

Molly-Melissa E. Sakslund

Progressive Aspect in English and possible mistakes Norwegians make while using it

Bachelor's project in Lektorutdanning i språkfag

Supervisor: Christopher Mark Wilder

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Norwegian University of Science and Technology
Faculty of Humanities
Department of Language and Literature

 **NTNU**
Norwegian University of
Science and Technology

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1.0 Introduction

The progressive aspect is one of the main inflection types in English. Norwegians do not have progressive aspect, which can cause errors when Norwegians speak English. The progressive aspect in English is the grammatical way of informing about a single event as ongoing.

Syntactic construction is a form of “be” directly followed by the ing-form. However, it is not as simple as adding some letters to a verb to use the progressive aspect correctly.

In my bachelor thesis I will mainly look at cases where English must use the progressive aspect as illustrated in (1):

(1) I **was sleeping** when you called me yesterday.

and cases where English cannot be used with the progressive aspect, as in (2). *I will provide a star next to the ungrammatical sentences.*

(2) *I **was knowing** everything you said before you called me yesterday.

Why is it not correct to use “knowing” in (2) but correct to use “sleeping” in (1)? I am going to have to look at what the progressive aspect is made up of to understand why the progressive is used in some sentences and not in others.

I will especially look at the different meanings/semantic to why progressive aspect must be used, and cannot be used, when this seems to be the biggest issue for Norwegians. In the first part of my thesis I will provide a deeper understanding of the progressive aspect in English. In the second part of my thesis, to provide better understanding of why Norwegians might make mistakes with the progressive aspect, I will look at some interesting research done by Ingebjørg Tonne (2007) concerning progressive-like meaning in Norwegian. From the established knowledge provided in this thesis the paper will conclude with interesting facts to how the progressive aspect is used correctly, and reasons to why Norwegians may use it wrongly.

2.0 Progressive aspect

The progressive aspect is one of the two aspects in English, the other one being the perfect aspect. Progressive aspect is used for ongoing and continuing events used with dynamic situations, which you will see on the next page. In present tense it is used to inform of an event that is still going on and has not finished yet. The present progressive is more common

than the simple present when referring to a present event (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech & Svartvik, 1985: 199), however in Norwegian, simple present is often used to describe a single ongoing event, as illustrated in (3) below.

(3) Hvem **spiller** fotballkamp nå? (*Simple present tense*)

*Who **plays**.PRES a.football game now? (*Simple present tense*)

(Who **is playing** a football game now)? (*Progressive present*)

Since Norwegians use simple present tense to describe single ongoing events, they might think that it is correct to use simple present tense in English. However, this is one of the examples where the progressive aspect is more commonly used, the reason is to imply the short duration that the event tends to have (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech & Svartvik, 1985: 199). The simple present in English often imply an event that occurs more than once, as in example (4) below:

(4) Who **plays** football on Wembley Stadium? *Simple present*

(5) Who **is playing** football on Wembley Stadium? *Present progressive*

The event in (4) implies an often-occurring event, not an on-going event. (5) however, informs us of an ongoing event. We will get a deeper understanding of this in section “2.3 Semantics”.

The progressive aspect can also be used to describe an event in the past and the future. The past and future progressive provides background activity “against which another event occurs” (Saeed, 2009: 129), you can therefore say

(6) I **was running** yesterday when the weather changed.

The progressive aspect is often used when the activity is a background for another event going on in past or future tense (Saeed, 2009: 129). This means that you can use past progressive aspect as a part of a bigger sentence to explain something that interrupted another event.

I will now look at specific parts of the progressive aspect which will give us answers to why one might use the progressive aspect wrongly.

2.1 State and event:

We are now going to look at a deeper level of the progressive aspect. The first important issue to address is the difference between state and event.

State is a condition which **cannot** be used with the progressive aspect, the progressive aspect is used to inform of something in progress, however in states there are no progress made (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech & Svartvik, 1985: 198). Examples of stative verbs are: *know, love, be, have (can be both stative and non-stative)*. The verb “love” is a state where no progress is made. As well as stative verbs, states can be described by adjectives: *dead, gone, lost, asleep*. The same way as “love”, “asleep” is a state of the human body, and not an action in progress.

Event on the other hand is an ongoing action and **can** be used with the progressive aspect. Examples of dynamic verbs are: *leave, jump, speak, draw, dream, sleep*. The difference between state and event is illustrated in (7) and (8) below:

(7) *I was **knowing** it *State*

(8) I was **sleeping** *Event*

(7) is an ungrammatical sentence because the stative verb “know” has the progressive inflection, which can only be used with a dynamic verb. With this explanation I have already explained why example (2) above is not a grammatical sentence. (8) is grammatically correct because the progressive inflection is attached to the dynamic verb “sleep”. The well-known McDonalds slogan below is actually ungrammatical because the state “love” is attached to the progressive aspect:

(9) *I’m **loving** it

However, it is debatable because of the new use of some stative verbs, as I will take a deeper look at in section “2.3 Changes in the progressive aspect”.

Using progressive aspect on static verbs is an error Norwegians tend to create. In Norwegian we inflect many static verbs the same way as we inflect dynamic verbs, as illustrated in (10):

(10) *Static verb*: Jeg **elsker** å løpe

I **love**.PRES to run.INF

(I **love** running)

- (11) *Dynamic verb*: Jeg **løper** hver dag
 I **run**.PRES every day
 (I **run** every day)

The state «elsker» and the event «løper» are both inflected with the simple present inflection *-er*, which can make a Norwegian believe that state and event functions in the same way in English as in Norwegian. However, the only type of verbs that can be used with the progressive aspect in English is dynamic verbs.

2.2 Dynamic verbs

Now that we have established that only the dynamic verbs can be used with the progressive aspect, we can dig deeper into what kind of dynamic verbs there are, and how they work. We will now look at two different semantic distinctions in dynamic verbs. We will start off with durative and punctual verbs.

Durative verbs describe an action that lasts for a period of time. The opposite is **punctual verbs** which describes an action so instantaneous that it involves almost no time at all (Saeed, 2009 :122). The difference is illustrated below:

- (12) Lisa **drove** to work this morning. *Durative*
 (13) Lisa **jumped** over the puddle. *Punctual*

In (12) Lisa is doing an action that lasts for some time, however, in (13) Lisa is doing an action that takes nothing more than a couple of seconds. “Drive” is therefore durative, and “jump” is (in this sentence) punctual. **Iterative representation** is what you find between a punctual verb and a dynamic verb. It is an action where the punctual event is assumed to be repeated for a longer period (Saeed, 2009: 122), as in (14).

- (14) Lisa **jumped** on the trampoline the entire morning *Iterative*

In (14) “jumped” is a repeated event, which makes it an iterative representation of the punctual event “jump”.

The other semantic distinction is between telic and atelic. **Telic** refers to a process which has an ending point and the action is bounded. **Atelic** is the opposite; it refers to an action that can continue indefinitely. Atelic is therefore unbounded (Saeed, 2009: 123).

Example:

(15) Karl **was drawing** a picture of the house. *Telic*

(16) Karl **was dreaming** about Spain last night. *Atelic*

The difference between these two sentences is that if you interrupt the events, you cannot say “Karl drew a picture of the house” because the sentence does not communicate a completed event. “Drawing” is a bounded event and therefore telic. However, if you interrupt Karl when he is dreaming about Spain, you can still say “Karl dreamt about Spain last night” because there are no consequences of Karl not finishing his dream. “Dreaming” is not a bounded action and therefore atelic.

To sum up everything we have learned until now, let us look at these examples:

(17) Karl **loves** his dog

(18) Karl **was driving** to work this morning

In (17), “loves” is a state, not an action, which means that it cannot be used with progressive aspect. In (18), “driving” is in this sentence a dynamic verb and can be used with the progressive aspect. It is an action that take some time (durative) and the driving will stop when Karl arrives at work, if he is interrupted, he will not reach his destination, and the action is therefore bounded (telic).

2.3 Semantics

Let us take a closer look at the semantics of Karl driving to work with some different ways of describing the event:

(19) Karl **drove** to work this morning *Simple past*

(20) Karl **was driving** to work this morning *Past progressive*

(21) Karl **drives** to work every morning *Simple present*

In examples (19)-(22), Karl has used or is using his car to drive to work, however the semantics are different. In (19), Karl “drove” to work, which means it is in the past and he was able to get to work without any interruption. In (20), Karl was “driving” to work, however this sentence does not communicate a finished event, which means that Karl’s driving to work got interrupted (Wilder, 2018 :25). In (22), Karl “drives” to work every morning, which indicates a **habitual event**. However, a habit can be both **permanent** or

temporary, which means that the two following sentences have different meaning even though they seem very similar:

- (22) Karl **is driving** to work every morning *Temporary*
 (23) Karl **drives** to work every morning *Permanent*

The progressive aspect is used to imply temporariness, not permanence, which means that (22) indicates an ongoing habitual event that is temporary, not permanent (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech & Svartvik, 1985: 198). This means that Karl is driving to work every morning for only a period of time. Example (23) on the other hand, indicates a permanent habitual event, which means that Karl always drive to work every morning. The same reason applies to example (4) and (5) above. Another example which can make it easier to understand the difference is the two following examples borrowed from Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech & Svartvik (1985: 199):

- (24) We **are living** in the country *Temporary residence*
 (25) We **live** in the country *Permanent residence*

Example (24) can indicate that the people are on a holiday and they are staying at a hotel in the country, however example (25) indicates that the people live in the country on a permanent basis.

This is a mistake Norwegians tend to make when using the progressive aspect. A Norwegian would just as easily say:

- (26) *I **am living** in Norway
 ...as well as:
 (27) I **live** in Norway

...even if they live in Norway on a permanent basis. The reason for this possible mistake might be the lack of progressive aspect in Norwegian, or the confusion between temporary and permanent events. In Norwegian the sentence would be:

- (28) Jeg **bor** i Norge
 I **live**.PRES in Norway
 (I **live** in Norway)

Example (28) is the only way in Norwegian to communicate the living situation, both for a temporarily residence and a permanent residence. The predicate is however how you know if the event is permanent or not. The lesson is simple; the progressive aspect cannot be used for

a permanent event in English. The progressive aspect can be used for habitual events, however the semantics, as we have seen in examples (19) to (23), will change when you use the progressive aspect instead of simple tense.

2.4 Changes in the progressive aspect

A change that has happened with the progressive aspect is the use of states. As illustrated in example (9), the well-known McDonalds slogan is originally ungrammatical because of the use of the state “love” with the progressive aspect. However, this use of states has become more and more used with the progressive aspect. The big difference is in the semantics. If you use the stative verb “love” in the same way as “dead”, there is no progress made, and can not be used with the progressive aspect, as illustrated below:

(29) *My grandfather **is deading**

(30) My grandfather **is dying**

To be dead is not a progress, it is a state and cannot be used with the progressive aspect as in (29), because the progressive aspect requires a progress. However, the dynamic verb “dying” as in (30) is an event in progress. If you use the word “love” in the same way as you use “enjoy”, you can attach the progressive aspect to the verb “love”. If you are “enjoying” something, it is a progress, as illustrated below:

(31) I **am enjoying** the sunset *Event*

(32) I **am loving** the sunset ?

(33) I **love** the sunset *State*

The verbs “enjoying”, “loving” and “love” are durative, because the event does not happen in only some seconds, and they would all be telic since the event is not bounded to a specific end, but what is then the difference? Sentence (31)-(33) all informs us of some sunset, however sentence (31) and (32) inform us of an ongoing progress; that the sunset is happening right now, and the love is happening right now. Sentence (33) informs us of a state and feeling of which someone has with all sunsets. (32) is a more expressive and intense way of informing of one’s state than in (33). The use of progressive aspect on stative verbs may be a reason why Norwegians might use the progressive aspect wrongly, however there are some other interesting facts that we will see in the next section which also can be reasons to why Norwegians might use the progressive aspect wrongly.

3.0 Progressive-like meaning in Norwegian

As mentioned in chapter “2.0 Progressive aspect” and “2.3 Semantics”, Norwegian uses simple tense for ongoing events whereas English uses the progressive aspect. As illustrated in example (3), the interrogative sentence in simple tense in Norwegian does not translate well into English simple tense, however it does not mean that Norwegian sentence cannot be expressed in another way than simple tense.

Ingebjørg Tonne (2007) has introduced the fascinating representation of progressive-like meaning in Norwegian which I now will present for you as a possible reason to why Norwegians might use the progressive aspect wrongly. It is crucial to understand that there is no concept in the Norwegian grammar called “the progressive aspect”. Verbs in Norwegian can have five forms: infinitive, preterit, past participle, passive participle and verbal adjective, but no progressive aspect (Eide, 2016: 128). The progressive aspect that Tonne (2007) is introducing is simply two sentence constructions in Norwegian which has a similar meaning to the progressive aspect. I will in this chapter present to you the two constructions and the similarities they have to the progressive aspect in English.

3.1 Pseudo-coordination and prospec group

The two constructions in Norwegian which have a progressive-like meaning are called pseudo-coordination and prospec group. **Pseudo-coordination** has its name from its function, it coordinates a structure with the conjunction *og*. The pseudo-coordination is supposed to have a process meaning where the actor is in the middle of the situation informed about (Tonne, 2007: 186). Tonne also informs that one of her findings is the pattern of pseudo-coordinations occur with atelic predicates 95% of the time (Tonne, 2007: 189), which means that the event can go on indefinitely. Examples of pseudo-coordination is illustrated below in (34) and (36). (35) illustrates how the simple tense version in Norwegian would look like.

(34) Jenta **sto** og **hoppet**

the.girl **stand**.PST and **jump**.PST

(The girl were **jumping**)

(35) Jenta **hoppet**

the.girl **jump**.PST

(The girl **jumped/ were jumping**)

Simple tense has an ambiguous interpretation as shown in (35) where the verb can be translated to an ongoing process or as a past event, however the pseudo-coordination is always unambiguous imperfective, which means that it can only be interpreted as an ongoing or habitual event (Tonne, 2007: 198). This means that a sentence with pseudo-coordination has a progressive-like meaning and is not ambiguous as the simple tense, however, the translation of simple verbs in Norwegian often translates into progressive aspect in English (Tonne, 2007: 191).

Another example of pseudo-coordination is with the verb *drive* “(original meanings, intransitive “drift” and transitive ‘run (something)’)” (Tonne, 2007: 198) as illustrated below in example (36):

(36) Karl **drev** og **syklet**

Karl **drive**.PST and **cycle**.PST

(Karl was **cycling**)

The verb *drive* has another effect than the verb *stand* because it is less restricted lexically (Tonne, 2007: 197). It has no location or posture restriction which the verb *stand* has, which makes *drive* very similar to the English progressive aspect in function (Tonne, 2007:198). Another verb opposite to the *drive*-pseudo-coordination is the verb *sit* (sitte) which is a posture verb and has a clear lexical meaning (Tonne, 2007: 199). An example of this pseudo-coordination is illustrated below:

(37) Jenta **satt** og **lekte** da moren lagde mat

The.girl **sit**.PST and **play**.PST when the.mother make.PST food

(The girl was **playing** when her mother made food)

Sit, as well as *drive* is imperfect unambiguous, however the verb *drive* is depending on the second conjunct verb to be analysed with an imperfective interpretation, however the posture verb *sit* already “imposes special restrictions on its own” (Tonne, 2007: 199). The posture verb *sit*, as well as *stand* are unambiguous stative in Norwegian, and are therefore believed to have the subinterval property (Tonne, 2007: 199), which means that if the interpretation is true for one interval, it is true for any subinterval of the sentence (Rothmayr, 2009: 3). One of the differences between the English progressive aspect and the Norwegian pseudo-coordination is that the latter is also used with stative verbs, which the progressive is not (Tonne, 2007: 198). This takes us back to the problem we met in chapter “2.1 State and event” where Norwegians use stative verbs as a dynamic verb, as we now also have seen with

the posture-pseudo-coordination, which can cause confusion and mistakes when using the progressive aspect.

The other concept close to the progressive aspect is **prospec group**, which in contrast to pseudo-coordination does not have the conjunction *og* (Tonne, 2007:187). The words which functions as *prospec group* are called *periphrastic progressive* and normally describes continuity, movement or path when used in other contexts, examples of these are *holdt* (hold), *ferd* (journey) and *vei* (way). Prepositions as *på* (on), *i* (in) and *med* (with) are often included. An infinitival structure is also a part of the construction and carries the most important lexical content (Tonne, 2007: 188). In contrast to pseudo-coordination, where 95% of the sentences have atelic predicates, *prospec group* sentences seem to be 95% telic predicates (Tonne, 2007: 189-190), which is a description that fits examples (34) and (36)-(39). Below I have provided examples of *prospec group* borrowed from Tonne (2007:188):

(38) Han **holdt på** å dø

He **HOLDT PÅ**.INF die

(He **was dying/ about to die**)

(39) Han var **i ferd med** å frakte materiale opp til balkongen

He was **I FERD MED**.INF carry the.materials-the up to the-balcony

(He **≈was carrying/ ≈about to carry** the materials up to the balcony)

As we can see in these two examples, there are some difference in meaning. In *prospec group* it is said to be two different imperfective meaning types. One of them is describing an event in the middle of the situation, as example (38) illustrates, which is similar to accomplishments in the English progressive aspect. The other type is describing an event where the subject looks ahead towards a point of change, this can be called *prospective reading* (Tonne, 2007: 188). The latter type is illustrated in example (39) where the event has not started yet, however both types is focusing on the phase prior to the main verb's telic point (Tonne, 2007: 200). The translation of both (38) and (39) can be confusing because both are translated into the progressive or "about to", however (38) is an ongoing event, and (39) is not. As you can see in example (39), the translation is only approximate because the sentence analysis does not indicate an achievement (Tonne, 2007: 189). The first type of imperfective meaning is therefore closer to the English progressive aspect because it describes an ongoing event, which the progressive aspect does.

Even though the pseudo-coordination might seem closer to the progressive aspect than some of the prospec group types, prospec group and the English progressive aspect have something in common which the English progressive aspect and pseudo-coordination does not; they do not work with stative verbs. Stative verbs do not work with prospec group's progressive-like meaning, as illustrated in (40) below:

(40) *Hun var **i ferd med** å være trøtt

She was **I FERD MED**.INF *being* tired.PST

(She **was about to** get tired)

Example (40) needs a dynamic verb as *bli* (become) to be grammatical, as well as the translated sentence needs the dynamic verb *get* to be grammatical. The impossibility to combine a stative predicate and a prospec form has the same reason to why interpretation of example (39) is difficult. The prospec forms are vague when informing about picking the time period prior or after the starting point of an accomplishment, which makes the result hard to interpret. This is why example (39) has two interpretations in the translated version (Tonne, 2007: 189).

Prospec group is rarely seen with activities, but when activities occur, they are either ambiguous between activity and accomplishment (41) or between activity and ingressive (42), as illustrated below (Tonne, 2007: 190):

(41) Druene var **i ferd med** å modne

the.grapes was **I FERD MED**.INF *ripen*

(The grapes **was about to** ripen)

(42) Hun var **på tur til** å le

She was **PÅ TUR TIL**.INF *laugh*

(She was about to laugh)

Example (42) is a change between state and activity, however both have the view where they look ahead to a point of change. Prospecs with activities do not translate well into the English progressive aspect as we can see in example (41) and (42) where the translation is “about to”. Even though not all prospec forms are equivalent to the English progressive aspect, translation of different prospec forms from Norwegian to English are often translated into progressive aspect (Tonne, 2007: 193). The translation from English progressive aspect into Norwegian might also be translated with the use of prospec group, especially when the

sentence is interpreted as prospective, for example when an achievement is combined with the progressive aspect as illustrated in example (43) borrowed from Tonne (2007: 194):

(43) He **was reaching** the top

Han var **i ferd med** å nå toppen

He was **I FERD MED**.INF *reach* the.top

Translating (43) into simple tense or pseudo-coordination would not have given the equivalent meaning to the progressive aspect as prospec group does.

3.2 Progressive aspect vs. progressive-like meaning in Norwegian

As we have seen in chapter “3.1 Pseudo-coordination and prospec group” above, there are both similarities and differences between the English progressive aspect and the two concepts of progressive-like meaning in Norwegian. The pseudo-coordination is very close to the progressive aspect in the way that both must be interpreted as imperfective unambiguous, however in Norwegian, simple tense can cover the same meaning as pseudo-coordination, which only progressive aspect covers in English (as we have seen in chapter “2.3 Semantics”). Pseudo-coordination also holds extra information, which means that if one were to translate the English progressive aspect into Norwegian, there would be two opportunities, where one (the pseudo-coordination) involves having to add extra information (like posture and locative meaning). So instead of adding extra information, the translator might translate the progressive aspect sentence into simple tense in Norwegian (Tonne, 2007: 192). This information is quite interesting to my thesis, because it shows that Norwegians have options when speaking in Norwegian, and this possibility might confuse Norwegians when speaking English. Norwegians might believe that the semantics and grammar will be the same in English as in Norwegian when using the progressive aspect.

The prospec group is quite different from the English progressive aspect and pseudo-coordination. The point of view is not as ongoing as a progressive aspect is supposed to be. The prospec group is quite vague in informing about how they pick the time, whereas the progressive aspect and pseudo-coordination is both in the middle of the event. The sentence can also be ambiguous in interpretation, as you can see in example (38); he could either be dying, or be about to die, or even not dyeing at all because a bullet missed him by inches. The translation from English progressive aspect into Norwegian can therefore be either simple

tense, pseudo-coordination or prospec group, and often with achievements, the prospec group would be the perfect translation, as seen in (43).

4.0 Conclusion

To recap, my thesis is about possible mistakes Norwegians make while using the English progressive aspect. I was going to look at when the progressive aspect must be used, and when it cannot be used. I was also going to look at how Norwegians express progressive-like meaning in Norwegian to find possible reasons to why mistakes can happen.

As we have seen, the progressive aspect in English can only be used with dynamic verbs, and only when informing about an ongoing event or when an event is interrupted by another event. The progressive aspect cannot be used with stative verbs, or to describe permanent habitual events. The English progressive aspect has both telic and atelic verbs, however pseudo-coordination has mostly telic predicates, and prospec group has mostly atelic predicates. We could almost say that we need both Norwegian concepts to cover the English progressive aspect, although we also can use simple tense in Norwegian to cover the progressive aspect, however the interpretation is ambiguous which the progressive aspect is not.

When it comes to reasons why Norwegians might make mistakes while using the progressive aspect, I have located more than one. Firstly, Norwegians inflect events and states in Norwegian the same way, and in pseudo-coordination states have progressive-like meaning, which can confuse the speaker when speaking English. The new use of stative verbs in English might also contribute to the confusion, where some stative verbs might handle the progressive aspect, and others do not. Secondly, Norwegians can use either simple tense or progressive-like meaning concepts when speaking Norwegian, which can make the speaker believe the grammar works in the same way in English. Although pseudo-coordination and prospec group have progressive-like meaning, it does not mean that they are equivalent to the English progressive aspect. Thirdly, the English progressive aspect is much more complicated than one might think when first approaching it because of the semantics. Norwegian has the same way of informing about a temporarily habit and permanent habit. In Norwegian the predicates hold this information, however in English the information is hold by the verb.

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