Introduction

Point of departure:
- In recent years, studies of variation and change have increasingly paid attention to linguistic change across the lifespan of an individual. What can change and how?
- Most of the studies of this type have a very limited time resolution, typically looking at 2–3 periods in the speaker’s life.

Main point:
While community-wide usage evolution is often systematic and gradual, individual lifespan change responds rapidly to idiosyncratic sociolinguistic pressures – demanding a high-definition approach.

What is this study about?
- Variable use of stylistic fronting in Icelandic in thousands of parliament speeches given by Steingrímur J. Sigfússon between 1990-2013. This reveals a fine-grained diachronic picture.
Icelandic SF: Optional movement into a PF subject gap

Variant without Stylistic Fronting (SF):

(1) Bækur [CP sem eru lesnar til skemmtunar] eru bestar. books [CP that are read for entertainment] are best ‘Books that are read for entertainment are the best ones.’

Variant with Stylistic Fronting (SF):

(2) Bækur [CP sem lesnar eru til skemmtunar] eru bestar. books [CP that read are for entertainment] are best ‘Books that are read for entertainment are the best ones.’

Without SF (1):

\[
\emptyset \quad \text{TP} \quad \text{With SF (2):

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{read} \\
T \\
\text{are} T \\
\text{are read} \ldots
\end{array}
\]
\]

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{TP} \\
T \\
\text{are} T \\
\text{are read} \ldots
\end{array}
\]
While community-wide usage evolution is often systematic and gradual, individual lifespan change responds rapidly to idiosyncratic sociolinguistic pressures – demanding a high-definition approach.

Roadmap:

- Social meaning and linguistic performance.
- Stylistic fronting and the envelope of variation.
- Lifespan change and other types of linguistic change.
- Evolution of Steingrímur Sigfússon’s SF use.
- Conclusion.
Social meaning and linguistic performance
How does social meaning shape linguistic performance?

Reactions to (“simple”) pressures towards formal/informal style:

- Variation along a one-dimensional scale.
- Attention paid to speech (Labov 1972)
- Linguistic Marketplace (Sankoff & Laberge 1978)

Reactions to perceived social roles of speaker/hearer:

- Multi-dimensional facts about society and social networks.
- Audience/Referee design (Bell 1984, 2001)
- Social identity; group membership (Eckert 1989; 2001)

Different types of forces

- Situational forces (style shift with respect to current moment).
- Long term forces (social status at this point in life).
The Linguistic Marketplace (Sankoff & Laberge 1978)

Linguistic Market Value in a nutshell

A reasonable measure of how important language is for a person can be a good predictor of the rate of use of formal/respectable variants.

High Linguistic Market Value:

- Politicians, teachers, reporters and in general people who are linguistic role models and/or visible in the media.

Our study ...

- ... can be seen as tracking the linguistic market value of Sigfússon throughout his political career and how it correlates with the use of a stylistically formal syntactic variant.
Stylistic fronting
What is Stylistic Fronting (SF)?

SF is an optional movement in Icelandic of a head (/word) or a phrase to the front of a clause that has a phonological subject gap.

(3) ... [CP sem lesnar eru lesnar til skemmtunar] eru bestar.  
... [CP that read are read for entertainment] are best  
‘... that are read for entertainment are the best ones.’

Properties:

- SF has no effect on truth conditions.
- The only clear meaning component is a sociolinguistic one – SF is associated with formal style.
- SF is found in both main clauses and subordinate clauses, as long as the subject is not phonologically overt.
- Although XP’s can be stylistically fronted, we only focus on the canonical case where a non-finite main verb is fronted.
Envelope of variation

In our study, we focus on the following word orders involving the complementizer *sem* that introduces Icelandic relative clauses:

(4) a. *sem* - **finite auxiliary** - **non-finite main verb**
    b. *sem* - **non-finite main verb** - **finite auxiliary**

Why?

- This does not include all cases of SF but allows us to extract a well-defined envelope of variation with high accuracy (where SF application and non-application are accounted for).
- Python script that matches actual relevant cases.
- Reliability checked manually and the method works well.
Lifespan change and other types of linguistic change
Syntactic change

Historical change:
- Trajectories that can span several generations – or even centuries.
- Some mechanical (or at least systematic) effects yield S-shaped curves. *(As mathematically neat as we can hope for.)*

Change across the lifespan of an individual:
- **Age-grading:** Patterns in linguistic performance associated with certain age groups. Relatively systematic generalizations over communities. *(Somewhat systematic and predictable)*
- **Individual lifespan change:** Rapid reactions of individuals to idiosyncratic events. *(Chaotic and unpredictable; explanations demand a high level of both quantitative and qualitative depth)*
Syntactic change: S-curves across contexts (Kroch 1989)
Lifespan change (whether syntax or phonology)

Studies of lifespan change are difficult:

- Ideally, we would want repeated sociolinguistic interviews with the same speaker every year for a couple of decades. This is time consuming.
- Even lifespan studies that use publicly available recordings often focus on just 2–3 time periods because the transcription work is time consuming (e.g., Kwon 2017).

Our study

- We use publicly available transcripts and audio recordings of 23 years of a political career in the Icelandic parliament.
- Not sociolinguistic interviews, but still relatively natural speech and an abundance of data to analyze.

A very important study on morphosyntactic lifespan change, but the time resolution is only 2 readings per individual (1971 and ’84).

Figure 3: Individual percentages of periphrastic futures for all SEC=1 speakers (N=7), trajectories traced between 1971 and 1984.

Point about studying lifespan change

- A more fine-grained time resolution would tell us more.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Researcher(s)</th>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Time resolution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sankoff &amp; Blondeau, 2007</td>
<td>Language change across the lifespan: /r/ in Montréal-French</td>
<td>2 (/3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kwon, 2017</td>
<td>Vowel change across Noam Chomsky’s lifespan</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sankoff &amp; Wagner, 2006</td>
<td>Age grading in retrograde movement: The inflected future in Montréal-French</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MacKenzie, 2014; forthcoming</td>
<td>Intraspeaker change in later life: Implications for grammatical representation</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Steingrímur J. Sigfússon’s parliament speeches 1990-2013
A mixed method

Quantitative:
- 8005 tokens of the SF variable extracted from publicly available audio+video recordings and transcriptions.

Coded for:
- SF application (SF vs. unused opportunity to use SF)
- Speaker’s age
- Type of speech (prepared/response) – note: prepared ≠ read
- Manual checking of selected samples of machine annotation as well as transcription accuracy (by listening to recordings).

Crucial aspect of the design: High time resolution

We divide the data into 23 years.

Qualitative:
- Interview with Sigfússon carried out on 2 March, 2017.
- Side-by-side investigation of SF use and Icelandic political history.
1990-2013: Sigfússon’s overall rate of SF use

Initial observations:
- Not a (one simple) S-shaped curve.
- SF use ranges from 41% to 62% – and can change rapidly.
- A lot of information would be lost if we only had the first and the last year (a time resolution of 2 instead of 23).
1990-2006: Linguistic retrenchment (cf. Chambers)

- Gradual decline in use of SF.
- A different status in the Linguistic Marketplace.
- Linguistic retrenchment – more confident and less external pressure.
We asked Sigfússon if he had experienced becoming more relaxed about being in the role of a parliament member as he gained more experience in the job.

‘Yes, there is no doubt about that.’
After the 2007 elections the right wing Independence Party and the Social Democratic Party form a coalition government.

Steingrímur's Left-Green Party transforms from a small and somewhat marginal party into the biggest opposition party.

The other main opposition party at the time, The Progressive Party (Framsóknarflokkurinn), is in a weak position after suffering a loss in the election.

Quote from our 2 March interview

‘I felt like I had greater responsibilities. At least, I had a bigger role than before.’
Events leading up the economic collapse in 2008

Steingrímur becomes a frequent commentator in the Icelandic media, warning that an economic disaster is looming.

### Quotes from our 2 March interview

- ‘At that point I had become very worried that the [economic] balance was deteriorating and that we were about to be derailed. I received a lot of attention in discussions about the economy [and my message case across as] some kind of a general response to the government and its economic policies.’
- ‘They should have listened to me back then’.
Observations:

- The biggest rise in SF use between years in the study.
- An analysis in terms of a status change in the Linguistic Marketplace is well motivated.
2008: Economic collapse and demonstrations

- Following the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers in the fall of 2008, the entire Icelandic banking system collapsed.
- Street demonstrations followed, the government lost its majority, and Sigfússon eventually found himself as the minister of finance in an economy fighting for its life.
As minister of finance, Sigfússon was a key figure of the Icelandic side of a legal dispute between Iceland and the UK over savings accounts in the collapsed Icelandic banking system.

Below, Sigfússon is on BBC news, arguing the Icelandic point of view, before a conclusion was reached by an international court.

The claim made on the Icelandic government by the UK at the time was close to $10,000 per every living Icelander.
On great responsibilities

From our 2 March interview:
‘The tasks that I had to undertake were really difficult and many of the proposals I put forth were terrible [...] gory budget cuts and tax increases [...] but you just had to do it because there was nothing else that could be done.’
Observations:

- SF use is highest when Sigfússon is responsible for the Icelandic economy in the aftermath of the 2008 economic collapse.
- Sigfússon’s linguistic market value skyrockets in this period under any reasonable way of measuring it.
2013: Sigfússon steps down

- In the 2013 election, the left wing government lost its majority.
- Sigfússon stepped down as minister of finance and as a the leader of the Left Green party.
- He returned to being a normal parliament member and others took over those roles.

Quote from our 2 March interview

‘... I had had enough in the sense that my first thought was simply that it was time for me to take a break, get some rest, breathe and recover.’
2013: Tending to the sheep

One month after the election ...
Sigfússon steps down after the 2013 election

Observations:
- SF use sharply declines when Sigfússon steps down as finance minister and leader of his party.
- While he is still a member of the parliament, he has passed on the torch in terms of the leadership roles that shaped his usage 2006-2012.
Style shift

The graph illustrates the percentage change over age, with different token values shown in various colors. The response categories are indicated by "FALSE" and "TRUE" colors.
Conclusion
Conclusion

Main point:

While community-wide usage evolution is often systematic and gradual, individual lifespan change responds rapidly to idiosyncratic sociolinguistic pressures – demanding a high-definition approach.

- Our method is not a replacement for sociolinguistic interviews.
- Different approaches are appropriate for different kinds of questions; here we need a lot of data from one speaker.
- Individuals can be more complicated than communities.