High and low inceptives in North Sámi

It has been claimed that when inceptives appear to take nominal complements, as in (1), they actually select an abstract verbal complement (Pustejovsky 1995, Jackendoff 1997, Rochette 1999, Cinque 2006).

(1) Mary began the hard work of changing her lifestyle.

However, the North Sámi inceptive verb álgit with an overt verbal complement is syntactically different from álgit without an overt verbal complement, and there is arguably no abstract verbal complement present in the latter case. When it takes a verbal complement, álgit is located below modal verbs, tense, mood and the progressive aspect. Modal verbs will precede álgit, while álgit can carry suffixed markers of mood (see (2)) or progressive aspect (see (3)), or of tense (see (4) and (8)). Marking the lower verb instead is ungrammatical.

(2) Mii sáva-šeimmet ahte dát joavku álggá-sii fas čuojahit
we wish-COND.1PL that this group.NOM begin-COND.3SG again play.INF
‘We would wish that this group would begin to play again.’

(3) Lean odne álgi-min fáret.
am today begin-PROG move.INF
‘Today I am beginning to move (house).’

On the other hand, the lower verb can be causativised, as in (4), or marked for frequentative/continuative aspect, as in (5).

(4) Dál álget Porsánggus oahpa-h-it beatnagiid ocat ráppiid.
now begin.PRES.3PL Porsángu.LOC learn-CAUS-INF dog.PL.ACC search.INF carrion.PL.ACC
‘In Porsángu they are now beginning to teach dogs to search for carrion.’

(5) De fáhkkestaga álga Biera jeara-halla-t eatni-s.
then suddenly begin.PRES.3SG Biera ask-FREQ-INF mother-POSS.3SG
‘Then suddenly Biera begins to ask his mother over and over.’

This indicates that álgit, when it takes a verbal complement, is located higher than the causative and also higher than frequentative aspect. The order of álgit with respect to Voice cannot be established, since native speakers reject passivisation of álgit as well as passivisation of the lower verb. Álgit without a verbal complement, on the other hand, it is sitting below the causative and also below Voice—see (6) and (7).

(6) Eiseválddit álggá-h-edje boazo-logu heiveheami.
authority.PL.NOM begin-CAUS-PAST.3PL reindeer-number.GEN adjustment.ACC
‘The authorities initiated the adjustment of the number of reindeer.’

(7) Mánáid-valáštallan-skuvla Kárášjogas álgo-juvvo.
children-sport-school.NOM Kárášjohka.LOC begin-PASS.PRES.3SG
‘A sport school for children is started in Kárášjohka.’

More specifically, álgit with a verbal complement is an auxiliary, whose position in the functional sequence can be identified with the higher inceptive argued for by Cinque (2006). It refers to the initial boundary of the event denoted by its complement, and it is thematically trans-
parent—it does not assign any theta roles or take any arguments of its own. Instead, the structural subject of álgit will be a thematic argument of the lower verb, if the lower verb has arguments at all.

When álgit does not have a verbal complement, one possibility is that it takes one single nominal argument, which will then be its subject, as in (8). The subject must represent either an event or an object with serial properties or spatial extent, and álgit will make reference to the initial boundary of its subject.

(8) Oaggun-gilvu álggii diibmu ovttas.
    fishing-competition.NOM begin.PAST.3SG hour one.LOC
    ‘The fishing competition began at one o’clock.’

Alternatively, álgit takes two nominal arguments and refers to the initial boundary of its object. In this case, the object will be marked with illative case, as shown in (9). This should be compared to (10), where there is a verb below álgit and ‘school’ has accusative case. This indicates that in (9), there is no abstract verb present. Instead, álgit is the argument-taking verb, and the illative case is dependent on álgit.

(9) Rannjá-gánda ii lean vel álgán skuvlii.
    neighbour-boy.NOM NEG.3SG be.PAST yet begin.PTC school.ILL
    ‘The boy next door had not started school yet.’

(10) Mun álgen vázzit skuvlla 1946.as.
    I begin.PAST.1SG go.INF school.ACC 1946-LOC
    ‘I started going to school in 1946.’

I propose that when álgit does not have a verbal complement, it spells out the initiation head proposed in Ramchand (2008). The complement of init is then a nominal phrase representing the event or object with the relevant initial boundary. Optionally, init also takes an initiator in its spec. When an initiator is present, it will end up as the surface subject and have nominal case, while the nominal in complement position will carry illative case. When there is no initiator, the nominal complement of álgit will instead end up as the surface subject and have nominative case.

References


