The Two Perfects of North American Icelandic

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1. Introduction

The perfect is a somewhat problematic category due to the multiplicity of its meaning and uses and for a child learning the language it can be quite challenging to distinguish between the fine variation differences. This must be particularly difficult when the perfect is represented by more than one syntactic construction as in Icelandic. As Jónsson (1992), Thráinsson (2017) and others have pointed out, Icelandic has two kinds of perfect. Firstly, the common Germanic type with the auxiliary hafa ‘have’ and the verb in the past participle:1, 2

(1) Ég hef séð þessa mynd.
    I have seen this movie
    ‘I have seen this movie.’

Secondly, the younger second type consisting of búinn + infinitival complement:3

(2) Ég er búin að baka köku.
    I am BÜINN to bake cake
    ‘I have baked a cake’

I will follow Thráinsson (2017) in calling this the hafa-perfect and the búinn-perfect.4

English has only one type of the perfect, which is similar to that of the hafa-perfect, made of an auxiliary followed by a past participle:

(3) I have seen this movie.

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1 Examples like Ég er farinn (e. I have left) might indicate that Icelandic has indeed three different kinds of the perfect, showing a “have/be” alternation, but as Jónsson (1992) and Thráinsson (2007, 2017) have shown, Icelandic uses hafa ‘have’ with a variety of predicates that usually take “be” in languages with “have/be” alternations. Furthermore, in Icelandic, vera + past participle has a strictly state (or adjectival) reading. The construction is therefore not considered a true perfect construction in Icelandic.

2 Due to the richness of Icelandic morphology, I will not gloss the examples morphologically.

3 I will follow Wide (2000) and Thráinsson (2017) and gloss búinn as BÜNN, regardless of gender and number. Jónsson (1992) glossed it as finished but that is somewhat misleading, as the word does not always have that meaning in the construction.

4 Linguists have not agreed on whether the construction is fully lexicalized or not. Jakub (1970: 179) calls the búinn-construction marginal lexical construction and not a true perfect, as there are various restrictions on its use. Similarly Wide (2000: 7) claims that the construction has not yet been fully grammaticalized as a perfect and Larsson (2008: 87-88) says that it has not developed all the properties of a perfect. However, Thráinsson has shown how the construction “has gradually developed into a more general type of perfect in Icelandic, through a process of grammaticalization, although it is still more restricted than the hafa-perfect” (2017:139). Whether the búinn-perfect is fully grammaticalized or not is not crucial to this study.

English has only one type of the perfect but Icelandic has two. Exploring the use of the perfect in North American Icelandic can therefore be quite interesting as it gives us information on how well heritage speakers retain certain grammatical constructions when their heritage language differs from the majority language in that respect. We might even expect to see some dominant language transfer, particularly as one of the two perfects of Icelandic has a structure quite related to that of the dominant language.

The goal of this paper is to answer the following questions:

- Do North American Icelanders still use both types of the perfect?
- If they do, do they use it in the same way as Icelanders, with the same distinction in meaning?
- Have they in some way simplified either construction, syntactically or morphologically, similar to what children and foreign learners of Icelandic have the tendency to do, or have they retained the perfect both syntactically and morphologically?

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 focuses on the two perfect constructions of Icelandic, showing how they are used with respect to the three categories of the perfect: universal, resultative and experiential. Section 3 focuses on the perfect in North American Icelandic, looking at the use of the perfect, the distribution and the syntactical and morphological problems, giving answers to the research questions. Conclusions are given in section 4.

2. The two perfects of Icelandic

2.1. The different categories of the perfect

The perfect is often split into three categories in the literature (see e.g. McCawley 1971):

- The Universal perfect: She has lived in Iceland for three years.
- Experiential perfect: I have read the book twice.
- Resultative perfect: I have lost the car keys.

Jónsson (1992) and Thráinsson (2017) have discussed the behavior of the two Icelandic perfects based on how they work with respect to these different categories. Even though both constructions can be used to establish the different meanings, they do seem to have a kind of a division of labor. The hafa-perfect is most commonly used for the experiential reading, the búinn-perfect for the resultative reading, and both types are used to represent the universal reading, even though the hafa-perfect is still more common and in many cases, the búinn-perfect is less formal.5 This can be seen in examples (4)–(6).

(4) Universal perfect
a. Hún hefur búið á Íslandi í þrjú ár.
   She has lived in Iceland for three years
   ‘She has lived in Iceland for three year.’

b. Hún er búin að búa á Íslandi í þrjú ár.
   She is BÚINN to live in Iceland for three years
   ‘She has lived in Iceland for three years.’

(5) Resultative perfect
a. Ég hef týnt bíllyklunum
   I have lost car-keys
   ‘I have lost the car keys.’

b. Ég er búin að týna bíllyklunum.
   I am BÚINN to lose car-keys
   ‘I have lost the car keys.’

5 Wide (2002) and Larsson (2008) showed that the búinn-perfect is still rather rare in formal language.
(6) Experiential perfect

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{a. } & \text{Ég hef komið til Íslands} \\
& \text{I have come to Iceland} \\
& \text{‘I have been to Iceland.’}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{b. } & \text{Ég er búinn að koma til Íslands.} \\
& \text{I am BÚINN to come to Iceland} \\
& \text{‘I have been to Iceland.’}
\end{align*}
\]

Notice that even though (5a) can have the resultative reading, the experiential reading is more prominent, particularly without further context, and in (6b) the resultative reading is more prominent, even though context can make the experiential reading work.

This pattern is nevertheless rather clear as shown in table 1:

Table 1: The use of the two perfects of Icelandic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Universal</th>
<th>Experiential</th>
<th>Resultative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Both but \textit{hafa} more common</td>
<td>Almost always \textit{hafa}</td>
<td>Usually \textit{búinn}</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The \textit{búinn}-perfect has an obvious preference for a resultative reading but this preference seems to have started out as a requirement as there have been much stronger restrictions on the use of the \textit{búinn}-perfect than the \textit{hafa}-perfect. Let us look at these closer.

2.2. Restrictions and changes in the \textit{búinn}-perfect

\textit{Búinn} is originally an adjective, which in Old Norse meant “ready, prepared” among other things and the construction \textit{vera búinn að} + infinitive thus meant “be ready to”. In Modern Icelandic, however, \textit{búinn} rather has the meaning “be finished” and many of the perfect sentences with \textit{búinn} could be translated as \textit{be finished to V}. That is however not always the case and Thráinsson (2017) has shown with the use of a historical corpus how the \textit{búinn}-construction gradually turned into the systematic perfect that it is today. There are nevertheless still some restrictions on the use of the perfect, some of which seem to be slowly disappearing.

Jónsson (1992) claimed that the \textit{búinn}-perfect could not have the experiential reading and pointed out that adverbials such as \textit{nokkurn tímann} (e. ever), that can only be used with experientials, are fine with the \textit{hafa}-perfect but not with the \textit{búinn}-perfect. He also pointed out that with states, the \textit{hafa}-perfect can get both a universal reading and an experiential reading, whereas the \textit{búinn}-perfect only gets the universal reading. However, as Thráinsson (2017) has pointed out, we can create a context where \textit{búinn} is used as an experiential perfect:

(9) Óg veit ekki hvað ég er oft búinn að brjóta gleraugun min. \\
I know not what I am often BÚINN to break glasses.DET mine \\
‘I don’t know how often I’ve broken my glasses.’

Thráinsson (2017) points out that most of the restrictions that linguists have discussed with regard to the \textit{búinn}-perfect have exceptions. For instance, the \textit{búinn}-perfect mostly appears with telic predicates and subjects that are animate and agentive, but that is not always the case. Similarly, even though it does not seem to be compatible with certain predicates, adverbial modification can sometimes make such sentences grammatical. Furthermore, the \textit{búinn}-perfect does not in general occur with proportional adverbs like \textit{alrei} ‘never’, as pointed out by Jónsson (1992), but they can when the adverbs have a wide scope. However, \textit{búinn} is completely incompatible with modal verbs and with the passive. It is because of these restrictions that linguists have not counted the \textit{búinn}-perfect as fully grammaticalized (see footnote 4) and Wide (2000) claims that it functions primarily as a current relevance perfect.

However, recent studies (Práinsson & Torfadóttir 2015; Thráinsson 2017) have shown that the restrictions on the \textit{búinn}-perfect are decreasing and the perfect is getting more common. This means we
are seeing more and more examples of recipient and experiencer subjects with the búinn-perfect and we are getting it more frequently with the experiential reading. In fact, the younger generation seems to prefer the búinn-perfect to the hafa-perfect (Wide 2002; Thráinsson 2017).

Wide (2002) has also shown that Icelandic children learn the búinn-perfect earlier, even though it is morphologically more complex, as Thráinsson (2017) has pointed out. That is however partly solved by children reducing the construction to the invariant form būna for various gender and number forms. Andrason (2008) has shown similar generalization in the language of second language learners in Iceland; they have generalized the búinn-perfect to all verbs and all subjects. The inflecting verb vera ‘be’ has been lost from the construction, which has led to the construction becoming invariable for tense and has thus lost its temporal deictic transparency. The Icelandic sentence in (9b) has been replaced by (9a) in the language of these immigrants and the italic parts in (9b) are deleted.

(10) a. É búna kunna gera þetta. (Andrason 2008: 121)
    I būn know do this

b. Ég er búinn að kunna að gera þetta.
    I am būinn to know to do this

These changes in the búinn-perfect are thus of two kinds: the decrease in restriction, probably due to the grammaticalization of the perfect on the one hand, and the morphological and syntactical simplification by the language learners on the other hand.

So let us now turn to North American Icelandic and see if either of these changes have taken place in the language.

3. The perfect in North American Icelandic

3.1. The data

North American Icelandic is spoken by the descendants of Icelandic immigrants to North America. Most of the speakers are elderly and live in Manitoba although the language is also spoken in western Canada as well as in North Dakota and Washington State.

The data used in this study was gathered in three separate trips in 2013 and 2014. There were 40 speakers: 20 men and 20 women. They all live in Manitoba, Canada. Average age was 75.1. All but one learned Icelandic as the first language but the age of learning English varied, ranging from birth until school age. About half has taken some Icelandic classes, usually short conversational classes. Only one speaker has taken extensive Icelandic lessons.

The data was gathered through elicited conversations, where a researcher asked the speakers various questions about themselves and their background. As the speakers were differently talkative, the length of each interview varies, ranging from 196 words to 3292 words. Average length of conversation was 749.4 words.

3.2. Results

3.2.1. Use of the perfect

When we look at the frequency of the perfect amongst these 40 speakers, we see that it is not used very much. The average use of the perfect is 0.43 times per 100 words, ranging from zero to 1.10 per 100 words. However, majority of the speakers uses a perfect in their speech and the biggest group uses both types, as can be seen in table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Used both types</th>
<th>Used only hafa</th>
<th>Used only búinn</th>
<th>Used neither</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The fact that almost half of the speakers uses both types of the perfect indicates the survival of both types in North American Icelandic, even though individual variations are obvious, as to be expected. It is particularly important to keep in mind that even though 15 speakers in all use only one type of the perfect, 10 of these 16 speakers only used a perfect once so even though they knew both types, they would not have shown that. The absence of a construction does not mean the speaker does not know it or use it, but it also does not tell us that they do. Therefore, we cannot state for sure that both types of the perfect have survived in the language of all these speakers, even though they clearly have in the language of some. However, looking at how the speakers use the perfect might give us some clues. A speaker that knows or uses only one of the two types must use that type with all of the different meanings, resultative, experiential and universal. The likelihood of finding patterns different from that in Icelandic should therefore be considerable.

3.2.2. Distribution of the perfect

So let us then turn to the next question: Do the North American Icelanders use the different types of the perfect in the same way as the Icelanders do? As seen in section 2.1, Icelanders tend to use búinn for the resultative perfect, hafa for the experiential perfect, and both types for the universal perfect, even though hafa is more common for that reading. When we look at the results from the North American Icelanders, shown in table 3, we see exactly the same pattern:

Table 3: Distribution of the two kinds of perfect in the conversations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Búinn</th>
<th>Hafa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Resultative</td>
<td>24 (85.7%)</td>
<td>4 (14.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiential</td>
<td>10 (15.4%)</td>
<td>55 (84.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universal</td>
<td>11 (37.9%)</td>
<td>18 (62.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfinished</td>
<td>5 (45.5%)</td>
<td>6 (54.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be seen in table 3, bóinn is used to represent the universal perfect in 85.7% of the times whereas hafa is used in mere 14.3% of the times. This is the other way around in the case of the experiential perfect; hafa is used in 84.6% of the times and bóinn 15.4% of the times. Both types are considerably common with the universal perfect, although hafa is used more, 62.1% of the times compared to 37.9% for the bóinn-perfect. Even though we do not have similar numbers for Icelandic, this is the same pattern as shown by Jónsson (1992) and Thráinsson (2017), and previously mentioned in section 2.1. The sentences in (11)–(13) are therefore good representatives of each type.

(11) Resultative perfect
    Ëg er bóinn að gleyma hvað það var. (R81)
    ‘I have forgotten what it was.’

(12) Experiential perfect
    Hún hefur komið að heimsækja mér. (G66)
    ‘She has come to visit me’
The North American Icelanders therefore seem to have retained the distinction between the perfects and do not show any influence from English, even though we might have expected a rise of the hafa-perfect, which is a comparable construction to the English perfect. The examples with hafa are indeed more numerous than those with búinn, but that is also the case in Icelandic. There are, therefore, no signs of dominant language transfer in this data.

Let us then look at those speakers that only use one type of the perfect. If they know only one type, we might see cases where the wrong perfect is used with any of the different meanings but that is in general not the case. Of the 16 speakers, 26 examples in all, only one sentence would be considered wrong in Icelandic:6

\[(14) \text{Ô hann er búinn að meita fólk frá Chile bara. (W29)}\]
\[
\text{Oh he is BÚINN to meet people from Chile only}
\]
\[
\text{‘Oh, he has only met people from Chile’}
\]

There is also one example where the speaker uses a perfect where one would in general use a simple past tense:

\[(15) \text{Ég hef f-verið fæddur í Kanada (A52)}\]
\[
\text{I have f- been born in Canada}
\]
\[
\text{‘I have been born in Canada.’ (Meaning: ‘I was born in Canada.’)}
\]

Finally, there are two cases where the hafa-perfect is used as a resultative but in both cases, the use of hafa in that context seems completely natural to the native ears of the author. Every other example fits completely with the pattern given in section 2.1 for Icelandic and shown clearly in table 3 for North American Icelandic. It is therefore tempting to draw the conclusion that even though these speakers happen to use only one of the two perfect constructions, they most likely know both.

3.2.3. Problems in syntax and morphology

We do not seem to have any clear indications that either of the two construction types are disappearing or that the speakers have in general any problems using the perfect. There are, though, 11 examples where a speaker starts using a perfect but then does not finish the sentence. In these cases, it is impossible to tell whether the speaker left the sentence unfinished because he was not sure of how to construct it, or if he was not sure of how to construct his thoughts. We all sometimes start a sentence that we do not finish, not because we do not know the grammar but rather because we decide to explain our thoughts in a different way. It is nevertheless important to keep in mind that if these unfinished sentences do reflect problems with constructing the perfect, that problem is similar between the two constructions as shown in the last column of table 3 where there are five examples of unfinished búinn and six examples of unfinished hafa.

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6 This is in fact only one of two sentences in all the data where the wrong perfect is used compared to the use in Icelandic.
In all the data, there is only one example where a speaker mixes the two constructions.

(16)  O þá þetta er leiðinlegt ég hef búin að gleyma því. (G27)
    ‘Oh, yeah, that is sad. I had forgotten that.’

Problems with morphology are also few. There is only one case of a wrong form of the past participle and a few where there are problems with agreement (such as feminine version of búinn used by a man).

Furthermore, there is nothing indicating any kind of simplification for the búinn-construction as seen in the language of immigrants and children in Iceland, as there was no case of búinn lacking gender or number marking or deletion of the infinitive marker and only one example of the copula missing. Overall, there is nothing indicating any problems with the perfect in North American Icelandic.

Finally, the restrictions mentioned in section 2.2 seem to more or less hold for North American Icelandic as the búinn-perfect mostly appears with telic predicates and subjects that are animate and agentive. It does not appear with any modal verbs nor does it show up in the passive. There are, however, two example (from one speaker) where the búinn-perfect appears with proportion adverbs such as alltaf ‘always’ and aldrei ‘never’ with narrow scope:

(17)  a. …og ég er alltaf búinn að muna það. (W8)
    ‘…and I have always remembered that.

b. …svo ég er aldrei búinn að gleyma því (W8)
    ‘…so I have never forgotten that.’

This use of proportion adverbs with the búinn-perfect is rather common in the language of immigrants in Iceland (Andrason 2008) but is not used in Icelandic nor in general in North American Icelandic.

Sorace (2011: 8) has pointed out that sensitivity to the subtle aspectual and semantic distinctions impacting the syntactic behavior of verbs is acquirable but that it does not reach the same level of determinacy as in monolingual speakers. She also points out that in second generation heritage speakers it is affected by attrition. That does not seem to be the case here. However, it is important to bear in mind that the results of this paper are based on very limited data so we need to be careful in drawing conclusions.

4. Conclusion

The results of the research clearly show that even though we do not have many examples of a perfect from each speaker, most of them use one or even both types of the perfect. What is more important is that when we look at how each construction is used, the same pattern as in Icelandic emerges: hafa is used for the experiential perfect, búinn for the resultative perfect but both types are used for the universal perfect even though hafa is more common in that context. Furthermore, nothing seems to indicate any kind of weakening for either type of the perfect in North American Icelandic as mistakes are very few and the use is quite systematic. There is no sign of a simplification of the búinn-perfect as has been seen in the language of second language learners of Icelandic and in fact Icelandic children, meaning that these heritage speakers show a more consistent use of the two perfects than young Icelanders in Iceland do today. Finally, there are only minimal syntactical and morphological problems with the constructions.

As Benmamoun et al. (2013: 172) have pointed out “exposure to natural language during the critical period should allow one to develop native-like competence” but that is not the case for heritage speakers in all grammatical domains. In some ways, they pattern with native speakers and in some with L2 learners. We know that aspect is more vulnerable to attrition in the language of heritage speakers than tense, as pointed out by Benmamoun et al. However, the results here seem to indicate that the perfect in North American Icelandic—and perhaps aspect in general—does not pattern with those aspects of the grammar that require significant input and use in order to be immune from attrition but rather with those
areas of the grammar which are naturally resilient. With respect to the perfect, North American Icelanders clearly pattern with native speakers of Icelandic, showing maintenance of the properties of the perfect and therefore monolingual-like performance. Furthermore, there are no signs of dominant language transfer in this data.

This indicates a lack of attrition with respect to the syntax-aspect mapping and indicates that the form-meaning pairings are quite solid. That is in fact in accordance with previous studies that show that the syntax-semantic interface is less vulnerable with bilingual speakers than the syntax-pragmatic interface (Tsimpli & Sorace 2006). In fact, Putnam, Kupisch & Pascual y Cabo (2018) have pointed out that as various studies have shown vulnerability of the interfaces while others show monolingual-like performances, it is difficult to maintain claims about the general vulnerability of the interfaces. This study supports that.

Even though the results are rather clear, the study reported consists of a very limited set of data, as some speakers use a perfect only once and some not at all. With a bigger data pool, and particularly more examples from each speaker, it would be possible to draw conclusions that are more reliable.

References
