Building Deverbal Ability Adjectives in Icelandic

Jim Wood
Yale University

Einar F. Sigurðsson
University of Pennsylvania

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.upenn.edu/pwpl

Recommended Citation
Wood, Jim and Sigurðsson, Einar F. (2014) "Building Deverbal Ability Adjectives in Icelandic," University of Pennsylvania Working Papers in Linguistics: Vol. 20 : Iss. 1 , Article 37. Available at: https://repository.upenn.edu/pwpl/vol20/iss1/37

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. https://repository.upenn.edu/pwpl/vol20/iss1/37
For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.
Building Deverbal Ability Adjectives in Icelandic

Abstract
This paper discusses two ways of forming Icelandic ability predicates: one with the present participle (Ability Participles, APs) and the other with an adjectivizing affix (Ability Adjectives, AAs). We show that they each share distinct properties with passives and with middles (and differ from both). We compare the meaning of the different ability predicates; in APs, the ability relates to properties of the understood subject or the event process, whereas in AAs, the ability relates to properties of the object. On our analysis, the adjectivizing head of AAs attaches on top of a participial structure which both APs and AAs share.
Building Deverbal Ability Adjectives in Icelandic

Jim Wood and Einar Freyr Sigurðsson*

1 Introduction

Two ways of forming Icelandic ability predicates are (i) with the present participle -andi, and (ii) with the adjectivizing affix -anlegur; (1) is an attested translation of an Oscar Wilde quote.

(1) Munurinn á blaðamennsku og bókmenntum er só, að blöðin eru ó-les-andi en bókmenntarnar eru ekki lesnar.1

‘The difference between literature and journalism is that journalism is unreadable, and literature is not read.’

(2) Póstið hér ef þið viljð fá einkaðráð sem er ekki les-an-legur af öðrum.2

‘Post here if you want to use a private thread that’s not readable by others.’

In this paper, we examine the properties of Icelandic ability adjectives and ability participles, and show that they each share distinct properties with passives and with middles (and differ from both). The analysis proposed, and the overall picture, suggests that ability adjectives in general do not embed a primitive passive or middle voice head; instead, they are built from some of the same, smaller primitives.

While -andi participles have been the subject of a number of theoretical and descriptive studies (Friðjónsson 1982, H.Á. Sigurðsson 1989, H.Á. Sigurðsson and Egerland 2009, Jóhannsdóttir 2007, 2011), -anlegur adjectives have received almost no attention in theoretical work (but see Rögvaldsson 1988). We will follow a suggestion in Kvaran (2005:140) and assume that morphologically, -anlegur is built by adding the general adjectivizing affix -legur to the participle -andi. (See also Jóhannesson 1927:67; thanks to Jón Axel Harðarson for pointing out this reference to us.) As we will see below, this decomposition is important, because a relationship between passive/middle voice, stative aspect, and ability modality can be seen in a number of phenomena in a number of languages, but this relationship needs to be better understood (Kayne 1981, Dubinsky and Simango 1996, Roeper and van Hout 1999, 2009, Oltra-Massuet 2010, Samioti 2013, Anagnostopoulou and Samioti to appear).

We begin with a brief overview of the properties associated with passives and middles, followed by a brief discussion of -andi participles more generally in Section 3. We then turn to the ability use of -andi, which we call “Ability Participles” (APs), followed by -anlegur adjectives, which we call “Ability Adjectives” (AAs) in Sections 4–5, followed by a comparison of the ability semantics of APs and AAs in Section 6. We then turn to an analysis aimed at teasing apart the syntactic and semantic primitives used in building ability adjectives in Section 7, before concluding.

2 Passives and Middles

Passives and middles are similar in that both involve a semantically transitive verb with the external argument, such as the “agent,” not being projected/merged in overt syntax, though in both cases, it is implicit in some sense. Passives and middles can be distinguished, however, by a number of
diagnostics, some of which will be reviewed in this section. To begin, by-phrases naming an implicit agent are possible in passives, but not generic middles. Instrument PPs are possible with both.

(3) a. The ship was sunk (by pirates). (Passive)
b. Enemy ships sink easily (*by pirates). (Generic Middle)
(4) a. The door was opened with a skeleton key. (Passive)
b. This door opens easily with a skeleton key. (Generic Middle)

Indirect objects are possible with passives, but not generic middles. (5b) is ungrammatical on the reading where the subject receives the money; it is, of course, acceptable if the subject is the agent, but that is not the reading we are interested in here.

(5) a. He was paid the money. (Passive)
b. * He pays money easily. (Generic Middle)

Here, we understand the term “indirect object” as referring to the intersection between the thematic roles introduced by Appl(licative) heads in Pylkkänen (2008) and the morphosyntactic property of being the “first object” in a double object construction (regardless of case-marking).

An adverb, negation, or other licensing material is needed for generic middles, but not passives.

(6) | Passive | Generic Middle |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. This bread was cut.</td>
<td>d. ?? This bread cuts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. This bread was cut easily.</td>
<td>e. This bread cuts easily.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. This bread won’t be cut.</td>
<td>f. This bread won’t cut.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In case-marking languages like Icelandic, accusative may become nominative in the passive, while dative and genitive are retained, as illustrated for dative in (7b). In middles, dative and genitive may be lost (Maling 2001), as illustrated in (7c).

(7) a. Við læsum oft þessari hurði. 'We often lock this door.'
    b. þessari hurði er oft læst. 'This door is often locked.'
    c. þessi hurði læsist ekki. 'This door doesn’t lock.'

We will summarize the properties of passives and generic middles in the table in (29), which shows also how they compare to AAs and APs. But first, we turn to a brief, general discussion of -andi participles in order to familiarize the reader with them.

### 3 Properties of -andi Participles

-andi is a present participle affix that in many instances has a distribution similar to English -ing.

(8) Parna kemur hún hlaup-andi. 'There she comes running.' (H.Á. Sigurðsson 2010:37)
(9) Við héldum áfram, hann les-andi bókina, ég horf-andi á sjónvarpið. 'We continued, him reading the book, me watching TV.'

However, -andi is also quite different from -ing in that it cannot form a progressive construction describing an ongoing activity. Instead, the active progressive requires an adverbial like ‘always’ or an “iterative” prefix like sí- (Friðþjófnsson 1982, Jóhannsdóttir 2007, 2011).

(10) a. * Hann er les-andi núna. INTENDED: 'He is reading now.'
b. Hann er alltaf les-andi. 'He is always reading.'
c. Hann er sí-les-andi þessa dagana.  
he is ever-read-ing these days
‘He’s always reading these days.’
d. Jón er alltaf hlaup-andi.  
John is always run-ing
‘John is always running.’

This is a potentially important property of -andi, given the connection between stativity and ability modality (Samioti 2013). Jóhannsdóttir (2007:182) writes that “when we have a present progressive sentence with an implicit when-clause, such as in ([10d]), [...] it seems as if the implicit time frame is stative. It does not have the punctual reading of ‘now’ but rather the durative reading of ‘these days’.” Similarly, sentences like (11) refer to Maggie’s state generally, not her actions at the moment.

(11)  
Maggie Simpson: [...] Hæglátur krakki enda ekki enn tal-andi³  
quiet kid since not yet talk-ing
‘A quiet kid, as she’s still not talking.’

The -andi suffix can also form attributive adjectives with an ‘active’ meaning, similar to English -ing, as shown in (12), and a number of other uses as well. It may, for example, form adverbs, and agent-denoting nominals (much like -er in buyer, though the suffix -ari probably corresponds more directly to -er). Attributive -andi adjectives can also yield an ‘able’ meaning, as shown in (13). In this paper, we focus on the use of -andi in (13), but in the predicative position rather than the attributive.

(12) a. Hann sá glans-andi bíl.  
he saw glisten-ing car
‘He saw a glistening car.’ (Friðjónsson 1982:193)
b. Hún er ákaflega hríf-andi konu.  
she is extremely enchant-ing woman
‘She is an extremely enchanting woman.’ (Thráinsson 1999:37)

(13) a. Ó-drekk-andi vatn í Höfnum⁴  
undrink-ing water in Hafnir
‘Undrinkable water in Hafnir.’
b. Hún systir mín lét mig hafa þessa líka entré gert drekk-andi kaffi úr henni.⁵  
she sister my let me have this forreffexcellent espresso can so I tested whether I could make drink-ing coffee out.of it
‘My sister let me have this excellent espresso can so I checked whether I could make drinkable coffee from it.’

4 Ability Participle -andi

Like the passive, the AP may preserve dative/genitive case (14c–d), but not accusative (14a–b).

(14) a. Við drekkum mjólkina.  
we.NOM drink milk.the.ACC
‘We drink the milk.’
b. Mjólin er ekki drekk-andi.  
milk.the.NOM is not drink-ing
‘The milk is not drinkable.’
c. Við breyttum þessu.  
we changed this.DAT
‘We changed this.’
d. Þessu var ekki breyt-andi.  
this.DAT was not change-ing
‘This was not changeable.’

It is worth briefly noting that accusative is possible for some speakers, in some constructions, when the DP is left low and does not move to the subject.

(15) það er ekki drekk-andi Miller nema ÍSKALDNAG [sic]⁶  
expl is not drink-ing Miller unless ice.cold.ACC
‘There is no drinking Miller unless it is ice-cold.’

(16) [. . .] að það sé ekki fín-andi mann eða konu  
that EXPL is not find-ing man.ACC or woman.ACC
í þessu þjóðfélagi sem er síðferðislega samkvæmt [sic] sjálfum sér.⁷  
in this society who is ethically accountable self REFL

in this society who is ethically accountable self
'(I’m starting to worry) that there’s no finding any man or woman in this society who is ethically consistent.'

This construction seems to resemble English constructions like *There’s just no talking to him*, which also have an ability meaning, and may have properties in common with the ‘New Impersonal Passive’ (see Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir 2002, 2013, Eythórsson 2008, Jónsson 2009, H.Á. Sigurðsson 2011, Ingason et al. 2012, E.F. Sigurðsson 2012); we have to set such cases aside for now.

Indirect objects are possible in APs, although not all verbs seem to allow them.

   we.NOM offer people.DAT this.ACC not
   ‘We don’t offer this to people.’
   (H.Á. Sigurðsson 1989:341)

b. Þetta er ekki bjóð-andi.
   this.NOM is not offer-ing
   ‘This is not offerable to people.’
   (H.Á. Sigurðsson 1989:341)

c. Ólafur er ekki bjóð-andi.
   Ólafur.DAT is not offer-ing
   ‘Ólafur is not inviteable.’
   (H.Á. Sigurðsson 1989:342)

(18) a. Við svöruðum honum þessu.
   we.NOM answered him.DAT this.DAT
   ‘We answered him this.’

b. Heimskum karlrembusvínum er ekki svar-andi.8
   stupid chauvinists.DAT are not answer-ing
   ‘It’s not worth responding to stupid chauvinists.’

c. Annars er sumu fólki ekki svar-andi.9
   otherwise are some people.DAT not answer-ing
   ‘Actually, some people are not answerable.’

(19) Amma mín sagði að fermingarmyndin mín væri svo ljót að hún væri ekki mönnum sýn-andi!10
    grandmother my said that confirmation.picture my was so ugly that it.F was not men.DAT show-ing
    ‘My grandmother said that my picture from when I got confirmed was so bad that it couldn’t be shown to people.’

By-phrases are not possible with APs (see 20), while instrument PPs are (see 21).

(20) a. Einkaþráðurinn er ekki les-andi (*af neinum).
    private.thread.NOM is not read-ing by anyone
    ‘The private thread is not readable.’

b. Lögunum er ekki breyt-andi (*af hverjum sem er).
    laws.the.DAT are not change-ing by whoever
    ‘The laws are not changeable.’

(21) a. Stjórnmálamönnum er ekki mút-andi með peningum.
    politicians.DAT are not bribe-ing with money
    ‘Politicians are not bribeable with money.’

b. Þetta fólk er nú eiginlega ekki finn-andi með svona lélegu GPS tæki.
    these people.NOM is PRT sort.of not find-ing with such bad GPS machine
    ‘These people aren’t really findable with such a bad GPS.’

c. Miðþúfa [...] er mjög bröst og ekki far-undi nema með réttum búnaði.11
    Miðþúfa is very steep and not go-ing unless with right equipment
    ‘Miðþúfa is very steep and not traversable unless you have the right equipment.’

Like middles (and unlike passives), APs generally need a special licensing environment; in fact, their distribution somewhat resembles that of weak NPIs. They are odd on their own (22a), but they are possible with the negative ó- prefix (22b), clausal negation (22c), ‘only’ (22d) and yes-no questions (22e).
To sum up this section, -andi participles are like passives in that they preserve dative and genitive case and allow indirect objects, and are like middles in that they disallow by-phrases and need an adverb, negation, or other special licensing environment.

5 Ability Adjective -an-legur

Like APs, -anlegur adjectives (AAs) can be attributive adjectives, as shown in (23a–c). Unlike middles and APs, AAs may—but need not—take a negative adverb or ó ‘un-’ prefix, as shown in (23d).


‘This is an easily enjoyable movie.’ ‘This is a sinkable ship.’ ‘Guðbrandsdals cheese is a cuttable cheese.’ ‘The cutting depth is (un)changeable.’

AAs do not preserve any case assigned by the verbs they are derived from, neither accusative (24a–b), dative (24c–d), nor genitive (25).


‘We drink the milk.’ ‘We don’t change the laws.’


‘We enjoy romantic comedies.’ ‘Romantic comedies are enjoyable.’

Like passives and unlike APs or middles, AAs may allow by-phrases (E.F. Sigurðsson 2012:5), as illustrated in (26). Like APs, middles, and passives, instrument PPs are possible, as shown in (27).

(26) a. Er ekki hægt að endurskoða þau þegar nautsyn krefur; b. Skrifðu af mönnum breyt-an-leg af mönnum?

‘Isn’t it possible to re-examine them when need arises; written by people change-ing-ADJ by people’
b. Postið hér ef þið viljið fá einkatráð sem er ekki les-an-legur af öðrum.15
   ‘Post here if you want to use a private thread that’s not readable by others.’

(27) a. Sláttufjarlægð er breytn-an-leg með yfirtenghrádr vorlæs.16
   ‘The cutting depth is changeable with a tractor’s control rod.’
b. Neyðarrofi fyrir hús, les-an-legur með lýkl.17
   ‘Emergency switch for a house, lockable with a key’

Like middles and unlike APs and passives, indirect objects are not possible subjects of AAs. (This is still impossible even if dative case is preserved: *Heimskum karlrembusvín er ekki svaranlegt.)

(28) * Heimsk karlrembusvín eru ekki svar-an-leg.
   stupid chauvinists.NOM are not answer-ing-ADJ
   INTENDED: ‘Stupid chauvinists are not answerable.’

To sum up this section, ability -an-legur adjectives are like passives in that they allow by-phrases and do not require a special licensing environment, and are like middles in that they disallow indirect objects and do not preserve dative and genitive case. Combining this with the last section, we see that AAs and APs share different properties with passives and middles; this is summarized in the table in (29).

(29)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Passives</th>
<th>Middles</th>
<th>APs</th>
<th>AAs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instrument PPs</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By-phrases</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect objects</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preserve dative/genitive</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requires adverb/negation</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6 Ability Meaning Compared

While both -andi participles (APs) and -anlegur adjectives (AAs) translate to English ‘-able’ adjectives, and their meanings can be hard to tell apart in some cases, there turn out to be important differences between the two. With APs, the ability relates to properties of the understood subject or the event process. Whether the event can happen may depend on the ability of the subject to make it happen. With AAs, the ability relates to properties of the theme/object or the result. Whether the event can happen depends on the properties of the object. This is illustrated with the following contrast.

(30) a. Mjólkin er ekki drekk-an-leg.
      milk.the.NOM is not drink-ing-ADJ
      ‘The milk is not drinkable (because it is frozen).’

b. Mjólkin er ekki drekk-andi.
      milk.the.NOM is not drink-ing
      ‘The milk is not drinkable (because it tastes terrible).’

(31) a. # Oddatölum er ekki deil-andi með tveimur.
      odd.numbers.DAT are not divide-ing with two
      ≈ ‘One shouldn’t bother dividing odd numbers by two.’

b. Sléttar tölur eru deil-an-legar með tveimur.
      even numbers.NOM are divide-ing-ADJ with two
      ‘Even numbers are dividable/divisible by two.’

Heimir Freyr Vidarsson (p.c.) informs us that for him (30a) can mean (30b), but not the other way around. This makes sense, since taste can be construed as a property of the object or of the experimenter/agent. Similarly, (32a) is untrue because a pan is always touchable, even if it is very hot and would burn the toucher. (32b) is true in a circumstance where the pan is hot, because it is only un-touchable in the sense that touching it will have unacceptable consequences: it will burn you. Thus, (32c) is not a contradiction.
(32) a. # Pannan er eikki snert-an-leg.
pan.the.NOM is not touch-ing-ADJ
‘The pan is not touchable.’ (generally untrue of pans)
b. Pannan er eikki snert-andi.
pan.the.NOM is not touch-ing
‘The pan is not touchable (because it is very hot).’
c. Þessi sjóðandi heita panna er snert-an-leg, en hún er eikki snert-andi.
this steaming hot pan is touch-ing-ADJ but it.İ is not touch-ing
‘This steaming hot pan is touchable, but it’s not “touchable.”’

These examples suggest that APs relate the ability modality to the properties of the subject or event as a whole, whereas AAs relate the ability modality to the properties of theme.

7 Analysis

The table in (29) compared APs and AAs with passives and generic middles on the basis of five properties. We now use these properties to sketch an analysis of APs and AAs couched within a syntactic theory of word formation and a constructivist theory of argument structure, along the lines of Embick (2004), Oltra-Massuet (2010) and others. Instrument PPs, which are acceptable in both APs and AAs, diagnose the presence of an agentive Voice head (Bruening to appear, 2013; Anagnostopoulou and Samioti to appear; a.o.). Voice is also suggested by the morphology of the stem (Wood 2012).

(33) a. Þeir brjót-a glugga.
they.NOM break windows.ACC
‘They break windows.’
windows.NOM break-NA
‘Windows break.’
c. Gluggar eru { brjót-an-legir / *brót-an-legir }.
windows.NOM are { break-ing-ADJ / *break-ing-ADJ }
‘Windows are breakable.’

Both constructions include a stativizing Asp head (Oltra-Massuet 2010, Samioti 2013); this is the function of the head spelled out as -an(di). If a verb assigns dative (breyta ‘change’), this is specified on a verb that matches the verb root in question (H.Á. Sigurðsson 2012, Wood 2012). In -anlegur, -legur is a general adjectivizing head in Icelandic, a category-determining little a head in the present theory (Embick and Marantz 2008). In this case, it attaches on top of the -an(di) participle.

(34) a. AAs: [Ap DP NOM [a [Asp-an [VoiceP Voice [vP vDAT √BREYT (DP NOM) ]]]]]
b. APs: [XP DP DAT [... [Asp-andi [VoiceP Voice [vP vDAT √BREYT (DP DAT) ]]]]]

The main difference between the two is the adjectivizing affix in AAs, which must have the following effects: (a) it forces the internal argument to be predicated of little a; (b) it links the ability modality to properties of the internal argument; (c) it prevents vDAT from assigning the (dative) case it is specified for; (d) it prevents indirect objects from being licensed; (e) it allows agentive by-phrases.

We assume, tentatively, that (b) can be made to follow from (a); (c) should also follow from the presence of the adjectivizing head. Bruening (to appear) offers one proposal that would derive this result. He proposes that adjectivizing heads force the internal argument to be a null operator, which derives a predicate such that the ‘visible’ internal argument is an externally-merged subject, much like the standard analysis of tough-movement. This operator could then silently bear the dative case assigned by vDAT. We have no ready explanation for (d), except to note that this is a general property of middles, adjectival passives, and other constructions restricted to themes.

As for by-phrases, we assume that they are licensed in contexts where the agent is existentially closed over. By-phrases are unavailable despite agentive semantics when either (a) there is a syntactically present null DP argument (such as PRO) or (b) the event/implicit agent is generically quantified, rather than existentially quantified. Since -andi participles are similar to generic middles in other ways (e.g. requiring an adverb), we will assume that the latter explanation is on the right track for them. If we want to assume that the Asp head is the same in -andi participles
and -anlegur adjectives, this means that generic quantification (for -andi) and existential quantification (for -anlegur) are higher than Asp. Existential quantification, then, may be associated with the adjectivizing head (also as in Bruening to appear).

To summarize the analysis, for both AAs and APs Voice introduces the agent, and Asp stativizes the event and generically quantifies over it. For APs, something higher generically quantifies over the agent as well, and for AAs, the adjectivizing head existentially closes over the agent and predicates aP of the theme.

8 Conclusion

We conclude with a number of open questions. Why are indirect objects restricted in AAs and related constructions? How does the “stative” property of -andi relate to modality? Can the latter be made to follow from the former? Related to this, what is the status of English constructions such as There’s just no drinking this milk, which has an -ing participle and an -able-like meaning? The evidence presented here suggests that -able adjectives are built in two steps: one step stativizing a VoiceP (with Asp), and another step quantifying over the understood agent. How that second step happens will have other effects, such as whether by-phrases or indirect objects are possible. Neither APs nor AAs fit well into a view of Voice systems which take “passive” and “middle” to be primitive, even if some properties appear to cluster together. Understanding “ability” constructions, then, will help us understand passives and middles better, since they use many, but not all of the same syntactic/semantic primitives.

Appendix: More on -anlegur Adjectives

In (35), we present AAs which have a clear ability meaning, some other meaning, and are ambiguous. Some non-ability adjectives have a derivationally unpredictable meaning—see below. The list, which we built in large part with the help of Snara (http://snara.is), an online resource of dictionaries, includes a few examples of P-Prefixing and is not supposed to be exhaustive in any way.


**Source URLs for attested examples**

1. http://www.oliagustar.net/2005/10/04/hverjum-er-ekki-misbo%C3%B0i%C3%B0/
5. http://ofvitinn.wordpress.com/2008/08/24/ma%C3%B0ur-er-manns-gaman/
7. http://hekla.blog.is/blog/hekla/entry/1044796/
13. (Kirkjuritið 30(8–9):341, 1964) http://timarit.is/view_page_init.jsp?pageId=4742314
15. http://www.2.alex.is/cgi-bin/ritmal/leitord.cgi?adg=daemi&n=623629&s=679289&l=yfirtengi

**References**


Nevins, Andrew. 2002. One-able, two attachment sites. Manuscript, MIT.


Jim Wood  
Department of Linguistics  
370 Temple Street  
Yale University  
New Haven, CT 06520  
jim.wood@yale.edu

Einar Freyr Sigurðsson  
Department of Linguistics  
619 Williams Hall  
University of Pennsylvania  
Philadelphia, PA 19104-6305  
einarsig@ling.upenn.edu