

# The Semantics of Progressive Aspect: A Thorough Study

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## Abstract

In English grammar, verbs have two important characteristics--tense and aspect. Grammatically tense is marked in two ways: Present and Past. English verbs can have another property called aspect, applicable in both present and past forms of verbs. There are two major types of morphologically marked aspects in English verbs: progressive and perfective. While present and past tenses are morphologically marked by the forms *verb+s/es* (as in He *plays*) and *verb+d/ed* (as in He *played*) respectively, the morphological representations of progressive and perfective aspects in the tenses are *verb+ing* (He *is/was playing*) and *verb+d/ed/n/en* (He *has/had played*) respectively. This paper focuses only on one type of aspectual feature of verbs--present progressive. It analyses the use of present progressive in terms of semantics and explains its use in different contexts for durative conclusive and non-conclusive use, for its use in relation to time of reference, and for its use in some special cases. Then it considers the restrictions on the use of progressive aspect in both present and past tenses based on the nature of verbs and duration of time.

## 1. Introduction

'Aspect' has been widely discussed in English grammar with respect to the internal structure of actions, states and events as it revolves around the grammatical category of English verb groups and tenses. Depending on the interpretations of actions, states, and events as a feature of the verbs or as a matter of speaker's viewpoint, two approaches are available for aspect: 'Temporal' and 'Non-temporal'. Temporal view regards 'the Temporal Quality or Condition' of an event with respect to itself, in terms of such things as inception, repetition, duration, punctuality etc' (Freed, 1979, p. 10). On the other hand, Non-temporal view considers 'a speaker's

viewpoint or perspective on a situation . . . as either completed (perfective aspect), or as ongoing (imperfective aspect), continuing (continuing aspect), ending (egressive aspect), or repeating (iterative or habitual aspect)' (Brinton, 1988, p. 3). The key points here are (1) inherent feature of an event or action or state as applies to the temporal view and (2) speaker's perspective on a situation as considered for the non-temporal view. In consideration of these two points, the temporal view is identical with the term *aktionsart* and the non-temporal with *aspect* as we talk about the phenomena of aspectuality. Brinton (1988) distinguishes between *aspect* and *aktionsart* by associating the latter with the speaker's point of view and *aspect* with what can be termed in Comrie's (1976) definition as 'inherent or semantic aspect' (p. 41-52). However, Huddleston (1984), Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartvik (1985), Huddleston (2002), Leech (2004) do not make such kind of distinction. Interestingly, all of them including Brinton (1988) have discussed *aspect* in terms of the underlying semantics of the situation itself. Does this imply that aspect is a semantic phenomenon, over all?

As a possible answer to our question, we would like to consider Brinton's (1988) explanation:

In English, the analysis of aspect seems to pose particularly acute problems, since formal markers of aspect are not predominant in the verb--English is a 'tense' not an 'aspect' language--and since lexical markers of aspect do not appear to constitute a coherent system. (p. 1)

We do not deny the importance of tense in English. But we think such an assumption made by Brinton (1988) ignores the significance of *aspect* in English. In this regard, we would like to consider the following examples,

- (1) *Hasan reads a newspaper.*
- (2) *Hasan is reading a newspaper.*

In both cases, we are talking about the same tense: 'present'. But there is a difference between them. The sentences denote habitual and progressive aspect respectively. Depending on their aspects, they would have different interpretations. The first sentence refers to Hasan's regular practice such as he reads a newspaper almost every day. But the second one refers to his activity of reading a newspaper on a particular occasion or during a particular time. In this case, tense without the aspectual distinction fails to convey the difference in meaning between these two sentences, and therefore, aspect is as important as tense in the study of English Grammar. Besides, in our opinion, English is quite enriched in *aspect*, may be not in syntactic, but in semantic terms. For example, the English progressive aspect marked syntactically by the auxiliary *be + verb-ing* gives a range of semantic interpretations to the basic expression of a situation as it is 'in progress'. In our present essay, we are going to concentrate only on progressive aspect and consider its semantics as we are discussing its use and constraints.

## **2. Use of Progressive Aspect:**

### **2.1 Durative situation:**

Progressive aspect usually conveys the idea that an event has duration. For example,

(1) Q: *What is John doing at this moment?*

A: *He is watching television.*

(2) Q: *\*What does John do at this moment?*

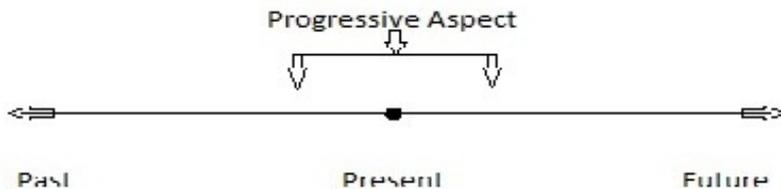
A: *\*He watches television.*

The first example implies an event that accompanies the implication of duration and therefore, the present progressive is used. Does this mean that the events that have no duration cannot have progressive aspect? Let us consider the following examples:

(3) *The referee blows his whistle.*

(4) *The referee is blowing his whistle.*

In example 3, the event has instantaneous present meaning. In contrast, example 4 tends to suggest a continuous or repeated blowing of the whistle. In example 4, progressive aspect stretches the event some way into the past and into the future and imposes duration on it:



Therefore, it is no longer instantaneous. However, progressive aspect allows the stretching of duration in an event to a certain extent. However, it is not the case that all events with duration denote progressive aspect. For example,

- (5) *The professor types his own letters.*
- (6) *The professor is typing his own letters.*

To us, in both examples the event of *typing* has duration. In example 5, it is an extended duration. We would interpret example 5 as the event of *typing letters* keeps going on over and over a period of long duration. In example 6, too, the event is ongoing but over a period of limited duration. The interpretation, in this case, is that *the professor usually does not type his letters*. It may be the case that the professor's secretary is ill or unavailable for some reasons, and so, the professor has to do the job for the time being. Huddleston (2002) has disregarded limited duration as a feature of progressive aspect. He said, 'neither limited duration nor extended duration is a feature of the meaning of the progressive' (p.168). To him, limited duration is a matter of 'Implicature' (implicature is the term that refers to intended or implied meaning). In our view, if we disregard 'limited duration' as a meaning of progressive aspect, we cannot see the

distinction between sentences 5 and 6. Example 5 with extended duration implies a habit which is permanent and it is represented by the repeating (iterative or habitual) aspect. On the other hand, example 6 with limited duration conveys a temporary habit and is represented by progressive aspect. Therefore, unlike what Huddleston (2002) thinks, the notion of limited duration with respect to progressive aspect is very important.

### **Durative non-conclusive:**

Progressive aspect can represent durative situation types non-conclusively. An event is generally regarded as non-conclusive in the sense that it does not result in a change of state. For example,

(7) *It is raining.*

(8) *Sally is dancing.*

For both examples, the events of *raining* and *dancing* are ongoing, incomplete and do not exhibit a change of state. The one difference between these two is that the first one is 'non-agentive' and the second one is 'agentive' (In agentive sentences, there is a 'doer' or an agent who does the action. And non-agentive sentences do not have doers.). Quirk *et al.* (1985, p. 207) have called the first type of situations as 'Durative Non-conclusive Goings-on' and the second one as 'Durative Non-conclusive Activities'.

### **Durative conclusive:**

The durative situation type, here, is capable of resulting in a change of state. For example,

(9) *The weather is getting warmer.*

(10) *Kidan is knitting herself a sweater.*

We can interpret the first example that *the weather* is in the process of getting warmer. Therefore, it can be viewed that it is on its way to a change of state. The second one denotes an action or activity which takes place over a period and it has a goal or end-point. Therefore, it implies that the activity of *knitting* is incomplete at this moment but it is going to be finished and

result in a change of state. While example 9 involves no agent, example 10 has an agent. According to Quirk *et al.*'s terminology (1985) the first example is a case of 'Process' and the second one of 'Accomplishment' (p.207-208). It should be noted here that both these examples have been considered conclusive because they lead to a state of change as the events progress towards completion, not because the events result in a change.

We find the distinction between conclusive and non-conclusive duration to be a marginal one. Intransitive verbs which function as durative non-conclusive activities generally become accomplishments when a direct object or an adverbial or destination is added. By these additions an activity becomes a task with a defined conclusion, and consequently non-conclusive verbs become conclusive. We could also argue that non-conclusive events have an implication of change of a state. For example, when we say, *it is raining*, we assume that the event is ongoing and it has a limited duration. Consequently, it would end at a certain point and result in a change of state. Therefore, the event of *raining*--which we have regarded as non-conclusive--can receive a conclusive interpretation.

It should be noted that for both conclusive and non-conclusive durative events, we have assumed the ongoing events as incomplete. We have brought the idea of completeness to the discussion of conclusiveness but as an implication of the event in future. But it does not mean that we can make a generalisation that progressive aspect refers to 'Incompleteness'. As an example:

(11) *I was reading between ten and eleven.*

In the above example, the event of *reading* has a starting point at ten o'clock and end point at 11. It says that there is an interval of time between ten and eleven when the activity was ongoing. It should also be noted that the interval of time indicates a limited duration. Therefore, we can say that progressive aspect can be used to imply the completion of an event as long as it satisfies the criteria for the event to be 'ongoing' for a 'limited

duration'. However, the interrelationship between time and event can be varied, and depending on the meaning progressive aspect can be used.

## 2.2 Situation in relation to time of reference:

Let us consider the following examples:

- (1) *When we arrived, Jenny made some fresh coffee.*
- (2) *When we arrived, Jenny was making some fresh coffee.*

The first example tells us that the *coffee making* followed the time of *our arrival*, but the second one says that *our arrival* took place during the time of *coffee making*. The first sentence can be best interpreted as a matter of 'time-sequence': (i) at first we arrived and (ii) then the coffee was made. On the other hand, the second one is a matter of 'time-inclusion': the time of *arrival* is included within the time of duration for *coffee making*. In relation to the time of *arrival*, progressive aspect in the second sentence stretches the ongoing event of *coffee making* from the past to the future. Such a case has usually been described as the 'temporal frame' (Leech, 2004) of progressive aspect. 'Temporal frame' is the notion that allows us to view some point of orientation within the flow of time from which a temporary event can be seen to stretch into the future and into the past. Therefore, if an event cannot be viewed in terms of a particular point of time, the framing effect of progressive aspect does not occur. For example,

- (3) *Throughout the Prime Minister's speech, the foreign secretary was listening in the gallery.*

Here the event of *listening* is related to a period during which *the speech* continued. There is no point of time around which *listening* can form a frame. In this regard, Leech (2004) said:

The 'temporal frame' effect is not an independent feature of the progressive form's meaning; it follows, rather, from the notion of 'limited duration'. Whenever a point of time or a brief event is in a contemporaneous relation with a happening that has duration, it is natural that that happening should extend beyond the event-without-

duration or point-of-time in both backward and forward directions-in short, that a 'temporal frame' should be set up. (p. 22)

However, from the discussion we can say that progressive aspect can form temporal frame but it is not its obligatory property.

### **2.3 Special use:**

Progressive aspect can be used to denote non-aspectual meaning. By 'non-aspectual', we mean, the event is not in progress. For example,

- (1) *Are you going to the meeting tomorrow?*
- (2) *They are getting married next spring.*

In the above examples, the events of attending the meeting and of getting married are not in progress. They refer to upcoming events in the future. The first one denotes very near future. For the second one, it may be near future or not but the progressive is used here to denote a future plan or arrangement.

Progressive aspect can also be used to refer tentatively to a present wish or attitude. For example,

- (3) *I am hoping to borrow some money.*

Example 3 implies that the speaker has a wish to make a request and progressive aspect here expresses his or her polite attitude.

## **3. Constraints on Progressive**

### **3.1 Stative verbs:**

Typically, progressive aspect is unacceptable with stative verbs. The reason is that stative verbs usually denote a state and a state is non-progressive in nature. Therefore, stative verbs are generally resistant to progressive aspect. For example,

- (1) *We own a house in the country.*

\*We are owning a house in the country. (own as a stative verb)

However, there are some stative verbs which are exceptions. As an example, *think* is an intellectual stative verb and it denotes mental state and therefore, in the following example it occurs in the form of 'simple present'.

(2) *I think such kind of phenomena in plain economic terms.*

However, it can occur in progressive aspectual form such as

(3) *I am thinking such kind of phenomena in plain economic terms.*

But progressive aspect, in this case, no longer denotes mental state but a kind of work as mental exertion. The use of progressive aspect has changed the situation from static to dynamic. The verb *think* has also changed its status. It has become a member of a different verbal category. It is no longer a stative verb in this case. Another change that has happened in the interpretation of the above sentences is that progressive aspect has attributed the meaning of temporariness to the second example whereas the first one denotes a permanent state. In this regard, we can consider the use of other kinds of stative verbs taking progressive form, such as

(4) (McDonald's Happy Meal!) I am loving it. [love as state of emotion]

(5) My scarf is no longer smelling lavender. [smell as state of perception]

However, temporariness as a feature of progressive aspect is somewhat problematic. There can be sentences where progressive aspect does not denote temporariness. For example,

(6) *The western landmass is always moving towards the water.*

The event refers to persistent or continuous activity and there is no sense of temporariness. On the other hand, there can be non-progressive form that can denote temporary state such as

(7) *The manager is away this afternoon.*

Example 4 tells us that usually in the afternoon the manager stays in but he is not there this afternoon. The implication is that *this afternoon* is an exception and the manager will be back to his usual routine. Therefore, the simple present form gives a temporary reading for the sentence in 4. Paradoxically, here the stative verb *be* with its simple present form invades the semantic territory of progressive aspect. Therefore, we would say that progressive aspect can attribute temporariness to an event but it is not its obligatory feature.

### 3.2 Punctual situation:

Punctual situations typically involve either no duration at all or a very short duration. Therefore, they usually do not occur in progressive form. However, it is not always the case. For example,

- (1) *Downstairs, a door is banging.*
- (2) *The train is arriving at platform 6.*

The events as implied in examples 1 and 2 involve repetition of the action. The verbs *bang* and *arrive* usually represent punctual events in the sense that they are so momentary that it is difficult to think of them as having any duration. However, as these verbs occur in the progressive form, they give duration to the events. Progressive aspect, then, forces us to think of them as representing a series of events rather than a single event. It should be noted that the first example differs from the second one in the sense that the first one is non-conclusive and the second one is conclusive.

## 4. Conclusion

We have discussed the use and constraints of progressive aspect in terms of semantic explanation. We should mention that even the verbal categories that have been used as an explanatory factor for progressive aspect have also been defined in terms of semantics. The major features that progressive aspect represents for a particular event are:

- (1) Duration
- (2) Specifically limited duration
- (3) Not necessary incompleteness
- (4) Capability for temporariness
- (5) Time of reference within the time of situation

Considering these features, we can conclude that progressive aspect allows us to have an 'inside view' of a happening, rather than an 'outside view'. In a sense, it breaks up an event into intervals and lets us see what is going on in those intervals and prevents us from looking at the whole situation in a single broad canvas.

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