

Recent changes in the use of the progressive construction in English*

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1 Introduction

A classical distinction has entrenched itself in linguistics, namely the diachronic and synchronic ways of studying a language. The first considers language in its stages of development, whereas the latter looks at languages viewed from the present moment. This old Saussurean dichotomy has recently been called into question, and it has been argued that the distinction is artificial (see, for example, Labov 1972). Instead, it is argued that languages change all the time, even within the synchronic phases. As a result of these new attitudes to language development there has emerged a new research impetus in linguistics which concerns itself with what has been called *recent (or current) change* (see Mair 1995, 1997; Mair and Hundt 1995, 1997, Denison 1998, Leech 2000, Smith and Leech 2001, Smith 2005, Mair and Leech 2006, Leech *et al.* 2009). Christian Mair at Freiburg was the first to construct parallel corpora of written British and American English spanning four decades in the twentieth century (the *LOB/FLOB* and *Brown/Frown* corpora). These are excellent resources enabling linguists to research changes in written English over 30 years. Manual searches are still unavoidable, however, as these corpora have not been parsed.

constructing a corpus of British English comprising selections of spontaneous spoken English from the *London-Lund Corpus* (dating from the late 1950s to early 1970s) and from the British component of the *International Corpus of English, ICE-GB* (dating from the 1990s). This corpus, which we have called a *Diachronic Corpus of Present-Day Spoken English (DCPSE)*, will allow researchers to investigate recent changes in the grammar and usage of Present-Day English over a period of 25-35 years. DCPSE differs from FLOB and Frown in a number of important ways. Firstly, the corpus is unique in containing exclusively spoken English. We opted for a corpus of spoken English because it is generally recognised that spoken language is primary, and the first locus of changes in lexis and grammar. Secondly, the corpus is parsed, which will permit research

In this paper we will look at the changing use of a particular grammatical construction in English, namely the progressive, which has recently been receiving a lot of attention. Our data are derived from DCPSE. We will show how it can be used to perform constructional searches in spoken English.

2 Changes in the Use of the English Progressive: Previous Studies

It is commonly accepted that the progressive increased in frequency during the nineteenth century (see e.g. Denison 1998, Hundt 2004, Smitterberg 2005, Núñez-Pertejo 2007, and Aarts, López-Couso and Méndez-Naya, forthcoming). Recent research has shown that the nineteenth century trend of an increase in the frequency of use of the progressive has persisted into the twentieth century. Hundt (2004) uses ARCHER (A Representative Corpus of Historical English Registers) to track the use of the progressive from 1650 to 1990.¹ Her results indicate a rise in the frequency of the progressive in the twentieth century (lower line in Figure 1).

Figure 1: Evidence for the rise of the progressive in Modern British English writing.

Kranich (2008) investigates the progressive using ARCHER-2. Like Hundt, her results indicate a continued increase in the frequency of the progressive in the 20th century, as shown in the upper line in Figure 1 (Kranich: 2008: 178).² However, what is not clear is whether the rise that is observed is due to a shift toward the progressive within a set of alternative verbal constructions.

Mair and Leech (2006: 323) investigate the increased use of the progressive using the Brown quartet of corpora. Table 1 shows that in British English the use of the progressive seems to be advancing more quickly than in American English. British English has a higher frequency of

progressives than American English in 1961 and the use of the progressive increases by a larger percentage between 1961 and 1991/92.

(PRESS)	1961	1991/92	% rise from 1961
British English (LOB/ FLOB)	606	716	

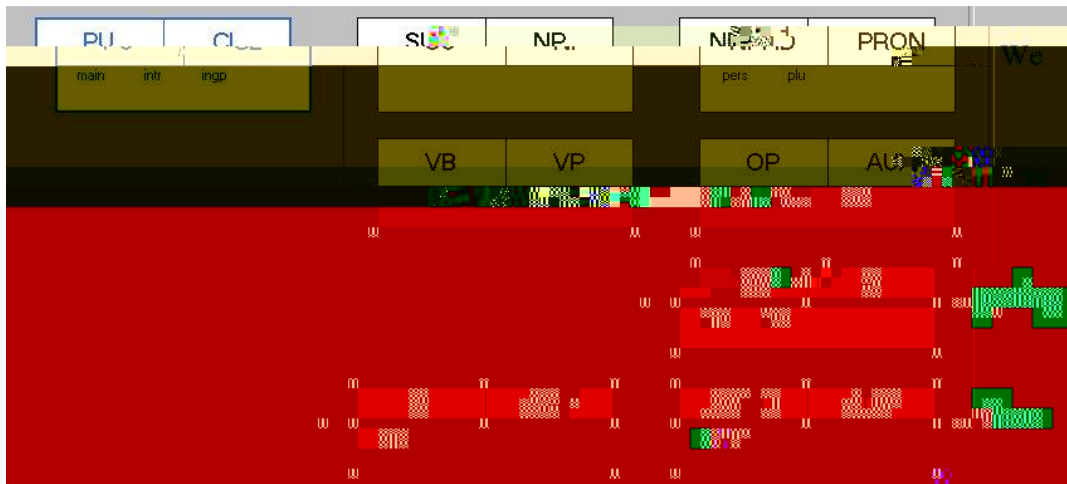


Figure 2: The tree diagram for [unclear] from DCPSE (here visualised left-to-right).⁷

In this tree diagram each lexical item, phrase and clause is associated with a node which contains function information (top left), form information (top right), as well as features (bottom portion). Using this architecture DCPSE can be searched with the corpus exploration software ICECUP (the *International Corpus of English Corpus Utility Program*), developed at the SEU. This

3.2 *Investigating How the Use of the Progressive Varies*

In calculating the use of the progressive in DCPSE, we follow Smitterberg (2005) in measuring its use against the number of verb phrases, taking knock-out factors into account. As Sm are made. Firstly, we have not excluded stative verbs from the study; Mair and Leech (2006:324) point out that in twentieth century English the progressive may occur with stative verbs, although occurrences are too infrequent to account for the statistically significant overall increase of the progressive. Secondly, in order to exclude demonstrations and performatives as Smitterberg does, each example would need to be manually checked. As they

Comparing the spoken content in the ICE-GB and LLC corpora with the written LOB and FLOB corpora, Smith (2005) found that progressives were almost twice as frequent in spoken rather than wri

also led to an increase in frequency of the progressive construction in British English, particularly the present progressive.

(1)

(2)

tion; and, in

degree of pragmatic meaning and/or subjectivity on the part of the speaker than regular uses of the
et al.

Another use of the progressive construction, which may have contributed to its increased frequency, can be found in the examples below.

- (3) slogan)
- (4)
- (5) Who re you wanting to seduce? (DCPSE:DI-C01 #0211:1:A)

Stative verbs like *love* and *want* do occur in the progressive, although for many speakers the simple present is still the expected form. This usage is not new. Denison (1998: 146) records some examples from as early as 1803 and 1820, and an example with the verb *love* from 1917. Nevertheless, it would be fair to say that until quite recently utterances like (3) and (4) would have been less marked if they contained a verb in the simple present tense.

Mufwene (1984:36) presents a scale of stativity ,

- (6) **High:** e.g. *contain, know, belong to, consist of, need, concern, matter, owe*
Intermediate: e.g. *love, hate, depend, want, intend, wish*
Neutral: e.g. *enjoy, wait, stay, stand, lie; revolve, turn, work, run, read, write; call, claim, speak, say*
Punctual/low: e.g. *kick, reach, crack, die, break, hit, etc.*

The reports on the progressive discussed in section 2 above suggest that the progressive is spreading up the scale in PDE; currently it is often found with stative verbs such as *love, wish* and *want*, and perhaps in the future we will see an increase in use with verbs such as *know, need*, etc. Interestingly, in DCPSE, there is an example of *know* in the progressive from the 1961 data.

- (7) We will compare a play written in the Restoration Period with something that happened in Elizabethan times and we assume that our students *are knowing* what we are talking about you see. (DCPSE:DL-A01#0512)

5 Conclusions

In this paper we have shown how the *Diachroni* *Tf1 0 /sC-GBfor7BT/F4 12 Tfnr19(sC-GB)421.27 Tm(re)*

any linguistic construction, including the progressive, may not be constant between different time periods or genres. The danger is that we end up measuring two things at the same time (i) *the opportunity* to use the progressive combined with (ii) *the decision* to use the progressive, once the opportunity has arisen. Since we are interested in whether people increasingly choose to use the progressive, we must measure usage relative to opportunity.

A big advantage of using a parsed corpus like DCPSE is that in many cases the detailed grammatical analysis makes it easier to identify the set of cases where the opportunity for an event to occur arises. Ideally, we would wish to count the set of *true alternates*, i.e. those cases where we can say that the speaker could have chosen to use the progressive, but did not. This could be done by check

Notes

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9 For more details on ICE-GB, DCPSE and ICECUP, see Aarts *et al.* (1998), Nelson *et al.* (2002), as well as www.ucl.ac.uk/english-usage/projects/dcpse/research.htm.

10 Smitherberg (2005:47) also excludes non-finite VPs (progressive and non-progressive) on the grounds that in terms of complementation the choice seems to be between a *to*-infinitive and present participle (e.g. *She continued to read* vs. *She continued reading*) rather than a progressive and a non-progressive *to*-infinitive (e.g. *She continued to be reading* vs *She continued to read*). It seems to us that this depends on the verb in the super-ordinate clause; in PDE with a verb like *pretend* for example, the choice does seem to be between progressive and non-progressive (e.g. *She pretended to be reading* vs. *She pretended to read*). In order to exclude non-finite verb phrases, each example would have to be checked. This was beyond the scope of this paper.

11 Strictly speaking, we should add, *for language data consistent with the sampling of the corpus*. One possibility is that the way that samples were collected by Randolph Quirk *et al.* differs from

12 The simple Binomial confidence interval for a probability (or percentage) is calculated by the following formula.

$$e = z_{crit} \sqrt{p(1-p)/N}$$

where z_{crit} is the critical value of z for a given confidence level, p is the probability of the event occurring (in this case, that the VP is progressive) and N is the total number of cases (i.e. applicable VPs). $(1-p)$ is the probability that the VP is *not* progressive. Note that for a 95% confidence interval, z_{crit} is approximately 1.96.

13 r^2 , fitting to a power law, is approximately ~95%). There are a number of sources of variance. Our samples are relatively small, the numbers of texts used in any given year are limited, and in DCPSE annual samples are not consistently balanced. Note that these sampling issues, while important to bear in mind, have not proved to be a barrier to obtaining this corpus-wide trend.

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