ESTAR – NDO AS A GENERIC

Estar – NDO como um genérico

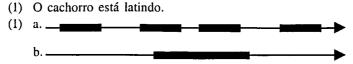Castro Gonçalves*
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Introduction

In this paper I will present an analysis of progressive constructions such as *estar – ndo* of BP (for Brazilian Portuguese) as a generic such that it saves the insights from the existing analysis of *be – ing* as a progressive but also accounts for: (a) phenomena of BP which those analyses leave unexplained; (b) phenomena common to English and BP which progressive based accounts merely describe.

I will start by going through the highlights of the progressive account of *be – ing*, what I call *the progressive story*. As it is found in Dowty (1979), Asher (1992), Smith (1997), Vlach (1981) and many others. I will then say why I take the progressive story to be unconvincing when told in BP. Third, I will use a simplified form of Carlson's 1977 theory as evidence of how the various (and semantically diverse) readings of *estar – ndo* can be seen as a single genericity-style phenomenon. I will also suggest how the progressive (is-happening-at-utterance-time for present progressives) reading may be captured as a discourse/pragmatic phenomenon.

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The main problem I deal with is deciding how *estar – ndo* alternate between readings (1 a) and (1 b). The progressive story for *be – ing* and *estar – ndo* has given, as we shall see, secondary attention to this problem.

(1) O cachorro está latindo.

(1) a.

b.

The progressive story

The central concern of semantic theories dealing with constructions like *be – ing* of English and *estar – ndo* of BP has been with a certain oddity of their truth conditional import. Different verbs put into such constructions (commonly and rather misleadingly dubbed *the progressive*) yield different truth conditions for the phrases they occur in. To put it in Asher (1992, p. 2) terms:

PROG (φ) entails eventually φ.

for non-telic processes like *run*. Whereas on the other hand if the process is a telic one such as *cross the street*:

PROG (φ) does not entail φ.

Nevertheless, despite the non entailment, it is common-sensical to assume that, if it is the case that (2), it will/would be the case that Henrietta will/would get to the other side.

(2) Henrietta is/was crossing the street.

The possibility of oncoming buses, earthquakes and other catastrophes keeping Henrietta from reaching the other side of the street blocks the entailment from PROG (φ) to Æ in these cases, but we still expect her to get there. This expectation has to come from somewhere.

Thus, in this approach to *be – ing* type constructions, giving PROG a semantics involves explaining how it remains common sensical to assume that if Henrietta is crossing the street she (tipically) gets to the other side, despite the

fact that there is no entailment from PROG (φ) to φ in this case. What is needed is an explanation of why and how outcomes of the appropriate sort would or should follow a progressive state, such as *be crossing the street*.

In other words the semantics of *be-ing* involves explaining eventual outcomes and recommends modality. And indeed, debate has hinged on features of modal structures such as *inertia worlds, normality of events, perspectives, nonmonotonicity*, etc.

The truth conditional import of progressiveness has both gained insights from and contributed to the classification of verbs and verbal constituents. The telic vs. atelic distinction above is a telling case. Another, even more notorious example is that most frameworks distinguish between statives and eventive verbs based on their occurrences in *be – ing* constructions. *Be – ing* does not take statives, as shown in (2).

(3)   a. *John is knowing the answer.
       b. *Max is being in the kitchen.
       c. *Joan is having a car.

Although there has been much debate on where and how to draw lines between one verb class and another, it seems certain that at least a tripartite division into (something like) telic, atelic and stative is needed. Again, progressive structures have an important role in these divisions. It sets telics and atelics apart and also atelics from statives. So this suggests that it is an important issue with pretty far reaching consequences.

Review of the literature shows that the status of the role of *be – ing* in verbal class distinction varies. Vendler (1967) seems to have taken it as evidential. The adequate tests could vary from language to language. For instance, *be ing* may prove reasonably adequate to set English statives from English telics, but it may not be the case with *estar – ndo* and BP statives and telics. But there have been stronger claims: for example, Vlach (1993, p. 239) explicitly states that occurence of a verb is criterial, not indicative. That is, it is the incompatibility of statives and be – ing is due to the very nature of stativeness and progressiveness. So if a certain language has a *be – ing* like periphrasis and it takes statives its either not a progressive (at least not a pure one) or the verb is not a stative.

Taking the PROG test as criterial for distinguishing states from eventives faces the problems of accounting for the many observational inadequacies, such as *Jane is living in Chile*. But a case can be made for it, once agreed that progressives describe episodes statively, it might be argued that it is superfluous

(and thus ungrammatical) to take a state and make it into a state. Accordingly, the inadequacies might be explained away as a pragmatic mechanism that gives 'colour' and 'contrast', to use Smith's 1997 wording.

Although habituality is not the chief concern of the progressive story, it has kept room available to shelter it. Certain types of phrasal contexts, amongst which adverbial modification, require this compatibility.

(4)   a. Tom is playing tennis.
        b. Tom is playing tennis on Fridays these days.

This compatibility is made possible by the use of intervals as the denotation of verbal constituents. Approaches agree in taking PROG as an interval encompassing other intervals. For example *Tom was watching the telly, when the phone rang* where the *be ing* clause encompasses the *when* clause. The same goes indifferently for instants as verbal denotations. The issue of what to take as basic would have not affect the compatibility.

There is, however, an important point to underscore concerning the compatibility. It is important to notice that, in the progressive story, habituality is taken as somehow imposed on PROG. I.e., progressiveness is basic, habituality secondary. For example Smith (1997, p. 51), from whence (4) was taken, has it that

> These examples are somewhat odd in isolation. They require adverbial and other contextual support.

This treatment of progressiveness as primary and habituality as secondary, added to the fact that *be ing* is sensitive to verbal classes, affords a very sloppy account of the *be - ing* related phenomena for English and no account whatsoever for *estar – ndo* in BP. Consider, for example, the set of phenomena below. Each set of phrases is an operation of PROG onto a different class of verbs and for each one we get a different result. The progressive story has to deal with these as well as with the imperfective paradox mentioned above. But the technical sophistication of the semantics that deals with the paradox does not afford much elegance. As far as I can see, the progressive story deals with this on a one-to-one basis, a pretty poor ratio.

- with durative non statives, PROG focuses on internal stages:

(5) a. Mary is walking in the park.
b. Sam is eating the apple.

- With achievements (instantaneous events) PROG focuses on the preliminary stages, giving no info of the outcome; some of the results are odd and need contextual support.

(6) a. Joan is reaching the top of the mountain.
b. ?Jack is finding his watch.

- Semelfactives (*knock, kick, cough*) don't yield progressives in *be ing* form, instead they yield 'derived activities of the multiple action types' (Smith, 1997)

(7) a. Joan is knocking at the door.
b. Jack is coughing.

- activities and accomplishments with progressives yield events in progress and allow for some sort of discontinuity:

(8) a. John is building a house.
b. John is running.

The discontinuity comes from the ontology of the eventuality. *Build a house* contains times when the process is going on and times when it is not. This in turn leads to speculations about what counts as being within the house building interval or not and the role of granularity etc. Likewise for the other examples, eventuality ontology is what affects what *be – ing* will focus on.

- As mentioned, observational inadequacies are described as colour, contrast and so on; thus the difference between the (a) and (b) phrases below.

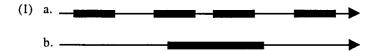(9) a. They were living in Geneva.
b. They lived in Geneva.

(10) a. The ship was moving along.
b. The ship moved along.

Notice that it is not enough to say that the different results are yielded due to differences in the verb classes. That is begging the question. What we want is an account of how the operation associated with *be – ing* does all this.

The progressive story in BP

Apart from phenomena pretty similar to the above, the progressive story in BP has also to deal with two other issues: free alternation between the readings depicted for (1) and the behaviour of stative verbs.

As shown above, the free alternation is between (a) readings where the interval of the relevant process is not continuous and the moment of speech does not necessarily coincide with a subinterval where the process is actually going on; and (b) readings of *estar – ndo* where the interval is continuous and includes the moment of speech (for sentences in the present tense). As the repeated (1) depicts for (10 a) but according to judgements from native speakers, not (10 b).

(10) a. João está lendo o livro/jornal.
b. John is reading the book/the newspaper.

In the analysis sketched here free alternation is taken as evidence for questioning the option made in the progressive story of taking the continuous (progressive) value as the most basic value of *estar – ndo*.

However this is not without obstacles, even in BP with free alternation and all. Similar to English speakers, the first reaction of the average BP speaker toward an out-of-the-blue *estar – ndo* phrase is that it is about something true at utterance time. In the end this intuition will be accounted for in the line I am following (see below). But the deviation from intuition can be justified as of now.

In Gonçalves (2003a) I tried to start developing some support for this view by showing its plausibility. I restrict to giving the main line of argumentation: if we can find phrasal contexts where the habitual reading is preferred to the progressive, it's plausible that intuitions of preference for the progressive are a by-product not of *estar – ndo* semantics 'per se' but of its interaction with other factors. If this turns out to be right then there is justification for disregarding the average speaker's intuition of preference as semantically relevant. It seems that such phrasal contexts do exist:

Focalisation makes discontinuous (habitual) readings more plausible (without altering the reading of the subject from token to type, for example)

(11) a. O menino está colando (e não a menina).
    The boy is 'cheating-in-exam' (not the girl)
    b. O copo está quebrando.
    The glass is breaking.

Certain nouns/complex nouns also cancel the preference for the continuous reading

(12) a. O turista está sujando a praia.
    the tourist is making the beach dirty.
    b. O professor do ensino primário está pensando em mudar de emprego.
    the elementary school teacher is thinking of changing jobs.

Certain verbs work the same effect

(13) a. Aquele cachorro está desistindo de esperar sobra de comida.
    That dog is giving up waiting for leftovers (i.e. through out the weeks he comes less and less)
    b. O panda está se extinguindo.
    The panda is itself extinguishing (the panda is becoming extinct)

Accepting that the preference for the progressive reading is not a clear-cut semantic issue has an important consequence: to further understanding of *estar – ndo* type constructions it is not enough to concentrate on the semantics of the continuous reading and make the framework merely compatible with

discontinuity (habituality) imposed by discourse relation phenomena. Building the semantics of *estar – ndo* on the progressive reading is stipulative. The fact that alterations, some with no other relevant temporal effect, revert the 'probability' of a habitual reading suggests that both continuous and discontinuous are somehow available at sentence level. Thus, the first step to understanding of *estar- ndo* constructions has to seriously consider the relation between (1 a) discontinuous and (1 b) continuous.

The other peculiarity the progressive story has to deal with in BP is the behaviour of statives with *be ing*. For one, there are very few cases of BP statives sounding odd in *estar – ndo* constructions. This makes it much more difficult to describe these cases as 'colour', BP stative verbs are used in *estar – ndo* form the whole time (why is BP so colourful?). Also, statives in *estar – ndo* are the only cases where there is no clear continuity vs. discontinuity alternation. For example:

(14) a. Maria está amando João.
        Maria is loving João. [Maria loves João]
      b. Ela está morando no Chile.
        She is living in Chile.
      c. Pedro está entendendo o problema.
        Pedro is understanding the problem. [Pedro understands the problem]

Furthermore, these phrases cannot be interpreted as in (15).

(15) a. *Às vezes, a Maria está amando o João.
        sometimes, Maria is loving João.
      b. *De vez em quando, ele está morando no Chile.
        once in a while, he is living in Chile.
      c. *Vez ou outra, Pedro está entendendo o problema.
        once in a while, Pedro is understanding the problem

These problems make it very difficult to sustain the claim that *estar – ndo* behaviour is evidence for verbal class distinction (or to accept Vendler classes or the imperfective paradox, as it stands, for that instance). Before any distinction can be hypothesised there must be a solution to the alternation problem. This involves understanding of how it works and why it is blocked for statives, despite their occurrence in *estar - ndo*. The correct way to do this seems to be by looking at how the interpretation of *estar – ndo* changes as its arguments are changed.

Dowty (1979, p. 178) did this to bar *be ing* phrases with stative verbs. He suggested that *lie* in *New Orleans is lying at the mouth of the Mississipi* is an Individual level predicate derived from an stage level *lie* by means of a generic operator. The approach sketched here furthers that strategy.

Before moving on it is important to notice that the claim that state verbs in *estar – ndo* form have undergone a coercion which makes them eventive is pretty weak. More so if the coercion is not motivated. Why does BP rely on it so much? Why is it more frequent in BP than English?

Also important is that by other tests, BP stative verbs behave as they should, i.e., as stative verbs. I will not go through the tests here, but Vlach (1993) has the following list of tests: *statives do not take manner adverbials; do not appear in pseudo-cleft; occur in the present without habitual interpretation; behave uniquely when modified by when clauses.* BP statives are like English ones with respect to these.

Understanding the alternation in Carlson's early theory

For this description I will tentatively assume that *estar – ndo* is insensitive to verbal classes. The description will confirm the adequacy of this.

Carlson (1977) posits two kinds of entities: Individuals and Stages. Individuals subdivide in Kinds and Objects. Stages are defined as the set of things x which bear a relation R (for realises) to the individual. Since Individuals are Objects or Kinds, the relation R may render either Stages of Objects or of Kinds.

Verbs differ with respect to the kind of arguments they can take. Statives are verbs taking Objects and Kinds; eventive verbs are those which take Stage arguments.

Estar – ndo is, as *be ing*, a Stage Level Predicate according to Carlson (1977). It takes either Stage of Kind or Stage of Object. And as will be shown, such a distinction is relevant for understanding the *estar – ndo* reading alternation.

Eliminating the alternation

Consider phrase (16). As shown above it could either be taken as depicted by (1 a) or by (1 b).

(16) O cachorro está latindo.

In BP, definite NPs such as *o cachorro* are Kind denoting (see Müller, 2001); in a context where there is a salient dog it could also refer to that entity (an Object). Since *estar ndo* is a Stage Predicate, it will take *o cachorro* either as a Stage of Kind (SK) or as a Stage of Object (SO). I will show the possible ways of taking phrase (16) in table 1 below.

O cachorro está latindo.

SK		*c	d
SO		c	d

This shows that the continuous (c) vs. discontinuous (d) alternation in the interpretation of *o cachorro está latindo* is possible only when *o cachorro* is a Stage of Object. I.e., where *o cachorro* is Kind only the discontinuous interpretation is available. In such cases the phrase cannot be read as saying that there is a continuous event of barking perpetrated by representatives of caninity, nor by caninity itself. So we have eliminated one instance of the continuous vs. discontinuous alternation by specifying a configuration where only the discontinuous is available.

Verbs select arguments of the appropriate levels. For those with two argumental position this can be loosely described as happening in two steps. Consider (17).

(17) estar atacando o vilarejo.
     be attacking the village.

As was the case with the subject position, there is a reading where the definite singular *o vilarejo* is Stage of Kind and one where it is Stage of Object. Since the alternation is a general trait of *estar – ndo* phrases it is pretty safe to

assume that it is active already at this level, though judgements are rather subtle. The elimination of the ambiguities can start once we fill in the remaining argumental space.

(18) O urso está atacando o vilarejo.
the bear is attacking the village

SK	SK	*c	d
SO	SK	*c	d
SK	SO	*c	d
SO	SO	c	d

Table 2 shows the possible interpretations of each argument. It also shows that the continuous reading of *o urso está atacando o vilarejo* is only available when both arguments are taken as Stages of Objects. Intuitively, this phrase describes NONE of the following processes: (a) the continuous attack upon villagedom (the village kind) perpetrated by beardom (the bear kind); (b) the continuous attack perpetrated by a certain bear upon villagedom; (c) the continuous interval throughout which village stages were attacked by beardom, or the bear kind.

If we take (a) – (c) of the preceding paragraph but talk about discontinuous attacks we get perfectly acceptable readings.

In one word, **on any reading where *estar – ndo* mediates a Stage of Kind vs. Stage of Object relation, intuition has it that there was discontinuity in the process.** So the only case where the alternation persists now are the cases where both arguments are Stages of Objects.

We can eliminate this remaining ambiguity straightforwardly if we take discontinuity of *estar – ndo* as a basic semantic notion and continuity as a pragmatic, discourse related specialisation of this.

The analysis above showed that the continuous reading is not available when arguments denoting such abstract entities as caninity, 'villagedom' and 'beardom' are involved. The only place where the continuous reading is available is in phrases such as *o urso*$_{\text{stage of obj.}}$ *está atacando o vilarejo*$_{\text{stage of obj.}}$. This suggests that continuity (or progressiveness, the nature of which we are after) is an object level phenomenon.

I propose taking this hint from empirical phenomena as enough to formulate a tentative condition for the continuous reading to arise. This condition would go somewhat like: the continuous reading necessarily involves

presentiality of the argument denotations. This means that it is an object level phenomenon.[1]

Once this condition is satisfied we have the two readings available for a phrase like *o urso*$_{\text{stage of obj.}}$ *está atacando o vilarejo*$_{\text{stage of obj}}$. This remaining case of ambiguity can be solved by taking the continuous reading as a restriction imposed by Grice's Maxim of Quantity to the discontinuous reading. This is how this restriction roughly takes place. The phrase *o urso*$_{\text{stage of obj.}}$ *está atacando o vilarejo*$_{\text{stage of obj}}$ has a generalisation reading, which says that a certain interval contained a certain number (maybe only one) of subintervals where the relevant eventuality occurred. That is, the phrase starts out with the reading depicted in (1 a).

(1) a.

This phrase is compatible with the continuous reading since both arguments are objects. But by the condition mentioned just above, this is not enough. Some kind of evidence will have to say that the arguments are present. This may be done linguistically or not. Thus *o urso*$_{\text{stage of obj.}}$ *está atacando o vilarejo*$_{\text{stage of obj.}}$ will be interpreted continuously when the interlocutor has some sort of 'direct' evidence of the attack (presence of the drooling bear, frightened screams all over the village, the locutor's stutter, bear breath...) or when the phrase is in the closure of a discourse stretch where the existence of a particular bear at that particular moment has been asserted.

It is at this point that Grice's Maxim of Quantity comes in. As is well known, the maxim tells us not to give more than the necessary amount of information for the current conversation. So, in cases where the Presentiality Condition is met, the interlocutor will not conclude that the stages of that same bear attacked that particular village in other occasions as well. I.e., he will NOT take the phrase as discontinuous. Or at least, he will not be warranted to such an inference. It being the case that there is a bear present and the scene takes place in a village, if the locutor had a series of discontinuous attacks in mind, he would explicitly say that the attacks he is talking about are discontinuous.[2] So the Maxim of Quantity takes the interval with subintervals (1 a) and yields a single interval, including the utterance time, in which the eventuality is continuously happening, such as (1 b).

1   This agrees with Carlson (1977), but I am not making a claim about the level of the predicate here as the idea is treating continuous as a discourse phenomenon.

2   Dowty (1979, chap. 3) makes a similar move but with a more restricted aim: elimination of phrases like *New Orleans is lying at the delta of the Mississipi*, which have stative verbs.

(1) b. ────────────────████████████──────────▶

Notice that this solution works for the cases of BP bare singulars and indefinites. (As for BP bare singulars behave pretty much like English bare plurals, but they don't have existential readings (at least in subject position)). Accordingly, phrases in (19) have no continuous reading, only the discontinuous (habitual) ones.

(19) a. Urso está atacando o vilarejo.
b. O urso está atacando vilarejo.
c. Urso está atacando vilarejo.
d. Um urso está atacando o vilarejo.
e. O urso está atacando um vilarejo.

The way ahead

In this section I will list some issues that the approach sketched above could deal successfully with but which could not be worked into this paper due to space limitations.

A theory for *estar ndo* has to deal with the alternation. In the progressive story this is done by maintaining PROG compatible with habituality. The analysis sketched above suggests a different solution. As just seen, the configuration for the discontinuous (habitual) reading is easier to be obtained than the configuration for the continuous. If, as argued above, the preference for the continuous reading is not a semantic matter, then we are well recommended to take discontinuity (habituality) as basic. We would have even stronger motivation for that if we can eliminate the remaining case of alternation and give an elegant explanation for the facts that the progressive story 'explains' on a one to one basis.

A second topic concerns the relation of this approach and the progressive story. The discontinuity hypothesis sketched here is compatible with the semantics that deals with the imperfective paradox. The only change would be one of level of the phenomenon, since progressiveness would now be regarded as pragmatic/discourse related. The claim is not that the imperfective

paradox is not a relevant linguistic problem and that it disappears under this analysis. Rather, the claim is that the paradox arises from discourse not from sentences by themselves.

The approach also offers a possible explanation for those cases of English where contexts 'forces' phrases into a discontinuous reading, despite strong intuitions that that same phrase is continuous when isolated. For example, A: *why has John been coughing so much?* B: *Cause he is smoking (again).*

Also, as an alternative to keeping the semantics of progressiveness compatible with habituality it doesn't seem to result in any loss of descriptive power for English, while it results in a clear gain for BP. The same seems to be the case with Rumanian where there is no distinction between habituality and progressiveness (Sorin Ghergut, p.c.).

RESUMO

Neste artigo, defendo que as perífrases formadas por *estar – ndo* do PB são semanticamente habituais (generalizações sobre situações) e também que o valor progressivo que lhe foi atribuído é de natureza pragmática. À primeira vista, isso parece ser o contrário do que dizem as abordagens que seguiram Dowty (1979). Nessas abordagens, o valor progressivo é um fenômeno semântico do qual o habitual é um subproduto pragmático. No entanto, mostro que pode haver harmonia entre essas duas posições, mas que a hipótese da habitualidade como valor semântico lida tanto com os fenômenos do *be – ing* do inglês, que motivaram Dowty (1979), quanto problemas de *estar – ndo* que a referida linha de análise não consegue capturar.

Palavras-chave: progressivo, habitualidade, denotação dos nomes comuns.

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I defend the hypothesis that periphrases formed by an auxiliar copula followed by a main 'content' verb in gerund form such as ESTAR – NDO of Brazilian Portuguese (BP) are habituals (i.e., generalizations over situations) and that the progressive value it takes is a pragmatic specialization of habituality. At first sight this seems to be the opposite of what frameworks stemming from Dowty (1979), which are based on progressiveness, posit for the semantics of BE – ING and ESTAR – NDO. In such frameworks, habituality is a by-product of phrasal progressiveness and certain conditions imposed by discourse structure. I suggest that there can be harmony between

the two views, but that the habituality hypothesis defended here is suited to deal with BE – ING of English as well as with problems of ESTAR - NDO for which the progressive based semantics offer no satisfactory results.

Key-words: progressive, habituality, common noun denotation.

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