

# The Epistemic Meaning of the Progressive

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Analyses of the semantics of the progressive in different languages generally focus on aspecto-temporal notions such as (temporary) duration and ongoingness. Yet, as De Wit & Brisard (2014) demonstrate for English, the progressive may be employed to convey non-aspectotemporal meanings as well. In the following example, for instance, the semantic difference between the simple-present and the present-progressive report of the same event (talking) is not aspectual; it seems, rather, that the speaker is epistemically qualifying his statement by means of the progressive variant:

- (1) Well, he says minorities. He's smart, he **talks** about minorities. But he's really **talking** about African Americans. (SBCSAE, Part 1)

Such “interpretive” uses of the progressive, as well as modal and emotional connotations of surprise and irritation, have also been attested in other languages – see e.g. Anthonissen et al. (ms.) on the “mirative” uses of the Dutch progressive or Donabédian (2012) on the saliency of events reported by means of the progressive in Western Armenian.

These observations raise the following questions about the semantics of the progressive (as a universal category): (i) 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, and (ii) 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?

We will argue that the basic meaning of the progressive, like that of many other markers of tense/aspect, is modal. More specifically, we contend that the construction indicates epistemic contingency in all of its uses: it is essentially used to refer to situations that have a non-structural or “phenomenal” status within the speaker’s conception of reality (Goldsmith & Woisetschlaeger 1982). This association of the progressive with the expression of contingency is a direct consequence of the fact that, as a matter of definition, the progressive combines exclusively with event verbs (or verbs coerced into an event type), which report situations that are construed as bounded in time and thus as more ephemeral. We propose, furthermore, that both aspectual (purely temporal) and non-aspectual uses can be directly derived from the semantic core that we posit for the progressive and that they are in this sense, *qua*

extensions from a common schema, not necessarily different in status (semantic vs pragmatic, denotational vs connotational); this constitutes the unifying aspect of our analysis. The concrete non-aspectual meanings expressed by the progressive (surprise, irritation, emphasis, incongruence, ...) are analyzed as emerging from the interaction of the notion of contingency and features of the wider context (e.g., echoing, as in ex. 1) or construction (e.g., WXDY) in which it appears.

### *References*

Anthonissen, Lynn, Astrid De Wit & Tanja Mortelmans (ms.), 'Mirative Uses of the Dutch Progressive Constructions'.

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Goldsmith, John & Erich Friedrich Voisetschlaeger (1982), 'The Logic of the English Progressive', *Linguistic Inquiry* 13: 79-89.