The Passive in North American Icelandic

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In Icelandic, the subject of a passive sentence corresponds to the object of the active voice. A popular explanation claims that the passive subject is base generated in the object position. The subject is not assigned a theta role and the specifier position is empty. The object is then moved to that specifier position, with a NP-movement (Práinsson, 2005). To complicate matter, the moved item undergoes a change in case but only if it is originally in the accusative; accusative objects become nominative subjects in the passive voice whereas dative and genitive objects stay unchanged when passivized:

- (1) John beat me (acc). I_i (nom) was beaten t_i.
- (2) The man pushed the woman (dat.) The woman $_i$ (dat.) was pushed t_i .

Cases are usually divided into two main categories based on their relationship to their semantic and syntactic roles; structural case is determined by the syntactic role of the phrase and lexical case is determined by the case assigner (e.g., Jónsson 1997–1998). As the accusative is a structural case, accusative objects become nominative subjects when passivized. The dative is a lexical case and stays a dative when passivized.

Passivization in English includes no change in case and the subject of a passive sentence is always in the nominative. North American heritage speakers of Icelandic might therefore have some problems with the case of the passivized subjects in Icelandic and it wouldn't be surprising to see some nominative subjects where we should have oblique case. That would be in line with the weakening of oblique subjects in North American Icelandic (Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2006). Furthermore, changes in case assignment in Icelandic seem to follow a certain pattern which has led to the hypothesis of the direction of case changes which claims that lexical case is likely to become structural case (e.g., Jónsson, 1997–1998).

The goal of this paper is to explore the passive voice in North American Icelandic, particularly the case assignment, in order to see if dative objects are likely to become nominative subjects in the passive, just like accusative objects.

Data was gathered from 33 Icelandic North Americans who took a judgement test; they were shown different possible passive sentences and asked to pick all the acceptable ones. The results show that most of the speakers pick the correct passive, even with dative subjects, indicating that that oblique subjects in the passive are still rather consistent in the grammar of these informants, which is in consistence with recent discussions in the literature that suggest the maintenance of a robust and relatively complex system in moribund grammars (e.g., Bousquette & Putnam, 2020).

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