

THE PROBLEMATIC PROGRESSIVE

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English mother tongue speakers very seldom find the Progressive form problematic. However mother tongue errors are not uncommon, because ideal competence, whether mother tongue or second language, is never completely manifested in real competence (Streiff 1978). It is obvious that a second language speaker's competence is generally (but not always; for example, Joseph Conrad and Vladimir Nabokov) inferior to that of a mother tongue speaker. Therefore, the second language speaker will experience more difficulty in the learning of target forms. This observation is nowhere truer than in the learning of the English Progressive forms. It is common knowledge that black learners of English very rarely master the Progressive forms: this paper endeavours to show why.

Before analysing the English Progressive, I think it appropriate at this point to distinguish between natural and unnatural (cognitive) language learning (I'm not sure whether "unnatural" is such a suitable term, because it assumes that we know what "natural" is; perhaps the distinction between "child" language learning and "adult" - twelve years and older - language learning would be better). A

second language learner can easily master the language if it is learnt in a natural situation, on condition that learning takes place before the end of the critical period, i.e. up to about 12 years old (researchers differ on the age limit of the critical period; Lenneberg 1967, Schumann 1982); and even after the critical period, a natural situation will generally be superior to a cognitive approach. Of course individual differences need to be considered, because there are learners who thrive on the cognitive approach. Many modern theorists advocate the communicative approach to second language learning, i.e. it is recommended that language use should precede and even dominate the rule learning approach (Widdowson 1978, 1979, Savignon 1983). They maintain that for most learners the cognitive approach, i.e. learning rules, is far more difficult. Whether these theorists are right, the communicative approach seems to produce few positive results in the learning of the Progressive forms. The use of the English Progressive among mother tongue speakers may generally require no conscious manipulation, but the second language speaker, in this context the South African black speaker, whose success generally depends on rule learning, is faced with what I believe to be an insurmountable problem. Therefore, I consider this discussion more in terms of a campaign than an analysis.

In this attempt to clarify the nature of the English Progressive, I'd like the reader to imagine the second language learner in the classroom, trapped within the recesses of the analysis, like a novice surfer caught up in the froth of a giant wave. I shall attempt to show that he'll probably drown.

This discussion is divided into the following sections:

1. Tense and Aspect.
2. Forms and uses of the English Progressive.
3. The Distinction between English Progressive and non-Progressive forms.

1. Tense and Aspect in English

Leech and Svartvik define tense and aspect in the following way:

By tense we understand the correspondence between the form of the verb and our concept of time (past, present or future). Aspect concerns the manner in which a verbal action is experienced or regarded: for example as complete or as in progress. (1975:305)

According to Leech and Svartvik, English has two tenses: the Simple Present and the Simple Past, and two marked aspects: the Progressive and the Perfective. Both the Simple Present and the Simple Past, as their names indicate, consist of only one verb.

The suffix *-ing* indicates the Progressive aspect, and the auxiliary *have* (or *had*) indicates the Perfective aspect. Leech and Svartvik give the four basic combinations of verbs in verb phrases which contain more than one verb (1975:305):

- A. Modal, e.g. *He can type well.*
- B. Perfective, e.g. *He has (had) typed several letters.*
- C. Progressive, e.g. *He was typing when the telephone rang.*
- D. Passive, e.g. *Several letters were being typed by him.*

The reason why the Future form is not regarded as a tense is because it is either a Modal form, e.g. *He will type well*, or a Progressive form, e.g. *He is going to type well*.

Leech and Svartvik have defined "tense" above as the "correspondence between the form of the verb and our concept of time...". Although "tense" often corresponds to "time", this is not always the case, i.e. the Past tense and the Present tense need not refer only to past and present time respectively.

Palmer (1971:38) gives the following examples:

1A *I wish I knew.*

Knew in this utterance is a Past tense form, but it does not refer to past time.

Another example is the use of the Present tense in narrative to

make past time more immediate to the reader (a common literary device), e.g.

2A *He feels in his pockets, but the keys aren't there.*

Nehls refers to the above examples as "tense metaphors", because they occur in unusual contexts (1978:58).

Contrary to Nehls, Sopher does not think that the lack of correspondence between tense and time is an unusual phenomenon, but regards it as the norm rather than the exception:

In fact there is a considerable overlap in the time reference of the various tenses and no one tense has the monopoly of any particular time-context. The writer/speaker may, in a particular context, have a choice of various possible tenses, and his choice will be determined by stylistic considerations. (1971:51)

Therefore, tense, contrary to Leech and Svartvik, need not always correspond to time, and if Sopher is correct it is language use which determines the use of tense, not time. It appears that Sopher's term "stylistic" refers to far more than literature. It refers to the whole domain of language appropriacy, i.e. to socio-linguistic context or discourse. If Sopher is correct, and I believe he is, there is little value in learning textbook grammar unless it relates to language in use. On the other hand, one can learn a lot of English if one follows Leech and Svartvik's rule that time is equivalent to tense.

Nehls believes that the term "aspect" should be reserved for the opposition between the "expanded" form and the "non-expanded" form (1978:48). The "expanded" form refers to the Progressive, i.e. *I am eating*, the "non-expanded" form to Simple forms like *I eat/ate*. Nehls, it seems, would then regard the Progressive as an aspect, and a non-Progressive form (non-expanded) as a tense.

2. **Forms and uses of the Progressive**

The Progressive aspect emphasises duration and can appear under

the following forms (the basic classification is taken from Leech and Svartvik).

(i) The temporary present:

- 3A *Hurry they're leaving.*
- 4A *They're having their breakfast.*
- 5A *We're living in London.*

The emphasis here is on limited duration.

In contrast with the Progressive aspect compare the Simple Present tense which conveys the concept of permanence and permanent habit:

- 6A *It's very hot in Botswana.* (permanent)
- 7A *The people here are very friendly.* (permanent habit)

(ii) Temporary habit:

- 8A *He is working in the garden this week.*
- 9A *She is making breakfast while her mother is away.*

(iii) Continuousness:

- 10A *The pupils are always doing the wrong thing.*

The Progressive is often identified with the continuous tense, and for many teachers of English, the two are synonymous. We see from this classification that continuousness is only one function of the Progressive aspect.

(iv) Repetition of temporary events:

- 11A *Every time I see him, he is picking his nose.*

(v) Temporariness (or something busy being done):

Compare the Simple Past tense with the Past Progressive aspect -

- 12A *He baked a cake.*
- 13A *He was baking a cake.*
- 14A *She wrote a letter this morning.*
- 15A *She was writing a letter this morning.*

(vi) Immediate future events:

Compare the following two utterances -

- 16A *They're having a lecture this afternoon.*
- 17A *They're going on honeymoon.*

3. **The distinction between Progressive and non-Progressive forms**

Leech and Svartvik are not correct in their assertion that the "meaning" the Progressive aspect is 'limited' duration" (1975:64). The use of the Present Progressive to express future time indicates that the Progressive does not always express duration. Palmer (1965:98) mentions other forms which do not indicate duration, e.g.

- 18A *I'm forgetting names nowadays.*
- 19A *I'm seeing things.*
- 20A *I'm feeling the cold nowadays.* (habitual actions over a limited period)
- 21A *I'm continually forgetting names.* (sporadic repetition).
- 22A *We're living in London at the moment.* (moved there recently)

Palmer refers to the verbs in 18A - 22A as "non-progressive" verbs, which may take Progressive forms (1965:98); see also Scheffer (1975:23) who shows that the term "progressive" covers more than the concept of duration.

Palmer believes that in most State verbs (which describe a state) and Private verbs (which indicate an internal condition of the speaker), the concept of duration is contained in the lexical meaning of the verb. He maintains that there is no need to indicate duration by means of the Progressive aspect (1965:97). In other words, a Progressive meaning may be implicit in a Present

Simple form, e.g. *I want* in the utterance *I want a pen* could imply Progressive meaning. It's difficult to understand Palmer's reasoning here due to the nebulousness of the identification of the term of "want" with the *concept* of wanting"; his reasoning is hard to follow. To put it bluntly, when somebody *wants* must he be *wanting*?

Here are a few other examples, given by Palmer, of non-Progressive forms, which when used in the Simple Present tense are purported to indicate Progressive meaning: *taste*, *smell*, *think* and *feel*. But these non-Progressive forms may indeed be used in the Progressive form, e.g. *I'm tasting the food*, *I'm smelling the flowers*, *I'm thinking about it*, *I'm feeling fine*. However, Palmer does admit that it is not always easy to categorize a verb semantically: "We are on the borderline of lexis and grammar, and some decisions will have to be arbitrary" (1965:101). Palmer also points out that the Progressive aspect may indicate ambiguous meaning, e.g. *I am reading a book*, which could either indicate that the reading is taking place at the moment, or that part of the book has been read with the intention of continuing reading it. Palmer's reasoning is spurious. It may be that from the sentential (what Widdowson 1978, 1979 refers to as "propositional meaning" or "text" or "usage") point of view, ambiguity is possible, but from the point of language in use (which Widdowson refers to as "discourse") any ambiguity is eclipsed by the context.

If the Progressive aspect refers to "duration" and the non-Progressive form to State, it seems reasonable to suggest the possibility that if State verbs could contain Progressive meaning, as Palmer believes, there would be no need to have Progressive forms to express Progressive meaning. If it could be demonstrated that it is possible for the majority of State and Private verbs to exist in both the Progressive and the non-Progressive forms, this could indicate that Progressive meaning may only be conveyed explicitly by means of the Progressive aspect (form); otherwise there would be no need to have a Progressive form to express Progressive meaning; the job could be done by the State verbs, as Palmer indicates (unless the Progressive is, in this case, an alternate form of saying the same thing).

Let us now consider Coe's (1980) position with regard to State and Progressive verbs. He compares the following pair of utterances:

A. *Maura is watching a play.*

B. *She thinks it very good.*

He comments:

If the meaning of the verb refers to an activity (example A), then the verb can have progressive forms in that meaning; if the verb does not refer to an activity then it cannot have progressive forms in that meaning. In other words, if the meaning is not about what someone does, then the verb in that meaning can only go in the present simple. (1980:124)

If "activity" involves "duration", then Coe's argument would contradict that of Palmer who has stated that "duration" may be contained in the Simple Present form of Private and State verbs. So a State verb such as *taste*, *smell* and *think* (Palmer's examples mentioned above), which Palmer states contains the concept of duration, cannot be activity verbs, because according to Coe, activity verbs must take the Progressive form. I have shown above that Progressive forms of Palmer's State verbs such as *I am thinking*, *She is tasting* are legitimate, and the operations described in these two utterances, unless my reasoning is faulty, appear to be activities. So it seems that Coe would agree that if *I am thinking* can be described as an activity, the Progressive form of the verb must be correct.

Coe mentions two groups of verbs which he believes cannot take the Progressive form:

Group 1. "Verbs with meanings connected with knowledge, belief, appearance, emotion and the senses: *appear*, *consider*, *envy*, *expect*, *forget*, *hate*, *like*, *love*, *understand*, *want* and *wish*."

But what about the following forms?

23A *I'm loving (or hating) every minute of it.*

- 24A *I'm wishing it away.*
25A *He's forgetting himself.*
26A *I'm understanding him more as each day goes by.*
27A *We were wanting to talk to you.* (See Leech and Svartvik, 1975:71 for this particular example.)

Coe does not distinguish between the written form and the spoken form. Most of these examples, 23A - 27A, could be regarded as exceptional in the written form, but as typical in speech.

Group 2. Relational verbs, i.e. "verbs which refer to relations, qualities or capacities: *be, belong, concern, contain, cost, equal.*"

But what about the following?

- 28A *It's costing a lot of money to feed all these cats (brats).*
29A *Look! Zola is equalling the world record.*

Examples 23A - 29A reveal that there is a distinction in meaning between Progressive forms and Simple forms of these "relational verbs"; the only reasonable explanation seems to be that there exist two different forms, because they have, as I have argued above, distinct semantic roles to play (the Progressive is one form a second language learner can do without, especially where it is (claimed by experts to be) semantically redundant).

It has been shown that there are many Private and State verbs, more than Palmer and Coe perhaps assume, which may have their Progressive equivalent. The problem is that the grammatical rules governing the classification of verbs into State and Progressive categories are not consistent. Ultimately it is language use which determines the appropriateness of the form. Here are some examples:

- 30A **I am wanting a pen.*
31A **I am desiring better behaviour.*

Consider now the Past Progressive forms of these verbs:

- 32A *I was wanting to see you.*

33A **I was desiring better behaviour.*

Examples 30A, 31A (perhaps a case could be made for their acceptability) and 33A are incorrect. The Past Progressive form 32A is correct, while 33A is incorrect. There is no grammatical rule which can explain the correctness of 32A and the incorrectness of 33A. The explanation must lie in language use.

Here is a summary of English verbs which may assist in clarifying the relationship between Progressive and non-Progressive forms.

Group A - Verbs which may have either a Simple or a Progressive form in the appropriate situations. For example, Simple forms like walk (walked), talk (talked) will always have a corresponding context in which the Progressive form may be used; *I walk/I am walking.*

Group B - Verbs where the Progressive form (meaning) can also imply the Simple form (meaning) but not the other way round, e.g. it is possible to say *I won't be able to come this evening because my back is aching* or *I won't be able to come this evening because my back aches*, but in the utterance *My back aches every time I pick up the chair*, it is not possible to substitute *My back is aching...* for "My back aches..." (see Nehls 1978:47).

Group C - State verbs which may be expressed by either Progressive or non-Progressive forms in the same context. Nehls (1978) gives the following example:

34A1 *He hopes to get some leave next month.*

34A2 *He is hoping to get some leave next month.*

Group D - State (which subsumes "private" and "relational" verbs) verbs which may never be expressed by the Progressive form, e.g.

35A **I was trusting him.*

36A **I was knowing her.*

Group E - State verbs which rarely use the Progressive form, e.g. *I was loving, I was wanting.*

In conclusion, this discussion has attempted to show how difficult it is for a mother tongue speaker of (or indeed an expert in) English to delineate the boundaries of the English Progressive. It has been shown that it is not possible to devise consistent rules for this recalcitrant form. All the more difficult must it be to teach it to second language learners. I mentioned at the beginning of this discussion that although the communicative approach to language teaching is, nowadays, generally the most acceptable method of teaching a second language, this method may not be the most appropriate one to teach the Progressive. The reason for this, as I mentioned earlier, is the scant exposure of the learner to real language situations. Perhaps it would be possible to combine a communicative with a cognitive (grammatical) approach. My opinion, based on fifteen years experience in second language teaching in black education, is that there is little hope that forms such as "I am having a headache" will ever be eradicated.

I hope that the custodians of the English language, who prescribe usage to those unfortunate victims of our beautiful unruly English language, show some flexibility and learn to accept the "I am having a headache"s and the "I am trusting that you will do something quickly to change this insufferable situation"s. Otherwise I may have laboured in vain.

I end with a bit of pithy advice from Angus Rose:

Any language worth its salt is a living, dynamic entity, with a soul and character of its own, as well as a unique kind of independence that is blissfully immune to the tinkering of cranks, bores, fops, fundis and other kinds of linguistic do-gooders who fondly believe they can alter its relentless course. History has shown that whenever someone (or a group of someones) tries to 'fix' a language, then one of two things invariably happens: either the fixer comes to a sticky and unsuccessful end, or the language itself becomes moribund and petrified. (Rose, 1987:33).

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