

## On the ‘Future Use’ of the Present Progressive\*

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### 1. Introduction

As is well known, the present progressive in English can refer to future time. So far, numerous studies on the ‘future use’ of the present progressive have been made (e.g. Jespersen (1924), Poutsma (1926), Kruisinga (1931), Allen (1966), Leech (1971, 1987, 2004), Goodman (1973), Close (1975), Wekker (1976), Huddleston (1977), Smith (1981), Prince (1982), Quirk et al. (1985), Hirtle and Curat (1986), Palmer (1987), Declerck (1991, 2006), Leech and Svartvik (1994), Huddleston and Pullum (2002), Hundt (2004), Nesselhauf (2007), Wada (2009), Bergs (2010)). According to Declerck (1991:92, 2006:184), the ‘future use’ of the present progressive “implies less certainty than the simple present: it refers to a present plan which may possibly still be altered, while the simple present denotes a plan or arrangement that is regarded as unalterable.”<sup>1, 2</sup>

The aim of this paper is to explore the ‘future use’ of the present progressive by taking into consideration the concept of subjectification as defined by Traugott (1989, 1995, 2003, 2010), Traugott and Dasher (2002), Hopper and Traugott (2003), Brinton and Traugott (2005), and Brinton (2008). Although Declerck and the other studies mentioned above are trying to precisely describe the semantic nature of the ‘future use,’ among these, works have not been found by approach of subjectification. It is argued here that the ‘future use’ of the present progressive has undergone subjectification. In terms of subjectification, this paper provides the ‘future use’ with a simple, convincing, and new account. Further, although it is certain that the ‘future use’ does not denote physically ongoing events, this paper will discuss the question whether or not in the ‘future use’ nothing should be regarded as in progress.

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<sup>1</sup> The simple present tense can be used to refer to future events, as follows:

- (i) The semester *starts* on 1st February. (Leech (2004:65))

<sup>2</sup> As Leech et al. (2001:175) too put it, future plans or arrangements referred to by the progressive are not so fixed in comparison with the simple present tense.

- (i) *We are starting for* Istanbul tonight. (Leech (2004:65))  
 (ii) *We start for* Istanbul tonight. (Leech (2004:65))

According to Leech (2004:65), sentence (i) above “announces a present plan which could, conceivably, be altered later.” In sentence (ii), however, “changing the plan is out of the question.”

## 2. Previous Studies

Sub-section 2.1 shows, by observing descriptive definitions of the ‘future use’ of the present progressive in some previous studies, that it is very difficult to precisely define the nature of the future referred to by the progressive and the situation in which the present progressive with future time reference is used. Sub-section 2.2 shows that the present progressive can be used not only in the near future but also in the distant future. In sub-section 2.3 it is shown that, in the ‘future use’ of the progressive, verbs of not only motion but also non-motion can occur.

### 2.1. *Difficult Semantic Definition of the Future Use of the Present Progressive*

In this sub-section, first of all, let us survey works which offer a descriptive definition of the ‘future use’ of the present progressive. According to Leech (2004:61), “a reasonably precise definition of the Present Progressive futurate is: future event anticipated by virtue of a present plan, programme or arrangement.” Here are examples:

- (1) She’s *getting married* this spring.
- (2) The Chelsea-Arsenal match *is being played* next Saturday.
- (3) We’re *having* fish for dinner.
- (4) I’m *inviting* several people to a party.

(Leech (2004:61))

In each example “there is the implication of an arrangement already made: the marriage has been arranged, the football match has been fixed, the menu has been chosen, the party has already been decided on” (Leech (2004:61-62)).

Hirtle and Curat (1986:65) state: “a number of scholars characterize the ‘future’ use of the progressive in terms of ‘arrangement,’ ‘plan,’ ‘program’ and the like.”<sup>3</sup> Huddleston and Pullum (2002:171), however, say that the Present Progressive futurate is not limited to ‘arrangement,’ ‘plan,’ and ‘program’:

- (5) I’m *phoning* her tonight. (Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 171))

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<sup>3</sup> With regard to the characterization of the ‘future use,’ for example, Declerck (1991:92, 2006:184) states that: “when a future situation is referred to by the present continuous (the progressive form of the present tense), it is represented as resulting from a present plan or arrangement.” Radden and Dirven (2007:226), on the other hand, call the use of the present progressive with future reference the “planned future” and state: “the planned future applies to future events for which arrangements have been made in the present.” In addition, Wekker (1976:108-109) observes that “the progressive can be used only when the future is felt to be one that has been planned or prearranged by some human agents.”

According to Huddleston and Pullum (2002:171), in (5), “it could be that I have simply formed the intention to phone her (without consulting her or anyone else about the matter).” Nesselhauf (2007:203) too states that some instances in the ‘future use’ of the present progressive “refer to mere intention without any kind of social arrangement.”<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, let us observe the following:

- (6) “That is the fever, darling. Listen, I’m coming up to you! I’m leaving now, at once. No don’t protest.”  
 “All right, I’m glad you’re coming, Mark. I dare say — I’m not so brave as I thought.” (Hirtle and Curat (1986:75))

According to Hirtle and Curat (1986:75), “the first progressive in this passage certainly does not evoke a ‘programmed’ event, nor does it suggest ‘intention.’” They state, moreover, that “as for *I’m leaving*, it could be taken as evoking either a ‘decision’ nuance or ‘intention’” (Hirtle and Curat (1986:76)).

In this sub-section, we have seen that the present progressive for future time reference suggests ‘arrangement,’ ‘plan,’ ‘program,’ ‘intention,’ and ‘decision.’ In this way, we can state: it is very difficult to precisely describe the nature of the future indicated by the progressive and the situation in which the Present Progressive futurate is used. As will be presented in section 3-4 later, however, this paper attempts to offer a simple and unified account for descriptive studies of the ‘future use,’ in terms of subjectification.<sup>5, 6</sup>

## 2.2. *Distant Future*

The progressive tends to be used for the relatively near future (see Huddleston and Pullum (2002:171)). In fact, Leech (2004:61-62) states that “it is understandable that the notion of ‘fixed arrangement’ comes to be associated with the near rather than distant future.” Here, note that Leech (2004:62) describes the

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<sup>4</sup> There are a number of examples where the expressive effect is simply the intent of the subject. For example:

- (i) Aubrey, well, she’s going to town, Cayley says here, and his visit is at an end. He’s coming over this morning to call on you. (Fries (1956:131) in Hirtle and Curat (1986:73))

According to Hirtle and Curat (1986:73), “any other arrangements are simply ignored here.”

<sup>5</sup> With reference to the simple present tense signifying a plan or arrangement, Leech (2004:65) describes the simple present like this as “future assumed to be fact.” At this point, since the future present tense is assumed to be fact, we can state that the simple present tense signifying a plan or arrangement is not related to subjectification.

<sup>6</sup> Wada (2009) offers a principled explanation for sentences containing the present progressive with future time reference. A way of accounting for the ‘future use’ of the progressive by subjectification motivates a study like this, and can lead to a justification for a study like this.

future use as: “the near rather than distant future.” The progressive, however, can also be used for an event in the distant future, as in the following:

- (7) *After a year in Vienna I'm working with Dr. Hochberg.* (Allen (1966:215))
- (8) *It's expiring in five years.* (Huddleston and Pullum (2002:171))
- (9) *I'm leaving the university in two years' time.* [when I've finished my studies] (Quirk et al. (1985:215))

In (7)-(9) above, *after a year*, *in five years*, and *in two years' time* are used respectively. These adverbials are expressions not referring to the near future. In this way, the present progressive can be used for the distant future.

### 2.3. *Non-Motion Verbs*

Nesselhauf (2007:198) states that “with respect to the verbs that occur in the progressive with future time reference, a common claim is that the construction is predominantly used with motion verbs or verbs of movement” (cf. Bergs (2010)). But, as Palmer (1987:64-65) says, “there is no restriction to such verbs,” as follows:

- (10) *I'm staying at the Gardners next week.* (Declerck (1991:92))
- (11) *We are owning the farm tomorrow.* (Smith (1981:369))

The verbs in the examples above are not motion verbs or verbs of movement.

In this sub-section, we have seen that the verbs that occur in the ‘future use’ of the present progressive are not restricted to verbs of motion or movement, that is to say, that verbs of non-motion or non-movement can occur in the ‘future use’ of the present progressive.

## 3. **Subjectification**

Since Benveniste (1971[1958]) the topic of subjectivity has been discussed in many ways, and subjectification has been defined in different ways (cf. Traugott (1989, 1995, 2003, 2010), Traugott and König (1991), Schwenter and Traugott (2000), Traugott and Dasher (2002), Hopper and Traugott (2003), Brinton and Traugott (2005), Brinton (2008)). In Traugott (2010) it is assumed that a distinction is to be made between subjectivity and subjectification: subjectivity marks a synchronic state, and subjectification a diachronic process. In this section we will explore the concept of subjectification, because subjectification is the notion on which a way to account for the ‘future use’ of the progressive, developed in the

present paper, is based, and plays a key role in a unified account for the ‘future use.’<sup>7</sup> According to Traugott (1995), the term of ‘subjectification’ refers to:

- (12) “a pragmatic-semantic process whereby ‘meanings became increasingly based in the speaker’s subjective belief state/attitude toward the proposition,’ in other words, towards what the speaker is talking about”  
(Traugott (1995:31))

Traugott and Dasher (2002:225) and Traugott (2003, 2010), on the other hand, argue that expressions can be organized along a cline of subjectivity as in (13) below:<sup>8</sup>

- (13) non-/less subjective > subjective

As examples of subjectification Traugott (1995, 2010) has adduced the development of *be going to* from expressions of motion with intent to act in the sixteenth century to those of speaker’s assessment of the future. Look at the sentences below:

- (14) a. Mary *is going to* visit her agent.  
(progressive motion verb *go*, purposive *to*)  
b. Mary *is going to/gonna* visit her agent. (quasi-auxiliary)  
(Traugott (1995:31))

In this pair, the italicized form or phrase in (14b) developed historically later than that in (14a): Example (14a) is constructions with purposive non-finite complements, whereas example (14b) involves the reanalysis from purposive *be going to* to auxiliary *be going to*, and can undergo phonological reduction (see Hopper and Traugott (2003:2-3)). Example (14a) is expressions of motion with intent to act; example (14b) is expressions of speaker’s assessment of the future. Thus, the italicized

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<sup>7</sup> Traugott (2010) states that subjectification is the mechanism by which: “meanings are recruited by the speaker to encode and regulate attitudes and beliefs” (Traugott (2010:35)). In this way, Traugott’s (2010) way to define subjectification is more general and abstract than Traugott’s (1995); therefore, the definition of subjectification by Traugott (1995) is more reader-friendly than that by Traugott (2010).

<sup>8</sup> Strictly speaking, Traugott and Dasher (2002:225) and Traugott (2003, 2010) argue that the semantic change of expressions can be generally organized, as follows:

- (i) non-/less subjective > subjective > intersubjective

However, the phenomena dealt with in the present paper are not related to intersubjectivity and intersubjectification.

form or phrase in (14b) and can be shown to be more subjective in meaning than its cognate in (14a) (see Traugott (1995:31)). This statement indicates that the form or phrase in (14b), which has historically followed the use in (14a), is subjectified. In examples of subjectification Traugott (2010) has also included epistemic *will* derived from a main verb of desire or volition (cf. Aijmer (1985), Bybee et al. (1994:16), Harris and Campbell (1995:92), Lehmann (1995:28) and Campbell (2001) too state that English *will* originally meant ‘want’). Look at the sentences below:

- (15) Ic wille mid flode folc acwellan  
 I will with flood kill people  
 ‘I will kill people with flood’ (Genesis 1296 (Visser (1969:1677)))
- (16) I am aferd there wylle be something amyss  
 (c.1450, Coventry Myst.; Assumption 349 (Visser (1969:1701)))

Sentence (15) is an example of volition of the subject, and sentence (16) is an example in which epistemic *will* is found. In this way, *will* has changed from volition of the subject to an epistemic sense. Epistemic modality is concerned with the speaker’s attitude to the truth-value or factual status of the proposition (see Lyons (1977, 1995), Palmer (1987, 1990, 2001)). We can refer to the semantic change of *will* like the shift from (15) to (16) as subjectification.<sup>9</sup>

#### 4. The ‘Future Use’ of the Present Progressive

In the last section we introduced the notion of subjectification and observed some examples of subjectification. Here, I argue that the ‘future use’ of the present progressive has undergone subjectification. The purpose of this section is to demonstrate that the ‘future use’ has been subjectified diachronically.

“In OE, the present participial morpheme, *-ende*, was inflectional and agreed in number, case, and gender with the N modified” (Brinton and Traugott (2005:113)):

- (17) *Æ[th]elwulf ferde to Rome and [th]ær wæs xii mona[th] wuniende.*  
 (OED<sup>2</sup>, Be 15a)

A lot of studies have been made about the replacement of the *V-ende* form by *V-ing*

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<sup>9</sup> With respect to subjectification, furthermore, according to Traugott (2010), *a bit of* was subjectified from a Partitive ‘morsel, unit bitten out’ to a Quantifier (endowed with quantificational scalar meaning ‘somewhat,’ a ‘downtoning’ or understating meaning like that of *a little*). In addition, Traugott (2010) has argued that subjectification is independent of processes of grammaticalization, but there is inevitably a close interaction between grammaticalization and subjectification for reasons relating to the various functions of grammar.

and the development of *be* + *-ing* into the progressive (see, e.g. Nickel (1966), Visser (1963-1973), Denison (1993), Warner (1995)). In later OE, *-ende* was often weakened to *-inde*, and this became the regular Southern form of the ending in Early ME. From the end of the 12th century there was a growing tendency to confuse *-inde*, phonetically or scribally, with *-inge* (see *OED*<sup>2</sup>, *ing* 2):

- (18) *Syngynge* he was, or *floytynge*, al the day  
 ‘He was singing, or fluting all day’ (Chaucer, *General Prologue* 91)

In ME, *-ing* replaced *-ende* partly under the influence of another nominal derivative, *-ung/-ing*. In Brinton and Traugott’s (2005:115) words, “over a period of about a thousand years, a new discontinuous aspect marker *be -ing* came into being to mark progressive aspect.” In this way, we can see that, in *-ing* forms, the use of present ongoing activities preceded the ‘future use’ i.e. that the development of the ‘future use’ of the present progressive followed present ongoing activities. In fact, *OED*<sup>2</sup> (Be 15) says that *be*-verbs with the present participle form continuous varieties of the tenses, and adduces an initial example in ME as follows:

- (19) he was a-fighting  
 ‘he was fighting’

‘Arrangement,’ ‘plan,’ ‘program,’ ‘intention,’ and ‘decision,’ which can be used for describing the nature of the Present Progressive futurate and the situation in which it is used, are terms for the speaker’s attitudes and beliefs, compared to ‘present ongoing activities.’ In order to confirm this, let us consult English-English dictionaries and look at the meanings of ‘arrangement,’ ‘plan,’ ‘program,’ ‘intention,’ and ‘decision’:

- (20) a. ‘arrangement’: the things that you must organize so that an event, meeting etc can happen (LDCE<sup>3</sup>)  
 b. ‘plan’: something that you intend to do or achieve (OALD<sup>6</sup>)  
 c. ‘program’: a plan of things that will be done or included in the development of something (OALD<sup>6</sup>)  
 d. ‘intention’: an idea or plan of what you are going to do (COBUILD<sup>4</sup>)  
 e. ‘decision’: a choice or judgment that you make after a period of discussion or thought (LDCE<sup>3</sup>)

The part underlined in (20a-e) above denotes more belief/attitude than activities. For example, *organize so that an event, meeting etc can happen* in (20a) represents more subjective belief/attitude than activities, because *so that*-clauses are expressions of purpose; *intend* in (20b) evidently expresses subjective belief/attitude; thereby, ‘program’ and ‘intention’ in (20c, d) can be regarded as terms for more belief/attitude than activities; in (20e), *judgment* and *thought* are evidently terms for belief, compared to activities. This is why we can state that the meaning of the Present Progressive futurate has been recruited to encode and regulate the speaker’s attitudes and beliefs, that is to say, the Present Progressive futurate has undergone subjectification. A phenomenon like this is very similar to the development of *be going to* in that the meaning of the expression shifted from progressive motion to speaker’s assessment of the future. Thus, we see that the ‘future use’ of the progressive is an example of subjectification. In this way, the present paper has demonstrated that the progressive with future time reference has undergone subjectification.

Here, again, look at examples (1)-(5), repeated as (21)-(25) below:

- |      |   |         |
|------|---|---------|
| (21) | She’s <i>getting married</i> this spring.                       | (= (1)) |
| (22) | The Chelsea-Arsenal match <i>is being played</i> next Saturday. | (= (2)) |
| (23) | We’re <i>having</i> fish for dinner.                            | (= (3)) |
| (24) | I’m <i>inviting</i> several people to a party.                  | (= (4)) |
| (25) | I’m <i>phoning</i> her tonight.                                 | (= (5)) |

As we saw in section 1, in examples (21)-(24) there is the implication of an arrangement already made: for example, in (21), the marriage has been arranged; in (22), the football match has been fixed; in (23), the menu has been chosen; in (24), the party has already decided on. In (25), further, it could be that I have simply formed the intention to phone her. Thus, the future referred to by (21)-(25) suggests ‘arrangement’ or ‘intention’: in (21)-(24), events are organized to happen (cf. (20a)); in (25) I intend to phone her or am going to phone her (cf. (20b, d)). Since ‘arrangement’ and ‘intention’ are terms for subjectivity (see (20a, d)), we can conclude that examples (21)-(25) are subjectified.

## 5. Psychological State in the Present Progressive

In the last section we argued that the ‘future use’ of the present progressive was triggered by subjectification; in other words, the Present Progressive futurate is more subjective than the use of present ongoing activities.<sup>10</sup> At this point, the

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<sup>10</sup> Progressive forms tend to be accompanied by an emotive overtone, usually of disapproval,



question arises whether or not it is understandable that in the ‘future use’ nothing is in progress. What the ‘future use’ of the progressive has in common with the sense of an ongoing action will be the preservation of a psychological state at the moment of speech. In using the ‘future use’ of the progressive, the speaker’s psychological state is identical to the one in which the sense expressing ongoing activities, that is to say, the sense of ‘in progress’ is used. As statements for endorsing this view, Allen (1966:215) says “that the present progressive form often seems to refer to a future event for which preparations of some kind already have begun.” Likewise, Poutsma (1926:355) too maintains that when the progressive is used, “the preparations for the action are then thought of as in progress.” In this way, when the ‘future use’ of the progressive is used, the speaker’s psychological state at the moment of speech is construed as identical to one in which the sense of ‘in progress’ is used.

Based on the view mentioned above, it can be accounted for why judgments vary as to the acceptability of a sentence like (26); sentence (26) is originally from Goodman (1973). Wekker (1976) and Leech (1987, 2004) asterisk sentences like this, while Huddleston and Pullum (2002:171) maintain the anomaly of examples like (26). According to Goodman (1973), however, if an appeal to the notion of a divine planner is made, the plan for (26) may be retained; if there is a divine plan controlling the movement of the heavens, it might be said that sentences like (26) are acceptable.

(26) # The sun is setting at 8:39 tomorrow. (Goodman (1973), Wekker (1976:108-109), Huddleston (1977), Prince (1982) with a slight modification, Leech (1987:64, 2004:63) with a slight modification)

When the speaker’s psychological state at the moment of speech is construed as identical to one in which the sense of ‘in progress’ is used, examples like (26) are acceptable. On the other hand, the speaker’s psychological state at the moment of speech is not construed as such, examples like (26) are judged as deviant.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

In this paper it is claimed that the ‘future use’ of the present progressive has undergone subjectification. This paper has, furthermore, stated that in using the

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when emphasised by such adjuncts as *always*, *continually*, *constantly*, and *perpetually*. Look at:

(i) They’re *always meeting* at the market. (Huddleston and Pullum (2002:166))

A use like this in the present progressive is more subjective than ongoing activities. Present Progressive like (i) above is also subjectified.

‘future use’ of the progressive, the speaker’s psychological state is identical to one in which the sense expressing ongoing activities is used.

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