

ON THREE APPARENT ANOMALIES WITH THE ENGLISH PROGRESSIVE

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Comments welcomed.

## 1. Progressive *being*<sup>2</sup> followed by a noun- or adjective phrase

Some years ago, one of the authors of this paper (Schmerling) was working in a large organization with many layers of management. It often happened that a manager who usually performed certain functions was unavailable to do so, and those functions were performed by a so-called backup, who was authorized to perform them in the manager's absence. It was common for a backup performing such a function to say a sentence like (1) to other employees, and those other employees might speak of the occasion using a sentence like (2):

1. I'm being Mary today.
2. Sue is being Mary today.

In the kind of situation described, employees who were not performing these managerial functions accepted sentences like (1) and (2) and understood them to be conveying the propositions conveyed by the sentences in (3) and (4), respectively:

3. Mary has authorized me to perform functions in her absence that she normally performs.
4. Mary has authorized Sue to perform functions in her absence that Mary normally performs.

The use of sentences like those in (1) and (2) served to foster a sense of camaraderie among the employees.

Our purpose in this section is to show that utterances like (1) and (2) are representative of a much broader class of utterances in which progressive *being* is followed by a definite or indefinite Noun Phrase (NP) or an Adjective Phrase (AP) and that, contrary to assumptions that appear to be widely held, these utterances can in fact be seen to involve garden-variety progressives.

Sentences (1) and (2) could be—and were—taken to be truthful. It was possible for them to be taken this way precisely because it was understood that they meant that Sue was acting in Mary's stead.

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The two authors contributed equally to this work and are listed strictly in alphabetical order.

<sup>2</sup> We are not concerned here with *being* as it occurs in a gerund like (i), which does not have the implications of sentence (19):

i John's being a genius took us all by surprise.

Consider now (5), which we propose has more in common semantically with a sentence like (2) than might at first be thought:

5. John is (just) being John.<sup>3</sup>

To see how (5) is perhaps surprisingly similar in meaning to sentence (2), consider how it differs from a sentence like (6), which is of course a tautology:

6. John is John.

(5) is not a tautology.<sup>4</sup> A rough paraphrase of (5) is that John is displaying properties that help give him his distinctive character. It thus might be used as the answer to a question like (7) or (8):

7. Why is John being so defensive?

8. Why is John going out of his way like this to be helpful to other people?

Sentences (2) and (5) have in common that they pertain to slices of time that are stages of larger intervals, intervals that we might describe as viewed more holistically than these stages. The more holistically viewed intervals, we maintain, are those involved in the interpretation of (9) and (10), respectively:

9. Mary is Sue's manager.

10. John is John. (= (6))

We propose that (2) and (5) reflect a fact about the progressive aspect that we can express informally as in (11):

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<sup>3</sup> Haj Ross has brought to our attention the possibility of a sentence like (i):

i. John is (just) being himself.

There is no question that sentence (i) is acceptable, but our judgments are unclear about whether (i) is or can be semantically or pragmatically equivalent to (5). We have not yet determined a productive way in which to address this question. If they can indeed be interpreted as equivalent, this is of course a problem for any theory that requires anaphors and non-anaphors to be in complementary distribution.

<sup>4</sup> A tautology like (6) may in fact give rise to a conversational implicature in the sense of Grice 1975, such as the proposition that we all know what John is like (, namely...). (Compare *Boys will be boys*.) But the interpretation of (5) is crucially different from that of sentence (6). The meaning we are discussing for a sentence like (5) does not depend on speakers' engaging in cooperative behavior in the way that a conversational implicature does (see our discussion of Grice's Cooperative Principle below). And unlike (6) with an associated conversational implicature, (5) does not require a tautological reading for its interpretation—and indeed it does not make use of one: sentence (5) is not a tautology in the first place. See also fn. 6.

11. An NP following progressive *being* denotes the set of properties belonging to that NP during a proper subinterval of the interval pertaining to the interpretation of the sentence as a whole.<sup>5</sup>

How does (11) apply to the sentences under discussion? We propose that sentence (2) does not pertain to Mary in the same interval as the interval that *Mary* pertains to in sentence (3) or (4); rather, we propose, it pertains to a proper subinterval of that interval, a subinterval during which the most salient property of Mary is her position as department manager, a position she has relinquished to Sue during that subinterval. Mary's property set contains properties other than this one, of course, but these other properties are not pertinent to the meaning of the NP that follows *being* in (2). We refer to the property of Mary's that is in fact pertinent to the meaning of this phrase as a *stage-level property*, since this property is pertinent to one stage of the overall interval during which sentence (2) is true. Sentence (5) has in common with sentence (2) that the NP following *being* pertains to a proper subinterval of the interval during which the sentence as a whole is true. In (5) this subinterval is one during which the properties of the NP following *being* could include the set of properties that are especially noteworthy, in context, in the characterization of the subject NP. Sentence (5) is not a tautology, because that characterizing set of properties is a subset of the set that the subject itself picks out.<sup>6</sup>

We have been looking at some sentences in which progressive *being* is followed by an NP. Consider now some examples with adjectives following *being*. It has been suggested in the literature that such sentences impute volition to the subject of the sentence (Lasnik and Fiengo, 1974; Partee 1977, Schmerling 1983). Thus a sentence like (14), in contrast to either (12) or (13), has been said to impute volition to the machine and therefore to anthropomorphize it.

12. The machine is noisy.
13. The machine is being repaired.
14. The machine is being noisy.

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<sup>5</sup> We follow Montague 1973 in analyzing *John*, for example, as picking out John's property set.

<sup>6</sup> Our assertion that sentence (5), *John is being John*, is not a tautology receives support from the way it differs from (6), *John is John*, in its co-occurrence restrictions:

- i. \*John is very John today.
- ii. John is being very John today.

The second instance of *John* in example (ii) behaves like an adjective insofar as modification by *very* is concerned. This is to be expected if this instance of *John* is behaving in a way that is akin to the way an adjective behaves in this construction (see our discussion of adjectives in the upcoming portion of this paper). Since we analyze the second instance of *John* in a sentence like *John is being John* as picking out a property set that can differ from the set picked out by the subject, it is not surprising that analogous facts hold where the NP following *being* is distinct from the subject NP:

- iii. \*John is very Barack Obama today.
- iv. John is being very Barack Obama today.

We propose that the anthropomorphizing effect displayed by sentence (14) results from a fact that is reminiscent of (11), as seen in the effects we noted when progressive *being* is used with a following NP. To show this, we must first take into account that in a sentence like (14) *being* precedes an adjective, unlike sentences in which it is an NP that follows *being*. (14) has the effect indicated in (15):

15. An adjective following progressive *being* denotes a property belonging to the subject NP during a proper subinterval of the interval that pertains to the interpretation of the sentence as a whole.

The wording of (15) is based on the assumption that an adjective denotes a property. We propose revising our account of the meaning of adjectives so that an adjective denotes a unary property set. Then we can unify (11) and (15) as in (16):

16. An NP or AP following progressive *being* denotes a property set belonging to the subject NP during a proper subinterval of the interval that pertains to the interpretation of the sentence as a whole.

It would appear that (13), *The machine is being repaired*, shows that the anthropomorphizing effect in (14) cannot be attributed to the progressive aspect. Recall, however, that the adjective *noisy* in (14) makes reference to a property that is a member of the set of properties picked out by the subject of the sentence at a certain interval and as such has in common with the NP's following *being* that we have looked at so far that it in fact holds at a stage of the interval during which the subject's properties hold. If *noisy* in (14) makes reference to a stage-level property, noisiness need not hold of the machine at other times. If the machine can be understood as a participant in a change to noisiness in sentence (14), one can then reasonably conclude that the sentence anthropomorphizes it.

How might the machine be so understood? In the world of people and machines, we assume that machines are not free agents; they are inanimate and have been built to serve people. So we assume that a machine has an assigned operator. The speaker of (14) has, we assume, encountered a change in the noise level of a machine and has not seen evidence of an operator whose actions might have brought about this change. Now, like speakers generally, the speaker of (14) is in a position to exploit the Cooperative Principle (CP) introduced by Paul Grice (1975), according to which people make their contributions to joint interactions maximally cooperative. Such interactions include conversation (Grice 1975: 45, 48-49). A special case of the CP is Grice's Maxim of Quantity (45): "Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange)." Grice went on to propose that if a speaker appears to have flouted the CP—if, as in this case, no reason is given for the assertion that the machine is being noisy—then the other participants in the conversation can assume that the speaker has intended to be cooperative and has uttered (14) on the assumption that listeners will conclude additional information: a conversational implicature, as in fn. 4. The additional information here is that the speaker intends to convey that there is some *cause* for the machine's increased noise level.

We suggest that listeners who interpret (14) as imputing volition to the machine are making two crucial assumptions (but we shall see that, significantly, it turns out that not all listeners make these assumptions). The first assumption is that some operator must be responsible for the noise increase; the second assumption is that, since no human operator is mentioned, the only other candidate for being the relevant operator must be the machine

itself. Those listeners who are making these assumptions thus conclude that the machine has been a volitional agent in its own noise increase.

One of our informants, however, did not interpret (14) in such a way that the cause of the change in the machine's noise level was the action of some agent; this informant reported that he would immediately assume that the machine had run out of oil. The imputing of volition to the machine, and the anthropomorphizing that this entails, is not in fact a necessary part of the meaning of (14).

Since we are proposing that the proposition that the machine is an active participant in the change entailed by (14) is in fact a Gricean conversational implicature, we now note that this conclusion is not necessary even for those who reach it initially. The conclusion that the machine is acting volitionally can be canceled, as in (17); the possibility of such cancellation is the hallmark of a conversational implicature:<sup>7</sup>

17. The machine is being noisy, because of a malfunction.

The account of a conversational implicature that we have given, like our account of the interpretation of (14), extends readily to sentences in which an adjective follows *being* in a sentence with a human subject, as in the examples in (18). These examples are unremarkable, since it is almost unnoticed when agency is imputed to a person:

18. John is being obnoxious/kind/unkind/foolish/smart/fair/unfair/strong (in character).

Up until now we have not considered sentences in which the phrase following progressive *being* is an indefinite NP, as in (19):

19. John is being a genius.

It may help to preface our discussion of (19) by noting that the same anthropomorphizing effect as that that (14) can have can also be observed when *being* is followed by an NP. Thus (20) can impute animate qualities to the subject.<sup>8, 9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The following exchange occurred recently in the presence of one of the authors of this paper (Krivochen):

A: It [this PC] is taking ages to load!

B: Yes, they're being slow lately.

No anthropomorphizing of the PC was understood in this exchange.

<sup>8</sup> It is not uncommon for people to anthropomorphize machines. Utterances like (i) occur with some frequency:

i. Machines hate me.

But the anthropomorphizing effect of (14) is not attributable to the use of a word that is analogous to *hate*, which is the source of the effect in (i). With regard to sentence (20), a nuisance does not typically involve a human agent, and the subject therefore cannot be the source of an anthropomorphizing effect in that sentence.

<sup>9</sup> As with (14), the implicated imputing of volition to the subject of (20) can be canceled, as in (i):

20. My car is being a nuisance.

The affinity of (14) and (20) serves as an introduction to the fact that NP's following progressive *being* and introduced with the indefinite article are semantically very much like adjectives in such a context, a fact that is unsurprising if we assume the unified analysis of the NP and AP meanings given in (16). This affinity lends support to the analysis we propose for sentences like (19) and (20).

We are now in a position to see how *John is being a genius* and *My car is being a nuisance* are like *Sue is being Mary today*: *a genius* and *a nuisance* differ from an NP like *Mary* inasmuch as they do not pick out particular individuals' property sets as the meanings of the NP's following *being*, but their meanings do involve stages to which a property pertains, whether such a stage is that of being a genius, a nuisance, or a manager. Such stages can be seen as comparable to the kind of stage that is pertinent to the meaning of an adjective following progressive *being*, as described in (16). Since *a nuisance* in (20) or *a genius* in (19) pertains to a stage-level property set, the property of being a nuisance or a genius must hold during a proper subinterval of the interval that is relevant to the interpretation of the sentence as a whole. Focusing on example (19), we maintain that since (19) has been used instead of the simple present *John is a genius*, (19) is understood, like (14), in a way that is a consequence of Grice's CP. Here, the CP leads us to reason that since the speaker has spoken of John's being a genius during a bounded interval of time specifically, we can conclude that John must be a genius in some way that does not entail that he is a genius throughout the interval that is pertinent to the semantics of the sentence as a whole. This could happen if John is only acting like a genius in some way during the bounded interval and would not necessarily act this way at other times—that he is not a true genius.

We have suggested that (19) and (20) can be seen as comparable to (1) and (2). The temporary but non-contradictory action that is entailed by these last sentences—in context—is made possible by the special conditions obtaining in the hierarchical world of bureaucracy.

An account that is analogous to the account we have proposed for (18) also holds for a sentence like (21), which implies that the subject is play-acting:

21. Johnny is being a dog.

A conversational implicature leads us to conclude that in (19) and (2), respectively, John can be a genius or Sue can be Mary at the stage level alone, that is, during a bounded interval of time. Similarly, we understand that it can be only at the stage level that Johnny is a dog. This limitation to the stage level, we propose, is the understanding that this kind of conversational implicature leads us to draw from (21). One circumstance in which (21) could be true can be one in which Johnny is acting like a dog. Other circumstances can be imagined, however: Johnny might for example be playing the part of a dog in a play.

We conclude this section by returning to adjectives and noting that some adjectives do not work well following *being*. Some such adjectives are given in sentences (22) through (26)).

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i. My car is being a nuisance according to the city; this is a day when parking isn't permitted here.

22. #John is being strong (physically).<sup>10</sup>

23. #John is being handsome.

24. #John is being old.

25. #John is being young.

26. #John is being tired.

We have not starred these examples, because we do not believe that they contain adjectives that are lexical exceptions to occurrence following progressive *being*. Our position, rather, is that physical strength, handsomeness, old or young age, and tiredness—to focus on the examples here—would not usually appear to be good candidates for being stage-level properties. As one example, we noted in (18) that *John is being strong* is in fact readily acceptable if non-physical strength is intended. In contrast to physical strength, such non-physical strength is indeed an appropriate candidate for being a stage-level property. To understand physical strength only as a stage-level property, one must draw a conversational implicature that is analogous to that drawn by the utterance of a sentence like (19), *John is being a genius*. (19) carries the (unusual) implication that John is a genius only at certain times, however that state of affairs comes about.

We maintain that analogous considerations hold for the remaining adjectives that do not occur easily following progressive *being*.

We have shown that special implications that seem to arise from sentences with NP's or adjectives following progressive *being* can all be traced to such sentences' pertaining to proper subintervals of the intervals that are pertinent to the semantics of the sentences of which they are a part. Conversational implicatures are additionally involved in some of the implications we have noted. We conclude that nothing further need be said about special implications of progressive *being*.

## 2. Progressives as preludes to states

Verbs such as *enjoy* and *like* are generally thought of as stative and as such do not typically occur in the progressive (Vendler 1957). Thus we have sentences like (29):

27. The students like the class.

It is sometimes noted, however, that progressive versions of sentences like (30) occur:

28. The students are liking the class.

(30) might be uttered in the first part of a term, when the uttering of (29) would be premature.

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<sup>10</sup> We use a prefixed # to indicate that a sentence is pragmatically anomalous in most contexts.



What is the meaning relationship between (29) and (30)? We propose that sentence (30) involves *like* in an achievement reading, again in Vendler's sense. An achievement differs from a state in that, whereas a state holds throughout an interval of time, an achievement takes place only *after* an interval. Typical achievements are picked out by such verbs as *realize* or *die*. We propose that the verb in a sentence like (30) occurs after a special sort of interval, what we call a *prelude interval*: an interval that ends when the state denoted by the cognate stative verb can first be said with certainty to hold. To get a stative verb like that in (29) to denote an appropriate achievement, then, we propose that the semantics of a sentence like (30) makes use of an operator that takes a verb's stative interpretation as input and yields as output an interval that is such that a state like that picked out by the input begins no earlier than the end of the output interval, our prelude interval.

As with Section 1, we have shown that what has struck some as an unusual use of the progressive in fact follows from the semantics of the sentence of which that progressive is a part, and that nothing special needs to be said about the use of the progressive itself in a sentence like (30).

### 3. Progressives of stative predicates

Consider sentences (31) and (32):

29. John is having a seizure.

30. John is having a migraine.

An interesting contrast between (31) and (32) emerges when we consider that different time adverbials can co-occur with *have a seizure* and *have a migraine*. The difference in acceptability between (33) and (34), assuming the time of utterance as what Hans Reichenbach (1947:288) called the point of reference  $R$ ,<sup>11</sup> shows that *have a seizure* and *have a migraine* are different aspectually:<sup>12</sup>

31. \*John has had a seizure since 10:00.

32. John has had a migraine since 10:00.

The anomaly of (33) is analogous to the anomaly of (35), which contains what is unambiguously an achievement verb:

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<sup>11</sup> Reichenbach (1947: 287–298) argued for distinguishing a point of reference, his  $R$ , both from what he termed the point of event  $E$ , and the point of speech  $S$ .

<sup>12</sup> Sentences like (33) and (35) are acceptable if  $S$  is understood as distinct from  $R$ , as in (i):

i. Several things have happened since we last spoke. One is that John has died.

In (i) the point of reference is the time of our last speaking rather than the time of (i)'s utterance. This is not problematic if one assumes that  $S$  and  $R$  need not be identical, but rather that  $R$  can be any topically relevant point or interval. A point of reference often appears in a topic position, broadly construed, as it does in (i).

33. \*John has died since 10:00.

The adverbial *since 10:00* involves an interval starting at 10:00 and, in a sentence like (34), continuing until the time of utterance. An achievement verb, however, does not involve an interval throughout which a state holds and so is incompatible with an adverb like *since 10:00*, where just such an interval is indeed invoked.<sup>13</sup>

What can we conclude from the difference between (33) and (34)? The progressive (32) must be possible despite the fact that *have a migraine* is a stative verb phrase. (32) is not only possible, in fact, but obligatory; sentence (36) is not acceptable on a punctual reading:<sup>14</sup>

34. \*John has a migraine.

We propose that sentence (32) obligatorily involves an operator like the operator deriving achievements from states that was discussed in Section 2. (32) must refer to an achievement with an interpretation analogous to that of (30), which is derived from a state analogous to that in sentence (29). The derived achievement accounts for the obligatoriness of the progressive.

## 4. Conclusion

In this paper we have examined what have been viewed by various authors, writing at the intersection of various compatible theoretical frameworks, as involving what appear to be

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<sup>13</sup> An anonymous reviewer has suggested that *have a seizure* is not analogous to the achievement verb *die*, claiming that (i) is acceptable but that (ii) is contradictory:

- i. John was dying, when the doctor gave him medicine. So he didn't die.
- ii. John was having a seizure, when the doctor gave him medicine. So he didn't have a seizure.

We have heard sentences like (iii),

- iii. He was dying, but, miraculously, the doctors were able to take his heart out of him, start it again, and put it back in.

We believe, however, that (iii) is something of a play on words: we *thought* he was dying, but as it turned out he really wasn't. Note that a sentence like (iii) sounds most natural with accentual prominence on *dying*, of a sort that we take to be the phonological analogue of what would be represented graphically using scare quotes. We maintain that (i) and (ii) are of equal acceptability or lack thereof.

<sup>14</sup> It is critical to our argument that (34) be given a punctual interpretation. Frequentative variants of (34) are of course possible, as in (i):

- i. John has a migraine every time he has to go to the dentist.

On a frequentative reading each event of John having a migraine is considered separately, thus, perfectly. The resulting interpretation of a succession of perfective events is inflective by inference (crucially, not by syntax). Compare (ii):

- ii. Guests kept arriving.

anomalies in the use of the English progressive. We have shown that these apparent anomalies in fact arise from the overall semantics of the sentences in which these progressive forms occur, supplemented in some cases with appropriate conversational implicatures. No special apparatus is required to account for the readings of the progressive that we have discussed, and our proposed solutions hold independently of any particular theory of syntax or semantics.

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