have been better but we decided to stick to E.F. Sigurðsson’s (2012) study as it had already been tested on a few speakers.

- (17) Síðustu daga hafa verið fregnir af því að nokkur hreyfing hafi verið á fiskveiðikvóta, en kvóti er leyfi til að veiða fisk. Nýlega var **keyptur mikill kvóti** / keypt mikinn kvóta af útgerðarmanninum Aðalsteini Guðmundssyni. Aðalsteinn býr á Patreksfirði en hann á fiskiskipið Aðalmund.

‘For the past few days, there has been news about a fishing quota moving from one place to another. A quota is a permission to fish. Recently, a large quota was bought from/by the fishing vessel owner A.G. A. lives in P. and he is the owner of the fishing vessel A.’

For our purposes, only the boldfaced/underlined sentence matters for us here; it is glossed in (18):

- (18) Nýlega var keyptur mikill kvóti /keypt  
recently was bought.M.NOM.SG much.M.NOM.SG quota.M.NOM.SG /bought.DFLT  
mikinn kvóta af útgerðarmanninum Aðalsteini Guðmundssyni.  
much.M.ACC.SG quota.M.ACC.SG from/by fishing.vessel.owner.the A. G.

When our speakers had read the story, they were asked to write—with the help of keywords—about the man in the story. All sentences were supposed to start with *hann* ‘he’ or *maðurinn* ‘the man’:

- (19) 1. Maðurinn heitir [‘The man’s name is’] \_\_\_\_\_ (nafn [‘name’])  
2. \_\_\_\_\_ (atvinna [‘occupation’])  
3. \_\_\_\_\_ (kvóti [‘fishing quota’])  
4. \_\_\_\_\_ (staður [‘place’])  
5. \_\_\_\_\_ (skip [‘ship’])  
6. Annað [‘other’] \_\_\_\_\_

We were interested in the answer to 3 in (19): Speakers who answer, e.g., *Hann seldi mikinn kvóta* ‘He sold a large quota’ show that they interpret *af* as meaning ‘from’ whereas those who answer, e.g., *Hann keypti mikinn kvóta* ‘He bought a large quota’, interpret *af* as ‘by’.

### 4.3 Speakers

Before we look at the results, a note on the speakers is in order. We conducted the study in two schools in Inner Reykjavík: Laugalækjarskóli (7th–10th graders; n=196) and Hagaskóli (10th graders; n=16); and three schools Elsewhere: Ölduselsskóli (10th graders; n=27), Hamraskóli (7th graders; n=20) and Myllubakkaskóli (8th–9th graders; n=50). All speakers got the question in (7) above. The first group we tested, 7th and 8th graders in Laugalækjarskóli, did not get the question in (8) since it was not suggested in E.F. Sigurðsson 2012; the question was added later. Speakers in Myllubakkaskóli did not get the ambiguous *af*-phrase (see Section 4.2)—instead they were asked the following five questions (we were interested in the answers to (20a,d)=(7), (8)):

- (20) a. Hvaða tungumál er talað í Noregi? ‘What language is spoken in Norway?’  
b. Hver er forseti Íslands? ‘Who is the president of Iceland?’  
c. Hver er höfuðborg Danmerkur? ‘What is the capital city of Denmark?’  
d. Hvaða tungumál er talað af Finnum? ‘What language is spoken by Finns?’  
e. Í hvaða landi búa Svíar? ‘In which country do Swedes live?’

No adult speaker, however, was asked the question in (8). Most of the adults live in Reykjavík.

## 5 Results

We start by looking at the results for (7) *Hvaða tungumál er talað í Noregi?* (see Table 5); we excluded a speaker’s results if she did not answer the question with one word in the nominative or accusative. A much higher percentage of adolescents than adults answer in the accusative—the difference between adolescents and adults is statistically significant ( $p=.002$ ; here and henceforth we use Fisher’s Exact Test). If Voice mismatch would be grammatical here, we might expect the percentage of adults to be higher. Instead, it is very low, which, we argue, is because the NIP is much

less frequent among older speakers. It should, however, be emphasized that the numbers in the table only indicate that **at least** 23% of the adolescents and 3% of the adults are NIP speakers; if a speaker answers in the nominative to (7) (or (8)), it does not entail that accusative is ungrammatical for her.

	Nom. (LCP)	Acc. (NIP)
Adolescents	238 (77%)	71 (23%)
Adults	37 (97%)	1 (3%)

Table 5: Nominative and accusative answers to the question ‘What language is spoken in Norway?’

Next, let us look at the results for those speakers (adolescents) that were asked the two questions in (7) *Hvaða tungumál er talað í Noregi?* and (8) *Hvaða tungumál er talað af Finnum?* (see Table 6).<sup>7</sup> The fact that 20 speakers answer in the accusative to (8) ‘What language is spoken by Finns?’ suggests that ‘by’-phrases are grammatical in the NIP. This number is very low when compared to the number of speakers who answered in the nominative (200) but when compared to the number of speakers who answered (7) ‘What language is spoken in Norway’ in the accusative (38), it is rather high. The results in Table 6 are in line with results from the two judgment tasks (see Tables 1–2) where NIP sentences without ‘by’-phrases were accepted to a higher degree than NIP sentences with ‘by’-phrases. Interestingly, accusative is produced significantly less as an answer to the question with the ‘by’-phrase (8) than to the one without it (7) ( $p=.016$ ). Five speakers, however, answer (8) in the accusative but (7) in the nominative case—23 speakers answered (7) in the accusative and (8) in the nominative and 15 speakers answered both in the accusative.

	Nom. (LCP)	Acc. (NIP)
‘What language is spoken in Norway?’	182 (83%)	38 (17%)
‘What language is spoken by Finns?’	200 (91%)	20 (9%)

Table 6: Adolescents’ answers.

This poses a problem: If ‘by’-phrases were ungrammatical in the NIP, we would not expect NIP speakers to produce accusative when answering (8); if ‘by’-phrases are grammatical in the NIP, there should not be a difference between the two questions. Tony Kroch (p.c.) has pointed out that the results may suggest that for some NIP speakers, ‘by’-phrases are grammatical but not for others; then possibly some NIP speakers have a construction with the same properties as the Ukrainian *-no/to*-construction, which allows ‘by’-phrases, whereas other NIP speakers have a construction similar to the Polish construction, which does not allow ‘by’-phrases (see Section 2). Thus, these results do not necessarily refute the Active Analysis, especially if Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) are right in that the NIP is on its way of being reanalysed as an active impersonal.

Another possibility is that ‘by’-phrases are grammatical in the NIP to all NIP speakers but that many speakers prefer ‘by’-phrases in the Canonical Passive: When the question in (8) is interpreted as NIP, the *wh*-phrase A’-moves to spec,CP. When the same question is interpreted as passive, the DP possibly A-moves to spec,TP before moving to spec,CP. Therefore, it would not be an example of the LCP but rather Canonical Passive. We saw before that ‘by’-phrases are less accepted in passive sentences without DP-movement, whatever the reason is. Even though a speaker interprets the question in (7) as NIP, she may interpret (8) as Canonical Passive if she disprefers ‘by’-phrases in sentences where the DP stays low. This needs to be studied further.

<sup>7</sup>In Table i below, we present the results for all answers, whether or not speakers answered both questions. Again, the difference is significant ( $p<.001$ ) between the LCP and the NIP, with and without a ‘by’-phrase.

	Nom. (LCP)	Acc. (NIP)
‘What language is spoken in Norway?’	238 (77%)	71 (23%)
‘What language is spoken by Finns?’	200 (91%)	20 (9%)

Table i: All adolescents’ answers.

Next we look at results for the ambiguous *af*-phrase, shown in Tables 7–8.<sup>8</sup>

	<i>af</i> = ‘by’	<i>af</i> = ‘from’
NIP speakers ( <i>keypt mikinn kvóta</i> )	11 (28%)	28 (72%)
Other speakers ( <i>keyptur mikill kvóti</i> )	55 (41%)	78 (59%)

Table 7: Adolescents’ interpretation of ambiguous *af*-phrases.

	<i>af</i> = ‘by’	<i>af</i> = ‘from’
NIP speakers ( <i>keypt mikinn kvóta</i> )	0 (0%)	1 (100%)
Other speakers ( <i>keyptur mikill kvóti</i> )	7 (23%)	23 (77%)

Table 8: Adults’ interpretation of ambiguous *af*-phrases.

We see in Table 7, that 28% of the NIP adolescent speakers interpret the ambiguous *af*-phrase as an agentive ‘by’-phrase. This is another indication of ‘by’-phrases being grammatical in the NIP. It is still possible, just as before, that for some NIP speakers, ‘by’-phrases are ungrammatical in the NIP. The difference between NIP speakers and Other speakers in the way they interpret *af* is interesting: 28% of NIP speakers interpret it as ‘by’ whereas 41% of Other speakers interpret it that way in the LCP. This difference is not significant ( $p=.19$ ), however. Therefore, we can only speculate over the results. It is possible that we would get a statistically significant difference with a larger group of speakers. Then it might be the case that NIP speakers make a distinction between the NIP and the LCP, such that they interpret ambiguous *af*-phrases as ‘from’ in the NIP but as ‘by’ in the LCP.

Most adults categorized as Other speakers (see Table 8) interpret the *af*-phrase in the LCP as meaning ‘from’. That is not surprising. 7 out of 30 speakers interpret it as a ‘by’-phrase, though, which suggests that this is not ungrammatical, at least not for all speakers. That these speakers interpret *af* as ‘by’ is in a way unexpected since the ‘from’ reading should be available to all speakers.

When we compare adult Other speakers to adolescent Other speakers, we see that the percentage of those who interpret *af* as ‘by’ is almost twice as high among adolescents. This difference between adults and adolescents is not statistically significant ( $p=.09$ ). We do not know how to explain this if it is not a coincidence. Remember, however, that the group of Other speakers may very well include NIP speakers, and it is likely that there are more of them among adolescent Other speakers than adults. It would be interesting to test NIP speakers further to see whether they distinguish between the NIP and the LCP in use or if this is a case of two competing grammars (cf. Kroch 1989).<sup>9</sup>

## 6 Conclusion

Our focus in this paper has been on whether ‘by’-phrases in the NIP are grammatical. The question is important for the analysis of the construction: If they are grammatical, the Active Analysis (Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir 2002) cannot be correct. In short, our results support Jónsson’s (2009) conclusion, based on the judgment task data discussed above, that agentive ‘by’-phrases are indeed grammatical in the NIP but the matter is possibly much more complicated. When NIP speakers in our study were presented with an NIP sentence that had an *af*-phrase that was ambiguous between ‘by’ and ‘from’, most of them interpreted it as ‘from’ whereas a little less than one third interpreted it as ‘by’. This strongly indicates that ‘by’-phrases are grammatical—why else would they not interpret it as ‘from’ since that reading should definitely be available?

Our results indicate that there may be a difference between adults and adolescents w.r.t. to interpretation of an ambiguous *af*-phrase in the LCP. Future research might benefit from using both

<sup>8</sup>Some adolescents found the *af*-phrases ambiguous when they did the quota story assignment (some realized it after they had finished the task). They were told to write the interpretation that came first to mind.

<sup>9</sup>Ingason et al. (2013:98) estimate “that the first speakers who do not acquire the Canonical Passive will be born around 2050”.

a judgment task, to locate non-NIP speakers, and our method because it is important to compare younger and older *non*-NIP speakers. Such research might confirm that there is a difference between younger and older speakers w.r.t. ‘by’-phrases in the LCP. It will also be important to study how NIP speakers interpret the LCP and compare it to a) the results for non-NIP speakers and b) how these same NIP speakers interpret ambiguous *af* in the NIP.

A few speakers, 20 out of 220, in our survey produced accusative when answering the question ‘What language is spoken by Finns?’, which is another indication of ‘by’-phrases being grammatical in the NIP. More speakers, 38 out of 220 answered a similar question without a ‘by’-phrase in the accusative; the difference is statistically significant. These results raise the important question whether some speakers analyse the NIP differently than others—even though ‘by’-phrases are grammatical for some speakers, it is possible that they are not for other NIP speakers. That might be an indication of a reanalysis of the NIP from a passive to an active construction (Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir 2002). It goes without saying that this needs to be studied further.

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