

Grammaticalization, subjectification and the layering of meanings How to deal with the semantics of the present-day English progressive

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The semantics of the present-day English progressive, i.e. the form *I am working*, has presented a puzzle to many a researcher, and the puzzle is still not satisfyingly solved. The description by Quirk et al. (1985) is exemplary: they state that the progressive can express duration, limited duration and incompleteness (cf. also Leech 1987), but then they also discuss particular meanings of the construction under the heading ‘other uses’ which cannot be related to these concepts (cf. Quirk et al. 1985: 210). Similarly, Huddleston and Pullum (2002), who state that the progressive “has as its basic use the expression of progressive aspectuality” (Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 162), operate with six strong implicatures, and still do not manage to account in this way for all meanings the progressive has in actual discourse.

The term ‘progressive aspect’, as it is most commonly used, refers to a subtype of imperfective marker: a situation is viewed as dynamically progressing at reference time (cf. Bybee/Dahl 1989: 55). Such a definition captures the meaning of the form in a considerable proportion of uses in present-day English, but is certainly not adequate for all of them. Particularly uses where the construction conveys speaker attitude (e.g. *You are being extremely selfish.*) or pragmatic nuances such as tentativeness/politeness (e.g. *I was hoping that by now you were a settled family man*), as well as uses with particular types of verbs (e.g. verbs of saying as in *Mummié was saying such sweet things about you in the cab.*) are difficult to relate to the meaning ‘progressive aspect’. And they are neither readily explicable with reference to duration (limited or unlimited) or incompleteness, the meanings focused on by Quirk et al. (1985).

The present paper aims at shedding light on the semantics of the present-day English progressive by taking the long diachronic view of the development of the construction since Old English. We shall see that the progressive has undergone several related processes: a primary grammaticalization process in (pre-) Old English times which led to its emergence as a construction and was accompanied by subjectification and, much later (roughly speaking between 1700 and 1900) a secondary grammaticalization process which led to its emergence as an aspectual marker. The paper is based on qualitative and, for the Modern period, also quantitative analyses of data from various corpora (*DOE*, *The Corpus of ME Verse and Prose*, *MED online* and *ARCHER-2*; the examples above are all from the 20th century part of *ARCHER-2*).

On this basis, it will be shown that the different meanings the progressive has in present-day English are explicable as the result of layering of meanings: older, less grammaticalized uses of the form co-exist today with more recent, more grammaticalized functions, and modern speaker-based uses partly go back to the subjectification that accompanied the primary grammaticalization in Old English times, and partly only emerged in the Modern period from the grammaticalized aspectual function. A complex picture unfolds which can hope to capture the whole range of meanings the progressive has in present-day English and date their emergence.

References

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