

TO BE in the Progressive: A New Use

WALTER HIRTLE

and

CLAUDE BÉGIN

Université Laval

*Introduction*¹

Visser (1973:1968) gives a long list of verbs "more or less incompatible" with the progressive that have this in common: in their general sense

they do not express a real activity . . . In order to account for their use in the expanded form one ought to go in quest of the various senses and sub-senses that are tinged with a notion — however slight — of activity. (1973:1969)

Implicit in this comment is the idea that there is one meaning underlying and motivating every use of the progressive, a position that ultimately leads to the view of language as systematic. Considering the complexity of usage here (cf. *inter alia*, Buysens 1968; Jespersen 1954; Mossé 1938; Poutsma 1926; Scheffer 1975; Visser 1973), proposing monosemy for the progressive involves the very strong claim that all uses can be explained in terms of the single underlying meaning of the grammatical form. Quirk et al. (1985:202), echoing Mossé (1938:273f), express a point of view which is very different from that of Visser, namely that meaning is not the only factor motivating usage:

the constraints of the progressive cannot, it seems, be explained entirely in terms of meaning. Since the use of the progressive aspect has been undergoing grammatical extension over the past few hundred years, it is likely that its use is still changing at the present day, and that its description at any one time cannot be totally systematic. This would explain the difficulties faced by those attempting to account in every respect for the conditions for the use of the progressive in terms of semantic generalizations.

¹We wish to acknowledge the financial support provided by the *Fonds FCAR* of the Government of Quebec. We also wish to acknowledge the helpful suggestions of two anonymous readers.

The point at issue here is of considerable importance if only because it calls into question the very basis of grammatical explanation and how it can deal with the variation of usage. Should we, as Visser, Poutsma (1926:339) and others suggest, seek the reason for using a grammatical form in the meaning expressed, or are there other factors conditioning the use of a form, as Mossé, Quirk et al., Sag (1973) and others suggest? That is, we can view language as meaning-expressing activity or as motivated by some other factor(s). The former view with its consequent strong claim concerning the monosemy of the progressive form is adopted here. To support this view, rather than marshalling theoretical arguments — in science as at table, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, not in the recipe — we shall examine attested usage to see if one can explain real examples in terms of meaning. We shall restrict our attention to the verb *to be* used as a copula partly because of the intrinsic interest of this verb, but mainly because it would appear to be undergoing a historical development at present and so provides a test case for the claim put forward in Quirk et al.

Historical and Theoretical Considerations

The use of *to be* in the progressive is fairly recent according to Jespersen (1954:225), who has only two examples before the middle of the 19th century, the earliest being from Keats (c. 1817):²

- (1) You will be glad to hear . . . how diligent I have been, and *am being*.

The fact that the first attested example of the passive progressive:

- (2) a fellow, whose uppermost upper grinder *is being torn out* by a mutton-fisted barber. (Southey 1795, cited in Jespersen 1954:211)

is only some 20 years earlier is surely no mere coincidence. It suggests that a new way of representing the passive auxiliary and the copula has evolved, a way of conceiving them in the mental form provided by the progressive, which is different from that of the simple, the only possibility up to that time. Like any other innovation in language, this had to begin with some individual or individuals (no doubt in the spoken language of

²Visser disagrees with Jespersen. His counter-claim (1973:2426) that *to be* in the progressive was "widely used" with a predicate adjective at the beginning of the 19th century, seems to be based (1973:1954) on three examples from the late 15th century, at least one of which is suspect (cf. Mossé 1938:§87) and on examples of the type *This is being wicked for wickedness' sake; That's being a spunger, sir; this is being too resentful* (pp. 1956, 1958) which are not, in fact, progressives. Furthermore, it is significant that *to be* in the progressive with predicate adjective does not become frequent in print until the late 19th century, when the construction with a predicate substantive first appears.

the 18th century), and be adopted by others — in the passive auxiliary it spread more rapidly than in the copula according to Jespersen — until today both of these are commonly accepted uses. What then ^{was} is this new way of representing the abstract content of *to be*, and more particularly of the copula (an examination of the passive construction would require a separate study)? A brief look at the different manners in which the simple and the progressive grammaticize the lexical meaning of a verb — how they give the lexical matter different grammatical forms — will suggest an answer.

As has been argued elsewhere (Hirtle 1988), the simple form can properly be called a "perfective" because it always represents a stretch of duration long enough to situate all the various impressions (or features) constituting the verb's lexeme (its lexical meaning). This it can do in two, and only two ways, depending on the temporal relations between these lexical impressions. If the different impressions arising from the speaker's particular experience are perceived to occur successively in time, the simple form will necessarily represent the total duration of the event, from beginning to end, because it evokes all such impressions; and their succession in time will give a developmental, activity sense to the verb. If, on the other hand, the different impressions constituting the lexeme strike the speaker as arising simultaneously in his experience, the simple form can represent them all in just one instant of the event's duration; this momentary representation will give rise to a stative, "like-parted" (Quirk et al. 1985:198) event because, by definition, there can be no innovation or change in the situation throughout the duration of the event. The two examples given above can provide good illustrations of these two representational possibilities of the simple form commonly discussed in the literature. Thus, for example, in:

- (2a) a fellow, whose uppermost upper grinder *was torn out* by a mutton-fisted barber

the simple form of the auxiliary represents the whole stretch of time involved in tearing out a molar, thereby evoking a developmental, action-like, dynamic event from beginning to end. However, in:

- (1a) You will be glad to hear . . . how diligent I have been, and *am*.

the simple form of the copula evokes all the impressions involved in being diligent in only one instant of the event's duration, that corresponding to the moment of speech, and so presents the event as non-developmental, state-like. In each case, the simple form is perfective since it provides the stretch of time required to situate all the lexical elements of the event.

By contrast, the progressive is "imperfective" since it always provides a stretch of duration which is not long enough to accommodate all the lexical impressions implied in the event. This comes out clearly with the passive progressive in (2) since it depicts the poor fellow in the middle of the excruciating experience, with further instants of the event yet to be actualized.

The progressive here interrupts the development of the event, thereby leaving the subject poised for the next instant of its realization. Because it is an imperfective, the progressive is restricted in usage to developmental events, events which involve change or at least are open to change. The progressive cannot express stative events because, being necessarily complete in its every instant, a state cannot be represented as incomplete in this way. In the case of the copula, the progressive can appear only when the speaker feels that the elements involved take place successively, that is, when the speaker perceives, not a static situation, but a behaviour or activity of some sort on the part of the subject. And this is exactly the sense of the example from Keats.

Thus insofar as *to be* is concerned, it seems that the historical development consisted in adapting its abstract content to the imperfectivity of the progressive. That is, besides using the copula to evoke merely a single instant of the duration of a state, a "like-parted" event,³ certain speakers felt that it could evoke an instant of the duration of a "different-parted" event, an event which may innovate in each succeeding instant. Thus it is not surprising to see the construction developing first to express some characteristic of the subject as manifested in his behaviour, nor, consequently, to find that nearly all examples have an animate subject. The point here is that this new use of the progressive appears to have arisen because of some speaker(s) mentally perceiving that *to be* could express a new sense, one which lends itself to a representation as a developmental event. Moreover it appears that this is the manner whereby the use of the progressive arises with more and more "incompatible" verbs. That is to say, it is not the grammatical meaning of the progressive — the manner in which the progressive represents an event, how it forms the lexical matter of a verb — that changes in such cases but rather a new development in the lexical sense of particular verbs which permits the gradual spread of the progressive. An examination of usage will help to substantiate this claim.

Usage with an Animate Subject

To be with an animate subject has become so common in the progressive that it can hardly be considered among the incompatible verbs in contemporary usage. Numerous grammarians point out that in the progressive it expresses an activity of the subject, such as a special type of behaviour:

- (3) "Something — something that I suppose I may as well point out to you. Because in certain matters — in certain matters you *are being* a fool." (Wells 1918:490)

³Or even all the instants of such an event, as in: *He was secretary for five years.*

playing a role:

- (4) The little lady looked away with a bright, musing look towards the window. She *was being* a heroine in a romance. Hannele could see her being a heroine, playing the chief part in her own life romance. (Lawrence 1960:188)

make-believe:

- (5) "That's our son . . . At the moment he's *being* a flying squad car from Scotland Yard." (Dickson 1954, cited in Visser 1973:1957)

or simply manifesting one's own nature:

- (6) If they are genuine portraits, therefore, they tell us something profoundly odd about the home life of Pantaloon; nothing less than this, that as he was on the stage, so he was off it, clothes, powder, and all; he was not acting a part in the harlequinade, he *was* merely *being* himself. (Barrie 1929, cited in Buyssens 1968:154)

Uses involving activity of the subject, which clearly involve developmental events, are common with *to be* + predicative adjective as well:

- (7) The Chief Constable *was being* as tactful as it was in his nature to be with Mrs. Castle. (Christie 1970:55)
- (8) He fascinated Joyce by telling her that she was subtle, then telling her what she *was being* subtle about. (Lewis 1961:391)⁴

Uses involving personification of an inanimate subject are similar and require no special comment here:

- (9) This typewriter *is being* stubborn again. (cf. Dowty 1975:581)

There has been some discussion concerning which adjectives can be used in this construction (cf. Visser 1973:1955; Scheffer 1975:100), a question that can best be settled by a comment from Wood (1962:212):

One cannot imagine any circumstances in which we could say 'He is being right', but that is because it is not possible to give an outward display of 'rightness' as it is of anger and illness.

In other words, any adjective that can characterize a behaviour may be found with *to be* in the progressive, and it is hazardous to lay down rules since they would probably reflect merely the limitations of the grammarian's imagination. In any case, the following example suggests a context in which *right* might not be impossible with the progressive:

⁴In passing, it is worth pointing out the contrast between the two grammatical representations of the copula here: as a stative, not open to change *was* (*subtle*), and as a developmental event open to change *was being* (*subtle*).

(10) I haven't had children, although I prayed for them, and perhaps now it is as well. But Nina! She's known she was mine, and, until now, she's loved to know it. But now she's escaping from me, and she knows that too, and is ashamed. I think I could bear anything but that sense that she herself has that she's *being* wrong — I hate her to be ashamed. (Walpole 1919:49)

Of more interest are examples that do not express overt behaviour as such. Thus in:

(11) "I was sitting quietly in the library, working at the catalogue," she began: and I guessed, by the way the phrases came rolling out, that she *was* at last *being* able to make use of the material she had prepared . . . (Huxley 1965:39)

the manifest activity of the subject is merely implied. The progressive here suggests a moment by moment realization of the conditions making this activity possible, implying that this situation may or may not continue, whereas the simple form (*she was at last able to*) would merely evoke the static existence of the conditions making the activity possible. Similarly in:

(12) "You're *being* a precious long time about it." (Christie 1967:207)

it is not what the subject is doing, the particular activity in itself, but rather the impression of the activity, whatever it is, extending instant by instant that calls for the imperfective here. The activity of the subject is even more abstract in the following:

(13) Rapidly filling his note-books, sinking ever deeper into the past, he was not merely doing his work, he *was* living and *being* it: the supreme experience of the artist in any medium. (Diver 1927:50)

One might paraphrase this "he was living and becoming identified with it" to bring out that it is the subject's manner of realizing his existence which is represented as being actualized moment by moment. Perhaps the extreme in abstraction of the subject's behaviour is provided by the next example where the progressive suggests little more than that each moment of existence is a new one:

(14) Before Mr. Direck could begin a proper inquiry into the young man's work and outlook, he had got the conversation upon America. He wanted tremendously to see America. "The dad says in one of his books that over here we *are being* and that over there you are beginning. It must be tremendously stimulating to think that your country is still *being* made. (Wells 1917:54)

Finally, Visser points out that there are cases where the notion of behaviour is non-existent. Thus in:

(15) You will see much more than any of your colleagues, who, I hear, *are not being* fortunate in their trip to Laku. (Waugh 1933, cited in Visser 1973:1954)

it is not what the colleagues are doing but rather what they are undergoing — a series of unfortunate experiences constituting the trip so far — which calls for the progressive.

Examples such as these give a clear view of how the progressive provides a mental form for the lexeme of the verb so that the reader evokes it as spread over a series of instants, some but not all of which are already realized. It is not the systemic meaning of the progressive that changes here, but rather the manner of representing the lexeme of *to be*, a lexeme which one usually thinks as a state. The verb in the progressive as always evokes an impression of development, of an event open to change. Incidentally, such cases indicate the limitations of the common term "dynamic", a term aptly describing a well-known expressive effect, but which can hardly be applied to some of these examples. These uses also show how an initial impression, that of overt behaviour (found in all 19th century examples mentioned in Visser 1973), can be refined and extended to the point where the verb in the progressive suggests only the impression of possible change or development from instant to instant in the subject's activity.

In all these cases, the experience the speaker wishes to talk about gives rise to the impression of some happening unfolding. Thanks to the development of *to be* in the 19th century, the speaker can now call on this verb to provide a lexical representation of such events, for which the progressive is available to provide the appropriate imperfective grammatical representation. Readers of such examples are told by the progressive to represent the event as incomplete, as one involving successive phases some of which have not yet been realized. In examples with an inanimate subject, the progressive tells us the same thing but the expressive effect is quite different since there is no suggestion of behaviour, overt or covert.

Usage with an Inanimate Subject

To be in the progressive with an inanimate subject "is at least (or is still) a pretty unusual construction in English", according to Osselton (1980:453). The earliest example that has come to hand so far dates from 1927, so this may well be a historical development unfolding at the present time and as such deserves close attention as a test case. Visser (1973:1958) gives some examples with a substantive as subject:

(16) The afternoon *was being* golden, after all. (Wodehouse 1929)

(17) The bridge party *was not being* a success. (Waugh 1930)

(18) I think he realized that his visit *was not being* a success. (Christie 1932)

(19) All these months we have been studying this rock . . . To-day . . . for the first time we are entirely certain. This stone *is being* an altar of your Druid peoples. (Hinde 1966)

The first three of these examples may strike one as a novel use of the progressive; indeed, a number of people consulted remarked that they understood the sentences but do not use the progressive in this way — surely the reaction to be expected when one is confronted with a new use. On the other hand, (19) does not appear to make sense, and indeed upon further investigation proved to be spoken by someone whose mother tongue is not English (the author of the novel from which it is taken uses this and several other grammatical means to indicate this).⁵ The example does, however, pose a problem: what distinguishes its subject from the subjects of (16), (17) and (18)? What divides acceptable from unacceptable usage here? An examination of these uses and others will suggest a solution:

(20) My holiday at Crome *isn't being* a disappointment. (Huxley 1936:144)

(21) But that wasn't a novel feeling. It had come to her so often . . . however drab her days *were being*. (Snow 1977, cited in Osselton 1979:53)

In all acceptable examples that have come to hand so far, the subject evokes or at least implies a stretch of time in which something is developing or going on. Indeed, one observer describes the expressive effect of the last example as follows: "it is as if she were visualizing her drab daily activities, following upon each other, with no end in sight" (cited in Osselton 1980:453). This depicts quite aptly the role of the progressive (as opposed to the simple form) here — evoking in activity-like fashion the moment by moment realization of her days, each one of which brings a possibility of change, a possibility which does not materialize.

It seems then that this use arises when the subject itself involves a stretch of time and is represented, not as engaged in some behaviour, as with animate subjects, but simply as realized over successive instants with the possibility of development or change, a realization which the progressive evokes as incomplete. This observation is also borne out by all the examples that have come to hand so far with *it* as anticipatory subject:

(22) *It was being* a very successful cocktail-party. (Christie 1945, cited in Visser 1973:58)

(23) *It was being* a very different kind of Christmas. (Collins 1945, cited in Visser 1973:58)

(24) Altogether *it was being* a perfect heaven of a morning. (Collins 1959, cited in Visser 1973:58)

(25) He looked with love at her blooming face: *it was being* a good pregnancy. (Snow 1977, cited in Osselton 1979:53)

⁵This example is included because it shows that judgements based on sentence meaning can provide clear data. Cf. next note for a different view.

(26) Captain Walker got back to James Bond. "Sorry about that. *It's being* a busy day." (Fleming 1966, cited in Scheffer 1975:102)

In each of these cases, *it* anticipates either an expression of time or something implying a stretch of time. And in the following example, *it* refers to the whole period of time, part of which, described previously, is represented as realized:

(27) Then followed exciting days of visiting churches, planning, deciphering, guessing . . . I haven't told you half enough what gorgeous fun *it's being*. (Bell 1927:240)

In these examples, *is/was being* has the sense of 'it is/was turning out to be . . .', a paraphrase which helps to bring out both the moment by moment realization of the time involved and the impression of imperfectivity. That is, *to be* here has taken on the sense of 'coming to be'.

Conclusion

Some speakers may still find this use of *to be* in the progressive with inanimate subjects surprising since it goes well beyond any sense of activity on the part of the subject. The examples examined here indicate that it is found only when there is the possibility of situating in time successive moments of the subject's coming into existence because there is then a hint of possible development or change from moment to moment. As such they bear witness to the theory adopted here: that the progressive is an imperfective in the sense that it situates part but not all of the verb's lexical matter in time. And precisely because the lexeme of the verb *to be* is so abstract here, this use provides an exceptionally clear view of the role of the progressive as a grammatical form coming to grips with its lexical matter.

By the same token, this recent development supports the claim that the uses of the progressive can be explained in terms of the meaning expressed even when a historical change is taking place. It seems clear that this new use involves no new development insofar as the meaning of the progressive is concerned. ~~That is to say,~~ there is no change on the level of the system of grammatical representation, but rather an extension of the use of the progressive form to a newly conceived sense of the copula: the sense of 'coming-to-be', as opposed to the sense of 'behaving', current since the 19th century. That is to say, besides its usual meaning involving existence, *to be* can now express both what necessarily follows on existence, behaviour or activity, and what necessarily precedes existence, coming into being. In this respect *to be* patterns like other so-called incompatible verbs.

From the grammatical point of view, this appears to be the latest step in a process that has been going on since Middle English, when the progressive became an integral part of the system of the English verb. At any rate,

these examples show that variation in the use of English is not as erratic as some would seem to suggest⁶ but rather that these uses of the progressive, like many others (cf. Hirtle 1967, Hirtle and Curat 1986), can be explained by postulating a single underlying meaning. Ultimately, this very minor point of English grammar lends further support to the view that man's most remarkable achievement, his mother tongue, far from being something haphazard, is rather a highly systematic construct, a "system of systems" as Guillaume (1983:4) characterizes it.

REFERENCES

- Bell, Gertrude
1927 *The Letters of Gertrude Bell*. Vol. 1. London: Benn.
- Buyssens, Eric
1968 *Les deux aspects de la conjugaison anglaise au XXe siècle*. Bruxelles: Presses universitaires de Bruxelles.
- Christie, Agatha
1967 *Endless Night*. London: Collins.
1970 *Evil Under the Sun*. Toronto: Pocket Book. [First published 1941].
- Diver, M.
1927 *But Yesterday*. London: Grosset and Dunlap.
- Guillaume, Gustave
1984 *Foundations for a Science of Language*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Hirtle, Walter H.
1967 *The Simple and Progressive Forms*. Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval.
1988 Events, Time and the Simple Form. *Revue québécoise de linguistique* 17:85-106.
- Hirtle, Walter H., and V.N. Curat
1986 The Simple and Progressive: 'Future' Use. *Transactions of the Philological Society*: 42-84.
- Huxley, Aldous
1936 *Crome Yellow*. London: Penguin. [1921].
1965 *Brief Candles*. London: Penguin. [1930].
- Jespersen, Otto
1954 *A Modern English Grammar*, Part IV. London: Allen and Unwin.

- Lawrence, D.H.
1960 *The Ladybird*. London: Penguin. [1923].
- Lewis, Sinclair
1961 *Arrowsmith*. New York: Signet, New American Library. [1925].
- Mossé, Ferdinand
1938 *Histoire de la forme périphrastique être + participe présent en Germanique*. Paris: Klincksieck.
- Osselton, N.E.
1979 Points of Modern English Syntax. *English Studies* 60.
1980 Points of Modern English Syntax. *English Studies* 61.
- Poutsma, H.
1926 *A Grammar of Late Modern English*, Part II, Section II. Groningen: Nordhoff.
- Quirk, Randolph, Sidney Greenbaum, Geoffrey Leech, and Jan Svartvik
1985 *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. London: Longman.
- Sag, Ivan A.
1973 On the State of Progress on Progressives and Statives. Pp. 83-95 in *New Ways of Analyzing Variation in English*. Charles-James N. Bailey and Roger W. Shuy, eds. Washington: Georgetown University Press.
- Scheffer, Johannes
1975 *The Progressive in English*. Amsterdam: North-Holland.
- Visser, F.Th.
1973 *An Historical Syntax of the English Language*, Part III, Second half. Leiden: E.J. Brill.
- Walpole, Hugh
1919 *The Secret City*. New York: Doran.
- Wells, H.G.
1917 *Mr. Britling Sees it Through*. Toronto: Macmillan.
1918 *Joan and Peter*. New York: Macmillan.
- Wood, Frederick T.
1962 Correspondence. *English Language Teaching* 16.

⁶Cf. Sag (1973:85), for whom acceptability judgements seem to be "relative rather than absolute" and who considers that "an accurate account of the facts is beyond the scope of . . . any . . . theory hampered by its reliance on discrete categorization."