

THE PROGRESSIVE AND STATIVITY IN ENGLISH

by

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英語における進行形と状態性について

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1. INTRODUCTION

Practically every English grammar book states that the 'progressive' is not applicable to those verbs called 'stative' or 'status' verbs, and this incompatibility of the progressive is one of the criteria which delineate the status verbs from all the other verbs in English called 'dynamic' or 'non-status' verbs. These two groups are not equal in number nor in composition. This distinction is not only for verbs but also for adjectives, and adjectives are grouped into two groups, 'stative' and 'non-stative' (Lakoff 1967).

In this article I would like to examine the relation between the progressive and the status verbs and to discuss in an informal way some rules which will explain some of the aspectual features of English. This is intended to be a preliminary study to a further study of the aspect in English. The discussion here is limited to the progressive in the present tense; the term 'progressive' is used throughout to refer to the form 'be + verb-ing,' and 'state,' 'status' and 'stative' are used interchangeably.

2. VERB-TYPES IN ENGLISH

Verbs are classified by Vendler (1967) into four types based on "time schemata": "activities," "accomplishments," "achievements" and "states." Those verbs that occur in the progressive are said to be "processes going on in time." They are of two types: "activities" (*run, push a cart, cry*) are those processes that go on in time "in a homogeneous way"; any part of the process is of the same nature as the whole, and "accomplishments" (*run a mile, paint a picture, grow up, recover, etc.*) "also go on in time, but they proceed towards a terminus which is logically necessary to their being what they are." Verbs that do not occur in the progressive are also divided into two types: "achievements" (*recognize, find, win (the race), start, stop, die, be born*) occur "at a single moment," "can be predicated only for single moments of time, and "states," in contrast to "achievements," "last for a period of time," and "can be predicated for shorter or longer periods of time."

Kenny (1966) combines Vendler's "achievement" and "accomplishment" into "performance," giving threefold categories, "activities," "performances" and "states." Mourelatos (1981) reviews the classifications by Vendler and Kenny and offers a binary contrast between "states" and "occurrences," "occurrences" consisting of "processes" (activities) and "events" (performances), and "events" consisting of "developments" (accomplishments) and "punctual occurrences" (achievements). Vendler's "achievements" which are combined with "states" on account of the incompatibility with the progressive are under "events" in contrast to "development."

3. THE PROGRESSIVE ASPECT

Although it is often called a 'progressive tense,' or 'continuous tense' and so on, the progressive in English is generally considered to denote an aspectual feature. Aspect is defined as the nature of the action of the verb or the manner in which that action is regarded especially with reference to its beginning, duration, completion, or repetition. Unlike the perfective aspect widely in use for most verbs in English, the use of the progressive is compatible only with those verbs which signify process or activity. This limitation in use has been pointed out and discussed in most of the grammar books and the verbs which are not used in the progressive are most often called 'state, status, or stative' verbs, although the composition or membership is not identical.

A short historical background will give us a foundation in considering the essential meaning or function of the progressive form.

The progressive forms were rare in Old English and Middle English and most of the forms found there were in translations from Latin, used probably by the translators who wished 'to render a Latin expression consisting of two words (an auxiliary and a verb form) by means of a similar collocation.' About the origin of the progressive form Jespersen states:¹⁾

...the modern English expanded tenses are in some vague way a continuation of the old combinations of the auxiliary verb and the participle in *-ende*; but after this ending had been changed into *-inge* and had thus become identical with that of the verbal substantive, an amalgamation took place of this construction and the combination *be on* + the sb, in which *on* had become *a* and was then dropped.

Even in Modern English Marlowe and Shakespeare used them very sparingly and "it is not until Bunyan and, even more pronouncedly Addison that we find the modern rules for the employment of the expanded forms carried out to their full extent and with precision of our own times."²⁾

In Jane Austen's novels written in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, for example, the use of the progressive seems to be still fairly free. The verbs *wish*, *prefer* and *despise* are the ones seldom used in the progressive in the present-day English, but Austen seems to have had no idea of refraining from the use as can be seen in the followings:

She was humble and wishing to be forgiven. (*Mansfield Park* p.462)³⁾

Had he learnt to love her because he believed her to be preferring him, it would have been another thing. (*Persuasion* p.182)⁴⁾

I had supposed him to be despising his fellow-creatures in general. (*Pride and Prejudice* p.80)⁵⁾

It may be said that her use of the form is only to add some descriptive power to the sentences regardless of the kind of the verbs she chooses to use, and is quite different from the present-day practice intended to give some aspectual modification.

But as time went, the use of the progressive became more frequent and more precise and established itself as having an important semantic or grammatical function in the language. The grammarians in the late 19th century and early 20th century use various names for the progressive, "continuous," "definite," "peripheral," or "expanded," each supposed to describe its essential meaning best by the grammarians, respectively.

According to Sweet, "definite tenses always imply incompleteness" and they also imply "a certain duration ... The characteristic of these tenses is that they use duration to define the time of a point-tense, as in *When he came, I was writing a letter.*"⁶⁾

Curme says that essential meaning of the progressive form is duration and it never means anything else, and further, "Progressive Aspect is expressed by the expanded forms and represents the action as progressing, proceeding, hence as not ended."⁷⁾

Kruisinga, too, says that the progressive always implies incompleteness, and after pointing out the descriptive value which the progressive form has, he says that "the descriptive value of the progressive often suggests that the activity, occurrence or state described has been the object of the particular interest or careful observation on the part of the speaker," and mentions that the fundamental function of the expanded form is "to express durativeness or iterativeness," but it may also have a variety of secondary functions, which are not always easy to determine or discriminate.⁸⁾

Jespersen, on the other hand, says that "the assertion" that "expanded tenses indicate duration of the action or state denoted by the verb" is not "correct," and that "the essential thing is that the action or state denoted by the expanded tense is thought of as a temporal frame encompassing something else which as often as not is to be understood from the whole situation." He further mentions that "the use of the expanded forms often gives a certain emotional colouring to a sentence chiefly because of the physical length of the form."⁹⁾

Zandvoort characterizes the progressive as "dynamic" in contrast with the simple form which he describes as "static," and he points out that there is little difference in meaning found between the expanded and non-expanded forms of certain verbs which in themselves express continuity or duration, as in *The bride wore a dress of white silk* in contrast to *The bride was wearing a dress of white silk.*¹⁰⁾

Leech (1969) discusses continuous tense forms and calls the semantic feature which discriminates these from the simple tense forms 'situation,' the opposite being called 'non-situation.' Then he identifies duration, limited time extension, happening not

necessarily complete and continuousness as properties which individually may or may not be contrastive in a given instance, but collectively distinguish it from 'non-situation'.¹¹⁾

Thus the essential meaning of the progressive is considered to denote 'duration,' 'limited time extension,' 'incompletion' or 'continuation' of the action or state of the verb used, on one hand, and to give a more descriptive, or emotional colouring to the sentence, on the other, although Jespersen is more concerned about the function of providing a temporal frame to another predication.

3. STATE VERBS

Along with the discussion of the essential meaning of the progressive form, there are given a group of verbs which do not occur in the progressive form, and another group of verbs which do not occur when used in the central meaning of the verb, but do occur in some subsidiary meaning. Zandvoort (1957), for instance, lists those verbs which express an essentially 'static' idea in the former group (*believe, belong, deserve, prefer, recognize, remember, resemble, satisfy, seem, sound, suffice, suit, surprise and understand*), and some others in the latter group (*forget, mind, think of and be funny*). Thus the idea that the use or non-use of the progressive is closely related with the semantic features of verbs had been discussed and established among the so-called traditional grammarians.

In the 1960s several works were published on the verb system including tense and aspect in the present-day English, and in one of them Joos discusses the types of predication: process and status. One group of verbs are used for process predication, another for status predication and the other both for process and status. He cites from W. Stannard Allen's *Living English Structure* (pp.78f.) that "certain verbs are practically never used in the Present Continuous (present temporary aspect), even when describing the real present... These are mainly verbs of condition or behavior not strictly under human control; consequently they go on (their referents occur) whether we like it or not..."¹²⁾ As to "a fairly complete" list of these 42 verbs not usually found in continuous forms {*see, hear, smell, recognize, notice; remember, forget, know, understand, recall, recollect, believe, trust (=believe), feel (that), think (that), gather (=understand), suppose, mean, want, wish, desire, refuse, forget, care, love, hate, like, be fond of, adore, be angry, be annoyed, be pleased, seem, signify, appear (=seem), belong to, matter, possess, consist of, contain (=hold), be, have*}, Joos says it is "deceptive both in size and complexion," and suggests that he can extend the list to eighty-five off-hand in about half an hour of musing, and there are surely over two hundred of them, and most of the verbs in the extended list resemble in meaning a small minority of those in Allen's list, namely *seem, signify, appear, belong to, matter, possess, consist of, have, be*. To this minority group Joos adds some others, *make a difference, fill, complete, suit, resemble, extend, reach, adjoin, border on, fail, differ, include, preclude, comprize, complicate, vitiate, demonstrate, show, interesect, be supposed to*.¹³⁾

According to Joos the single meaning of each status verb is such as to reject the

time-limited validity of the temporary aspect. "That makes no difference" is not a process, not an event that essentially proceeds but is now frozen for our inspection; it is instead a relation between 'that' (whatever it is) and the whole world we live in: it doesn't happen, but simply *is so*."¹⁴⁾

Robert L. Allen made an extensive analysis of verbs in *The Verb System of Present-Day American English* (1962), in which he gives a list of types of predication that do not normally occur with expanded verb-clusters. The two types given there are: (1) 'momentary' predications, further classified into 'assertive' and others, and (2) 'suffusive' predications, further classified 'public' and 'private,' and the number of the verbs listed (though as samples) amounts to 235 counting every time whether in the parenthesis or repeated. The number is approximate to the number which Joos suggests as mentioned above. The status-verbs are far smaller in number than non-status verbs, but far more frequent in occurrences.

In *A Grammar of Contemporary English* (1968) Quirk et. al gives the classification of situation types into "dynamic" and "stative" by the opposition feature of count/non-count, which is applied to nouns and adjectives. Stative verbs are further classified into subtypes, (A) qualities, (B) states and (C) stance, and the use or non-use in the progressive is discussed grouping (B) states according to their meanings into several classes.

Verbs are not the only category that is subclassified as to 'stativity,' but adjectives, which differ from verbs as to the feature 'verbal/non-verbal,' can be subclassified in the same way. The difference between verbs and adjectives is that 'stative' is norm or unmarked for adjectives and 'non-stative' is norm and unmarked for verbs. The progressive is one of the syntactic features along with 'imperative,' 'do-something in cleft' and some others which condition the distinction with respect to the feature 'stativity.'

4. EFFECT OF THE PROGRESSIVE ON THE VERB-TYPES

"The function of the progressive operator is to make stative sentences, and there is no reason for the progressive to apply to sentences that are already stative,"¹⁵⁾ says Vlach after he has defined a stative sentence, and this explains quite well why the progressive is incompatible with the state verbs since the state verbs are in themselves 'states.' But this is only a general principle and there remain cases to be discussed in detail. In examining the interaction between the verb types and the function or effect of the progressive, I would like to refer to the function of the progressive in terms of the following composite features: (1) duration, (2) limited time and (3) incompleteness. These three features do not affect at the same time nor to the same degree, that is, in one case one or two of the features affect more than the other(s), and in another case, another feature may affect more.

Here, verbs are classified into non-states and states, and non-states are subclassified into activities, accomplishments and achievements following Mourelatos in essence, but labeling after Vendler.

(1) NON-STATE VERBS

(A) ACTIVITIES: The progressive changes an activity into a state, giving (1) duration to the activity, which is in progress, (2) limited time to the activity, whose duration in time is limited and (3) incompleteness to the activity, which is going on; any part of the activity in progress being of the same nature, homogeneous as the whole, as if the period in which the activity takes place is painted solid.

(B) ACCOMPLISHMENTS: The progressive changes an accomplishment into a state in the same way as in the case of an activity. The difference in activities and accomplishments is that the progressive in accomplishments does not show the homogeneousness of activity as a whole since accomplishments often with the object imply culmination of the act or process, but the feature 'incompleteness' of the progressive never allows to get to the point of culmination.

(C) ACHIEVEMENTS: Achievement verbs capture either the beginning or the climax of an act and they are momentaneous. Generally the momentaneous occurrence does not go along with any of the progressive features. But when they are used in the progressive, as in *He is knocking on the door*, one knocking does not assume the duration but the period of time in which a number of times of knocking are repeated is considered to assume duration which stretches over some limited time. On the other hand, those achievements which do not indicate possible repetitions in a limited time are considered to be affected by the feature 'incompleteness' of the progressive form as in *die* or *drown*. This needs to be elaborated as to the lexical meaning of the verb itself and the progressive features.

(2) STATE VERBS

The assumption in most of the works and throughout this discussion has been that state verbs do not occur with the progressive and this gives a foundation to the subclassification of verbs and adjectives. But in actuality state verbs do occur in the progressive and these cases have to be accounted for.

Those denoting qualities with *be* + adjectives or nominals (*be tall, be kind, be a Japanese, etc.*) do not occur in the progressive when the quality referred to is not controllable by the human being, that is, cannot be changed into something else by someone's will. But when the adjectives after *be* are non-stative or dynamic, the progressive is possible, and the feature given may be said to be 'limited time,' that is, it has duration as a state verbal, but the duration is only for a limited time. *He is friendly* is indefinite as to the duration, but in *He is being friendly* it is implied that the duration is of limited time (hence his insincerity is detectable, but this is something to be discussed some other time in relation to the inherent meaning of the word).

The self-controllability or agentivity has an important effect on the use or non-use of the progressive with the verbs of perception, but instead of listing as exceptions, we might register those verbs to both classes, feel¹ in *I am feeling the ground with my foot* to activity, and feel² in *I feel the ground* to state.

Those verbs of stance (*live, stand, sit, etc.*) may also be considered to be featured

by 'limited duration' when used in the progressive. *I live in Tokyo* implies the permanent residence in *Tokyo*, but *I am living in Tokyo* suggests temporary residence, that is only for a limited period.

So-called habitual progressive may be regarded as the case in which the repetition takes place over a limited period specified by a time adverbial. *The professor types his own letters* suggests that the habit is permanent while *The professor is typing his letters while his secretary is ill* suggests that the habit is temporary.

5. SUMMARY

In this article I have examined some of the ideas of the progressive form and verb-types in English in relation to stativity, and then discussed the features of the progressive which effect the aspectual manifestation, and I have argued that the features of the progressive affect in two ways: (1) they change the non-stative into the stative, and (2) they change the stative supposedly with indefinite duration into the stative with limited duration.

The discussion here is limited in scope and depth omitting much of the discussion needed, but I hope this will make a step to a study on the relative stativity in English.

NOTES:

- 1) Jespersen (1949) pp.165f.
- 2) *ibid.*
- 3) Chapman (1923)
- 4) *ibid.*
- 5) *ibid.*
- 6) Sweet (1898) p.97
- 7) Curme (1931) p.233
- 8) Kruisinga (1932) p.342
- 9) Jespersen (1949) p.180
- 10) Zandvoort (1957) p.37
- 11) Leech (1969) p.114
- 12) Joos (1966) pp.114 f.
- 13) *ibid.*
- 14) *ibid.*
- 15) Vlach (1981) p.274

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