

THE POSTURE VERB PROGRESSIVE IN ICELANDIC*

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Abstract

In this paper I focus on a construction in Icelandic in which a coordination of two simple present/past verbs, where the first verb is a posture verb, gets a progressive reading. Those sentences indicate that the ‘two events’ take place simultaneously (at the reference time). That is, there is an event, which consists of two components, such as *sitting* and *reading*. The main question is: How does coordination with a posture verb yield a progressive reading? The proposed solution to this 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 have two events but one. Furthermore, I argue that the fact that posture verb coordinations get 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. I assume that external arguments cannot at the same time be an agent and a holder of an event. However, this can be solved in two ways. One is by adding an external argument, such that we have both an agent-argument and a holder-argument. That results in two separate events, and doesn’t get a progressive reading. The other way of solving this is by coercing ‘read’ to be a state. Now one external argument, a holder, satisfies both verbs. Because of this coercion of an event to a state, the reading we get is that an event that is both a sitting and a reading holds at a certain time. As all states are imperfective this coercion of the event verb to a state makes it imperfective and as Icelandic doesn’t have an imperfective construction separate from the progressive Icelanders understand these sentences as progressive. This is why these posture verb co-ordinations result in a progressive reading rather than a perfective one.

1 Introduction

There are two main progressive constructions in Icelandic. The more common one, which I call the standard progressive, has the copula followed by a verb in the infinitive (shown in (1a)) but in the second one we have a coordination of a posture verb and an event verb (shown in (1b)).

- (1) a. *María er að lesa*
Mary is to read
‘Mary is reading’
- b. *María situr og les*
Mary sits and reads
‘Mary is reading’

I will focus on the second construction and the main question of the paper is this: Why and how does a co-ordination of a posture verb and an event verb yield a progressive reading?

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The proposed explanation is that the progressive reading comes from a mismatch in the status of the two external arguments, as states get a ‘holder’ argument but events get an ‘agent’ argument (as proposed by Kratzer (1994)). To solve the mismatch, the event verb is coerced to a state and gets a holder argument, which in turn yields a progressive reading.

In Icelandic, just as in English, the simple present gets a habitual reading such that a sentence like *María les* yields the meaning ‘Mary is a reader’ rather than ‘Mary is reading (now)’

- (2) *María les*
Mary reads
≠ ‘Mary is reading’
= ‘Mary is a reader’

In order to get the reading that Mary is reading at this particular moment the infinitival progressive is chosen:

- (3) *María er að lesa*
Mary is to read
‘Mary is reading’

However, if we have a coordination with a posture verb, using the simple present is suitable:

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

Importantly, the sentence in (4) gets a progressive reading; at this particular moment Mary is both sitting and reading. So unlike (2), (4) does not mean that Mary is a ‘sitter and reader’. In fact, Mary might generally never read and the situation described by (4) could be exceptional.

The two verbs in (4) are connected in the sense that the sitting somehow “serves” the reading. In fact we could say that a *sitting position* is the *mAnnar* in which the reading takes place. Notice that even though a sentence like (4) gets a progressive reading, it does not mean that the Icelandic verb *sitja* means ‘is sitting’ or that *lesa* means ‘is reading’. Instead, when you conjoin the two verbs they form a unit, which yields a progressive construction.

2 Arguments for a Progressive Analysis

Before going further it is necessary to show that the construction in (1b) really is a progressive construction.

Firstly, it is worth mentioning that it is quite common in languages that morphemes that denote a posture can also be used with grammatical functions. In many cases they mark some kind of aspect (progressive, continuous, durative, imperfective, etc.)

- (5) a. *Progressive aspect: Swedish* (Platzack 1979)
 Linda sitter och röker på expetitionen
 Linda sits and smokes in office
 ‘Linda is smoking in the office’
- b. *Continuative aspect: Manhartha* (Austin 1998:24)
 ngatha kumpa-artu tharla-rnu papa-jaka
 1SG.NOM sit-USIT feed-IMPF.SS water-COM
 ‘I used to feed (him) with water’
- c. *Habitual aspect: Yankunyjtajara* (Goddard 1985:207)
 wati-ngku kaḷi atu-ṛa nyina-nyi
 man-ERG boomerang,ACC chop-SERIAL sit-PRES
 ‘The man makes boomerangs’

This is, for instance, a very common way to form the progressive in Swedish, Norwegian and Danish, languages that are all closely related to Icelandic (Ebert 2000).

Secondly, progressive tests indicate that this really is a progressive construction. Let’s now look at some of those tests.

2.1 Progressive tests

2.1.1 Statives in the progressive

Individual states like *know the answer* and *love John* do not generally occur in a progressive construction.

- (6) a. *Jón er að vita svarið
 John is to know answer.the
 ‘John is knowing the answer’
- b. *Anna er að elska manninn sinn
 Anna is to know man.the her
 ‘Anna is knowing her man’

Neither do they occur in the posture co-ordination:

- (7) a. *Jón situr og veit svarið
 John sits and knows answer.the
 ‘John is sitting and knowing the answer’
- b. *Anna situr og elskar manninn sinn
 Anna sits and loves husband.the her
 ‘Anna is sitting and loving her husband’

So when it comes to stative verbs, the posture verb behaves like we would expect it to if it really were a progressive construction.

However, in recent years it has become more and more common to use stative verbs in progressive constructions:

- (8) a. Þið eruð ekki að vita neitt.
 You are not to know anything
 ‘You are not knowing a thing’ (= ‘You don’t know a thing’)
<http://www.f4x4.is/new/forum/default.aspx?file=ferdir/7440>
- b. Af því að hæstv. ráðherra var að halda að ég mundi fara að tala um
 Of it that honourable minister was to think that I would go to talk about
 Borgarfjarðarbrú o.s.frv. þá...
 Borgarfjörður. bridge etc. then...
 ‘Because honourable minister is thinking I would start talking about Borgarfjörður
 bridge, etc. then...’ (= ‘Because honourable minister thinks...’)
<http://www.althingi.is/altext/112/r3/3768.html>

So it is a question whether the stative test is reliable anymore.

2.1.2 Imperfective paradox

We know that in English the culmination of events in accomplishment sentences in the progressive can easily be cancelled, whereas in perfective sentences it cannot (Dowty 1979):

- (9) a. Mary was fixing her radio yesterday but she didn’t finish.
 b. *Mary fixed her radio yesterday but she didn’t finish.

The same applies in Icelandic with the standard progressive:

- (10) a. María var gera við útvarpið sitt í gær en hún lauk ekki við það
 Mary was fixing with radio-the hers in yesterday but she finished not with that
 b. *María gerði við útvarpið sitt í gær en hún lauk ekki við það
 Mary fixed with radio-the hers in yesterday but she finished not with that

The same also seems to apply to the posture co-ordination:

- (11) María sat og gerði við útvarpið sitt í gær en hún náði ekki að klára það
 Mary sat and fixed with radio-the hers in yesterday but she managed not to finish it
 ‘Mary was fixing her radio yesterday but she didn’t finish it’

Both the verbs in (11) are in the simple past and yet the event hasn’t reached its natural endpoint, like the progressive sentence in (10a), and unlike the perfective sentence in (10b). So again, the posture verb co-ordination is behaving like a progressive construction.

2.1.3 Habitual reading

It is standardly believed that one of the things that distinguish the progressive from the general imperfective is the progressive’s inability to give a habitual reading¹.

¹ Although sentences with ‘always’ tend to give habitual reading: When I come home in the evenings my children are always studying’.

- (12) Anna er að þrjóna
 Anna is to knit
 = Anna is knitting
 ≠ Anna is a person who knits.

However, it seems fairly easy to get a habitual reading with the posture verb coordination:

- (13) Anna situr og þrjónar (á kvöldin)
 Anna sits and knits in evenings
 ‘Anna sits and knits (in the evenings)’

Usually it is the context that makes it clear in such cases whether the sentence is habitual or pure progressive.

- (14) A: Hvernig er María þessa dagana? Mér skilst hún hafi tekið skilnaðinn nærri sér.
 How is Mary these days? I understand she’s having a hard time after the divorce.
 B: Hún liggur uppi í rúmi og grætur
 She lies up in bed and cries
 ‘She is lying in bed crying’

This is not really surprising as Ebert (2002:627) has pointed out that in languages that use posture verb progressives, they combine easily with habitual contexts.

In Swedish the example in (15) can either be a progressive, meaning ‘Linda is smoking’, or it can be habitual, where it means ‘Linda smokes’.

- (15) Linda sitter och röker
 Linda sits and smokes
 ‘Linda is smoking/Linda smokes’

In the progressive, Linda actually has to be sitting in order for the sentence to be true, but in the habitual aspect that is not the case (Per Anders Rudling p.c.). The same seems to apply to Icelandic. Does this indicate independent grammaticalization of posture verbs as habitual aspect? Or does it just tell us that the posture verb progressive differs considerably from other progressive constructions?

However, just as with the stative verb, there has been a change with how Icelanders use the progressive and the progressive construction is increasingly used in habitual context, which again might make tests like these unusable.

- (16) a. Til að fyrirbyggja misskilning má þess geta að við vorum ekki að
 To that prevent misunderstanding may that mention that we were not to
 byrja í vinnunni klukkan 9 á kvöldin í svona tórnum.
 begin in work.the clock 9 in evenings in such times
 ‘To prevent any misunderstanding I will mention that we weren’t starting work
 until 9 in the evenings during those times’ (= ...we didn’t start until...)
<http://blog.central.is/annabjo>
- b. Nokkrir vinir mínir eiga hann og ég er að heyra mjög misjafna dóma ...
 A.few friends mine own him and I am to hear very different judgements
 ‘A few of my friends own it and I’m hearing very different opinions’ (...I hear...)
<http://www.bt.is/BT/spjall/Lesa.aspx?UMSRN=58139&svaedi=1>

2.2 The Importance of Aktionsart

The progressive reading only occurs with the combination of a posture verb and an event verb. Other combinations do not yield a progressive meaning and seem, in general, bad with the conjunction.

- (17) a. Jón situr og les (POST + EVENT)
John sits and reads
- b. #Jón borðar og les (EVENT+EVENT)
John eats and reads
- c. #Jón veit svarið og les (STATE+EVENT)
John knows answer.the and reads
- d. #Jón situr og veit svarið (POST+STATE)
John sits and knows answer.the
- e. #Jón veit svarið og elskar konuna sína (STATE+STATE)
John knows answer.the and loves wife.the his

Not everyone agrees on how to analyze posture verbs. In English they are usually considered activities and they occur regularly in the progressive:

- (18) a. John is sitting in a chair
- b. Mary is lying in bed, sick.

Icelandic has several posture verbs with the most common ones being *sitja* 'sit', *standa* 'stand' and *liggja* 'lie'.

- (19) a. Jón sat á stólnum
John sat on chair-the
'John was sitting on the chair'
- b. Jón stóð teinréttur
John stood straight
'John was standing straight'
- c. Jón lá uppi í rúmi
John lay up in bed
'John was lying in bed'

Unlike in English they do not occur in the progressive:

- (20) a. *Jón er að sitja
John is to sit
'John is sitting'

- b. *Jón er að standa uppréttur
John is to stand straight
'John is standing straight'
- c. *María er að liggja
Mary is to lie
'Mary is lying'

In Icelandic, posture verbs are stative verbs, although it's not so easy to show that clearly as tests for stativity are somewhat flawed and few applicable to Icelandic. Lakoff (1966) offered five stativity tests but Lee (1971), Dowty (1974) and others have argued that at least three of those (the tests that have to do with imperatives, complements of verbs such as *command* and *persuade* and sentences with certain manner adverbials) actually mark agentivity and not stativity. This leaves only two tests. Firstly the inability of statives to occur in the progressives and their inability to occur in pseudo-cleft sentences and with *do-so* reductions. As has been previously mentioned, Icelandic posture verbs cannot occur in the progressive and neither do they work well with pseudo-cleft sentences:

- (21) *Það sem Jón gerði var að sitja
It that John did was to sit
'What John did was sitting'

Additionally it should be mentioned that they do not describe any kind of activity and they cannot denote the movement to a posture. For that, Icelandic has special achievement verbs (although *stand up* needs an adverb, just as in English):

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

These achievement verbs can easily occur in the progressive, unlike the stative posture verbs.

- (23) a. Jón var að setjast þegar ég gekk inn í stofuna
John was to sit.down when I walked into in livingroom.the
'John was sitting down when I walked into the livingroom'
- b. María var að leggjast þegar jarðskjálftinn varð
Mary was to lie.down when earthquake.the was
'Mary was lying down when the earthquake happened'

Notice that when the posture achievement verbs occur in a coordination with an activity verb we do not get a progressive reading and instead we get the reading that one event happened after the other.

- (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

3 The Syntax of the Posture Verb Coordination

Before looking at the semantics of the posture verb coordination it is worth looking at the basic syntax. Certain basic facts of the coordination can indicate what the syntax of the construction really is, so let’s look at that now.

Firstly, in a posture verb coordination, both conjunctions must have the same tense, whereas that is not necessary in an ordinary coordination:

- (25) a. *Jón sat og les
 John sat and reads
 ‘John was reading (while sitting)’
 b. Jón fékk lánaða bók í gær og skilar henni á morgun
 John got borrowed book in yesterday and returns her in morning
 ‘John borrowed a book yesterday and returns it tomorrow’

Secondly, no overt subject can appear in the second conjunct of the posture verb construction :

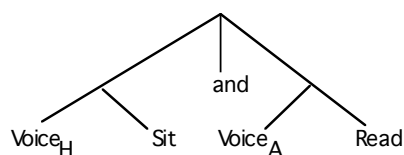
- (26) a. #Jón situr og hann les
 John sits and he reads
 ‘John is reading (while sitting)’
 b. Jón málar myndir og hann sker út
 John paints pictures and he carves out
 John paints pictures and carves (from tree)’

Thirdly, the order of conjuncts in the posture verb cannot be changed without change in meaning:

- (27) a. Jón [situr og les] / [les og situr]
 John sits and reads reads and sits
 ‘John is reading (while sitting)/John reads and sits’
 b. Jón [málar myndir og sker út] / [sker út og málar myndir]
 John paints pictures and carves out carves out and paints pictures
 John paints pictures and carves /John carves and paints pictures’

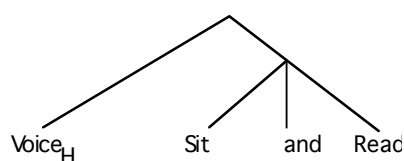
These facts indicate that the posture verb construction is completely different from an ordinary coordination. The regular coordination has two verbs, each with its own voice head, conjoined:

(28)



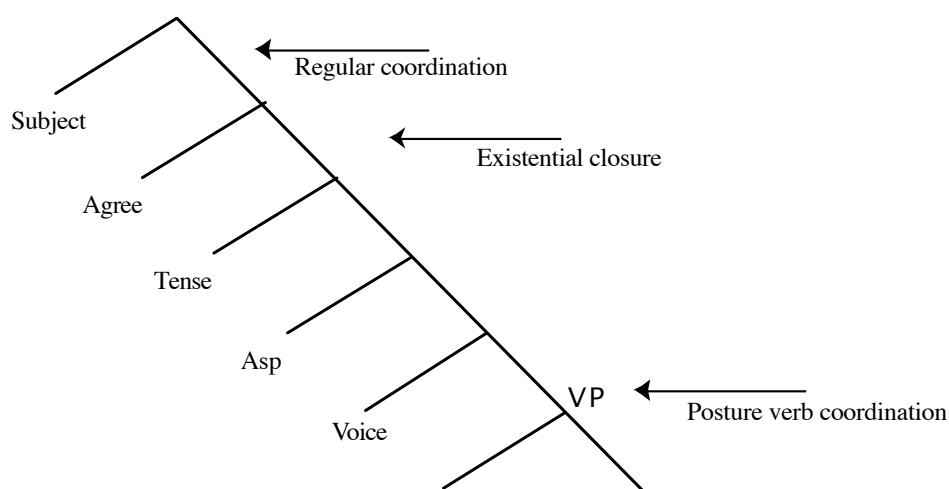
I suggest that a posture verb coordination has only one voice head and the two conjoined verbs, therefore, share that voice head:

(29)



In addition to that difference, the posture verb coordination occurs very low in the tree, below both the voice head and tense head, which explains, for instance, why the verbs cannot occur in different tenses or voices. An ordinary coordination occurs much higher in the tree.

(30)



There might be possible problems with this analysis. It predicts that the posture verb progressive should not be able to occur in the passive. At first look this does not seem a problem as only the simple past/present occurs in the passive.

- (31) a. Jón var laminn (Passive in the simple past)
 John was beaten
 'John was beaten'
- b. *Jón sat og var laminn (Passive in the progressive past)
 John sat and was beaten
 'John was being beaten'

However, the standard progressive in Icelandic also *cannot* be easily passivized in this particular context:

- (32) *Jón var að vera laminn
 John was to be beaten
 ‘John was being beaten’

And, there are examples of passivization of the progressive in Icelandic when the sentence is impersonal:

- (33) Það er verið að byggja nýja kirkju
 It is being to build new church
 ‘A new church is being built’

Also, it should be pointed out that the posture verb progressive in Norwegian *can* be passivized:

- (34) Sauermugg er en trett og gretten mann der han sitter og blir konfrontert med livet sitt
 S. is a tired and grumpy man there he sits and gets confronted with life-the his
 ‘Sauermugg is a tired and grumpy man now that he is being confronted with his life’
 (Tonne 2001: 119)

It is, however, not clear whether this really is a problem or not.

4 The Semantics of the Posture Verb Progressive

4.1 Kratzer’s Analysis of External Arguments

According to Kratzer (1994), external arguments are not true arguments of their verbs and therefore must be introduced by independent heads. Kratzer uses the operations of Functional Application and Event Identification to compose the denotations of complex expressions.

Event identification is a special kind of conjunction and Kratzer states it as follows:

- (35) *Event Identification*

$$\begin{array}{ccc} f & g & \rightarrow h \\ \langle e, \langle s, t \rangle \rangle & \langle s, t \rangle & \langle e, \langle s, t \rangle \rangle \\ & & \lambda x_e \lambda e_s [f(x)(e) \ \& \ g(e)] \end{array}$$

(*e* the type of individual, *s* the type of events)

- (36) *Example of Event Identification*

$$\begin{array}{ccc} f & & g & & \rightarrow & h \\ \langle e, \langle s, t \rangle \rangle & & \langle s, t \rangle & & & \langle e, \langle s, t \rangle \rangle \\ \lambda x_e \lambda e_s \text{Agent}(x)(e) & & \lambda e_s \text{wash}(\text{the clothes})(e) & & & \lambda x_e \lambda e_s [\text{Agent}(x)(e) \ \& \ \text{wash}(\text{the clothes})(e)] \end{array}$$

An action predicate like ‘wash the clothes’ expresses a partial function that is only defined for actions (events). A stative predicate like ‘own the clothes’ expresses a partial function that is only defined for states.

(37) Rasoá owns the clothes

(38)
$$\begin{array}{ccc} f & & g & & \rightarrow & & h \\ \langle e, \langle s, t \rangle \rangle & & \langle s, t \rangle & & & & \langle e, \langle s, t \rangle \rangle \\ \lambda x_e \lambda s_s \text{Holder}(x)(s) & & \lambda s_s \text{own}(\text{the clothes})(s) & & & & \lambda x_e \lambda s_s [\text{Holder}(x)(s) \& \text{own}(\text{the clothes})(s)] \end{array}$$

The operation of Event Identification is only defined if the two predicates that are being conjoined have compatible Aktionsart.

In (37) the verb is stative, and the external argument denotes the person who is the holder of the state, of owning the clothes. Since the event arguments of both predicates are restricted to states, Event identification can proceed as before, no clash so far.

What we cannot do, however, is combine the holder function with the denotation of an action predicate or the agent function with the denotation of a stative predicate.

Supposing that the set of actions and the set of states are disjoint, the operation of Event Identification comes out undefined in those cases. Given the two input functions, there is no output function of the required kind. This, then, explains why there is a connection between the Aktionsart of the verb and the thematic role of its external argument. The connection is forced by the operation of Event Identification.

4.2 Explanation based on Kratzer’s analysis

So how can Kratzer’s analysis help us to explain the semantics of the posture verb progressive constructions?

(39) Jón situr og les
John sits and reads
‘John is (sitting and) reading’

‘Sit’ is a state and therefore gets a Holder external argument whereas ‘read’ is an event and gets an Agent external argument. The verb ‘sit’ can be translated as (40a) and the verb ‘read’ as (41a) using Kratzer’s Event Identification. And in (40b) and (41b) we see the mean of the verbs conjoined with their functional heads.

(40) a. $\lambda s [\text{Sit}(s)]$
b. $\lambda x_e \lambda s_s [\text{Holder}(x)(s) \wedge \text{Sit}(s)]$

(41) a. $\lambda e [\text{Read}(e)]$
b. $\lambda x_e \lambda e_s [\text{Agent}(x)(e) \wedge \text{Read}(e)]$

A sentential conjunction such as (42a) is translated straightforwardly as in (42b):

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

This does, however, not give us a progressive reading.

In the progressive construction *situr og les* we do not have a sentential conjunction as in (42) and therefore no two conjoined events. Instead *og* ‘and’ conjoins two parts of an event so there is only one event that is both ‘a sitting’ and ‘a reading’. And as it is only one event, there is only one external argument:

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

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. This means we need both a holder and an agent external argument. But as we have only one external argument (introduced by a single Voice head) this is impossible.

This is what I believe happens: When event verbs like *lesa* ‘read’, which call for an Agent, form an event with a posture verb the event verb is in a way *coerced* to a stative verb. Now both verbs in the coercion need a Holder as the external argument and therefore one external argument is sufficient to fulfil both verbs.

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

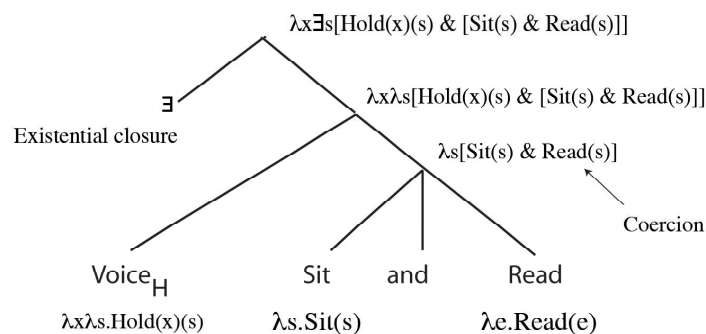
Therefore a sentence like (43a) would be translated as:

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

Because of this coercion of an event to a state, the reading we get is: Some state that is both a sitting and a reading takes place at a certain time.

(46) shows this in more details.

- (46)



4.3 The Progressive Reading

The big question, yet remaining to be answered, is this: Where exactly does the progressive reading come from?

Here is a possible answer: All states are imperfective. So when an event has been coerced to a state it becomes imperfective. As Icelandic doesn't make a clear difference between a progressive reading and a general imperfective reading, the imperfectivity of the coerced state gets taken as a progressive reading. Therefore, Icelanders hear an imperfective sentence as the progressive. If true, sentences like *Jón situr og les* aren't really progressive but imperfective.

5 Problems

There are some remaining problems that yet haven't been dealt with. Firstly: Why do we not get the progressive reading when we have event verbs occurring with states like *know* and *love* but only with posture verbs?

One possible answer is that the coercion only happens when we have one eventive with two parts that call for two different external arguments. It does not happen when we have two eventives (and therefore two external arguments)

I believe the solution lies in what kind of eventualities can form one eventive. *Sitting* and *reading* can easily be seen as one event as the sitting serves the reading; kind of a mAnnar. However, I can't see how *loving someone* and *reading* can be seen as one eventive, or *knowing something* and *reading*. Now, reading in order to know something does make sense but then you obviously first read about it and then you know it. So that's quite different. The challenge is to show how exactly verbs like *sit and read* can form a unity that *love and read* cannot.

The second problem we are faced with is: Why is the event coerced to a state and not the state to an event?

What would we get if states were coerced to being events? It would mean that 'sit' was an activity and that is exactly what some people think it is. So we would have the agent of sitting. If we have two activities, sitting and reading, one should follow the other? But we do not get that reading with sentences like 'John sat and read'. At the moment I don't know why that is.

6 Conclusion

A co-ordination of a posture verb and an event verb in Icelandic yields an imperfective reading. The posture verb calls for a holder external argument whereas the event verb calls for an agent external argument. As there is only one external argument in those co-ordinations, and that one argument cannot be at the same time a holder and an agent, the event verb gets coerced to being a state and the event holds. As states are always imperfective this coercion makes the sentences imperfective.

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