

Two Paradoxes in the Interpretation of Imperfective Aspect and the Progressive

My proposal approaches a rare phenomenon of semantic competition in Basque, a language isolate spoken in the Pyrenees (Comrie 1981, Dixon 1994, Primus 1999). A verb inflected with the suffix $-t(z)en$ can be interpreted as progressive or habitual (1). Thus, Ortiz de Urbina (1989) and Laka (1990) among many assume that $-t(z)en$ is an imperfective aspect marker because it syncretizes both interpretations (Comrie 1976, Giorgi & Pianesi 1997). In contrast, I propose that $-t(z)en$ is semantically vacuous: a default aspect marker. $V+t(z)en$ is exclusively interpreted as habitual in an arbitrary class of verbs known as the *trinko* class (2a). This class is arbitrary because the four categories of inner aspect are represented (Vendler 1967, also Verkuyl 1989; see 3 for a list). What brings these verbs together is that only these predicates allow simple forms (see table 4). The simple forms are imperfective (2b progressive; also generic, reportive, futurate; habitual reading of states). The reading distribution suggests that habitual is a feature of its own, in line with Chierchia (1995) and Higginbotham (p.c.), projecting a higher aspectual node (a la Cinque 1999). Syntactically, this class presents a case similar to deponent verbs in Latin (Embick 2000 on lexical insertion before syntactic operations; contra Halle & Marantz 1993).

- (1) Ni-k borobil-ak marraz-**ten** ditut
I-E circle-A.pl draw-ASP have.1sg.3pl
'I draw/ am drawing circles'
- (2)a. Ni-k liburu-ak erama-**ten** ditut
I-E book-A.pl bring-ASP have.1sg.3pl
'I carry/ *am carrying books'
- b. Ni-k liburu-ak daramatzat
I-E book-A.pl bring.1sg.3pl
'I am carrying books'
- (3) states (izan 'be', etzan 'lie/ rest'...), activities (ibili 'move', esan 'say'...) achievements (liburua ikusi 'see the book'...), accomplishments (euritakoa ekarri 'bring an umbrella')
- (4) Table 1: a classification of verbs in Basque based on their syntactic form

	Compound	Simple
Ordinary verbs	$V+t(z)en$ = hab/ prog (1); also reportive	[---]
<i>Trinko</i> verbs	$V+t(z)en$ = hab only (2a)	$V+ASP+T$ = prog (2b)

This phenomenon of semantic competition is caused by simple forms only. Basque has two constructions that express the progressive and habitual independently (5). The existence of these forms doesn't prevent $V+t(z)en$ from expressing the progressive or habitual in (1).

- (5)a. Ni borobil-ak marraz-ten **ari** naiz (ari requires absolutive subjects & be)
I.A circle-A.pl draw-ASP PROG be.1.sg
'I am drawing circles'
- b. Ni-k borobil-ak marraz-tu **ohi** ditut (ohi requires perfective aspect)
I-E circle-A.pl draw-PER HAB have.1.sg.3.pl
'I draw circles/ I have been drawing circles'

The data in (1-2, 5) lead us to note the **first paradox**, namely that $-t(z)en$ can express the progressive in (2), but not in (3a). On the other hand, the progressive *ari* construction (5a) is virtually banned in the *trinko* class (6b), degree achievements excepted (7ab cfr. Laka 1993).

- (6)a. Jon-ek liburu-a darama
Jon-E book-A carry.3sg.3sg
'John is carrying the book'
- b. *Jon liburu-a erama-ten ari da
Jon.Abook-A carry-ASP PROG be.3sg
'John is carrying the book'
- (7)a. Liburu honi kolore-a joa-ten ari zaio
Book this.to color-A go-ASP PROG be.3sg.3sg(dative)
'This book is losing its color'

- b. Jende-a uholde-ka etor-tzen ari zen
 People-A flood-ly come-ASP PROG be.3sg.past
 ‘People were coming in floods (all afternoon)’

The data in (5a) and (6-7) introduce a **second paradox**. While *ari* can express the progressive of regular events in (5a), in the trinko class *ari* is restricted to degree achievements (7ab).

As already noted, earlier literature assumes that *-t(z)en* is imperfective. Yet the interpretation of *-t(z)en* depends on verb class (1 vs 2a; also 5a vs 6b). The changing interpretation of *-t(z)en*, and the fact that progressive *ari* & habitual *ohi* don’t trigger competition, is left unexplained. On the other hand, Albizu (1998) and Arregi (2000) assume that *-t(z)en* expresses habitual, for they favor the surviving reading in the trinko class. However, this assumption reverses the first paradox (why can *-t(z)en* express the progressive in (1)?), and does not consider the second.

Let us address first why competition is restricted. Assume that *-t(z)en* is semantically vacuous

(8) Set of aspectual markers in Basque: *-tu* [perfective], *-tzen* []

-T(z)en is inserted by default when there is no morpheme to express a given aspectual value (e.g. feature matching in Weak/Strong Lexicalism; underspecification in Distributed Morphology). Since Basque has a perfective marker (possibly borrowed from Latin; Laka 1993, Hualde 1992), *-t(z)en* expresses non-perfective values in (1) and (2a). The free morphemes *ari* & *ohi* don’t compete for insertion against the suffix *-t(z)en*, because they target a position over aspect (5). Accordingly, my proposal predicts that *ari* & *ohi* will not trigger competition effects.

Why the first paradox? As noted, the interpretation of simple forms is imperfective. Laka (1990) assumes that simple forms are imperfective by virtue of an imperfective morpheme in this class that is morphologically conditioned and phonologically null (e.g. past/ participle in put, cut...). On the other hand, Arregi (2000) assumes that simple forms have no aspectual features and are interpreted as imperfective by default. My proposal enables an independent assessment of these ideas based on competition for insertion. Assuming Laka (1990), the insertion of *-t(z)en* to express imperfective aspect is blocked by the silent imperfective morpheme. In contrast, Arregi (2000) does not provide an aspectual node in simple forms, which prevents a competition account. Following my proposal, *-t(z)en* is inserted for habitual in (2a) for lack of other options.

The same thesis captures the second paradox, which is a different scenario. In simple forms, the verb moves to the tense position as a repair strategy to acquire phonological weight (2b). In the *ari* construction, the silent morpheme is also inserted instead of *-t(z)en*, but *ari* blocks further movement of the verb (the derivation crashes). In contrast, *-t(z)en* is inserted for the progressive of degree achievements. I propose that the feature spelled out by *-t(z)en* here is plural, following the intuition in the event semantics literature that these predicates are plural events (Schein 1993, Higginbotham p.c.). Since V has phonological weight, the *ari* construction converges (7).

The choice of verb root has implications for movement. If the root is ordinary, the verb moves up to Aspect (1). If a trinko root, the verb may move up to Tense (2b). Different proposals exist concerning lexical insertion, namely post-syntactic (Halle & Marantz 1993) and pre-syntactic (Embick 2000 on the Latin Perfect). Deponent verbs are compound even in the active voice of the perfect. Embick proposes to associate an arbitrary feature [passive] with the root of deponent verbs. In Basque, trinko roots may also need to be marked. Yet, in contrast to deponent verbs, the syntax of trinko verbs changes according to aspectual interpretation. Consequently, an arbitrary feature alone cannot motivate movement, at best, a [f] + [imperfective] feature combination.

My proposal that *-t(z)en* is semantically vacuous enables an account of two paradoxes in Basque and its restriction to the existence of simple forms. My analysis supports habitual as a higher aspect and invites further reflection on the point of lexical insertion.