



# The Epistemic Meaning of the Progressive

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- “Unfortunately there are issues with undesirable images within the data. It would appear that a surprising number of people are using webcam conversations to show intimate parts of their body to the other person. Also, the fact that the software allows more than one person to view a webcam stream means that **it appears to be being used** to broadcast pornography.”

(From a post 9/11 Optic Nerve top secret assessment, monitoring webcam use in the early years 2000 to detect terrorist activity, as cited in HyperNormalisation, Adam Curtis, BBC, 2016)

# 1. Non-aspectual uses of the progressive

- Descriptions and analyses of progressive aspect (in different individual languages and in cross-linguistic/typological studies) generally focus on aspectotemporal notions such as ongoingness, viewpoint, limited duration, etc.
- Examples:
  - Bertinetto et al. (2000) on the meaning of the progressive in European languages “the event is viewed as [...] in progress at the relevant moment”
  - The (English) progressive imposes an internal perspective on an event (Leech 2004; Declerck 2006)

# 1. Non-aspectual uses of the progressive

- And indeed:
  - English: *Please stop singing, I'm **trying** to concentrate.*
  - German: *“Ich habe eine Woche lang DVDs gesichtet und **bin gerade am Schreiben**,” erzählt er. ““I have been sorting out DVDs for a week and now I’m writing,” he said.’ (DeReKo; Anthonissen et al. 2016: 12)*
  - French: *Je suis **en train de chercher** le nom mais je l'**retrouve plus**.* ‘I’m looking for the name but I can’t find it anymore.’ (CFPP2000; De Wit et al. 2013: 849)

# 1. Non-aspectual uses of the progressive

- Non-aspectual meanings of the progressive are typically ignored or mentioned as pragmatic inferences (secondary), especially in studies of the English progressive, which has a notoriously wide variety of such uses.
- BUT: non-aspectual uses are quite common in languages across the world, also with less grammaticalized progressives (than in English).

# 1. Non-aspectual uses of the progressive

- French:

- ?? *Il est en train de bien lire.*

versus

- *Il est en train de lire de travers.* (Franckel 1989: 78)

‘He’s reading well/aslant.’ (Lit.: ‘he’s in the course of...’)

→ progressive associated with **atypical, surprising** events

# 1. Non-aspectual uses of the progressive

- Dutch: *was d ook één jongen in 't team en z en dat vind ik nou wel een beetje irritant worden want die **loopt** altijd heel erg **te roepen** van uh als je iets fout doet* 'there was also one guy in the team and I think it's getting a little annoying cause **he's always shouting** if you do something wrong [lit. he always runs to shout]' (CGN NL Dutch; Anthonissen et al. submitted)
- progressive (especially posture and motion verb constructions in the case of Dutch) for the expression of **irritation**

# 1. Non-aspectual uses of the progressive

- Western Armenian: *O č`, č`unim, k'ësem **kor**, anpayman k'uzes ëllay, č`unim!* 'No, I haven't got any, and **I'm telling you**, you absolutely want there to be some, and I haven't got any!' (Donabédian 2012: 9)

→ progressive for reasons of emphasis



# 1. Non-aspectual uses of the progressive

- German: [Renate Götschl, an alpine ski racer:] *“Die Strecke ist interessant, [...] hat Wellen, ich **bin** noch ein bisschen **am Probieren**,” meinte die Steirerin, die bisher in der Abfahrt ebenfalls hinter ihren Erwartungen geblieben war. ““The ski slope is interesting, [...] has curves, **I’m still testing it** a little,” said the woman from Styria, who hitherto has not lived up to expectations in the downhill too.’ (Anthonissen et al. 2016)*

→ progressive for more **tentative** formulations

# 1. Non-aspectual uses of the progressive

- English: [In a discussion between a professor and his students about Jesse Jackson:] *Well, he says minorities. He's smart, he **talks** about minorities. But he's really **talking** about African Americans.* (Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English, Part 1; De Wit & Brisard (2014: 52))

→ “interpretative use” of the progressive (Ljung 1980)

# 1. Non-aspectual uses of the progressive

- Progressive constructions can be used for the expression of:
    - atypicality & surprise => incongruity (e.g., WXDY)
    - intensity vs tentativeness
    - irritation and other (negative) emotions
    - (re-)interpretation => echoing contexts
- Progressive is used to make situations ‘stand out’ in one way or another.

# 1. Non-aspectual uses of the progressive

- Note also: association of progressive aspect and predication focus in Bantu languages (Güldemann 2003)
  - Predication focus = sentence focus lies on (part of) the predicate
  - Cognate constructions within Bantu zones indicate progressive aspect or predication focus, or both
  - E.g. Zone S (Zulu, Xhosa, Tsonga...): prefix *-ya-* for focus

a. *ndi-thetha ku-ye*

1S-speak:PRS to-3S

'I am speaking to him.'

a. *ba-funda incwadi*

2-read:PRS book

'They read/ are reading a book.'

b. *ndi-**ya**-thetha ku-ye* [focus]

1S-PF-speak:PRS to-3S

'I am speaking/do speak to him. (Xhosa)

b. *ba-**ya**-yi-funda incwadi* [intensive action]

2/S-PF-9/O-read:PRS 9:book

'They study the book.' (Zulu)

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a. *ba-yi-dumisa inyoka*

2/s-9/o-worship:PRS 9:snake

‘They conduct snake-worship (as a habit).’

b. *ba-ya-yi-dumisa inyoka* (progressive)

2/s-PROG-9/o-worship:PRS 9:snake

‘They are worshipping the snake.’ (Zulu)

# 1. Non-aspectual uses of the progressive

- Note also: association of progressive aspect and predication focus in Bantu languages (Güldemann 2003)
- Frequently attested isomorphism of predication focus and progressive aspect is the result of a grammaticalization process from predication focus to (present) progressive
- Progressive as an “inherently focused verb category” (Güldemann 2003: 346) → progressive makes situations ‘stand out’ (cp. reduplication?)

# 1. Non-aspectual uses of the progressive

- Two questions in this talk:
  - 1) How can we account for the attested variety of aspectual and non-aspectual uses in a unified way, i.e., how are they motivated by a common semantic schema?
  - 2) Why is the progressive such a good candidate cross-linguistically for being used in contexts involving events that 'stand out' in one way or another?

# 1. Non-aspectual uses of the progressive

- Central claim:
  - The progressive indicates **epistemic contingency** in all of its uses (as opposed to the simple present). Both its aspectual uses and its non-aspectual uses can be derived from this basic meaning of epistemic contingency. (De Wit & Brisard 2014)



## 2. Epistemic contingency and the progressive

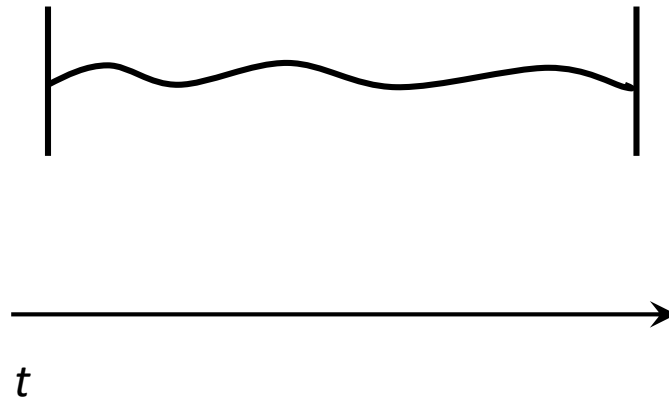
- Previous proposals to analyze the progressive in modal terms, for English, in contrast with the simple present:
  - Calver (1946): “mere occurrence” versus “the constitution of things”
  - Dowty (1975): “accidence” versus “essence”
  - Goldsmith & Woisetschlaeger (1982): “phenomenal” versus “structural”
  - Williams (2002): “susceptibility to change” versus “no susceptibility to change”
- These notions are not applied to ALL the uses of the progressive / simple present (Calver, Dowty, Goldsmith & Woisetschlaeger) or it is not clear how the different usage types attested for the progressive tie in with each other, i.e., form a network (Williams).

## 2. Epistemic contingency and the progressive

- Two undisputed facts about the progressive as a universal category:
  - 1) Progressive selects event verbs by definition → if the progressive combines with stative verbs, these verbs are coerced and turned into event verbs (cf. *He is nice* versus *He is being nice*) (Michaelis 2004)
  - 2) Progressive creates an internal temporal perspective on situations reported by such event verbs

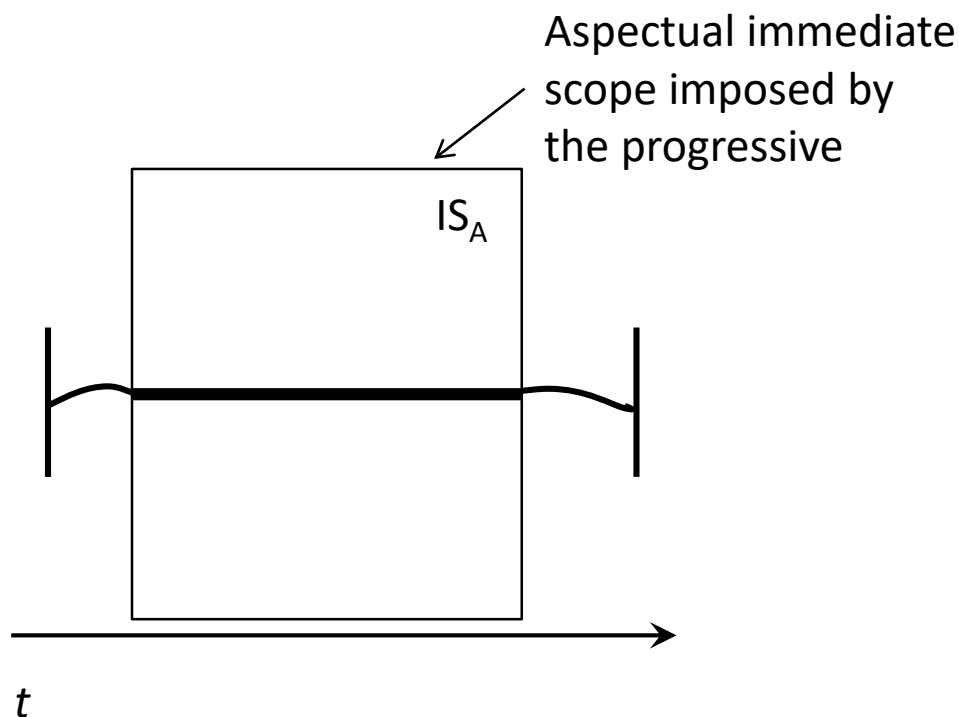
## 2. Epistemic contingency and the progressive

- Progressive creates an internal perspective on events: CG



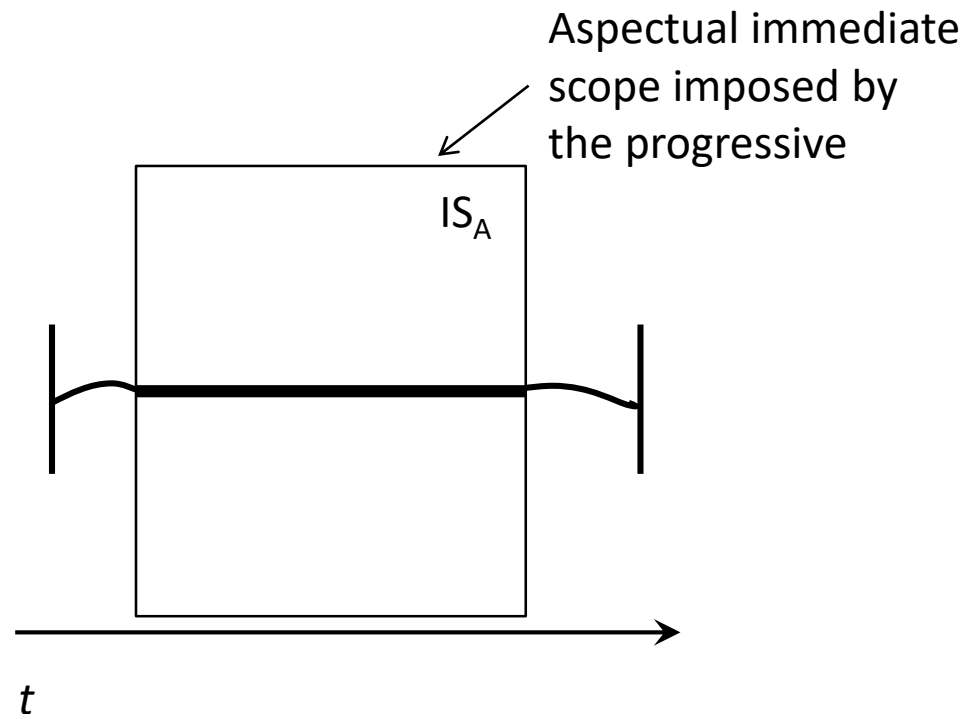
## 2. Epistemic contingency and the progressive

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## 2. Epistemic contingency and the progressive

- Progressive creates an internal perspective on events: CG



- The semantic configuration of progressive aspect by definition implies/imposes **boundaries in the conceptual background**.

## 2. Epistemic contingency and the progressive

- The progressive is inherently associated with actually occurring situations that are construed as bounded in time, and thus as more ephemeral.
- Progressive always reports situations that contribute a contingent, i.e. non-structural, SoA to the speaker's conception of reality: their occurrence does not follow from the structure of the world as S knows it, and its development cannot be entirely predicted.
- Simple present **in English**: reported situations are a structural part of the world – their occurrence can be fully conceptualized at the time of speaking (Brisard 2002; De Wit 2017).

## 2. Epistemic contingency and the progressive

- What about other languages in which the progressive is less grammaticalized, such as Dutch, German or French, and in which the simple present can also be used to report events that are currently ongoing?
- Simple present not dedicated to the expression of structural necessity, yet the progressive in these languages is still dedicated to the expression of contingent ongoing events.

### 3. Contingency in temporal uses of the progressive

- Prototypical use of the progressive in different languages: ongoingness at a certain reference point, e.g.:
    - English: *What is she doing? She **is brushing** her hair.*
    - Dutch: *Wat is ze aan 't doen? Ze **is** haar haar **aan het borstelen**.*
    - French: *Qu'es-ce qu'elle fait? Elle **est en train de se brosser** les cheveux.*
- Event is real at the time of speaking, but it is also contingent, as it doesn't involve a structural (e.g., habitual or defining) property of the subject.

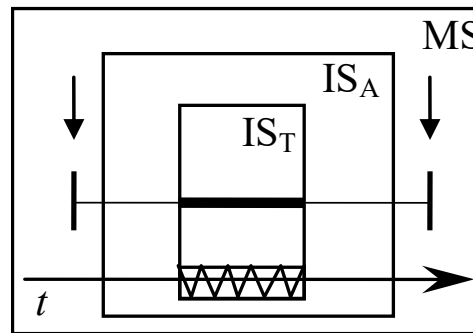


### 3. Contingency in temporal uses of the progressive

- Compare also:
  - *She's ordering everybody to leave* (description) versus *I order you to leave* (performative).
- Event in the progressive is contingent, just like any other currently ongoing event, whereas the simple present in the performative context indicates that the reported event is fully conceptualized by the speaker at the time of speaking.

### 3. Contingency in temporal uses of the progressive

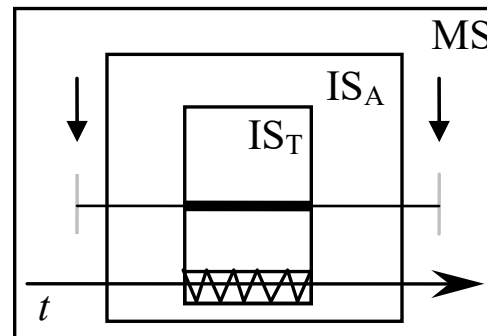
- Other aspectotemporal uses of the progressive, e.g. extended/abnormal duration, temporariness, futurity (English only) are extensions of the prototypical temporal meaning of ongoingness.



Temporary Validity

### 3. Contingency in temporal uses of the progressive

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Extended Duration

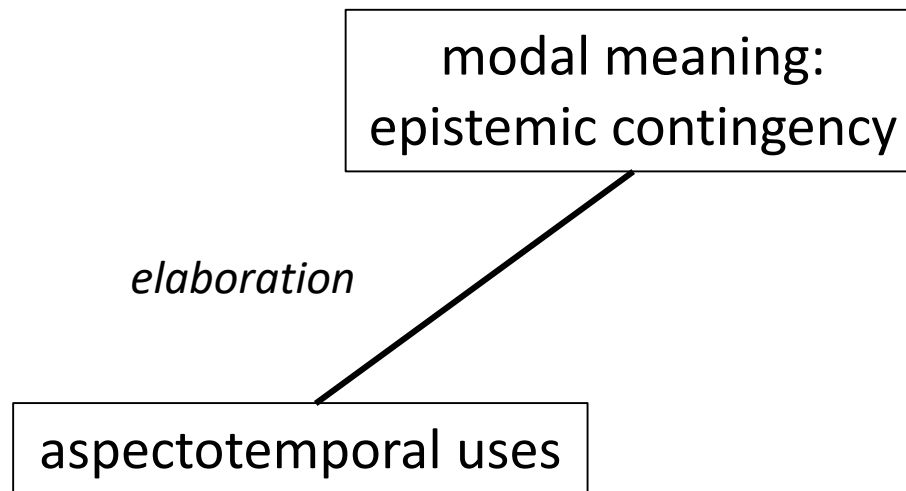
### 3. Contingency in temporal uses of the progressive

- Note also habits:
  - Habits in the progressive construed as temporary (in English, mostly): *Everywhere we've been, in the past several years, everybody's **talking** about how, the weather just isn't normal.* (SBC, Part 1; De Wit & Brisard 2014: 81)
  - and/or as atypical/irritating: Dutch: *Ik heb geen zin om te gaan. Hij **zit** altijd de godganse dag **te zagen**.* ('I don't feel like going there. He's nagging the whole day.')

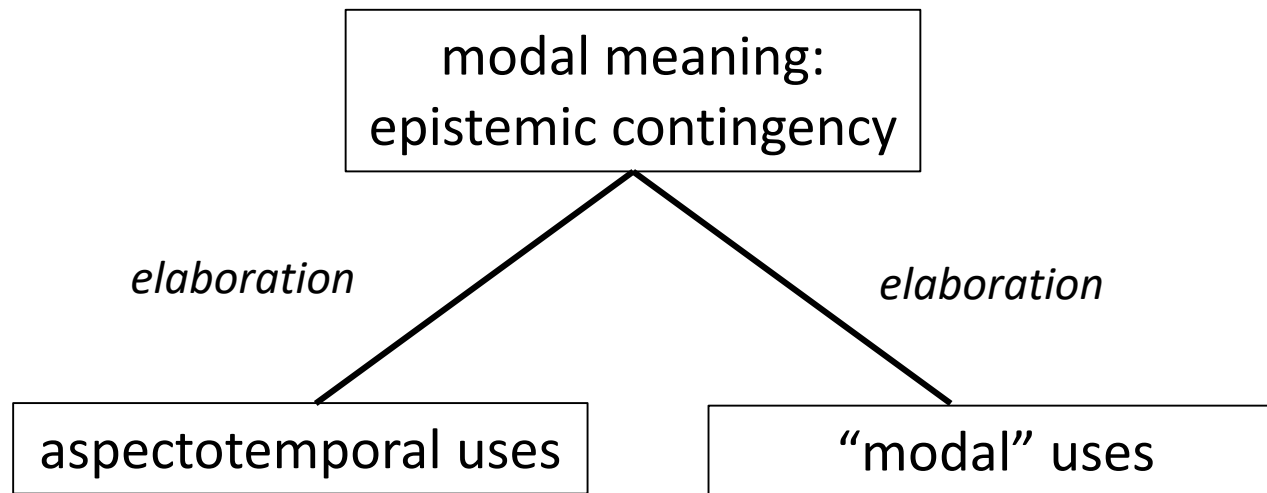
### 3. Contingency in temporal uses of the progressive

modal meaning:  
epistemic contingency

### 3. Contingency in temporal uses of the progressive



## 4. Contingency with modal uses

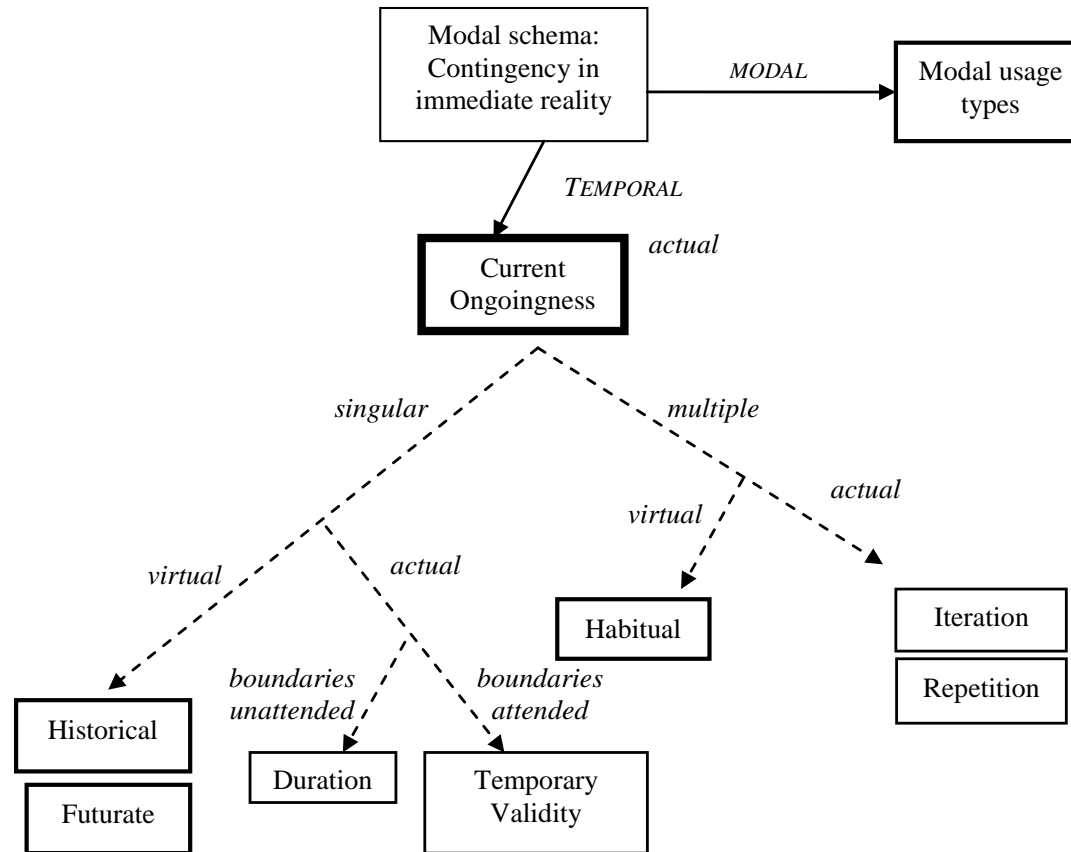


## 4. Contingency with modal uses

- In some cases, the progressive is used for “**modal**” reasons.
- These usage types also constitute direct elaborations of the schematic meaning of epistemic contingency → events that are not necessary are more likely than structural events/states to be atypical/surprising or irritating, or to require emphasis, some reformulation, or a tentative formulation.
- Such uses are most prominent in languages in which the use of the progressive is not obligatory (in the present).



## 4. Contingency with modal uses



A semantic network of the English present progressive

## 5. Conclusion and discussion

- The progressive (as a universal category) can be used for the expression of both aspectual and non-aspectual (modal) meanings.
- Both meanings constitute elaborations of a common underlying schema, which we have defined in terms of epistemic contingency.
- The contingent meaning of the progressive is a direct corollary of the boundaries implied(/imposed) in its semantic configuration.
- This schematic meaning of contingency makes the progressive particularly prone to readings of surprise, atypicality, re-interpretation, emphasis and tentativeness.

## 5. Conclusion and discussion

- Discussion:
- Can the progressive be said to have **mirative** functions (cf. Anthonissen et al. submitted)?
- What about **extravagance** (Petré forthcoming)? Does the progressive acquire these non-aspectual uses at an incipient stage of grammaticalization to enable speakers to be noticed? Is it its meaning of contingency that makes it possible for the progressive to mark extravagance?
- Can the progressive, in some of its uses, be analyzed as a marker of **predication focus**?