THE GRAMMATICALIZATION OF THE PRESENT PROGRESSIVE IN FRENCH COMPARED TO ENGLISH

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A couple of observations

- Eng  Right now I *walk* (I ‘m walking) through the garden.
  vs. Fre  Là je *me promène* dans le jardin.

  → PROG obligatory in English but not in French

- Eng  Tomorrow *I’m taking* her to the zoo.
  vs. Fre  *Demain je suis en train de l’emmener* au zoo.

  → PROG excluded in futurate contexts in French but not in English

- Eng  *I’ve been working* here for years, so he knows me quite well.
  vs. Fre  *Je suis en train de travailler* ici depuis des années, donc il me connaît assez bien.

  → PROG rarely used to express (limited) duration in French but not in English
Corpus data

De Wit & Brisard (manuscript), De Wit & Patard (forthcoming):

- Spoken corpora (English: Santa Barbara corpus of spoken American English / French: CFPP2000, Elicop, Clapi)
- Overall frequencies (per 10000 tokens)
CORPUS DATA

- De Wit & Brisard (manuscript), De Wit & Patard (forthcoming):

Eng PROG has a wider range of uses (frequencies per 10000 tokens)
RESEARCH QUESTIONS

(i) Why is the present progressive in French less grammaticalized (less entrenched) than the present progressive in English?

(ii) When is the French present progressive nevertheless preferred over the simple present?

(iii) Why is the use of the French present progressive excluded or avoided in certain contexts?
(i) Why is the Fre prog less grammaticalized (less entrenched) than the Eng prog?

Basically:

→ Different evolutions in the Fre and Eng present-tense paradigms

→ Present-day situation: Different semantics of the simple and the progressive forms in the present tense:
  ○ English simple present indicates perfectivity
  ○ French simple present is aspectually underspecified

→ Consequences for the semantics of the present progressive
(1) Why is the Fre prog less grammaticalized (less entrenched) than the Eng prog?

- Different evolutions in the Fre and Eng present-tense paradigms → different semantics of the simple and the progressive forms in the present tense

**English:**


- Unmarked verbs ~ imperfective
- Prefixed verbs ~ perfective

e.g. *wrītan* (‘to write’)

*ā-wrītan* (‘to write down, out’)

(Brinton 1988: 211)
(1) Why is the Fre prog less grammaticalized (less entrenched) than the Eng prog?

- OE – ME: Loss of aspectual prefixsystem

  → aspectual vacuum (Núñez-Pertejo 2004)

  → trigger grammaticalization progressive (+ Celtic influence)
(1) Why is the Fre prog less grammaticalized (less entrenched) than the Eng prog?

Old English:

Simple present

Middle English:

Simple present  PrProg

Modern English: further grammaticalization of the progressive:

SP  Present progressive  Imperfective

→ Imperfective construction grammaticalizes

→ Simple present more associated with perfective aspect
Why is the French progressive less grammaticalized (less entrenched) than the English progressive?

Simple present as a marker of perfectivity:
- Indicates that a present-time situation is viewed in its entirety (i.e., that the speaker has full knowledge about this situation)
- Conceptual incompatibility of present tense and perfective aspect: “present perfective paradox” (Malchukov 2009).

→ Combination only felicitous in a limited number of contexts (e.g., performatives, states).

Solution: present progressive imperfectivizes dynamic situations so as to align them with the time of speaking.

→ Obligatorification of the English progressive around the end of the 19th century.
Why is the Fre prog less grammaticalized (less entrenched) than the Eng prog?


Original meaning être + en train de: ‘being in the mood, in the disposition to’.

⇒ Only acquired its aspectual function halfway the 19th century.
⇒ late grammaticalization, little time to develop into a full-fledged aspectual marker.
⇒ Apparently no need for a progressive
Why is the Fre prog less grammaticalized (less entrenched) than the Eng prog?

Explanations:
- Availability of an aspectual prefix system (Buridant 2000: 354; Dufresne, Dupuis & Longtin 2001), but: productivity?
- Strong aspectual opposition in the past domain: perfective (passé simple) / imperfective (imparfait).
- Variety of periphrastic progressive constructions: ‘être + present participle’, ‘être après (‘be after’) + infinitive’, ‘être à (‘be at’) + infinitive’ and ‘aller (‘go’) + gerund’.
- Prescriptivism?

→ être + en train de not very grammaticalized + simple present aspectually underspecified
(1) Why is the Fre prog less grammaticalized (less entrenched) than the Eng prog?

Overview:

Present-tense paradigm

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>French</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Simple present</td>
<td>Simple present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perfective</td>
<td>Perfective / Imperfective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present progressive</td>
<td>Pr prog</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

→ Function of present progressive in French?
(II) **When is the French present progressive preferred over the simple present?**

- **Main difference simple present – present progressive:** implied *boundaries* in the background configuration
(ii) When is the French present progressive preferred over the simple present?

- Main difference simple present – present progressive: implied *boundaries* in the background configuration
(II) **When is the French present progressive preferred over the simple present?**

- **Main difference simple present – present progressive:** implied *boundaries* in the background configuration
(ii) When is the French present progressive preferred over the simple present?

- Function progressive: evoking boundaries (cf. Franckel 1989)

  e.g.:
  - Temporary validity: focus on both the initial and the final boundary
  - Incompleteness: focus on the final boundary
  - Modal uses: frequent association of être + en train de with expressions of surprise, tentativeness, irritation and emphasis → the situation “stands out”

  e.g. a. *Il est en train de lire de travers.*
  “He is reading the wrong way.”

  b. *? Il est en train de bien lire.*
  “He is reading well.” (Franckel 1989:78)
(II) When is the French present progressive preferred over the simple present?

- Function progressive: conjuring up boundaries
  - In modal contexts: être + en train de used for the expression of surprise, tentativeness, irritation and emphasis

→ Progressive is used to indicate that a situation does not constitute a structural part of the present reality.
(iii) Why is the use of the French present progressive excluded or avoided in certain contexts?

- Exclusion of futurate

  - departure from the prototypical meaning (no coincidence with the time of speaking)

  - the future situation is contrued *as if* it was ongoing at the time of speaking

    → Virtual, subjectified construal (Langacker 2006)

  - Higher degree of subjectification = higher degree of grammaticalization

    → the Fre PPROG has not arrived (yet?) at those highly subjectified uses.
(iii) Why is the use of the French present progressive excluded or avoided in certain contexts?

- Difficulty with durative contexts


  → Original meaning of être + en train de: ‘being in the mood, in the disposition to’. ‘Atypical’ origin → does not lend itself to a durative interpretation.

- Exceptional contexts: ‘ça fait [temporal indication of duration] que’

  e.g.,
  
  `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’re realizing.’

  → Connotation of surprise/irritation!
CONCLUSION

Comparison French and English present progressive:

- The French progressive is less grammaticalized, less entrenched
  → Explanation: different histories → the English simple present has grammaticalized into a marker of perfective aspect, while the French simple present is aspectually underspecified → the progressive in French is not needed to align dynamic situations with the present.

- The French progressive is not obligatory for imperfectivization, instead it is used to conjure up backgrounded boundaries.

- The French progressive is not used in futurate contexts (which involve a high degree of subjectivity) and hardly occurs in durative contexts (incompatibility with original meaning).
REFERENCES


De Wit & Brisard (manuscript). A Cognitive Grammar account of the semantics of the English present progressive.

De Wit & Patard (forthcoming). Modality, aspect and the progressive. The semantics of the present progressive in French, in comparison with English. Languages in Contrast.


(I) Why is the Fre prog less grammaticalized (less entrenched) than the Eng prog?

Simple present as a marker of perfectivity:
- Indicates that a present-time situation is viewed in its entirety (i.e., that the speaker has full knowledge about this situation):
  - With states → contractibility!
  - In contexts in which the event is (made to) coincide with the present, e.g., performatives
  - With dynamic situations that can be contracted because they have been epistemically “consolidated”: habitual and generic contexts.