

Some issues with monosemic analyses of polyfunctional aspectual grams: the progressive

Stepan Mikhailov, stepanmihajlov@gmail.com

National Research University Higher School of Economics

Abstract. This short paper presents some of the functions of progressives (König 1995; Bertinetto et al. 2000), that any theory of a progressive must account for. The data from 36 constructions in the languages of Europe (Dahl (ed.) 2000: §4) suggest that three major groups of functions of differing semantic nature can be distinguished — aspectual (in the sense of (Klein 1994)), actional, and expressive (in the sense of (Lyons 1995)). The paper highlights some of the properties of these functions that have to be taken into account. To derive the variation in the aspectual functions of progressives a prototype-based notion «proto-process» is presented. The progressives are said to differ in the strictness of the selectional restrictions they impose on the predicates via this notion. A possible neo-Gricean approach to a range of functions is sketched and a challenge of overgeneration that it faces is discussed. The challenge is to derive only some of the functions, but not the others, since the cross-linguistic data show that in some languages only some of the functions derivable in a neo-Gricean fashion are attested, while similar functions are unavailable for the same construction. It is noted that the notion of proto-process is also useful from a diachronic point of view, since it picks out exactly those functions that are inherited, when a progressive evolves into an imperfective.

Key words: aspect, progressive, proto-process, actionality, expressive, typology, diachrony, neo-Gricean pragmatics

1. Introduction

For a semanticist encountering a polyfunctional linguistic expression it is natural to try to contrive a monosemic analysis thereof. That is, to provide the expression with such a semantics, that all of its multiple functions will automatically follow from it. Indeed, as the principle of Modified Occam's Razor states: «Senses are not to be multiplied beyond necessity» (Grice 1978, 47).

The issue, however, is that at least in the formal semantics of aspect it is occasionally the case that in deriving such a monosemic analysis the researcher overlooks multiple other functions as given aspectual gram. Thus, the seminal work (Landman 1992) is only concerned

with the differing entailments of accomplishments and activities in the English Progressive construction. A more recent article (Portner 2011, 1241) presents a series of challenges that any theory of progressive has to overcome, there it is explicitly stated that only the «core progressive meaning» will be considered.

The issue is not overcome in typological literature either. For example, in the works on the progressive in languages of Europe by P. M. Bertinetto and colleagues (Bertinetto et al. 2000) the diversity in the progressive constructions is organized in two types of the progressive, essentially, two clusters of properties: focal progressive and durative progressive. However, a closer investigation of their data shows that the 36 constructions examined correspond to 28 different sets of functions. Thus, even if one assumes that the two types have fuzzy boundaries, the overall theory fails to generate significant predictions.

A more recent and much broader typological study of progressives (Vafaeian 2018) is entirely based on the theory of P. M. Bertinetto and colleagues. Even though it presents novel generalizations pertaining to other issues in the typology of progressives, it provides no significantly new theoretical insight into the multiple functions of the progressive and the analysis thereof.

In the research by A. De Wit and her colleagues (*e. g.* De Wit et al. 2013), carried out in the Cognitive Grammar framework, different **uses** of the **present** progressive are analyzed with modal uses taking the central stage. (The latter roughly correspond to the expressive functions of the present study, see 2.3.) However, it also presents a narrower perspective, since only the present uses of the progressive are discussed and only two constructions are compared, thus the set of functions considered is smaller than a broader study would allow for.

The goal of the present study is to provide a formulation of different functions that a theory of progressive must account for, based on a re-examination of the data by P. M. Bertinetto and colleagues.

2. Three groups of functions

Since the functions to be discussed are derived from data collected from translations of a questionnaire, the formulations of the functions will crucially rely on the sentences from the questionnaire. For each function discussed here the code for the sentences will be given. The questionnaire PROGQ is provided in (Dahl (ed.) 2000, 810-818).

A function is only said to constitute a separate region in the semantic space of the progressive, if there are at least two constructions that differ with respect to it.

2.1. Aspectual functions

Following (Klein 1994) aspect is defined here as a relation between the Topic Time (TT) and a Time of Situation (TSit) of a sentence.

The aspectual functions all involve an imperfective aspectual viewpoint, that is TT is included in TSit.

The core function, available to all constructions in the study, — the **agentive function** — is observed, when a sentence with a progressive is used to describe a process¹ performed by an agentive subject (PROGQ S01, S03).

(1) PROGQ S01 for English

{Somebody on the phone wants to know about Ann; the answer is: — Ann is near me...} she **is working** right now.

The first point of cross-linguistic variation is observed for the **absentive function**, when the sentence describes a process that is not perceptually accessible to the speaker (PROGQ S46, S47). This function is not available, for example, for the Danish construction *er ved at* + INF.

(2) PROGQ S46 for English

{on the phone: A: Is Ann at home right now? — B: No,} she **is shopping**. She left one hour ago.

The **habitual function** is observed, when a sentence describes a regularly repeated situation and it usually implies that the tendency in question is temporary (PROGQ S63, S02).

(3) PROGQ S63 for English

At that time, he **was going** to dance every Saturday.

When a progressive is used with posture or wearing verbs, stative in their nature, to describe a temporary situation, the **postural function** is observed (PROGQ S28, S29).

(4) The statue **is standing** in the garden. (Bertinetto et al. 2000, 535)

Finally, the possibility for a progressive to be used with **non-human subjects** also constitutes a separate function (PROGQ S37, S38, S62, S77).

2.1.1 Proto-process

The classic intuition about the semantics of the progressive, *e. g.* that it is the imperfective restricted to processes, is clearly wrong (4).

One possible way to repair this intuition, is to say that the restriction on processes refers not to the aspectual class, but rather to a set of properties. The cross-linguistic variation in

¹ Following (Tatevosov 2010) the states are understood here to differ from the processes in the fact that the former can be true of momentary intervals of time, while for the latter a non-momentary interval is required.

aspectual functions of progressives can then be said to derive from the differences in the strictness of this restriction.

This set of properties is introduced here under the name of **proto-process**, it includes:

- i. the subject is agentive
- ii. the situation described is perceptually accessible to the speaker
- iii. the predicate can be true of momentary time intervals
- iv. the situation is temporary
- v. the situation is restricted to one occasion

The most restricted progressives such as the Danish construction demand that the predicate that appears in this construction wholly corresponds to the proto-process. On the other hand, in languages with more grammaticalized progressives such as English the restriction is laxer, and hence more functions are available for the progressive.

The notion of proto-process will be discussed in more detail in the talk.

2.2. Actional functions

Actional functions are revealed when a progressive occurs in a perfective context.

For example, the Spanish *estar -ndo* construction can occur with perfective tenses and **durational adverbials** (5) (PROGQ S48). Note that the latter according to (Klein 1994, §10.2.1) specify the temporal boundaries of a situation, which should be impossible with a TT included in TSit.

- (5) **Estuvo leyendo** todo el día.

‘S/he spent the whole day reading’. (Bertinetto et al. 2000, 535)

In such cases the only function of a progressive seems to be to derive an atelic process from a verb of some actional class (Bertinetto, Delfitto 2000, 208).

Another actional function is observed, when a progressive is embedded under a perfect, which is possible in English (PROGQ S81, S82):

- (6) PROGQ S81 for English

{I am so tired:} I **have been baking** all day since I got up this morning.

According to (Klein 1994, §6.5) a perfect specifies that the TT is in the posttime of TSit. Since the TT clearly can’t be included in TSit and follow it at the same time, it follows that a progressive in such cases does not perform an aspectual function.

Any analysis of a progressive that has actional functions must specify how the contradiction in such cases is resolved. With no additional refinements the classic analysis that a progressive specifies inclusion of TT in TSit will fail in such cases.

2.3. Expressive functions

The expressive functions, as the name suggests, involve expressive semantics. J. Lyons describes such semantics as: «the kind of meaning by virtue of which speakers express, rather than describe, their beliefs, attitudes and feelings» (Lyons 1995, 44).

One example of expressive functions is found in the **behavioral** uses of progressives (PROGQ S42, S43), which occurs with adjectives that denote properties controllable by the subject and that involve judgement or opinion on the speaker's part, *i. e.* the speaker may be mistaken in attributing this property to the subject (see (König 1995, 156-157)):

(7) Ele **est sendo** alegre.

‘He is being friendly’. (König 1995, 159)

E. König (König 1995, 157) describes such uses as derived via a Q-implicature based on a Horn scale <*polite, being polite*>, where a use of the progressive is said to be logically weaker than a use of the unmarked form, and hence the sentence with the unmarked form is implied to be false. That is, such behavior is considered by the speaker to be uncharacteristic of the subject and to be volitional on the subject's part.

Another expressive function, which seems to necessarily involve adverbials such as *always*, is the **hyperbolic function**, when a habitual situation is presented as occurring too often. (For this function there was no sentence in the PROGQ.)

(8) You **are** always **complaining!** (Bertinetto 2000, 659)

Note the difference with the same sentence in Present Simple:

(9) You always complain!

Example (8) seems to imply some additional negative attitude on the part of the speaker as compared to (9).

Once again, an analysis of a progressive possessing these functions has to incorporate an account of how the expressive meaning is derived.

3. A neo-Gricean account

One tempting way to derive some of these functions, is to claim that they are essentially Q-implicatures based on a Horn scale <unmarked form, progressive>, as König suggests for behavioral uses. A use of a progressive in such an approach can imply that the situation in question is temporary as opposed to unrestricted (*e. g.*, the habitual or the postural function) or that the situation is performed voluntarily as opposed to unconsciously (the behavioral function).

The problem for such an approach would be to derive just the implicatures needed for a particular progressive and not derive the others. This problem arises, for example, in the case of the Portuguese *estar* + GER construction, which has the habitual function and doesn't have

the postural function. Or in Finnish where the situation is opposite: the *olla -ma-ssa* construction has the postural and doesn't have the habitual or the behavioral function.

4. Concluding remarks

This paper aimed to show that a theory of a progressive has to account for three semantically distinct kinds of functions: aspectual, actional, and expressive. Naturally, such a theory is even more promising, if it can easily be adopted for the progressives in other languages, that is, if it can also account for the cross-linguistic variation in progressives.

One possible way towards such a theory is through adopting a notion similar to the proto-process presented here, which allows to provide a rather similar semantics for differing progressives: a progressive specifies the TT to be included in the TSit and requires that the predicate in question correspond to the proto-process. The differences in the functions of the progressive come from the difference in the strictness of the proto-process restriction.

A drawback and a benefit of the proto-process approach at the same time is the fact that it only concerns the aspectual functions. The drawback is that one has to provide an additional account of how the other functions are derived. The benefit is that only the aspectual functions seem to be preserved when a progressive evolves into an imperfective (Bybee et al. 1994), this evolution can be modeled as a gradual relaxation of the proto-process restriction, until none of the properties are necessary for the form in question to be used.

Finally, it has been noted that a neo-Gricean account will have to somehow prevent overgeneration in cases where only some of the implicature-like functions are available to a progressive.

References

- Bertinetto, P. M. (2000) The progressive in Romance, as compared with English. In: Ö. Dahl (Ed.), *Tense and Aspect in the Languages of Europe*. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter - Mouton, pp. 559-604.
- Bertinetto, P. M., Delfitto, D. (2000) Aspect vs. Actionality: Why they should be kept apart. In: Ö. Dahl (Ed.), *Tense and Aspect in the Languages of Europe*. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter -Mouton, pp. 189-226.
- Bertinetto, P. M., Ebert, K. H., de Groot, C. (2000) The progressive in Europe. In: Ö. Dahl (Ed.), *Tense and Aspect in the Languages of Europe*. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter - Mouton, pp. 517-558.

Bybee, J. L., Perkins, R., Pagluica, W. (1994) *The evolution of grammar: Tense, aspect, and modality in the languages of the world*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Dahl, Ö. (Ed.) (2000) *Tense and Aspect in the Languages of Europe*. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Mouton.

De Wit, A., Patard, A., & Brisard, F. (2013) A Contrastive Analysis of the Present Progressive in French and English. In: *Studies in Language*, 37(4), pp. 846-879.

Grice, H. P. (1978) Further notes on logic and conversation. In: Peter Cole & Jerry L. Morgan (Eds.), *Pragmatics* (Syntax and Semantics 9). New York: Academic Press, pp. 113-127.

Klein, W. (1994) *Time in language*. London: Routledge.

König, E. (1995) He is being obscure: non-verbal predication and the progressive. In: P. M. Bertinetto, V. Bianchi, Ö. Dahl, M. Squartini (Eds.), *Temporal Reference, Aspect and Actionality. Vol. 2: Typological Perspectives*. Torino: Rosenberg & Sellier, pp. 155-167.

Landman, F. (1992) The Progressive. *Natural Language Semantics*, 1, pp. 1-32.

Lyons, J. (1995) *Linguistic semantics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Portner, P. (2011) Perfect and progressive. In: K. von Stechow, C. Maienborn & P. Portner (Eds.), *Semantics: An International Handbook of Natural Language Meaning*. De Gruyter Mouton, pp. 1217-1261.

Tatevosov, S. G. (2010) Aktsional'nost' v leksike i grammatike [Actionality in the lexicon and in the grammar]. Ph. D. Thesis, Moscow.

Vafaeian, G. (2018). Progressives in use and contact: A descriptive, areal and typological study with special focus on selected Iranian languages. Ph. D. Thesis, Stockholm University.