

Verbal meaning and the progressive form

Inmaculada Fortanet
Universitat Jaume I.

Abstract

Verbs have often been classified according to the relationship between their meaning and the progressive form.

Linguists like Poustma (1921), Leech (1971) or Quirk et al. (1972) have distinguished the 'verbs that admit the progressive form' from the 'verbs that do not admit the progressive form'.

In this article, and using our own methodology and a restricted corpus of literary works written in English during the second half of the 20th century, we try to prove that all verbs in the English language can admit the progressive form when justified by the context.

Many linguists have tried in their studies of the progressive form to make a classification of the English verbs that admit or do not admit the use of this periphrasis.

Most earlier analyses of the relationship between the verbal meaning and the progressive form share the same methodology: they make a rigid classification of isolated verbs, for which convenient examples are provided. This methodology leads to serious errors, such as considering the verb *look* under just one title in the classification, when it is possible to find it in such different contexts as:

'I *was looking* for me money', said Mr. Walsh.

(Lodge,D.1991:20)

'You must *be looking* forward to it.'

(Lodge,D.1991:23)

He's not *lookin'* too good right now, Mom.

(Shepard,S.1986:21)

Most linguists have included the verb *look* within the group of verbs of activity, as opposite to *see*, verb of inert sensorial perception. But they have not taken into account the complexity of the verb *look* in its associations with prepositional or adverbial particles that can alter its meaning, changing it into a verb of physical activity (first example) or of mental activity (second example). They also seem to have ignored the function of copula of the verb *look*, such as in the third sentence.

Another example of the variety of meanings that one verb can have is *go*. For most linguists it is a verb of physical activity. However, as can be observed in these examples, this is only one among the many meanings of this verb in its context:

Are you going to the parade, Herr Zangler?

(Stoppard, T. 1981:25)

Saw enough to know somethin' *was goin'* on.

(Shepard, S. 1986:7)

Um, *am I going* deaf, or something?

(Allen, W. 1986:39)

In the first example it clearly expresses a physical activity, however in the second example the verb *go* is associated with the preposition *on* to mean an activity which is in progress without specifying if it is physical or mental activity. In the third example *go* has the value of a copula to express a process.

Although there are many more examples of verbs whose meaning depends on the context, we think that those already presented are significant enough to show the danger of making a classification of English verbs without taking into account their sentence and textual context.

For the study presented here, we have used a limited, though fairly extensive, corpus of literary works written in English during the second half of the 20th century¹¹. The aim is to classify all and every verb in the corpus in its context, instead of making up a classification and then looking for suitable examples.

The linguists that have been most accurate in their categorizations have been Leech (1971:18-27) and Quirk et al. (1972:95ff)¹². In our study, we will take Leech's classification as a reference, although some modifications have been added.

A) MOMENTANEOUS VERBS (*hit, jump, kick, knock*, etc.). They are verbs that express an action without duration and when used in the progressive form, they mean a series of events.

Welch *had been flicking* water from his hands, a movement he now arrested.

(Amis, K. 1953:12)

I'm damned sure they *are sending* messages to each other but I can't work out how they're doing it.

(Stoppard, T. 1981:12)

B) VERBS OF TRANSITIONAL EVENTS (*arrive, die, fall, stop*, etc.). They are verbs that express an action without any duration, that mark a change of state. In the progressive form they mean a preparation or approach to that change, the present tense having a future sense:

I'm sending Marie to a 'secret address where you will never find her, search how you will.

(Stoppard,T.1981:14)

If we compare this example with the one we have presented with the same verb in group A, we can observe that it is the context that makes them belong to one or another group. In this second example, the speaker is not in the process of 'sending' (since this action can only occur at the same moment the subject gets away from the object or person sent) but preparing the sending.

Another example:

Mom, if you bring him in that house - *I'm leaving*'.

(Shepard,S.1986:27)

As happened with *send*, *leave* expresses a momentaneous action. In this case, the progressive form means the speaker has decided to carry out the action if the condition is fulfilled.

C) VERBS OF ACTIVITY (*drink, eat, play, rain, etc.*). This is the most numerous group in our corpus. The progressive form of these verbs expresses an activity in progress, carried out willingly by the subject. This activity can be of different kinds, for this reason we should consider at least:

C1) VERBS OF INTELLECTUAL OR SENSORIAL ACTIVITY (*think, lie, look, touch, etc.*). This subgroup includes verbs that express mental activity:

I was thinking that.

(Stoppard,T.1981:23)

as well as those that imply oral performance:

I knew she *was lying* too.

(Shepard,S.1986:5)

or the intended sensorial perception by the speaker:

But Sally *had been staring* at her breast intently.

(Sharpe,T.1976:27)

Some attitudes adopted intentionally by the subject as those expressed by the copulative verb *be* in the progressive form have also been included in this subgroup:

I told him how silly he *was being*.

(Sharpe,T.1976:22)

'Look here, Dickinson or whatever your name is,' Bertrand began, 'perhaps you think you're *being* funny, but I'd as soon you cut it out, if you don't mind.

(Amis,K.1953:42)

Other verbs whose progressive form expresses the attitudes of the subject towards an action are *die*, *try*, *long* in examples like the following ones:

I'm simply dying to see you in those lemon loungers.

(Sharpe, T. 1976:22)

I'm trying to make you look on the bright side.

(Stoppard, T. 1981:37)

She and her mother are coming back to Paris in two weeks and she's *longing* to see you.

(Hampton, Ch. 1989:49)

Most linguists had included this kind of verbs among those that do not admit or are reluctant to admit the progressive form. However, in fact these verbs denote attitudes which are adopted by the subject willingly, which makes the use of the progressive form with these verbs more and more frequent, as proved by these examples.

Hope, a verb controversial in its use of the progressive form, which in this case has a meaning similar to *expect* have also been included in this subgroup.

Are you hoping for a legacy?

(Lodge, D. 1991:37)

C2) VERBS OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY (*travel*, *walk*, *swim*, etc.). They are verbs that express an activity that needs physical movement to be carried out.

Are we travelling together?

(Stoppard, T. 1981:20)

Has he been drinkin' or somethin'?

(Shepard, S. 1986:24)

Sometimes, we must analyse accurately the context of a verb to distinguish whether an intellectual or a physical activity is being expressed, since some verbs with a clear meaning of physical activity are sometimes used in figurative language to denote an intellectual activity:

Bernard, sensing that he *was touching* a sore topic, did not pursue it.

(Lodge, D. 1991:42)

C3) VERBS WHICH EXPRESS AN ACTIVITY WITHOUT MOVEMENT (*stand*, *sit*, *lie*, etc.). These verbs seem to express a state with a duration, usually limited by the context, rather than an activity in process.

Your auntie will *be sitting* up in bed in a lace cap when Belgium produces a composer.

(Stoppard, T. 1981: 14)

In another corner a dozen people *were lying* in a circle listening to the Watergate tapes.

(Sharpe,T.1976:37)

In spite of this detailed subdivision of the 'verbs of activity', there are some examples that cannot be included in any of the subgroups. The verbs used in these sentences are *do, go on, happen*, etc. The speaker does not explain which activity he wants to express and his intention when using these verbs is to cause ambiguity which will usually be solved in a reply by another character.

What *are* you *doing* here?

(Stoppard,T.1981:38)

I gotta find out for sure what's *goin'* on.

(Shepard,S.1986:26)

D) VERBS OF PROCESS (*change, grow, mature*, etc.): These verbs express a process, every process implies a change, and has a beginning and an end that will show the results of the process. These are some examples:

I *was* just *getting* everything straight.

(Stoppard,T.1981:25)

The Fenland College of Arts and Technology *was expanding*.

(Sharpe,T.1976:13)

Get is one of the most common verbs to express process, with the support of the complements that specify its meaning. In the first example, the subject is in the process of 'getting everything straight'. The starting situation is a misunderstanding and the final situation will be the understanding.

In the second example the initial situation was a small institution and the process will finish when the institution gets larger.

E) VERBS OF INERT PHYSICAL PERCEPTION (*see, smell, taste*, etc.). Leech (1971) and Quirk et al.(1972), as Poustma (1921) had done much earlier, included in this group verbs that convey passive sensorial perceptions, that is, independent from the subject's will. We think it more appropriate to include all passive physical perceptions, so that sentences with verbs such as *feel* with the meaning of 'feeling sick' (though we will not include, for example, the meaning of 'feeling sad') or *spin* with the meaning of 'someone's head is spinning' can be considered. These are some examples:

Are you *hearin'* me?

(Shepard,S.1986:24)

But I would ask you - assembled here in this house of God - to recognise that we *are witnessing* something new - something so unexpected, so unusual that it is not surprising the government is at a loss. (Briley,J.1982:41)

In the first example, the verb *hear* replaces the verb *listen* taking the meaning of the latter. From our point of view, the author uses this verb on purpose. The hearer appears for the speaker as performing the role of a deaf man, as expressed by the context. This situation would explain the use of *hear* instead of *listen*.

Other examples in this group are:

Mom thinks she's *feeling* her ashtma, and so...

(Allen,W.1986:12)

Within seconds my head *was spinning* - a really nice sensation.

(Dally,W.K.1987:10)

This group of verbs was included, in Leech (1971) and Quirk et al.'s (1972) classifications, among those that were seldom found in the progressive form. As has been shown there are enough examples in today's language to consider the use of this verbal form as usual, though its frequency with this kind of verbs is lower than with other verbs such as those of activity.

The progressive with verbs of inert physical perception expresses an action in progress, as with other verbs; something that happens during the time denoted by the context, and which can be different from what happens habitually, as expressed by the simple form.

F) VERBS OF INERT MENTAL PERCEPTION AND COGNITION (*forget, understand, feel, suffer, etc.*). In earlier classifications only the verbs that convey a state or attitude of the mind were in this group. It was a state or attitude not intended by the subject (*forget, understand, etc.*). We have kept this definition of the group, but adding to it the verbs of inert mental perception, which had not been considered by other linguists. In doing so, we can include verbs such as *feel, suffer* or *have* with the meaning of 'feeling or suffering psychologically'.

Leech stated that when a verb of this group was found in the progressive form, there should be an intended activity implied in the verbal meaning. We cannot find this implication in sentences like the following:

Like she *was imagining* someone else touching her.

(Shepard,S.1986:8)

Just a moment, *aren't you forgetting* the interview?

(Stoppard,T.1981:16)

In the first example, there cannot be intention on the part of the speaker because it is the description of a dream. The progressive form means the action is in progress, whereas the simple form would mean an habitual action or an action seen as a whole. Neither seems to be intention in the second example; this question could not be admitted with the sense of '*Aren't you forgetting (on purpose) the interview?*'. In this sentence the progressive form also denotes an action in progress; but moreover, the use

of the simple form could mean a change in the linguistic register. The context tells us that the sentence is part of a dialogue between two characters: a polite shopkeeper and a potential ironic insolent servant. The shopkeeper, who pronounces the sentence, tries to show his best qualities and talks to the servant with great respect. The use of the progressive form is due in this case to the intention of respect by the speaker. A simple form could have led to misunderstanding.

These are some other examples with verbs of inert mental perception:

It's her mind that's *suffering* now, you see, not her body; physically she's absolutely fit again, I should say.

(Amis, K. 1953:9)

How d'you know she's not just *panicking*?

(Lodge, D. 1991:50)

These are examples of mental perception, and the use of the progressive form is due exclusively to the need to express the action in progress. None of these sentences can have the meaning of an activity intended by the subject.

Therefore, we think that the use of the progressive form with the verbs of inert mental perception or cognition does not imply necessarily an intended activity by the subject, its basic meaning of 'action in progress' is the most important one in this group of verbs.

G) RELATIONAL VERBS (*be, have, resemble, depend, deserve, etc.*). Leech (1971:20) gave to this group the name of 'verbs of state of having and being'. In this group he included the copulative verbs, *have*, and verbs that imply in their meaning the sense of 'having' or 'being' and which can often be substituted by a paraphrasis with *be* or *have* (for example, *resemble = be like*). This definition of the group is from our point of view ambiguous and too difficult.

Apart from the verbs of inert physical perception and inert mental perception and cognition, Poustma (1921:85ff.) talked about another two groups of verbs which were 'reluctant' to the use of the progressive form. The first one included the copulas classified by this linguist in:

- Copulas of the first type: *be* and other verbs, with not very specific meanings, that have the same function as *be*;

- Copulas of the second type: verbs like *remain*, with specific meaning, but with a predicative complement: *They remained silent*.

The second group was formed by verbs of adverbial relation, such as *appear, seem, like, hate, prefer, change, happen, need*, followed by an infinitive: *You happen to mention the very subject I wanted to consult you*.

But Poustma's description, though clearer than that of Leech, still leaves aside some verbs such as: *belong, contain, consist, cost, depend, deserve, matter, own, resemble, or*

have. Quirk gives to these verbs the name of 'relational verbs'. This is for us the most simple and appropriate denomination, since all these verbs express a relation between the subject and the direct object.

Therefore, in our classification, we will include the copulas³³ and the verbs of adverbial relation, as they were described by Poustma, and the relational verbs, as defined by Quirk et al., in the group of 'relational verbs'.

There are not many examples of the use of these verbs in the progressive form. These are some of the examples:

'Poor Henry's *looking* so forlorn', said Sally, 'I'll go and transfuse him.'
(Amis, K. 1953:39)

In this example the progressive form means an unusual state of this person.

There are some other examples in which we can find the verb *have*. We have already seen other examples with the use of this verb in the progressive form which are included in other groups. This is due to the variety of meanings this verb can have. In this sentence *have* is a relational verb:

We'd also *been having*... discussions... about how we would register the baby, if it was born before the day of census.

(Dally, W.K. 1987:8)

The progressive form is used in this case to express the repetition of the action, the action has been in process during some time due to its constant repetition.

H) VERBS OF BODILY SENSATIONS (*ache, itch, hurt, etc.*). These verbs can be used in the simple and progressive form without any change in their meaning. In spite of being common verbs in colloquial English we have not found examples of their use in the progressive form in the corpus of this study. The reason must be not only the low frequency with which they are used in literary works, but also the reduced number of verbs that are included in this group.

By means of this classification, we have tried to provide a new perspective to the relationship between the progressive form and the meaning of the verbs. First of all, we think we have proved that a verb cannot be considered as an isolated unit for this kind of classification, since, on most occasions, its meaning depends on the context. Secondly, we have adopted different criteria in our classification, since instead of classifying verbs at random, we have tried to be exhaustive including each and every example of the use of the progressive form that appears in our corpus in any of the groups of the classification. This has sometimes meant taking decisions about verbs that, despite having specified their meaning by means of the context, still could have been included in some other group if another point of view had been taken.

In conclusion, we can say that the progressive form is present in all the groups of verbs, though its frequency varies considerably. The use of the progressive form will

depend on the sense the speaker wants to give to the verb, always bearing in mind that there are verbs that, because of their meaning, have a narrower relationship with the progressive form, whereas for some others that relationship is not so obvious. This circumstance does not prevent, however, its use; it outlines the willingness of the speaker to give a special nuance to his discourse.

It is not possible, then, to speak about verbs totally incompatible with the progressive form; there can always be a context that justifies the presence of the progressive form with any verb.

Notes

1. The works used in this study are:

NOVELS:

Amis, K. (1953) *Lucky Jim*; Nabokov, V. (1955) *Lolita*; Sharpe, T. (1976) *Wilt*; Lodge, D. (1991) *Paradise News*.

THEATRE:

Williams, T. (1956) *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*; Stoppard, T. (1981) *On the Razzle*; Shepard, S. (1986) *A Lie of the Mind*; Dunne, F. (1987) *Dreams of Dublin Bay*; Dally, W.K. (1987) *Mary's*.

CINEMA SCRIPTS:

Briley, J. (1982) *Gandhi*; Allen, W. (1986) *Hannah and her Sisters*; Hampton, Ch. (1989) *Dangerous Liaisons*; Scorsese, M. and Pileggi, N. (1990) *Goodfellas*.

POETRY:

Contemporary Verse (1945-1980); *Contemporary American Poetry*; Heaney, S. (1991) *Seeing Things*; Gunn, T. (1992) *The Man with Night Sweats*.

We have consulted the first fifty pages of each work, except for two theatre works, *Mary's* and *Dreams of Dublin Bay*, which have 18 and 14 pages respectively; and *Contemporary Verse (1945-1980)* and *Contemporary American Poetry*, the examples of which have been taken from the 50 last pages, since they had more recent poetry.

2. As we will see, both classifications have much in common, which must be due to the influence of Geoffrey Leech on this work, since he is also one of the authors.

3. Except *be*, that in its use in the progressive form, has been included in the group C1) Verbs of intellectual or sensorial activity.

REFERENCES

Allen, W. 1988 [1986]. *Hannah and her Sisters*. London: Faber and Faber.

Amis, K. 1982 [1953]. *Lucky Jim*. Middlesex: Penguin.

Briley, J. 1982. *Gandhi*. London: Duckworth.

- Comrie, B. 1976. *Aspect: an introduction to the study of verbal aspect and related problems*. Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dally, W.K. 1987. *Mary's*. In *Best Radio Plays of 1987*. London: Methuen.
- Hampton, Ch. 1989. *Dangerous Liaisons*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Leech, G.N. 1971. *Meaning and the English verb*. London: Longman.
- Lodge, D. 1992 [1991]. *Paradise News*. Middlesex: Penguin.
- Poustma, H. 1921. *The Characters of the English Verb and the Expanded Form*, Groningen.
- Quirk et al. 1972. *A Grammar of Contemporary English*. London: Longman.
- Sharpe, T. 1976. *Wilt*. London: Pan Books Ltd.
- Shepard, S. 1987 [1986]. *A Lie of the Mind*. London: Methuen.
- Stoppard, T. 1982 [1981]. *On the Razzle*. London: Faber and Faber.