

## On the progression of the progressive in early Modern English

*Johan Elsness, University of Oslo*

### *Introduction*

The progressive verb form in English is well worth our attention for at least two reasons.<sup>1</sup> One reason is that this construction, consisting of a form of TO BE followed by the *-ing*-form of the next verb in the verb phrase, is one which does not have any obvious parallel in any of the languages that English is most closely related with. Hence the study of this form is important from a contrastive point of view, and for the teaching of English as a second language. Obviously, it makes a great deal of difference whether one says 'I crossed the street when I noticed her.' rather than 'I was crossing the street when I noticed her.', or 'Mary speaks with an Irish accent.' rather than 'Mary is speaking with an Irish accent.', and that is a difference which foreign learners need to be taught.

Also, the frequency of the progressive has long been on the increase, an increase which seems to be continuing unabated in present-day English, which makes it all the more important that we should try to understand the use and meaning of this verb form. To further that understanding it may be helpful to study the historical development of the progressive: how it came to be what it is.

400 years ago the position of the progressive was very different from what it is today. Then Polonius could ask, 'What do you read, my lord?'. And Hamlet himself could begin his last speech with the words 'O, I die, Horatio'. Today the good Lord Chamberlain would have had to rephrase his question and rather ask, 'What are you reading, my lord?', and whatever a present-day Hamlet would say in similarly dire circumstances, he would hardly choose the non-progressive present.

Not surprisingly, the terms used to refer to this construction have varied. 'Definite', 'expanded', 'continuous', 'progressive' have all been used. What is more surprising, considering what is very often the situation as regards linguistic terminology, is that the position today is characterised by something approaching consensus: the term 'progressive' has now been almost universally adopted, obviously because a central

element in the meaning of this verb form is to describe an action as on-going, as being in progress. It should be noted, however, that considered as a description of meaning the term 'progressive' may be less apt in references to earlier English.

### ***The progressive meaning***

Nowadays the progressive meaning is often defined in terms of the general linguistic concept of aspect, more particularly the contrast between perfective and imperfective aspect: a progressive verb form signals imperfective aspect, with certain qualifications a non-progressive verb form typically signals perfective aspect. This is broadly the view of Comrie (1976), and also of many others who have looked into these matters recently.

If a situation is referred to perfectively, the whole situation is referred to in its entirety, without regard to its internal temporal structure. In the imperfective case, on the other hand, the reference is explicitly to the internal temporal structure of the situation, and there is no implication of the situation being completed. In 'I crossed the street when I noticed her.' we are referring to the whole action of crossing the street – the reference is perfective – whereas 'I was crossing the street when I noticed her.' does not imply that I completed the action of crossing the street: I may have turned back when I noticed her, in order to talk to her, or perhaps in order to avoid having to talk to her; hence the reference is imperfective.

Leech (1971: 19) and Quirk *et al.* (1985: 198) are more concrete in their definition of the meaning of the progressive. Both publications describe this meaning in three points: (i) the progressive indicates duration; (ii) it indicates limited duration; and (iii) it indicates that the happening, as they call it, need not be complete.

### ***Sketch of historical development***

The historical origin and development of the progressive construction in English has been extensively discussed, by for instance Dal (1952), Jespersen (1931), Mossé (1938), Nehls (1988), Nickel (1966), Traugott (1972 and 1992) and Visser (1973). There seems to be pretty general agreement that at least as far as form is concerned it derives most directly from a construction in Old English, with parallels in many other early Germanic languages, which also consisted of a combination of a BE verb and a present participle, in Old English generally taking the

ending *-ende*.<sup>2</sup> According to Jespersen (1931: 165), this construction was more common in translations from Latin, especially of complex Latin verb forms, than in original Old English texts.

The use of the Old English equivalent of the Modern English progressive is illustrated by (1):

- (1) ... *æt scip wæs ealne weg yrnende* under segle. (From 'The voyages of Ohthere and Wulfstan')  
'... that ship *was* all the way *running* under sail.', as translated by Traugott (1972: 90)

It may be noted that the translation also has the progressive, although in this context it does not seem mandatory in present-day English. As many have observed, the Old English construction often expressed a general durative meaning rather than the limited duration characteristic of the present-day progressive. Traugott (1972: 90) quotes two Old English instances of the BE plus present participle construction where present-day English would definitely have the non-progressive (the translations are Traugott's):

- (2) [Orosius 8.14] of Danai *ære ie, seo is irnende* of nor *dæle*  
'from Danai that river which *is running* (=which runs) from northern-part'
- (3) [Orosius 12.35] *æt seo ea bið flowende* ofer eal *Ægypta land*  
'that this river *is flowing* (=floods) all Egyptians' land'

In Middle English two things happened: the BE plus present participle construction, never particularly frequent in Old English, became even less frequent, and the form of the present participle changed, from taking the ending *-ende* to taking *-ing*, to coincide with the nominal verb form known as the gerund, now regularly also ending in *-ing*. This meant not only that the construction of BE plus present participle became formally more similar to the progressive construction we are familiar with today; it also meant that the Middle English construction of BE plus present participle became more similar to another construction that occurred in Old and Middle English, with BE followed by a preposition, often *on*, plus the gerund, as in Old English

- (4) ... *Zyrstandæz ic wæs on huntunze* ... . (From *Ælfric, Colloquy* 68)

Here *huntunze* is the nominal verb form, the gerund, corresponding to Modern English *hunting*.<sup>3</sup> The meaning of this construction was apparently not very different from that of the modern progressive: 'Yesterday I was hunting.'

In Middle English similar constructions began to be common with just a light *a* before the main verb, as in 'He was a-hunting.', generally seen as a remnant of the full preposition.

If the preposition was not only reduced but dropped altogether, there was no longer any formal difference between the two constructions: that with BE followed by the present participle, and that with BE followed by the gerund, now without any intervening preposition.<sup>4</sup>

At about the same time that this levelling of the difference between the two constructions became widespread, i.e. roughly at the transition from Middle to Modern English at around A.D. 1500, the combined construction consisting of BE plus an *-ing*-form seems to have started to increase quite drastically in frequency.

### ***Increasing frequency in Modern English***

As regards the scale of the increase in Modern English, Jespersen (1931: 177) reports that he once asked one of his pupils (!) to make a comparison of the use of the progressive, or 'expanded' verb form, as Jespersen calls it, in two versions of the Gospel according to St. Mark: the Authorised Version from the beginning of the 17th century and the Twentieth Century Version from the early part of our own century. In the Authorised Version a total of 29 progressive forms were counted, in the Twentieth Century Version no less than 106, i.e. the frequency multiplied by not much less than four over that period of about 300 years.

Visser (1973: 1997) quotes Dennis (1940), who suggests that the frequency of the progressive may have multiplied ten to twenty times since around 1500.

Arnaud's (1983) investigation is confined to the 19th century, where he similarly records a marked increase in the frequency of the progressive.

In Elsness (1991; see also 1989) I report the results of a major investigation into the use of the perfect and the preterite in contemporary and earlier English, where occurrences of those elements in combination with the progressive were among the verb forms recorded. We shall see what my investigation revealed about the development of progressive forms in particular. Table 1 sets out the number of forms I recorded in which the progressive combines with the preterite and/or the perfect,

on the basis of a strictly formal definition of the progressive as a verb form consisting of a BE verb followed by the present participle. As can be seen, most of my corpus is divided into sections of 50-year periods distributed over intervals of in most cases 200 years. In the case of the present-day language and the period from 1750 to 1800 it is further divided into an American English and a British English section. Each of the sections from earlier English contains roughly 1,000 recorded verb forms, those from the present-day language – American and British – quite a few more. Hence comparison between the present-day sections and the various sections from earlier English should be based on the percentages rather than on the absolute frequencies.

Table 1: Progressive verb forms among all perfect/preterite verb forms in corpus used for study of the perfect and the preterite. Absolute frequencies and vertical percentages.

		OE	c1200	1350-1400	1550-1600
Progressive	n	3	0	4	3
	%	.3	.0	.4	.3
All perfect/preterite	N	1019	1018	1022	1034
	%	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
		1750-1800 AmE	present-day AmE	1750-1800 BrE	present-day BrE
Progressive	n	15	55	7	52
	%	1.5	3.5	.7	2.8
All perfect/preterite	N	1010	1588	1014	1883
	%	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

My figures confirm that the proportion of progressive constructions remains low from Old English through Middle English until the beginning of the Modern English period, and also that it was particularly rare in early Middle English; indeed, not a single progressive was recorded in my section from c1200. In Modern English, however, the frequency of the progressive increases very markedly, first from 1550-1600 to 1750-1800, and then there is a very distinct further increase up to present-day English. The increase can be seen to have been even more marked in the American than in the British English section of my corpus. My

findings suggest that the frequency of the progressive may have multiplied by as much as ten over the past 400 years, at least as far as perfect and preterite verb forms are concerned, while it had been stagnant before that.

Early Modern English thus emerges as a potentially important period in the development of the progressive construction as it is known in present-day English.

The study of the historical development of the English language up until that time has recently been made a great deal easier by the completion of the Helsinki Corpus, which is a computerised corpus consisting of texts extending from the earliest Old English period up until early Modern English (see Kytö 1991).

It is evident that in a full investigation of the development of the progressive one will have to look both at the impact of other uses of the present participle and the gerund, and at the relationship between the progressive and the non-progressive in various contexts. Here we shall have to focus exclusively on the progressive, looking at the occurrence of such forms in the Modern English section of the Helsinki Corpus. This Modern English section divides into three subsections, each covering a period of seventy years, from 1500 to 1570, from 1570 to 1640, and from 1640 to 1710. I shall refer to these as Period I, Period II and Period III, respectively. The sections covering Period I and Period II each contain about 190,000 words, that covering Period III about 171,000 words.

I shall later return to some of the problems of classification I encountered during my analysis of this corpus, although the majority of the recorded constructions are entirely straightforward instances of the progressive, which could easily occur and be recognised as such even in present-day English.

If a wide definition of the concept 'progressive verb form' is adopted, the corpus was found to contain a total of 185 instances of the progressive, in various combinations with the present and preterite tenses and other verbal categories. The distribution of these 185 occurrences over the three periods that the corpus is divided into, and over the various verb forms distinguished, is presented in Table 2. The results for the most important verb forms are illustrated in Figure 1.

Table 2 and Figure 1 demonstrate very convincingly that there was a sharp and consistent increase in the frequency of progressive verb forms during our period, i.e. roughly the first two centuries of Modern English. The overall relative frequency of the progressive increases very markedly

from Period I to Period II of our section of the Helsinki Corpus, and then it more than doubles from Period II to Period III.

Table 2.: Progressive verb forms in Modern English section of Helsinki Corpus. Absolute frequencies and relative frequencies per 1,000,000 words.

		Period I 1500-1570	Period II 1570-1640	Period III 1640-1710
Present	n	4	20	32
	rel	21.0	105.4	187.1
Preterite	n	17	30	48
	rel	89.4	158.1	280.6
Present perfect	n	2	0	4
	rel	10.5	0.0	23.4
Plu-perfect	n	0	0	1
	rel	0.0	0.0	5.8
Other	n	10	2	15
	rel	52.6	10.5	87.7
SUM	N	33	52	100
	rel	173.5	274.0	584.7

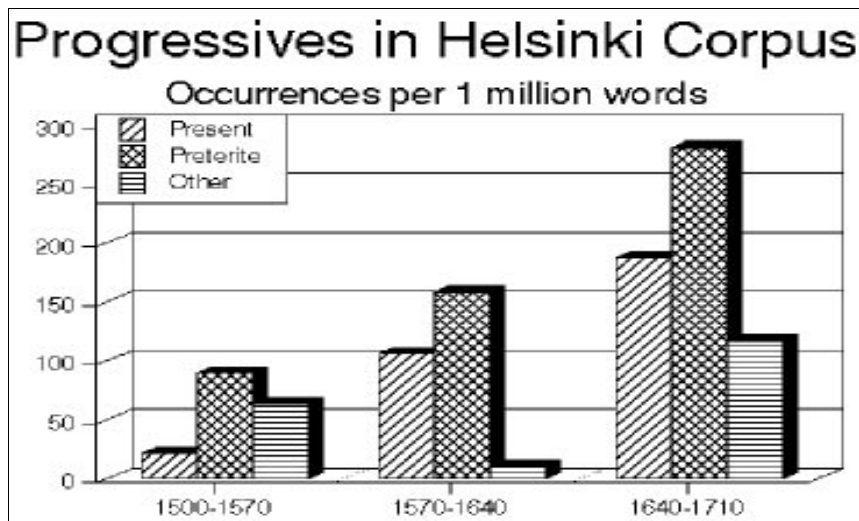


Figure 1. Progressive verb forms recorded in Modern English section of Helsinki Corpus. Relative frequencies per 1,000,000 words.

### ***Problems of classification***

As was made clear, the figures set out in Table 2 are those for progressive constructions taken in a wide sense. There are several problems of classification, so that a fair number of the constructions included are at best marginal progressives. Some of the problems are well-known from present-day English, not least the distinction between the progressive and apparently similar constructions with subject complements. The problem is illustrated by the following brief dialogue, quoted from Scheffer (1975):

- (5) A: Is your mother entertaining this season?  
B: Not particularly.

Here A probably intends the construction to be interpreted as progressive, but B misunderstands and takes *entertaining* as a subject complement. Such confusion may occur even in real life.

### ***Intervening preposition***

Other problems of classification have to do with differences between early Modern English and present-day English. One such problem is that in early Modern English some constructions which in other respects are similar to present-day progressives still have a preposition, or at least a prepositional remnant, between BE and the *-ing*-form. We shall look at some examples, first of constructions where the preposition appears in a reduced form, as just the letter *a*. In all but one of the instances recorded in the Modern English section of the Helsinki Corpus, this *a* is printed separate from the following verb:

- (6) ... and as I entryd ynto the castell yarde, the judgys  
*were a rysynge*, and they, seyng me comynge, sat downe  
agayne. [Helsinki Corpus, Period I/NN BIA MOWN-  
TAYNE 208]<sup>5</sup>
- (7) This gave him some chagreen: however, it gave him  
also an opportunity, one day, when the prince *was a*  
*hunting*, to wait on a man of quality ... . [Helsinki  
Corpus, Period III/NI FICT BEHN 157]

These constructions have a lot in common with the present-day progressive, and are often treated as early instances of this verb form.



The similarity with the present-day progressive construction is less striking in cases where the preposition appears in its full form. I recorded only four constructions of this type which were otherwise sufficiently similar to (other) progressives to be included in the coding. Two of these are:

- (8) ... the Milke-mayd whilst she *is in milking* shal do nothing rashly or sodainly about the Cowe, which may affright or amase her, but ... . [Helsinki Corpus, Period II/IS HANDO MARKHAM 108]
- (9) ... Dr. Bargrave is newly chosen Prebend of Canterbury in roome of an old Prebend lately deceased and *is now uppon going* to Algiers to redeem some Captives. [Helsinki Corpus, Period III/XX CORP HOXINDEN 275]

Table 3: Some features of progressive constructions in Modern English section of Helsinki Corpus. Absolute frequencies and vertical percentages.

		Period I 1500-1570	Period II 1570-1640	Period III 1640-1710
Prepositional (al remnant) before main verb	n	4	5	6
	%	12.1	9.6	6.0
Preposition <i>of</i> before object	n	1	1	2
	%	3.0	1.9	2.0
Passive syntax	n	0	1	0
	%	0.0	1.9	0.0
Passive import	n	4	8	2
	%	12.1	15.4	2.0
Future-referring <i>going to</i>	n	0	1	8
	%	0.0	1.9	8.0
All progressives	N	33	52	100
	%	100.0	100.0	100.0

The figures recorded for constructions with a preposition, or in most cases just the prepositional remnant *a*, appearing between the two

elements of the progressive can be studied in the first line of Table 3. They are illustrated by the first diagram in Figure 2. Even though the absolute number recorded of such constructions increases slightly – from four in Period I through five in Period II to six in Period III – their relative frequency is reduced by half from Period I to Period III, because of the sharp increase in the frequency of the prepositionless construction.

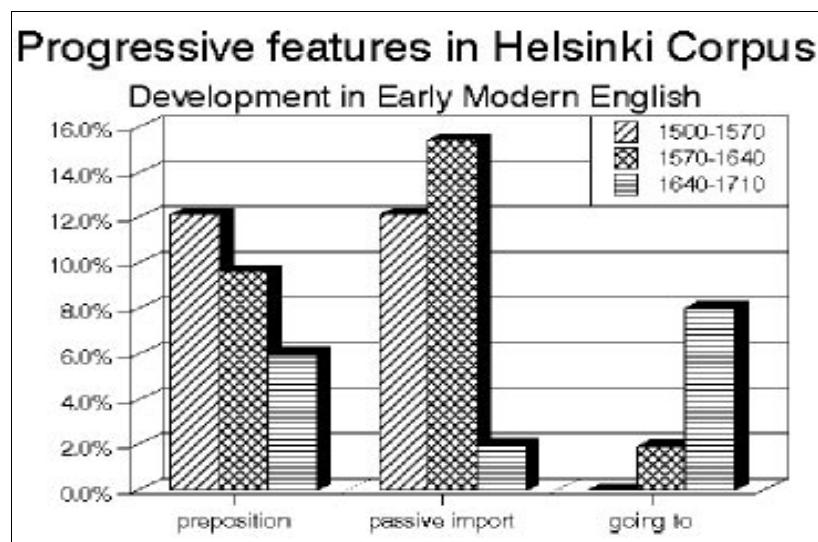


Figure 2. Progressives with: (i) preposition(al remnant) between auxiliary and main verb; (ii) passive import but active syntax; (iii) future-referring 'going to'. Proportions of all recorded progressives in each period.

### ***Preposition before object***

In some other constructions the preposition *of* crops up between a transitive main verb and the following object. Four such constructions were recorded in our corpus. We shall look at two of them:

- (10) ... and after dinner came two Cauelliers, and a Moore being one of their slaues to the watering place, where our men *were filling* of the Caske, and asked whether ... . [Helsinki Corpus, Period II/NN TRAVCOVERTE 12]

- (11) And this Gabriel Holmes did advise to have had two houses set on fire, one after another, that while they *were quenching* of one, they might be burning another. [Helsinki Corpus, Period III/NN DIARY PEPYS VIII 320]

This seems to be yet another pointer to the original construction with the main verb functioning as a gerundial prepositional complement (cf. Jespersen 1931: 176), since the object of a gerundial verb commonly appears in an *of*-construction, as in ‘Her handling *of* the question was very impressive.’. (11) suggests very strongly that such constructions with the preposition *of* preceding the object were indeed treated as progressives, since this construction occurs in close parallel with a progressive without any similar preposition: ‘... while they were quenching *of* one, they might be burning another.’

It can be seen from the second line of Table 3 that the constructions where the preposition *of* occurs before a verbal object are spread over all the three subperiods of our early Modern English corpus. Obviously, it is impossible to draw any further conclusions from such small numbers.

### ***Passive constructions***

The similarity with the present-day progressive construction is even less conspicuous in cases where the intended meaning is clearly passive, even if there is no passive marker, as in ‘The house is building.’. First, however, we may note that one single progressive construction with passive syntax was recorded in our corpus, in Period II, as can be seen from the third line of Table 3. That is remarkably early. Jespersen (1931: 211) says that the syntactic passive construction began to be common in colloquial use in the last few years of the 18th century. Our construction is nearly 200 years earlier:

- (12) Also in what Coast or part of heauen, the Sunne, Moone, or any other starre *is* at any time *being mounted* aboute the Horizon, as whether it bee Southeast or Northeast, .. . [Helsinki Corpus, Period II/EX SCIO BLUNDEV 155R]

What in our period can be described as the normal thing, however, was to express the passive meaning in the progressive without any syntactic or other formal marking. If the main verb is transitive and there is no expressed or implied object, the progressive can be assumed

to be intended in a passive sense. For the progressive to have such passive import was found to be much more common if the progressive contained a preposition, or at least a prepositional remnant, before the main verb. Indeed, roughly half of these prepositional progressives expressed a clear passive meaning. Some examples again:

- (13) ... the kinges coronacion, of which the time appointed then so nere approched, that the pageauntes and suttelties *were in making* day and night at westminster, and much vitaile killed therfore, that afterward was cast away. [Helsinki Corpus, Period I/NN HIST MORERIC 46]
- (14) Then sayde the Iewes: xlvi. yeares *was* this temple *abuyldinge*: and wylt thou reare it vp in thre dayes? [Helsinki Corpus, Period I/XX BIBLE TYNDNEW II 20]
- (15) Then said the Iewes, Fourty and six yeres *was* this Temple *in building*, and wilt thou reare it vp in three dayes? [Helsinki Corpus, Period II/XX BIBLE AUTH-NEW II 20]
- (16) Y<sup>r</sup> gowne and things *are a making*, but will not be done against whittsunday, ... . [Helsinki Corpus, Period II/XX CORP KNYVETT 57]

It is not only because of the passive meaning, without any formal marker, that these constructions seem odd from the point of view of present-day English. It is doubtful whether even a formally marked passive progressive would be used today.

In the case of (14) and (15), neither ‘46 years was this temple being built.’ nor ‘This temple was being built for 46 years.’ would make quite convincing present-day English. Part of the problem is that the progressive does not normally combine with an adverbial or other specific quantification of the verbal action, which is the function of ‘46 years’ in these constructions, because this suggests perfective rather than imperfective reference. The most recent English Bible translation I have had access to manages without both the progressive and the passive in its rendering of the same verse: ‘It has taken forty-six years to build this Temple!’

As for (16), and also (13), it can be argued that this is more closely related to a present-day expression like ‘be in the making’ – ‘Your gown and things are in the making.’ – than to a present-day progressive.

Passive import is not confined to constructions with either full or reduced prepositions. Some examples where there is no trace of any preposition but the meaning is still clearly intended to be passive are:

- (17) ... nothing vnderstanding of the banquet that *was pre-paring* for him after sopper, and according to the prouerbe, that swete meate wyll haue sowre sawce ... . [Helsinki Corpus, Period I/NI FICT HARMAN 72]
- (18) The rest of y<sup>r</sup> bill *is makeing* redy and also my sweetharts wascote. [Helsinki Corpus, Period II/XX CORP KNY-VETT 60]
- (19) ... wee must needs say this, That now that he is informed, that an Army *is making*, and that it is evident, that ... . [Helsinki Corpus, Period II/XX CORO ELIZ 402]

The number of progressives in each period which express a passive meaning without being formally marked for the passive is set out in the fourth line of Table 3, and also illustrated by the second diagram in Figure 2. It can be seen that this type of construction increases somewhat, even in relative terms, from Period I to Period II, and then decreases to just two occurrences in Period III. My findings thus support Jespersen’s (1931: 205) claim that this construction was a feature of the 16th to 18th centuries.

However, this type of construction is not entirely dead even in the present-day language. One thing is that it survives in a few fossilised expressions, such as ‘BE lacking’, ‘BE missing’, ‘BE wanting’. Very occasionally it is also used more freely, as in this quotation from a letter I received from Heffers, the English booksellers:

- (20) 9th December 1991  
Dear Sir,  
We regret WATKINS / A CONSERVATIVE COUP: THE FALL OF MARGARET THATCHER, ISBN 0715623869 *is reprinting* and unlikely to be available in time for Christmas.

**going to**

We shall consider one final construction type which is at best a marginal member of the set of progressive constructions. In present-day English what seems like the progressive form of TO GO is commonly used in expressions of future time: 'I'm going to tell her.', 'It's going to be fine tomorrow.' In descriptions of the present-day language this *going to* is usually treated as an auxiliary construction, and the following infinitive seen as the main verb.

Evidently, the *going to* construction has its origin in a construction where GO is the main verb and the following infinitive an adverbial of purpose: 'I'm going *in order* to tell her.'

In the period we are now concerned with, early Modern English from 1500 to 1710, the status of *going to* as an auxiliary in this type of construction is less obvious than it is today. I therefore included such constructions among the ones I coded, to be able to follow their development in early Modern English. A total of nine future-referring constructions with 'BE going to' followed by the infinitive were recorded in our section of the Helsinki Corpus. Some examples:

- (21) I *am going to bid* Gossips for your W<sup>PS</sup> child Sir, A goodly Girle I faith, giue you ioy on her, ... . [Helsinki Corpus, Period II/XX COME MIDDLET 19]
- (22) The council sat upon it, and *were going to order* a search of all the houses about the town; ... . [Helsinki Corpus, Period III/NN HIST BURNETCHA 1,II,164]
- (23) I blesse God I am now in good health, though 5 or 6 days since, and when we *were going to fight* the Dutch, I had such a paine in my right arme that ... . [Helsinki Corpus, Period III/XX CORP RHADDSR 15]
- (24) It is now about 12 of the clock, Mooneday noone and my Cozin Dalison *is going to take* water for Gravesend. Shee will be at Deane Tuesday night. [Helsinki Corpus, Period III/XX CORP HOXINDEN 280]

As can be seen from Table 3, and also from the rightmost diagram in Figure 2, this construction displays a very sharp increase towards the end of the time covered by our corpus, with no recorded instances in Period I, just one in Period II and then as many as eight in Period III.

### ***Adverbial specification***

The kinds of adverbial which appear in early progressive constructions reveal a great deal about the use and meaning of this verb form. Quite a few of the adverbials recorded in our corpus denote frequency or length of time. We saw two examples where that is the case – (14) and (15) – when we considered constructions with prepositions and passive import. Two more are:

- (25) This new accident made him more impatient of liberty, and he *was* **every day** *treating with* Trefry for his and Clemene's liberty and offer'd either gold, or a vast quantity of slaves, ... . [Helsinki Corpus, Period III/NI FICT BEHN 191]
- (26) He had a faculty of speaking indefatigably upon every subject: but he spoke ungracefully, and did not know that he was ill at raillery, for he *was* **always** *attempting* it. [Helsinki Corpus, Period III/NN HIST BURNETCHA 1,I,174]

In present-day English combinations of the progressive and adverbials of frequency often convey connotations of annoyance or irritation (cf. 'He's always talking about the weather.'). A similar reading might be assigned to (26) but would be more dubious in the case of (25), where today the non-progressive would seem more likely, if not mandatory. Instead (25) can be said to express a more general durative meaning, of the kind that has been recorded all the way back to Old English, as we have seen. In these cases the progressive does not signal any clear imperfective meaning.

### ***Stative verbs***

There are other cases where the deviation from present-day usage is striking. Today the progressive is typically used with dynamic rather than stative verbs, although the distinction is sometimes difficult to draw, and there are quite a few verbs which in themselves would probably have to be classified as stative but which combine with the progressive in present-day English.

Some of the verbs combining with the progressive in our section of the Helsinki Corpus are nevertheless such as to draw attention to

themselves when considered from the viewpoint of present-day English, because the verb is stative of a kind that would not be expected to appear in the progressive today. Some examples:

- (27) Therefore that which *is* in its Nature *differing* from the chief Good, cannot be said to be the Good it self: ... [Helsinki Corpus, Period III/XX PHILO BOETHPR 136]
- (28) I know you expect I should tell you what is become of the money I brought along with me: and I will gladly satisfy you in any thing. Some of it *is* yet *remaining* in my hands, for uses: ... . [Helsinki Corpus, Period III/XX CORP STRYPE 181]
- (29) There is not any of the batcholers in this country *are inclineing* to marry this yeare that I heare of. [Helsinki Corpus, Period III/XX CORP EOXINDEN 309]

In all these constructions the progressive would seem questionable in present-day English, although not necessarily altogether impossible. In fact, in some such constructions the *-ing*-form might alternatively be seen as adjectival, and be analysed as a subject complement: ‘to be differing’ in (27) is more or less the same as ‘to be different’, and ‘to be inclineing’ in (29) not very different from ‘to be inclined’.

### ***Thematic function***

A consequence of the different temporal meanings expressed by progressive vs. non-progressive verb forms in present-day English is that they tend to perform different thematic functions: the progressive is typically used to refer to backgrounded situations, the non-progressive, especially the non-progressive preterite, to refer to foregrounded situations. In narrative contexts, for example, the normal thing is to use the non-progressive preterite to refer to the sequence of events which bring the action forward, while the progressive is rather used of backgrounded situations outside this sequence of events.

Again some of the progressive constructions recorded in our early Modern English corpus seem to deviate from present-day usage. Perhaps the most striking examples occur in the following passage:

- (30) ... & I went in ye other way: through Lunbart street & there was another garde sett & ye Curte full of people.



And a frende *was speakinge* but hee had sone ended:  
& I was after moved of ye Lord: to stande upp ... &  
then they had mee on towards Moorefeildes & as wee  
*was goinge* alongst ye streets this officer *was layinge*  
his hande upon mee & at last hee *was askeinge* Will  
Warwicke a question whome ye Constable had taken  
prisoner ye same time alsoe ... . [Helsinki Corpus,  
Period III/NN BIA FOX 156]

In present-day English the progressive *was speaking* in this passage would mean that the friend had already started to speak before the writer arrived. This may also be the intended meaning in our quotation – context does not provide any clear clue.

The next progressive verb, *was goinge*, seems to refer to a straightforward backgrounded situation, so that the progressive would be the expected form even in present-day English. In the case of the last two progressives, however, we appear to be faced with an obvious breach of the rules which today determine the choice between progressive and non-progressive verb forms: ‘was layinge his hande upon mee’ and ‘was askeinge a question’ denote a sequence of events, and since these events are clearly foregrounded, and the reference perfective, present-day English would select the non-progressive.

### **Conclusion**

We have seen that some of the progressive verb forms recorded in the early Modern English section of the Helsinki Corpus are such that one would expect the non-progressive in present-day English, in spite of the fact that the overall frequency of the progressive has increased markedly since the beginning of the Modern English period some 500 years ago.

It may be significant that all the progressives recorded in the last few sets, which seem to deviate from present-day usage in that the meaning is perfective, or at least not clearly imperfective, are of the straightforward type as regards form, without any preposition or prepositional remnant, i.e. they may be derived directly from the BE plus present participle construction in Old English. It will be recalled that the Old English construction could express general duration rather than the limited duration that is characteristic of the present-day progressive meaning; hence it had a less obviously imperfective meaning than the progressive has today.

On the other hand, we have seen that constructions which deviate from present-day English by expressing a passive meaning without being syntactically marked for the passive are particularly apt to have prepositions or the prepositional remnant *a*, i.e. to be most directly related to the Old English construction with a preposition and a gerundial verb, of the type illustrated by (4) ‘... ZyrstandæZ ic *wæs on huntunZe* ...’. This type appears to have been closer to the present-day progressive meaning, and it may also lend itself better to expressing a passive meaning. In fact, all the recorded constructions with prepositions or the prepositional remnant either express a passive meaning or they are intransitive; not a single prepositional progressive was recorded taking an object, which is further evidence that the *-ing*-form in these cases was felt to retain some of its gerundial status: even though gerundial verbs may also take objects, such objects are less likely in constructions of the original prepositional type, such as (4).

This seems to mean that in our period, early Modern English up to the beginning of the 18th century, the two constructions were not yet fully merged, the difference between the two historical origins still making itself felt.

It is clear enough that from a formal point of view the construction with a full preposition or a prepositional remnant before the main verb deviates from the present-day construction. And yet it seems impossible to see the present-day progressive as simply a continuation of the syntactically similar, prepositionless construction which can be traced all the way back to Old English.

For one thing, it is difficult to explain the sudden increase in the frequency of the progressive in early Modern English, after a long period of stagnation, except as a result of the merger of the two constructions.

Secondly, the prepositional construction has clearly contributed to the meaning of the progressive as it functions in the present-day language. Our investigation has revealed that even at the end of the period we have been focusing upon, i.e. in the late 17th and at the beginning of the 18th century, the meaning of this construction was still markedly different from what it is today, as demonstrated by the fact that several of the constructions which are semantically different from the present-day progressive meaning were recorded in Period III of our corpus.

Although we have concentrated a lot of our attention on progressives from early Modern English without any obvious progressive equivalents in the present-day language, we must not lose sight of the basic fact that in early Modern English, from A.D. 1500 to 1710, progressive verb

forms as a whole were used much less frequently than they are today. In the vast majority of cases where early Modern English and present-day English would make different choices, it would be early Modern English that would choose the non-progressive and present-day English the progressive, so that Polonius could ask, 'What do you read, my lord?', and Hamlet could begin his last speech with the words 'O, I die, Horatio'.

What we have found about early Modern English suggests that significant changes must have taken place in later Modern English, changes which may help to shed light on the use and meaning of the progressive in the many varieties of the present-day language but which do not seem to be fully accounted for in the existing literature. Indeed, Strang (1982) states that the meaning of the progressive has been largely stable since the year 1700, a statement which is hardly justified by our results. Work still needs to be done before we can claim fully to understand the historical development behind the progressive verb form as it appears in present-day English.

### Notes

1. This article is a revised version of the 'trial lecture' on a topic of my own choice which I gave as part of the examination for the degree of doctor of philosophy at the University of Oslo.
2. Nickel (1966), quoted by Traugott (1992: 188), lists three syntactic environments in Old English where a BE verb is followed by a present participle, all of which may have contributed to the development of the progressive verb form.
3. Dal (1952), quoted by Traugott (1992: 189), also mentions three other Old English constructions with a preposition followed by a deverbal nominal in *-ung/-ing* which may have contributed to the development of the progressive. Lockwood (1968: 105) argues that the prepositional construction which appeared in Old English was a calque on Celtic.
4. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for 871 contains what may look like an early example of a blend of the two constructions, with an *-ende-*form apparently occurring in the prepositional pattern: 'ond

*on feohtende wæron o niht* (*ChronA* 70.28) (I am grateful to Michael Benskin for bringing this example to my attention.) Of this construction Mitchell (1985, vol. 1: 412, f.n.) says that it may be a ‘confused blend’ of the two patterns, although he thinks it ‘more likely that we have to do with an embryo compound *on-feohtan*’.

5. The codes, giving source text and position within source text, are explained in Kytö (1991).

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