

## [-ing Forms and Nominalisations]

Recent Changes in the Use of the Progressive Construction  
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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 change* or *current change* (see Mair (1995, 1997), Mair and Hundt (1995, 1997), Denison (1998, 2001, 2004), Krug (2000), Leech (2000, 2003, 2004a), Smith (2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2005), Mair and Leech (2006), Leech and Smith (2006, 2009), Leech et al. (2009), Aarts et al. (forthcoming)). 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

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to research changes in written English over 30 years. Manual searches are still unavoidable, however, as these corpora have not been parsed.

At the Survey of English Usage (UCL) we have taken Mair's initiative further by constructing a corpus of British English comprising selections of largely 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 the *Diachronic Corpus of Present-Day Spoken English* (DCPSE; Aarts and Wallis (2006)), allows 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 into synchronic and diachronic grammatical variation. Thirdly, the corpus is fully searchable using the *International Corpus of English Corpus Utility Program* (ICECUP), the corpus exploration software that we developed for ICE-GB. DCPSE is already being used as a major new resource complementing the Freiburg corpora.

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 grammatical 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 (2000, 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 pro-

gressive has persisted into the twentieth century. Hundt (2004) uses Mossé's (1938) M-coefficient, which normalises the frequency of the progressive to occurrences per 100,000 words, to track the frequency of the progressive from 1650 to 1990 in ARCHER (*A Representative Corpus of Historical English Registers*).<sup>1</sup> Her results indicate a rise in the frequency of the progressive in the twentieth century (the 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)).<sup>2</sup> However, what is not clear is whether the rise

<sup>1</sup>





formatives (*I name this ship Elizabeth*), simple imperatives, non-finite verb phrases and stative situations. As discussed by Smitterberg, some of these factors are easier to exclude than others. Imperatives, for example, can easily be removed from any corpus which is tagged, whereas removing stative verb phrases requires manual checking of each example, a time-consuming process.

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 Smitterberg's study was based on nineteenth century English, some modifications 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 with such verbs. Secondly, in order to exclude demonstrations and performatives, as Smitterberg does, each example would need to be manually checked. As they are rare and unlikely to affect the results, they have not been removed.<sup>8</sup>

### 3.3. The Progressive in DCPSE

We used FTFs to look for progressives in DCPSE. The FTF below instructs the search engine to search for a progressive VP (note the feature 'progressive' in the bottom section of the node).

<sup>8</sup> Smitterberg (2005: 47) also excludes non-finite VPs (progressive and non-progres-



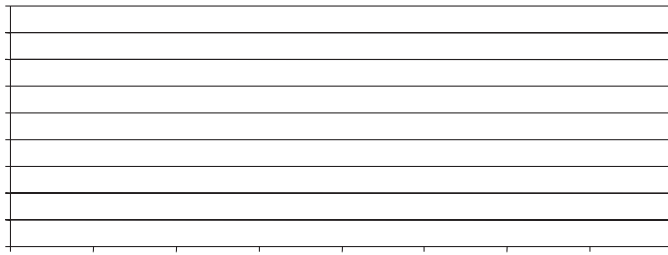


Figure 5: Charting the Rise in Spoken Progressive Use in English Using DCPSE

#### 4. Why Has the Progressive Increased in Use?

Mair (2006: 88–89) comments that there are three types of changes affecting the progressive:

- (i) many uses which were fully established around 1900 have increased in frequency since then;
- (ii) new forms have been created; and
- (iii) there is a tendency to use the progressive with stative verbs such as *understand* (see also above and below).

Smith (2005) suggests the following factors as probable causes of the increase in the use of the progressive in recent times.

- (i) Contact—the progressive is more common in American English than in British English (Biber et al. (1999: 462)) and the growing contact between the two countries may have contributed to the increased usage in British English.
- (ii) Increased functional load—“[T]he progressive has evolved his-

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.

because it is cancellable. Huddleston and Pullum et al. (2002) observe that when the interpretive progressive is used, the mid-interval implicature is always cancelled.

Smutterberg (2005:



the frequency of the progressive relative to the possibility of it being used in the first place. Many studies have considered progressive use in terms of normalised absolute frequencies, such as the M-coefficient, i.e. frequencies considered in proportion to the total number of words in a particular dataset. However, the opportunity to use 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

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### [-ing Forms and Nominalisations]

#### On *Going*

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Mmm, folks won't fnd us now because  
Mister Satch and Mister Cros  
We gone fshin' instead of just a-wishin'  
Bah-boo-baby-bah-boo-bah-bay-mmm-bo-bay  
Oh yeah!

*Gone Fishin'* (Lyrics and music by Nick and Charles Kenny, 1951)

#### 1. *To Go Drinking vs. ??to Go Eating*

In a squib in *Linguistic Inquiry*, Arlene Berman (1973) pointed out some interesting restrictions on expressions like *Yg\*uxg+ i qpg" tujkpi*, which we shall refer to as ‘expeditionary *go*.’ As well as fshing, Louis Armstrong and Bing Crosby could with full grammaticality have gone camping, shopping, visiting or travelling, but probably not *\*working*, *\*dining* or *\*smoking*. To relax afterwards there was no linguistic reason for them not to *go drinking*, but they are unlikely to have *??gone eating*. Typical corpus examples are:

- (1) So it looks as though we'll be able to go shopping tomorrow by the weather forecast.
- (2) I might be going swimming at lunchtime today so I could probably run up there or put it in the post if I go.
- (3) One day the young lord went hunting with his hound in a densely thicketed part of the forest.