

Posture verbs in Icelandic*

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In this paper I will focus on the Icelandic posture progressive co-ordination shown in (1):

- (1) Jón situr og les
John sits and reads
'John is (sitting and) reading'

In such sentences the conjunction *og* 'and' is not the regular conjunction of two events and instead we have only one event that is both a sitting and a reading. I will argue that we get the progressive reading from such co-ordinations because of a coercion of the event to a state in order to fulfill the requirement of only one external argument.

1. Posture Verbs

Posture verbs are generally considered to be verbs that denote a particular posture, such as *sit*, *stand*, *lie*, *kneel*, *squat*, etc. Lichtenberk (2002:273) argues that "sitting, standing, and lying can be taken as the basic postures in the sense that they are the ones that languages are most likely to have simple lexemes for." Such verbs seem to exist in most languages but it differs whether the subject has to be animate or not, whether the verbs are stative, dynamic or both, whether the verbs have only the posture meaning or additional extended lexical structures such as tense or aspect, etc.

It is, in fact, quite common that morphemes that carry posture meanings can also be used with grammatical functions. In many cases they mark some kind of aspect, the most common being progressive, continuous, durative, imperfective and continuative/persistent (Lichtenberk 2002:308). This will be further discussed in section 2.

In Icelandic, the posture verbs *sitja* 'sit', *standa* 'stand' and *liggja* 'lie' all have a clear stative meaning as they only represent the state of sitting, standing or lying but not the motion towards those positions:

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- (2) a. Jón sat
John sat
- b. Jón stóð
John stood
- c. Jón lá
John lay

To indicate a motion towards a posture, Icelandic uses special achievement verbs for ‘sitting down’ *setjast* and ‘lying down’ *leggjast* but for standing up it adds a directional adverb just like English, *standa upp* ‘stand up’.

- (3) a. Jón settist
John sat.down
- b. Jón stóð upp
John stood up
- c. Jón lagðist
John lay.down

Therefore, when we get verbs like *sitja*, *standa* or *liggja* we know for sure that they are stative and not dynamic. This is quite important for the theory that I will argue for as if these verbs were really dynamic the external argument mismatch would not occur and no coercion were needed. And since Icelandic has separate dynamic posture verbs it is easy to show how only the stative verbs yield a progressive reading and not the dynamic ones. I will turn to that again in section 4.

2. Icelandic Progressives

Icelandic has at least three different ways to express the progressive. The most common—and in fact, often the only one discussed in the literature—is the standard progressive (the infinitival progressive), which has the copula followed by the infinitive marker¹ and a verb in the infinitive:

¹ It can be argued that the *að* in the progressive is not actually the infinitive marker but the preposition *að* ‘at’ and some linguists choose to look at it that way (e.g. Bertinetto et.al. 2000). It is actually impossible to know whether *að* is here the infinitive marker or the preposition as historically they were both present. Older versions of the progressive have the preposition followed by the infinitive marker: *Jón er að að borða* (John is at to eat), meaning ‘John is busy eating’, which is fairly similar to the Danish construction: *Jon er ved at spise* ‘John is eating’. At some stage in the grammaticalization either the preposition or the infinitive marker dropped and only one *að* is left. I choose to call it the infinitive marker in this paper but it might just as well be the preposition that remains.

- (4) a. Jón er að borða
John is to eat
'John is eating'
- b. *Jón er að sitja
John is to sit
'John is sitting'
- (5) a. Anna er að horfa á sjónvarp
Anne is to watch on television
'Anne is watching television'
- b. *Anna er að sofa
Anne is to sleep
'Anna is sleeping'

This progressive form has been completely grammaticalized as a progressive marker and Icelandic is, in fact, the only Scandinavian language to have a grammaticalized progressive (Ebert 2000, Torfadóttir 2004).

Notice that the b-sentences, with the verbs *sitja* 'sit' and *sofa* 'sleep' are ungrammatical and Icelandic differs, therefore, from e.g. English where *sit* and *sleep* can both occur in the progressive. Both *sitja* and *sofa* are pseudo-stative (see Jóhannsdóttir 2006) in Icelandic, which seems to render them ungrammatical in the infinitival progressive. However, it is possible to indicate that a sitting or a sleeping is in progress. To do so Icelanders use another progressive form, which has the copula followed by the present participle:

- (6) a. Jón er sitjandi
Jón is sit.pres part
'John is sitting'
- b. *Jón er borðandi
John is eat.pres part
'Anne is watching television'
- (7) a. Anna er sofandi
Anne is sleep.pres part
'Ása is sleeping'
- b. *Anna er horfandi á sjónvarp
Anne is watching on television
'John is eating'

The verbs that occur in this latter kind of progressive are first and foremost posture verbs, and a few pseudo-stative verbs like *sofa* 'sleep'. Additionally, this progressive form is available to any eventive verb if a temporal adverb like

alltaf ‘always’ or *stöðugt* ‘constantly’ is present in the sentence, as shown in (8b):

- (8) a. *Jón er borðandi
John is eating
‘John is eating’
- b. Jón er alltaf borðandi
John is always eating
‘John is always eating’

The third kind of progressive is a co-ordination with the first verb being a posture verb and the second one any kind of event:

- (9) María situr og les
Mary sits and reads
‘Mary is sitting and reading’

Using a posture verb to indicate that an event is in progress is widely used by the languages of the world and it is this particular progressive construction that is the focus of this paper. I will, therefore, discuss this third kind of progressive in the next section.

3. Posture Verbs in the Progressive

In Icelandic, using the simple present morphology for activities when intending a progressive reading is somewhat odd, as shown in (10a); a sentence that is maybe not bad in all contexts but is definitely somewhat awkward if intended as an answer to a question like *What is John doing?* Instead we prefer a progressive form, as in (10b).

- (10) a. ?Hann les
He reads
‘He’s reading/he reads’
- b. Hann er að lesa
He is to read
‘He’s reading’

The sentence in (10a) would rather be understood as a habitual sentence and would fit well as an answer to a question like *What does John do when he’s not working?* However, when we have a co-ordination with a posture verb using the simple present is suitable, as shown in (9) above, here repeated as (11).

- (11) *María situr og les*
 Mary sits and reads
 ‘Mary is sitting and reading’

The sentence in (11) is completely grammatical. It tells us that at this particular moment (or whatever reference time is given by context) Mary is in a sitting position and she is reading. So, not only does the sentence give us a progressive reading but also the feeling that the two events take place simultaneously (at the reference time) and that they are somehow linked. It seems, therefore, clear that it is not a coincidence that Mary is both sitting and reading; it is rather as if she is sitting in order to read. Notice that it does not mean that *situr* means ‘is sitting’ or that *les* means ‘is reading’. It is when you conjoin them that they form a progressive construction.

In fact many languages use posture verbs to form a progressive, such as Swedish, Norwegian, Kxoe, Dutch and Boumaa Fijan, to name a few:

- (12) a. *Linda sitter och röker på expetitionen* (*Swedish*, Platzack 1979)
 Linda sits and smokes in office
 ‘Linda is smoking in the office’
- b. *Barna satt og skreiv* (*Norwegian*, Tonne 2005)
 children-the sat and wrote
 ‘The children were writing’
- c. *Tí kx’ó-à-n̄ùè* (*Kxoe*, Kilian-Hatz 2002)
 1SG eat-I-sit
 ‘I’m eating (while sitting)’
- d. *Ik zat te lezen* (*Dutch*, Lemmens 2005)
 I sat to read-INF
 ‘I was (sitting and) reading’
- e. *E koto n̄* (*Boumaa Fijan*, Schütz 1985)
 2SG lie lie
 ‘She was lying down’

Icelandic, Swedish, Norwegian and Dutch, all happen to be Germanic languages, with the first three being Northern Germanic. However, this is by no means particular to Germanic as can be seen by the examples from Kxoe and Boumaa Fijan. Languages from as unrelated language families as Siou, Altaic and Tibetic also use posture verbs to form a progressive (see Newman 2002). I will, however not discuss in this paper how other languages use the posture verbs to form the progressive, even though it is quite an interesting subject on its own. Instead I will focus more on the posture verb progressive in Icelandic.

Let’s now look further at the Icelandic posture verb progressive. As previously mentioned, the posture verb co-ordination gives us a progressive

reading as well as the feeling that the two verbs are somewhat linked. Interestingly the order of the verbs cannot be reversed:

- (13) #María les og situr
 Mary reads and sits
 ‘Mary is reading and sitting’

Most Icelanders would probably agree that the sentence in (13) is grammatical, but that it is somewhat odd; people want to reverse the order. Most also agree that in this particular order we don’t get a progressive reading and that the two events really seem separate. There is a reading event and there is a sitting event. They could take place at the same time but they might be also be separate in time. If the conjunction was the regular logical conjunction, we would expect the truth conditions of (13) to be the same as (11) and we would expect the same reading more or less. The fact that we don’t indicates that *og* is here not the logical connection and that the structure we get in (11) differs from (13) in more ways than just the order of the verbs.

But do we really get a progressive reading when the first verb is a posture verb? Interestingly, we can’t easily use the other progressive constructions in such a co-ordination:

- (14) Þegar ég kom heim...
 when I came home
- | | | |
|----|-------------------------------|--|
| a. | *var hann sitjandi og las | (<i>sit</i> in the progressive, <i>read</i> in the simple past) |
| | was he sitting and cried | |
| b. | *var hann sitjandi og að lesa | (<i>sit</i> in pres-part progressive, <i>cry</i> in standard progressive) |
| | was he sitting and to read | |
| c. | ?sat hann og var að lesa | (<i>sit</i> in simple past and <i>read</i> in standard progressive) |
| | sat he and was to read | |
- ‘When I came home he was sitting and reading’

This is to be expected if the use of the posture verb is already providing a progressive meaning². However, the other progressive constructions are only bad when we have conjoined two VPs. If we use fully conjoined sentences instead, the progressive forms become available again:

² The c-sentence, where we have the posture verb in the simple past and the activity verb in the infinitival progressive is considerably better than the others and some Icelanders find it perfectly fine. I’m not quite sure why that is and whether it means then that we have double progressive. However, none has ever claimed that double progressive is impossible so there is no need to worry about this. It is interesting though that even though the activity verb can be in the progressive construction in such a sentence, the posture verb definitely cannot. This may have something to do with the fact that the eventive verb really is the main verb of the construction with the posture verb providing the aspect.

- (15) Þegar ég kom heim...
When I came home...
a. sat hann og hann var að lesa
sat he and he was to read
b. sat hann og hann las
sat he and he read
'When I came home he was sitting and he was reading
- (16) Þegar ég kom heim...
When I came home...
a. ?var hann sitjandi (á stól) og hann las
was he sitting on chair and he read
'When I came home he was sitting and he was crying'
b. var hann sitjandi (á stól) og (hann) var að lesa
was he sitting on chair and he was to read

However, by conjoining sentences instead of VPs the two verbs seem to indicate two events rather than only one. The sitting doesn't anymore seem to serve the purpose of reading but rather is a separate event, as if he happens to be sitting while reading. So by conjoining sentences we lose something from our co-ordination.

Before we go further, let's recap what we've already discussed. First, we can use posture verbs to form a progressive construction and in those cases the order of the VPs is fixed – the posture verb has to precede the eventive verb. Other progressive forms cannot (easily) occur in this co-ordination but if we conjoin sentences rather than VPs we don't get this effect.

4. Solution using Kratzer's analysis of external arguments

My solution to the posture-verb progressive puzzle involves the claim that the conjunction *og* 'and' does not have the semantics of conjunction here, and that we do not really have two events but one. The former claim is not new. However, the main importance of my argument is that posture verb co-ordinations, as the one in (11), consist of only one event instead of two. So while a sentential conjunction such as (17a) is translated straightforwardly as in (17b), I argue that the progressive conjunction in (18a) is translated as in (18b):

- (17) a. Jón_i situr og hann_i les
John sits and he reads
b. $\exists e[\text{Sit}(e) \wedge \text{ExArg}(\text{jón})(e) \wedge \exists e'[\text{Read}(e') \wedge \text{ExArg}(\text{jón})(e')]]$
- (18) a. Jón situr og les
John sits and reads
b. $\exists e[\text{Sit}(e) \wedge \text{Read}(e) \wedge \text{ExArg}(\text{jón})(e)]$

Furthermore, I will argue that the fact that (18a) gets a progressive reading comes from a mismatch in the status of the external argument, building on Kratzer (1994). ‘Sitting’ is a state and calls for a ‘holder’ external argument, whereas ‘reading’ is an event which calls for an ‘agent’ argument.

The verb ‘sit’ can be translated as (19) and the verb ‘read’ as (20) using Kratzer’s Event Identification.

(19) $\lambda x_e \lambda s_s [\text{Holder}(x)(s) \wedge \text{Sit}(s)]$

(20) $\lambda x_e \lambda e_s [\text{Agent}(x)(e) \wedge \text{Read}(e)]$

The verb ‘sit’ is a two-place relation between a state and its holder and ‘read’ is a two-place relation between an event and its agent. So with this more detailed analysis of the eventives (17b) can be re-analyzed as (21):

(21) $\exists e (\text{Sit}(s) \wedge \text{Holder}(\text{jón})(s)) \wedge \exists e (\text{Read}(e) \wedge \text{Agent}(\text{jón})(e))$

In (18) we have only one external argument, introduced by a single Voice head. There is also only one eventive. I assume that external arguments cannot at the same time be an agent and a holder of the same eventive. This can be solved in two ways. One is by adding an external argument, as in (17a), such that we have both an agent-argument and a holder-argument. That results in two separate events, as shown in (17b), and it doesn’t get a progressive reading. The other way of solving the co-ordination is by coercing ‘read’ to be a state. Now one external argument, a holder, satisfies both verbs:

(22) $\lambda x_e \lambda s_s (\text{Sit}(s) \wedge \text{Read}(s) \wedge \text{Holder}(x)(s))$

Therefore a sentence like (18a) would be translated as:

(23) $\exists s (\text{Sit}(s) \wedge \text{Read}(s) \wedge \text{Holder}(\text{jón})(s))$.

Because of this coercion of an event to a state, the reading we get is that some sitting and some reading hold at a certain time. As argued by Parsons (1989) we get a progressive reading when an event holds at t and this is why these posture verb co-ordinations give a progressive reading rather than a perfective one. Additionally it provides support for existing analysis, such as Parsons (1989) and Kratzer (1994).

As a further argument, see what happens when the posture verb is dynamic instead of stative; a case where it takes an agent external argument, just like events:

(24) Jón sest og les
 John sits.down and reads
 ‘John sits down and reads’
 = John sits down and then starts to read
 ≠ John is sitting down and reading simultaneously

It is clear that in (24) we don't have a progressive reading and instead of the two events taking place simultaneously, the reading follows the sitting down. So it's not the posture verbs per se that cause the coercion to a progressive but their stativeness.

There are, however, some remaining questions, such as: Why does this not apply to states like *know* and *love* but only to posture verbs? And: Why is the event coerced to a state and not the state to an event? Answering those questions is a project for another paper.

5. Conclusion

In this paper I have shown that one of the ways Icelandic forms a progressive is by co-ordination where the first verb is a posture verb and the second verb is an event. In such cases the order of the VPs is fixed; the posture verb has to precede the eventive verb. I argue that the progressive reading comes from a mismatch in the status of the external argument. A state calls for a holder argument and an event calls for an agent argument. You can have only one external argument and so if you have an eventive that is both a state and an event one of the two needs to be coerced in order to satisfy the requirement of a suitable external argument. I argue that in constructions like (11) *lesa* 'read' has been coerced to a state and that is what gives us the progressive reading of the sentence.

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