In Search of Lost Telicity: Evidence of Basque Causatives

The paper addresses the issue of telicity in Gipuzkoan dialect of Basque¹. I am arguing that Basque telicity is strongly interconnected with verbal argument structure and can be accounted for only in reference to internal syntactic process.

1. Basic rules of Basque argument structure: In Basque, the verb agrees with all its core arguments: subject, direct object and indirect/dative object; agreement is manifested in the auxiliary verb. The core arguments also bear case marking: subject is marked by NOM or ERG, direct object is marked by NOM, indirect object is marked by DAT, see (1). Case marking can always be predicted from verbal agreement, and vice versa: intransitive auxiliary is possible only with nominative subject, transitive auxiliary is possible only with ergative subject.

The subject of one-argument verbs is either logically marked by NOM (2), or, in fewer cases, by ERG (3-4). In the latter case a ‘dummy’ object can usually (see (4)), though not always (see (3)), be there, but it still does not behave like a real direct object (cf. discussion in [Laka 1993]).

(1) Iker-ek Bilbo ikusi du. ’Iker has seen Bilbao.’
Iker-ERG Bilbo.NOM see.PVF AUX.NOM3SG.ERG3SG
(2) Koldo etorri da. ’Koldo has come.’
Koldo.NOM come.PFV AUX.NOM3SG
(3) Txakurr-a-k zaunka-tu du. ’The dog barked.’
dog-DET-ERG bark-PFV AUX.NOM3SG.ERG3SG
(4) Koldo-k hitz egin du. ’Koldo spoke.’
Koldo-ERG word make AUX.NOM3SG.ERG3SG

Even though the agreement is transitive in sentences like (3-4), these verbs are syntactically intransitive. Indeed, a normal direct object can never be inserted there, while a simply omitted ‘small pro’ can always be restored in Basque:

(5) Ikusi ditu. ’He has seen them.’
see.PFV AUX.NOM3PL.ERG.3SG

Verbs using intransitive auxiliary will be called ‘Intr-Aux verbs’ (cf. etorri ‘come’ in (2)), verbs using transitive auxiliary will be called ‘Tr-Aux verbs’. It was already shown that syntactically intransitive verbs can take transitive auxiliary: these verbs will be called ‘Tr-Aux1 verbs’ (cf. zaunkatu ‘bark’ in (3)), while standard transitive verbs will be called ‘Tr-Aux2 verbs’ (cf. ikusi ‘see’ in (1)).

2. Inchoative-causative alternation in Basque: Majority of Intr-Aux verbs are inchoative in the sense of [Haspelmath 1993] and they easily form a causative pair, i.e. add external ergative argument and thus take a transitive auxiliary: these verbs will be called ‘Tr-Aux1 verbs’ (cf. zaunkatu ‘bark’ in (3)), while standard transitive verbs will be called ‘Tr-Aux2 verbs’ (cf. ikusi ‘see’ in (1)).

(6) Izotz-a ur-tu da. The ice has melted.
Ice-DET.NOM melt-PFV AUX.NOM3SG
(7) Koldo-k izotz-a ur-tu du. Koldo has melted the ice.
Koldo-ERG ice-DET.NOM melt-PFV AUX.NOM3SG.ERG3SG
(8) *Koldo-k txakurr-a zaunka-tu du. Koldo made the dog bark.
Koldo-ERG dog-DET.NOM bark-PFV AUX.NOM3SG.ERG3SG

Such syntactic behavior suggests that Intr-Aux verbs can be considered unaccusatives in the sense of [Perlmutter 1978]: they have only internal argument and easily add an external

¹ The evidence was collected during my stay in the Basque country in the Autumn 2005; the main bulk of data comes from my fieldwork with Eider Etxeberria Mendizabal, though some points were checked with other native speakers as well. I am very much indebted to all of them for the invaluable cooperation.

² A question apart is whether inchoative and causative uses represent two uses of one lexeme or two different lexemes.

³ Interestingly, few Tr-Aux1 verbs allow adding internal argument (zuzurikatu ‘whisper’, ohikatu ‘cry’ and some other speech verbs).
argument. Similarly, Tr-Aux1 verbs can be considered unergatives: they cannot take an external argument (see further syntactic evidence for this distinction in [Laka 1993]).

3. Telicity in Basque: It has generally been noted that internal argument is a trigger of telicity (cf. references in [Alexiadou et al. 2004]). My paper will show that this hypothesis is smartly proved by the Basque evidence. While intransitives with external argument, i.e. Tr-Aux1 verbs, are always atelic, intransitives with internal argument, i.e. Intr-Aux verbs, are mostly telic, even though few are atelic (see (9-10)).

(9) Bost minuzu zaunka-tu du. ‘He barked for five minutes.’
   five minute-INSTR bark-PFV AUX.NOM3SG.ERG3SG
(10) Izotz-a bost minutu-ta-n ur-tu da.
   Ice-Det.Nom five minute-PL-LOC melt-PFV AUX.NOM3SG
   ‘The ice melted in five minutes.’

Moreover, underived causative pair was shown to be possible only in the case of intransitives with internal argument (see (6-7)). At the same time, atelic Intr-Aux verbs never have underived causative pair, proving thus that these verbs have no internal argument.

As for transitics, they are usually telic: this is also logical due to the presence of internal argument in their structure. It can be assumed then that telicity in Basque is defined by the plain presence of the internal argument: only the verbs that have internal argument can be telic.

4. Derived causatives in Basque: Additional evidence comes from derived causatives (cf. ibili da ‘he walked’ – ibili-razi du ‘he has caused him to walk’). In Basque, most of them have two sub-events: a caused event and a causing one. The causing event is always telic, due to inherent transitivity of causatives, see (11)

(11) Zaunka-razi dio bost minutu-ta-n.
    bark-CAUS AUX.NOM3SG.DAT3SG.ERG3SG five minute-PL-LOC
    ‘It took him five minutes to make him bark.’

As for the caused sub-event, if the verb was atelic before the causative derivation, then it is also atelic, see (12). Otherwise, if the verb was telic, the caused event has two interpretations: both telic and atelic, i.e. it is a sub-event with unspecified telicity (or ‘weak’ telicity), see (13).

(12) Ni-k zaunka-razi dut bost minutuz.
    I-ERG bark-CAUS AUX.NOM3SG.ERG1SG five minute-INSTR
    ‘I made him bark for five minutes.’
(13) Bost minuzu //minuzu-ta-n ur-arazi dut.
    five minute-INSTR minute-PL-LOC melt-CAUS AUX.NOM3SG.ERG1SG
    ‘I melt it for five minutes // in five minutes.’

5. Conclusion: Examples like (13) suggest that originally the telicity of verb was not a real lexical telicity: otherwise it would remain after the causative derivation. Thus, the telicity in Basque is not originated in the lexicon, but is generated by some further syntactic rules.

My paper will be devoted to the exposition of this analysis supported by some further language evidence. The interconnectedness of argument structure and telicity in Basque is particularly intriguing: while the former has been discussed in the literature, the latter is only starting being studied.


