

Stative Verbs and How to Run in Suspended Animation

We'll show you a trick today ... how you can run without moving.

But first we have to consider what on earth a stative verb is. It's quite easy really ... you can basically sort all verbs (in those languages that have verbs that is ...) into two groups. Verbs which describe an outright action and verbs which describe a state (hence 'stative') or a relationship. "Hit" is a very good example of an active verb. You need to lift your arm, bring it down with force and make contact with something/someone else ... "Sleep" on the other hand doesn't really involve any great actions, you can sleep for hours without moving about at all.

Now in English it doesn't really matter whether a verb is active or stative ... English treats both the same way - "he is sleeping" or "he is hitting" don't require you to do different things in terms of the grammar. Well, you could argue that depending on how you're using a verb, it influences the choice of tenses available, so "I am drinking Espresso" (which uses "drink" as a stative verb) would be stative and "I drink Espresso" (which uses "drink" as an active verb) would be active but that's a bit silly really.

Anyway, there are a lot of languages where active and stative verbs are treated VERY differently. In Lakhóta (Sioux) for example you have to use two entirely different personal markers depending on what kind of verb it is - either **wa** (for active verbs) or **ma** (for stative verbs):

iyápsica	wimáchaša
I jump	I am a man

Now what does this have to do with Gaelic? Well, Gaelic treats active and stative verbs differently. Luckily enough though, there aren't many stative verbs in Gaelic.

The one's that are though use the 'na paradigm:

tha mi 'nam chadal	I am sleeping
tha thu 'nad chadal	You are sleeping
tha e 'na chadal	He is sleeping
tha i 'na cadal	She is sleeping
tha sinn 'nar cadal	We are sleeping
tha sibh 'nur cadal	You are sleeping
tha iad 'nan cadal	They are sleeping

So how many stative verbs are there in Gaelic? Well, maybe 20 or so, I don't think anybody has ever made an exhaustive list but here's the most common one's:

breislich	confused
cadal	sleep
dùisg	awake
faireachadh	conscious, awake
gurraban	crouched down
laighe	lie
ruith	run
seasamh	stand
sineadh	stretch
suidhe	sit
tost	silent

The interesting thing is that with some of them you can make very neat distinctions. For example, *tha mi a' seasamh* and *tha mi 'nam sheasamh* are both correct but mean rather different things. In the first case, you are actively standing up, as in, you were sitting or lying a moment ago and are now trying to get on your feet. In the second case you're already standing and simply stating that that is the case. That is why traditionally you do not need to use *suas* or *sìos* with *seasamh* and *suidhe* in Gaelic. Depending on how you use them, one of them describes the action, the other the state: *tha mi a' suidhe* (or *tha mi a' dèanamh suidhe* even) and *tha mi 'nam shuidhe*. Perhaps we should better call them "potentially stative" rather than "stative verbs". Anyway.

Now, funnily enough, not all languages agree on whether the same action is considered active or stative. In Basque for example the verb for "to begin" is considered 100% stative ... And that is where the trick comes in. In Gaelic *ruith* is considered a stative verb: *tha mi 'nam ruith*. From the English point of view that is weird because running is considered a very active action ... but not so in Gaelic and so you can think of Gaelic running taking place as some sort of frozen action!

But just to touch all bases - even *ruith* can be an active verb: *ruith e a-mach*. That is because in this case you're not focussing on the ongoing running (at a Marathon for example) but the action that is (suddenly) taking place. So a good contrastive example would be *bha mi 'nam ruith nuair a chuala mi fuaim* "I was running when I heard a sound" and *chunnaic mi gun robh a' chidsin air theine is ruith mi a-mach às an taigh* "I saw the kitchen was on fire and ran out of the house".

Time for a walk I think ...