

Subordinate Contexts Can Be Innovative: Evidence from the History of Icelandic
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Background There is disagreement in the literature on language change as to whether certain clause types are more conservative than others. One view is that subordinate clauses are generally more conservative than main clauses (Givón 1979; Hock 1986; Bybee 2002), though there exist robust counterexamples to this generalisation (e.g. the loss of null subjects in the history of English; Walkden 2013). It has even been suggested that subordinate clauses being more resistant to pragmatic operations and, hence, reanalysis (Bybee 2002). A well-known operationalisation of the rate of linguistic change is Kroch’s (1989) Constant Rate Hypothesis (CRH), amounting to the generalisation that *change is constant across linguistic contexts*. Despite its appeal, there are potential issues with its conceptual foundations, such as falsifiability: proving the *lack of variable rate* effects is problematic as it is tantamount to failure to reject the null (Kauhanen and Walkden 2018). **Aim of this paper** In this paper, I argue based on data from the Icelandic Parsed Historical Corpus (IcePAHC; Wallenberg et al. 2011) that the perfect-like marker *búinn* was first reanalysed as marking discourse progression in temporal subordinate contexts (see Thráinsson 2017 for more on the diachrony of *búinn*). This case study suggests that subordinate contexts can indeed be innovative. On the surface, this dataset appears to run counter to the Constant Rate Hypothesis. Nevertheless, I show using statistical model comparison (Kauhanen 2022) that constant rate models, for the most part, provide a reasonable fit for the data across clause types, tenses and genres. The only exception to this is narrative contexts. I argue this follows from *búinn*’s function as a marker of discourse cohesion; constraints on its usage would have been in flux as the variant became more entrenched in its new usage. **Adjectival origins** The example in (1) is from the 13th century, where *búinn* is an adjectival participle with a ‘prepared’ reading, a reading which often blurs together with notions of *completeness*. An anterior (past temporal reference) reading is unavailable.

- (1) En er Egill var búinn og byr gaf þá siglar hann í haf.
and when Egill was búinn and wind gave then sails he to sea
And when Egill was prepared and there was wind, he sailed to sea. (1250.THETUBROT)

Emergence of anterior The availability of anterior readings accompanies a prevalence of infinitival complements, which were previously rare. I propose that hearers were prompted to reanalyse these occurrences as marking discourse coherence, following the account in Rosemeyer and Grossman (2017) for Spanish *acabar*; (2) shows that *búinn* cannot be interpreted as future-oriented. Instead, hearers ‘fill-in-the-blanks’ and assign it an anterior interpretation (via the semanticisation of an implicature of imminence; see Eckardt 2006: 118). *búinn* allows for narrative pre-foregrounding in a pluperfect context, serving as a meta-linguistic trigger sequentially linking the events in the two clauses, as in (2).

- (2) Þegar ég var nú búinn að tala við Jón yngra úti kom ég inn aftur í kirkjuna
when I was now búinn to speak with Jón younger outside came I in again into the church
When I had spoken with John the younger outside I returned to the church (1659.PISLARSAGA)

Trajectory Proposed: (i) Stative, adjectival participle (‘ready, prepared, completed’) → (ii) Temporally anterior meaning emerges as a narrative device in subordinate clauses (When (in the state of being) finished...); co-occurrence with infinitives → (iii) Acquisition of prototypical perfect properties and increased prevalence in main clauses. **Informativity contrast** *Búinn* and past-marked *hafa* ‘have’ are in paradigmatic competition in the pluperfect—the hearer is forced to accommodate hearing a more marked expression where it does not seem to be otherwise informationally necessary (as per Eckardt’s 2009 “Avoid Pragmatic Overload”). Jón Magnússon’s grammar (from the 1730s) suggests that an “already” inference was present at this stage, supporting a discourse cohesion view (Lee 2017; cf. *Noam had already arrived when Halldór did*). **Outlook** This data-driven account of a single phenomenon in diachrony demonstrates the crucial importance of accounting for register effects when considering the dynamics of change. Finally, different conceptions of register competence make diverging predictions with regard to the CRH, e.g. the lack thereof in diglossic situation (Gardiner 2015; Simonenko et al. 2018).

Keywords: Icelandic; Register; Subordination; Grammaticalisation; Constant Rate Effect

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