

# The passive in Heritage Icelandic\*

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## 1 Introduction

Research has established that syntax tends to be rather well preserved in heritage languages, but that case marking is vulnerable and that an extensive use of the unmarked case is common (Benmamoun et al. 2013). This has been shown for instance for both Russian and Spanish heritage languages, as the inherent subject dative is replaced by the nominative (Benmamoun et al. 2013). This seems also to be the case in Heritage Icelandic, which has shown increased tendency to replace oblique subjects with nominative subjects (Arnbjörnsdóttir 2006; Óskarsdóttir & Bráinsson 2017; Björnsdóttir 2018).

So, what about constructions that require syntactical change and are morphologically complex, such as the passive voice? In many languages, the transformation from active to passive voice includes word order change. The functions of subject and object are reversed, making it more difficult to parse and produce (see e.g., Rodriguez et al. 2017). In Icelandic, the morphology is also complex as the auxiliary and the past participle behave differently based on the case, requiring two different strategies; dynamic features of number, person, and gender come into play with structural case but do not with lexical case. Because of this complexity, passives cross-linguistically are acquired rather late in first language, generally around the age of 6 to 7 (e.g., Marinis 2007; Kirby 2010). This is also the case in Icelandic as research shows that Icelandic pre-school children have difficulties comprehending the passive (Sigurjónsdóttir 2015). As Tsimpli (2014) has pointed out, late acquired phenomena are often more affected by reduced input, and the passive can therefore be difficult for heritage speakers, and research has shown that

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\* When it was time to write my thesis I couldn't choose between Hotze and Lisa. I knew they were both great and that they would both contribute enormously to my work, making it better and making me better. However, they had somewhat different styles and approaches, and I knew that I needed both to succeed. I had taken classes from Hotze, and I had been his teaching assistant, so I knew he would be supportive and encouraging, but I also knew he would push me, not let me get away with slacking off and scold me when needed — and I knew I needed that. Fortunately, they agreed to co-supervise me and for that I'm forever grateful. Thanks for all you did for me, Hotze, and you Lisa both.

young heritage speakers of Spanish simply avoid the passive (Silva-Corvalán 2014). So, what is the status of the passive in Heritage Icelandic, a language spoken by the descendants of Icelandic immigrants to North America, bilinguals who live in an English-dominant language environment?

The goal of this paper is to explore the passive voice in Heritage Icelandic as it pertains to the syntactic structure and case assignment, to see whether the passive is stable or vulnerable in the language. For this purpose, 29 speakers of Heritage Icelandic participated in a task-specific examination, where they had to choose their preferred version of a passive sentence. Results show that the syntactic structure of the passive is still rather strong, as suspected, but that there are definite signs of attrition in case marking.

## 2 The passive in Icelandic

The passive in Icelandic is formed with the auxiliary verb *vera* ‘be’ plus a past participle of the main verb:<sup>1</sup>

- (1) Jón var kysstur.  
 John was.PAST kissed.PAST PART  
 ‘John was kissed.’

The subject of the passive sentence corresponds to the object of a similar active voice sentence. It is base generated in object position and moved to a specifier position with an NP-movement (e.g., Þráinsson 2005). Case assignment then depends on the case. If the original object is not assigned a lexical case, it is assigned structural case in its object position, which in Icelandic is the accusative. Then, when it is passivized into subject position, it is assigned the nominative.

- (2) a. Jón barði **Guðmund**.  
 Jón beat Guðmundur.ACC  
 ‘John beat Guðmundur.’

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<sup>1</sup> The following abbreviations are used in this paper: ACC = accusative, DAT = dative, DET = determiner, GEN = genitive, NOM = nominative, NT = neuter gender, P = person, PAST = past tense, PAST PART = past participle, PL = plural, SG = singular.

- b. **Guðmundur** var barinn.  
 Guðmundur.NOM was beaten  
 ‘Guðmundur was beaten.’

If the original object is assigned a lexical case (dative or genitive), it does not undergo a change in case when passivized, resulting in an oblique subject.

- (3) a. Maðurinn ýtti **Guðmundi**.  
 man.DET pushed Guðmundur.DAT  
 ‘The man pushed Guðmundur.’
- b. **Guðmundi** var ýtt.  
 Guðmundur.DAT was pushed  
 ‘Guðmundur was pushed.’
- (4) a. Hann saknaði **Guðmundar**.  
 he missed Guðmundur.GEN  
 ‘He missed Guðmundur.’
- b. **Guðmundar** var saknað.  
 Guðmundur.GEN was missed  
 ‘Guðmundur was missed.’

In addition to this different behaviour in case assignment, there is also difference in agreement. With structural case the subject and the verb agree in case whereas with lexical case they do not; the auxiliary is always in third-person singular and the past participle in the neuter.

- (5) a. Konunni var ýtt.  
 woman.DET.3P.SG was.3P.SG pushed.NT  
 ‘The woman was pushed.’
- b. Mér var ýtt.  
 I.1P.SG was.3P.SG pushed.NT  
 ‘I was pushed.’
- c. Ykkur var ýtt.  
 you.2P.PL was.3P.SG pushed.NT  
 ‘You were pushed.’

In Icelandic, the agent is usually not present in a passive sentence although it can be introduced in a prepositional phrase:

- (6) Konunninni var ýtt af mannum.  
 woman.DET was pushed by man.DET  
 ‘The woman was pushed by the man.’

One of the most noticeable changes in Icelandic syntax in recent years is the so called “New Passive”, first mentioned in print in 1979 (Jónsson 1979). In the “New Passive”, the object doesn’t raise to the subject position but stays in object position and keeps its case, whether it is structural or lexical. Instead, the expletive *það* ‘it’ is inserted into the subject position:

- (7) a. Jón barði mig.  
 John beat me.ACC  
 ‘John beat me.’ [Active]
- b. Ég var barinn.  
 I.NOM was beaten  
 ‘I was beaten.’ [Passive]
- c. Það var barið mig.  
 it was beaten me.ACC  
 ‘It was beaten me’ = ‘I was beaten.’ [“New Passive”]

This “New Passive” construction is extremely common among young people but hardly used by anyone over the age of 30 (see e.g., Sigurjónsdóttir & Maling 2001; Sigurjónsdóttir 2018). The reasons for the change are not clear but this new construction is obviously much simpler than the original passive as it does not require NP-movement of the object, nor a change in case; the object stays in-situ, in its original case.

When comparing the Icelandic passive to the English passive, we see the same NP-movement of the object from object position to the subject position, and when the object/subject is the first-person pronoun, we even see a change in structural case (8), something that is not visible in any other instance (9):

- (8) a. John beat me.  
 b. I was beaten by John.

- (9) a. John beat **the woman**.  
b. **The woman** was beaten by John.

As English has all but lost its case marking, speakers of English do generally not have to think about a change of case in their passives; this is something that might affect the passives in Heritage Icelandic. We might therefore expect the syntactic structure of the passive to be rather stable in Heritage Icelandic but the case assignment to be affected.

### 3 The current research

Heritage Icelandic is a language spoken by the descendants of Icelandic immigrants to North America from approximately 1870 till the First World War. The speakers today are generally third or fourth generation speakers and they are getting old; many of them haven't used the language on regular basis for decades. Of those speakers that can still be considered fluent speakers of the language, most live in Manitoba, Canada, particularly in the area called New Iceland. There are also still some speakers in Saskatchewan and North Dakota, but fluent speakers in other provinces or states are usually people that grew up on the prairies and moved away during their adult years.

Data used in this study were elicited in 2014 from 29 speakers, 13 men and 16 women. Of these 29, 14 were from Manitoba, 4 from Saskatchewan, and 8 from North Dakota. Average age was 75.18, ranging from 35 to 97. All but the youngest speaker had spoken Icelandic from birth, but it varied at what time English took over as the dominant language. In general, the people from Manitoba only spoke Icelandic until they went to school around the age of six, but the speakers from Saskatchewan and North Dakota were more likely to have been exposed to English earlier, even from birth. Considering that children do not acquire the passive until around 6 to 7, as previously stated, this means that English had already taken on a leading role for most speakers by the time they had fully acquired the passive in their heritage language.

The speakers took a judgement test where they were asked to choose acceptable sentences from a list of various passive sentences. First, they would see a context sentence and then three or four options were given

for the test sentence.<sup>2</sup> These sentences would vary in case and in syntactical structure.

- (10) *Það kom upp leiðinlegt atvik.*  
 ‘There was an unpleasant incident.’
- a. **Stráknum** var hrint. ‘The **boy (DAT)** was pushed.’  
 [Regular passive]
- b. **Strákurinn** var hrintur. ‘The **boy (NOM)** was pushed.’  
 [Passive with NOM]
- c. Það var hrint **stráknum**. ‘It was pushed the **boy (DAT)**.’  
 [“New Passive”]
- d. Það var hrint **strákurinn**. ‘It was pushed the **boy (NOM)**.’  
 [“New Passive” with NOM]

There were two different tests used, each including six passive sentences, three that required a nominative subject and three that required a dative subject. Genitive was not tested as very few verbs that assign genitive can be passivized and they are very rare in the language. They may therefore not be in the vocabulary of a heritage speaker.

In addition to differences regarding case, the test sentences differed in syntactical complexity such that two sentences had direct word order, two included an interrogative pronoun in subject position, requiring a V2-inversion, and two sentences included an AdvP or PP in subject position, which also requires a V2-inversion. Even though the syntactic structures of the passives in Icelandic and English are rather similar, English does not have V2-inversion, so the more complex of these sentences might cause the speakers some problems.

Based on what we now know, three predications are made for Heritage Icelandic:

*Prediction 1: The passive construction is rather well preserved but there will be signs of confusion.*

*Prediction 2: The “New Passive” is not common.*

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<sup>2</sup> Three sentences were given for structural case as there were no sentences with an accusative subject. However, four sentences were given as an option when the original object was in the dative case.

*Prediction 3: There will be a tendency for the nominative to replace oblique subjects.*

## 4 Results

### 4.1 The syntax

As the syntax of the English passive doesn't differ much from that of Icelandic, and as syntax is generally not much affected in heritage languages, we didn't expect the syntax of the passive in Heritage Icelandic to show much sign of weakening. In fact, the correct syntactical structure, including an NP-movement, was chosen 76% of the time whereas the syntactical structure of the "New Passive", with the object in-situ, was chosen 24% of the time. Furthermore, eleven speakers, or 38% of all speakers, always picked the correct sentence structure, indicating no syntactical confusion with the passive for them.

However, 18 speakers (62%) did pick the in-situ version at least once, indicating that their passives may be at least somewhat shaky, and Rodriguez et al. (2017) showed that the passive can indeed cause heritage speakers some confusion, particularly in production. When the data from these 18 speakers are examined, we see not only inter-speaker variation but also intra-speaker variation as some of the speakers only picked the in-situ version once or twice whereas others seemed to prefer that version. Six speakers chose the in-situ version more often than the NP-movement version, although all but one chose the regular passive construction at least once. That speaker correctly chose the regular passive in the pre-test sentence but never in the actual test.

Interestingly enough, when we look at the syntactical structures of these passive sentences, one might have speculated that the heritage speakers would do better with simple constructions than those that require a V2-movement, particularly since there are signs of weakening of the V2-system in Heritage Icelandic (Arnbjörnsdóttir et al. 2018). However, the sentences that started with an interrogative pronoun, requiring a V2-inversion, had the highest accuracy rate, 86.4%, whereas the simple construction and the construction with an AdvP or PP in the initial position, also requiring a V2-inversion, had an accuracy rate just over 74%. There are therefore no signs of the simpler constructions faring better when it comes to the passive.

For some speakers the passive seems still strong.<sup>3</sup> However, as 62% of the speakers show some signs of affected passive, and some of them seem to choose the in-situ version over the one that includes an NP-movement, there might be reasons to speculate that Prediction 1 might be underestimating the situation.

*P1: The passive construction is rather well preserved but there will be signs of confusion.*

The correct construction is picked 75% of the time, but 62% of the speakers nevertheless pick the incorrect construction at least once.  
= P1 borne out?

Now, one might believe that 24% is a rather high number for problems with the syntax, particularly when the two languages are so similar, and that it might indicate that the “New Passive” also exists in Heritage Icelandic, but before we jump to conclusions, we should look at the in-situ sentences in more detail.

## 4.2 The “New Passive”

As discussed in Section 2, the so-called “New Passive” has become increasingly common in the language of younger Icelanders, and the fact that 62% of the speakers pick the in-situ-version at least once might indicate that a similar change is taking place in Heritage Icelandic, even though there has been no new immigration to talk of for over a hundred years. However, when we look at our heritage data, we see one major difference between Icelandic and Heritage Icelandic — case. The thing to remember here is that in the “New Passive”, the in-situ object includes no case change, meaning that a dative object stays dative, and an accusative object stays accusative, as seen in (7c). However, when we look at the in-situ sentences in Heritage Icelandic, we see quite a different pattern. In 73% of the cases, the speakers choose the nominative object and only in 27% of the instances the “New Passive” version with an accusative or dative object. This means that the “New Passive” construction is only chosen in 7% of the instances, by only nine speakers. What we have here can therefore hardly be the rise of a “New Passive”,

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<sup>3</sup> We should nevertheless keep in mind that Rodriguez et al.’s (2017) study indicated that recognizing the correct passive is easier than producing it correctly and as this study only required the speakers to pick out the correct passive, we might see stronger outcomes than if we asked the speakers to produce the passive.

like that in Icelandic, but instead we seem to have indications of an expanded use of the nominative case. Prediction 3 is therefore borne out:

P2: *The “New Passive” is not common.*

Only 7% of the sentences chosen are of that construction.

### 4.3 The case system

Case is much more vulnerable in heritage languages than syntax and, in the passive, the Icelandic case system is much more complex than that of English. One would therefore expect the passive in Heritage Icelandic to show more attrition regarding case.

In the sentences where a dative subject is expected, 68% of the speakers correctly pick the sentence with the dative subject and the nominative is only picked 32% of the time, indicating a rather strong position of the dative in passive sentences. However, as 16 speakers (55%) chose a nominative subject over a dative one at least once, it also tells us that just like with the syntax, there is both inter-speaker variation and intra-speaker variation when it comes to case.<sup>4</sup>

As we see strong signs of intra-speaker variation, it is interesting to see whether it is completely random when the dative is kept or whether there is any pattern to it; that is, whether the structure of the sentence might affect the choice of case. The data show that the dative keeps its position best in a direct word order, 76% accuracy rate, but least with an interrogative pronoun, 62% accuracy rate. The sentence structure with an AdvP or PP falls in between with 67% accuracy rate. The fact that V2-inversion didn't seem to affect the accuracy rate of the NP-raising might make it less likely that the complexity of the syntax is affecting case assignment here, and a much bigger data pool would be required for any such claim. However, Icelandic is a V2-language and V2 is more vulnerable in topicalization structures in Heritage Icelandic (Arnbjörnsdóttir et al. 2018), so we cannot rule it out that syntax is affecting the case assignment in some way.

The fact that 55% of the speakers chose a nominative subject over the dative subject when the syntax was otherwise correct might indicate a more general tendency for the dominance of the nominative which would be in line with English, a language that has all but lost its case marking. As we generally don't get any accusatives in the subject position of the passive in Icelandic, and the test sentences didn't account for any such

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<sup>4</sup> Only one speaker always picked the nominative subject.

cases,<sup>5</sup> we can only compare sentences where the speakers chose the in-situ version. Here the results show that the nominative replaces the accusative in object position 77% of the time and the dative 64% of the time, meaning that the nominative replaces the accusative more often than the dative. As the accusative is seen as the unmarked case of the Icelandic object, we would have expected this to be the other way around. However, Arnbjörnsdóttir (2006), who reported a confusion in case marking in Heritage Icelandic, pointed out that there didn't seem to be any signs of it being regular or consistent and there was even a tendency of using the dative where there should be an accusative. Björnsdóttir (2018:355) reported a similar tendency of the dative replacing accusative and genitive objects. On the other hand, Dehé and Kupisch (2021) saw increase in the use of nominative and accusative case at the expense of the dative. These contradicting results indicate that the case system in Heritage Icelandic is quite vulnerable and that there is some confusion as to which case to use. Therefore, it seems that Prediction 3 is borne out:

*P3: There will be a tendency for the nominative to replace oblique subjects.*

55% of the speakers pick a nominative subject instead of dative subject at least once, indicating a clear tendency for the nominative to replace an oblique subject.

This is in line with other studies that show that case assignment is vulnerable in heritage languages and that the unmarked subject case has the tendency to replace the dative in subjects (Benmamoun et al. 2013). What we have here is perhaps even increased confusion with more complex syntax.

## 5 Conclusion

The syntax of the passive is rather strong in Heritage Icelandic, but it nevertheless shows some signs of vulnerability as to whether the object rises to subject position or not. There are also indications of changes in the case marking where the nominative seems to be overextending, not only as the subject case but in some instances also as an object case. This is in line with previous research that shows that the syntax of heritage

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<sup>5</sup> It would have been interesting to see if the speakers would ever have picked a sentence with an accusative subject, indicating that they treated the structural case in the same way as the lexical case, but such sentences were not included in the test.

languages is rather strong but that the case system is vulnerable (Benmamoun et al. 2013). When a heritage speaker is faced with a rather complex linguistic process, such as the passive, it is natural that they may show some vulnerability, not only in their production but also in comprehension. This may not necessarily mean a reduction in the case system but possibly new semantic domains. Even though these speakers may not perform exactly like the speakers of the base-language, Heritage Icelandic is a completely grammatical system which shows some signs of reanalysis of the structural system.

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