

---

# Completed and progressive action in Swedish and Icelandic child language<sup>1</sup>

HRAFNHILDUR RAGNARSDÓTTIR, SVEN STRÖMQVIST & ÅSA NORDQVIST *Iceland University of Education, University of Lund, University of Göteborg*

## 1 Introduction

The present paper presents an exploratory study of the encoding of completed and progressive action in two closely related Scandinavian languages, Icelandic and Swedish, and the effects of crosslinguistic differences on children's acquisition of these languages. Both languages have simple present and past tenses, whereas neither of them has a full-fledged aspectual system. Each language, however, offers means for encoding aspectual distinctions along a multidimensional cline of grammaticalization (see Thorell 1973; Haugen 1987; Friðjónsson 1989; Sigurðsson 1989; Þráinsson 1990).

To refer explicitly to an action as completed, Icelandic and Swedish use a perfective construction with auxiliary have and Past Participle (just like English) which we will henceforth refer to as *have Perfective* or *haPerf*.

- (1) Icelandic: *Barn-ið hef-ur drukk-ið mjólk.*  
'child-DEF have-PRES drink-PASTPART milk'  
Swedish: *Barn-et ha-r druck-it mjölk*  
'child-DEF have-PRES drink-PASTPART milk'  
English: The child has drunk milk

In contrast to Swedish and English, Icelandic has at least one other construction for making reference to completed action: *Vera búinn að V-INF* 'be done at V-INF', henceforth *búinn Perfective* or *búPerf*. In distinction to the Icelandic *haPerf*, which is contextually generalized, *búPerf* is constrained to action verbs and is used preferably with animate, agentive subjects and definite objects. Further, *búPerf* is used to refer to specific, recently completed actions/events, whereas *haPerf* is used to refer to more remote, general completions. (Friðjónsson 1989:106). *BúPerf* is more likely to be encountered in spoken, informal genres than in formal or written ones, whereas the reverse holds for the *haPerf*. See example 2 for an illustration.

- (2) Icelandic: *Barn-ið er búið að drekka mjólk-ina*  
'child-DEF be-PRES done at drink-INF milk-DEF'  
Swedish: *Barnet har druckit mjölken*  
'child-DEF have-PRES drink-PASTPART milk-DEF'  
English: The child has drunk the milk

Icelandic has a relatively highly grammaticalized means for encoding the notion of progressivity, the construction *vera að V-INF* 'be at V', henceforth called *be Progressive* or *beProg*, which is very similar in meaning and applicability to the English progressive 'V-ing'. In contrast, Swedish resorts to means of a considerably lower degree of grammaticalization, in order to mark an action as progressive. The strongest candidate is the *V and V* construction, henceforth 'V&V' (e.g., *sitter och läser* 'sits and reads'), where the first verb is a verb of posture or, possibly, locomotion, and the second an intentional verb. Further, the two verbs show tense agreement, and the second V receives phrasal stress. Example 3 provides illustrations.

- (3) Icelandic: *Stelpa-n er að les-a*  
'girl-DEF be-PRES at read-INF'

---

<sup>1</sup> This work was supported by grants from NOS-H to all three authors, and from the Icelandic Research Council to the first.

## References

- Berman, R. A. and Slobin, D. I. 1994. *Relating events in narrative. A crosslinguistic developmental study*. Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Dahl, Ö. 1985. Tense and aspect systems. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Friðjónsson, J. 1989. *Samsettar myndir sagna*. Reykjavík: Málvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands.
- Haugen, E. 1987. Danish, Norwegian and Swedish. In B. Comrie (Ed.), *The World's Major Languages*. London: Croom Helm, 157-179.
- Karmiloff-Smith, A. 1981. The grammatical marking of thematic structure in the development of language production. In W. Deutsch (Ed.), *The child's construction of language* (pp. 121-147). London: Academic Press.
- Mayer, M. 1969. *Frog where are you?* New York: Dial Press.
- Ragnarsdóttir, H. 1992. Episodic structure and interclausal connectives in Icelandic children's narratives. In R. Söderbergh (Ed.), *Colloquium Paedolinguisticum Lundensis* (pp. 33-45). Lund University: Dept. of Linguistics.
- Ragnarsdóttir, H. & Strömquist, S. (1997) The linguistic encoding of spatial relations in Scandinavian child language development. In E. Clark (Ed), *The Proceedings of the Twenty-eighth Annual Child Language Research Forum* (pp. 271-282). Stanford: CSLI.
- Sigurðsson, H.A. 1989. *Verbal syntax and case in Icelandic*. University of Lund: Department of Nordic languages.
- Slobin, D.I. 1998. A typological perspective on learning to talk about space. In H. Ragnarsdóttir and S. Strömquist (Eds.), *Learning to talk about time and space. Proceedings of the 3rd NELAS conference*. Gothenburg Papers in Theoretical Linguistics 80 (pp 1-30). Reykjavík & Göteborg: University College of Education and Department. of Linguistics, University of Göteborg.
- Slobin, D. 1996. From "thought and language" to "thinking for speaking" . In J.m Gumperz. and S. Levinson (eds), *Rethinking Linguistic Relativity*. Studies in the Social and Cultural Foundations of Language, Volume 17, pp. 70-96. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thorell, O. 1973. *Svensk grammatik*. Stockholm: Esselte Studium.
- Þráinsson, H. 1990. *Setningafræði*. Reykjavík: Málvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands.