



## 1. Introduction

- The Definiteness Effect (DE) has been argued to play a key role in the development of the New Impersonal Passive (NIP) in Icelandic
  - The DE applies in the Canonical Passive (CanP), see (1a), whereas it does not in the NIP, see (1b)
- That is, what makes (1a) ungrammatical is the fact that the definite NP stays in situ whereas the accusative case NP in (1b) can be definite without affecting the grammaticality of the sentence

- (1) a. \*Það var lamin stúlkan.  
there was beaten.F.NOM the.girl.F.NOM  
Intended: ‘The girl was beaten.’  
b. %Það var lamið stúlkuna í klessu.  
there was beaten.DFLT the.girl.F.ACC in a.mess  
‘The girl was badly beaten.’

- Two hypotheses on DE’s involvement in the rise of the NIP:
1. Eythórssón (2008) suggested that a “leakage” in the DE led to reanalysis of the CanP with a definite postverbal NP
  2. Ingason, Legate and Yang (2013), on the other hand, argued that the rise of the DE was a crucial factor in the spread of the NIP
- This is an unresolved issue: The purpose of the current paper is to examine quantitative facts about the DE in the history of Icelandic
  - To evaluate different analyses of the DE (and the NIP) and its development, we need a historical corpus
- The Icelandic Parsed Historical Corpus (IcePaHC; Wallenberg et al. 2011) is exactly what we need

## 2. The Definiteness Effect in Modern Icelandic

- Existential constructions are subject to a definiteness restriction:
- (2) a. There is **a wolf** at the door.  
b. \*There is **the wolf** at the door.
- (3) Það er **úlfur** / \***úlfurinn** við dyrnar.  
there is a.wolf.NOM / the.wolf.NOM at the.door
- This is the **Definiteness Effect (DE)**, which applies in various constructions, including the Canonical Passive (see also (1a) above):
- (4) Það var lesin **bók** / \***bókin**.  
there was read.F.NOM a.book.F.NOM / the.book.F.NOM  
‘A book was read.’
- For (4) (and also (1a) and (3)) to be grammatical with a definite NP, it must move to subject position:
- (5) **Bókin** var lesin.  
the.book.F.NOM was read.F.NOM  
‘The book was read.’

## 3. The Lack of DE in the NIP

- The New Impersonal Passive (NIP) is a construction with passive morphology without NP movement to subject position, whether or not the NP is definite
- The NP is assigned objective case in the NIP, accusative in (6). This differs from the CanP, see (5), where a NP that is assigned accusative case in the active is in the nominative case in the passive
- (6) %Það var lesið **bókina**.  
there was read.DFLT the.book.ACC  
‘The book was read.’
- By comparing the NIP in (6) and the CanP in (4) and (5), we can see that the DE does not apply in the NIP but only the CanP
  - This suggests that the status of the theme argument (‘book’) is different in the NIP than in the CanP

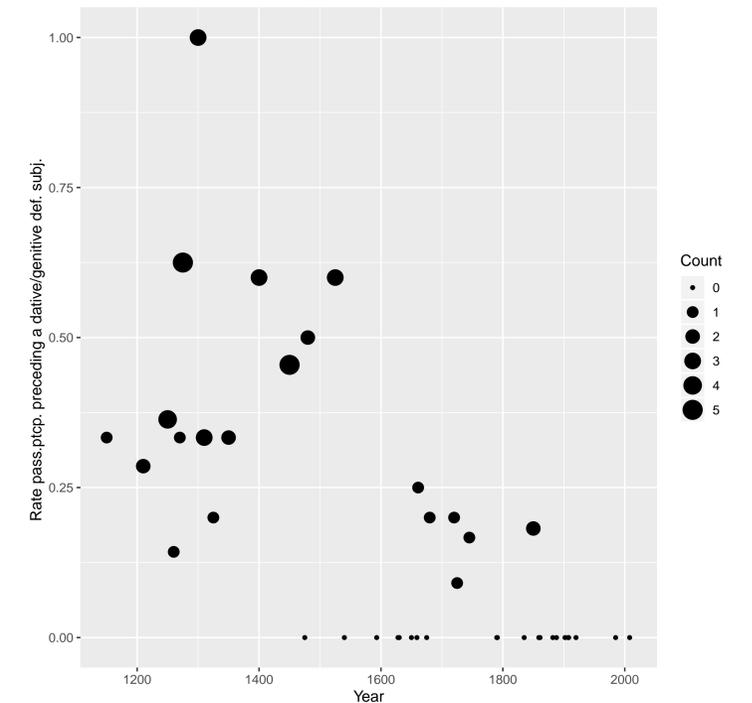
## 4. DE as a Factor in the Emergence of the NIP

- For an account of the emergence of the NIP, Eythórssón (2008) looked at cases where CanP and NIP are the same on the surface
  - He suggests that there may be exceptional DE violations, a “leakage”, in CanP input in language acquisition, such as in (7) where *litla barnið* is syncretic for nominative and accusative
- Nominative in (7) would reflect a DE violation in the CanP whereas accusative would reflect a NIP grammar
- (7) %Það var skammað litla barnið.  
there was scolded little the.child.NOM/ACC  
‘The little child was scolded.’

- Such a leakage is found at all times in the history of Icelandic, as pointed out by Eythórssón, and corroborated through search queries in IcePaHC. We focus here on dative and genitive leakage
- (8) IP-MAT\*|IP-SUB\* idoms VAN|BAN|DAN|RAN|MAN|HAN  
AND IP-MAT\*|IP-SUB\* idoms NP-SBJ\*  
AND VAN|BAN|DAN|RAN|MAN|HAN precedes NP-SBJ\*  
AND NP-SBJ\* idoms NPR-D|NPR-G|NPRS-D|NPRS-G|D-D|D-G|PRO-D|PRO-G
- A 13th century example is shown below — it is ungrammatical for modern non-NIP speakers
- Proper names are definite and therefore the dative NP *Sturlu* would have to move to subject position to make this example grammatical in modern Icelandic
- (9) Var þá dæmt Sturlu Staðarhólsland [...]  
was then adjudged Sturla.DAT Staðarhólsland.NOM  
(ID 1250.STURLUNGA.NAR-SAG,436.1625)
- Even though DE violations are found at all times, the question is whether there has been a change from older to modern Icelandic

## 5. DE in the History of Icelandic

- To evaluate whether there has been any change in the history of the DE, we look at quantitative data from IcePaHC, which contains around 1 million words from the 12th through the 21st century
  - We focus here on definite NPs in the dative or genitive following passive participles (cf. (9)) and take a look at relative frequencies over the time period covered by IcePaHC
- These are shown in the figure below



- The relative frequency is higher as we go further back in time
  - Therefore, it looks like Ingason et al. (2013) are right when they say that there was a rise in the DE, with decreasing relative frequency of apparent DE violations over time
- The figure suggests that in earlier Icelandic there may not have been such a phenomenon as DE
- 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

## 6. 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 Eythórssón (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
- This may indicate that there was no actual DE at the time