

THE PROGRESSIVE FORM AND THE NON-PROGRESSIVE FORM IN ENGLISH: THE THEORY OF 'SUSCEPTIBILITY TO CHANGE'¹

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ABSTRACT

In this article the writer examines the difference between the progressive form and the simple (non-progressive) form in English by applying the theory of 'susceptibility to change'. It is argued that the use of the progressive form implies a situation that is in some way susceptible to change, while the use of the non-progressive form implies that there is no idea of susceptibility to change. The writer analyses 23 different cases covering a wide range of situations and tenses in order to verify how this theory works in practice. Aspectual features, notably imperfectivity/perfectivity, but also features relating to Aktionsart, i.e. punctuality/durativity, stativity/non-stativity, telicity/atelicity, are also considered in the light of the works of leading theorists in tense and aspect, such as Hirtle, Comrie, Bertinetto and, in particular, Declerck.

KEY WORDS

Progressive, non-progressive, susceptibility to change, (im)perfectivity, (non)durativity, (non)stativity, (a)telicity.

RESUMEN

En este artículo el autor analiza la diferencia entre la forma progresiva y la forma simple (no progresiva) en inglés aplicando la teoría de 'susceptibilidad al cambio'. De acuerdo con ella, el uso de la forma progresiva implica

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una situación que de alguna forma es susceptible de cambiar, mientras que el uso de la forma no progresiva implica una situación que no es susceptible de cambiar. El autor analiza 23 casos distintos que cubren una amplia gama de situaciones y tiempos verbales, para comprobar si esta teoría funciona en la práctica. Junto a características aspectuales, en concreto la imperfectividad/perfectividad, también se consideran aspectos relacionados con Aktionsart, como puntualidad/duratividad, estatividad/no-estatividad y telicidad/atelicidad siguiendo los trabajos de eminentes teóricos como Hirtle, Comrie, Bertinetto y, especialmente, Declerck.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Progresivo, no progresivo, susceptibilidad al cambio, (im)perfectividad, (no) duratividad, (no) estaticidad, (a)telicidad.

RÉSUMÉ

Dans cet article l'auteur analyse la différence entre la forme progressive et la forme simple en anglais à travers l'application de la théorie de la 'susceptibilité de changement'. Selon cette théorie l'utilisation de la forme progressive implique une situation susceptible de changement tandis que l'utilisation de la forme simple implique une situation non susceptible de changement. L'auteur analyse 23 cas différents qui couvrent une large gamme de situations et de temps pour vérifier le fonctionnement pratique de cette théorie. Il prend en considération des questions concernant l'aspect comme l'imperfectivité/perfectivité, mais aussi concernant l'Aktionsart comme la ponctualité/durativité, la stativité/non-stativité, la télécité/non-télécité, d'après les œuvres des théoriciens les plus éminents dans l'étude du temps et de l'aspect, comme Hirtle, Comrie, Bertinetto et, surtout, Declerck.

MOTS-CLÉ

Progressif, simple, susceptibilité de changement, (im)perfectivité, (non)durativité, (non)stativité, (non)télécité.

A considerable amount of research work has been carried out over the years analysing the criterion –or criteria– for choosing between the simple form (called here the non-progressive form) and the continuous form (sometimes known as the expanded form, but called here the progressive form) in English.

One reason for this interest in the two forms is that “the English Progressive has, in comparison with progressive forms in many other languages, an unusually wide range” (Comrie, 1976, p. 33). As Comrie goes on to point out, in languages such as Spanish or Italian “it is normally possible to replace the Progressive by other forms, without imply-

ing nonprogressive meaning" (1976, p. 33), e.g. the equivalent of 'John is singing' in Italian is 'Gianni canta'/'Gianni sta cantando'.

Two important monographic studies on the progressive and non-progressive forms in English are those of Hirtle (1967) and Ljung (1980). The former provides a detailed and idiosyncratically original monographic study of the two forms, adhering strictly to the dichotomy perfectivity/imperfectivity as a means of distinguishing between the non-progressive and the progressive, while the latter –concerned primarily with the progressive form– provides an excellent overview in its opening chapter (1980, pp. 7-30) of previous studies on the subject up to 1980, even if some of his theories in subsequent chapters would seem to be wide of the mark. Interestingly, it is rare among those linguists who have attempted to distinguish between the two forms to find two analyses that are the same, though certain key features tend to recur.

One question that is sometimes raised by linguists –and which was the driving force behind my own research in this field– is whether it is possible to identify a single criterion that is capable of accounting for the choice of either one or the other forms in English, or whether we need to resort to a number of different criteria.

Rather than examine the various theories that have been put forward over the years, I shall come straight to the point and put one particular criterion to the test. In the ensuing development of my hypothesis, we shall inevitably be calling into play some of the other ideas that have been aired in the past, and we shall see how far they fit into this particular framework.

The hypothesis I wish to put forward here concerning the underlying difference between the two forms is as follows: the use of the progressive form implies that the situation referred to in the verb may be susceptible to change in some way, while the use of the non-progressive form suggests that the situation referred to in the verb is not susceptible to change. Using the non-progressive form does not automatically entail that the general situation being described necessarily has a perceptibly more 'permanent' quality to it, although this is almost always the case. It may simply mean that the idea of the susceptibility to change is not uppermost in our minds at the moment when we decide to use the verb in its non-progressive form.

In order to clarify this point, let us examine the sentences 'I work nightshifts now, but I can't do that for long'/'I'm working nightshifts now, but I can't do that for long'. Quite clearly, regardless of whether the non-progressive form or the progressive form is used, the situation

of working nightshifts is perceived as being an essentially temporary one. But while the use of the progressive form ('I'm working nightshifts now') implies reference to an activity that is in progress –and is therefore, on the basis of our theory, inherently 'susceptible to change'– the use of the non-progressive form ('I work nightshifts now') implies reference to a general state that holds at the present, no matter how uncertain the future may appear to be. In other words, when using the non-progressive form, the speaker may not necessarily be implying that the overall situation is anything other than provisional, but in deciding to use the non-progressive form he or she has made the choice of deciding to view the situation of working nightshifts as a state that holds at present rather than as an ongoing activity. We shall return to this question later (see section 14).

On the basis of this theory of susceptibility to change, then, what essentially conditions our choice between the two forms is our view of 'the way things (might) end up', even more than how long they last or how temporary or permanent they may be.

This idea of susceptibility to change has certain similarities with the one expounded by Hirtle: "The opposition between simple and progressive is therefore basically one between whole and part. An event whose material significate strikes the mind as being complete, as permitting of no further additions, will be expressed by the simple form. One which gives the impression of lacking something, of leaving room for something to come, will be expressed by the progressive" (1967, pp. 26-27).

Let us now turn to some concrete examples to illustrate our point. For example, if we say

(1a) 'Inzaghi passes the ball to Totti'

(2a) 'I chop the onion and put it into the saucepan'

(3a) 'The Queen walks slowly up to the altar'

(4a) 'Vladimir slowly crosses the stage and sits down beside Estragon'²

(5a) 'Blair and family smile for the photographers'

(6a) 'So I look through the newspaper and I see there's a photo of an old schoolfriend'

(7a) 'Mr Dombey goes upon a journey'³

² Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (1956), Faber & Faber, London, 1965, p. 53.

³ Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son* (1848), Mandarin Paperbacks, London, 1991, p. 293.

- (8a) 'Pressure grows on EU to tighten BSE controls'
- (9a) 'Wash the dishes'
- (10a) 'Let's go'
- (11a) 'The Earth revolves around the sun'
- (12a) 'The sun sets in the west'
- (13a) 'He always watches television'
- (14a) 'We live in London at the moment'
- (15a) 'You're silly'
- (16a) 'I understand more about physics every single day'
- (17a) 'My back aches'
- (18a) 'I promise to pay you back'
- (19a) 'I've finished the article'
- (20a) 'She wrote to him'
- (21a) 'The bride wore a white dress'
- (22a) 'I arrive in Tokyo at six o'clock tomorrow'
- (23a) 'Will you use the car this evening?'

in each case it is not the susceptibility to change of the situation as expressed by the verb that is of primary interest to the speaker or writer. In all cases the situation is viewed a) as either being essentially complete in itself, and thus as not allowing for the possibility of change, or b) as continuing indefinitely into the future without there being any hint of change.

Vice versa, if we say

- (1b) 'Inzaghi's passing the ball to Totti'
- (2b) 'I'm chopping the onion and putting it into the saucepan'
- (3b) 'The Queen's walking slowly up to the altar'
- (4b) *'Vladimir is slowly crossing the stage and is sitting down beside Estragon'
- (5b) 'Blair and family are smiling for the photographers'
- (6b) 'So I'm looking through the newspaper and I'm seeing there's a photo of an old schoolfriend'
- (7b) 'Mr Dombey is going upon a journey'
- (8b) 'Pressure is growing on EU to tighten BSE controls'
- (9b) 'Be washing the dishes'
- (10b) 'Let's be going'
- (11b) 'The Earth is revolving around the sun'
- (12b) 'The sun is setting in the west'
- (13b) 'He's always watching television'
- (14b) 'We're living in London at the moment'

- (15b) 'You're being silly'
 (16b) 'I'm understanding more about physics every single day'
 (17b) 'My back's aching'
 (18b) 'I'm promising to pay you back'
 (19b) 'I've been finishing the article'
 (20b) 'She was writing to him'
 (21b) 'The bride was wearing a white dress'
 (22b) 'I'm arriving in Tokyo at six o'clock tomorrow'
 (23b) 'Will you be using the car this evening?'

in each instance we are concerned (albeit unconsciously in some cases) with the fact that the situations as expressed by the verbs are –or were, or have been, or will be– liable to some sort of change. Either their outcome is viewed as in some way uncertain –some form of interruption or termination of the situation is always there as a possibility, and this feature generally conveys an air of incompleteness or impermanence about the situation in question– or else we are dealing with a *process* which, by its very nature, is continually changing, unlike a state, and which has a beginning, a middle and an end, even if that end may sometimes be unforeseeable. Even when one says, for example, 'Man has been evolving for millions of years', or 'The universe is forever expanding', in the former case the process is perceived as an incomplete, ongoing situation which may come to an end sooner or later, while in both cases, because we are dealing with processes, the idea of continuous change (of man's evolution or of the expansion of the universe) is an inherent part of their meaning, even when that process is perceived as lasting forever (Ljung, 1980, pp. 28-9).

My theory differs from Hirtle's in particular over the contrast between perfectivity and imperfectivity. By perfectivity we refer to a state, process or activity that is viewed in its entirety, as something complete but not necessarily completed (Comrie, 1976, p. 18), to which –as it stands– nothing more can be added, while imperfectivity has to do with a process or activity that is seen as something (either actually or potentially) incomplete or ongoing, and which may or may not be interrupted or terminated at some point. Hirtle claims that "the simple form is *perfective*, the progressive *imperfective*" (1967, p. 27), but this would seem to be an oversimplification of what is in reality a rather more complex state of affairs. In the theory I am expounding here, I argue that while the progressive form is imperfective (as Hirtle and

most other linguists affirm), the non-progressive form may be perfective in certain cases and imperfective in others.

In my theory, then, we concentrate in particular on the (actual or potential) outcome of a situation, and, as a consequence, we do not have to try to force certain uses of the non-progressive such as 'eternal truths' etc. into the perfective mould by stating that sentences such as 'The sun sets in the west', or 'Paris lies on the Seine' represent 'complete' situations (in the former case an endlessly iterative event, in the latter a permanent state). I consider permanent situations of this type in the non-progressive present to be imperfective: they are unbounded, but precisely because of their quality of permanence and unchangeability, we use the non-progressive form. Such situations continue indefinitely into the future without there being any idea (in the mind of the speaker or writer) of some future change in the situation.

I shall now go on to examine each of the sentence pairs listed above in order to illustrate my theory of susceptibility to change in greater detail and put it to the test over a wide range of situations and contexts.

1) **'Inzaghi passes the ball to Totti'/'Inzaghi's passing the ball to Totti'.**

The use of the non-progressive forms for sports commentaries –especially radio commentaries– is well-documented in the literature (e.g., Diver, 1963, p. 174; Hirtle, 1967, pp. 36-41; Leech, 1971, p. 15; Braroe, 1974, pp. 14-15; Barense, 1980, p. 29; Ljung, 1980, pp. 9, 13, 16, 26; Comrie, 1985, p. 37; Bertinetto, 1986, p. 326; 1997, pp. 65, 195; Fenn, 1987, p. 30; Declerck, 1991b, p. 176). In the sentence 'Inzaghi passes the ball to Totti', we have a description of the event the moment it takes place. Moreover, the event is seen in its entirety insofar as it begins and ends almost simultaneously with the moment of speech; the commentator already knows how the action finishes before describing it, or can foresee how it will end from repeated experience. Although the action (i.e. the passing of the ball from one player to another) is perceived by listeners as if it were happening at exactly the same time as it is being described, in actual fact there is, of course, often a gap (even if only of a fraction of a second) between the moment in which the action takes place and the moment of utterance.

The fast-moving actions relating to the way the game unfolds are usually conveyed in the non-progressive form, but when the commentator wishes to refer to background situations or to some unexpected event occurring, then the progressive form is often used, e.g. 'It's rain-

ing so hard and making the pitch so slippery that some of the players are having problems just standing up', or 'One of the fans is running across the pitch, and four policemen are chasing after him'. The use of the non-progressive form here (as in 'One of the fans runs across the pitch, and four policemen chase after him') would be inappropriate because the situation is of an unpredictable nature; in other words it does not come within the accepted rules governing the overall event of what constitutes a football match, while it would be perfectly acceptable to use the non-progressive form with the same verbs ('run' and 'chase') in contexts such as 'Inzaghi runs with the ball down the left wing, lobs it deep into the penalty area, and the goalkeeper chases after it'.

The progressive form is frequently used, then, with non-stative verbs in situations where the commentator is referring to the sports event in more general terms, for example when making a value judgement concerning a team's or an individual's performance rather than describing the action taking place on the pitch. A sentence such as 'United's defence is really struggling against Real Madrid this evening' refers to a situation currently in progress, while a sentence such as 'Inzaghi's passing the ball to Totti a lot more in this game than he has in the last few matches' refers to an iterative event that is still in progress; Inzaghi has so far passed the ball to Totti on several occasions during the present match (Hirtle, 1967, p. 38). In all the above cases where the progressive form is used, there is an idea of incompleteness about the situations, i.e. of the situations still being in progress, thus automatically ruling out the possibility of using the non-progressive form in such contexts.

2) 'I chop the onion and put it into the saucepan'/'I'm chopping the onion and putting it into the saucepan'.

With cookery demonstrations or other kinds of demonstrations or, for example, with a magician's patter when describing the various phases of a trick (e.g. 'I place a card under the cup like this'), there are certain fundamental analogies with the situation of the sports commentator reporting on an event that is in progress: in all these cases the speaker has to convey to an audience a description of a series of events (generally of very brief duration) each of which begins and ends at roughly the same time as it is being described. There is, however, one major difference: unlike the sports commentary, it is usually (though not necessarily) the speaker who is performing the action being

described and who knows what the sequence and outcome of his/her actions will be. Even if the actual event described terminates either just prior to or just after the moment of utterance, this in no way affects the decision to use the non-progressive form. The speaker is already fully aware of how the event will end (or how it has just ended) before it is described insofar as it has been planned in advance. The idea in the speaker's mind is that of an action the end of which is already foreseen or has already occurred, and this necessitates the use of the non-progressive form. Hence the use of the non-progressive present in the description of the various phases involved in a pre-established routine such as the preparation of a dish or of a magician's trick (Hirtle, 1967, p. 39).

However, also in cookery demonstrations, and in similar contexts in which something is being demonstrated or illustrated, if the speaker is not describing the various phases that make up the actual recipe, the progressive form may be used, for example when giving an explanation for a certain action: 'As you can see, I'm chopping the onion and putting it into the saucepan while we're waiting for the water in the other pan to boil'. In this case the speaker's perspective is different with respect to when the non-progressive form is used insofar as the action in the latter sentence does not actually form part of the planned sequence of instructions. The speaker is in practice providing added information with respect to the actual instructions, perhaps to fill in a gap while waiting to announce the next stage in the recipe.

3) 'The Queen walks slowly up to the altar'/'The Queen's walking slowly up to the altar'.

With televised (or radio) commentaries of ceremonies such as coronations, royal weddings, state funerals etc., we have a ritualised event where every part of the sequence has been learnt to perfection, both by the participants and, presumably, by the commentator, thus leaving nothing open to chance or to change. When the speaker utters the sentence 'The Queen walks slowly up to the altar', even if the Queen has not yet reached the altar when the words are uttered, there can be no doubt that she can only be heading towards the altar, and that her immediate aim is to reach the altar. Once again, the action is part of a pre-established sequence whose outcome is already known. It has been observed that the use of the simple form in ceremonial situations where the commentator foresees the end of the action described before it has occurred "adds a certain impression of dignity to the description

because it suggests that the action is not contingent on the decisions and accidents of the moment but is the outcome of ritual and tradition" (Hirtle, 1967, p. 39).

The use of the progressive –'The Queen's walking slowly up to the altar'– is possible if the commentator merely wishes to describe an event in progress, or if he or she is not certain as to what the Queen will do next. The use of the progressive form here tends to suggest that the action may not come within the planned sequence of ritual events; its outcome is therefore 'open-ended'.

It is worth noting as a more general point that the non-progressive present also serves as means of establishing the temporal sequence of an event that is composed of a number of phases, while the progressive form cannot generally be used in order to establish such a temporal sequence. For example, we can say 'The Queen walks slowly up to the altar and kneels', but the progressive equivalent *'The Queen is walking slowly up to the altar and kneeling' is impossible here because it implies that the two actions are taking place contemporaneously. For the same reason the progressive form of the stage direction given immediately below in section 4 yields an equally nonsensical meaning.

4) 'Vladimir slowly crosses the stage and sits down beside Estragon'/*'Vladimir is slowly crossing the stage and is sitting down beside Estragon'.

Also in the case of directions for stage productions or film (or television) scripts –e.g. 'The butler and the young man drop to the ground and set about picking up the glasses. Susan regards them for a moment, then steps round them and hurries up the stairs'⁴– the non-progressive form of the present tense is predominantly used in preference to the progressive, irrespective of whether the situation is punctual or durative⁵. Of course, the non-progressive form is used when describing a punctual situation, as in 'He jerks the rope'⁶, or with a sequence of punctual situations, as in 'Vladimir halts, the Boy halts'⁷, and also when there is an iteration of punctual acts, as in 'Vladimir hops from one foot to the other'⁸. However, it is also very common to find durative

⁴ Ian McEwan, *The Ploughman's Lunch*, Methuen, London, 1985, p. 3.

⁵ According to Comrie (1976, p. 42), punctual situations, unlike durative situations, "do not have any duration, not even duration of a very short period".

⁶ Samuel Beckett, *ibidem*, p. 89.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 92.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 76.

(i.e. non-punctual) situations being described in the non-progressive form with stage directions, as with the verb 'cross' in 'Vladimir slowly crosses the stage and sits down beside Estragon', where the inclusion of the adverb 'slowly' underlines the durative nature of the situation (we have a similarly durative situation in section 3 in 'The Queen walks slowly up to the altar').

Unlike the examples given in the first three sections, stage and screenplay directions do not refer to the deictic present. The conventional use of the present tense in such contexts entails that such directions always have 'current validity'.

It is also possible to find the progressive form in stage directions or film or TV scripts, e.g. in situations that do not 'push the action forward' but which describe a situation already in progress, as in the opening scene of the play *Waiting for Godot*, 'Estragon, sitting on a low mound, is trying to take off his boot'⁹ or in a film script: 'The big room is now in darkness except for a light by James's armchair. He is talking on the phone to his friend Jeremy Hancock'¹⁰.

5) **'Blair and family smile for the photographers'/'Blair and family are smiling for the photographers'.**

With captions, e.g. for photographs in newspapers or magazines, as in 'Young Libyans pulse to Arab pop music during a Tripoli wedding event reserved for women'¹¹, or for paintings in art galleries or art books, as in Chagall's 'The Soldier Drinks', the moment is 'frozen' in time (Ljung, 1980, p. 24), even when we are dealing with a durative situation; we see that moment in its completeness, there is nothing 'ongoing' about the photo or painting –that will now remain 'forever'– even if the action we see in the photo or painting is of an ongoing nature. As with the other four cases analysed so far, the situation described comes within a rule-based, 'conventionalised' context (in this case, that of the conventional rules pertaining to captions), thus necessitating the use of the non-progressive form.

However, when referring to photographs or paintings in contexts that do not have to adhere to the rules specifically pertaining to captions, e.g. in conversation, one is much more likely to find the progressive form being used, as in 'In this photograph John is winking at

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 9.

¹⁰ Ian McEwan, *ibidem*, p. 2.

¹¹ *National Geographic*, November 2000, pp. 6-7.

the camera', where the action, "which is usually treated as nondurative, has been 'frozen' here in its middle" (Declerck, 1991b, p. 162).

- 6) 'So I look through the newspaper and I see there's a photo of an old schoolfriend' /?'So I'm looking through the newspaper and I'm seeing there's a photo of an old schoolfriend'.

With the historical present, as in 'So I tap him on the shoulder, and he turns round and hits me', the non-progressive form is frequently used. In reporting something that (the speaker claims or pretends) has happened in the past but which is described as if it belonged to the present –a device often used in story-telling or joke-telling in order to give a greater sense of 'liveliness' to the event or story¹²– in a sense we are using the rules of direct speech/reported speech in reverse where a non-progressive present in direct speech ('John said "I like jazz"') is transformed into a past simple in reported speech ('John said he liked jazz').

If we were to describe a situation in the historical present as a past event, we would normally use the simple past –'So I looked through the newspaper and I saw there was a photo of an old schoolfriend', or 'So I tapped him on the shoulder, and he turned round and hit me'– when referring to actions that push the story forward. It is therefore natural that, when using the device of the historical present to describe a past event, the verbs that would normally have been in the non-progressive form of the past will automatically be transposed into the non-progressive form of the present.

There may, of course, be situations in the historical present in which the progressive form can be used, as in 'So I'm sitting in the corner minding my own business when he turns round and hits me'. Indeed, as Declerck has pointed out¹³, the progressive can represent a foreground situation in historic speech, as can be seen in the use of 'we are climbing' in the following example: 'So we get up at six and leave the camp at 6.30. Soon after we are climbing the northern slope of the mountain. The vegetation is gradually diminishing and we are completely above the tree-level when we reach the next camp at 5 p.m.'

¹² Leech refers to the use of the present in narratives as a "device of dramatic heightening" (1971, p. 12).

¹³ Personal communication.

7) 'Mr Dombey goes upon a journey'/'Mr Dombey's going upon a journey'.

The non-progressive form of the present tense is often used in résumés of chapter headings of novels etc., e.g. 'Chapter XIV: In which Martin bids Adieu to the Lady of his Love; and Honours an obscure Individual whose fortune he intends to make, by commending her to his Protection'¹⁴, or in plots in soap operas etc., e.g. 'When Brenda discovers lipstick on Harry's shirt, she takes revenge and invites George, an old flame, for drinks'.

It is worth noting that the non-progressive present may be used not just in chapter headings but sometimes in the titles of novels themselves, as in Christopher Isherwood's *Mr Norris Changes Trains* or Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, and especially in children's literature, as in Enid Blyton's *Mr Pink-whistle Interferes* or *Five Go Off to Camp*. Once again, we see the simple form being used partly because the totality of the event is present in the mind of the writer, thus excluding any possibility of prospective development (Hirtle, 1967, p. 40), but also because we are dealing, once again, with rule-based settings where the specific convention requires the use of the non-progressive present.

8) 'Pressure grows on EU to tighten BSE controls'/'Pressure is growing on EU to tighten BSE controls'.

With television news headlines or headlines from newspapers or magazines (especially those dealing with current affairs), e.g. 'Foot-and-mouth: Farmers Speak Out'¹⁵ or 'Fujimori steps down'¹⁶, besides saving precious space insofar as the non-progressive form is shorter than the progressive form, the use of the non-progressive form of the present is one of the conventions employed (together with other space-saving devices such as the general omission of articles and a widespread use of past participles) in conveying résumés of the 'facts' that are usually (e.g. in the case of a newspaper) described below in greater detail¹⁷. In such cases the story or situation described may refer to the recent past ('Ferryboat sinks near Singapore'), the present ('Rail strike contin-

¹⁴ Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1852), Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1995, p. 202.

¹⁵ *Time*, 9 April 2001, p. 1.

¹⁶ *The Economist*, 23 September 2000, p. 35.

¹⁷ There may, of course, be situations, e.g. on certain Online news or television news programmes, where only the bare headlines are provided (and may be repeated every few minutes) with no story following.

ues despite talks’) or the future (‘PM flies to Tokyo tomorrow’). In contexts such as television news broadcasts and news articles in daily newspapers where one of the central aims is to keep people up to date as regards the latest events, the use of the present tense in presenting news headlines is therefore particularly apposite.

As with all the other cases outlined so far, the non-progressive form can be used both with reference to punctual situations, as in ‘Lightning strikes village church’, as well as to durative situations, as in ‘Pressure grows on EU to tighten BSE controls’ where the verb ‘grow’ refers to a process that necessarily lasts for a certain amount of time.

We often tend to find the non-progressive form of the present being used not only in headings but also in subheadings, as in ‘Man dies in parachute accident: A man plummets to his death when a parachute jump goes wrong and his chute fails to open –plus other news in brief’¹⁸, or in the ‘Features’ page of a magazine, as in ‘Libya: After three decades of international isolation, the nation works to shed its outlaw image’¹⁹.

It is occasionally possible, however, to find the use of the present progressive with news headlines, as in ‘Rail speed limits “are working”’²⁰. In this particular case the claim refers to the speed restrictions introduced in Britain on railway lines in November 2000 following a series of rail accidents. Such restrictions were presumably perceived as being of a purely temporary nature while the necessary safety measures were being implemented. Hence the choice of the progressive form: the situation is seen as being both a very recent and a provisional one that is highly ‘susceptible to change’. Had the speed restrictions been in operation for a long time, or had they been viewed as constituting a permanent feature of rail travel from the moment of their introduction, it is more likely that the non-progressive form (‘Rail speed limits “work”’) would have been used.

9) ‘Wash the dishes’/?‘Be washing the dishes’.

It is essentially the same kind of logic as we have seen in all of the above examples that determines our use of the non-progressive form with imperatives. When we use the imperative form –‘Stop that

¹⁸ *BBC News Online*, 25 November 2000.

¹⁹ *National Geographic*, *ibidem*, p. iv.

²⁰ *BBC News Online*, *ibidem*. The subheading here is ‘The Deputy Chief Inspector of Railways rejects claims that the current speed restrictions are making the network more dangerous’.

noise', 'Believe me', 'Don't say a word' etc.— we are thinking about an action which must be performed in its entirety in order to be carried out correctly.

Generally speaking, the imperative is not used with the progressive form, though there may be limited contexts where its use is possible, for example 'Go on. Be washing the dishes when your Mum gets back. She'll be really amazed'. In such cases the speaker urges the hearer to perform a certain action but uses the progressive form because the action must already be in progress (the washing of the dishes) at the time when some other event takes place (the mother's return) (Charleston, 1955, p. 276). The speaker is not interested here in whether the hearer actually completes the washing of the dishes or not.

10) 'Let's go'/'Let's be going'.

While the progressive form is relatively unusual with second person imperatives, and would seem to be mainly restricted to cases such as that outlined above where the hearer or reader is urged to perform an action while some other situation is taking place, it can be found with somewhat greater frequency with imperatives in the first person plural.

First of all, we shall examine the sentence 'Let's be thinking about that idea for a few minutes while we listen to a song from our special guest' (as spoken, for example, by a TV host during a chat-show to an audience or to television viewers). In this case, it is possible to substitute the first person plural imperative with the second person imperative, i.e. 'Be thinking about that idea for a few minutes while we listen to a song from our special guest'. Here the logic is similar to the point we discussed previously in relation to 'Be washing the dishes when your Mum comes back': the progressive form is used to indicate an action in progress while some other event takes place. The only difference is that, in the example relating to the TV host, the two actions ('thinking' and 'listening') are presumably seen as beginning at the same time and as running parallel, while in the other example, the action of washing dishes will already have begun prior to the mother's return. Similarly, a sentence such as 'Let's be getting on with the exercise' can also be used with the second person imperative, i.e. 'Be getting on with the exercise', especially if we add some kind of subordinate clause with 'while', as in 'Be getting on with the exercise while I go and see the headmaster'.

On the other hand, the situation is rather different when we take into consideration a sentence such as 'Let's be going' if there is no idea of the action taking place contemporaneously with some other situation. In this particular case the use of the progressive form with the second person imperative –?'Be going'– sounds distinctly odd, while 'Let's be going' is perfectly acceptable.

However, there would appear to be severe restrictions as to which verbs can be used in this way: 'go', 'get', 'do' and 'make' would seem to be amongst the few that can readily take the progressive form in such contexts, e.g. 'Let's be getting back home', 'Let's be doing something about that, shall we?' or 'Let's be making a move'.

It is interesting to note that progressive imperatives which refer to an event taking place simultaneously with some other situation may refer to an event that is not restricted to any particular moment in the future. The progressive imperative in 'Go on. Be washing the dishes when your Mum gets back. She'll be really amazed' could refer to the immediate future or to some other time hours, days or even weeks ahead. Similarly, 'Be getting on with the exercise while I go and see the headmaster' could refer to the immediate future or it could be an instruction given to a class concerning the following day's lesson.

On the contrary, it would appear that where there is no idea of an event occurring at the same time as some other situation, progressive imperatives in the first person plural can only refer to a present situation –i.e. a situation that is already 'in progress'– requiring immediate action: 'It's late. Let's be going', or 'Let's be getting on with correcting these papers, otherwise we'll be here all day', etc. This restriction becomes apparent if we imagine a context which involves the following exchange: 'There's a free jazz concert on in town tomorrow'. 'Great. Let's go'. In this case *'Great. Let's be going' would be quite inappropriate, precisely because the imperative refers to a situation that is located in a future time that is detached from the present moment.

11) 'The Earth revolves around the sun'/'The Earth is revolving around the sun'.

All the non-progressive cases provided in the previous ten points are examples of perfectivity, i.e. the action or state described is seen in its entirety and completeness, from beginning to end, even if a present tense is used (and the present might seem –on a superficial reading, at least– to suggest that a situation is in some way still in progress). We shall now go on to examine a few cases in the non-progressive

present in which the situation is in some way 'endless', and hence imperfective (as Declerck, 1991^a, pp. 283-284) has pointed out, there is no such thing as a 'timeless' sentence. Any sentence containing a finite verb must necessarily refer to some moment in time; so-called 'timeless' sentences generally include the present moment).

There are many cases, such as scientific laws, permanent truths, etc., where the non-progressive present is used: 'Ice floats on water', 'Living creatures adapt to their environment'. Here it is of no importance whether the verb used refers to an action ('Light travels faster than sound'), a process ('We all grow older') or a state ('A diamond lasts forever'). In practice, the permanence of the situation reduces all of them to states, and states by their very nature possess an unchanging quality that generally makes them impervious to the progressive form²¹. If we use a progressive form with what is normally regarded as a stative verb, e.g. 'understand' or 'be', we are no longer referring to a state but to a process or activity, e.g. 'I'm understanding more about physics every single day', or 'You're being silly' (see sections 15 and 16). In a sentence such as 'The Earth revolves around the sun', the verb refers to an activity of movement, that of revolving, but because of its endless and unchanging quality it is perceived as a state. The situation is seen as a fact, as something permanently true and not susceptible to change.

However, the progressive form is also possible here, even if no end to the situation is envisaged at all, precisely because the action is in progress, and hence constantly changing. It is in this sense that the situation (i.e. of the Earth's revolving around the sun) is susceptible to change, that is, simply by being permanently in motion, by not being static. The position of the Earth vis-à-vis the sun is constantly changing; both are moving objects in space. Hence we have two ways of viewing the same phenomenon, each of which produces different results in terms of the choice of the progressive or non-progressive form.

12) 'The sun sets in the west'/'The sun's setting in the west'.

Here again we are dealing with a situation which can also be classified as a 'permanent truth' when the non-progressive form is used.

²¹ Bertinetto (1997, p. 77) has observed that there are a few so-called 'postural' verbs –such as 'to hang' or 'to lie'– which, while belonging to the class of statives, are also compatible as statives with the progressive form, e.g. 'The picture's hanging in your bedroom', 'Her clothes were lying all over the floor'.

There is absolutely no idea of any future modification to the situation; it is a permanent fact, unchanging and endless, and hence imperfective. One major difference with respect to the sentence 'The Earth revolves around the sun' is that the sentence 'The sun sets in the west' represents an iterative event; it describes something that the sun does time after time, not a never-ending activity such as the Earth revolving round and round the sun (the latter is not permanently setting –it only sets once a day– while the Earth is permanently revolving around the sun. We are not interested here in how long it takes to complete a revolution). Some linguists have claimed that iterative sentences of this kind in the non-progressive form are perfective by arguing that we may take any instance of an iterative situation (e.g. the setting of the sun) as being a complete event in itself, but in my view the permanence and infiniteness of the situation make the imperfective interpretation more logical. The progressive form here –producing the (somewhat tautological) sentence 'The sun's setting in the west'– will normally refer to the event only as it is happening at the present moment²², precisely because we are dealing with an iterative event, unlike the sentence 'The Earth's revolving around the sun', which indicates a constant activity and hence is true at any given moment in time.

13) 'He always watches television'/'He's always watching television'.

Bearing in mind the observations we have made so far, the distinction between two different ways of viewing habitual present actions, e.g. 'She continually changes her mind'/'She's continually changing her mind', should now be clear. In the former case we are dealing with a permanent feature which is reported in a matter-of-factual way. Here too, even though the verb may express an action or process, its endless iterativity (which thus makes it imperfective) transforms it into a state.

In the latter case we are dealing with what may well be a relatively recent habit, and presumably with one that the speaker hopes will not last; a possible end to the habit is envisaged through the use of the progressive. And hence the emotive element (generally irritation or disapproval) that often accompanies this progressive use of the habitual present. Sometimes the emotion expressed may be a positive one, such as admiration ('She's forever helping old people') or love ('We're always thinking about you and wondering how you're getting on'). But

²² Declerck (1991b, p. 158) speaks of "reference to a single instance in progress".

what is lacking in the progressive form here is precisely the idea of the *permanence* of the habit –which is not to be confused with the *persistence* of a (generally bad) habit– in spite of the use of adverbials such as ‘always’, ‘forever’, ‘continually’, or ‘constantly’.

14) ‘We live in London at the moment’/‘We’re living in London at the moment’.

The difference in meaning between the non-progressive and the progressive forms in situations referring to states or activities that hold over the present period even if they do not necessarily hold at the moment of utterance (e.g. ‘Bill works for a computer company’ or ‘Bill’s working for a computer company’ is still true even if Bill is on holiday or sleeping at the moment of utterance) is sometimes so marginal that it has induced one or two grammarians to claim that they may in some cases be considered as the same thing. In the case of the sentence ‘We live in London at the moment’ (and similar sentences, as we have seen in the introduction), no matter how provisional the speaker’s situation may be, it is not the temporariness of the situation that the speaker wishes to convey when using the non-progressive form, while this aspect of impermanence is inherently implicit in the use of the progressive form. The choice in contexts of this sort, as we have already observed earlier, is one of emphasis between that of perceiving the situation as a state that holds in its entirety in the present or as a situation that is in progress in the current period.

Even if we remove the deictic time reference and assert simply ‘We live in London’, the situation, though temporally unbounded, refers to the present and not to all time, even if there is no restriction concerning the continuity of the situation into the future. Of course, if we subsequently add some form of restriction as in ‘We live in London, but we’re thinking of moving to Scotland’, or if a deictic time adverbial is included in the sentence (‘We live in London at the moment’), the situation becomes temporally bounded, i.e. the state of living in London is viewed in its entirety only in relation to and not beyond the present moment. This is also true even in cases such as ‘We live in London now, and we shall stay here forever’. It is only in the second part of the sentence that the situation may be viewed as endless and hence imperfective; the first part remains temporally bounded (so-called ‘right-handed boundedness’). The progressive form renders the situation imperfective regardless of whether there is any temporal adverbial or not: ‘We’re living in London (at the moment)’.

15) 'You're silly'/'You're being silly'.

An inordinate amount of intellectual energy has been consumed by a number of linguists, such as Ljung, over the difference between the non-progressive form and the progressive form of the verb 'be'. The problem would seem to be a relatively straightforward one: in most of its uses the verb is to be considered statively, e.g. 'That's a pity', 'We're here', 'They're rich', and hence only the non-progressive form can be used. As a stative verb, and as the most commonly used verb in the English language, 'be' covers a wide range of meanings, some of which are valid only in relation to the present moment and do not possess a permanent quality, e.g. 'It's eight o'clock', 'That dress is new', 'Sue's pregnant', 'You're drunk', 'The forks are over there', while others will be seen as possessing a permanent quality, e.g. in gnomic sentences such as 'Time is money' or 'Cows are herbivorous'²³. And, of course, there are also situations which are in essence permanent, e.g. 'Life's wonderful', unless the sentence contains a deictic time adverbial ('Life's wonderful at the moment') or some other restrictive feature ('Life's wonderful, but I can feel it's about to get worse').

But when 'be' means something like 'act or behave in a certain way', i.e. when it is used non-statively, it may take the progressive form because we are dealing with an activity or process that is temporary and cannot be viewed as a permanent feature of a given situation. Indeed, one of the underlying meanings of the progressive form of 'be' is precisely that of acting in a way that is abnormal with respect to the general situation: 'She's being very unreasonable about the divorce', 'That's just being ridiculous'. Because such behaviour is considered as being in some way out of keeping with respect to the norm, it is therefore viewed as being of a temporary nature, and hence liable to come to an end sooner or later. Thus 'be' performs just like thousands of other polysemic verbs, i.e. it possesses several different meanings, some of which may be stative, others non-stative.

16) 'I understand more about physics every single day'/'I'm understanding more about physics every single day'.

As is well-known, there are several stative verbs that only rarely take the progressive form, and several grammarians have provided lists

²³ Bertinetto (1997, p. 87) refers to the former examples (e.g. 'It's eight o'clock') as 'contingent statives' and to the latter examples (e.g. 'Time is money') as 'permanent statives'.

classifying such verbs in terms of their degree of imperviousness to the progressive form. Those which appear to shun the progressive form almost completely are a number of so-called 'relational' verbs such as 'own', 'contain', 'belong', 'seem'. The 'quality' of owning or belonging or containing or seeming is perforce a static situation: either you own a car or you do not, either you belong to an association or you do not; you can always stop owning a car, or stop belonging to an association, but you cannot modify in any way the 'quality' of owning or belonging²⁴. In most cases it is impossible for such verbs to be seen as processes "with internal temporal structure" (Comrie, 1976, p. 24) that can be broken down into a beginning, middle and end. Hirtle (1967, p. 26) makes an almost identical point with regard to sentences containing other fundamentally static situations, e.g. 'The book is red' or 'I know the answer': "the event expressed by the verb may last for a long time, but it will not change as long as it exists"²⁵. On the rare occasions when 'understand' is used progressively, it behaves as a non-stative verb describing a developing process (Comrie, 1976, pp. 36-37).

17) 'My back aches'/'My back's aching'.

There is an almost imperceptible difference between the non-progressive and the progressive form when dealing with a particular group of verbs (used in most cases intransitively) which refer to bodily and sometimes psychological states or sensations (Leech, 1971, p. 22; Ljung, 1980, p. 14) such as 'feel', 'hurt', 'itch', 'rub', 'sting', 'tingle' etc.; indeed, here too, as in section 14, some grammarians consider the two forms as being identical. The difference would seem to be minimal in situations in which the physical or psychological state or sensation has already begun some time (pragmatically speaking, at least a few seconds) before the moment of utterance. Insofar as there is a difference, it would appear to lie in the fact that, with the non-progressive form, we are primarily concerned with conveying a state of being and, precise-

²⁴ Declerck (1991b, p. 57) observes that "states involve no change and hence cannot be seen as developing or ongoing (...) all states are in a sense complete: a state exists as a whole during each and every instance of its duration".

²⁵ In his very lucidly argued essay (which draws heavily on the terminology and underlying framework of Hirtle), Defromont –referring to verbs such as 'be', 'have' and 'know'– affirms "il ne faut pas de temps pour être, avoir ou savoir. Certes, l'existence, la possession et la connaissance peuvent être limitées **dans** le temps, mais chacun des instants de ce temps est identique aux autres, et il suffit de considérer l'un d'entre eux pour les considérer tous. De tel verbes sont **statiques** et les procès qu'ils évoquent ne sont susceptibles d'aucune évolution" (1973, p. 63).

ly because we view the situation as a state and not as a sensation currently being experienced, we use the non-progressive form, e.g. 'My eyes sting' or 'My feet itch'.

With the progressive form we are concerned with conveying our experiencing of a temporary sensation that is already in progress at the moment of utterance, e.g. 'My eyes are stinging', 'My feet are itching'. In this case we are referring to an ongoing process which is probably seen as a temporary sensation that will end sooner or later.

The temporary nature of the sensation is brought out even more clearly if we add 'again' to these sentences, the result being that we note a marked preference for the progressive 'My back's aching again' or 'My eyes are stinging again' as opposed to the non-progressive 'My back aches again' or 'My eyes sting again' (as an indication of the recurrence of a certain condition the non-progressive form is possible, but the progressive form would generally seem to be a more natural option). Backache and stinging eyes come and go, they are iterative events that may occur sporadically during the current period, but they are not a permanent 'fact of life' for the speaker in question.

Interestingly, if we refer to a physical or psychological state that suddenly comes into being immediately prior to the moment of utterance, e.g. 'Mmm, that feels good' or 'Ooh, that stings', or 'That hurts' in reply to an insensitive remark such as 'Given up dieting, have you, Fatty?', then we find that the progressive form is generally quite inappropriate. The reason for this would appear to be that in order to use the progressive form the situation must be perceived as having already come into existence for a certain amount of time (at least a few seconds) prior to the moment of utterance.

18) 'I promise to pay you back'/'I'm promising to pay you back'.

We must also examine a group of verbs that have variously been termed as 'asseveratives' (Joos, 1964), 'performatives' or 'illocutionary' verbs. These are verbs such as 'name' ('I name this ship "The Princess"'), 'say' ('I say you're wrong'), 'advise' ('I advise you to see a specialist') etc., where the performance of the verb in question must be carried out in its entirety at the moment of utterance in order to be considered as valid. Here we are dealing with a perfective use of the non-progressive form. The use of the progressive form with any of these verbs implies that the action has not been performed in its entirety. 'I'm advising you to see a specialist' suggests that the speaker still has something to add in terms of the advice being offered, perhaps because

the hearer is not really convinced that the advice being given is suitable. Similarly, 'I promise to pay you back' represents an act –that of promising– which has been completed simply by being uttered (whether the promise is subsequently fulfilled is immaterial), while 'I'm promising to pay you back' implies that the act of promising is still in progress and is hence incomplete.

19) 'I've finished the article'/'I've been finishing the article'.

The observation made in the previous point concerning 'performatives' points to an even wider issue that is often of crucial importance in determining whether the non-progressive or the progressive form is used. In short, as we have already had cause to note in several cases so far, we are often forced to examine what Lyons (1968, p. 706) has defined as the 'aspectual character' of the verb, a phenomenon more commonly referred to as either 'Aktionsart' or (less frequently) 'actionality'²⁶.

Verbs have been classified by linguists in a number of ways; one of the most fruitful distinctions has been that of identifying what have variously been called 'accomplishment' and 'achievement' verbs (Vendler, 1967), 'transitional event' verbs (Leech, 1971), or 'telic' verbs (Garey, 1957) (from the Greek 'telos' meaning goal or objective), i.e. where the kind of situation expressed by the verb or verbal expression must reach a terminal point for it to be considered as having been accomplished. For example, if we take the telic verb 'persuade', the sentence 'I've persuaded Bob to join our sports club' implicates that Bob is now a member –or is about to become a member– of the sports club as a result of being successfully persuaded by the speaker, while 'I've been persuading Bob to join our sports club' implicates that the act of persuasion has not been fully completed.

Sometimes the verb may be essentially 'atelic', e.g. 'play', as in 'I play golf every day' or 'I'm playing golf at the moment', but when it becomes part of a certain type of verbal expression, e.g. 'play a round of golf', it becomes 'telic', for while the sentence 'I'm playing golf at the moment' does not invalidate the subsequent claim that the speaker has indeed played golf, the sentence (for example spoken to someone on a mobile phone) 'I'm playing a round of golf at the moment'

²⁶ Bertinetto (1997, pp. 27-60) is one of the many contemporary theorists who consider of the utmost importance the necessity of making a sharp distinction between 'aspectuality' and 'actionality'.

cannot subsequently be taken as meaning with any certainty that the speaker has played a round of golf. He or she may have begun playing a round of golf, but may have been forced to give up before completing the entire round. Similarly, someone who was drowning but was subsequently saved clearly has not drowned, and so on.

The implications of the distinction between telic and atelic expressions have been widely examined by linguists, often with reference to the perfect tenses, above all the present perfect. A sentence such as 'I've finished the article', containing the telic verb 'finish', leaves no room for doubt that (at least, according to the speaker) the article has been completed. This type of non-progressive present perfect can be defined (on the basis of Declerck's classification, 1991a, p. 328) as 'indefinite' insofar as the moment of completion of the action lies wholly before the moment of utterance, and hence is quite clearly perfective. The sentence 'I've been finishing the article' is open to both a 'continuative' and an 'indefinite' reading. For example, if someone asks a person sitting in front of a computer screen 'What have you been doing all day?', a possible answer could be 'I've been finishing the article. Just five more minutes and I'll have finished it completely'. Here we have a continuative reading: the speaker is still in the process of putting the final touches to the article at the time the utterance is made. Alternatively, as an answer to the observation made during an evening meal 'You look dreadful. What have you been doing all day?', the reply 'I've been finishing the article' is self-evidently of the indefinite variety since the speaker is not actually involved in the activity of finishing the article at the moment of utterance.

This indefinite type of progressive present perfect is sometimes called the 'explanatory resultative' type (Declerck, 1991a, p. 341, note 62) in that it tends to be used to explain the reason for a given situation, e.g. 'Your sleeves are all wet. Have you been watering the plants again?' or 'Sorry I'm late. I've been trying to find somewhere to park'. Although the actions referred to in such sentences have already come to an end before the moment of utterance, their resultative implications are very strongly in the foreground –the situation described in the indefinite present perfect progressive is, as it were, prolonged in its results (Defromont, 1973, pp. 66-67)²⁷. Such uses of the indefinite present per-

²⁷ Referring to examples of the indefinite form of the present perfect progressive (e.g. 'You haven't been listening' or 'Who's been eating my porridge?'), Defromont observes: "l'action désignée par *has been -ing* a, dans ces exemples, des résultats

fect in the progressive form would seem to invalidate the claim made by some linguists that only the non-progressive form may be considered as having 'resultative' implications.

20) 'She wrote to him'/'She was writing to him'.

Little can be usefully added here that has not already been observed in hundreds of grammar books concerning the basic difference between the non-progressive and the progressive form of the past. Non-progressive uses of the past in English tend to be predominantly perfective²⁸ insofar as the majority of situations are perceived as already having been completed regardless of whether they are punctual or durative ('You blinked just now', 'It took billions of years of evolution to create someone like you'); the situation described usually has no connection with the present. Even sentences such as 'And they all lived happily ever after', or 'Their love was eternal' are temporally bounded, the situation having presumably terminated some time before the present moment. However, there may occasionally be exceptions to this rule, as Declerck has pointed out (1991a, p. 227), in cases such as 'Where's John?' 'He was in the kitchen five minutes ago, so I suppose he's still there', where the situation of John being in the kitchen is not represented as 'completed' by the past tense.

In the sentence 'She wrote to him', the action of writing is viewed as being complete, while the progressive form of the past, on the other hand, as is well known, indicates an action or process that was in progress but was in some way (either actually or potentially) incomplete, e.g. 'She was writing to him when she suddenly realised she didn't know his new address'.

directs et concrets qui sont présents à l'esprit du locuteur au moment où il parle" (1973, p. 68).

²⁸ This statement requires some qualification as there are a number of cases in which the non-progressive past tense may refer to an imperfective situation. Just to take one example, in certain 'narrative' contexts, a sentence where all the verbs are in the non-progressive form of the past tense, e.g. 'As the farmer walked down the lane, the sun shone and the cows lazily munched grass' is, semantically and pragmatically speaking, almost indistinguishable from the sentence in which all three verbs are in the past progressive: 'As the farmer was walking down the lane, the sun was shining and the cows were lazily munching grass'. (Obviously, the latter sentence would strike most native-speakers as the more natural of the two). Assuming one ignores the possibility of giving an ingressive interpretation to 'the sun shone' in the former example (which would render the situation aspectually open to more than one interpretation), in both sentences the verbal situations can be seen as being in some way incomplete and hence may constitute cases of imperfectivity.

Even modal uses of past tenses, such as ‘distancing’ as in ‘I was wondering if you felt like going out for a meal tomorrow evening’ or ‘Did you want to speak to the manager?’, which need not necessarily refer to a situation wholly located in the past time sphere, do not substantially affect the above remarks.

21) ‘The bride wore a white dress’/‘The bride was wearing a white dress’.

Sometimes the difference between the progressive form and the non-progressive form in the past tense is minimal, but a slight nuance may still be discernible, and it is one that lies at the heart of the difference between the two forms. With the non-progressive form here we have a situation that refers to an action (which may well be perceived as being complete), while with the progressive form we have a situation that smacks more of a description than of an action. Declerck (1991a, p. 276, note 41) agrees with Fenn (1987, p. 35) in considering certain instances of progressive sentences of this type, i.e. which refer to atelic situations (e.g. ‘John was standing outside the pub’), as being in no way incomplete. From a purely pragmatic viewpoint this may well prove to be the case. But all cases of the progressive are *potentially* incomplete in a way that many cases of the non-progressive cannot possibly be. For example, the progressive sentence here could theoretically be preceded by a construction that would allow this (potential) aspect of incompleteness to emerge clearly, e.g. ‘When the vicar accidentally spilt coffee all over her, the bride was wearing a white dress’, while the non-progressive form (‘When the vicar accidentally spilt coffee all over her, the bride wore a white dress’) would imply a sequence of actions, first the spilling of the coffee, then the wearing of the dress.

It is precisely this difference in the way the two forms behave that accounts for the way they are sometimes intermingled in descriptive scenes in novels, the non-progressive form carrying the action forward, the progressive form filling in the scene: “I flung on my clothes. The corridor was holding an exhibition of appalling paintings of happy Russian peasants dancing in snow-filled forest glades. In the casino, two sullen Finns were playing against a roomful of croupiers and hostesses. I stepped into the street. A flurry of girls with their pimps advanced on me”²⁹.

²⁹ John Le Carré, *The Game*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1995, p. 257.

- 22) 'I arrive in Tokyo at six o'clock tomorrow'/'I'm arriving in Tokyo at six o'clock tomorrow'.

Another well-documented difference between the non-progressive form and the progressive form consists in the two future uses of the present tense. The non-progressive form implies an arrangement or state of affairs that is so certain that it becomes in practice a kind of continuation of the present, thus making the use of the present tense particularly appropriate. Once again it is to be viewed perfectly as a situation that is already complete in itself, and the presence of the non-progressive form lends an air of authoritativeness to the situation, leaving no room for uncertainty: the future situation has already entered the realm of 'fact'. The progressive form –so frequently employed when referring to short-term personal plans– may sometimes leave room for a margin of uncertainty; although considered unlikely, things might not go according to plan.

However, the choice between the non-progressive and the progressive form does not always depend on the greater degree of certainty implicit in the use of the non-progressive form; it may often be a question of how the speaker's perceives the situation. For example, if someone says 'Hurry up. The film starts in ten minutes', the situation of the film starting is perceived "from outside" (Comrie, 1976, p. 4), as an objective fact that is in some way 'detached' from any other consideration and which pertains to the near future, whereas if that same person says 'Hurry up. The film's starting in ten minutes', the situation is perceived as implicitly referring to a wider situation which came into being prior to the moment of utterance, in this particular case, for example, the arrangement to see the film. It is that wider situation which is currently 'in progress' –and which the speaker is 'in the middle of– that necessitates the use of the progressive form. But the use of the latter does not necessarily imply a greater degree of uncertainty as to whether the film will in fact start in ten minutes' time or not.

However, one cannot say *'It rains tomorrow' (Comrie, 1985, p. 47) because there is no hundred per cent certainty about weather forecasting, while one can say 'The sun rises at 5.30 a.m. tomorrow' because it is a fact that obeys a scientific law. The progressive forms *'It's raining tomorrow' and *'The sun's rising at 5.30 a.m. tomorrow' are unacceptable because the present progressive with future time reference refers exclusively to man-made phenomena that are planned or arranged in advance, and leaves room for the eventuality that the planned event may not take place. It is no coincidence that the 'going to' form

–which implies either intention, e.g. ‘I’m going to enjoy myself this evening’, or prediction, e.g. ‘It’s going to rain’– has no non-progressive equivalent; there can never be total certainty that the intention or prediction will in fact be fulfilled.

Finally, it is also worth noting that ‘be going to’ can occasionally be found with the progressive infinitive, as in ‘I’m going to be studying all afternoon, so I won’t have time to watch TV’³⁰.

23) ‘Will you use the car this evening?’/‘Will you be using the car this evening?’.

The use of the progressive form here tends to suggest much more strongly than the non-progressive form that the speaker has plans for this evening that are dependent on the availability of the car. As is well known, one of the uses of the future continuous is “to suggest that something has already been fixed or decided” and “is therefore often used as a polite way of asking about somebody’s plans” (Declerck, 1991b, p. 165). As we have just seen in section 22) in relation to (non)progressive forms with future time reference, the use of the non-progressive form does not necessarily imply that some situation which existed prior to the moment of speech is being taken into consideration, while the use of the progressive form *does* automatically imply that some prior situation is being taken into account. The same observations often apply to the future tense using ‘shall’ or ‘will’³¹.

The use of the future continuous to ask ‘What have you already decided?’ ostensibly signals that the speaker does not wish to influence the hearer’s decision. Indeed, the speaker will typically use such a question if he or she “wants to prepare the ground for making a request or suggestion” (Declerck, 1991b, p. 166). But a pragmatic reading of the situation may, in some cases, suggest that, precisely because this use of the future continuous conveys connotations of politeness and tactfulness by signalling a desire not to influence the hearer’s decision, the hearer may, as a result, be more inclined to change his or her mind in order to comply with the speaker’s implicit request (of course, depending on the particular context and relationship between speaker and

³⁰ See Declerck (1991b, p. 158, note 1).

³¹ Of course, the future tense with the progressive form may convey other meanings besides the idea of a prediction or arrangement, such as ‘pure’ future time reference, as in ‘This time next month I’ll be starting my new job’ where the progressive form is used simply to convey the idea that some situation will be in progress at a given moment in the future.

hearer, this could have the opposite effect on the hearer who may have the sensation of being manipulated)!

As we have already observed in a variety of other contexts, we find subtle psychological considerations being called into play in determining the choice between the progressive form and the non-progressive form, further confirmation, if any were needed, of the infinite complexity of language.

The observations that I have made can be applied to all tenses including the habitual past, e.g. 'He used to prepare/be preparing drinks when I visited him', as well as to modals, e.g. 'You should think/be thinking about your future'³², and even to the infinitive forms, e.g. 'It would be nice to play/to be playing tennis again'. Almost all of the cases that I have examined here can be found in textbooks and articles, and many of them are dealt with in much greater length with respect to my limited observations. And, as I stated in the introduction, a number of theories have been aired on the difference between the non-progressive form and the progressive form. But I hope to have demonstrated in the examples above that it is possible to bring together the multitude of different meanings and nuances by applying a single criterion that underpins the entire system³³. I therefore offer my the-

³² Declerck (personal communication) rightly points out that as regards modals, there is a clear difference between the use of the (non)progressive in epistemic and non-epistemic sentences. This is particularly true of non-stative verbs. For example, 'He must study hard today' can only be used in its non-progressive form if we wish to express the idea of obligation (this observation does not apply if we remove the temporal adverbial 'today': 'he must study hard' may also have epistemic meaning), while the progressive form 'He must be studying hard today' can only be used in the progressive form if we wish to express a deduction or conviction. However, there may occasionally be cases in which the progressive form can be used with non-statives with non-epistemic meaning, in particular with the verbs 'go' and 'get', as in 'Gosh, is that the time? I must be going'/'I must be getting on with some work'. Charleston also provides the following example with the verb 'dress': "Well, we must be dressing for dinner" (1955, p. 275). The situation is different as regards statives, which generally cannot take the progressive form but which may be either epistemic ('She must be bored out of her mind'/'You must know a lot about football') or non-epistemic ('She must be more careful'/'You must know your phrasal verbs better if you want to pass the English exam'), depending on the context.

³³ While it is true that I have discussed several features relating to aspect and Aktionsart, such as perfectivity/imperfectivity, temporariness/permanence, punctuality/durativity, in many of the observations I have made, the criterion of 'susceptibility to change' remains, in my opinion, the most essential feature in distinguishing between progressive forms and non-progressive forms.

ory of the 'susceptibility to change' as a modest contribution to the subject in this ongoing debate.

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