

Marking Simultaneity and Sequentiality in North American Icelandic Narratives

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1. Introduction

In narratives, the speaker introduces series of events that take place in a certain order.¹ The order in which these events take place can be represented in various ways; it is often clear from context but the order might also be explicitly expressed, for instance with adverbial transition markers like the ones we see in (1a) or by using aspect (1b). In some cases we get an interaction between the methods.

- (1) John read a book *while* listening to the evening radio. *Then* he closed the book, stood up and *finally* turned off the radio.
- (2) John *was reading* the book when the door *rang*. He *had ordered* pizza.

The range of temporal expressions each speaker commands must at least somewhat depend on his overall control of the language. Bilingual speakers with greater control over one language than another might show greater capacity in describing how individual events are related to each other in his dominant language, but they might also collapse the two systems in one, over-use elements of one system or they might not fully master some aspects of one or both of the languages.

Heritage speakers are bilingual speakers that grew up speaking one language (the heritage language) but where another language, a majority language, has become dominant. In this case we have speakers of Icelandic background that are born and raised in Canada, where English has become their dominant language, and Icelandic is the heritage language. Icelandic and English are two related languages but there are nevertheless some interesting differences in how they represent relations in time. For instance, these two languages have slightly different means of linking events in a narrative and it is therefore interesting to see which of the strategies the heritage language speakers make use of.

In this paper we will particularly focus on two types of event linking, simultaneity and sequentiality, as there is a difference in how these notions are perceived. The goal of the paper is to report on a pilot study that should lead to answers to questions such as:

- What principles drive heritage speakers when they are asked to tell a story, with regard to marking simultaneity and sequentiality?
- Do they use different strategies when speaking their heritage language from speaking their dominant language?
- Do they use different strategies than full-fledged speakers of the heritage language (Icelandic)?

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¹ I use the word *narrative* here in a similar way as Polinsky (2011) who defines a narrative as “an account of a story or past events, and does not presuppose a dialogical interaction”. Polinsky’s definition is rather broad, whereas in this paper the narratives refers to elicited narrative, namely that of telling the story pictured in Mercer Mayer’s book.

In order to answer these questions, the Icelandic narratives of ten Icelandic Canadians were examined and compared to the English narratives produced by the same speakers, as well as to the narratives of European Icelanders (henceforth Icelanders) who served as the control group.

The structure of the paper is as follows: Section 2 introduces event relations, adverbial transition markers and the progressive. Section 3 contains information on the study. Results are introduced in section 4, and finally the conclusion is given in section 5.

2. Event relations

In a narrative, the order in which the eventualities² are mentioned, will give the listener certain information about the order in which they take place, according to Klein's (1994: 45) *Principle of natural order*. There are nevertheless plenty of cases where we need to convey a different timeline from the one these natural orders can handle. This is for instance the case for simultaneous events as seen in (2):

- (2) a. John listened to the radio. He played a computer game.
 b. John listened to the radio *while* he played a computer game.

Example (2a) does not automatically mean that these two events took place simultaneously and in fact, most speakers might assume that they took place in the order mentioned. However, with the addition of the adverbial transition marker in (2b), the simultaneous reading is clear.

Simultaneous events take place at the same time (although they do not have to begin or end at the same time) and could be represented by $E1 = E2$, where the equal sign represents overlap in time. Sequential events, however, follow one another, and could be described with $E1 < E2$, meaning that E1 precedes E2. There are good reason for focusing on these two types of adverbial transition markers as Aarssen (2001) has pointed out: a) Simultaneity and sequentiality are both core notions of temporality and they are perceptually accessible for children as young as four years old. b) There is a difference between the two kinds as simultaneity is usually more difficult to perceive than sequentiality, and can therefore be expected to be less used. c) These concepts can be expressed by various forms. In fact, using adverbial transition markers to express these temporal relations is only one of the options a speaker has; the same information might be expressed using aspect, subordination, inceptive verbs and discourse principles. As previously mentioned, aspect does also give information about the relationship between two events where the perfect usually orders one event time before some other time whereas the progressive indicates the inclusion of one event time in another.

Icelandic and English both have a grammaticalized progressive aspect, the only two Germanic languages that do. In English, the progressive is formed by taking the verb *be* plus the main verb in the present participle, which means that the suffix *-ing* is attached to the root of the verb, *be* + *V-ing* (see (3a)). In Icelandic the verb *vera* 'to be' is coupled with an infinitive marker and the main verb in the infinitive (see (3b)):

- (3) a. *John is eating.*
 b. *Jón er að borða.*
 John is to eat
 'John is eating.'

Even though the morphological construction of the progressive in the two languages differs, they are used quite similarly, both marking clearly an ongoing process at a certain time. However, the English construction is somewhat broader as the English progressive can be used with posture verbs, unlike the Icelandic progressive (Jóhannsdóttir 2011).

Research shows that the English progressive construction is easily learned compared to other syntactic constructions (Dulay and Burt 1973) and that it comes very early in the acquisition process (Giacalone Ramat 1997). It is perhaps because of this that speakers of English as a second language use the progressive quite a lot, even more than native speakers do (Ranta 2006). No such research exists for

² I use the term *eventuality* here in the sense of Bach (1981) where eventuality refers to both states and events.

the progressive aspect in Icelandic. However as Jóhannsdóttir (pending) shows that Icelandic Canadians use the progressive considerably more than Icelanders do, it is worth exploring their use of the progressive in narratives with regards to sequentiality and simultaneity.

3. The study

3.1. The speakers

The North American Icelandic data was collected in 2013 and 2014 in four places in Manitoba, Canada: Arborg, Gimli, Riverton and Winnipeg.³ It consists of data from ten speakers, three men and seven women. The average age was 71.9, with the oldest speaker at 96 and the youngest at 30. The speakers differ considerably in how much they use Icelandic today; where some speak the language daily but others only occasionally.

The control group were ten full speakers of European or Homeland Icelandic. They all live in or close to Akureyri, Iceland; five men and five women. The average age was 74.5, ranging from 46 to 87 years old. All these speakers are native speakers of Icelandic and were not exposed to other languages in early age. The Icelandic data was collected in 2015 and 2017.

The speakers in this study are of two nationalities speaking two different languages. This can be seen in the following table:

Table 1: Speakers and languages in the study.

	Icelandic	English
Canadians	√	√
Icelanders	√	

Furthermore, we have two varieties of Icelandic; the variety spoken in North America, North American Icelandic, and the one spoken in Iceland, Homeland Icelandic.

3.2. Method

All the speakers were asked to tell the same story, *Frog where are you?* by Mercer Mayer (1969) in their own words. This stimulus was chosen because of the extensive research that has been done in various languages using the said book, which opens the opportunity for comparison with other research. Furthermore, it is quite useful for the present study because of its constant shifting of dramatic events and because it allows the narrator to describe “a complex network of temporally sequenced events, while prompting them to attend to each scene in turn” (Berman & Slobin 1994: 42).

In the study by Berman & Slobin (1994), the speakers were given the chance to look through the book before telling the story, but unfortunately that example was not followed in this study; a mistake that can solely be explained by the inexperience of the researchers. The speakers therefore did not know what would happen on the next page, which completely excluded foreshadowing and might have led to less linkage between events. It would also have been interesting to have the speakers then retell the story from memory, as the high number of deictic use indicates that not all speakers managed to see the pictures as a story and instead were simply describing what they saw.

The narratives were recorded and transcribed in Transcriber and then each narrative was carefully coded for adverbial transition markers, tense and aspect, and clauses. Following Berman & Slobin (1994: 26), modal and aspectual verbs were counted together with their main verbs so *went to climb a tree* and *goes to look* were counted as one clause. As Berman and Slobin point out, this analysis into clauses makes it possible to compare relative length and propositional complexity of texts. Clauses were further divided

³ In total, 125 speakers of North American Icelandic were interviewed in four Canadian provinces and two American states. Of these, 59 told the frog story in Icelandic and 29 in English. Data from only ten of these speakers have been transcribed in both Icelandic and English.

into three categories based on what they described, based on their role in the story; the setting, the plot and additional comments:

- (4) The setting: *and it was dark* (G29)
- (5) The plot: *and the bees go after the dog and the dog goes running away* (A47)
- (6) Additional comments: *I do not know how you call a frog* (R81)

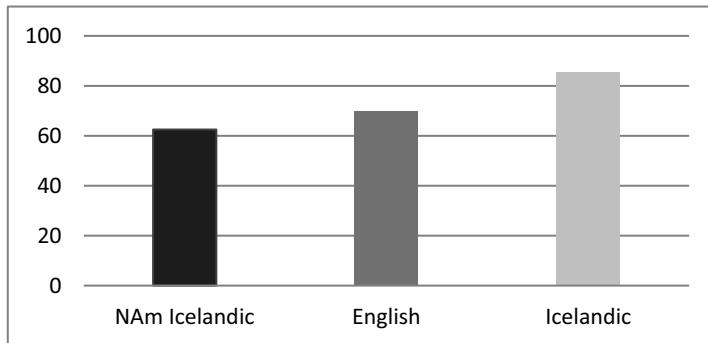
Events were, however, not divided into foreground and background events in the style of Berman & Slobin (1994).

4. Results

4.1. Number of clauses and adverbial transition markers

The Icelandic Canadians used on average 68 clauses to tell the frog story in Icelandic but 73.4 clauses to tell it in English. When only the plot-advancing events are counted the difference is 62.5 in Icelandic compared to 69.9 in English. This is considerably fewer clauses than were used by the Icelanders, who used 103.8 clauses on average and 85.4 to describe the plot:

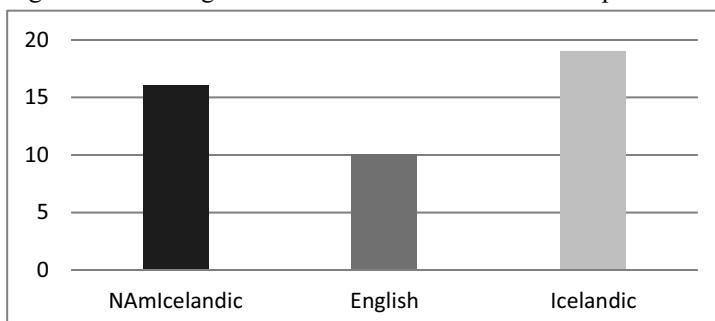
Figure 1: Average number of clauses that describe plot events.



When looking at the use of adverbial transition markers in the text (Figure 2 below), we find that the Icelandic Canadians use adverbial transition markers much more when speaking Icelandic than when speaking English; 16.2% of all finite plot clauses start with a transition when they speak Icelandic, but only 10.2% when they speak English. Interestingly, the number for the North American Icelandic narratives is similar to what we get when we look at the results for the Icelanders, who used adverbial transition markers in 18.9% of the plot clauses.

However, it is not enough just to look at the number of adverbial transition markers; the types of adverbial transition markers matter as well. These will be discussed in the next section.

Figure 2: Percentages of adverbial transition markers in plot clauses.



4.2. Markers of simultaneity

Adverbial transition markers that describe simultaneous events occur very infrequently in the data. In the English narratives, simultaneity was marked seven times and all of them with an adverbial transition marker; the adverb *meanwhile* appeared five times and the adverb *while* twice. There was only one such example in the Homeland Icelandic data, the adverbial *meðan að* ‘while’. However, there were two instances in the Homeland Icelandic data of a relative clause marking simultaneity. Interestingly enough, the only instance of simultaneity marking in the North American Icelandic data was also with a relative clause.

- (7) *Og litli drengurinn er að horfa á hundinn sem er að horfa*
 and little boy.DET is to look at dog.DET who is to look
þarna inn í brúsann á froskinn. (G70)
 there inside in jar.DET on frog.DET
 ‘And the little boy is looking at the dog *who* is looking into the flask at the frog.’

It is worth mentioning here that both the main clause and the relative clause are in the progressive; something we did not see in the relative clause examples in Homeland Icelandic. This difference might however be important because it indicates a difference in strategies, i.e. a preference for the progressive in North American Icelandic, even though relative clauses are used in both cases. However, this is only a single example.

If the pattern shown by those few sentences is representative of these languages, we have an indication of a typological difference with respect to expressing simultaneous events: In English, it is expressed with adverbial transitional markers, in Homeland Icelandic with relative clauses. However, with this small set of data we cannot know if this is in fact representative of the languages. Furthermore, even though the only instance of simultaneity in the North American Icelandic data patterns with the Homeland Icelandic data when it comes to using relative clauses, it only does so partly. Obviously further research and a bigger data set is required.

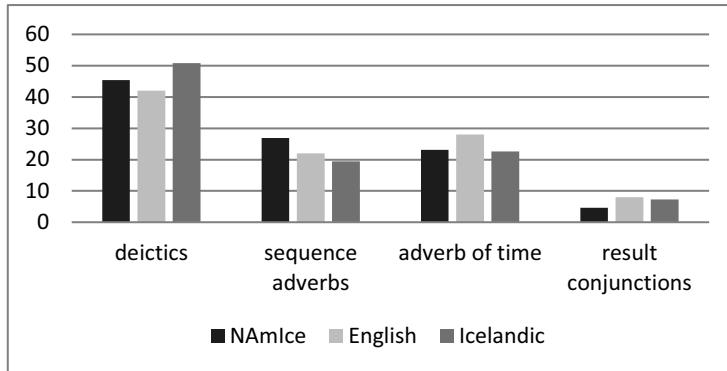
4.3. Markers of sequentiality

Sequential transitions markers are considerably more common than simultaneous markers, both in the speech of Icelandic Canadians and the Icelanders, and when looking at the data we can divide the sequential markers into four main categories:

- Deictics: *hér* ‘here’, *hérna* ‘here’, *þar* ‘there’, *þarna* ‘there’, *á næstu mynd* ‘on next picture’
 Sequence adverbs: *fyrst* ‘first’, *svo* ‘then’, *næst* ‘next’, *loks* ‘finally’
 Adverbs of time: *nú* ‘now’, *núna* ‘now’
 Result conjunctions: *svo að* ‘so that’, *við það* ‘by that’, *þannig að* ‘such that, by doing so’

As can be seen in Figure 3, the different strategies to move the events forward pattern are used similarly in the three language varieties.

Figure 3: Percentages of different methods of marking sequentiality.



In all three varieties, the deictics are the most used markers of sequentiality, ranging from 42% in English and up to 50.8% in Homeland Icelandic, whereas result conjunctions are the least common, ranging from 4.6% to 8%. In Homeland Icelandic and English, adverbs of time are the secondly most used strategy whereas in North American Icelandic it is sequence adverbs. Notice, however, that the difference between the sequence adverbs and adverbs of time in all the languages is rather minimal and we can thus safely say that the three language varieties behave quite similarly when it comes to marking sequentiality.

Even though the languages use similar strategies to show sequentiality, they differ in respect to the number of types.

Table 2: Number of types of sequential transitions.

	North American Icelandic	English	Homeland Icelandic
Deictics	3	4	5
Sequence adverbs	2	5	4
Adverb of time	2	1	2
Result conjunctions	3	3	3

When comparing the adverbial transition markers in the two Icelandic varieties we see that there is, in fact, not a great difference between the vocabularies the Icelanders use and the one the Icelandic Canadians use. In all three language varieties the deictics are the most common and the result conjunctions the least common. However, the Icelanders use more types of markers than the Icelandic Canadians. For instance, they have two forms for ‘here’, *hér*, *hérna*, and two forms for ‘there’, *þar*, *þarna*. The Icelandic Canadians, however, use only the longer forms *hérna* and *þarna*. For ‘then’, both groups use *þá* and *svo* but the Icelanders additionally use *síðan*. What is important here is that the Icelanders and the Icelandic Canadians can convey exactly the same meaning with these adverbial markers; the Icelanders simply possess slightly more variety in their vocabulary. The English vocabulary is completely comparable with that of the Icelandic one with the same meaning expressed.

Finally, the Icelanders, as well as the Icelandic Canadians when speaking English, also used various stylistic phrases that seem to be common in storytelling, such as *viti menn* ‘what do you know’, *ekki nóg með það* ‘not just that’, *nema að* ‘except that, all of a sudden, the next thing you know’. These were non-existent in North American Icelandic and reflect a loss in the linguistic abilities in the heritage speakers.

4.4. The Progressive

As mentioned above, Jóhannsdóttir (pending) shows that Icelandic Canadians use the progressive a lot more in their Icelandic than Icelanders do. The same results are evident here: 32% of the North

American Icelandic plot clauses of the frog story were in the progressive, compared to only 3.7% of the Homeland Icelandic plot clauses and 17.6% of the English plot clauses. This indicates that the Icelandic Canadians are overusing a common English feature in their Icelandic to the extent where they use it even more than in their English. But does this difference in the use of the progressive has any influence on the use of other markers of simultaneity and sequentiality?

Different languages have different means for coding temporal linking. Therefore, languages with clear marking of imperfective or progressive seem to use temporal transition markers less than languages that do not, see for instance Schlyter (1996) on the use of aspect vs. adverbials in Swedish-French bilingual children and Lanza (2001) on the use of the progressive and adverbials in Norwegian-English bilingual children. Both English and Icelandic have a grammaticalized progressive, as previously mentioned, so we might expect less of a difference between these languages when it comes to the use of connectors. However, the fact that the progressive is more commonly used in English might nevertheless have some effect on the use of adverbial transition markers, i.e. the more common the progressive is, the less necessary it is to use the adverbial transition markers. The fact that the progressive is the most common in North American Icelandic where connectors are also relatively frequent, does not comply with that. This might simply be the result of heritage speakers overusing certain common patterns in each language, therefore mixing the methods of Icelandic and English in this respect.

5. Conclusion

Bilingual speakers with one language more dominant than the other can deal with variations between the languages in various ways and use different strategies to approach different structures. They can show greater capacity in describing certain aspects in their dominant language; they might collapse the two systems in one; they can over-use elements of one system in both languages; or they might not fully master one or both of the languages. We seem to have several of these different strategies visible in this data. If we start by looking at the main results presented in the previous chapter we see that:

- a) Adverbial transition markers are more commonly used in Homeland Icelandic than English; and the Icelandic Canadians use them more in their Icelandic than their English.
- b) The progressive is used more in English than in Homeland Icelandic. The Icelandic Canadians use it even more in their Icelandic than in their English.
- c) The Icelandic Canadians have more lexical variation in transitional adverbs in their English than in their Icelandic.

The main point here is that the Icelandic Canadians do not have any trouble with constructing events in time and they have control over using adverbial transition markers in their Icelandic just as in their English. In fact, they use the same coding strategies when speaking Icelandic as when speaking English. Homeland Icelandic and English are two related languages with a rather similar structure when it comes to expressing temporality; these are, as mentioned, the only two Germanic languages with a grammaticalized progressive. Nevertheless, the progressive is used more in English than in Homeland Icelandic, which has led to overuse of the progressive in the Icelandic of the Icelandic Canadians.

The amount of types of adverbials produced by the Icelandic Canadians is slightly smaller in their Icelandic than their English. This means that they need to rely more often on the same adverbials, indicating that they do indeed have greater capacity in describing how individual events are related to each other in their dominant language. This is by no means surprising given the fact that English is the language used mostly by the Icelandic Canadians and that they do not in general make use of or practise written Icelandic or have other considerable contact with Iceland.

It seems then that in these elicited narratives we see traces of various interactions of the systems. On the one hand, they function side by side without any interference from one another, on the other hand, we see dominance of one language over the other, overusing of elements of one language and possibly even a case of collapsing of two systems into one. The individual variations evident in the data – one speaker might use only one transition while another might use seven or more – also show us the

importance of expanding the data pool in order to get more accurate picture of how these speakers construct their events in time.

The study reported consists of a very limited set of data – particularly when it comes to marking simultaneous events – so more data is needed in order to draw reliable conclusions. It might also be beneficial to compare these results with monolingual English speakers of American Iceland descent who have learnt Icelandic in their youth but now do not speak it in order to see whether the English of these speakers might be somewhat affected by their Icelandic. Furthermore, as there are traces of simple picture-describing in these narratives, it would be interesting to see how these speakers would construct narratives in free speech or even the frog story told from memory. In such cases the pictures could not serve as a crutch for the storyline and the speakers would be forced to express temporal relations more explicitly.

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