

# The Progressive Of Stative Verbs

by

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## 状態動詞における進行形

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

I argued in Tamura (1994) that the features which the progressive aspect gives to the predication are: (1) stativity in the case of non-stative verbs and (2) limited duration in the case of stative verbs, but omitted much of the discussion as to actual usages of the progressive in different types of verbs. From (1) mentioned above, the progressive is not necessary to stative verbs which are +STATIVE in nature, but it is actually used with stative verbs and gives limited duration to the state as mentioned in (2) above. In this article I would like to review these actual uses in stative verbs and examine some of the characteristics of these uses.

### 2. STATIVE VERBS

Stativity or stativeness is a feature which applies not only to verbs but also to the classes of words such as nouns, adjectives and adverbs. As to the opposition of 'stative' and 'dynamic', Quirk et al. (1972) states:

'Broadly speaking, nouns can be characterized naturally as 'statives' in that they refer to entities that are regarded as stable, whether they are concrete (physical) like house, table, paper, or abstract (of the mind) like hope, botany, length. At the opposite pole, verbs can be equally naturally characterized as 'dynamic': they are fitted by the capacity to show tense and aspect, for example, to indicate action, activity and temporary or changing conditions.' (p.48)

Then they go on: "...there are some verbs such as *know* which could not normally be used with the progressive (*\*he is knowing*): that is, which could not be seen as referring to something that was in progress. Verbs so used we called 'statives', and they should be seen as exceptions within the class of verbs." (p.48)

Lakoff (1970) asserts that verbs and adjectives are members of a single lexical

category because both can be subcategorized with respect to the feature STATIVE, two other conditions for subclassifying as +STATIVE being non-occurrence in the imperative (\*Know that Bill went there, \*Don't be tall) and non-occurrence in do-something construction (\*What I'm doing is knowing that Bill went there, \*What I'm doing is being tall). (p.121)

Vendler (1967) proposed a quadripartition of verbs: states, activities, accomplishments, and achievements; and Kenny (1966) proposed a tripartition: states, activities and performances (equivalent to Vendler's accomplishments and achievements combined). Mourelatos (1981) reviews the classifications by Vendler and Kenny and gives two-fold contrast between states and occurrences, occurrences consisting of processes (activities) and events (performances), and events consisting of developments (accomplishments) and punctual occurrences (achievements). Verkuyl (1989), on the other hand, points out that it is not the classes that play a role in the explanation of aspectual phenomenon but rather some semantic factors from which the classes are constructed.

Although the ways of subclassifying verbs into several groups differ depending on the theoretical background of each linguist, the dichotomy between stative verbs and dynamic or non-stative verbs is clear in the studies on verbs or predications as is seen in "process versus state (or 'stative' or 'status') predication" by Joos (1968: pp.116f), "event versus state predication" by Leech (1969: pp.134-7), or "state versus occurrence situation" by Moureltos (1978: p.201).

The subclassification of the class of verbs given by Quirk et al. will help to grasp the general idea of the composition of the class: verbs are divided into dynamic verbs and stative verbs, dynamic verbs further into (a) activity verbs, (b) process verbs, (c) verbs of bodily sensation, (d) transitional event verbs and (e) momentary verbs, starting with the classes that are most likely to occur in the progressive, and stative verbs into (f) verbs of inert perception and cognition and (g) relational verbs. (p.95)

### 3. THE RELATIONAL VERBS

As typical *relational verbs*, Quirk et al. (1972) list APPLY TO, BE, BELONG TO, CONCERN, CONSIST OF, CONTAIN, COST, DEPEND ON, DESERVE, EQUAL, FIT, HAVE, INCLUDE, INVOLVE, LACK, MATTER, NEED, OWE, OWN, POSSESS, REMAIN (A BACHELOR), REQUIRE, RESEMBLE, SEEM, SOUND, SUFFICE, TEND, etc., which are usually impossible in progressive aspect. (p.96)

- (1) He owns a big car. (\*He is owning a big car.)
- (2) This book belongs to my wife. (\*This book is belonging to my wife.)
- (3) His actions deserve some comment. (\*His actions are deserving some comment.) (pp.95-96)

These are called 'state verbs of being and having' in Leech (1971) since they include, as part of their meaning, the notion of 'being' or 'having' (p.21). Some of these verbs can easily be rephrased with be + adjective (as matter = be important, resemble = be like), which indicates that the degree of stativity is higher in these

verbs than in the others.

Although *be* is considered to be the representative of this subclass, it is quite different in its usage from other relational verbs, and a separate discussion seems to be in order. *Be* is used in sentences as (a) existential *be* (Some people are still at table), (b) attributive *be* (John is a teacher), (c) equative *be* (John is Mary's husband) and (d) auxiliary *be* (He is drinking coffee, The letter is written in Japanese). Existence of something could hardly be thought to indicate any kind of action or process; attributive and equative uses of *be* indicate neither action nor process but the state of being or being equivalent to things or persons. Existential *be* is at the farthest from action or process and never occurs in the progressive form as in (4) – (7):

- (4) The typewriter is on the desk by the wall.
- (5) \*The typewriter is being on the desk by the wall.
- (6) There are three children playing in the park.
- (7) \*There are being three children playing in the park.

On the other hand (b) attributive *be* and perhaps (c) equative *be* can be used in the progressive form, followed by nouns (phrases) or adjectives (phrases) as complements. Since nouns and adjectives are characteristically stative, the phrase *be* plus a noun or an adjective is supposed to be stative, but we find the progressive as the followings:

- (8) Oh, Gawge is just being Gawge. (Suddenly Last Summer, cf. NOTE)
- (9) He's just being a colonel. (Winslow Boy)
- (10) I'm just being a grandfather. (Family Album USA)
- (11) He is being a fool. (Leech p.25)

In the counterparts of (8)–(11) in simple forms (8)' Oh, Gawge is just Gawge, (9)' He's just a colonel, (10)' I'm just a grandfather, and (11) He is a fool, each *be* is either attributively or equatively used and indicates the state of being someone, and in this case these sentences tell nothing about the duration of the state, that is they simply tell the state but do not tell how long the state has lasted or will last; on the other hand, those (8)–(11) in the progressive form imply a fairly short duration along with the semantic feature different from (8)' – (11)'; (8) means that 'Gawge is behaving like Gawge usually does', (9) means that 'He is behaving just like a colonel is expected to', (11) means 'I'm doing what a grandfather is supposed to do', and (12) He is acting foolishly'. The nouns or noun phrases used in these sentences are those terms which refer to family relationship, occupations, proper names and some common nouns such as *fool* or *hero*. It would be possible to include some terms of animals, plants and fish in case the subject is playing or imitating one of these. The explanation given by Leech (1971) to the use of the progressive is, "Even if no recognized "activity" meaning is available, one may frequently make sense of a sentence *X is being Y*, however improbable the context, by reading into it the idea of acting a part" (p.25). Also, in Quirk et al. (1985): "Nouns are characteristically stative, but they can assume the dynamic meaning of 'temporary role or activity' as subject complement following the progressive of *be*. (p.1564)

*Be* is also used in the progressive form when it is followed by some types of adjectives as in the followings:

- (12) She's not being fair. (Suddenly Last Summer)
- (13) I'm not being violent, Sister. (Suddenly Last Summer)
- (14) Sorry, darling, am I being pompous? (Murder in Vicarage)
- (15) You're being very foolish. (Murder in Vicarage)
- (16) Then didn't you think you're being rather hasty? (Murder in Vicarage)
- (17) Why are you being so apologetic? (The Price)
- (18) You are being quite silly. (Scarlet)

The adjectives in the examples are *fair*, *violent*, *pompous*, *foolish* *hasty* and *apologetic*, and the counterparts in non-progressive use are: (13)' She's not fair, (14)' I'm not violent, Sister. (15)' Sorry, darling, am I pompous? (16)' You're very foolish, (17)' Then didn't you think you're rather hasty? and (18)' Why are you so apologetic? The sentences (13)' – (18)' describe the human propensity or nature of the subject person. In contrast, those used in the progressive form indicate a present state which probably lasts only a very short time, and temporariness is one of the characteristics of this construction.

As in the case of nouns, adjectives are basically thought to be 'stative' in nature in contrast to naturally 'dynamic' verbs. Quirk et al. (1972) classifies adjectives into 'stative' and 'dynamic' on semantic point of view, saying, "most adjectives that are susceptible to subjective measurement are capable of being dynamic... A stative adjective such as *tall* cannot be used with the progressive aspect or with imperative: \**He's being tall*, and \**Be tall*. On the other hand, we can use *careful* as a dynamic adjective: *He's being careful*, *Be careful*." (p.265) The list of the dynamic adjectives given there is as follows:

ABUSIVE ADORABLE AMBITIOUS AWKWARD BRAVE CALM CAREFUL CARELESS  
 CHEERFUL CLEVER COMPLACENT CONCEITED CRUEL DISAGREEABLE DULL  
 ENTHUSIASTIC EXTRAVAGANT FAITHFUL FOOLISH FRIENDLY FUNNY GENEROUS  
 GENTLE GOOD GREEDY HASTY HELPFUL IMPATIENT IMPUDENT IRRITABLE  
 IRRITATING JEALOUS KIND LENIENT LOYAL MISCHIEVOUS NAUGHTY NICE  
 NOISY OBSTINATE PATIENT PLAYFUL REASONABLE RUDE SENSIBLE SERIOUS  
 SHY SENSIBLE SPITEFUL STUBBORN STUPID SUSPICIOUS TACTFUL TALKATIVE  
 THOUGHTFUL TIDY TIMID TROUBLESOME UNFAITHFUL UNSCRUPULOUS UNTIDY  
 VAIN VICIOUS VULGAR WICKED WITTY

Thus occurrence of *be* in the progressive depends on the nature of the following nouns and adjectives, and one way of looking at this phenomenon is to consider that a 'dynamic' feature contained in the noun or adjective renders it possible for the *be* plus a noun or an adjective to act as a 'dynamic' or 'non-stative' verb just as in the case of genuine 'dynamic' verbs, and the other is to consider that the use of the progressive causes a change in stativity of the noun or adjective making an additional semantic interpretation 'dynamic' possible.

As to the contrast between *He is awkward* and *He is being awkward*, Leech (1971)

states as follows:

“...Whereas the Progressive Present here restricts the adjective to the meaning ‘obstructionist’, the Simple Present is ambiguous, allowing both ‘state’ and ‘activity’ interpretations. Two separate conditions of meaning are involved: (1) the time-span is temporary rather than permanent; and (2) the verb may be construed as referring to an activity with human agency. The first of these conditions is fulfilled in *He is hungry*, and the second in *He is awkward* (meaning ‘He habitually goes out of his way to be obstructive’). Only when both conditions are present together, as in *He is being awkward*, does one expect the Progressive Aspect with the verb *be*.” (p.26)

In this paper the most important effect of the progressive on statives is considered to be temporariness or limited duration of a state supposedly permanent or of a long span of time which stative terms inherently have. It seems that by limiting a permanent state into a temporary state a subsidiary effect is given: insincerity and fiction interpretations in the case of those terms which refer to favorable state of being, as is seen in *He is being friendly* and *He is being kind*, which mean ‘He is acting friendly’, and ‘He is acting kindly (toward someone)’, with a possible implication that it is not his nature to be kind or friendly.

*Be* used as an auxiliary verb in the progressive does not duplicate the use, and the counterpart (\**He is being writing a letter*) of *He is writing a letter* does not appear in English. Another use as an auxiliary in the passive can take the progressive as in *A baby is being born* (Dynasty), and *I’m being scratched from the Oxford Stakes at the end of the year* (Winslow Boy). The relation between the passive and the progressive needs a further research and will be discussed in the future.

#### 4. VERBS OF INERT PERCEPTION AND COGNITION

Stative verbs form another group called “verbs of inert perception and cognition”, which include such as ABHOR, ADORE, ASTONISH, BELIEVE, DESIRE, DISLIKE, DETEST, DOUBT, FEEL, FORGIVE, GUESS, HATE, HEAR, IMAGINE, IMPRESS, INTEND, KNOW, LIKE, LOVE, MEAN, MIND, PERCEIVE, PLEASE, PREFER, PRESUPPOSE, REALIZE, RECALL, RECOGNIZE, REGARD, REMEMBER, SATISFY, SEE, SMELL, SUPPOSE, TASTE, THINK, UNDERSTAND, WANT, WISH, etc. (Quirk et al. 1972) (p.96)

The verbs of inert perception are also used as non-stative verbs and take the progressive form, in which case they are members of non-stative verbs, as in

(19) I’m smelling the perfume.

(20) I’m feeling the ground with my foot.

(21) I’m tasting the porridge, to see if it contains enough salt. (Leech)

But as stative verbs these rarely occur in the progressive, and when they do they convey an additional meaning as in the followings:

(22) I only think I’m seeing a pair of glasses. (Bewitched)

(23) You are hearing things. (Bewitched)

(24) Am I hearing something or is that my imagination? (The Price)

Each of the sentences implies that the subject is having an experience of seeing or hearing something that is not there.

With some of the verbs in this group the progressive form is often used when adverbials like *always*, *continually*, *all the time*, *more and more* and so on occur as in the followings:

(25) I distrust (\*is distrusting) that man.

(26) He's always distrusting his own judgment.

(27) I don't imagine (\*am not imagining) that taxes will be reduced this year.

(28) He's always imagining things that do not exist.

(29) I doubt (\*am doubting) whether he'll come.

(30) He's always doubting my word.

(31) My father wants (\*is wanting) me to be a doctor.

(32) Oh, yes. He's been wanting me to get married for years. (Winslow Boy)

In these examples the progressive sentences without the adverbials are not well-formed, but with adverbials they become well-formed and at the same time convey the speaker's strong emotion toward the situation. Although Huddleston says, "Whether stative or non-stative *always* or *continually* gives emotional coloring which in not the case in the simple form" (p.156), it seems that the degree of emotional coloring is greater in the progressive form of stative verbs than that of non-stative verbs because the use of the progressive form is less expected in the case of stative verbs and therefore produces greater surprise, doubt, sorrow or accusation.

## 5. SUMMARY

In this article I have concentrated on the use of the progressive form in stative verbs such as relational verbs with a special attention on *be* and verbs of inert perception and cognition, and discussed its effect on the situation. It was argued in Tamura (1994) that, first, the use of the progressive form in non-stative verbs changes the situation into state, and secondly, the use of the progressive in stative-verbs changes the state supposedly with indefinite duration into that of limited duration. From what we have seen in this article, we might say that the limitation of duration accompanies a rather strong attitudinal implication of the speaker of the sentence because the state expressed by stative verbs from the start is to be intensified by the use of the progressive making the state more noticeable. In this respect the use of the progressive in stative verbs is not so much grammatical in a very strict sense but rather a stylistic modification by the speaker.

Compared with the number of the so-called stative verbs, the number of stative verbs that may be used in the progressive form must be much lower, as a due inference from the general idea that the progressive use of stative verbs is exceptional. After adding some members of status verbs to Allen's list, Joos (1964) says:

Now a certain interest surely attaches to the standing these words have in

English-speaking culture and for the members of it. My supplementary list are mostly rather mature words, yet not esoteric one: the member of the culture has a fair chance to learn substantially all of them by the time he reaches voting-age (though for most people not much earlier) while no normal person learns half other process verbs (*hydrogenate, scarify* etc.) in his lifetime. Again, new ones are hardly ever invented except by mathematicians, the specialists in relation. The psychic state verbs begin to be learned in earliest childhood; in more mature years one adds only their learned synonyms to the personal vocabulary: *perceive, comprehend, detest*. In short, learning the status verbs is tantamount to learning the ropes of English-speaking culture. (p.119)

It is not so difficult for native speakers of Japanese to understand the form and meaning of the progressive in non-stative verbs since the form of the progressive helps to correlate itself to its meaning. The difficulty arises when they try to express a situation in which a native speaker of English would use a stative verb without the progressive. The Japanese language has a quite different system of classifying verbs or verbals and adjectives or adjectivals from that of English, and the distinction in the stative versus non-stative in the language is considered to be one of the factors for the difficulty in recognizing the kind of verbs in English. The present article is by no means exhaustive, but I hope this may lead to a further study of the progressive form in English, and also a comparative study between English and Japanese.

NOTE : Examples in the article are taken from the following works with the titles given in the parentheses from the plays by Terence Rattigan, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, and from TV dramas and movies. Otherwise, they are taken from Leech (1971) , Quirk et al. (1972, 1985) and Hornby (1975) .

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