Modality, aspect and the progressive

The semantics of the present progressive in French, in comparison with English*

Astrid De Wit, Adeline Patard

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This paper proffers a corpus-based study of the semantics of the French present progressive in comparison with its English equivalent. We describe the temporal and modal uses of *be + -ing* and investigate to what extent they overlap with the uses of *être + en train de*. The observation that the use of the French present progressive is not obligatory and more restricted than the present progressive in English is taken as a sign of a less advanced stage grammaticalization of the former. On the other hand, the two progressive constructions are alike in that they turn out to share the same basic, modal meaning, which we define as epistemic contingency in current reality. This meaning is, among other things, reflected in the (inter)subjective connotations that are often associated with the progressives.

**Keywords**: progressive aspect, present tense, modal uses, French/English

1. Introduction

In this paper, we report on the various uses of the present progressive in French, in comparison with its counterpart in English. Since the progressive in English, expressed by *be + -ing*, is notably more grammaticalized than its equivalents in other (Germanic) languages, many studies have been devoted to its formal and semantic features and its diverse array of uses. The *être + en train de* construction in French, on the other hand, is less widespread and thus, even though its functions and meaning as a marker of progressive aspect have attracted some scholarly attention (Franckel, 1989; Pusch, 2003; Do-Hurinville, 2007; Mortier, 2008; Lebas-Fraczak, 2010), there are no detailed semantic analyses incorporating its various temporal and modal uses in comparison with its heavily grammaticalized English counterpart.¹ One exception is Lachaux (2005), who looks into French
translations of English-progressive uses in novels. We will refer to some of her findings in due course.

In the present paper, we mainly introduce new observations on the uses of the present progressive in French, as its English equivalent has already been studied thoroughly in previous work: De Wit and Brisard (manuscript) list the usage types of the present progressive in English as they have been attested in the *Santa Barbara Corpus of spoken American English, Part 1* (Du Bois et al., 2000), consisting of approximately 50,000 words. Their findings, which we summarize in Section 2, will guide our comparative analysis: on the basis of an in-depth study of contemporary spoken (European) French data – a sample of approximately 2,000,000 words has been collected from three corpora: *Elicop* (Debrock et al. 2000), *CFPP2000* (2009) and *Clapi* (2001) – we will verify which of the English categories of use reoccur in French and which do not (Section 3) and how the differences in the relative frequency of occurrence of the categories in the two languages relate to the degree of grammaticalization of the periphrases under consideration (Section 4). In Section 5, we will elaborate on the basic modal meaning which the two progressive constructions share. Finally, in Section 6, we submit our conclusions and suggest some paths for further investigation.

Let us, before embarking on the presentation of our corpus work, point out that we are only focusing on the uses of the *present* progressive. The reason for this is that an important motivation for using the progressive is allowing the alignment of events (i.e., dynamic situations) with the time of speaking – at least in English, in which events (as opposed to states) even obligatorily take the progressive in the present (cf. the ungrammaticality of *I walk home right now*). Such “pressure” does not exist in the past, i.e., the simple past can be used more broadly than the simple present. In French, as we will see, it is not obligatory to use the progressive for present-time reference with events, yet Lebas-Fraczak (2010) points out that many of the existing analyses of the semantics of the French progressive only pertain to present-tense uses, thereby implying that the present and past progressive have a different usage pattern. Similarly, when looking at the future paradigm, the English present progressive exhibits a clearly different pattern of use than its future counterpart *will + be + -ing*, which can, for instance, co-occur with stative verbs without coercing them (Celle and Smith, 2010:252). It is therefore reasonable to assume that analyses of the uses of the English as well as the French present progressive do not (entirely) hold for the past nor the future, and vice versa.³

2. The usage types of the present progressive in English

In what follows, we summarize the findings presented by De Wit and Brisard (manuscript) on the uses of the present progressive in English. Both from a theoretical and an empirical perspective, their analysis lends itself excellently to extrapolation to other languages, such as French. Although the body of literature on the English progressive is decidedly vast, many of the canonical works fail to establish one basic meaning of the construction (cf. Scheffer, 1975; Palmer, 1989; Quirk et al., 1985; Leech, 2004). One important obstacle for arriving at such a core meaning is the frequent occurrence of modal (subjective) uses that appear to be systematically associated with the present progressive (as we will see in Section 2.9). These uses are often neglected, or treated as “idiosyncrasies”
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(Comrie, 1976:38), essentially different from more prototypical aspectotemporal uses, such as progressiveness, duration or incompleteness. De Wit and Brisard (manuscript) propose to unite the variety of aspectotemporal as well as modal uses that they have come across in their study in a semantic network.

Although, in our study, we do not aspire to establish such a network, we do adhere to the classification (including its comprehensiveness) and methodological tools De Wit and Brisard (manuscript) have employed. Given the important function of the present progressive to align events with the present and given the fact that “the present” is (defined as) the time of speaking (i.e., the speech event), their study is based on spoken corpus data. Each example of be + -ing has been classified as instantiating a particular category of use on the basis of two criteria. The first is the interpretation of the progressive in contrast with the simple present, i.e., they have verified which aspects of meaning change when the present progressive is replaced by a simple present. The second cue comes from the co(n)text: if certain contextual elements (e.g., adverbials indicating temporariness, such as today) regularly co-occur with the construction, these elements are said to elaborate schematic meaning elements that are present in the overall semantic configuration of the progressive. That is, they are indications of the types of meaning with which the construction is in accordance. It should be noted, finally, that an example classified as an instantiation of a particular category (according to the aforementioned criteria) might also have characteristics associated with other types of use. However, this does not mean that such examples belong to two classes at the same time: in each case, the progressive is clearly used for the expression of a specific meaning (which is focused upon), while other meaning elements are more backgrounded (cf. Sections 2.1, 2.3 and 2.9 for illustrations). In Sections 2.1 to 2.9, we list and exemplify each of the usage types that De Wit and Brisard have attested, going from less to more modally colored uses.

2.1. Current ongoingness

In 93 of the 339 examples, the progressive is merely used to refer to events that are going on in the present, without any further specifications, as in (1):

(1) You could use the lettuce washer, cause Pete’s using the colander. (SBC003)

As noted before, the use of the progressive is obligatory in these contexts in English. Examples such as (1) have been classified as instantiations of the category CURRENT ONGOINGNESS. The other aspectotemporal usage types of the present progressive, listed in Sections 2.2 to 2.8, can be regarded as elaborations and extensions of this category, in that they involve events that are (actually or virtually) going on in the present with some additional qualifications to or minor modifications of the meaning of CURRENT ONGOINGNESS.

2.2. Temporary validity

In some cases, the boundaries of the currently ongoing event are emphasized. By definition, dynamic situations are temporary, as they do not normally go on forever. However, only those instances in which this temporary validity is
explicitly indicated (cf. *this year* in (2)) have been classified as belonging to the category **TEMPORARY VALIDITY**.

(2) So they’re kind of suffering from that… from that *this year*. (SBC006)

This usage type, which is instantiated in 23 examples, may be regarded as a more specific elaboration of **CURRENT ONGOINGNESS**.

2.3. Limited duration

The category **LIMITED DURATION**, comprising 16 examples, involves events that are currently ongoing but, in addition, the progressive emphasizes the duration of the process: the fact that it keeps going on within a particular time span, without significantly changing. Again, only examples containing a clear contextual indication of duration (such as *still* in (3)) are analyzed as belonging to this category.

(3) So then, and then, he sort of pulled the paper aside, and he’s still *staring* at you. (SBC008)

If, in this example, the speaker had continued using the simple past (*stared*) or instead used a simple present (*stares*), rather than shifting to the present progressive, the durative meaning would obviously be less conspicuous. Often, examples of **LIMITED DURATION** turn out to feature a sense of irritation, as is also the case in (3).

Both examples (2) and (3) involve situations that are limited in time and that have a certain duration. The difference between the two (i.e., the reason why they receive a different classification) is a matter of focus. In (3), the emphasis lies on the fact that the event has been going on for some time now – a paraphrase by means of *keep on* would therefore not significantly alter the meaning of the utterance. In (2), on the other hand, it is explicitly indicated that the suffering is only relevant for this year, while its actual duration is less important. Here, introducing *keep on* or another paraphrase with a durative sense *would* add some extra meaning (for instance, that it goes on longer than expected).

2.4. Incompletion

While in **TEMPORARY VALIDITY** both boundaries are emphasized, the category **INCOMPLETION** only pertains to the final one. A sense of incompletion is of course always present when the progressive is used with telic predicates, *i.e.*, predicates involving an inherent endpoint. Since the meaning of incompletion thus crucially derives from the verb’s telicity, it is difficult to maintain the existence of this category as a usage type of the English progressive. Only in two exceptional cases one might argue that the progressive itself is responsible for creating the sense of incompletion. Consider one of them in (4): if, in this example, *start* is put in the simple present, this entails that the process of starting is already completed, while in the progressive it is not. The difference in meaning between the two construals thus resides in the process’s (in)completion.

(4) So now Fletcher’s *starting* to realize what’s going on. (SBC006)
2.5. Shifted ongoingness

In some cases, the present progressive is used to refer to events that were actually ongoing in the past or in some story-world (cf. Chuquet 1994:120-137 for a more detailed characterization). This (historical-present) use, which De Wit and Brisard (manuscript) have classified as SHIFTED ONGOINGNESS, may be regarded as an extension of CURRENT ONGOINGNESS, since it involves virtual rather than actual coincidence with the present. It is of course typical of narrative contexts, but it occurs quite frequently in spoken English as well: 71 examples have been attested. One of these is given in (5).

(5) Two weeks ago I’m watching TV, and David Horowitz is going to have this former car radio thief on? (SBC006)

2.6. Futurate

Another function of the present progressive in English, attested in 46 examples, is referring to future situations that are, according to the speaker’s judgment, likely to occur (cf. (6)).

(6) It looks like these people aren’t going home alone tonight. (SBC002)

This FUTURATE use of the present progressive yields a slightly different interpretation than more canonical constructions used for future-time reference in English, such as will and be going to, in that the latter involve less certainty on the part of the speaker (Brisard, 2001). FUTURATE uses of the present progressive constitute yet another extension of CURRENT ONGOINGNESS, since the situations involved are construed as if they were ongoing in the present (i.e., there is again virtual rather than actual coincidence).

2.7. Iteration

Thus far, we have only encountered uses in which the present progressive refers to singular events, (virtually) ongoing at the time of speaking. The categories ITERATION and HABITUAL (cf. Section 2.8), however, involve multiple (repeated) situations, and thus again extend the meaning of CURRENT ONGOINGNESS. ITERATION, instantiated in 17 cases, comprises (typically short) events that are repeated many times at the time of speaking. In (7), the speaker is repeatedly slapping his hips to illustrate what he is saying:

(7) Cause their hips are beating up against you, you know. (SBC002)

2.8. Habitual

In the 43 cases in which the progressive is used to refer to HABITUAL situations (a meaning normally preserved for the simple present), these are usually temporary habits or habits that are, in a way, surprising or irritating in the view of the speaker. (8) features both a sense of temporariness and of atypicality:

(8) Everywhere we’ve been, in the past several years, everybody’s talking about how, the weather just isn’t normal. (SBC003)
2.9. Modal connotations and usage types

The overview of usage types presented in Sections 2.1 to 2.8 primarily features purely aspectotemporal notions, yet, as already indicated, one of the main points of De Wit and Brisard’s (manuscript) analysis is that English present-progressive examples often feature (inter)subjective connotations as well, i.e., expressions of a particular attitude of the speaker vis-à-vis the epistemic status of the situation (subjective interpretations) and vis-à-vis the hearer (intersubjective interpretations). In the foregoing examples, we have already come across notions of irritation (3) and surprise (8), and in other cases, the ongoing event may be emphasized or referred to in a more tentative manner. It is difficult to claim that such uses of the present progressive in English are only modal and not aspectotemporal, as it is obligatory to use the construction to refer to events ongoing at the time of speaking. Therefore, we refer to modal ‘connotations’ rather than usage types proper.4 We are nevertheless including the number of attestations of (inter)subjective connotations in our analysis, so as to verify whether such notions are more frequent in English than in French or vice versa. In the Santa Barbara Corpus, they turn out to occur quite often: there are 62 examples of ‘surprise’, 11 examples of ‘tentativeness’, 50 examples of ‘intensification’ and 36 examples of ‘irritation’. Once again, the presence of these connotations has been established on the basis of a comparison with the simple present and clues in the co(n)text (cf. Kranich (2010:208-213) for a defense of this approach for identifying subjective uses).

In addition, the corpus features 28 examples of the so-called INTERPRETATIVE use of the progressive (Ljung, 1980), illustrated in (9).

(9) He’s smart, he talks about minorities. But he’s really talking about African Americans. (SBC012)

Here, the event of talking is first rendered in the simple present, indicating that it concerns a habit on the part of the subject, and is then reformulated by means of the present progressive. This difference in aspectual construal is motivated by modal considerations, and not by aspectotemporal ones, i.e., the progressive is not inserted to align a dynamic situation with the present. This is why this INTERPRETATIVE use is regarded as a purely modal usage type, and not as a mere connotation. As we will explain in Section 5, this use of the present progressive indicates that the speaker deems it necessary to emphasize the real nature of the situation so as to help the hearer to arrive at a proper interpretation (cf. also Lachaux, 2005).5

3. The usage types of the present progressive in French

The occurrences of être + en train de attested in our corpora – 191 in total – are all drawn from spoken interaction and have been classified according to the categorization of the English progressive uses presented above.6 This enables us to verify to what extent the uses of the present progressive in French overlap with the English usage types. In Sections 3.1 to 3.9, we list the categories of use of être + en train de in the present, again with their number of attestation relative to the total number of progressive occurrences. We will see that some categories are relatively more entrenched in French than in English, and vice versa. It should be kept in mind, though, that in absolute terms the English present progressive is
much more widespread than its French counterpart: in the English 50,000 word corpus, the present progressive has been attested 339 times, whereas in the much larger collection of French corpus data, comprising almost 2,000,000 words, only 191 present progressive occurrences have been counted, which boils down to barely 4.78 occurrences per 50,000 words.

3.1. Current ongoingness

Clearly, this use, involving singular events that are actually ongoing in the present without any further qualifications, is the most frequent one among the examples: 113 out of 191 occurrences have been classified as instantiations of the category CURRENT ONGOINGNESS. This is, relative to the total number of progressive occurrences, more than in English. Recall, however, that not all events that are ongoing in the present obligatorily take the progressive (as opposed to in English). Some even resist a progressive construal: activities such as porter un t-shirt (“wear a t-shirt”), for instance, are not compatible with en train de.7 (10) illustrates the use of the progressive to refer to an event that is going on now:

(10) **Par exemple, là aujourd’hui, on est en train de faire... je suis en train de faire les euh... on est en train de coffrer un plancher là.** (Elicop)

“For instance, now today we’re making we’re making now we’re making the formwork for the floor.”

3.2. Temporary validity

Again, this category only includes examples in which the event’s temporary nature is explicitly indicated, for instance, by preceding and following events, as in (11).

(11) **On a travaillé pour le le temple protestant de Monaco. On on est en train de faire des vitraux pour euh Caen [...] je vais faire des vitraux prochainement à la Madeleine à à Saint-Maxime à la Sainte Beaume dans le Var.** (Elicop)

“We’ve been working on the the protestant temple of Monaco. [At present] we’re making stained glass for Caen [...] soon I’m going to make stained glass for the church of the Madeleine in Saint-Maxime in the Sainte Baume mountains in the Var.”

In total, TEMPORARY VALIDITY covers eleven examples.

3.3. Limited duration

Notably, this use has not been attested for French, except in one case:

(12) **Ça fait un an que je suis en train de faire un truc qui est incroyable. Je sais pas si tu te rends compte.** (Clapi)

‘For a year I’ve been doing this incredible thing. I don’t know if you realize.’

An exploratory Google search shows us that contexts of the type ‘ça/cela fait [time indication] que’ (e.g., cela fait une heure que...) can indeed elicit the use of en train de. These contexts, besides being durative, also characteristically feature
modal overtones, such as irritation or surprise – senses also present in the English translation of these contexts, typically featuring a present perfect progressive. Such cases indicate that Bertinetto’s (2000:576-577) claim that the French progressive cannot have a durative meaning does not entirely hold.

3.4. Incompletion

Our corpus study yields 17 examples of INCOMPLETION. This usage type is especially frequent with verbs of change of state.

(13) [...] Non, pas encore. Ah oui, quand ils vont avoir fini la couverture là, euh... Ils sont en train de me finir l’autre chantier, alors les plombiers vont s’en aller de là-bas. (Elicop)

“[…] No, not yet. Oh, yes, when they’re going to have the covering finished there, uhm… They are clearing the other construction site, so the plumbers will go from over there.”

Since it is not obligatory in French to use the progressive for events going on in the present, it is easier to establish INCOMPLETION as a genuine usage type than in English (cf. Section 2.4).

3.5. Shifted ongoingness

As in English, the use of the present progressive to refer to events that are actually situated in the past is especially exploited in narrative contexts, yet in French only twelve instances have been counted. One of the examples is given in (14):

(14) Alors voilà, c’est l’histoire d’un homme euh qui a tué une poule d’eau et qui est en train de la déplumer et alors il avait pas le droit et malheureusement pour lui il y a le garde champêtre qui arrive… (Elicop)

“Well, then, this is the story of a man who has killed a hen and who is plucking it and so he didn’t have the right and unfortunately for him the village policeman arrives…”

3.6. Futurate

The French progressive can never have future-time reference, according to our data.\(^8\) Compare (15a) with its French equivalent in (15b):

(15) a. I’m leaving tomorrow.
    b. *Je suis en train de partir demain.

3.7. Iteration

Our corpus data only contain two examples of the category ITERATION:

(16) Le petit garçon euh... saute pour le [son chien]... pour le chercher toujours euh il est toujours en train de l’appeler et euh i’ va enfin il va à la forêt. (Clapi)

“The little boy jumps, looking for him [his dog] still uhm he’s still calling him and finally he goes to the forest.”
Though infrequent, this use is not, in our view, marked. Sentences such as *Il est encore en train d’éternuer* (‘He’s sneezing again’) seem quite natural.

### 3.8. Habitual

Whenever habits are expressed by means of *être + en train de*, they often feature a sense of irritation or emphasis, as is also the case in English. In total, we have attested 18 examples of habits in the present progressive – cf. (17) for an illustration:

(17)  *Dès qu’ils ont une place apparemment ils sont en train d’mettre des des immeubles de bureaux. J’sais pas si vous avez remarqué.* (CFPP 2000)

‘As soon as they have space apparently they’re putting in office buildings. I don’t know if you’ve noticed.’

### 3.9. Modal connotations and usage types

Franckel’s (1989) enunciativist analysis of the semantics of, among other aspectual constructions, the French progressive points to an important similarity between *être + en train de* and *be + -ing*: both are used to refer to situations that diverge in a way from what is expected. Franckel (1989:78) notes that a sentence like (18a), referring to an awkward situation, more naturally takes *en train de*, than (18b), which involves a more normal event.

(18) a.  *Il est en train de lire de travers.*

“He is reading the wrong way.”

b.  *Il est en train de bien lire.*

“He’s is reading well.”

Along similar lines, Lachaux (2005) argues that the French progressive is typically used to convey some intersubjective purpose, *i.e.*, it is used when the speaker (or narrator) wants to make sure that the situation is interpreted correctly, which implies that this interpretation may not be straightforward or requires emphasis.

Indeed, our data point out that *en train de*, just like its English equivalent, frequently occurs in contexts in which the speaker draws the hearer’s attention to the situation so as to express surprise (19), tentativeness (20) or irritation (21) or to put any other kind of emphasis on the process (22).³

(19)  *Il vient nous embêter il dit: “Oh regardez, vous êtes en train de faire l’amour”, mais en fait c’est pas vrai on joue ensemble.* (Clapi)

“He comes bothering us he says: “Oh look, you’re making love”, but actually that’s not true we are playing together.”

(20)  *Je pense que c’est ce qu’on est un peu en train de faire, de tout mélanger, de régler ni les problèmes des immigrés ni les problèmes des français.* (Clapi)

“I think that that’s more or less what we’re doing, mixing up everything, sorting out neither the immigrants’ problems nor the French’s problems.”
(21) En ce moment, hein, à notre époque beaucoup les cadres les fils de bourgeois qui font les [...] hein c'est tout le temps en train de voyager ces gens-là hein. (Clapi)

“At the moment, huh, these days a lot the executives the sons of bourgeois that do the [...] huh they’re [lit. it’s] travelling all the time those people huh.”

(22) A: Il faut bien qu’ces pauvres gens euh gens qui sont en train d’s’entasser (/ s’entassent) dans une chambre d’hôtel, oui

B: les les leur donner un logement... (CFPP2000)

“A: These poor people people who are being cramped into one hotel room should be, yes

B: they they should be provided with accommodation…”

Contrary to Kranich’s (2010) expectation that the INTERPRETATIVE use of the progressive is unique for English, our data show examples of similar uses in French – cf. (23). 18 examples have been classified as instances of this category.

(23) A: Le quartier a des tas de liens, ne serait-ce que par l’école et les paroisses, hein

B: Absolument, c’est vrai

A: Ce que vous êtes en train de dire c’est qu’il y a une présence catholique forte encore (CFPP2000)

“A: In the neighborhood there are a lot of bonds, if only through school and the parishes, aren’t there

B: Absolutely, that’s true

A: What you’re saying is that there’s still a strong catholic presence”

As it is not obligatory in French to use the progressive to refer to situations that are going on in the present, it is easier to establish that the use of en train de is purely subjectively motivated. In French, too, modal connotations and coincidence with the time of speaking often go hand in hand ((21), for instance, clearly involves a habitual situation), yet native speaker judgment indicates that in some cases the motivation for using the progressive is primarily, if not solely, modal in nature. In (22), for instance, the crucial difference between sont en train de s’entasser and its counterpart in the simple present, s’entassent, resides in the higher neutrality of the latter construal. The progressive puts an emphasis on the denoted situation, which consequently ‘stands out’ and is viewed as being remarkable. Even if, logically, it seems difficult to maintain that the use of a particular construction is doubly motivated (cf. Kranich, 2010:207-208), we do not see any principled reason to exclude that such multiple motivations (i.e., modal and aspectotemporal) can be present in layers. In some uses of the French present progressive, the modal layer may be highly foregrounded, while the aspectotemporal one is more backgrounded. Yet, in order to facilitate comparison with the semantics of the English present progressive, we have not treated the (inter)subjective expressions associated with the progressive as usage types proper, but rather as connotations that relate directly to what we conceive of as the basic meaning of the construction (cf. Section 5).
4. Frequencies: overview

Let us now summarize our findings regarding the absolute and relative frequencies of the various uses of the present progressive in French and in English. Table 1 offers an overview of the absolute numbers and percentages (relative to the total number of occurrences) of the attested usage types in each language and in Table 2 we show to what extent the occurrences of be + -ing and être + en train de are associated with (inter)subjective expressions.

Table 1. Absolute and relative frequencies of usage types of the present progressive in English and in French.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>English</th>
<th></th>
<th>French</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Absolute number</td>
<td>Percentage (rounded off)</td>
<td>Absolute numbers</td>
<td>Percentage (rounded off)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Pure) current ongoingness</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>27.43</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>59.16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Temporary Validity</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>6.78</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited duration</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4.72</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incompletion</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shifted Ongoingness</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>20.94</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Futurate</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>13.57</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Iteration</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5.01</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.05</td>
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<tr>
<td>Habitual</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>12.68</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>9.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretative</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>8.26</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>9.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>339</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. (Inter)subjective connotations, absolute number and number of occurrences relative to the total number of attestations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>English</th>
<th></th>
<th>French</th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Absolute number</td>
<td>Percentage (total of 339)</td>
<td>Absolute number</td>
<td>Percentage (total of 191)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surprise</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>18.29</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7.33</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tentativeness</td>
<td>11</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>8.90</td>
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<tr>
<td>Irritation</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>10.62</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7.33</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intensification</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>14.75</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>19.37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These overviews bring us to a number of observations:

- The English-progressive occurrences are more evenly distributed over the variety of possible contexts than the examples of être + en train de, which is clearly particularly entrenched in the category CURRENT ONGOINGNESS. In all the other contexts, except for INCOMPLETION and the INTERPRETATIVE uses, the English present progressive has been attested more frequently than its French counterpart;

- The French present progressive is almost or entirely excluded in some contexts: DURATION is very infrequent and the FUTURATE category does not even exist, as opposed to in English;
The modal interpretations of the English present progressive that have been attested by De Wit and Brisard (manuscript) turn out to be present in French as well.

The first two observations reflect the lower degree of grammaticalization of the French progressive. They indicate that être + en train de has developed few uses that depart from the strict interpretation of progressiveness. Incidentally, the fact that être + en train de cannot be used in futurate contexts is very revealing. In such contexts, the strictly progressive interpretation is no longer available but has given way to a new future interpretation, a stage that French has not reached (yet). Put differently, être + en train de has not gone as far as its English counterpart in the diversification of its uses normally induced by grammaticalization. This lower degree of grammaticalization is also reflected in the remarkable difference in overall frequency between the two constructions under study (cf. Section 3). Since, in present-day French, être + en train de is the only dedicated progressive construction (cf., e.g., Bertinetto, 2000:601; Pusch 2003), it appears that speakers of French rely on the simple present tense in many contexts in which speakers of English (are forced to) use the progressive.10

In the following and final section, we will take a closer look at the third observation, i.e., the fact that both English- and French-progressive uses often feature modal connotations. We will argue that these notions are related to the construction’s basic meaning in both languages, which will be analyzed as contingency in present reality.

5. Unification of modal and aspectotemporal uses in French and English

De Wit and Brisard (manuscript) suggest that epistemic contingency in the speaker’s conception of current reality constitutes the basic meaning of the English present progressive.11 We contend, now, that this analysis also holds for the French present progressive, which entails that not only its modally colored uses, but also the apparently purely aspectotemporal ones, instantiate this meaning.

Let us first explain what we mean by contingency in present reality. Compare, for instance, examples (24a) and (24b):

\[(24)\]

a. *Pierre est en train de parler avec un accent lorrain.*

“Pierre is talking with a Lorrain accent.”

b. *Pierre parle avec un accent lorrain.*

“Pierre talks with a Lorrain accent.”

Since both sentences feature present-tense marking, Pierre’s talking with a Lorrain accent is rendered as real in the speaker’s conception of current reality.12 In (24a), however, it is not construed as structurally, necessarily real, in the sense that it does not belong to what the speaker conceives of as part of her structural, general knowledge about the world, which she can always access mentally (cf. Brisard, 2002). The denoted situation is, in other words, contingent, i.e., not part of what the speaker knows and can predict about Pierre’s behavior and she may, therefore, perceive it as somewhat unusual. By contrast, when using a simple
present (cf. (24b)), a more structural meaning arises: Pierre’s having a Lorrain accent is viewed as a normal, predictable situation in relation to the speaker’s knowledge of the world. This analysis is reminiscent of Lachaux’s (2005) enunciativist analysis. In fact, her approach in terms of intersubjective values may be regarded as complementary to our own semantic analysis, which integrates these pragmatic notions too. Yet, while her work hinges upon the function of the constructions in a communicative setting, we focus on their basic epistemic value, from which these pragmatic functions are derived.

The modal connotations frequently associated with être + en train de, such as surprise and emphasis, constitute specific instantiations of the basic meaning of contingency. Surprising situations are necessarily perceived by the conceptualizer as divergent from her structural world knowledge and she might feel the need to underline their remarkability. INTERPRETATIVE uses are also naturally linked to the meaning of contingency: the fact that a situation is conceived of as less straightforward to interpret correctly, may incite the speaker to construe it as not belonging to our structural knowledge. Other intersubjective readings that are derived from the basic meaning of contingency are irritation and tentativeness. Somewhat irritating situations or situations that require tentative phrasing (either because the speaker is not certain about their actual nature, or because the reported ongoing event might irritate the hearer) are normally not constitutive of our structural conception of reality.

Our data show that these modal connotations are, overall, not significantly more frequent in English than in French. This suggests that, in the case of the progressives, (inter)subjective interpretations are not to be equated with an advanced stage of grammaticalization, but that, from an early stage (as reached by être + en train de in Modern French), the progressive construction is susceptible to modal readings, which confirms that these are related to its basic meaning. Furthermore, as the use of the progressive is not obligatory in French, its occurrence may be solely triggered by the speaker’s wish to construe a situation as somewhat different than expected or not straightforward to interpret. In such modal contexts, the use of the French present progressive turns out to be particularly suitable.

In some examples, though, it seems that être + en train de, as well as be + -ing, only convey a purely aspectotemporal value – i.e., indicating that an event is going on in the present (cf. the many instantiations of the category CURRENT ONGOINGNESS) – and it may be difficult to see how these uses tie in with the basic meaning of contingency in immediate reality. Crucial here are, in our view, the presupposed boundaries that are conferred upon every situation in the progressive, while at the same time an internal perspective is created (involving, according to Chuquet (2004:120-137), a “subjective viewpoint”). This is illustrated in Figures 1a and 1b.  

![Diagram](image-url)
Figure 1a depicts a dynamic situation, bounded in time. The function of the progressive is to create an internal perspective on the originally bounded situation, so that within this aspectual scope A, imposed by the progressive, the situational boundaries are disregarded (cf. Figure 1b) (see, also, Declerck 2006:32-34). These boundaries become backgrounded, but they are still present in the overall configuration. In fact, whenever stative verbs in English receive a progressive construal (normally an infelicitous combination), they are coerced and become dynamic (and thus bounded). In French, in which the progressive does not even collocate with stative verbs, the boundaries are also by definition implied. In other words, Figure 1b constitutes the underlying configuration common to all English and French progressive uses. In a second step, then, the scope of the present tense T is imposed, within scope A, as can be seen in Figure 2.

The consistent implication of boundaries in the background is crucially related to the meaning of contingency, in that the use of the present progressive indicates that the situation has a beginning and an endpoint: it is construed as only valid in the present and not in a more structural conception of reality. That is, real though it may be, the event does not have a consolidated status and its occurrence and evolvement at the time of speaking could not have been predicted on the basis of the speaker’s general knowledge. The progressive is, in other words, not only systematically used with dynamic verbs, but it has, also, inherited the specific semantic traits of individual dynamic situations, which typically do not represent anything structural.

6. Concluding remarks and further investigation

In this paper, we have described the semantic parallels and differences between the English and the French present progressives on the basis of in-depth corpus work. In doing so, we have systematically compared the usage types of the French present progressive with those of its English counterpart. The use of être + en train de, being less grammaticalized, turns out to be more restricted, but it does feature the same modal connotations as the English present progressive. These connotations, we argue, reflect the progressive’s basic meaning of epistemic contingency in current reality in the two languages, relevant for all usage types.

At the same time, our corpus findings point to a number of observations that have not been addressed in this paper. How come, for instance, that the French progressive is less grammaticalized than the English one? Another issue that
needs to be tackled is why particular interpretations (such as duration) are very infrequent in French: which paradigmatic or historical characteristics of être + en train de make it prone to specific readings, while excluding others? It thus seems that the data presented in this paper raise a variety of questions that need further investigation.16

Notes

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1 Bertinetto (2000) discusses the progressive in Romance languages in comparison with English, but given the general outset and the diachronic focus of his study, there are few details on the usage types of the progressive in contemporary French and English and on the differences (for instance, in frequency) between the two.
2 In (2001), the corpus was first created, but it has been subject to changes up to the present day.
3 Similarly, Güldemann (2003) shows that the present-versus-past differentiation is valid for analyses of the semantics of the progressive in Bantu languages as well.
4 Here we depart slightly from De Wit and Brisard (manuscript), who do include other purely modal usage types.
5 Naturally, speakers always try to make sure that what they are saying is interpreted correctly. However, in the case of INTERPRETATIVE uses, the speaker has reason to believe – a priori or because there has actually been a misunderstanding – that a particular situation referred to in discourse may be “read” incorrectly. This may also take on the form of a question, in which case the speaker is not sure herself about the real meaning of the (communicative) situation at hand (e.g. Are you saying that…?) and tries to arrive at a shared interpretation.
6 This working method runs the risk of missing usage types of the French present progressive that do not exist in English. Yet, being aware of this possibility, we have explicitly looked for such usage types, but they have not been encountered.
7 Except when used in atypical contexts, such as: Mais regarde, il est en train de porter son t-shirt à l’envers! (“But look, he is wearing his t-shirt inside out!”). In contexts such as this, the use of the progressive seems modally motivated (cf. also Sections 3.9 and 5).
8 Except when the deictic center has been shifted to the future by means of a temporal adjunct scoping over the predicate (e.g., Demain, à cette heure-ci, je suis en train de travailler “Tomorrow, at this hour, I am working”).
9 In example (19), the speaker is pretending to be surprised.
10 Pusch (2003) points out the existence of two other constructions: ’être après + infinitive’ and ’être qui + finite verb’. Yet, since these periphrases are only used in Canada and on the island of Saint-BARTHÉLeMY, we will not take them into account in our analysis, which deals with European French only.
11 This echoes (but generalizes) the idea found in, e.g., Chuquet (1994:135), that, in some contexts, the progressive strongly emphasizes the “instability” of the situation.
12 This reality need of course not be actually present, cf., for instance, the historical–present uses of the present progressive. It would therefore be more correct to say that the situations under consideration are part of a particular conception of reality or “mental space” (Fauconnier, 1994) that is construed as presently available and immediate to the conceptualizer.
13 Figures 1a, 1b and 2 are based on Langacker (2001).
14 Note that other imperfective markers, such as the imparfait, do collocate with stative verbs (without coercing them), which entails that presupposed boundaries are not part and parcel of their semantics (cf. also Laca, 1998:208-209).
15 This even holds for Ljung’s (1980:28) example: The universe is forever expanding. Although this sentence seems to denote a structural situation, Ljung argues that, from an epistemological viewpoint, it does not: the denoted progression goes on longer than usual and speakers are forced “to think in time-frames far beyond the conventional measures” (Kranich, 2010:48).
16 These issues have already been dealt with partially in (Patard and De Wit, 2011).
References


