

9 *I was just reading this article – on the expression of recentness and the English past progressive*

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9.1 Introduction

Due to its poly-functional nature there has been an unbroken fascination with the English progressive construction and the various meanings associated with it. The motivations of these different meanings and their historical developments have found ample attention in the literature on the English verb phrase. Apparently, there is not just one straightforward form–function mapping for the progressive. It not only functions to express various notions of *imperfective aspectuality*, which are typically given to be *temporariness*, i.e. *duration* and *limited duration*, as well as *incompleteness*, etc., but it is also employed as a marker of non-aspectual pragmatic or subjective meanings, as for example in the signaling of politeness and discontent.^{1,2}

The progressive in contemporary English owes its functional diversity to a continuous development and evolution, possibly starting out as the conflation of two constructions in Late Middle English, viz. the earlier Old English periphrastic construction consisting of *beon/wesan* plus an often adjective-like present participle ending in *-ende* (OE *he wæs feohtende*), and a Middle English locative prepositional construction of the kind *be on/at V-ing* (ME *he was on huntunge*) (see Visser 1972: 1095; Jespersen 1909–49: IV, 169).³

While the incipient construction was restricted to activity verbs with animate or agentive subject NPs (Strang 1982; Hundt 2004a), the progressive has seen a remarkable increase especially since the Late Modern English period, not only in terms of frequency, but also with regard to its functional qualities (Arnaud 1998; Smitterberg 2005). Thus, alongside its spread through the verbal paradigm to also combine with the perfect tenses and the passive, *be V-ing* has also been subject to a great deal of lexical diffusion: it has spread from activity verbs to other verb classes and it now also frequently combines with non-agentive subject NPs (*the milk was*

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smelling funny). Furthermore, it occurs with inherently “non-progressive” or stative verbs such as *be*, *have* or *love* (*I am loving the show*). This weakening of restrictions on the lexical verb has gone hand in hand with the extension of the functional scope of the progressive to include non-aspectual pragmatic or subjective meanings (*I was wondering if you could give me a ride* or *He’s always forgetting our birthdays*).⁴ As for changes pertaining to the twentieth century, studies carried out with written data from the “Brown family” of corpora revealed an increase in frequency of the progressive in the thirty-year period between 1961 and 1991 (Mair and Hundt 1995; Smith 2002; Leech, Hundt, Mair and Smith 2009) and, for spoken English, results from the *Diachronic Corpus of Present-Day English* confirmed such an increase between the late 1950s and the early 1990s (Aarts, Close and Wallis 2010). Interestingly though, as the study by Smith (2002) shows, this increase was by no means proportional in all verbal categories. Thus, for the period in question, British English showed a measurable decrease of 9.0 percent in the use of the progressive in the active past tense. This number is of importance as we would like to argue in this chapter that the past progressive is increasingly used in contexts of recent past time and might even be headed towards developing into a fully fledged marker of the recent past.

9.1.1 Summary of progressive functions

Sentences (1) to (6) exemplify the different types of progressive uses in Present-Day English (PDE):

- (1) The convicts *were singing* it when I got there. (COCA: Spoken, 2002)
- (2) At the time I *was learning* about the American Revolution in social studies class. (COCA: Spoken, 2007)
- (3) You *are always talking*. Always trying to make yourself feel better at other people’s expense. (COCA: Fiction, 1997)
- (4) Always such a pleasure to see you. I *’m loving* you. (COCA: Spoken, 2007)
- (5) I *was wondering* if this swine flu outbreak is the same strain that was out in the 1970s. (COCA: Spoken, 2009)
- (6) I’m sorry, what *were you saying*, Julie? (COCA: Spoken, 1997)

Utterances (1) and (2) exemplify what is considered to be the core function of the progressive. They signal *imperfective aspectuality*, i.e. that the situation denoted by the verb is to be interpreted with respect to aspects of its internal organization and not as a whole (see Comrie 1976). Thus, not the totality of

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singing or learning about X is depicted, but only that subpart or phase which happens to be concurrent with the relevant temporal reference point, i.e. another event as in the case of *getting there*, or an adverbial expression like *at the time*, respectively. At the same time both *singing* and *learning* are to be understood as having duration (because singing a song or even just part of a song involves a certain amount of time as does the learning of any type of content) and as ongoing. They are therefore to be interpreted as not being completed at reference time, i.e. both actions can be assumed to have started before and to have continued after the respective reference points.

Unlike in examples (1) and (2), the past progressives in (3)–(6) cannot be understood as expressions of imperfective aspectuality. Rather they reflect the speaker's subjective perspective or attitude towards the proposition, rather than towards its temporal or situational relations. Thus, progressives such as those found in both (3) and (4) can be said to function as indicators of the emotional stance of the speaker: in (3) the co-occurrence of the past progressive with the adverb *always* adds to the negative evaluative overtone on the part of the speaker, signaling disapproval or annoyance. In (5) the progressive likewise underlines the emotional involvement, i.e. here a certain positive excitement of the speaker. It is finally for the sake of politeness that speakers have chosen past progressives like those in both (5) and (6) to establish a certain distance between them and the addressee.

In the light of the functional range of the progressive, the term itself might appear inapt as a collective label for any *be V-ing* construction, and the term 'expanded form' as proposed by Visser (1973: vol. III, part 2, 1921), which focuses on the formal expression rather than on the meaning side of *be V-ing*, may seem to be the more neutral and thus appropriate choice. However, due to the fact that it has become the most widely used expression in the literature, we will use the term 'progressive' for the following analysis of its particular use in PDE.

9.1.2 A new progressive function?

Having outlined the various functions of the English progressive, it becomes obvious that the following occurrences of the verb form in (7)–(10) cannot be explained in terms of either the aspectual or non-aspectual readings discussed above:

- (7) I *was just reading* the other day that Billy Graham, as you say he's been an important part of Richard Nixon's life, he officiated at the funeral of Hannah Nixon, who died in 1967.
(COCA: Spoken, 1994)
- (8) Tom, you *were just telling* me that in all you had nine students going down there. (COCA: Spoken, 1997)

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- (9) I was just, I *was hearing* the other day that somebody had smoked sixty a day. (BNC: H5U 68)
- (10) These pictures, the pictures that we *were just seeing*, it's obvious, for those were Iraqis being treated in hospitals. (COCA: Spoken, 2004)

What lies at the heart of the past progressive constructions found in utterances (7)–(10) cannot be assumed to be purely aspectual in terms of action in progress at reference time, duration, and/or incompleteness. Firstly, an “action in progress” reading is difficult to justify as all of the utterances (7)–(10) clearly lack either explicit or implicit past reference points at which the actions denoted by the verbs *read*, *tell*, *hear*, and *see* could be located, and for which the progressive would function to provide a temporal or situational frame. Secondly, suggesting *duration* as the main motivating factor for the occurrence of the progressive form is not entirely without problems either, as it is not so much the actions of *reading*, *telling*, *hearing*, and *seeing* themselves or their temporal characterization in terms of duration which are in the informational spotlight, but rather the result of these very actions, i.e. obtaining a certain piece of information, which is passed on to a third party. The use of the progressive in these types of context has also been noticed by Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad and Finegan (1999:1120) who in a similar fashion state that

[t]he emphasis with simple aspect falls on the act of speaking rather than on the nature of what was said. With the past progressive, on the other hand, the focus tends to be on the reported message itself ...

It is this very factor in particular which finally also rules out incompleteness as a possible explanation: thus, utterance (10) entails that both TV host as well as the audience have in fact seen the pictures showing soldiers in Iraq, while utterance (8) in a very similar fashion entails that a certain Tom has previously stated the total number of students involved, which would otherwise be unknown, had the action of telling in fact remained incomplete. This, however, is at odds with the view presented in Leech (2004b: 27) who argues that for the progressive type under consideration, “[t]he only part of the progressive meaning relevant is ‘lack of completeness’.”

All in all then, with regard to their internal temporal constituency, utterances (7)–(10) appear to be resultative and therefore perfective in nature – something which should, however, be incompatible with the progressive according to the standard accounts of verbal aspect.

With regard to the non-aspectual functions of the progressive outlined above, the examples found in (7)–(10) again hardly match any of the characteristics typically associated with sentences like (3)–(6) above. Thus, none of them seems notably accentuated in terms of either politeness or emotiveness.

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It is our aim in this chapter to shed light on the question of possible motivating forces for this rather idiomatic use of the progressive. Special attention will be given to the notion of temporal recentness, as this seems to be the unifying feature common to all of the examples in (7)–(10) which, relative to the moment of utterance, all refer to an action that can be located in the temporal context of the recent past, as indicated by overt expressions such as the adverbials *just*, *recently*, or *the other day*.

9.1.3 The recentness progressive

A common denominator and characteristic element of utterances like (7)–(10) is the co-occurrence of the past progressive with a lexical expression of recentness, typically the adverb *just*. Other commonly found expressions include the adverb *recently*, as well as temporal phrases like *the other day*, *the other week* etc., or *not long ago*:

- (11) I *was recently reading* that about 30% of herbs are “vindicated” by modern medicine.⁵
- (12) Remember what you *were saying the other day*?
(BNC AD9 2388)
- (13) I was just, I *was hearing the other day* that somebody had smoked sixty a day. (BNC H5U 68)
- (14) I *was telling* somebody *just the other day*, “We’re all sissies in comparison to Johnny Cash.” (COCA: Magazines, 2004)
- (15) “He’s quite a remarkable guy” Scorsese *was telling* me *not long ago* in New York, after an early screening of the film.
(COCA: News, 1995)

The co-occurrence of the past progressive and the notion of recent past time has been noted, e.g. by Leech (2004b: 32) who states that “the past progressive refers ... to a fairly recent communicative happening” or Biber *et al.* (1999: 1121) who similarly concludes that the past progressive “may refer somewhat vaguely to a recent time in the past”.

The signaling of the temporal proximity of a past situation relative to the moment of utterance, however, is covered in English by the present perfect in its so-called *Hot-News* function (see e.g. McCawley 1971). This is especially so in the case of British English, whereas American English also allows – and in colloquial usage even prefers – the preterite (see e.g. Elsness 1997: 84). Thus, alongside occurrences such as (7)–(10) we also find usages like (16)–(18) involving either a present perfect or preterite form of the verb:

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- (16) Alec Smith *said* the other day, “There is no human solution.”
(BNC: GXK 704)
- (17) Chinese officials *have also said recently* that there will be few
major alterations to the Basic Law. (BNC A1V 265)
- (18) I *have just read* an article – not in the Mirror I’m glad to say –
which has left me speechless with rage. (BNC CH1 6719)

And, indeed, it seems as though any of those examples (7)–(10) involving a past progressive could be just as well rendered using either a present perfect or simple past without causing a change in meaning, but resulting in a near equivalent version. They are repeated here in abbreviated form as (7′)–(10′):

- (7′) I *just read* that Billy Graham officiated at the funeral of Hannah Nixon.
- (8′) Tom, you’ve *just told* me that in all you had nine students.
- (9′) I’ve *just heard* the other day that somebody had smoked sixty a day.
- (10′) These pictures that we’ve *just seen*, it’s obvious, for those were Iraqis being treated in hospitals.

The questions that must necessarily arise are what may be possible motivating factors for speakers to use the past progressive instead of the present perfect or preterite, and whether the co-variation of these three alternatives in otherwise similar syntactic and semantic–pragmatic contexts might be indicative of an ongoing change in progressive use in terms of the emergence of a new progressive type which we shall henceforth call ‘recentness progressive’.

In order to arrive at answers to these questions an explorative study drawing on both corpus data and a grammaticality survey was carried out. The following sections serve to explicate in more detail the methods of data collection and to present and critically discuss the results.

9.2 Data collection and methodology

For the purpose of collecting data on the use of the past progressive in contexts of recent past time, two comparable corpora were used representing American and British English usage: the 425-million-word *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA)⁶ and the 100-million-word *British National Corpus* (BNC).⁷ In order to supplement the data drawn from the two corpora, an additional grammaticality survey was conducted with 39 speakers of British and American English (17 British and 22 American English speakers, 16 male and 23 female speakers). For the purpose of diachronic comparison, evidence from pre-contemporary usage was collected from the *Corpus of Historical American English* (COHA), the

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Table 9.1 Total number of hits for recentness progressives: was/were just/recently *V*-ing, was/were *V*-ing the other N_{temp}

Corpus	<i>just V-ing</i>	<i>recently V-ing</i>	<i>V-ing the other N_{TEMP}</i>	Total
BNC	71	17	86	174
COCA	922	403	189	1,514
Total	993	420	275	1,688

Modern English Collection of the University of Virginia Library Electronic Text Center (AD 1500–present),⁸ as well as the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED). Selected internet sources provided additional data.⁹

9.2.1 Corpus study

9.2.1.1 The distribution recentness progressives in PDE

Investigating the phenomenon under discussion here – the special use of the past progressive in contexts of recent past time – offers some particularly difficult methodological problems. First, this use, even though it has been attested and commented on (see e.g. Leech 2004b and Biber *et al.* 1999), only accounts for a relatively small fraction of the large number of progressive tokens in the corpora. Thus although the search for the phrase *was/were just/recently V-ing* returns a promising 7,233 hits in the COCA, these numbers have to be treated with a great deal of caution due to the heterogeneous form–function mappings of the progressive form and the obvious limitations of corpus searches in such cases of multifunctionality. Thus, the total number of hits also includes instantiations of “true” progressives of the type *I was just starting my lecture when my cell phone rang*, or *in 1989 his business was just taking off*, as well as futurate progressives involving the verb *go* as in *I was just going to give him a call*. For lack of a more fine-grained annotation system, which would ideally disambiguate the different functions of *V-ing*, proper recentness progressives had to be isolated manually by checking the context/co-text in every individual example.

Additionally, *just*, the adverb co-occurring most frequently with the recentness progressive, further complicates any quantificational analysis by presenting yet another case of polysemy. Thus, the interpretation of *just* in *we were just talking* as either temporal “we were talking a very short time ago,” or as adverbial in the sense of “only” as in “we were only talking and nothing else,” also relies heavily on the given context. Therefore, occurrences of *just* in the latter sense, as well as the great number of ambiguous cases, also needed to be identified and sorted out by carefully examining every example.

Filtering out instances of true progressives and non-temporal *just* brings the number of hits matching the requirements for recentness progressive down to approximately 10 percent of the original count. Table 9.1 summarizes the results from both corpora.¹⁰

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Table 9.2. *Diachronic distribution of just V-ing recentness progressives in the COCA*

Time period	1990–4	1995–9	2000–4	2005–9	Total
Tokens	211	212	216	283	922
Total words	104.0m	103.4m	102.9m	102.0m	412.4m

Subjecting the data in Table 9.1 to a “hierarchical configural frequency analysis” (HCFA,¹¹ using Stefan Gries’s *HCFA 3.2 R* script; see Gries 2009: 240–52) yields some interesting variety-specific results: the *V-ing the other N_{TEMP}* structure occurs significantly more often in the BNC ($p < 0.001$),¹² while it is disfavoured in the COCA ($p < 0.001$). In addition, *recently* ($p < 0.001$) and *just* ($p < 0.01$) are significantly disfavoured in British English. Such variety-specific effects are to a certain degree to be expected in the light of recent results from usage-based approaches to language acquisition (see e.g. Bybee 2006, 2010) as well as recent comparative work on British and American English (see e.g. Rohdenburg and Schlüter 2010).

On top of these results, another question concerns the diachronic distribution of recentness progressives. The COCA (unlike the BNC) conveniently allows one to track the development of the phenomenon in five-year intervals. Table 9.2 e.g. breaks down the COCA results for *just V-ing*.

As Table 9.2 shows, the construction can be identified from 1990 onwards, but there is a significant increase in recent progressives in the most recent time period, 2005–9 (as a goodness-of-fit chi-square test against the total number of words reveals: $\chi^2 = 17.68$, 3 degrees of freedom, $p < 0.01$, to which the 2005–9 cell alone contributes a χ^2 score of 13.21). This seems to support our hypothesis that the structure is currently gaining ground.

9.2.1.2 *Distribution of recentness progressives in pre-present-day English*

Assuming that the construction under consideration represents *current* change in progressive use, one would expect to find only a small number of tokens (if any at all) in older stages of English. Again, this is what our data suggest: there are indeed only few occurrences in the *OED* quotation database before 1850 and in both the COHA and the Modern English Collection of the Virginia E-text archives before 1900. Some of these include the following:

- (19) “I *was just making* the proposition to her sir.” “And what do’st say?” “She says we had better postpone it to another time.”
(COHA: Fiction, 1827)
- (20) “Do you know what Mr. de Gex *was just telling* me? His illness – it is worse than anyone thought. It’s incurable. He can’t live long; he must die soon. It’s dreadful – dreadful! Did you know it?”
(William J. Locke. 1910 *Simon the jester*, p.107)

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- (21) “But what about your stabilizer?” asked Ned. “I *was just talking* to my father about it” the young inventor replied. “He will be able to put the finishing touches on it ...”
(Appleton, Victor. 1917. *Tom Swift in the Land of Wonders*)
- (22) “John Marshall McCue writes to J.D. Imboden, requesting that he respond to a recent communication and also send a copy of the *Spectator*, and telling about an artist who *was recently sketching* the town ...” (John Marshall McCue to J. D. Imboden, July 22, 1856)

All this suggests that this use was rare before 1900, or even before 1950, but more informal spoken data from earlier periods of English would be needed to support the assumption that the construction did not exist or was not used with the same frequency as today.

9.2.2 Grammaticality survey

In order to complement the corpus data, an online survey was conducted, asking participants to give grammaticality judgments for a total of forty utterances. Altogether 39 (23 female and 16 male) participants took part in this survey, native speakers of both British English (17) and American English (22), representing age groups from under 20 to over 60 years of age. Participants were asked to rate the utterances on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 being unacceptable and 5 being highly acceptable).¹³ Out of the 40 utterances 15 contained a past progressive and 15 a present perfect or simple past form of the verb in otherwise comparable semantic–pragmatic and syntactic environments. Ten out of the 40 sentences functioned as mere distracters.¹⁴

9.3 Qualitative analysis and discussion

Even though the corpus search did not produce results reliable enough for a full-fledged quantitative analysis, the corpus data together with the survey data allow us to make some very interesting observations and, based on these, draw conclusions about the qualitative nature of the recentness progressive.

9.3.1 Verbs of communication and the past progressive in recent past contexts

The first observation from the corpus data is with respect to the verb type combining most easily with the past progressive in recent past contexts. In particular, verbs and verb phrases belonging to the class of communication verbs, including verbs denoting visual and auditory perception (*watch, read,*

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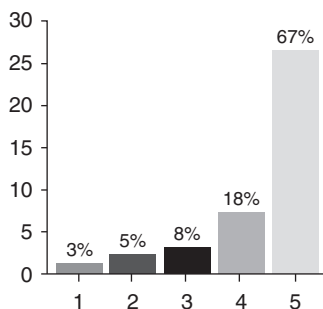


Figure 9.1. Participant ratings for sentence (23) *Funny, you should mention him, in fact I was just talking to him*

see, look, hear, listen), as well as verbs of speech production (*tell, say, talk, speak, discuss, state, have a conversation, mention, joke, make a point, point out*, etc.), are more likely to occur with the recentness progressive. This tendency is illustrated by examples (7)–(10) above. It is also in line with Biber *et al.* (1999: 1120f), who mention a certain reporting or quoting function of the past progressive being used with what they call “reporting verbs.”^{15,16}

More supporting evidence is provided by the survey data, where sentences containing verbs of communication received an overall higher rating of their grammatical acceptability than those containing a verb or verb phrase from a different type of verb. This distributional pattern is demonstrated in the following two contrasted utterances:

- (23) Funny, you should mention him, in fact I *was just talking* to him.
 (24) I *was recently flying* United Airlines myself, and you’re right, their leg room is really poor

Whereas 85 percent of the participants rated the utterance containing the communication verb 4 or higher on the acceptability scale, the utterance containing the non-communication verb was only rated 4 or higher by only 51 percent of the participants. As an Exact Wilcoxon signed rank test of the judgments of (23) and (24) (i.e. a test that compares the two distributions in Figures 9.1 and 9.2 to see whether they are significantly different) shows, this preference for communication verbs is statistically significant ($V = 270$, $p < 0.001$).

Interestingly, the comparison of two similar utterances, one containing a present perfect form and one containing a past progressive, revealed that the latter is not only highly acceptable but even slightly preferred over the former. Thus, no less than 67 percent of the participants gave sentence (25) the highest possible rating, whereas sentence (26) exhibits a slightly more heterogeneous distribution (the difference between Figures 9.3 and 9.4 is not significant according to the Wilcoxon test: $V = 174.5$, $p = 0.26$).

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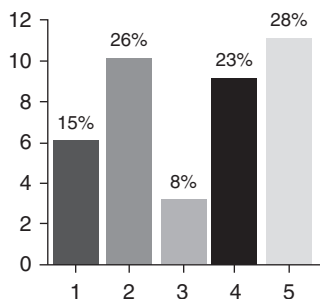


Figure 9.2. Participant ratings for sentence (25) *I was recently flying United Airlines myself, and you're right, their leg room is really poor*

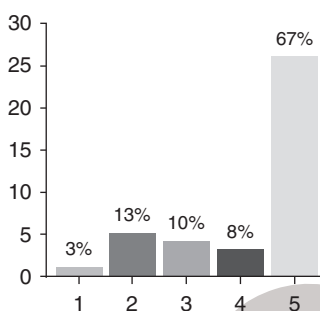


Figure 9.3. Participant ratings for sentence (25) *Someone was just telling me about this new band called Sugarplum or something*

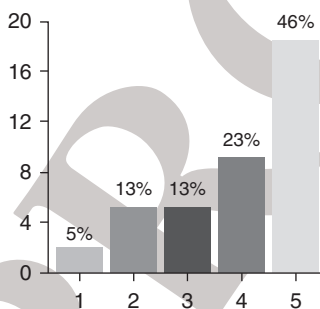


Figure 9.4. Participant ratings for sentence (26) *Someone has just told me about this new computer – I think I might buy it*

- (25) Someone *was just telling* me about this new band called Sugarplum or something.
- (26) Someone *has just told* me about this new computer – I think I might buy it.

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What this suggests is that the progressive, when used in contexts like (25) and (26), carries out a modal, rather than aspectual, function expressing evidentiality, i.e. signaling the source of the information being passed on.¹⁷ As such it would seem to function as a hedge, expressing a certain vagueness or distance on the part of the speaker with respect to the content of the reported message. This view is supported by Biber *et al.* (1999: 1120), who state that “[w]ith the past progressive ... the focus tends to be on ... the degree of authority it carries for the reporting speaker, and the evidence it provides.” This hypothesis for the motivation of the past progressive, however, does not have enough explanatory power to account for instances of first-person self-quoting, as in the following two examples:

- (27) I *was just saying* to Sally, why don’t you come out with us on Saturday? (BNC: BMW 2484)
- (28) I *was just telling* my son the other day that I could live here for the rest of my life. (COCA: Spoken, 2008)

In the light of occurrences like these, arguing for evidentiality to be the main motivation for the use of the progressive is of course not without problems as the clause containing the progressive form merely announces the reproduction of an earlier message by the very same speaker, rather than the source of information that is being passed on. Thus, in examples (27)–(28) the speakers simply report an earlier communicative situation, without explicitly or implicitly stressing the source of information. It therefore seems fair to say that in examples such as these the progressive is not a marker of evidentiality as such.

9.3.2 Other verbs and the recentness progressive

Despite the fact that the past progressive in recent past contexts is most frequently found with verbs of communication, this does not mean that other verbs are *per se* excluded. Thus, one comes across many examples featuring non-communication verbs, as examples (29)–(32) serve to illustrate:

- (29) It’s arguably one of the safest drugs, based on the fact that she *was recently giving* birth. (COCA: Spoken, 2007)
- (30) We’ve got some more pictures rolling in now. Some of this is unedited video that *was just getting* into us now. (COCA: Spoken, 2007)
- (31) I was actually waiting to hear from a press conference that *was just being given* now as we’re talking at the U.N. headquarters. (COCA: Spoken, 2002)
- (32) There *was* something *coming* through recently about that. (BNC: G4X 1529)

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Albeit rare in the corpus data, positive evidence of the occurrence of recentness progressives with non-communication verbs like the ones in (29)–(32) is yet another reason to assume that the use of the progressive in cases like these is not called for by the expression of evidentiality alone, but that there must be yet another motivation.

9.3.3 Discourse organization and the recentness progressive

9.3.3.1 Progressives in topicalized position

Another salient feature with respect to the recentness progressive is a discourse-functional one. The striking majority of utterances in the corpora containing this progressive type thereby follow a similar pattern in terms of discourse organization, displaying the progressive form in a topicalized position. Thus, utterances, more often than not, exhibit a biclausal structure in which the first clause contains the past progressive verb plus an expression of recent past time and the second clause contains either a simple past or present perfect verb form. Most of the time this biclausal structure is realized via co-ordination employing the conjunctions *and* or *but*, as in utterances (33)–(36), or, paratactically, without a co-ordinating conjunction, as in (37). Another common means is relativization as illustrated in example (38).

- (33) *I was just reading* a lovely essay that John Updike did about E. B. White. *And* E. B. White said, “The only thing I really know for sure is that I really love the world.” (COCA: Spoken, 1999)
- (34) *I was just recently lecturing* at West Point. *And* the commanders are saying, “This is among the most patriotic, capable, effective, informed generation that we’ve ever put in the field”. (COCA: Spoken, 2005)
- (35) *I was looking* at some data on radiolarians recently [...] – *and* in no occasion in a period of sixty thousand years did the population change by more than about half a standard deviation. (BNC: KRH 3822)
- (36) *I was just doing* a mind map for a blog that will be 10 ways to ignite your creativity. *And* one of the main ways is by Mind Mapping! (http://blog.mindjet.com/2007/09/brainstorming-blog-content-tutorial-from-mindmanager-customer)
- (37) *I was just looking* at your discography. You’ve collaborated with so many people in so many different music genres. (COCA: Spoken, 2006)

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- (38) I *was just talking* to a European diplomat, *who* said Iran may talk about money, but the difference between actually getting people to pay after they pledge is a big difference. (COCA: Spoken, 2006)

More evidence for the tendency of the recentness progressive to occur in the first part of a biclausal structure (which in some sense can be regarded as a rather prominent position in the discourse) comes from the earliest occurrences, which also suggests that there is a relationship between the discourse position and the use of the past progressive. Thus, when looking for recentness progressives in the COHA and the Virginia e-Text collection, we again found only very few instances, all of which, however, were of the type described above. Both examples (39) and (40) involve the paratactic juxtaposition of two main clauses comparable to (37) above:

- (39) “I *was just talking* to my father about it,” the young inventor replied. “He will be able to put the finishing touches on it.” (Appleton, Victor. 1917. *Tom Swift in the Land of Wonders*)
- (40) “I *was just talking* it over with some of the girls and boys at the last Debating Club,” said Anne, flushing. “They thought it would be rather nice”. (Montgomery, L. M. 1909. *Anne of Green Gables*)

Immediately striking is the fact that both instances of the recentness progressive involve verbs of communication and both quite obviously function to introduce a direct (39) or an indirect (40) quote, which would support Biber *et al.*'s argument in favor of evidentiality being manifest in the use of the past progressive.

However, as examples (29)–(32) above clearly illustrate, there are plenty of counterexamples exhibiting verbs other than those of the communication type.

Even more corroborative evidence comes from examples (41)–(45), which were collected from various internet sources (see notes):

- (41) I *was just testing* my all new Opera 8.51, but this one still has some glitches...¹⁸
- (42) Yes, I *was just downloading* it right now. I saw that it supports Filter strings.¹⁹
- (43) I *was just doing* some research, normally, unless you have 20% equity in the home, the IRS won't bother.²⁰
- (44) I *was recently eating* at Buzz Cafe, and it seemed to be a hippie magnet.²¹
- (45) For example, I *was recently flying* Virgin America for the first time, and they asked me at check-in for my loyalty.²²

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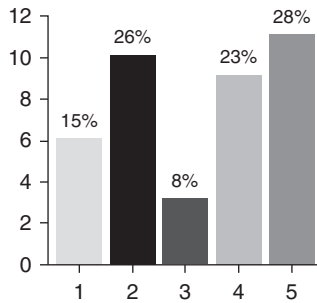


Figure 9.5. Participant ratings for sentence (46) *I was recently flying United Airlines and you're right their leg room is really poor*

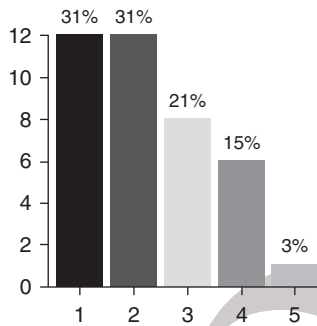


Figure 9.6. Participant ratings for sentence (47) *Why am I not hungry? Because I was only just having lunch*

These observations are supported even more by the survey data, as demonstrated by example (24) (repeated here as (46)) and example (47), both of which involve non-communication verbs, and, thus, as expected, received overall lower scores in comparison to those that contained a verb of communication. However, comparing these two sentences reveals that sentence (46), which exhibits a biclausal structure, was rated higher on the acceptability scale, with 51 percent of participants rating the sentence 4 and higher, than monoclausal sentence (47), which received an overall lower rating with 62 percent of participants giving it a rating between only 1 and 2 (this difference in judgments is statistically significant according to the Wilcoxon test comparing Figures 9.5 and 9.6: $V = 85$, $p < 0.01$).

- (46) *I was recently flying* United Airlines myself and you're right, their leg room is really poor.
- (47) Why am I not hungry? Well, it's because I *was only just having* lunch.

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In the light of the fact that none of the pre-PDE examples of the biclausal type used non-communication verbs, we can regard this as indicative of an incipient stage of lexical diffusion, whereby the past progressive in this specific sentence structure would be spreading from communication verbs to other verb types (e.g. *give birth*). It would seem that this happens at the expense of some of its quoting function, involving a shift of focus from the source of information to the actual reported message. However, given the overall low number of occurrences of recentness progressives in earlier stages of English, we should be cautious with an interpretation.

On a more general note, this observation, however, ties in perfectly with the notion of the “pragmatically dependent clause” as proposed by Frajzyngier *et al.* (2008) in their account of the progressive. They describe this as a clause which is

formally marked as pragmatically dependent in order to force the listener to interpret it in connection with some other element outside of the clause, be it a proposition, or a situation, whether previously mentioned or yet to be mentioned ... Pragmatically dependent clauses must be interpreted in connection with other propositions or events. (Frajzyngier *et al.* 2008: 90f.)

In a pragmatically dependent clause then, the progressive would function to provide the background for either the temporal interpretation of another clause, its proposition, or the situation contained in it. With respect to the past progressive, Frajzyngier *et al.* note that

[o]ne of the pieces of evidence that the past progressive codes a clause as pragmatically dependent is provided by the fact that the past progressive is often un-interpretable without another utterance that precedes or follows it (2008: 92)

This dependency is obvious in the case of temporal subordination, as in *Linda was playing the Piano when I entered the room*, where the clause containing the past progressive is only interpretable in terms of its temporal location, which is provided by means of the following subordinate clause. The clause containing the progressive could not be interpreted independently. Instead, the progressive, as argued by Frajzyngier *et al.* “force[s] the listener to look for the proper context to interpret the clause” (2008: 91).

In a similar fashion, then, the past progressive in (46) only seems interpretable in terms of providing the background for the proposition contained in the second clause, whereas monoclausal (47) might be felt to be missing an elementary piece of discourse, i.e. a second “elaborating” clause, which would aid in the interpretation of *eating*. As a dependent clause standing on its own it would be, according to Frajzyngier *et al.*, inevitably uninterpretable.

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9.3.3.2 *The recent progressive in other clause types*

Although the great majority of past progressives are part of biclausal structures, involving mostly communication verbs, but increasingly accepting also non-communication verbs, the recentness progressive can also be found in other sentence structures: thus one finds occurrences lacking an overt biclausal structure, e.g. in interrogative sentences (48)–(49), simple sentences such as (50) and (51) or subordinate clauses like (52):

- (48) *Were you recently trying to help a friend in need of a particular something and you felt you couldn't or didn't succeed?*²³
- (49) *Wasn't he recently pledging his future to the BBC for a million quid a year?*²⁴
- (50) *Funny, I was just hearing about this particular performance the other day!*²⁵
- (51) *Funny, I was just visiting them in Taiwan last week. I work in the chip industry.*²⁶
- (52) *Aw Sean didn't know you were getting married recently. [...] Hope you had a lovely time.*²⁷

Not only do three out of these five utterances not contain a verb of communication, but all of (48)–(52) obviously lack the prototypical biclausal structure. According to the account given by Frajzyngier *et al.*, they should therefore also lack semantic autonomy and thus be uninterpretable – which is clearly not the case here.

This finding was also supported by our survey data. The following two sentences scored a five-point rating by 50 percent or more of the participants, which can be taken as further proof for the acceptability of progressives in non-biclausal structures.

- (53) *Excuse me, were you just calling me a cheapskate?*
- (54) *Funny – I was just hearing that very story on the radio*

The fact that utterances like (53)–(54) do occur in colloquial spoken English and were on average rated 'acceptable' by speakers of both British and American English in our survey can be seen as clear evidence for the autonomy of the past progressive, which in the above utterances does not seem to be dependent on any other proposition or event.

9.4 Discussion

The idiomatic use of the past progressive in contexts where it does not carry its prototypical imperfective-aspectual meaning, but where it represents perfective situations, which are often located in the recent past – a

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semantic–functional space that is typically reserved for the present perfect – leads us to assume that the past progressive is currently developing yet another meaning, coming to function as a marker for recent past time – not unlike the hot news perfect. Such a construction would have started out with only a restricted set of verbs of the communication type from where it might be currently expanding to other verbs. We saw this supported by the fact that the earliest occurrences of past progressives in recent past time contexts, which appear to date back no longer than approximately 130 years, only appeared with communication–type verbs. Constructions like that, it seems, would have primarily fulfilled a certain evidential, quotative, or reporting function. Occurrences in PDE with non-communication verbs – albeit rare – we interpret as an indication of an incipient stage of lexical diffusion at the expense of the original evidential function towards one of temporal recentness.

However, a second observation revealed that the progressive in recent past time contexts also often occurs as part of a very salient discourse structure, whereby it is typically in topicalized position as part of a biclausal construction, involving either co-ordination, parataxis, or relativization. This led us to reconsider the origin of the recentness progressive in terms of a close interrelationship of the three features topicalization, evidentiality, and temporal recentness.

What we would like to argue here then is that the initial motivation for the use of the past progressive was not so much signaling recentness, but rather a discourse–functional one, whereby the progressive primarily functioned to mark the introduction of a new discourse topic, directing the listener’s attention to a following report of some sort – often a recent communicative happening, as proposed by Leech (2004b), or some other experience. Since this strategy is employed to accommodate a certain reporting function, this also explains why it would automatically coincide with a comparatively high frequency of communication verbs making it look evidential-like. In a similar fashion, since it is more often than not the reporting of recent events or hot news – be they communicative acts or otherwise – this would then also explain the frequent co-occurrence with lexical expressions of recent past time such as *just*, *recently* and others like *the other day* or any combination.

We would like to propose that what we are dealing with here is an instance of context–induced reinterpretation as we typically know it from processes of grammaticalization, whereby novel grammatical meanings arise when linguistic expressions – either lexical or already grammatical – are extended to new contexts (see e.g. Heine and Kuteva 2002, 2006; Heine, Claudi, and Hünemeyer 1991; Hopper and Traugott 2003; Bybee *et al.* 1994; Diewald 2006). In the case of the recentness progressive, hearers would have reinterpreted the past progressive in its function of a topic–introducing marker as an indicator for

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Table 9.3. *Context-induced reinterpretation of the past progressive*

Stage	Function	
I	<p><i>Dorothy was telling us during the break that you spoke to the Israeli astronaut. (COCA: Spoken, 2003) I was reading that you lost a lot of weight. (COCA: Spoken, 2007)</i></p>	Evidential
II	<p><i>We are talking to Tara McPherson, Associate Professor at the University of Southern California [...], also Jerone Mitchell, We were just hearing from him. (COCA: Spoken, 2008) I was just reading about your iPhone app. You are one hip brother. (COCA: Spoken, 2010)</i></p>	Evidential with recentness
III	<p><i>That is so interesting. I was just getting some recipes off her Cuisine blog yesterday. What a coincidence.^a It's arguably one of the safest drugs, based on the fact that she was recently giving birth. (COCA: Spoken, 2007)</i></p>	Recentness

^a <http://blog.cjanerun.com/2008/09/marrow.html>.

recent past time, simply because the notion of recentness happens to be very often involved in reports of any sort of new information.

Table 9.3 illustrates the hypothesized process, whereby Stage I would represent an evidential stage, which can, but need not necessarily involve overt markers of recentness – even though it often does. The high frequency of recentness contexts, we would then go on to argue, triggers a reinterpretation of the past progressive as a marker for recent past time, which is now also licensed in non-evidential contexts. Concerning the situation of contemporary spoken English we therefore hypothesize that we are currently situated in a *bridging stage*, in which the assignment of functions is still very often ambiguous and the primary motivation for the use of the progressive cannot always be clearly identified between the three factors of evidentiality, topicalization, and recentness. It would not seem impossible that this bridging stage could, however, give rise to a more thorough change towards recentness alone (Stage III).

9.5 Conclusion

Though this study has put forward some preliminary findings that suggest that the past progressive in PDE might be developing a new use, i.e. one of expressing a recent event, data drawn from the corpus searches and the grammaticality survey were not sufficient to establish a clear and unambiguous picture of the phenomenon yet. This of course is partly due to the fact that especially for the study of such a very incipient stage of linguistic change, as we have found it for the recentness progressive, even larger data sets, particularly of informal, unplanned, spoken discourse would be needed to capture the direction of such a process and to make more accurate predictions.

Appendix

List of utterances used in the online grammaticality survey²⁸

- (1) I've just read in one of last week's newspapers that there are more Klingon speakers than Esperanto speakers.
- (2) Funny, I was just talking about the same thing with ... erm ... what's her name ... erm ... Jenny.
- (3) You don't say – I was just dreaming something very similar!
- (4) Haven't I just asked you to stop yelling?
- (5) I'd better leave now, bet'n'I?
- (6) I was recently flying united Airlines myself and you're right, their leg room is really poor.
- (7) Someone has just told me about this new computer – I think I might actually buy it.
- (8) Hey, I was just reading that there's going to be a festival in town.
- (9) Oh, Marc is doing fine. I've actually just talked to him on the phone.
- (10) I've recently watched this rugby-like game on TV. It had a different name though.
- (11) What a coincidence – I was just shopping there myself!
- (12) Me and my sister? We're 6 years apart.
- (13) I saw your number on my caller ID – Were you just trying to call me?
- (14) I've only been told the other day that she's not coming back.
- (15) Funny you should mention him. In fact, I was just talking to him on the phone.

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- (16) Oh, by the way, I was recently eating at that restaurant you recommended.
- (17) Interesting – we’ve just had this very conversation at work.
- (18) Going up Mt. Washington? Hm, maybe next year. I was actually just climbing it.
- (19) Lets you and I go for a walk!
- (20) I don’t think he is going to come to the barbeque. He was just now eating this huge burger and is still feeling full from it.
- (21) Don’t worry about him – he prefers to get wet than carry an umbrella.
- (22) I was just hearing on the radio that GM is going to close all their plants for a month.
- (23) Have you just called me a stupid liar?
- (24) I don’t know, I mean, I was recently watching the movie myself and I liked it.
- (25) Hasn’t Mike just said the same thing?
- (26) Someone was just telling me about this new band called “Sugarplum” or something.
- (27) Why am I not hungry? Well, it’s because we were only just having lunch.
- (28) Cake goes good with tea, innit?
- (29) Marc and I were recently having the same argument.
- (30) Oh, we were making this change only very recently – that’s probably why you haven’t heard about it yet.
- (31) My apologies for this late reply, but I was only now reading you email.²⁹
- (32) This is truly an interesting phenomena, which should definitely be further pursued.
- (33) Excuse me, were you just calling me a cheapskate?
- (34) Ain’t there enough garden centers already?
- (35) We were only recently being told that the show is sold out.
- (36) I’ve just heard on the radio that there was another earthquake.
- (37) Wasn’t I just telling you to stop running?

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- (38) I am still shaking, I've just dreamt that a plane had crashed right into our house.
- (39) I was just learning from our neighbors that you can watch satellite TV on your computer.
- (40) Mark was definitely just saying the exact same thing.

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