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ABSTRACT

The uses of the present progressive tense in informal English spoken discourse are examined, focusing on the increasing frequency of the so-called stative or non-action verbs found in the progressive aspect. Generalizations are proposed to account for: (1) the discrepancy between grammar book explanations and actual usage, and (2) the meaning of stative verbs used in the simple present and the present progressive. It is concluded that the use of stative verbs in the progressive is not necessarily exceptional or contrary to standard accounts of the English present progressive, but rather is a predictable consequence of the meaning of the present progressive and the particular contexts in which progressive statives are found. (Author/MSE)

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THE PRESENT PROGRESSIVE: GRAMMAR VS. USAGE REVISITED

Susan Kesner Bland

This paper examines uses of the present progressive in informal English spoken discourse. It focuses on the increasing frequency of the so-called stative verbs found in the progressive aspect. Generalizations are proposed to account for (a) the discrepancy between grammar book explanations and actual usage and (b) the meaning of stative verbs used in the simple present and the present progressive. It is concluded that the use of stative verbs in the progressive is not necessarily exceptional or contrary to standard accounts of the English present progressive, but rather it is a predictable consequence of the meaning of the present progressive and the particular contexts in which progressive statives are found.

In this paper I propose a simple generalization about the meaning of the English progressive. This generalization is stated as follows:

- (1) The progressive focuses on a CHANGE (or changes) of state.

The two key notions in (1), which will be developed in detail, are "focus" and "change." This generalization not only accounts for standard uses of the progressive, but it also accounts for occurrences of progressive statives like (2):

- (2) Dan is resembling his father more and more every day.

Such sentences are the main interest of this paper. My goal is to explain how sentences like (2) exemplify the contribution of progressive meaning in English.

A natural question at this point concerns the place of such sentences in an ESL curriculum. I propose that we defer this issue for the moment, for once we look at all of the data, it will become apparent that at least some of the progressive statives are quite

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common. But more important, regardless of whether these sentences should be shown to students, my goal is to demonstrate the importance of such sentences as a tool for teachers to gain insight into the progressive.

The structure of this paper is as follows: (1) First I give a brief overview of treatments of the progressive in ESL texts and recent linguistic and applied linguistic literature. (2) Then I synthesize a treatment of the progressive from the linguistic and applied linguistic literature. (3) I then proceed to show how certain innovative progressive sentences, namely, progressive statives, support this analysis. (4) Before concluding, I briefly discuss ESL data that reflect some of the proposals made here.

PREVIOUS TREATMENTS OF THE PROGRESSIVE

An examination of ESL texts and recent linguistic literature (both theoretical and applied) reveals fundamental differences in the approaches taken.

ESL Texts

ESL texts tend to concentrate on the straightforward 'action in progress' meaning of the progressive, and they contrast it to the simple present. For example, intermediate and advanced ESL texts such as Azar 1981, 1985; Dart 1978; Praninskas 1975; Frank 1972; Davis 1977; etc. typically give examples such as (3) and (4), which portray the action in progress at the moment of speaking or at a particular time, not necessarily the present moment.

(3) I'm speaking now. vs. I speak English.

(4) He's writing a book this year. vs. He writes books.

The contrast between the notion of progressive events and non-progressive states is usually only briefly mentioned. Typically, a list of statives (often called non-action verbs) like (5) is given:

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| (5) Senses: | hear, taste, smell, see |
| Mental Perception: | know, believe, think, understand, remember, mean, recognize |
| Possession: | possess, have, own, belong |
| Attitudes and Emotions: | want, prefer, need, appreciate, love, like, hate, dislike, seem, look, appear |

This is a slightly amended version based on Azar 1981. It is stated that these verbs and others like them (the list is far from complete) resist the progressive. At the conclusion of this paper, I hope to have demonstrated the inadequacy of such an approach. I will show tendencies among various verbs to occur in the progressive, and I will show how some verbs are clearly more stative than others.¹

A few ESL books do list progressive statives as exceptions to a progressive rule. For example (Dart 1978:77):

- (6) a. You're being foolish.
- b. This operation is costing a lot.
- c. I am loving these moments with you.

For the most part, however, such sentences are not included in ESL texts.

A final point about ESL texts that should be noted is that they typically do not pay explicit attention to the different effect that the progressive has on different types of verbs. This is a point that I will take up shortly.

Linguistic and Applied Linguistic Accounts of the Progressive

Recent linguistic accounts of the progressive provide interesting discussions of the notion of events vs. states (cf. Comrie 1976; Smith 1983; Sag 1973; Leech 1971) and aspect as a discourse notion (cf.

¹See Sag 1973 for further details on this point about statives.

especially Smith 1981). Recent linguistic literature also tends to focus on the different effects of the progressive on different types of event verbs (cf. especially Leech 1971; Vlach 1981). There is also at least one revealing account of the simple present vs. the present progressive (cf. Goldsmith and Woisetschlager 1982).

In the recent applied linguistic literature, Richards 1981 and Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman 1983 also provide interesting discussions of the event-state contrast and the effect of the progressive on different types of verbs. These accounts tend to focus on the notion of 'incompleteness' and its manifestations as the semantic contribution of the progressive. The analysis I present is complimentary to both Richards and Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman in several respects, especially with regard to the semantics of aspect from a discourse perspective. My emphasis, however, is somewhat different than that of these authors. The approach described below focuses on the notion of 'change' rather than on 'incompleteness'. It is meant to be more graphic, especially for classroom teachers.

AN ANALYSIS OF THE PROGRESSIVE

The following analysis of the progressive is a synthesis of discussions of the progressive in the recent linguistic and applied linguistic literature.² It is offered as a more complete picture of the progressive, which is lacking in ESL texts. The analysis begins with a discussion of events followed by a discussion of states.

Events

The notion of event is important because virtually all verbs referring to events can be put into the progressive. What is an event? It is an occurrence of some kind, a situation where something happens, i.e. some sort of change takes place. I choose the term

²See Bland 1985 for a more detailed review of both recent and traditional treatments of the progressive.

event as a technical term which contrasts with state, but the reader may find it more convenient or useful to use the term "occurrence" or "dynamic situation" instead. This is because certain preconceived notions about the word "event" in English make it difficult for us to conceive of certain situations as events. For example, the following situations are not typically thought of as events, though theoretically they are:

- (7) a. She's blinking her eyes.
b. He's coughing his head off.

The importance of events in this discussion of the progressive is that they involve change, and therefore they have internal structure. They have beginnings and endings, and something, no matter how brief, is going on in between. The diagram in (8) below is meant to depict an event. The vertical lines represent the boundaries, and the wavy lines represent the changes going on during the event. Following Comrie 1976, we can say that the progressive makes explicit reference to the internal structure of dynamic situations. That is, the reason for using the progressive is typically to refer to the changes in between the boundaries in (8):



Dynamic situations can be analyzed into distinct phases due to the fact that they involve change. Thus, the generalization proposed in (1) is really a simplification of the following characterization of the progressive based on Comrie 1976: the progressive focuses on the unfolding of the event, which is made up of distinct individual phases.

Depending on the type of verb put into the progressive, different types of change or distinct phases are focused upon. For example, in (9) below, the focus is on the iterative motion of these progressive

activities. The diagram depicts the iterative motion of the events running on the beach and nodding his head.

- (9)a. Jan is running on the beach. } iterative
 b. Joe is nodding his head. } motion 

In (10) we have verbs in which the progressive focuses on progress toward an end. The diagram attempts to illustrate distinct progressive stages:

- (10)a. Tom is painting a picture. } progress toward
 b. The ship is arriving. } an end 

Cumrie proposes that this dynamic view of the progressive may account for the meaning of 'temporariness' also conveyed by the progressive. A dynamic view of (11a) below is that it focuses on the situation as a phase or a stage, suggesting change from the more permanent circumstance in (11b):

- (11)a. I'm living in New York.
 b. I live in New York.

Similarly, (12) presents the situation as a phase, not as a permanent situation or as a characteristic of the speaker:

- (12) I'm wearing a jacket.

Notice, however, that internal change does not appropriately characterize the situations in (11a) and (12). That is, neither diagram (9) nor (10) would appropriately depict them. Nevertheless, the notion of boundaries and change are implicit. According to Smith 1983, the progressive sets up the expectation for change, and in this sense it conveys the notion of temporariness.

The last important point about the internal structure of events is that it gives us insight into why certain event verbs either resist

the progressive or they occur infrequently in the progressive. These are basically event verbs that entail instantaneous change. For example:

- (13) recognize the woman
 realize his mistake
 discover the truth

The difficulty in putting the verb phrases in (13) into the progressive appears to be due to the difficulty in "stretching out" or "looking inside of" (so to speak) what is really an instantaneous occurrence: recognize something, realize something, etc. If they are put into the progressive, as in (14) below, they tend to mean 'inception of the event,' e.g. 'Joe is beginning to recognize the woman.' By signaling inception, they show change:

- (14) Joe is { recognizing the woman.
 } realizing his mistake.
 } discovering the truth. }

Certain other verbs that entail instantaneous change can be put into the progressive with the following results. In (15), the progressive focuses on a process which, if continued in the same characteristic way, will lead to the respective endpoints (die, win).³ The progressive in (16) focuses on the preparatory procedures leading to the endpoint, i.e. the moments just preceding the endpoint. (16a), therefore, might focus on the entry of the ship into the harbor, and (16b) might focus on the reduction in altitude and the lowering of the landing gear.

- (15)a. Tom is dying.
 b. Mark is winning.

³-----
 Vlach 1981 presents an in-depth analysis of these verbs in the progressive.

- (16)a. The ship is arriving.
 b. The plane is landing.

States

In contrast to the picture of events that has been described, states can be depicted as (17):

(17) _____

By this I mean that all parts of a state are the same. According to Smith 1983:490, "states are homogeneous, stable situations that lack internal structure." The diagram emphasizes the fact that the first moment of a state is the same as any other. States lack shift or variation; there is no activity and there are no successive stages. To sum up, states consist of "undifferentiated moments" (ibid.). Neither beginnings nor endings are integral to states, even though we may speak of such boundaries (e.g. I knew the answer. I don't know it any more.). Once a change takes place, a new state is said to come into existence. It is interesting, therefore, to note the contrast here with events: a number of changes typically make up the same event (cf. (8), (9), (10) above).

This discussion of states suggests why stative verbs typically resist the progressive. Since there is no relevant internal structure to states, i.e. no stages progressing toward an end which can be focused upon, there would seem to be no need for progressive statives. Why then, do we find the progressive statives in (18), (20a-c), (21), (23), and (25) below? The remainder of this paper deals with this question. The data that are discussed come from ESL texts, linguistics and applied linguistics articles, and sentences that I have heard in conversation.

PROGRESSIVE STATIVES

The main reason that statives can combine with the progressive is due to the aspectual nature of the progressive. The progressive presents a situation from a certain perspective. This is where the notion of focus comes in. Aspect can be described as a spotlight on a stage which focuses on different parts of the temporal contour of a situation.⁴ As we have seen in (11), the same situation (i.e. the same objective reality) can be viewed from two different perspectives.

What really happens in the case of progressive statives is that speakers endow certain states with features of event verbs. The progressive makes the stative verbs act as if they were non-states by imposing some sort of dynamics (i.e. change) on the stative situations. This notion of change is conveyed by progressive statives in several different ways. Therefore, I have divided the progressive statives into several groups, for ease of discussion. Although there may be some overlap in these divisions, this should not detract from the main objectives of this paper.

Let us consider the first group:

- (18)a. I'm hating this weather.
 b. I'm actually liking this play. (Smith)
 c. I'm loving these moments with you. (Dart)
 d. The whole family is wanting to go to the Bahamas for Easter. (King)
 e. I'm { really } loving it.
 { just }
 f. I'm enjoying my freedom.
 g. She's thinking that she wants to go home. (Leech)
 h. No, I'm thinking that I'd like a bit of a higher heel anyway.
 i. I'm remembering now. (Smith)
 j. I'm not doubting your word, but... (Smith)
 k. I'm missing you dreadfully. (Smith)

⁴-----
 This analogy is from Ron Hendricks (personal communication).

The sentences above represent the most common type of progressive statives. They are frequent in conversation, and they do appear in some ESL texts as exceptions to the progressive (e.g. (18c)). These examples are mainly verbs of attitude, emotion, and mental perception. The states referred to by these verbs are presented as events in the sense that they convey the dynamism of actions or processes. Most importantly, they convey change by suggesting that something is going on.

Why are they used? First of all, the immediate quality of the progressive gives more strength to the predication. These sentences are therefore more intense, emotional, and vivid than their simple present counterparts. The particular effect conveyed by the progressive depends on the verb. In (18i), for example, remembering conveys more of an active process, while in (18g and h) the progressive conveys the inception of these ideas. With emotions like love, hate, etc., the progressive expresses the strength and force of these states. Such progressive statives are often found with intensifiers and quantifiers to further emphasize the immediacy and intensity of the situation (cf. (18e) and (18k)), and many of these sentences are also likely to have emphatic intonation. Finally, it should be added that as expressions of emotion, it is probably no coincidence that almost all of the sentences in (18) are in the first person. The first person is, after all, most conducive to expressing emotion.

I have included sentence (19) below in order to demonstrate that the effect of vividness is not limited to emotional or perception verbs:

(19) A photograph of Grandma and Grandpa is sitting on the mantelpiece, as it has been for thirty years.

(Goldsmith/Woisetschlager)

We might want to say that in this sentence the progressive has the effect of putting us in the room with the picture. This use of the progressive with all types of verbs is often found as a literary

device at the beginning of a story.

The sentences in (20) represent more examples of emphasis or intensity with verbs other than the type in (18):

- (20)a. The operation is costing a lot. (Dart)
- b. The operation is really costing us a lot.
- c. Herbert's always hearing noises. (Celce-Murcia/Larsen-Freeman)
- d. Jane is constantly working on her book.
- e. Old Lilly is always feeding the pigeons in the park.
 (Goldsmith/Woisetschlager)

The progressive stative in (20a) conveys a more immediate quality in the sense that it is more personal than the simple present alternative. The operation costs a lot. In fact, I think that (20a) is probably more naturally expressed as (20b), since the progressive appears to attach an emotional value to the sentence. (20c-e) represent more examples of attaching an emotional value to progressive sentences. Notice that (20c) is a stative verb but (20d,e) are event verbs. (20c-e) show a common use of the progressive to convey a negative "emotional comment" (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman 1983) about an action which is often habitual. Such sentences, which express varying degrees of negativism, have also been called examples of colloquial hyperbole, exaggeration, irritation, and amused or mild disparagement or reproof (cf. Leech 1971; Goldsmith and Woisetschlager 1982, for example). Appropriate intonation; it should be added, is likely to accompany them. To sum up, let us say that the focus on behavior by the progressive may suggest some sort of comment or opinion by the speaker about that behavior.

I should add here that I have noticed that ESL speakers who overuse the progressive may use sentences such as (20c-e) when they do not mean to convey the emphasis or negativism. This point will be brought up again later in this paper.

The examples in (21) below illustrate more progressive statives. These sentences convey 'temporariness' or 'limited duration,' two meanings of the progressive discussed above.

- (21)a. Your're being $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{rude} \\ \text{polite} \\ \text{foolish} \end{array} \right\}$
- b. He's being $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{sorry} \\ \text{afraid} \\ \text{happy} \end{array} \right\}$ (Leech)
- c. Today my uncle is being Napolean. (Leech)
- d. The car is being difficult. (Leech)
- e. Peter is believing in ghosts these days. (Smith)
- f. The river is smelling particularly bad today. (Smith)
- g. ...it's looking like rain. (King)
- h. In general, she's looking fine. (Cathcart-Strong)
- i. They seem to be knowing it and then--poof--they don't.
(King)

The examples in (21) may be divided into two types. The first type, found in (21a-d), exhibits the following structural pattern: NP BE+ing ADJ. The second type constitutes the examples in (21e-i). Their expression of temporariness depends more strongly on an explicit or implicit time adverbial which limits the time duration. Let us turn first to (21a-d).

Examples (21a-d) are very common in conversation, especially those in (21a). The progressive in these sentences conveys temporary behavior by focusing on the behavior as a change from the status quo. (Once again, note the importance of the notion of change.) This is similar to the explanation for (11a) and (12) discussed above. The sentences in (21a) express an observation about the present, about present behavior. They do not characterize the behavior the way the simple present does. Compare: You're rude. vs. You're being rude. It should be pointed out here that not every adjective is appropriate in this sentence pattern. Only those adjectives that typically describe a situation that the agent can control (i.e. change) or pretend to control are appropriate. This predicts the ungrammaticality of the following sentence:

- (22) *You're being white as a ghost.

(21b,c,d) are less common examples from Leech which can be paraphrased as 'pretend' or 'act': 'he's pretending to be sorry,' 'he's acting like Napoleon,' etc. (21d) is an interesting example. It conveys personification of the car in addition to temporariness. The novelty of the sentence lies in its implicit reference to agency via the progressive: events typically have an animate subject which controls the change.

The second type of progressive statives expressing temporariness are those in (21e-i). The importance of the explicit or implied time adverbial is due to the fact that states do not include change. Therefore, an explicit time adverbial in (21e) and (21f) satisfies a condition for the use of the progressive by introducing the limited duration that implies change. Notice that in some cases, (21e) for example, the lack of a time adverbial would make the sentence less grammatical. Thus the sentence Peter is believing in ghosts is less acceptable without the adverb. In other cases, for example (21g,h), the use of the progressive itself conveys a focus on the present moment. (21i) may be said to express limited time duration by virtue of its meaning. Seem and the progressive support the conveyed notion of temporariness. This example is also interesting because know is a stative that is typically more difficult to put into the progressive than some of the other stative verbs that have already been discussed.

The third group of progressive statives in (23) is probably the most interesting group because it provides more examples of stative verbs like know and resemble, which are generally much more resistant to the progressive than the other stative verbs discussed. It is for this reason that I mentioned the problem of giving ESL students a list of stative verbs and a rule that says that they do not occur in the progressive. Ideally, such a list should be expressed in terms of "more" and "less" stative.

Let us now consider the data:

- (23)a. John is knowing the answer more and more often this semester. (King)
- b. Young kids are knowing more and more about sex and violence these days.
- c. The students are understanding Professor Throckmorton less and less these days. (Smith)
- d. The baby's resembling his father more and more every day. (Sag)
- e. These examples are gradually seeming less and less acceptable to me. (Smith)
- f. I'm understanding more and more about quantum mechanics as each day goes by. (Comrie)
- g. ...it's looking worse and worse. (King)
- h. John is resembling his great uncle these days. (Smith)

Smith 1983:493 describes the so-called states in these examples as being viewed dynamically on a continuum of intensity or frequency. They involve change over time and act somewhat like events in these sentences. The progressive introduces change in these states by focusing on the differences in degree among classes of related states. This is illustrated in (24):

(24) [The baby resembles his father]₁, [The baby resembles his father (more)]₂, [The baby resembles his father (even more)]₃...

[———]₁, [———]₂, [———]₃...

The illustration suggests that by quantifying over the states, we can make them progressive in the sense that we now have a number of related states ([———]₁, [———]₂, etc.) showing degrees of change. Note that I am not suggesting that we think of states as dynamic events with a lot going on inside them, as seen in (8)

above.⁵ Rather, I am suggesting that we think of groups of related states. The differences between the groups of related states in (24), for example, imply change over time, and in this sense, they can be viewed as a succession of stages. The adverbial phrases more and more, less and less, and worse and worse are obviously quite important in imposing the progressive meaning just described. Example (23h), however, differs from the others since it does not have one of these adverbial phrases. Instead, it has the time adverbial these days, which suggests change from before. The change is conveyed by a possible inceptive interpretation: 'John is beginning to resemble his great uncle.'

Let us turn now to the final group of examples:

- (25)a. Are you liking it here?
- b. Is she liking her new car? (King)
- c. I'm hoping you'll give us some advice. (Leech)
- d. We're wondering if you have any suggestions. (Leech)
- e. I'm guessing that you're French. (King)

These sentences are typical in informal conversation, and very frequent in questions. (25a) was spoken by a person at an informal party given in honor of a new neighbor. In this context, Are you liking it here? was actually much more polite than Do you like it here?. The latter would have been more direct or abrupt. My impression in observing this conversation was that the progressive question allowed for more hedging or a more descriptive and anecdotal answer. In other words, it "took the respondent off the hook" by requiring less of a value judgment on her part.

The use of the progressive for politeness is probably more typical in British English, and more frequent in some ideolects and dialects than others. Now why does the progressive convey

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 Contrary to the point of view taken here, Smith 1983 argues that these examples are not progressive statives at all, but rather they are dynamic situations (i.e. events) because of the change over time. However, Smith appears to ignore the stative meaning of these verbs, which I have tried to illustrate in (24).

politeness? Let us say that the progressive is the weaker form in certain situations because it does not assert (or question) general truths; it merely comments about more immediate behavior or situations. It is therefore less formal or binding and more temporary or contingent in its description. In this sense it is weaker and non-characterizing.

This discussion of the use of the progressive for politeness appears to present a contradiction: in (18) the progressive was said to have a strengthening effect, while in (25) it has a weakening effect. Notice, however, that the sentences in (18) and (25) serve different functions in discourse. Those in (18) represent statements, while those in (25) represent questions or sentences that function as questions. The conclusion that we can draw here is that not only does the progressive have different effects on different types of verbs, but it also has different effects on different speech acts.

ESL Errors

This section will briefly discuss some conversational ESL errors that are related to the progressive analysis presented in this paper. (26a,b) are from a German speaker, (26c) is from a French speaker, and (26d) is from a Hebrew speaker.

(26)a. Do you know Sapsucker Woods?

*Yes, my wife is often going there with the children.

b. *He is a character who is scaring everyone.

(Compare: He is a character who is always scaring everyone.

He is the character who is always scaring everyone.)

c. Look! *She doesn't wear a sweater. (= she's not wearing a sweater)

d. *He's a man who is known for being innovative and imaginative in the terrorism they are doing. (= acts of terrorism they commit)

(26a,b,d) are examples of overuse of the progressive. This appears to be the main problem with advanced speakers, and an interesting area for further research. (26a) represents a problem with adverbs. I believe that this sentence was produced by analogy to a sentence like She's always going there, which is a grammatical sentence with a possible negative connotation like (20c,d,e) above. Thus in addition to the incorrect combination of adverb and present progressive, the possible negative connotation or emotional comment conveyed by this type of sentence is not supported by the context.

The grammatical use of always with the progressive brings up a related point concerning the use of adverbs with progressive sentences, namely that adverbs are not always optional. Consider the following:

- (27) Why doesn't Ed have any money?
- a. He's buying designer clothes (these days).
 - b. He's (always) buying designer clothes.

These sentences are much less acceptable without the adverbs in parentheses. The fine line between acceptability and unacceptability may confuse the students unless they understand the role of adverbs in progressive sentences, and unless they are required to use them. As an illustration of this point, consider the fact that (26b) would have been considerably better with always.

It is also interesting that (26b) becomes more acceptable when it is not an introductory sentence with the indefinite article a, but rather a sentence whose subject has already been referred to in discourse, as the definite article the suggests. This provides more evidence for the use of the simple present for characterizing in general versus the use of the present progressive for describing something more immediate or specific. (26c,d) represent similar problems with the notion of characterizing something in contrast to merely commenting on a particular situation or a particular behavior.

CONCLUSION

The innovative uses of the progressive discussed above are important to ESL teachers, curriculum developers, and material writers because (1) they tell us a great deal about the speaker's perceptions of the meaning, range, and scope of the progressive; (2) they complement a communicative approach to ESL by focusing on the function of the progressive in discourse, e.g. its use in complaining, requesting, questioning, hedging, etc---uses which are not currently stressed in ESL texts; and (3) they force us to constantly reassess the relationship between the grammar book and the language the students are apt to encounter. In conclusion, the points raised in this paper clearly illustrate a comment about the progressive made by Geoffrey Leech (1971:26), namely, that the usage of the progressive is unstable in colloquial English, "and is probably undergoing continuing change."

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