Completed and progressive action in Swedish and Icelandic child language

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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 vera 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'

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References


