

## Just a bystander? Semantic change in the English simple tenses

Juliette Kayenbergh, Hendrik De Smet

As the English progressive construction *BE Ving* grammaticalized from a stylistically employed device without clear grammatical meaning into an obligatory grammatical aspect marker expressing ongoingness, incompleteness and dynamicity (e.g. Kranich 2010), it entered into a paradigmatic relation with the simple form. Accordingly, Bybee (1994) argues that when the progressive grammaticalized, the zero-marked simple form became obligatorily associated with the expression of non-progressive meaning – a process she refers to as “the grammaticization of zero”. However, the timing of obligatorification of *BE Ving* for the expression of progressive meaning remains unclear. Indeed, Kranich (2010: 165) points out that the history of the simple tense forms has been largely ignored in the literature, leaving a major blind-spot in our understanding of the development of aspectual marking in English. The aim of our research is to investigate the impact of the rise of *BE Ving* on the meanings of the simple forms in order to test Bybee’s (1994) hypothesis.

The hypothesis is tested against the history of the simple forms and their alternates in the *BE Ving* construction for three verbs: *sleep* (mostly expressing a ‘undirected activity’ (Croft 2012)), *drink* (mostly expressing an ‘activity’ or ‘accomplishment’) and *stand* (mostly expressing a ‘state’) (Vendler 1957). Data are collected from the EEBO, CLMET and BNC corpora, covering Early Modern, Late Modern and Present-day English. The data consist of random samples capped at 250 instances per verb per period.

As a first step, we establish how the interpretations of simple forms, which range from imperfective (including habitual and progressive) to perfective, arise pragmatically from other elements in the context, such as adverbial modifiers and relations established to other profiled events. For example, both the adverbial *now* in (1) and the framing subordinate clause in (2) encourage a progressive reading, while in (3) the sequence of events and the explicit endpoint to the *sleep* event jointly trigger a perfective interpretation.

- (1) Beyond the fear of ling’ring punishment, Aspasia now, within her lover’s arms, Securely **sleeps**[.] (CLMET, 1726-49)
- (2) Vnto this Pertynax therefore wente Letus, and Electus, with a few of theyr complices aboute mydnyghte, whyles all men **slepte**. (EEBO, 1556)
- (3) And so [I] wente to my bedde full ryght Where I **slepte** styll and merely tyll foure of the clocke after mydnyght Than vp I rose by the candell light (EEBO, 1506)

As a next step, we exploit the presence of these pragmatic interpretative cues as proxies to the likely intended aspectual reading of any given instance. This way, we can gain insight into any semantic change in the simple tense and its timing. If Bybee’s (1994) hypothesis holds, the simple tense is expected to shift away from contexts favouring or imposing a progressive interpretation as *BE Ving* gains in frequency.

At the time of writing, the analysis has been completed for *sleep*. Preliminary results show striking differences between present and past tense simple forms. In the present tense, the simple form over time increasingly refers to habitual situations, whereas the share of episodic progressive meaning declines. Although this is in line with expectations, we still find PDE examples that express ongoingness in the present-tense simple form, suggesting that contrary to received wisdom the simple tense does not obligatorily express non-progressive meaning even in PDE. The past tense casts even more doubt on the initial hypothesis, revealing an essentially stable coexistence of the simple form and *BE Ving* in the expression of progressive meaning. Results thus paint a far more complex picture than the literature suggests. If anything, obligatorification of the non-progressive interpretation in simple forms is a slow and contextually sensitive process.

## References

- Bybee, Joan L. 1994. Asymmetries in tense and aspect systems. In William Pagliuca (ed.), *Current Issues in Linguistic Theory*, vol. 109, 235-254. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company. <https://doi.org/10.1075/cilt.109.02byb>.
- Croft, William. 2012. *Verbs: aspect and causal structure* (Oxford Linguistics). Oxford [England] ; New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kranich, Svenja. 2010. *The Progressive in Modern English: a Corpus-Based Study of Grammaticalization and Related Changes* (Language and Computers 72). Amsterdam New York, NY: Rodopi.
- Vendler, Zeno. 1957. Verbs and Times. *The Philosophical Review* 66(2). 143-160. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2182371>.