

## THE PROGRESSIVE FROM OLD ENGLISH TO EARLY MODERN ENGLISH

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history of the English language, the combination of *be* followed by a present *-ing* participle has been referred to in a variety of ways. Labels such as "definite", "durative", "progressive", or "continuous aspect" or "tense" denote a functional point of view; others, such as "expanded", "periphrastic" or "*be* + *-ing* form", constitute formal designations. The label "progressive" may be suitable to refer to Present-day English (PE) and has been almost universally adopted nowadays. However, the terms "expanded form" and "non-expanded form" (EF/NEF; cf. Nickel 1966) seem more adequate for a diachronic treatment of the construction under examination, for they have a purely formal reference, which has nothing to do with the meaning 'action in progress' or 'on-going action' denoted by the term "progressive" in Modern English (ModE).

Separating "true" progressives from analogous constructions is not always easy, especially in early English.<sup>1</sup> One of these similar patterns involves the so-called 'appositive' participle (Denison 1993: 372), especially when *be* occurs in a preceding or following clause:

1) ... ere Edmund could have time to assemble all his powers: who yet with such as *were* at hand *invoking* divine aid, encounterd the Danes at Pen by Gillingham in Dorsetshire, and put him to flight. (Milton, *The History of Britain*, p. 271).

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<sup>1</sup> Denison (1993: 372 ff) proposes a series of tests which may be helpful when trying to separate real progressive constructions from others that show great resemblance to them (in early English), to wit: modifiers of *Vende/Ving*, complementation of *Vende/Ving*, substitution for BE + *Vende/Ving*, semantic and pragmatic criteria, inflection on *Vend(e)*, and coordination and metre, inter alia.

The main reason not to consider these appositive participles —when in combination with *be*— true progressive periphrases is the fact that they do not form a constituent with another verb. In fact, these participles function as heads of verb phrases (VPs) which do not contain *be*.

Another source of indeterminacy is the adjectival use of the present participle or the participial adjective (cf. Quirk et al. 1985: 413), where the *-ing* form is not verbal at all and, again, after *be*, can show great similarity to a true progressive. In these cases, the *-ing* form functions as head of an adjective phrase (AdjP), as in (2a) and (2b) below:

2a) But the major part of both houses, prevailed to make them King & Q: immediately, and a Crowne *was tempting* & c.- (Evelyn, *The Diary of John Evelyn*, p. 902).

2b) And my familiar Lucan told us, that the vanquishing cause *was pleasing* to the Gods, but the vanquish'd to Cato: Know this then,... (Preston, *Boethius*, p. 196).

Moreover, the preposition *to* in (2b) contributes to the ‘adjectival’ interpretation of *pleasing*, since if the sequence *was pleasing* were to be interpreted as verbal, and hence progressive, the direct object would immediately follow the verb phrase (*the vanquishing cause was pleasing the Gods*).

Progressives are then VPs consisting of an auxiliary verb (*be*) and a lexical verb under the form of a present participle ending in *-ing*.

## 2. THE PROGRESSIVE IN THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH

### 2.1. EXPANDED FORMS IN OLD ENGLISH

Formally speaking, there is a general tendency to ascribe the modern progressive to an Old English (OE) pattern consisting of *beon/wesan* and a present participle in *-ende*. Thus, a form such as ModE *he is coming* constitutes the logical result of OE *he is cumende*. The real problem comes, as Denison (1993: 371) very accurately points out, when one tries to find the real

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ancestor of this OE construction. Apparently, the pattern *beon* + present participle in *-ende* was more frequent in translations from Latin than in original OE texts, especially in interlinear glosses which had the aim of facilitating the task of understanding classical manuscripts written in Latin. If translators at that time wanted to be as faithful to the original Latin text as possible, they would probably find it difficult to translate two Latin constructions which had no counterpart in OE: the passive and the *verba deponentia* (verbs which are active in form, but passive in meaning).

Thus, gloss-writers had to resort to different tricks to account for both forms, such as using artificial devices like compound forms in order to render those Latin constructions unknown in OE. Passives, for instance, were usually transcribed as combinations of *beon/wesan* and a past participle, whereas *beon/wesan* followed by a present participle became the usual way of translating *verba deponentia*. Put more graphically, *consecutus est* in Latin would become *wæs fylgende* in OE. This view is shared, among others, by Otto Jespersen (1909-1949: IV: 166), for he considers it a common device for translators at that stage to translate a verbal periphrasis in Latin by means of a similar collocation in OE. Visser goes further and adds that «this happened strikingly frequently in interlinear versions where the glossator had two spaces to fill up underneath the Latin two-word cluster» (1963-1973: §1854). However, it is highly unlikely that glosses had much influence on the development of OE on the basis that they were intended to be read by those who knew Latin already.

It is really difficult to guess the real cause of the use of these periphrases in OE: in some cases, as already mentioned, they served as translations of Latin deponent verbs but, in others, they were used instead of simple forms. Despite the fact that many linguists have attributed a great importance to the influence of Latin on the OE expanded forms, there are others who consider that this role has been exaggerated. Nickel (1966: 205) is of the opinion that EFs existed quite independently of the Latin originals and that they also occurred in texts which had not been translated from Latin. Visser (1963-1973: §1852), goes a step further when he refers to the «autochthonic occurrence of the *beon* + *present participle* cluster in Old English as a matter of course» and reduces their use to a question of free choice and style. Other scholars (Dal 1952: 107ff) believe in the influence of foreign languages, such as Celtic and French. On the one hand, Old French (OF) structures of the type *est*

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*chantant* (is singing), often have a durative meaning. On the other, Celtic influence is understandable since the OE progressive was initially extended over the north of the country, which was the area most influenced by Celtic.

One of the most accurate visions on the origin of the OE EFs belongs to Nickel (1966). He offers a synthetic view which combines Latin influence on the one hand, and the autochthonic native character of the cluster, on the other. According to him, the majority of EFs which show influence from Latin translate participial constructions. OE EFs would then be the result of a syntactic mixture of several different constructions, namely:

- 1) Predicative adjectives: Combined with *be*, it is difficult to distinguish them from true EFs, especially because in OE, EFs could take intensifiers such as *swipe* ("very").
- 2) Appositive participles: *He on temple was lærende his discipulas*. It is considered one of the structures which has influenced the OE periphrasis more strongly, though again, it is sometimes difficult to differentiate appositive participles from EFs, especially when an adverbial of place precedes the *be*-form.
- 3) Constructions of the type *he sæt lærende*, i.e. present participles with verbs of state or motion. Needless to say, these structures cannot be classified as expanded forms, although it is possible, sometimes, to consider verbs of the type *sittan* or *cuman* similar to *beon*, in those cases in which the former have lost their denotational power and so resemble *beon*.
- 4) Agent nouns in *-end*: This is, by far, the most likely source of influence on the OE EFs, for the plural subject of the nominal agent in *-end* (which was *-ende*) was not formally distinguished from the ending of the present participle (*-ende*), so that confusion between the two might have arisen.

This view is better known as the "blending theory" (see Nickel 1967 for a summary), for it offers a heterogeneous account of the origin of the OE EF. This theory is welcome by those who disregard a unique explanation on the origin of this form, especially when one deals with the obscure and scarce data with which OE texts usually provide us.

As for the frequency of the cluster in OE, there is also room for disagreement. For some scholars (Nickel 1966: 261, Visser 1963-1973: §1858), its frequency of occurrence is exceptionally high, while for some others (Åkerlund 1911: 6, Bodelsen 1936-37: 220, Baugh 1959: 352), its use is very low and the data insufficient as to draw any definite conclusions. However, there is one point with which most scholars agree: EFs are more frequently used in prose than in poetry. Thus, Scheffer (1975: 142) considers that scarcity of progressives is a typical feature of poetic style, no matter the period in which it is written, this fact remaining a constant throughout the history of the English language.

One of the features that characterized the OE EF was its optional nature, i.e. the fact that it constituted a stylistic variant of the non-expanded form and had no obligatory functions of its own, whereas during the early Modern English period (eModE) it became part of the aspectual system of English and was finally grammaticalised.<sup>1</sup> In general, the function of the expanded form in OE seems to have been that of emphasizing the verbal action. It often expressed quite a general durative meaning, in contrast with the meaning of limited duration characteristic of modern progressives. However, the consideration of specific examples has led some scholars (Scheffer 1975: 213, for instance) to assert that many of the secondary meanings usually associated to the modern progressive are also found in OE. Apart from the case, already mentioned, of duration, Scheffer also mentions imperfectivity, frame-time<sup>2</sup> (as quoted in Jespersen 1909-1949: IV, 180), inchoativity, descriptive force, intensive character, and so on and so forth (all the examples below have been taken from Scheffer 1975: 206 ff):

3) Eac me sæde, Petrus, sum swype æwfæst wer 7 getreowe, 7 ic pagyt wæs wuniende in pam mynstre, þe he me pis cyþde, þæt sume dæge men wæron on scipfæreldre of Siccilia pam ealande secende Romebyrig (*Gregory's Dialogues*, p. 273). DURATION.

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<sup>1</sup> By grammaticalisation in this context, I understand the process by which the progressive became obligatory for the expression of 'action that is going on'.

<sup>2</sup> Scheffer relates frame-time to simultaneity, especially in subordinate clauses introduced by *pa*, although he admits that it is really difficult to decide whether this secondary meaning is simply a variation of the frame-time meaning or not.

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4) Gregorius him andswarode: "witodlice se halga wer, pa pa he *wæs farende* to oþrum stowum, ne onwænde he noht pone ealdan feond, peh pe he sylfa gecyrde to opre eardungstowe" (*Gregory's Dialogues*, p. 121). FRAME-TIME.

5) And hie late on geare to pam gecirdon pæt hie wip pone here *winnende wærun*. (*Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, A 867). INCHOATIVITY.

6) pa bæc sum ceorl in his earmum his forþferdan suna lichaman. he *wæs byrnende* 7 hatiende for pam heafe pære asteopnesse (*Gregory's Dialogues*, p. 165). DESCRIPTIVE CHARACTER.

## 2.2. EXPANDED FORMS IN MIDDLE ENGLISH

Dating the origins of the Middle English (ME) progressive is one of the most disputed points concerning the history of the construction. Whether it is a direct continuation of the OE pattern *beon/wesan + Vende*, or whether it is a descendant of a previous prepositional pattern, this is something that most grammarians do not dare to assert, for they consider that there is not enough data in many cases as to make them support one or the other option.

In spite of this, at least two relevant things took place in ME:

1) The pattern *be* + present participle, not particularly frequent in OE, became even less frequent in this period, especially at the beginning, in early Middle English (eME). The reason adduced for this decrease is apparently the fact that the OE literary tradition was replaced by that of French and Latin after the Norman Conquest in 1066. This was true of the dialects of the South and the Midlands, but in the North this pattern turned out to be quite frequent. During the 14th century, its frequency tended to increase in the East and Central Midlands, from where it expanded to the Oxford area. Likewise, its development in the East Midlands affected the London dialect, which in this century was the basis of the literary language. During the 15th century the division between dialects was less sharp, and that from the capital, together with the language of the great writers, influenced the English language very strongly. The use of the cluster was still much less frequent than today's, but at least its presence was felt in all types of language, from the highest and the

purest to the lowest. Olga Fischer (1992: 251-252) finds that one of the reasons for the increase of the progressive at the end of the period is the loss of the prefixal system (in OE prefixes acted as a kind of mark for the distinction between simple and expanded forms). This loss might have created the need of developing a different way of showing aspect, which could have been conveyed through the progressive paradigm.

2) The ending *-ende* of the present participle changed into *-ing* and finally coincided with that of the gerund or verbal noun, thus becoming more similar to the construction with which we are familiar today. It also became more similar to a construction which occurred in OE and ME, which involved *be* + preposition (often *on*) + gerund. And here comes the problem: does the ME progressive directly derive from the OE pattern *beon/wesan* + *Vende*, or has it, on the contrary, developed from a prepositional pattern?

There are scholars in favour of the theory of continuation, i.e. that the ME progressive directly developed from the OE model (Mossé 1938: ii, §175, Scheffer 1975: 218ff, 248). Contrary to this idea of continuation, we find supporters of the foreign influence on this construction, especially French and Celtic (Dal 1952: 107-116, Braaten 1967: 173). Apparently, one of the facts that contributed to the increase of the construction in ME was the influence of both Latin and French. The former is difficult to trace, as the number of translations decreased with respect to OE. As for the latter, things are even more complex, despite the opinion of Mossé (1938: ii, §§90-99) and Mustanoja (1960: 589) among others, who maintain that OF influenced ME progressives, since French (like many other Romance languages) had inherited the form from Latin, and thus, it could have affected English among other possible languages. There could have existed an influence from Celtic, but this was even less probable. The progressive was, apparently, not present among Celtic constructions and, in spite of the considerable Celtic influence appreciated in some modern dialectal areas, it would be too risky to assert that this influence went back in time and affected the development of the progressive in OE and ME.

The evolution from *-ende* (OE present participle) to *-ing* (its current form) is due to several phonological changes produced by the intercourse of the consonantic groups *-nd*, *-ng* and *-n*. During this period the pronunciation of *-end(e)*, *-ind(e)*, *-ing(e)* and *-en(ne)* must have been weakened to /en/ or /in/

in the South and in the Midlands, and even the spelling of these endings became interchangeable (we find *coming* beside *comend* or *gardyng* beside *garden*). The fact that *-ing(e)* finally replaced *-end(e)* is motivated by the influence of the verbal noun, also ended in *-ing(e)* from the 13th century onwards. At the beginning of the 14th century, the ending *-ing* began to spread from the South to the rest of the country. In a relatively short period of time, it became the usual ending of the present participle, and also of the gerund or verbal noun, thus replacing the traditional *-ung* typical of verbal nouns. At about the same time, the verbal noun in *-ing* began to develop verbal properties in the South and in the Midlands and finally became a gerund. Thus, this deverbal noun and the present participle seem to have influenced each other, the former giving its ending to the participle and the latter giving its verbal character to the deverbal noun in *-ing(e)*. This amalgamation of forms result in a number of borderline cases in which it is practically impossible to distinguish whether the *-ing* form stands for a present participle, a deverbal noun or a gerund.

The other view is defended by those scholars who ascribe the ME form to a prepositional pattern of the type *be* + preposition (usually *on*) + verbal noun in *-ing*. During the ME period, these constructions began to be common with just *a*, usually considered the remnant of the preposition (Jespersen, in an initial formulation, refers to the process of the weakening of the preposition as 'aphesis'; 1909-1949: IV, 168-169, 205). If the preposition was finally dropped, there would no longer be any formal differences between *be* + present participle and *be* + gerund.

A third theory combines the two already mentioned and constitutes a kind of "amalgamation" theory. Jespersen (1909-1949: IV, 169), after reformulating his initial proposal manifests that the modern English expanded tenses are, on the one hand, a continuation of the old combination of the auxiliary verb and the participle in *-ende* and, on the other, a result of the amalgamation of this construction (once the ending *-ende* has been changed into *-inge* and has become identical with that of the verbal substantive) and the combination *be* + *on* + *the sb*, in which *on* weakened to *a* and was then dropped. In this sense, Visser (1963-1973: §1859) speaks of a "polygenetic" origin of the ME progressive, and distinguishes three types of forms in this period:



- 1) Type *he is huntende*: It is the descendant of the OE EF, and its use is much extended until the end of the 13th century, combining both *-ind(e)* and *-end(e)*. Its decline began in the first years of the 14th century, starting from the South and going up to more northern regions.
- 2) Type *he is on/an/a hunting*: Its origin dates back to OE as well and it is extremely common during the whole ME period. Combinations with *in* were also available, maybe due to the influence of the French *en chantant* pattern.
- 3) Type *he is hunting* (the present form): It may have had a diverse origin. Among its possible ancestors, the following can be found:
  - the same parallel construction in OE,
  - the type *he is huntende*,
  - the type *he is on hunting*.

Mustanoja (1960: 587) also mentions the existence of a fusion between the OE pattern *beon/wesan* + present participle and the prepositional pattern which could have led to the present model. It would have taken place during the 13th century, and from that period onwards, many of the functional differences existing between both types disappeared, especially with the already mentioned reduction of the preposition before the verbal noun.

Within this theory of amalgamation, we find different opinions on the contribution made by each of the patterns to the final model. While Åkerlund (1936: 12-13) is of the opinion that the *a*-phrase is less contributory than the participial construction, Dal (1952: 101-102) gives more importance to the prepositional pattern for the later development of the progressive construction, the only difference between them being that the prepositional pattern would constitute a feature of colloquial style while the participial one would belong to the literary dimension of language. It can be postulated that the meaning of the progressive changes during the ME period, its use and function becoming more defined now. Of the secondary meanings found in OE, duration is certainly continued in ME (let us remember that, for some scholars, this is the chief meaning of the construction), as well as those expressing limited duration, "frame-time", simultaneity, etc., whereas the

inchoative value (if there was any in OE) disappeared in ME. Mustanoja (1960: 448) considers that it is the simple present tense in ME that expresses an action as going on, and it is the periphrasis *be* + *-inde* (*-ende*, later *-ing*) that is used for emphasis and vividness purposes and also for the description of an action in a more graphic way, since the periphrasis, being longer and weightier than the simple form, proves more adequate. The notion of permanence of an action or state is also conveyed by the progressive (especially with adverbials or adverbial phrases like *ay*, *alway(s)*, *ever* and *so on*), as well as that of continued, frequent or habitual occurrence, closely related to that of permanence. Despite the opinions that reject the existence of such notions in the use of the ME progressive, Mustanoja believes that the use of the progressive in ModE remains essentially the same as in ME and «is shown by current expressions like *I am telling you the truth*, *I am forgetting*, and *I really must be going home*» (1960: 596).

It can be concluded, then, that the progressive developed in ME into more or less what it is today. If compared to OE, its use decreases at the beginning of the period, but in the course of the ME period, it grows in a notorious way, although it does not reach the frequency it shows in ModE. It is also in this period that this form begins to acquire its full conjugation (the perfect and pluperfect tenses are first recorded in mid/late 14th century, while the OE system just showed two tenses: present and preterite). The present participle of *be* appears for the first time in ME, as well as the future progressives (which even go back to 13th century texts). However, future perfect tenses and all the passives make their appearance later on, with the particularity that a form with *should*, i.e. the so-called future-in-the-past, is recorded earlier than forms with *shall*, current in northern texts at the end of the 13th century. The progressive imperative, used in both OE and ME, disappears in the 16th century, but we will have to wait until the 17th and even until the 18th century to see the periphrastic conjugation fully developed, although its use and frequency go on doubling in the following centuries.

#### 2.2.1. THE PROGRESSIVE PASSIVE<sup>1</sup> (TYPE *THE HOUSE IS BUILDING*)

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<sup>1</sup> Visser (1963-1973: §1872) shows his disconformity with respect to the label 'passive', which usually implies a combination of *be* + past participle, and proposes the label 'passival' instead of 'passive' to refer to this type of

What is noteworthy about this pattern is the fact that, although it is a normal progressive construction in form, it is apparently used with a passive meaning, at least until the true progressive passive makes its appearance later on (type *the house is being built*). Two main sources dispute its origin in ME: the prepositional/gerundial construction and the normal progressive. If the former theory is adopted, this so-called 'passival' progressive (cf. Visser 1963-1973: §1872) would have achieved its form from the weakening and later disappearance of the preposition and its meaning from the neutrality (voice neutrality) of the verbal noun, so that a prepositional pattern of the type *is on (a) doing* could therefore mean both 'is engaged in the act of doing' and 'being done'. If, on the contrary, the explanation of the normal progressive is accepted, the use might then have derived from what has been denominated "neutro-" or "medio-passive", as in *this book sells very well*, but this explanation is only valid in some cases. A verb like *build*, which can perfectly occur in the progressive with passive meaning, as in *the house is building*, is not found, however, in "pseudo-passive" constructions of the type *\*the house builds*. This kind of 'passival' progressive is particularly associated with one semantic group of verbs, such as *do, build, prepare, cook*, etc.

Once more, we find supporters of a mixed explanation which combines both sources for the explanation of the development of the progressive passive, though one pattern receives more attention than the other depending on the scholars' views in each case.

With respect to the frequency of this pattern in OE, there are contradictory opinions on the subject. Some scholars assert that it was a common device at that time, with a complete range of functions and meanings attached to it. Others, however (especially Mitchell 1976), even get to the point of denying the existence of such pattern in OE. In ME, although the number of cases is relatively small, there are no doubts as far as the existence of this structure is concerned, despite its serious competitors in the expression of passive meaning, such as the prepositional cases with *on, a, in, at*, and even constructions with *man, men, me*. Between 1500 and 1699 the number of cases grow, although the usual idiom for expressions of this kind is still the type *the house is built*, structures of the type *man, men, me* being no longer used. Between

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progressives, or even better perhaps, he suggests referring to this pattern as the 'passive transform' of *they are building*.

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1700 and 1799 the so-called 'passival' progressive occurs alongside the type *is built* and it is during the 18th century that the construction enjoys its highest popularity, although its use was still occasional. Between 1800 and 1899 it occurs in prose and occasionally in poetry. And from 1900 onwards its use decays, owing to the rise of the model *the house is being built*, i.e. the 'true' progressive passive. It took this new pattern some time, however, to replace the old type and make it disappear from the language. Seemingly, it first appeared in private papers and was later introduced into the literary language (the first example attested in the language corresponds to Southey 1795).<sup>1</sup> At the beginning, there existed strong objections to it; it was considered a clumsy device, for the combination *is being* + past participle was not well seen, and it was even considered a syntactically-heavy construction at times. However, and in spite of all the controversies arisen by the development of the progressive passive, it is a well-known fact that it was definitely established in the English language and, except for a few cases in which the active model keeps a passive meaning (such as in *missing*, *owing*, *wanting* or in *dinner is cooking*), the "new" model has been finally adopted as a recognised feature of verbal syntax.

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<sup>1</sup> C. C. Southey, *Life I*, 9 October 1795, p. 249: a fellow whose uppermost grinder *is being torn out* by the roots by a mutton-fisted barber (cf. Scheffer 1975: 262).

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