

3Stative Verbs in English and the Progressive Aspect*

Kyu-Hong Hwang

(Dong-A University)

Kyu-Hong Hwang (2010), Stative Verbs in English and the Progressive Aspect. *Journal of Language Sciences* 17-3, 163~177. This paper aims to explore the interaction of lexical aspect of English verbs and the grammatical aspect of the progressive and account for the stative progressive in a principled manner. Based on their lexical aspect of whether they have duration or natural endpoints, verbs are classified into dynamic and stative verbs. It is then shown that dynamic verbs, which include verbs of activity, achievement, and accomplishment, can combine with the progressive, while stative verbs cannot because of the conflict between their lexical aspect and the grammatical aspect of the progressive. On the observation that the stative progressive is commonly in use in everyday English, efforts are also made to advance the proposal that the stative verbs can be in the progressive form in the contexts where they show limited duration or imply a series of changes over time. At the same time, it is proposed that stative verbs are made compatible with the progressive aspect when used dynamically or employed to add more vividness, intensity, and emotional strength. (Dong-A University)

Key Words: lexical aspect, stative progressive, stative verbs, activity verbs, achievement verbs, and accomplishment verbs

1. Introduction

It has been claimed in such pedagogical English grammar books as Kruisinga (1931), Jespersen (1933), Zandvoort (1975), Quirk et al. (1985), Biber et al. (1999), Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999), Huddleston and Pullum (2002), and Cowan (2008) that the so-called stative verbs are not compatible with the progressive aspect except when they have a dynamic sense. This claim seems to rely on a fundamental semantic

* This study was supported by research funds from Dong-A University in 2007.

conflict between the grammatical aspect, the progressive, that expresses limited duration and lexical aspect of stative verbs that denotes a stable state. It appears, however, that traditional English grammarians' argument for the incompatibility of the stative verbs with the progressive form is too strict to hold, now that it is not difficult to find such instances of the stative progressive as (1a) and (1b) below:

- (1) a. I am loving it.
b. John is resembling his father more and more.

It is generally unexpected that the typical stative verbs *love* and *resemble* above go with the progressive aspect, but this co-occurrence is wide spread nowadays.

As to the rise of the progressive aspect in English and its frequent use, some grammarians have claimed that it is exceptional to the standard English grammar rule and that it is a non-standard variety of English. The stative progressive aspect is also confusing to ESL or EFL students because they have been learning that typical stative verbs never form a progressive tense. In addition, English educators do seem to feel uncomfortable about the sentences in (1) and have difficulty explaining their grammaticality in a logical way.

Given the above and the fact that little or no research on the stative progressive in English has been conducted so far, this paper aims to explore the co-occurrence phenomena of stative verbs with the progressive aspect and describe the conditions that license such use of stative verbs. On the view that the stative progressive is the aspect of standard English that signals language change in progress, the following claims are made: the stative verbs can co-occur with the progressive when they show limited duration, involve changes over time, and add more intensity, vividness, and emotional strength.

The structure of the paper is as follow. Section 2 attempts to classify English verbs into different classes based on their lexical aspect: dynamic verbs and stative verbs. Then, it explores their interaction with the

progressive aspect. Section 3 is devoted to accounting for the stative progressive by examining what factors license such an innovative use of the progressive. Section 4 summarizes what has been discussed thus far.

2. Lexical Aspect of Verbs and Its Interaction with the Progressive

Lexical aspect of verbs generally refers to the property of their meaning, for example, whether or not an action can be characterized by the presence or absence of duration, beginning and ending points, or change. As Vendler (1967) claimed, English verbs can be divided into four different types according to their lexical aspect: activity, accomplishment, achievement, and state. In literature, this lexical aspect has been said to interact with two grammatical aspects, the progressive expressed by *be* + present participle and the perfective expressed by *have* + past participle. To the extent that this is valid, in what follows, we will classify the verbs into different categories based on their inherent lexical meaning and explore the effects of the progressive aspect on them.

2.1. Dynamic Verbs

Verbs of activity, accomplishment, and achievement have one thing in common: they all refer to an event or involve the change of states. They differ from each other in terms of natural endpoints and duration. Consider the following sentences:

- (2) a. Karen talked to Martha.
b. Georgia wrote a sonnet.
c. Joel arrived at the meeting. Baker (2001: 569–560)

In (2), the verbs *talk* and *write* are alike in that both of them have durative meanings and describe an action or event that takes place over a

period. In contrast to this, the verb *arrive* is not durative or punctual because it describes momentary events. In terms of natural endpoints, the verbs *write* and *arrive* behave alike because they have a natural endpoint, while the verb *talk* has an undefined beginning and endpoint.

This generalization seems to be borne out by the possibility of the verbs' co-occurrence with two prepositional phrases of time, one headed by *in* and the other headed by *for*. The following examples are relevant:

- (3) a. Karen talked to Martha ?in thirty minutes/for thirty minutes.
- b. Georgia wrote a sonnet in three hours/?for three hours.
- c. Joel arrived at the meeting in three days/?for three days.

Now that *in*-phrases entail a natural endpoint, they can be naturally used with the verbs of accomplishment and achievement, as in (3b) and (3c), but they cannot with activity verbs, as in (3a). On the other hand, *for*-phrases, which do not assume such endpoint, go well with only activity verbs, as in (3a), but not with the other two types of verbs, as in (3b) and (3c). This line of explanation accounts for the grammaticality difference in (3).

After all, it turns out that dynamic verbs consist of verbs like *talk* (activity verbs), verbs like *write* (accomplishment verbs), and verbs like *arrive* (achievement verbs). However, each class itself can be subdivided into smaller categories according to whether verbs are conclusive or they represent processes.¹⁾ The verbs of activity can also be distinguished from those of accomplishment and achievement in not having endpoints.

Now let us look at how the three classes of dynamic verbs interact with the progressive aspect. Since most of them involve change of a state or an event, they are generally compatible with the progressive aspect,²⁾ but the interpretations are different due to the difference in lexical aspect. Let us consider the examples below from Quirk et al. (1985: 207-209):

1) Refer to Quirk et al. (1985) for more details.

2) According to Comrie (1976: 24), these verbs have "internal temporal structure" in that they have beginning points, endpoints, or something, irrespective of the length of duration.

- (4) a. The engine was running smoothly.
- b. The children are playing chess.
- (5) a. The sun is ripening our tomatoes nicely.
- b. The boys were swimming across the estuary.
- (6) a. The top of the trees were waving in the wind, and the branches were shaking and knocking against the side of the house. Downstairs, a door was banging.
- b. John is nodding his head.
- c. The train is arriving at platform 4.

In (4), *run and play* are activity verbs, and being in the progressive form, they just put more focus on the fact that the action has duration and still going on. *Ripen* and *swim* in (5) illustrate characteristics of verbs of accomplishment: they both express the change of a state and focus on the progress toward the goal, but imply the incompleteness of the task at the time of speech. This is why we can add to (5a) and (5b), respectively, *but they are not completely ripe yet* and *but a giant wave made them turn back*. In case of (6), which contain punctual achievement verbs, (6a) describes a momentary event, (6b), an iterative action, and (6c), a transitional event.³⁾

2.2. Stative Verbs

Stative verbs are those which express permanent qualities or states that are relatively constant over the time. As a result, they have no natural endpoint like activity verbs, and they do not involve any action carried out by the agentive subject. Their representative members are usually verbs of cognition, perception, possession, emotions, measurement, and description: *smell, see, know, believe, think, understand, love, resemble, like, weigh*, etc. Since stative verbs are similar to activity verbs in not

³⁾ Verbs like *recognize* and *realize* are punctual achievement verbs, but they are hardly put into the progressive because of their instantaneous occurrences. However, they tend to represent an inception of the event when used with the progressive aspect.

having a natural endpoint, they are expected to co-occur with *for*-phrases easily, but not with *in*-phrases. With this prediction in mind, look at the following examples:

- (7) a. Roger had a rash ?in three days/for three days.
b. I owned my horse ?in three years/for three years.

Have and *own* above are typical stative verbs with no implication about clear endpoints. Consequently, the addition of *in*-phrase is very awkward or nearly impossible, while that of *for*-phrases is natural or possible.

A close examination of the nature of stative verbs and the progressive aspect makes it imperative that stative verbs cannot combine with the progressive. There is a semantic conflict between the lexical aspect of stative verbs and the grammatical aspect of the progressive. In this regard, see the examples that follow:

- (8) a. *I am understanding that the offer has been accepted.
b. *The teacher is liking to entertain the students.
c. *He is knowing the answer.

The verbs *understand*, *like*, and *know* denote a stable state, but this constant state contrasts with the grammatical aspect of the progressive that expresses a limited duration. Thus, all the sentences in (8) become unacceptable in unmarked contexts unless a change of a state or meaning is accompanied.

It must be borne in mind, however, that there is a group of verbs that are used statively as well as dynamically. Well-known examples of this class are verbs of perception such as *smell*, *taste*, and *feel*. Consider what follows:

- (9) a. The flower smells good.
b. The chicken soup tastes delicious.
c. The silk feels very soft.

In (9), *smell*, *taste*, and *feel* are used statively, and they do not imply the existence of any agentive subject. Consequently, if we replace the present simple tense in (9) with a corresponding present progressive tense, all the sentences become ungrammatical. This fact accords with the claim that verbs with a stative meaning show resistance to the progressive aspect.

On the other hand, all the verbs in (9) could be used dynamically with the agentive subject, as (10) below shows:

- (10) a. Mary was smelling the flower when I called her.
 b. The chef is tasting the chicken soup.
 c. I am feeling for the light switch.

Although they look the same in form as the verbs in (9), *smell*, *taste*, and *feel* above denote an action in progress: they are used dynamically in short. Since the verbs with a dynamic sense are in harmony with the progressive, all the sentences in (10) are grammatical and so are their non-progressive versions.

In case of *see* and *hear*, they have dynamic counterparts, *look at* and *listen to*. See different behaviors of these pairs of verbs in the following examples:

- (11) A: What are you doing?
 B: *I'm seeing these photographs.
 I'm looking at these photographs.
 (12) A: What are you doing?
 B: *I'm hearing a new record.
 I'm listening to a new record. Quirk et al. (1985: 204)

In answering the question that requires the progressive tense, *look at* and *listen to* are used instead of *see* and *hear* in (11) and (12), respectively because the former verbs have a dynamic sense, while the latter ones have a stative sense. Some support is lent to this claim by the fact that

look at and *listen to*, not *see* and *hear*, can be used in the imperative sentences that resist the stative verbs or verbs with a stative meaning.

We have so far attempted to classify verbs into dynamic and stative ones according to their semantic nature or aspect: whether they are durative or stative or they have a natural endpoint. It has been said that dynamic verbs include verbs of activity, accomplishment, and achievement, while stative verbs are the verbs that denote a stable state. With respect to the co-occurrence of the verbs with the progressive, dynamic verbs can be in the progressive form in the absence of their lexical aspect and the progressive grammatical aspect although their interpretations vary due to their different lexical aspect. However, stative verbs have been said to be incompatible with the progressive aspect because of the conflict between their lexical aspect and the grammatical aspect.

3. Stative Progressive Aspect

In the preceding section, we have discussed different types of verbs with different lexical aspect and their interaction with the progressive aspect. In what follows, we will lay more focus on the co-occurrence phenomena of typical stative verbs and the progressive aspect and account for them in a principled way.

According to Dagut (1977) and Smith (1983), stative verbs can occur with the progressive aspect when they show limited duration. As said before, stative verbs denote the unending duration and unchanging states. However, they can be viewed to conceive such states as events or activities with limited duration that have a sequence of developmental stages or processes. In this case, they can combine with the progressive aspect. The following examples serve to illustrate the point:

- (13) a. The river is smelling particularly bad today.
b. She is looking much stronger today.

In (13), *smell* and *look* are stative verbs and *the river* and *she* are not agentive. Despite this, the progressive aspect is allowed because neither of the sentences expresses permanent states. (13a) doesn't mean that the bad smell is the permanent property of the river, but it means that the bad smell of the river is a momentary phenomenon: smelling bad has limited duration because it is a state undergoing change for the moment. A similar account holds for (13b), which implies that the state of her looking stronger is not a lasting phenomenon but a temporary one. In other words, the duration of the state described at the moment is short or limited in both (13a) and (13b). Therefore, *smell* and *look* can be in the progressive form in (13) although they are assumed to be typical stative verbs.

The following examples, where the progressive form is used with stative verbs, can be analyzed in an analogous way:

- (14) a. Are you understanding this? I'm not quite getting it.
 b. I haven't seen animals, and I'm loving it.

Gavis (1998: 150, 153)

Assuming that (14a) is uttered during a lecture, the speaker is asking the listener whether he or she understood the moment-by-moment contents of the lecture. The speaker is not questioning if the listener understood the lecture as a whole. If this was the case, he would have said "Do you understand this? I'm not quite getting it." To be more specific, understanding is viewed as an on-going process in (14a) rather than an unchanging state. (14b) implies that I enjoy every moment of not seeing animals that goes by: loving is conceived as an activity. The simple tense version of (14b) means, on the other hand, that I enjoy or love the constant animal-free state. This amounts to saying that (14a) and (14b) have different interpretations from corresponding simple tense versions and thus tend to be used in different contexts.

Another case in which the stative and the progressive go together has to do with change in states over time. Pay attention to the progressive

use of stative verbs in (15) below.

- (15) a. John is knowing the answer more and more often this semester.
b. The students are understanding Professor Throckmorton less and less these days.
c. Mary is resembling her mother more and more.
d. These examples are gradually seeming less and less unacceptable to me. Smith (1983: 498)

All the sentences in (15) represent processes of some sort, not states. *Know*, *understand*, *resemble*, and *seem*, which are representative stative verbs, involve change in states or evolving processes in (15). They do not describe the states that remain unchanged or constant. Consideration of this nature of the verbs in (15) leads us to say that no semantic conflict exists between the verbs' lexical aspect and the grammatical aspect of the progressive.

In fact, such expressions as *more and more* and *less and less* above signal the degree of change and the evolution of processes. This is on a par with Bland's (1988: 64) representation of what (15c) means. She visually expresses the meaning of (15c) as follows:

- (16) [Mary resembles her mother]₁, [Mary resembles her mother]₂,
[Mary resembles her mother]₃ . . .

(16) indicates that the degree of Mary's resembling her mother becomes greater as time goes on, so it signals change over time. In short, the resembling process involves succession of stages. All the other sentences in (15) can be represented in the same way, being equal to (15c) in focussing on evolving change.

The stative progressive is also used to add more intensity, vividness, and emotional strength. The examples below are relevant:

- (17) a. Cathy's just loving that.

- b. I'm so wanting to see this.
- c. One night, in the middle of the night, I'm hearing dripping.
- d. This computer is really costing a lot of money.

In (17a) and (17b), the progressive aspect intensifies the emotion expressed by *love* and *want*. The existence of intensifying expressions such as *just* and *so* serves as supporting evidence for this claim. (17c) describes the situation in the past, but the present tense indicated by *am* is in use, which is historical present. Given that historical present is employed to make the description more vivid, (17c) is a vivid description, and it is made more vivid with the use of the progressive tense. In case of (17d), with the progressive, it makes the statement more emotional than its simple tense version: *This computer costs a lot of money*. This is in part signalled by the presence of the modifier *really*.

In contrast to the discussion in subsection 2.2., Jørgensen (1990 and 1991) holds that verbs of perception like *hear* and *see* can appear in the progressive aspect in some contexts instead of being replaced by their agentive counterparts, namely, *listen to* and *watch*. However, the contexts or conditions that allow the progressive form of *see* and *hear* are limited: it is possible only when those verbs denote activities in progress rather than momentary acts completed. This point is illustrated by the sentences in (18).

- (18) a. I'm hearing this, some of it for the first time.
- b. You're seeing probably over a hundred earthquakes in the last week. Gavis (1999: 181)

Let's imagine that (18a) is what the CEO of a company said to female employees while he was holding a meeting to learn about their complaints. If he uttered (18a) after listening to their complaints for a while, it is not possible to replace *am hearing* with *hear* in (18a) because *hear* here refers to what is undergoing constant change: as the meeting proceeds, different complaints are said from moment to moment. In the context where a

person is explaining to the public the occurrence of a series of earthquakes by pointing to a chart, (18b) implies that the earthquakes they see are different every moment. So, in both (18a) and (18b), *hear* and *see* do not describe perceptual states experienced. Instead, they both express change in progress or an activity developing each moment. It is this property of such verbs that enable them to combine with the progressive aspect.

Sometimes the verb *see* appears to be used with the progressive even when it does not represent change in progress, as shown in the example below from Biber et al. (1999: 473). This is not an exception to the above explanation, however:

- (19) 'And I'll like it even more,' Rabbit says, 'when you stop seeing this greasy creep.'

In (19), *see* is in the progressive although it involves no activity in progress. This is possible because *see* is not a sensory perception verb in terms of meaning any more, but it means "meet or have a relationship with." With this shift of the original meaning of perception, the verb is no longer stative, so it goes well with the progressive aspect. A similar case is easily found with the verb *think*. Consider the sentences below:

- (20) a. Don't interrupt me when I am thinking.
b. Oh, I was just thinking that it would be great to see the movie.

The meaning of *think* in (20) is not "have the opinion of or believe" but "consider or be in the process of forming an opinion." So, *think* does not denote a state but expresses the subject's will or ability to control the process. This proves to be true in that thinking can occur after *stop*, which entails thinking is an activity that can be controlled by the subject.⁴⁾

4) It's worth remembering that verbs with a stative meaning cannot occur after the verb *stop* because they do not imply that the subject is controlling what the verb denote.

In sum, stative verbs can co-occur with the progressive aspect in a number of cases, contrary to the commonly held-view that they cannot be in the progressive form. Such cases are as follows: when the verbs show limited duration or imply different states of change developing over time; when they add more intensity or vividness or express emotional strength. In cases where stative verbs are used with a dynamic sense or with a different meaning, they are also compatible with the progressive since they do not denote a constant state any more.

5. Summary

Stative verbs are frequently in the progressive form in current English, contrary to the traditional claim that they are incompatible with the progressive aspect due to their property of denoting a constant state. Given this state of affairs, efforts have been made to account for the well-formedness of stative progressive in a principled manner. Based on the stative progressive in use, it has been proposed that stative verbs can combine with the progressive aspect in these cases: when they represent limited duration rather than constant states; when they signal the change of states or events in progress; when they serve to intensify feelings, strengthen emotions, or make the statements or descriptions more vivid; when they have a dynamic sense, taking an agent subject, or carry a new meaning different from their stative one.

To pave the way to understanding the stative progressive better and finding out the factors that allow stative verbs to occur in the progressive form, an attempt has been made first to classify verbs into dynamic and stative classes on the basis of their semantic property or lexical aspect: whether they are durative or have natural endpoints. Verbs of achievement and accomplishment have been said to differ from those of activity, all of which are dynamic, in that only the former have natural endpoints. Moreover, it has been said that verbs of activity resemble stative verbs because both types have duration. As far as their co-occurrence with the

progressive aspect, dynamic verbs have been shown to be in the progressive form and carry a different meaning as a result of the interaction of their lexical aspect with the grammatical aspect of the progressive. At the same time, however, stative verbs have been claimed not to occur with the progressive except for the cases mentioned above.

주제어: 어휘상, 상태진행, 상태 동사, 활동 동사, 성취 동사, 완성 동사

References

- Baker, C. L. 2001. *English Syntax*. 2nd ed. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press
- Biber, D., S. Johansson, G. Leech, S. Conrad, and E. Finegan.. 1999. *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*. Essex: Pearson Education.
- Bland, K. 1988. The Present Progressive in Discourse: Grammar Versus Usage Revisited. *Tesol Quarterly* 22, 53-68.
- Celce-Murcia, M. and D. Larsen-Freeman. 1999. *The Grammar Book*. 2nd ed. New York: Heinle & Heinle Publishers.
- Comrie, B. 1976. *Aspect: An Introduction to the Study of Verbal Aspect and Related Problems*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Cowan, R. 2008. *The Teacher's Grammar of English*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Dagut, B. 1977. A Semantic Analysis of the "Simple/Progressive" Dichotomy of the English Verb. *Linguistics* 202, 47-61.
- Gavis, W. 1998. Stative Verbs in the Progressive Aspect: A Study of Semantic, Pragmatic, Syntactic And Discourse Patterns. Ph.D. Dissertation. Columbia University.
- Huddleston, R. and G. Pullum. 2002. *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jespersen, O. 1933. *Essentials of English Grammar*. London: Allen and Unwin.
- Jørgensen, E. 1990. Verbs of Physical Perception Used in Progressive Tenses. *English Studies* 71, 439-444.
- Jørgensen, E. 1991. The Progressive Tenses and the so-called 'Non-conclusive' Verbs. *English Studies* 72, 173-182.

- Kruisinga, E. 1931. *A Handbook of Present-Day English*. Groningen: Noordhoff.
- Quirk, R., S. Greenbaum, G. Leech and J. Svartvik. 1985. *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. London: Longman.
- Smith, C. S. 1983. A Theory of Aspectual Choice. *Language* 59, 479-501.
- Vendler, Z. 1967. Verbs and Time. In Z. Vendler (ed.), *Linguistics and Philosophy*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 97-146.
- Zandvoort, R. W. 1975. *A Handbook of English Grammar*. 7th ed. London: Longman.

Kyu-Hong Hwang
Department of English Language and Literature
Dong-A University
840 Hadan-2-dong, Saha-gu
Busan 604-714, Korea
Tel.: 051-200-7055
E-mail: kyu@dau.ac.kr

Received: 2010. 06. 25
Revised: 2010. 08. 02
Accepted: 2010. 08. 05