

Recent change in stative progressives: Spreading to new semantic domains

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The recent diachronic increase in the frequency of the progressive has been attributed to the spread from its prototypical domain, dynamic verbs, to new domains, such as stative verbs. There is real-time evidence of increasing use of stative progressives in 19th-century British English (e.g. Smitterberg 2005), but data from the 20th century shows that this increase may be halting. Leech et al. (2009), for instance, do not find stative progressives contributing to the increasing use of the progressive in written English in the period from the 1960s to the 1990s (p. 130), and Smith and Leech (2013: 89) find a small, but statistically not significant increase. However, we currently lack evidence on the further development of stative progressives since the 1990s, as well as their usage in conversations rather than writing.

We therefore ask whether the progressive is applied to a broader range of stative verbs in the present day, compared to the early 1990s, and investigate this question with the spoken, demographic sections of the old and new *British National Corpus* (Love et al. 2017). We searched the corpora for a total of 100 stative verbs (lemmata), and restricted the analysis to a variable context where a progressive could potentially occur (excluding, for example, imperatives and idiomatic expressions such as *you know*). Of verbs occurring more than 5,000 times, we analysed a random sample of 1,000 occurrences per corpus. In total, c. 44,000 tokens were investigated.

Our results indicate that, while overall stative progressives have not become more frequent in the last twenty years (1994 6.43%, 2014 6.50%), the progressive is indeed applied to a broader range of stative verbs (1994 59 lemmata, 2014 65 lemmata). We apply distinctive collexeme analysis (DCA) to assess the collostructional strength of individual lemmata and groups of stative verbs on the one hand, and the two grammatical constructions under investigation on the other. The results show that cognitive verbs, rather than affective, are increasing their progressive usage, and that stance verbs stand out as the only category statistically significantly associated with the progressive. Overall, our results suggest that the rise of stative progressives has been halted and is confined to particular lemmata. However, this might suffice to sustain the popular impression of a general, continuing spread.

References

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