

## The Development of the Progressive Aspect in the History of English

The combination of *be* + the present participle goes back to Old English but its meaning then was not necessarily aspectual.. The progressive proper develops in ME and can be regarded as a grammaticalised aspectual indicator in the verbal system by 1700. The set of progressive forms in all tenses, active and passive, is fully developed around **the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> c.**

### Old English

⇒ the verb *beon*, *wesan* and sometimes *weorðan* are used with V-*ende*. The OE construction (like in PDE) is largely limited to activity verbs but it is not exactly equivalent to the PDE *be+ing*.

- (1) Europe hio onginð ...of Danai þære ie, seo **is irnende** of norþdæle (Or)  
Europe she begins from Don that river, that is running from northern-part  
& seo ea Danai **irnð** þonan suðryhte on westhealfe Alexandres herga  
and that river Don runs thence due-south into western-part Aleksander's kingdom

⇒ For the most part the OE construction occurs with past tense; signalling action that continued through a limited period of time.

- (2) ...þæt scip **wæs** ealne weg **yrnende** under segle (Or 1 1.19.32)  
that ship was all way going under sail  
*that ship was running under sail all the way.*

- (3) Petrus **wearð** æfterweard þus **cweðende** (ÆCHom I,26 374.5)  
Peter was afterward thus saying  
Peter afterward said this .....

⇒ The development of the progressive appears to have been part of the growth of phrasal constructions in general, most especially of the (plu)perfect with which it contrasted as a marker of temporal relations. Its origins can be attributed to three types of OE constructions:

- (a) BE + predicative adjective; e.g. *hie wæron blissiende* beside *hie wæron blipe* 'they were happy'; originally the predicative adjective in *-ende* was identical to the plain adjectival form, but later came to be reinterpreted as part of the verb paradigm.
- (b) appositive participles, e.g. *he wæs on temple lærende his discipulas* 'he was in the temple, teaching his disciples', vs. *þa he on temple wæs lærende his discipulas* 'when he in the temple was, teaching his disciples' the latter could be reinterpreted as 'when he was teaching his disciples in the temple'
- (c) BE + agentive predicate nominal, e.g. *hie wæron ehtende cristenra monna* 'they were persecutors of Christian men', reinterpreted as 'they were persecuting Christian men' (the noun ending in *-end* in the singular but *-ende* in the plural)

⇒ In later periods we see the replacement of the original BE + *ende* construction by *be + ing*, probably due to the fact that the two constructions (one with the present participle and the other one with a preposition plus a nominal derived from a verb) are sometimes equivalent. This strengthens the suggestion that the origins of *be + ing* may be traced back to OE.

- a) the appositive *spræc wepende/on wepinge* 'spoke weeping/ in the act of weeping'  
b) with a verb of movement *com ridende/ on ridinge* 'came riding/ in the act of riding'  
c) with a verb of perception *geseah hine ridende/ on ridinge* 'saw him riding/ in the act of

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riding'

d) with *beon*, *wesan wæs feohtende/ on feohtinge* 'was fighting / in the act of fighting'

### Middle English

⇒ The reasons for the increase in the use of progressive forms are not entirely clear. In the **early ME** period their frequency is **very low**; no higher than in OE, in some cases even lower than in OE. At the **end of the ME** period the frequency almost **doubles**, and from the **beginning of the MnE** period onwards the use of the construction rises **astronomically**. The use of the progressive is much higher in northern texts than in midland or southern ones.

⇒ Factors which most likely contributed to the development of the construction

- a) in OE verbs which are inherently perfective (prefixed verbs in *a-*, *be-*, *ge-*) occur in the simple form, while durative verbs (sometimes the same verbs without the prefix) often appear in the expanded form. In ME the morphological distinction was lost, creating a need for other means of showing aspect.
- b) in eME the inflectional endings of the present participle, infinitive and verbal noun began to be confused. Perhaps because of this the verbal noun (OE *-ung*) began to develop verbal properties, e.g. acquired the ability to take a noun phrase as its direct object; it could be modified by adverbs which normally accompany verbs. An immediate consequence of this was an enormous expansion of the functional load of the *-ing* form, which may well have assisted in the breakthrough of the progressive form.
- c) because of the phonological developments mentioned two separate OE constructions: *he wæs huntende* and *he wæs on huntunge* become very similar in ME: *he was huntyng(e)* and *he was on/an/in/a huntyng(e)*. Ultimately (through the weakening of the preposition *on* > *an* > *a* >  $\emptyset$ ) they coalesced, thus sharply increasing the frequency of the progressive form. However, some scholars claim that the two constructions lived side by side from OE times on and in the course of the MnE period the verbal type superseded the nominal one. (there are instances of the nominal type as late as the 18<sup>th</sup> c.)

(4) she is in milking (Markham)

(5) I was just upon sinking into the ground (Richardson)

### Early Modern English

⇒ In the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> c. the use of the progressive is still unsettled

(6) What do you read, my Lord? (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*)

(7) What are you reading? (Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*)

⇒ The use of the progressive in OE and ME is optional. Only in MnE (according to Strang by about **1700**) did it become **obligatory**. Thus it was only in the MnE Period that the progressive became grammaticalised and formed part of the aspectual system of English. Before that time it must be seen as a stylistic device.

⇒ In eMnE the most common progressive forms are the present and the past but the construction with other tenses starts to appear from the 15<sup>th</sup> c. on. In OE the progressive appeared only in the past and non-past and after modals. In ME the progressive perfect and pluperfect are first recorded from the mid/late 14<sup>th</sup> c. but remain sporadic. Likewise the future progressive enter the language in the 14<sup>th</sup> c (first in the north). The only missing

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forms are future perfect and all passive forms.

(8) For often hee hath bene tempering (Harman)

(9) that it will be intruding itself (Hooke)

(10) the ploughes muste styll be doynge (Latimer)

⇒ In ME and eMnE the active progressive was used to express the passive. (*The house is building* or the simple passive *the house is built* were used instead of *being build*). The earliest instances of the passive form of the progressive date from around 1800. In 1755 Dr Johnson writes “*The grammar is now printing* (...) is (...) a vitious expression, probably corrupted from a phrase more pure (...): *The book is a printing*.”

**The set of progressive forms in all tenses (active and passive) is fully developed around the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> c.**

### Modern English

A three-fold increase during the 19<sup>th</sup> c. The central function of the construction is to present an action of a verb as being an activity rather than an event, result, state of affairs. In the 18<sup>th</sup> c the progressive is restricted to human or human-like subjects and to certain verbs. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> c there is expansion in the range of possible subjects and verbs.