PERFECT IN DIALOGUE

Form and functional potential of
the *vera búinn að* + inf. construction
in contemporary Icelandic

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PROCESSES, INTERACTION, AND CONSTRUCTIONS

MONOGRAPHS 3

Processes, Interaction, and Constructions
Pragmatics, Ideology, and Contacts
Postcards, Implicitness, Constructions
Possibly Imported Co-constructions

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Abstract

This study is an exploration of a grammatical construction in contemporary Icelandic (*vera búinn að* + infinitive, lit. 'be finished/done to'), which has not yet been fully grammaticalized as a perfect. The main purpose of the study is to investigate the (synchronic) communicative and syntactic-semantic diversity in the use of this construction in authentic recorded conversations and hence contribute to the understanding of how grammatical constructions, particularly tense-aspect constructions, are used in spoken language in real-life settings. Theoretically the study relates to two different frameworks. The overall framework is a functionalist and dialogic outlook on language and communication. The other framework brought up is that of grammaticalization, particularly the so-called Bybee and Dahl approach to tense-aspect constructions.

Three empirical investigations were conducted using primarily qualitative methods: a) a sequential analysis of the *búinn* construction in communicative contexts, b) a frequency study of the construction in different genres of texts, and c) an analysis of the construction in syntactic-semantic contexts.

One of the main results of the study is that the use of the construction *vera búinn að* + inf. can be explained in terms of a **functional potential**. On a more general level, the study demonstrates the importance of taking into consideration the communicative aspects of grammatical constructions, especially in studies of tense and aspect.

1 Introduction

This study is an exploration of a specific grammatical construction in contemporary Icelandic, *vera búinn að* + infinitive, lit. 'be finished/done to'[1] (henceforth referred to as the *búinn* construction). This construction can be characterized as a perfect which is not fully grammaticalized, in the sense that it is not used as an experiential (as in *I have been to Paris*, see chapters 4 and 5). The main purpose of the study is to investigate the (synchronic) communicative and syntactic-semantic diversity in the use of this construction in authentic recorded data and hence contribute to an understanding of how grammatical constructions, particularly tense-aspect constructions, are used in spoken language in real-life settings.

The *búinn* construction is the most recent in origin of the three main types of perfects in contemporary Icelandic. It has been attested in texts from the late 16th century (see section 5.3 below). Even though it is thus also used in written language, the *búinn* construction is particularly frequent in spoken language (cf. Guðmundsson 1922:171; Halldórsson 1956:96; Kress 1982:155; Ragnarsdóttir et al. 2000:96). In order to capture the special character of the construction, this study therefore focuses on spoken language. This is a deliberate and theoretically grounded choice of focus (see chapter 2), which will have many implications for how the study is structured and conducted. One of the main overarching goals is to show the importance of spoken language when investigating the use, function and development of tense-aspect constructions.

Theoretically the study relates to two different frameworks. The overall framework is a functionalist and dialogic outlook on language and communication. Accordingly, discourse, communication, thought, interaction, language use and linguistic practices are seen as primary in relation to language structure (Linell 1998:4). The major focus thus lies on authentic spoken interaction, which shows most clearly how discourse is social in nature, that is, socially constructed, sequentially organized and richly structured (ibid. p. xii). The other framework invoked is that of grammaticalization, particularly the so-called Bybee and Dahl approach to tense-aspect constructions (see Bybee and Dahl 1989 and 3.1 below). According to this view, cross-linguistically attested types of constructions, such as 'perfect,' 'past' and 'perfective,' are not seen as absolute entities, "but

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[1] The form *búinn* is inflected for gender and number according to the grammatical subject of the sentence (*hann er búinn*, *hún er búin*, *það er búið*, *þeir eru búnir*, *þær eru búnar*, *þau eru búin*). As the literal meaning of *búinn* in the construction has eroded to the extent that the construction can express ongoing events, I will use the masc. sing. form BÚINN in the glosses instead of, for example, *done* or *finish*.

rather as the statistically most probable clusterings in 'grammatical space" (Dahl 2000b:7). The substantive similarities in expression and content between constructions in different languages are emphasized, but at the same time the system-internal relations which characterize constructions are seen as resulting from substantive properties, rather than the other way around (ibid. p. 13). On the synchronic level, grammaticalization processes are therefore considered to give rise to situations that are not easy to describe in terms of binary oppositions. As Dahl (ibid.) concludes, tense-aspect constructions "tend to expand from a point of origin in a wave-like fashion, (metaphorically speaking) chasing each other along a path of development."

The focus in this study is on the synchronic level of language only. The dialogic aspects of language and communication will also be stressed throughout the study. Nonetheless, I relate my study to grammaticalization theory, in which the diachronic perspective plays a central role. The reasons for this are the following. I find the descriptions provided within grammaticalization approaches to tense-aspect, such as the Bybee and Dahl approach, to be the most plausible current descriptions of the nature of tense-aspect constructions (on the system level of language). Grammaticalization as a framework is also compatible with dialogic approaches to language of the kind advocated in this study (i.e., with respect to background assumptions about language). Furthermore, my explicit aim is to to address the tradition of grammaticalization approaches to tense-aspect. My main aim, however, is to investigate the synchronic use and function of the *búinn* construction from a communicative perspective, in the light of grammaticalization theory. In other words, I wish to describe the clustering which the construction forms in contemporary Icelandic. In so doing, I hope to achieve the following goals: a) to contribute to an understanding of the synchronic complexity of tense-aspect constructions (possibly) undergoing further grammaticalization, and b) to create a background for diachronic and comparative studies of the *búinn* construction in the future.

The theoretical foundations of the study are presented in chapters 2 (Communication and grammar), 3 (Tense and aspect) and 4 (The category of perfect). My aim is to explicitly combine a dialogic approach to language and communication with an often much more abstract and system-based approach to tense-aspect constructions. Even though both the approaches adopted view language from a functional perspective, they rely on somewhat different rhetorical traditions and methodologies. Tying the traditions together is thus not always feasible in practice. The study should therefore be seen as a contribution to the project of making it easier to combine the perspectives in the future (and not as a conclusive attempt to resolve the difficult problem of combining the perspectives).

1.1 The object of study

In the area of grammatical expressions for tense and aspect, contemporary Icelandic possesses a number of constructions that differ from those found in most other standard Germanic languages. In addition to traditional and fairly well investigated forms found widely among the Germanic languages, such as the simple present and past, *have/be*-perfects and pluperfects, Icelandic shows a number of periphrastic forms with temporal-aspectual function (see section 5.1). One of these forms is the object of this study, *vera búinn að* + inf., which is used as a perfect-type construction, denoting that something has been done or taken place in the past (or started in the past). The main typological difference between this construction and the older Germanic perfect-type constructions *hafa* 'have' + supine and *vera* 'be' + past participle (henceforth referred to as the *hafa* and *vera* constructions, respectively), which are also available in contemporary Icelandic, can be demonstrated with the following examples (see, e.g., Friðjónsson 1989:98f.):

(1.1)   *hafa* 'have' + supine (past participle in neuter singular)
      Ég hef lesið bókina [áður]. 'I have read the book [sometime in the past].'

(1.2)   *vera* 'be' + past participle (inflected for gender and number)
      Hann er kominn. 'He has come.' (lit. 'is come')

(1.3)   *vera búinn að* + infinitive
      Ég er búinn að lesa bókina [núna]. 'I have read the book (already)/[now].'

The *hafa* construction has grammaticalized furthest: it is said to be used with all types of verbs, and often appears to express indefinite past rather than 'current relevance' (see sections 4.1, 5.2). The *vera* construction, on the other hand, is said to be restricted to certain verbs of motion and change, and typically gets a resultative meaning. According to reference grammars (see, e.g., Kress 1982:155; Jónsson 1984:66f.; Friðjónsson 1989:105f; Svavarsdóttir & Jónsdóttir 1998:78; Einarsdóttir et al. 2001:54f.), the *búinn* construction is also restricted to certain types of verbs: it is used primarily with action verbs and not with durative, stative and momentary verbs (unless an adverbial is added to the clause, cf. section 5.2). At the same time, the use of the *búinn* construction seems to be highly dependent on the communicative situation or genre of text. The less formal and less monological the communicative situation is, the more the *búinn* construction tends to be used. The construction is also the first perfect Icelandic children learn, and it is frequently used by children (see Ragnarsdóttir et al. 2000). Yet the use of the construction does not seem to be merely a question of formality or genre. Rather it appears to be tied to certain types of functions and activities, such as

preparing a move or point to come in the discourse. Extract (1.4) below shows an example of this.

(1.4)　NO MORE FALLING! (*Child:Ari02*, C = child, M = mother)

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1  C: =ég var    a: DETTA (0.8) ég var    a: det:TA:²
      I   be.1.PST to fall.INF       I   be.1.PST to fall.INF
      'I just fell I just fell'
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→  M: já nú ertu      búinn að detta svo oft  (0.2) nú
      yes now be.2.SG+you.SG BÚINN.M.SG to fall.INF so   often        now
      'yes now you have fallen so often now'
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3     skaltu      ekki detta meira
      shall.2.SG+you not    fall.INF  more
      'you should not fall any more'
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In extract (1.4), which is discussed in more detail in chapter 7, the child (C) in one of the child-adult conversations investigated in this study (see section 6.1.1) has (for some time already) been sliding ("falling") off a chest in the room where the conversation takes place. His mother appears to find this activity somewhat troublesome or problematic. As seen, she responds to the child's comments about his activity (1.4:1) by stating that he has now fallen so many times that he should not fall anymore (1.4:2-3). She thus uses the *búinn* construction to note the current status of the child in relation to the activity of sliding off the chest; in other words, she makes the position explicit (from the background) by using the *búinn* construction. However, her use of the construction has an additional function: it prepares the request to come, that is, makes possible her request in 1.4:2-3 by establishing the premises for it. The purpose of the request, in turn, seems to be to solve the practical problem which has arisen, that is, to get the child to quit sliding off the chest; the mother, in other words, uses language and communication in the service of solving a practical problem.

　　Communicative aspects of the *búinn* construction, such as those discussed in relation to (1.4), will be focused on in particular in this study.

1.2 Scope, aims and methods of the study

The main purpose of this study is to explore and discuss the synchronic use of the *búinn* construction in its communicative as well as syntactic-semantic contexts in authentic interactional data. In addition to providing a comprehensive description of the construction in contemporary Icelandic, the study also aims to explore the question of how communicative processes

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² See section 6.3 for principles used in the presentation of examples.

involving certain kinds of grammatical constructions[3], of which the *búinn* construction is an example, take place in actual discourse. Furthermore, the study aims to explore the symbiotic relationship between language use and grammar in authentic discourse more generally. Needless to say, it will not be possible to achieve these latter, broad goals in the study in any other sense than to make a small, empirical contribution and thereby, it is hoped, help to increase our understanding of the very large complex of problems in question.

The role of communication and context is often stressed in studies of grammaticalization (cf., e.g., Bybee et al. 1994:86f.). Nonetheless, many studies of grammaticalization draw almost exclusively on isolated and/or constructed sentences. This study, on the other hand, relies on an empirically-based theory of communication (dialogism; see chapter 2), and on three empirical investigations based on authentic discourse data:

A. a sequential, communicative analysis of the construction in recorded and transcribed conversations (presented in chapter 7),

B. a frequency study of the *búinn* construction in different genres of texts (presented in chapter 8),

C. a syntactic-semantic analysis of the construction in recorded and transcribed conversations (presented in chapter 9).

Even though my aim in all three investigations under A-C is to explore the use of the *búinn* construction in contemporary Icelandic in the way discussed above, it must be emphasized that the investigations in many ways form independent entities. With the three types of investigations, I have endeavored to approach the *búinn* construction from three different angles. In other words, the investigations do not build directly upon each other; rather, they highlight different (but interconnected) aspects of the use of the construction.

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3   I generally refer to linguistic units with a certain function or functional potential when I use the term 'construction' in this thesis. However, I will use the term both to refer to individual, language-specific forms which are tied to certain grammatical and communicative tasks (such as the *búinn* construction), and to talk about abstract construction types (such as 'the perfect') which are cross-linguistically attested. When I talk about syntactic patterns (such as *vera búinn að* + inf.) without focusing particularly on their grammatical functions, I use the term 'form.' Finally, when talking about grammatical patterns that emerge in an interaction, I sometimes use the term 'structure.' Even though I refer to Construction Grammar (CxG) in the thesis to some extent, especially in the discussion in chapter 10, my use of 'construction' should not be confused with the CxG definition according to which grammatical constructions are **abstract** and representational entities, that is, conventional patterns of linguistic structure which are manifested in actual language as linguistic expressions or 'constructs' (Fried & Östman 2002:6f.).

The three investigations have also been structured and weighted in slightly different ways.

The investigation most central to the study is unquestionably the communicative analysis presented in chapter 7 (A above); the results of this investigation are therefore presented first. In this investigation I have aimed to explore, as much as possible on an inductive basis, how the *búinn* construction is used in interaction when looked upon from the premises of the interaction itself. The purpose of the frequency study presented in chapter 8 is to complement the picture of the communicative contexts in which the *búinn* construction occurs by providing a rough picture of the construction from a "bird's-eye view"; an implicit goal of the study is also to foreground differences among and within different types of data (and show how the choice of data set can affect the results of empirical investigations of, for example, grammaticalization processes).

The analysis of the syntactic-semantic contexts in which the construction occurs (C above) has been conducted as an independent investigation. Nonetheless, it has been subordinated to the communicative analysis presented in chapter 7. Furthermore, the analysis has been structured around features mentioned in earlier descriptions of the construction (reference grammars and the like). Rather than exploring various syntactic-semantic features of the construction inductively (which, without a doubt, would be highly interesting to do), I have thus decided to "check" features already ascribed to the construction. The reasons for this are twofold. On the one hand, it is interesting and important to check how a construction described in abstract terms in reference grammars is actually used in authentic data. The starting point in earlier descriptions furthermore enables both a dialogue with the tradition of describing the *búinn* construction and an analysis of features of interest from a grammaticalization point of view. On the other hand, conducting the syntactic-semantic portion of the study in a more comprehensively inductive and functionalistic manner would simply not have been possible within the time limits of my (dissertation) project.

Two types of data have been used in the empirical investigations conducted: a large body of texts available at *Orðabók Háskólans*, the Institute of Lexicography at the University of Iceland, and *Málvísindastofnun*, the Institute of Linguistics (see section 6.2); and 14 recorded and transcribed conversations and radio broadcasts[4] (partly) collected specifically for this study (see section 6.1). The main investigations, the close-up studies of the communicative and syntactic-semantic contexts in which the *búinn* construction occurs (presented in chapters 7 and 9), have been conducted

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[4]   The radio broadcasts included all consist of several shorter conversations and/or other inserts (monologues, interviews etc.). I will therefore use the term 'broadcasts' instead of 'conversations' when referring to these data (see section 6.1.2 for further details).

based on the 14 transcribed conversations and broadcasts. The large body of texts available at the Institute of Lexicography at the University of Iceland has only been used for investigating the frequency of the *búinn* construction in different genres[5]. The data used in the empirical investigations are presented in more detail in chapter 6.

With the exception of the frequency study presented in chapter 8, the empirical investigations have been conducted first and foremost by using qualitative methods. In both chapter 7 and 9, some quantitative figures are nonetheless provided along with the presentation in order to give a rough picture of the distribution of the features discussed. These figures should, however, be seen primarily as guidelines. The study as a whole relates to the endeavor which Korolija (1998:35) calls empirical pragmatics. The descriptive apparatus in the study is thus usage-based and probabilistic (cf. Dahl 2000b:7), rather than being based on theoretical models involving fully explicit rules.

This study will focus solely on the *búinn* construction, rather than on comparing the construction systematically to other perfect-type constructions in Icelandic (except for a comparison of the *búinn*, *hafa* and *vera* constructions in chapter 5, which discusses the *búinn* construction as presented in existing descriptions of the tense-aspect system in Icelandic). The reasons for this are twofold. On the one hand, the approach selected has made it impossible to investigate all three perfect-type constructions in Icelandic in this particular study: the development and execution of the communicative analysis presented in chapter 7, in particular, has been very time-consuming. Since the *búinn* construction represents a less investigated type of perfect construction (a construction derived from a source with a sense of 'ready, finished,' cf. Bybee et al. 1994:56ff.; Tommola 2000:472), it is furthermore relevant and motivated to investigate the construction itself properly. There are also additional reasons for exploring the *búinn* construction without defining its precise relations to other constructions. As Dahl (2000b:13f.) points out, it is often difficult or even impossible to find oppositions between older and younger constructions following the same path of development (see 1.1. above and 3.1 below).

1.3 Some general remarks about Icelandic

Icelandic is the most archaic of the North Germanic standard languages. Compared to Swedish, Danish and Norwegian, Icelandic has changed very little since the settlement of Iceland by Norwegians at the end of the 9th

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[5] The smaller comparative study of the frequency of the *búinn*, *hafa* and *vera* constructions presented in 8.2-8.3 has been conducted based on the 14 recorded and transcribed conversations/broadcasts.

11 Summary

In this study the construction *vera búinn að* + inf. lit. 'be finished/done to' in contemporary Icelandic has been investigated from a number of different perspectives: communicative functions in spoken interaction, frequencies in large corpora and syntactic-semantic features in spoken interaction. My main goal has been to explore the use of the *búinn* construction in authentic dialogue and thereby contribute to the understanding of how grammatical constructions are used as resources in interaction. In exploring these aspects of the *búinn* construction I have furthermore hoped to make a contribution to the theory of grammaticalization. On the one hand, my purpose has been to provide a thorough description of a less-investigated type of perfect construction, a construction including an element of 'ready, finished' in its source. On the other hand, I have aimed to investigate the synchronic complexity and variation underlying a grammatical construction possibly undergoing further grammaticalization.

The main focus in the study has been on the communicative aspects of the *búinn* construction. The main hypothesis referred to throughout the study has been that the *búinn* construction occurs in certain types of communicative situations. In order to investigate whether a pattern in the communicative use of the *búinn* construction could be found, occurrences of the construction in a large and diversified spoken language corpus (including everyday conversations as well as various types of radio and TV conversations) were analyzed sequentially. The focus on spoken language only was motivated by the spoken-language character of the construction; furthermore, the focus on spoken language was deliberately chosen in order to enable a dialogic analysis and to avoid a written language bias.

The sequential analysis of the *búinn* construction showed that the construction occurs in a number of different situations and assumes a number of different functions in actual situated use. Some patterns in the use of the construction can also be discovered. The construction occurs in situations which are highly dialogic, in that the statements with the construction are directly tied to something (specific) said or done in the situation and/or something being prepared for in the situation, such as a point in a story, an argument or a request. In many cases the situations are also problematic in some way: the participants in the conversation do not agree on what should take place next, do not follow each other's argumentation or simply have to prepare for some activity or act to come. The communicative job that the *búinn* construction does in these situations is to motivate, ground or make possible solutions to the problematic situation, or to ease the transition to the unexpected or unprepared task. On a more specific level, the construction

specifies the premises or position of the speaker which make it possible for him or her to say, do or claim something; alternatively, the construction may be used to specify the positions or background of someone or something talked about.

One feature which characterizes most of the situations in which the *búinn* construction occurs is that they are dynamic: some kind of change or transition often occurs either before or after the use of the construction. The construction therefore often – together with other linguistic and extralinguistic resources – assumes responsive and/or projective functions, namely it directly affects the course of the conversation. At an abstract level, the functional potential of the construction can therefore be summarized as follows: something has or has not taken place or been said in the situation, which in turn makes it necessary to say, state, conclude or add something in order to proceed with the interaction in a certain way. Hence, from a typological point of view, the *búinn* construction functions as a typical current relevance perfect: the construction occurs in and contributes to creating situations which are currently relevant in a particular way.

An investigation of the frequencies of the construction in large corpora showed that the construction also occurs more often in certain genres (e.g., children's books) than others (e.g., professional texts of various kinds). The more formal the text, the less the construction tends to occur. At the same time, the results show that there may be considerable differences among texts of the same kind, which suggests that the use of the *búinn* construction cannot only be seen as a question of genre. Rather, the decisive factor seems to be the acts and activities taking place in the communicative encounter.

In order to discuss features of interest for grammaticalization processes of perfect-type constructions, the syntactic-semantic contexts in which the *búinn* construction occurs were investigated based on the same interactional data as those used in the communicative analysis. Due to the decision to view this investigation as secondary to the communicative analysis, it was structured around features mentioned in earlier descriptions of the construction. This approach made it possible to also investigate the relevance of restrictions and features mentioned in reference grammars for the use of the construction in authentic data.

The syntactic-semantic analysis confirms that the *búinn* construction functions primarily as a current relevance perfect. However, the analysis also shows that there are borderline cases where something of an experiential meaning can be sensed. Furthermore, the analysis showed that features ascribed to the construction in reference grammars and the like should be seen as typical uses of the construction rather than constraints *per se*. For example, it turns out that the construction indeed occurs in durative and stative

predicates without adverbials of duration (which according to reference grammars should not be the case).

A general result of the syntactic-semantic analysis of the *búinn* construction was also that the use and function of the construction depend on several linguistic and contextual factors in discourse, all of which interact to give rise to the meaning or function of the construction in context. For this reason, less typical examples of the construction are seldom communicatively strange. This can be explained by the functional potential of the construction: even though certain uses tend to arise more often in certain syntactic-semantic contexts than in others, this does not exclude other, less typical uses from arising.

The current relevance function is often seen as the most prototypical use of perfect-type constructions. Even though the *búinn* construction, with the exception of a few borderline cases, does not seem to be used as an experiential perfect, it thus has a clear status as a perfect in Icelandic. The construction cannot, however, be characterized as a perfective. Even though it can obtain terminative readings, these readings are most often tied to the specific verbs used with the construction. In fact, as several examples in the study have shown, the construction rather often gets non-terminative readings.

One of the broad goals set for the study was to contribute to the understanding of how grammatical constructions, in particular tense-aspect constructions such as perfects, are used in spoken language in real life settings. A major point made at the beginning of the study was that grammatical constructions in authentic conversation interact with other linguistic and communicative resources to give rise to specific functions in context. The two major empirical investigations, the communicative and the syntactic-semantic investigations presented in chapters 7 and 9, also showed that this is the case. This became particularly salient in the communicative analysis, but the analysis of more formal aspects of the *búinn* construction also showed how linguistic and contextual factors together give rise to certain functions and meanings in authentic focused interaction, that is, when people do things together with words.

Finally, the empirical investigations in the study have also shown how tense-aspect constructions do much more than merely express temporal and aspectual meanings. Like other resources available to actors in discourse, they can be used for performing communicative tasks. As with everything in conversation, meanings and functions of tense-aspect constructions must be negotiated in discourse. This means that tense-aspect constructions are constantly being restructured and redefined in use, which also provides opportunities for potential changes. Such close-up analyses of for example tense-aspect constructions in authentic interaction could thus open up new perspectives for a theory, such as grammaticalization theory, which deals

specifically with change in grammatical constructions. In this study I have aimed to take a step in that direction and explore the patterns which unfold when one looks beyond the sentence-level and tries to understand how grammatical construction are actually used in their spoken-language settings.

PIC Monographs

1. Pekka Kuusisto, *Ethnicity in Print. Implicit linguistic manifestations of the construction of ethnicity in British and Finnish newspapers.* (Pragmatics, Ideology, and Contacts). 2000.
2. Anna Solin, *Tracing texts. Intertextuality in environmental discourse.* (Pragmatics, Ideology, and Contacts). 2001.
3. Camilla Wide, *Perfect in Dialogue. Form and functional potential of the* vera búinn að + *inf. construction in contemporary Icelandic* (Processes, Interaction, and Constructions). 2002.