

# Progressive Uses of So-called "Non-Progressive Verbs" in English : A Review of the "Reinterpretation" Theory

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# Progressive Uses of So-called “Non-Progressive Verbs” in English —A Review of the “Reinterpretation” Theory—

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## 概 要

状態動詞は一般に進行形にはできず、進行形にされている場合は、臨時的に動作動詞として使われて、動作を表しているからであるとされる。このような説の代表は Quirk et al. (1985)の「再解釈」説であるが、本論文はこれが誤りであることを証明する。即ち、進行形で用いられていても、状態動詞は依然として状態を表しているのであり、動作を表していると考えるのは、読者の側が、状態の表現から動作を想像して、意味を「再解釈」をしているからであるとする。そして、状態動詞でも、その表す状態が「一時的」であるならば、動作の場合と同様に、持続の途中でとらえて、進行形で表すことができることを様々な例と図式で証明する。

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. The Common View: “Stative Verbs Are Not Used in the Progressive Form”

#### 1.1.1. The Common View

Most English grammars say that some verbs are not used in the progressive form because of their semantic characteristics. Palmer (1987), for example, says as follows:

“There are some verbs that are commonly not used in the progressive form at all, even when they seem to indicate duration:

I see my brother over there.

It contains sugar.

They own a lot of property.

These verbs differ from the other verbs of English in that they usually, even in the present tense, occur with the non-progressive.” (Palmer (1987): 70)

#### 1.1.2. Verbs “Not Used in the Progressive Form”

The verbs not generally used in the progressive form are called “non-progressive verbs.” They are also called “stative verbs,” because they usually denote states of things rather than actions or processes. They are often defined as “verbs which refer not to an activity but to a state or condition.” (Palmer (1987): 71)

### 1.1.3. The Alleged Reason for Not Being Used in the Progressive Form

It is generally argued that the states and conditions indicated by "non-progressive verbs" are incompatible with the meaning of the progressive form. Palmer(1987) explains the reason as follows:

"The sense of duration is an integral part of the lexical meaning of the verb, and there is for this reason no need for a progressive form to indicate duration." (Palmer (1987): 71.)

This explanation can be formulated as a syllogism as in the following:

- (1) Major Premise: the function of the progressive form is to express duration, a durative state of the event
- (2) Minor Premise: stative verbs express duration, a durative state of the event by themselves
- (3) Conclusion: therefore, they are not used in the progressive form.

As we argue in later sections, this syllogism does not stand. The major premise is wrong. It is not based on the correct understanding of the function of the progressive form in English.

## 1.2. "Exceptions" and How They Are Explained

### 1.2.1. Examples of Stative Verbs in the Progressive Form

Contrary to the general rule, we find a lot of examples of stative verbs used in the progressive form. Many grammars treat them as exceptions, as cases in which the verbs are used in different senses from the original. A typical example is the progressive form of the verb BE as in "He *is being* foolish."

### 1.2.2. An Explanation of the Exceptions: The "Reinterpretation" Theory

#### 1.2.2.1. R. A. Close (1975)

R. A. Close (1975) is probably one of the earliest examples of the view that stative verbs are exceptionally used as dynamic verbs when they are used in the progressive form:

"*Foolish* refers to action in  
George was being rather foolish,  
for the fact that BE is, exceptionally, used in the progressive...the meaning is  
'George was acting rather foolishly.'" (R. A. Close (1975): 29)

#### 1.2.2.2. Quirk et al. (1985)

A more academic grammar explains the exceptional cases along the same line, but in a more theoretical way. Quirk et al. (1985) say that if stative verbs occur in the progressive form, they are "reinterpreted" as dynamic verbs. We can call this "reinterpretation theory." They take up the following examples of the verb BE and HAVE in the progressive form, and say that these do not normally occur:

- \*Mary is being a Canadian [1a]      ?\*Mary is being tired [3a]  
\*Mary is having blue eyes. [2a]      ?\*Mary is having a bad cold. [4a]

As to exceptional uses of this type of the progressive form, they present the following explanation:

“If sentences such as [1a-4a] do occur with the progressive, it is a sign that they have been in some sense reinterpreted as containing a dynamic predication. For example, *Peter is being awkward* signifies that ‘awkwardness’ is a form of behaviour or activity, not a permanent trait. If sentence [3a] were to occur, it would signify that Mary was pretending to be tired (ie indulging in a deceptive activity), rather than in a state of real lassitude.

Although verbs with stative meaning have sometimes been called ‘nonprogressive’, we should observe that the definition of stative verbs is not so much that they are incompatible with the progressive, as that when they are combined with the progressive, some change of interpretation other than the addition of the ‘temporary’ meaning of the progressive aspect is required. This change of interpretation can usually be explained as a transfer, or reclassification of the verb as dynamic, eg as having a meaning of process or agentivity.” (Quirk et al. (1985): 200-2)

## 2. Review of the “Reinterpretation” Theory

In this section, we will examine some more examples given by Quirk et al. (1985) as requiring their “reinterpretation theory.” We will also examine some other examples of exceptional cases from our collection. We will see whether we really need “reinterpretation” in order to explain their uses in the progressive form.

### 2.1. With the Verb of Being BE

#### 2.1.1. “Reinterpretation”

The progressive form of the verb BE is most commonly accompanied by adjectives like *foolish*, *awkward*, *friendly*, etc. as its compliment:

George *was being* rather *foolish*. (R. A. Close (1975): 29)

Peter *is being* *awkward*. (Quirk et al. (1985): 200)

The neighbours *are being* *friendly*. (Quirk et al. (1985): 202)

These sentences present states of being foolish, awkward, friendly etc. in the progressive form. The reinterpretation theory claims that the verb represents a process rather than a state in these examples. It says that the verb BE is reinterpreted as an action verb equivalent to *behave*, *act*, etc. Our question here is: Do we really need this kind of reinterpretation?

#### 2.1.2. Discussion

##### 2.1.2.1. The Verb BE Not Reinterpreted: Simply Expressing a State as an Abstraction from Observed Facts

###### 2.1.2.1.1. “BEING FOOLISH” as an Abstraction from Observed Facts

It is true that when somebody says “George is being foolish,” George is behaving in

a certain way. However, the speaker is not describing George's behaviours. If this is his intention, he will use the verb *behave* or some other action verbs. Instead, he chooses to use the verb BE. This is because he interprets the behaviours as a form of state, as a form of being—a kind of abstraction from observed facts.

Abstraction is a means of storing our observations in our memory. It is not easy to memorize the whole of observed facts, so we make abstractions from the facts, and keep the abstractions in our memory. From a series of certain behaviours by George, we deduce a single image of his "being foolish," a state of "being foolish." A series of complicated behaviours can thus be reduced to a single abstract idea of "being foolish."

We always do this kind of abstraction in our daily life. When we observe specific facts, we usually make a simple abstraction from them. This is a kind of interpretation. Observed facts ("behaving in a certain way") are interpreted into a single abstract idea ("being foolish").

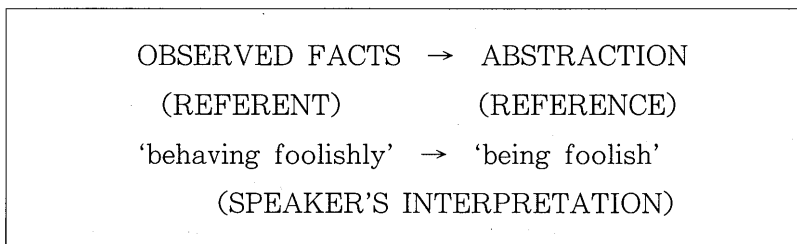


Figure 1

**2.1.2.1.2. BEING FOOLISH as an Expression of an Abstraction from Observed Facts**

When we report our observations, we often choose to report our abstraction rather than the details of the observed facts. Instead of saying in concrete terms like "George is behaving such and such a way," we often simply say "George is being foolish" as our interpretation of the behaviours. This process can be diagrammed as in the following:

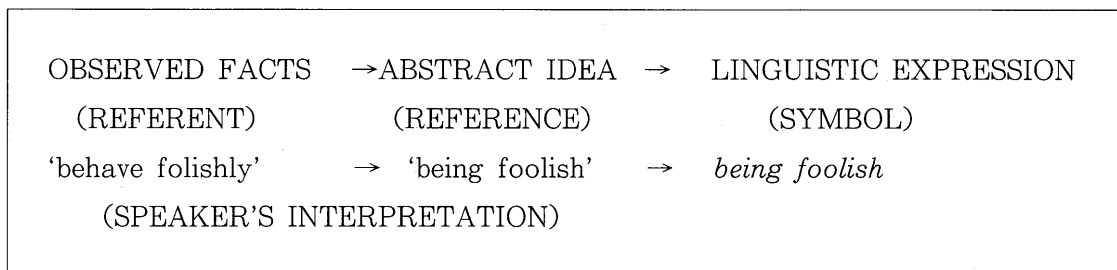


Figure 2

**2.1.2.1.3. BEING FOOLISH Reinterpreted Back to "BEHAVING FOOLISHLY"**

What will happen, now, when we hear the linguistic expression reported in the abstract as *being foolish*? We usually visualize some concrete behaviours which seem to

be implied by this abstraction. We put the abstracted idea back into concrete observable behaviours, and visualize George behaving in such and such a foolish way. This is what we usually do in our mind when we interpret a linguistic expression. And this is no other than a **REINTERPRETATION**. **It is a reinterpretation on the part of the hearer/reader.**

When we say (with Quirk et al.) that “George *is being* rather foolish” means ‘George is acting rather foolishly,’ we are reinterpreting the linguistic expression *being foolish* back into observable facts of George’s “behaving foolishly.” We reinterpret the abstract state indicated by the verb into concrete observable facts which could have been expressed by a dynamic verb like BEHAVE. This is a mental activity on the part of the hearer/reader/interpreter.

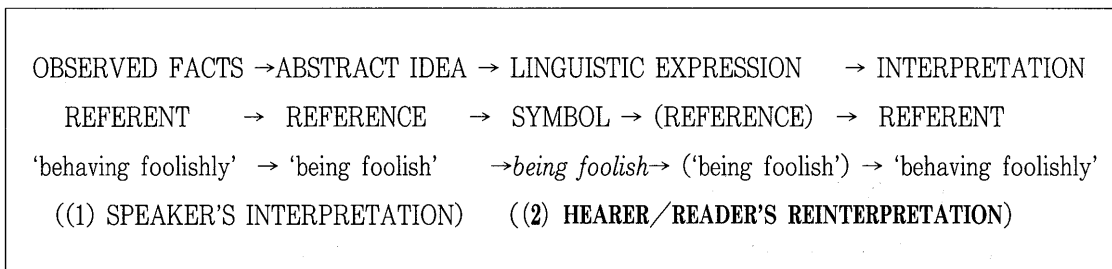


Figure 3

#### 2.1.2.1.4. So-called “REINTERPRETATION” Being the Hearer/Reader’s Reinterpretation

It should be clear now that there is no linguistic “reinterpretation” of the stative verb BE into a dynamic verb such as BEHAVE or ACT when we say “George is being foolish.” We simply present the state “being foolish” as an abstraction or an interpretation from the observed facts of the behaviour. There is no reinterpretation of the verb meaning, and hence no need of a “Reinterpretation” theory.

The “Reinterpretation” theory hypothesized by R. A. Close (1975) and Quirk et al. (1985) comes from a misunderstanding. The hearer’s REINTERPRETATION in dynamic terms (as in (2) in Figure 3) of the stative expression *being foolish* is misunderstood as if it were the speaker’s reinterpretation of the stative verb into a dynamic verb. Just because we reinterpret the stative expression *being foolish* in dynamic terms when we hear the utterance, we misunderstand as if the speaker himself had used the verb BE as a dynamic verb. Here we are imposing the hearer/reader’s reinterpretation of the verb BE onto the meaning of the verb itself, and think that the verb is reinterpreted as a dynamic verb—as if it were the speaker’s intended meaning of the verb. This is an ironical phenomenon in talking about grammar. Only native speakers of English can do this sort of misinterpretation. In their ordinary speech activities, SYMBOL, REFERENCE and REFERENT are not clearly distinguished.

### 2.1.2.2. The Progressive Use of the Stative Verb BE

The function of the progressive form is not to indicate "duration" per se. All situations, either actions, processes or states, have some length of duration, albeit very short. And they can be expressed both in the progressive form and the simple form. Palmer's view of the progressive form seen in §1.1.1 is not correct. The function of the progressive form is to take up a situation of temporary duration and present it as in its progression toward an end. This function applies to both dynamic situations and stative situations.

Therefore, if a state expressed by the verb BE is regarded as temporary, it can be grasped in the midst of continuation, in the imperfective aspect. Then it can be put in the progressive form. This is a legitimate use of the progressive form, not an exceptional use. We need not "reinterpret" the verb as a dynamic verb.

The function of the progressive form in these cases can be diagrammed as in the following:

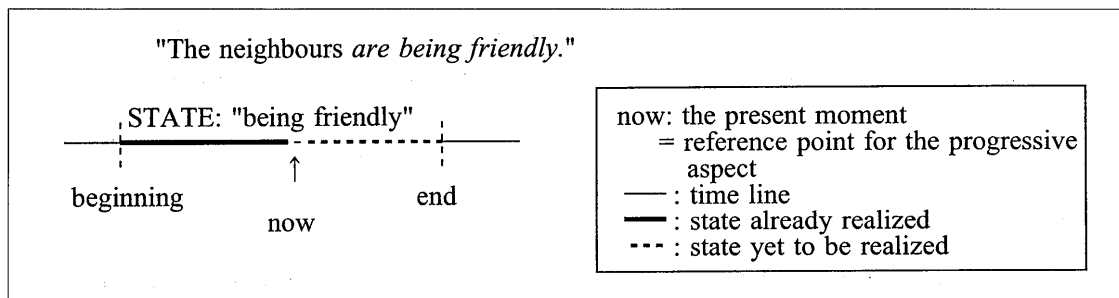


Figure 4

This use of the progressive form of BE is no different from that of the dynamic verb READ, for instance:

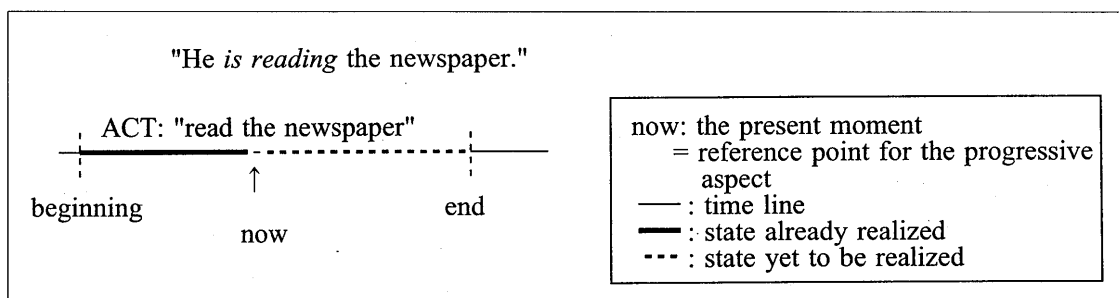


Figure 5

### 2.1.3. Some More Examples of the Verb BE in the Progressive Form

Here are some more examples of the uses of the progressive form from our collection.

#### (A) When Accompanied by Attitudinal Adjectives.

The verb BE in the progressive form are very often accompanied by attitudinal adjectives. *Friendly* is one example. Other examples are:

- (1) I may *be being* a bit *cynical*. (*London-Lund Corpus* (1990): 1.3. 992A)
- (2) .. but I *am* just *being polite* to Arthur. (*London-Lund Corpus* (1990): 10. 1220)
- (3) It is very painful to be thought obstinate when one is merely *being firm*.  
(Ganshina & Vasilevskaya (1953): 104)
- (4) You will be glad to hear ... how *diligent* I have been, and *am being*.  
(John Keats in one of his letters. Quoted in Ganshina & Vasilevskaya (1953): 104)

There are some observable behaviours behind the states expressed by the verb BE, but they are not linguistically expressed. They are what we assume as implications of the expressions *being cynical*, etc. The BE + adjective simply indicates states, not concrete behaviours. And their progressive form presents the states as being in progress toward their end.

#### (B) When Accompanied by Non-Attitudinal Adjectives

Non-attitudinal adjectives also can accompany the verb BE in the progressive form.

- (5) Dodo was making an effort to read, but she *was not being* very *successful*.  
(Ganshina & Vasilevskaya (1953): 104)
- (6) Alan was evidently pleased that he *was being able* to show Stella his own college. (*Kruisinga* (1925-32): II.1, section 508)
- (7) Benjamin can't work out why his mother *is being sick* every morning if she is not pregnant. (*TV Quick*, 1992, 21-27 Nov., 49.)

In (6), Alan was engaged in the activities of showing Stella his own college, but these acts are interpreted as a state of ability rather than activities, and this state of ability is the main thing in this predication. In (7), the mother is behaving in a certain way every morning, and this is interpreted as a state of *being sick*.

#### (C) When Accompanied by Nouns:

The progressive uses of BE is also possible with nouns as complements of the verb.

- (8) I don't know how *much of a chameleon* I *was being* in this common-room conversation. (*London-Lund Corpus* (1990): 1108A)
- (9) In the hallway he encountered a figure in a floating robe advancing towards him. Its eyes were tightly closed, its arms outspread... 'What are you doing?' 'I'm *being Lady Macbeth*,' said his daughter. (*Spoken English Corpus* (1988): G05 066-71)



In example (9) the daughter was behaving in a certain way. She was advancing toward her father, keeping her eyes tightly closed and spreading out her arms, acting the role of Lady Macbeth of the play *Macbeth*. By doing so, however, she was able to "be Lady Macbeth" temporarily, and she is in the midst of this temporary state. This is what she says in words. This use of the progressive aspect is quite legitimate.

## 2.2. With the Verb of Possession HAVE

### 2.2.1. Reinterpretation

Quirk et al. (1985) say that HAVE does not normally occur with the progressive, and they give the following example as ungrammatical:

\*Mary is having blue eyes. (Quirk et al. (1985): 201, [2a])

This sentence is probably condemned as unacceptable by most native informants. But this is not because the verb HAVE is a stative verb. It is because having blue eyes is normally supposed to be an everlasting state, not a temporary state. There seems to be no reason to present it as in the midst of continuation.

However, we can be more imaginative. There can be a pathological case of a woman with her eyes changing colours according to her physical condition, or according to the time of the day. In such cases it would be quite grammatical to say "Mary is having blue eyes now." Or we can imagine a scene of some comedy where a character enjoys changing the colour of her eyes. Then we would say the same sentence. It is within the legitimate function of language to be able to cope with even such fictional situations.

Quirk et al. (1985) are not quite sure about the following example.

?Mary is having a bad cold. [4a]

This sentence can be all right in some situations. It depends upon what sort of situation we have in mind. It should be acceptable if the speaker expects some improvements in the symptoms.

On the other hand, there are a lot of acceptable examples of HAVE used in the progressive form. The verb HAVE is very commonly used when we talk about activities like eating, drinking, enjoying, suffering, etc.

(12) I can't answer the telephone; I *am having a bath*. (Thompson and Martinet (1986): 125)

(13) I *am having a wonderful holiday*. (Loc. cit.)

And in these cases it might appear that they can be easily explained by the reinterpretation theory, because there are evidently a lot of activities behind these descriptions of our life.

### 2.2.2. Discussion

In the above cases, grammar books generally say that the verb HAVE means some kind of activity and that this is why this verb can be used in the progressive form.

However, we need not assume a reinterpretation of the verb here. The verb can be

literally interpreted as meaning possession, either concrete or abstract, and it can be a matter of temporary possession. Because it expresses a temporary possession with its end clearly in prospect, the verb HAVE can be used in the progressive aspect, and indicate that the state is in the midst of its temporary duration.

In the case of HAVING A BATH, this surely involves the “activity” of washing one’s body, but this act of daily routine is grasped and conceptualized as a kind of possession as HAVING A BATH instead of saying plainly as WASHING ONE’S BODY. This is probably as a form of euphemism. And we should take this expression at its face value as a figure of speech, because this is what language activity is about. This applies even more clearly to HAVE A WONDERFUL HOLIDAY, and HAVE A GREAT TIME. These expressions do not have to involve concrete activities. We can have a wonderful time or have a great time by doing nothing at all. Doing nothing at all on holidays can be a wonderful and great thing. Only it is not everlasting. That is why we can present them in the progressive form as in examples (12) and (13).

The same applies to the following example.

- (14) How can you tell when a motorcyclist has *been having fun* speeding on the motorway? (*British National Corpus Sampler*: chr (1133 (1134)))

It would not be easy to say that HAVING FUN is a form of activity here. It is not an activity. The actual activity is “speeding a motorcycle,” while *having fun* is a mental result of this act of speeding. It is a mental possession of fun resulting from speeding. And this sentence implies that speeding on the motorway does not necessarily produce fun. Whether it does or does not, it is a temporary matter, and for this reason it can be grasped in the midst of process toward its end. The reinterpretation theory is not able to explain the use of HAVE in the progressive form in this sentence.

### 2.3. With the Verbs of Perception SEE and HEAR

#### 2.3.1. Reinterpretation

Progressive uses of verbs of perception like SEE and HEAR are also regarded as exceptional. Quirk et al. (1985: §4.30 [c]) says:

“ [c] Note the exceptional use of *see* and *hear* with the progressive (focusing on the process of perception) in:

- (1) I need some spectacles. *I'm not seeing* things so well these days.  
 (2) A: Did you hear a bell ring just then? B: No. I can't hear a thing.  
 A: There it goes again! *I am hearing* it now. / I can hear it now.”

These uses are regarded as exceptional, as “focusing on the process of perception,” as a kind of activity.

#### 2.3.2. Discussion

##### 2.3.2.1. Examples Given by Quirk et al. (1985)

However, we have no ground to think that we have here “the process of perception” as

a form of activity. What sort of process of seeing can we visualize here? In the quoted example (1), what we really have is merely a STATE of *not seeing things so well*. The speaker hopes that his eyesight will recover sooner or later. He does not believe that he has lost some of his eyesight for ever. The STATE of not seeing well is a temporary state in the speaker's belief. In (2) in the quotation again, we merely have a STATE of *hearing a bell ringing now*. The ringing is sure to disappear soon. The ringing is of temporary duration, and the temporariness of the ringing makes the hearing temporary. As soon as the ringing stops, the hearing also stops. In these cases, a temporary state of not seeing things so well or of hearing a bell ringing is grasped in the midst of temporary duration. This is why the verbs SEE and HEAR can be put in the progressive aspect. These are quite legitimate uses of the progressive form.

In example (2), hearing the bell ringing might appear a process. The ringing of a bell is a process. But this does not mean that "hearing" it is therefore also a process. Here is a danger of confusing two different things (as we have seen in the use of BE in the progressive). We often misunderstand that the state of hearing is a "process" just because what is heard is a process.

Or can we regard any state as a process just because it is "temporary"? Surely not. A state is a state whether it is temporary or long-lasting. This use of SEE and HEAR could be rare because we do not usually focus on a temporary state of these kinds of perception, but we can do so when we are really interested in their temporary state. And this is why we have the progressive aspect. These uses of SEE and HEAR in the progressive are not "exceptional," and the verbs are not reinterpreted as process verbs.

#### 2.3.2.2. Some More Examples

Here are some more examples of the progressive uses of SEE and HEAR from our collection.

- (15) When you see an airplane without propellers or rotors of any sort, you *are seeing* a jet or rocket plane. (*Bookshelf for Boys and Girls*, (1970), vol. 7: 350)

This example is very interesting. In the *when*-clause we have the simple form of SEE expressing the non-progressive aspect, while in the main clause we have the progressive form of the same verb expressing the progressive aspect. This shows that the same perception of "seeing an airplane without propellers or rotors" can be grasped and presented either in the progressive (imperfective) aspect or non-progressive (perfective) aspect, i.e. either in its entirety or in its process toward an end. The perception is temporary because the airplane will soon disappear, and this temporary seeing can be grasped in the midst of duration and expressed by the progressive form. This seeing of an airplane is not an activity as contrasted with a state. If the seeing of an airplane referred to in the *when*-clause is a perception, then the seeing of the same thing seen in the main clause should also be a perception. The same observation applies to the

following example.

- (16) When you see your [letter] carrier at your front door, you *are seeing* the final step in a multidetailed delivery system. (“Ann Landers,” *Asahi Evening News*, May 26, 1988)

The seeing of the letter carrier at the front door is a passive act, a perception, and in the main clause this same state is interpreted as a state of seeing the final step in a delivery system, and this is presented in the progressive aspect, as being in the midst of continuation.

- (17) It [i.e. television] makes it possible for us “to see far off.” At the same time we *are “seeing* far off,” we are hearing far off. (*Book of Knowledge*, vol. 14)

Watching television is a temporary act. When we watch television, we see images and we hear sounds. And the seeing and hearing are both temporary. We can grasp these two types of temporary perception in the midst of continuation. This is why we have the progressive form of SEE and HEAR in this sentence.

- (18) so we’re *seeing* here in slow motion what actually happens at a much faster speed. (*London-Lund Corpus*, 10.9.1: 251a-254a)

- (19) I’ve always felt a wonder at old photographs... the sense of wonder at knowing that what you’re *seeing* was once real; that these people were there once, smiling into a camera. (From a magazine article)

In example (18) slow motion makes it easier to pay attention to the midst of an almost momentary perception. In example (19), seeing old photographs is a state of perception. We need not reinterpret it as “watching” or “looking at.” Even if we interpret it as “looking,” the result is that the images come into our eyes and we receive them as they come in, and this is a state of perception. This state ends after a few minutes, so this is temporary. And the speaker is concerned with some point of time within this temporary perception. In order to indicate this he puts the verb SEE in the progressive aspect.

- (20) The cloud we *are seeing* here is ... (“Weather Reports,” CNN.)

- (21) You *are seeing* here thousands of Haitians... (Reporting from Port-au-Prince, Haiti, CNN)

- (22) The man you *are seeing* on the screen now is King Hussein.

(Live coverage of President Clinton’s visit to Jordan, CNN, 1994)

These three examples are from TV broadcasting. The reporters are describing situations as they evolve. These are not reports after the event. They are real-time reports. The acts of seeing are evolving in real time. Both reporters and viewers are in the midst of SEEING. We are having more and more similar uses of the verb SEE in the progressive form in TV newscasts these days.

In all these cases we do not need any reinterpretation from stative verbs into process verbs. All the events and situations described by these sentences are temporary states rather than temporary activities. And these temporary states are presented as in the

midst of progression toward their end. Uses of verbs of perception SEE and HEAR are not exceptional. They are legitimately used in the progressive form because they refer to temporary states with a definite beginning and end, and because we focus our attention on some point of time within this temporary duration.

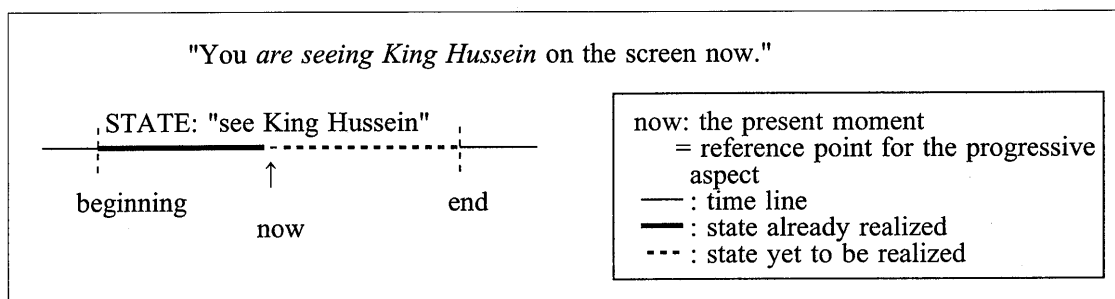


Figure 6

In Figure 6 the state "SEE KING HUSSEIN" is presented as in the midst of continuation at the present moment (now), which is the reference point of time for the progressive aspect.

### 3. A Non-Reinterpretation Theory of the Progressive Use of Stative Verbs

#### 3.1. The Function of the Progressive Form

When the non-progressive form is used, the event, whether it is an activity or a state, and whether it is of long duration or short, is grasped, viewed, and presented as a whole, without paying attention to the progression toward its end. When the progressive form is used, on the other hand, the same event is grasped at a point of time in the continuation toward its end.

The reason why some verbs of state are not often used in the progressive form is that we do not often pay attention to the progression of the state toward its end in our daily life. In many cases this is a matter of frequency.

However, with some other verbs like KNOW, it may be hardly possible to think of temporary existence of the states they express. We have no examples of the verb KNOW used in the progressive form in our collection. States must be of temporary duration in order to be grasped in the imperfective aspect.

#### 3.2. The Two Conditions for the Use of the Progressive Form

The progressive form does not indicate "duration" per se. It applies to a situation which has "duration." However, the duration must be of limited duration. Given this kind of event, either action, process, or state, the progressive form can indicate that it is in the midst of progression or continuation toward its presumed end, whether the end comes soon or very late. Here we have two conditions for the use of the progressive form.

The two conditions:

- (1) The event, either an action, process, or state, must be presumed to be of limited duration bounded by a beginning and an end.
- (2) The event must be grasped at a reference point placed between the beginning and the end.

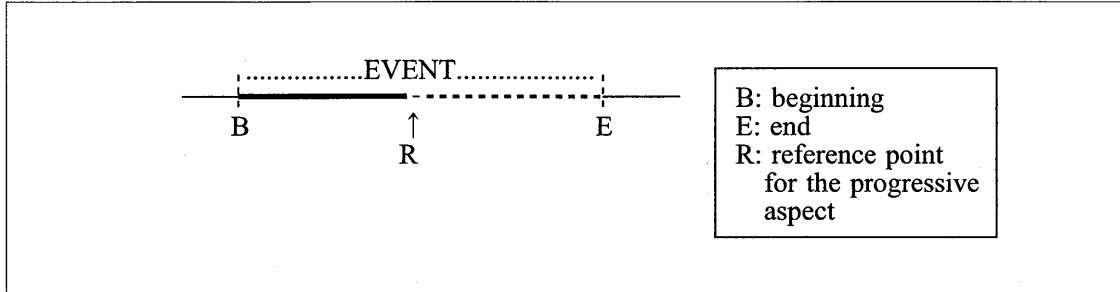


Figure 7

#### 4. Conclusion

We do not need any reinterpretation theory in order to explain the progressive uses of stative verbs. What is regarded as “reinterpretation” is not a reinterpretation on the part of the speaker. It is a reinterpretation on the part of the hearer as he interprets the progressive uses of stative verbs.

States as well as actions and processes can be grasped in the imperfective aspect and therefore be presented in the progressive form as long as they are temporary states — states of limited duration. It can be maintained that the essential function of the progressive form in English is to take up a situation of temporary existence, and grasp it in the middle of its duration, and present it as being in the progression toward its end, as in the imperfective aspect.

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