

# Two BEs or not two BEs: the progressive passive puzzle in English<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** English before 1750 does not allow *being* to occur in the progressive, a fact that has remained mysterious. In this paper I propose that this absence is due to semantic-pragmatic factors, and that the rise of progressive *being* reflects the innovation of a new BE of activity in modern English. I investigate these developments using diachronic corpora, and discuss some loose ends that arise.

**Keywords:** progressive passive, semantic change, English

## 1. Introduction: the progressive passive puzzle

This paper is about the English progressive passive, as in (1) and (2).

- (1) ODE To a PIG, while his Nose **was being bored**.  
(1799–1800 Southey, *Annual Anthology*, vol. 2, p. 264; Pratt and Denison, 2000: 414)
- (2) Regine **is being honoured** with a well-deserved festschrift.

From a present-day English perspective, there is nothing hugely objectionable or surprising about this construction. English has a progressive, formed with BE as auxiliary, and it has a passive, also formed with BE as auxiliary, and so it is natural that it can also combine the two.

What is surprising in historical perspective is how long it took this construction to come into existence. The English progressive in its current form – with a verb ending in *-ing* – dates back at least as far as Middle English, and plausibly has forebears even in Old English (see Denison, 1993: 400–408), spreading during the Early Modern period and beyond (Kranich, 2010). The English passive with BE is even older: there are numerous uncontroversial examples from the Old English period (Denison, 1993: ch. 14). So why is the progressive passive – which looks like simply the logical consequence of combining these two independently available options – not attested until the second half of the eighteenth century (Pratt and Denison, 2000; van Bergen, 2013)? This is what I term the PROGRESSIVE PASSIVE PUZZLE.

The puzzle has more than once been remarked upon before (see e.g., Denison, 1993: 440 and

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<sup>1</sup>The paper owes its existence, for better or for worse, directly to the recipient of this festschrift. In summer 2016, not long before I took up my current position as Regine's colleague in Konstanz, Regine contacted me to let me know that she was organizing a fun event on semantic change, and that I was welcome to submit an abstract. I duly did so, and thus had the good fortune to be present (and to present) at the inaugural Formal Diachronic Semantics (FoDS) conference, talking about precisely this material. I am grateful to audiences there and at the DAAD Workshop on Morphosyntactic Change through Corpora in German and Beyond at Newnham College, Cambridge, for comments and critique, and especially to David Denison, Leah Doroski, Andrew Koontz-Garboden and Igor Yanovich, as well as to the editors of this festschrift. FoDS is now an annual event, and approaching its tenth birthday; Regine is not only the founder of this series, but has a good claim – via electrifying 2006 monograph – to be the founding figure in diachronic formal semantics more generally. All the best, Regine, and apologies that this paper doesn't have more lambdas in it!

Warner, 1995: 533). Pratt and Denison (2000: 411) describe the emergence of the progressive passive as ‘the single most striking syntactic change of the last three centuries’. In this short chapter I suggest that the answer may lie in an unlikely place: the semantics of that most semantically uninteresting word, the copula BE.

## 2. Existing accounts

Most authors who have alluded to the progressive passive puzzle have done so only in passing.<sup>2</sup> Often the causal factors that researchers adduce provide a motivation in the form of a global, constant force; such motivations are inherently incapable of solving the puzzle, since they do not explain why the change took place when it did. For instance, Traugott (1972: 178) characterizes the emergence of the progressive passive as ‘an excellent example of simplification by generalization’; if so, one wonders why it took centuries before anyone came up with it. Similarly, Visser (1973: §2158) ascribes it to ‘the urge, permanently inherent in English as an analytic language, to signal separately every separate shade of meaning, function or connotation’. Whether or not it makes sense to talk of English as having an ‘urge’, clearly this sort of explanation would be just as valid if the progressive passive had emerged in Proto-Germanic, where already the change from more synthetic to more analytic must have been underway.

Clearly what is needed is a local cause, not a global one. Visser points to analogy with *being* + adjective; however, as Denison (1993: 442) points out, this construction is not earlier. Under Denison’s own account (1998: 149–150), a change elsewhere in the system precipitates the emergence of the progressive passive: an earlier form, the passival (*The house was building*), with inanimate subject, became ambiguous when the active progressive began to take inanimate subjects, and hence there was functional pressure to innovate. However, as has been pointed out by Hundt (2004a) and Kranich (2010), this account too runs into problems of chronology: 91 of 130 early examples of the progressive passive have non-human subjects (Hundt, 2004b).

Warner (1995, 1997) proposes a syntactic account in which a reanalysis leads to auxiliaries becoming frozen forms lacking the morphological interrelationships of full verbs. The local cause he adduces is the loss of *thou*, which removes the last vestige of person and number inflection on modals, along with the consolidation of *do*-support as a system-wide feature (on which see also Denison, 1993: 442–443). An alternative formal account of the change is provided by Cowper and Hall (2012), who propose that it is a symptom of a wider restructuring of the tense and aspect system of Late Modern English, set in motion by the reanalysis of the suffix *-en* as exponent of passive rather than resultativity.

What all these approaches have in common is that they treat the emergence of the progressive passive as a fundamentally syntactic problem rather than a semantic one. Warner (1997: 162) makes this most explicit, stating that ‘[s]emantic and functional contrasts ... are not central determinants in the same sense as the availability of morphosyntactic categories.’ The rest of this paper explores the possibility that, *pace* Warner, semantic change was indeed a central determinant.

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<sup>2</sup>This paper is concerned with the innovation of the progressive passive, not its spread through the population, on which see the suggestions in Pratt and Denison (2000) and van Bergen (2013).

### 3. Two BEs or not two BEs? That is the question

The standard view of the semantics of the copula – whose genealogy can be traced through Partee (1977, 1987) to Bertrand Russell (1919) and ultimately Aristotle – is that it doesn't have any. That is, English BE is the identity function on properties, (3); type-theoretically it is of type  $\langle\langle d, t \rangle \langle d, t \rangle\rangle$ , in Partee's (1987) formulation.

(3)  $\lambda P.P$

For English BE, though, this does not seem to be the full story. Consider the examples in (4).

- (4)
- a. Regine is brilliant.
  - b. Regine is being ingenious.
  - c. \*Regine is being awake.
  - d. ??Regine is being a professor.
  - e. \*The lake is being noisy.
  - f. \*The students are being quiet because they are asleep.

While (4a) is compatible with the identity function in (3), with the meaning that Regine is generally or inherently a brilliant person, there is something else going on in (4b). Here there are two forms of BE, one progressive, and the sentence conveys that Regine is actively doing something ingenious. Examples (4c) and (4d) show that the construction is incompatible with non-volitional states and individual-level predicates respectively, and (4e) shows that it is incompatible with inanimate subjects. Example (4f) further shows that subject animacy is necessary, but not sufficient: the subject of BE *being* must be agentive. Partee (1977) captures this behaviour by positing that there are in fact two homophonous BEs in English (cf. Dowty, 1979). One is an Aristotelian copula, with the semantics in (3) (or lack thereof); the other is an activity verb in terms of Vendler's (1967) typology, selecting for an agent theta-role, with a lexical semantics similar to that of 'to act'.

Partee's 'two-BE' solution neatly captures the facts in (4), as well as the fact – perhaps otherwise somewhat surprising – that BE can occur with itself. While acknowledging these facts, Rothstein (1999: 360–362) argues that there are problems with the two-BE account, and goes on to develop an account in which BE does not inherently belong to any of the Vendler (1967) aspectual classes but may be assigned to stative, activity, or achievement depending on contextual factors, i.e., it is underspecified (1999: 399–407). Under this account it is less obvious why BE can co-occur with itself. I am also not convinced that an achievement reading is possible: to me, *Regine is being Dean of Studies* does not have a reading in which Regine is *becoming* Dean of Studies, that is, in which she is incrementally approaching the endpoint of Dean-of-Studies-hood – and nor does *Regine is Dean of Studies*. Since Rothstein does not provide convincing evidence for the achievement reading, I will stick with the more restrictive Partee two-BE account, though most of what I have to say is just as compatible with Rothstein's analysis.

The fact that only the 'BE of activity' is possible in (4b)–(4f) is due to an independent restriction on the English progressive, namely that it is incompatible with individual-level statives, as shown by (5).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>This is something of an overstatement: see Dowty (1979: 104–109), Anderwald (2017: 177–178) and references cited there for somewhat more cautious discussion. For present purposes it will do the job.

- (5) a. \*Regine is knowing the answer.  
 b. \*John is resembling his father.

There are various theoretical accounts of this incompatibility, and no consensus on whether its aetiology is fundamentally syntactic (Carlson, 1977), morphosyntactic (Ramchand, 2018), semantic (Taylor, 1977), or pragmatic (Dowty, 1979). Here I will sketch Dowty's solution. According to Dowty (1979: 149), the progressive operator's truth conditions can be defined as in (6).

- (6) [PROG  $\phi$ ] is true at  $\langle I, w \rangle$  iff for some interval  $I'$  such that  $I \subset I'$  and  $I$  is not a final subinterval for  $I'$ , and for all  $w'$  such that  $w' \in \text{Inr}(\langle I, w \rangle, \phi)$  is true at  $\langle I', w' \rangle$ .

Here  $I$  is the index of an interval, and  $w$  is a possible world. The condition 'not a final subinterval' stipulates that the event must be ongoing, in line with traditional intuitions about the meaning of the progressive. The function *Inr* gives us a set of worlds which are identical to  $w$  up to the interval  $I$  in question, and in which events continue in some natural or expected way: these are what Dowty (1979: 148) calls INERTIA WORLDS.

The notion of inertia worlds is the most controversial aspect of Dowty's proposal for the semantics of the progressive; Landman (1992) presents a critique and more complex proposal, Portner (1998) defends a refined variant of Dowty's possible-worlds approach, and Ramchand (2018: §2.2–2.3) argues for an event-based account. For the purposes of the present paper, however, nothing rests on this part of the definition: what is important is that the progressive is defined in terms of intervals. Dowty (1979: 178–180) points out that, whereas the truth conditions of stage-level predicates (in the sense of Carlson, 1977) depend on the current state of the world, classic individual-level stative predicates such as *know* and *love* are not so dependent, but rather relate to our total past experience with a given individual. Such statives are true at an interval  $I$  iff they are true at all moments within  $I$  (cf. Taylor, 1977). But then it is pragmatically odd to predicate a property of an individual during interval  $I$  if that property is more generally and consistently a property of that individual, well beyond interval  $I$  (Dowty, 1979: 180). Effectively, a scalar implicature arises (though Dowty does not use the term): if one knows that George is generally or inherently a professor, it is a violation of the Maxim of Quantity to assert that *George is being a professor* – and hence a sentence of that type is only acceptable as a conscious flouting of that maxim, i.e., in a situation in which George is performing temporarily in some exceptionally prototypically professorial way, such as by conspicuously reading leather-bound books while wearing a tweed jacket. In other words, some sort of aspectual coercion (Moens and Steedman, 1988; Jeretič and Özyıldız, 2022) is needed.

If we then assume that the BE of identity is an individual-level stative predicate, everything falls into place: the ungrammatical sentences (4c)–(4f) are ungrammatical for the same reason as the examples in (5), namely that the progressive semantics gives rise to an explosive scalar implicature that there is no way to safely defuse. In short, there is no way of safely progressivizing BE unless your language has a second BE, Partee's BE of activity. This is directly relevant to the progressive passive in that the progressive passive crucially relies upon the availability of *being* in the progressive construction, which, as I have just argued, is a consequence of the availability of the BE of activity.

Under this account, it is essentially a lexical accident that sentences of the type (4b), *Regine*

*is being ingenious*, are possible in present-day English: it is due to the presence of the BE of activity. This would seem like an inelegant stipulation, were it not for two facts. First, sentences of the type (4b) are not universally available in languages with BE. In Dutch and German, they are ruled out, as (7) and (8) show.<sup>4</sup>

- (7) \*Hij is een dwaas aan het zijn.  
 he is a fool in the be.INF  
 ‘He is being a fool.’ (Dutch)
- (8) \*Er ist ein Vollidiot am Sein. / ?\*Er ist dabei, ein Vollidiot zu sein.  
 he is a complete-idiot in-the be.INF / he is there-in a complete-idiot to be.INF  
 ‘He is being a complete idiot.’ (German)

Secondly – and crucially for this paper – sentences of the type (4b) are completely absent from English before the eighteenth century. It is to these diachronic facts that we will now turn. But before we do, it is worth noting that facts of this sort, although not direct counterevidence to the Rothstein (1999) theory of underspecified BE, do raise questions for this theory. Recall that Rothstein’s main objection to the Partee-Dowty proposal of a BE of activity was that it is a lexical stipulation. If, however, the relevant readings are systematically absent in some languages or varieties, and this does not correlate with other grammatical properties, then the only way to account for this under the Rothsteinian theory is to accept that some languages may leave BE underspecified while others do not, as a matter of lexical variation – an account that is hardly any less stipulative than the Partee-Dowty proposal advocated here.

#### 4. The diachrony of progressive *being* in English

Let us briefly pause to recap. My proposal is that English developed a BE of activity in the eighteenth century. This allowed progressive forms of BE to occur, which – for semantic-pragmatic reasons – were necessary for the formation of the progressive passive. Before 1750, there was no BE of activity, and hence no progressive passive. This account predicts that the rise of BE in the progressive passive should go hand in hand with the rise of the BE of activity with nominal or adjectival complements. The main aim of this section is to test whether this prediction is borne out.

##### 4.1. The unbearable absence of *being*?

An alternative theory can be set aside immediately. One might propose that the key factor was not semantic-pragmatic, but rather morpholexical: the form *being*, in this alternative theory, simply did not exist in earlier English. At some point it was innovated (perhaps via analogy), and as soon as this happened the progressive passive (and other innovative forms of *be*) were free to occur. However, the historical record is not compatible with this theory. Progressive forms of BE are attested in relatively early Old English texts: the Latin-Old English glossary in MS Cotton Cleopatra A III has *wesendum*, *beondum* glossing *existentibus* (Stryker, 1951: 180,

<sup>4</sup>For judgments on the Dutch and German facts I am grateful to Lobke Aelbrecht, Bettina Braun, Eva Csipak, David Diem and Sarah Warchhold. It should be noted that not all varieties of German have a grammaticalized progressive (Flick, 2016), and the ungrammaticality of (8) is only probative for speakers – such as those of High Alemannic or Rhineland varieties – whose progressive is otherwise grammaticalized.

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cited in the online OED, s.v. *be*, accessed 8th December 2024). Warner (1997: 178) dates this form to circa 1050, but Rusche (1996: 4) argues that the manuscript can be dated to the 930s on palaeographical grounds. The form *being* is found in participial constructions from late Middle English onwards: the OED gives *for the tyme beynge* in a mercantile text of 1449, and after that its attestation is continuous. Thus, the morpholexical gap theory must be abandoned.

On the other hand, the presence of *being* outside of the progressive construction in late Middle and Early Modern English receives an immediate explanation under the present semantic-pragmatic theory. As Ramchand (2018: 67) observes, the *-ing* form is not incompatible with (individual-level) statives *per se*: the contrasts in (9) make this clear.

- (9) a. \*The wall is surrounding the castle.  
b. The wall surrounding the castle is high.  
c. \*The boy is fearing the dark.  
d. The boy fearing the dark was the only one who could not get to sleep.

Reduced relative/participial constructions containing *-ing*-participles are entirely compatible with individual-level stative readings. Thus, in short, the restriction is a property of the progressive, not of *-ing* forms. Hence, if BE in pre-1750 English could only have an individual-level stative reading, we would expect it to show up in reduced relative/participial constructions but not in the progressive – which is exactly what we see.<sup>5</sup>

### 4.2. Progressive *being* in corpora

The date of first attestation of a true progressive form of BE is debated in the literature. Visser (1973: §1834–5) provides three examples from the fifteenth century, but, as Denison (1993: 395–396) points out, all of these are questionable. The first example that Denison accepts as ‘modern-looking’ is (10), from 1819.

- (10) You will be glad to hear ... how diligent I have been, and **am being**.  
(John Keats, *Letters* 137 357.4, 11 Jul 1819)

This is more than fifty years later than the earliest attested progressive passive, given in (11) (from van Bergen, 2013: 183).

- (11) as she and her child **were being conveyed** ... to her parish  
(*General Evening Post*, 12–14 Nov 1761)

We should, however, be cautious about drawing inferences from the dates of the earliest attested examples. First of all, as will be seen, the *being* + NP/AdjP construction is much rarer than the progressive passive overall, so it is more likely to be accidentally absent from any given corpus or subcorpus. Secondly, these new progressive uses of *being* emerge in an era of advancing standardization and prescriptivism: see e.g., Pratt and Denison (2000) for proscription of the progressive passive. As such, there may have been social pressure not to use these new forms, potentially creating a lag before the feature’s emergence and its first attestation. Thirdly, van

<sup>5</sup>Ramchand (2018) accounts for this in terms of morphosyntactic competition between the finite verb forms and the progressive syntagm. The key intuition here – ‘why not use a simple finite form instead?’ – is the same one that underlies the present account, though I have argued in section 3 that the competition is pragmatic rather than morphosyntactic.

	Passive	Per million	With NP or AdjP	Per million	% Passive
1710–1780	1	0.10	0	0.00	100.0%
1780–1850	68	6.03	1	0.09	98.6%
1850–1920	638	50.55	5	0.40	99.2%
CLMET overall	707	20.56	6	0.17	99.2%
1960–1990 (BNC)	478	<i>169.10</i>	22	7.78	95.6%

Table 1: The quantitative rise of progressive *being*

Bergen (2013) had access to much richer corpus resources than Denison (1993), who was writing in what was in effect the pre-corpus era.

The Corpus of Late Modern English Texts (CLMET 3.0; Diller et al., 2011) is a 34-million-word part-of-speech-tagged corpus covering the period 1710–1920, and as such is well suited for an empirical investigation of progressive *being*. Since the corpus is part-of-speech-tagged but not parsed, a simple query searching for a finite form of BE immediately followed by *being* was used.<sup>6</sup> The results were then filtered manually to remove false positives. In order to provide a greater time depth and a further point of comparison, the same query was carried out on British National Corpus (BNC Consortium, 2007), a 100-million-word corpus which covers the period 1960–1990. This query yielded 17,399 hits, of which a random sample of 500 were selected for further analysis. The results are tabulated in Table 1, and visualized in Figure 1.<sup>7</sup>

Denison’s example (10) is also the earliest example found in CLMET, and the only one from before 1850. Two other early examples of *being* + NP/AdjP from CLMET are given in (12)–(13). Interestingly, three of the six examples of progressive *being* + NP/AdjP in CLMET are found in E. M. Forster’s works from the start of the twentieth century, including (13).

- (12) it would have been shocking if she had been so rude as to fall asleep when the Professor **was being so obliging** as to relate his own history  
(Augusta Webster, *Daffodil and the Croäxaxicans*, 1884)
- (13) Either she suspected him of dishonesty, or else she **was being dishonest** herself.  
(E. M. Forster, *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, 1905)

As Table 1 shows, *being* + NP/AdjP has always been rare: even today it does not exceed 5% of all uses of progressive *being*. In the very earliest period, when progressive *being* was itself very rare, it is entirely possible, therefore, that the absence of *being* + NP/AdjP reflects a chance gap in attestation rather than a period during which *being* was grammatical in the passive but not with NP/AdjP. Thus, the hypothesis that the rise of the BE of activity is what gives rise to both constructions is not falsified by these data.

Ideally, we would have access not only to all instances of progressive *being*, but also to all

<sup>6</sup>Query: *(is|are|am|was|were) being\_VBG*. This will not capture, for instance, examples in which negation intervenes between the two forms of BE (e.g., *is not being*); but it is a start.

<sup>7</sup>Values per million words are obtained by dividing the number of examples by the word count of the relevant (part of the) corpus and multiplying by 1,000,000. For the BNC, this involves the assumption that the distribution of the two types within the 500-word sample can be extrapolated to all of the 17,399 hits; hence these figures are estimates, and are italicized in the table. Frequency per million is log-transformed in Figure 1 for ease of visualization.

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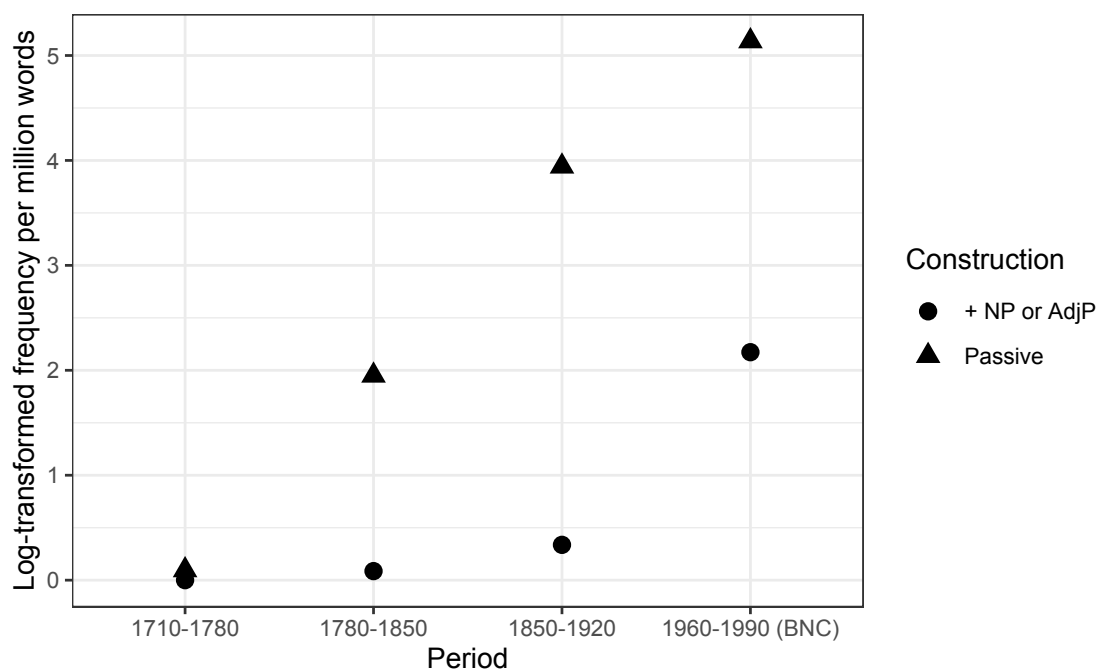


Figure 1: The quantitative rise of progressive *being*

instances where progressive *being* could have been used but was not: the Labovian ‘envelope of variation’. But this is difficult. The main alternative to the progressive passive was the ‘passival’, a construction of the type *The house was building* in which the underlying object of the progressive verb is raised to subject position; however, this was not the only alternative, especially given that the passival would very often have been ambiguous. As for *being* + NP/AdjP, it is not clear what functional alternatives were available. A full account of the envelope of variation here is a desideratum for future research.

### 5. Conclusion and issues arising

English before 1750 did not permit progressive *being*, either in the progressive passive or with nominal complements. I have proposed that the rise of progressive *being* in both constructions is a reflex of a new BE of activity, which was innovated around the middle of the eighteenth century and diffused through the population during the subsequent period. Thus, while for *Hamlet* circa 1600 the only viable option was ‘not two BE’, E. M. Forster and his contemporaries circa 1900 had another option. The unavailability of regular copular BE in the progressive, I have argued, is due to a quantity implicature that arises with individual-level stative predicates in the progressive.

This account obviously raises a number of questions, especially diachronic ones. I have said nothing about the causal factors that led to the emergence of a BE of activity in English in the eighteenth century. Coming up with a story for this is particularly desirable given that the development I have proposed flies in the face of theories of grammaticalization, especially as regards semantic ‘bleaching’. It is not possible for a word to have a semantics that is any more bleached than copular BE, the identity function – so, if I am right, BE in English has undergone



semantic enrichment, and looks suspiciously like an instance of degrammaticalization. Perhaps Kiparsky (2012) is right that degrammaticalization, where it occurs, is motivated by paradigmatic factors (see the discussion of Traugott, 1972: 178 in section 2 of this paper, and Denison, 1993: 440). Or perhaps the old BE somehow developed presuppositional baggage in its usage context, which was then reanalysed by perceivers who were eager to Avoid Pragmatic Overload (Eckardt, 2006, 2009). And how does the development discussed here relate to the further relaxation of the conditions on the progressive that we seem to see in the twenty-first century, for instance in the form of the famous McDonald's slogan *I'm Lovin' It* (cf. Anderwald, 2017)? There is still much work for diachronic semanticists and pragmaticists to do.

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