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Nominal vs. verbal -ing constructions and the development of the English progressive

1. In Standard English forms bearing an -ing ending can function as: (i) mixed nominalizations (Chomsky 1970) (1a), (ii) gerunds (1b), (iii) participles, used in the progressive (1c) (also in apposition and adjectival function). While (1a) and (1b) have the distribution of a noun, (1c) does not. (1a) further differs from (1b) in that only (1a) has the internal structure of a noun phrase: The -ing form in (1a) can be introduced by an article, be modified by adjectives and its complements are preceded by 'of'. On the other hand, in (1b) 'John's' cannot be substituted by a determiner, the complement bears accusative and adverb modification is possible (Chomsky 1970, Harley & Noyer 1998). In this paper, I address the differences and similarities among these patterns. On the basis of diachronic and dialectal data, I argue that all three constructions originate from a de-verbal action nominal in Old English. They vary, however, with respect to their degree of 'verbness' as a result of the confusion in the diachronic development of the forms used for the English progressive. I account for these differences on the basis of the idea that the number and the feature specification of functional projections these forms are built upon can vary from construction to construction.

2. Old English had two constructions for the progressive: (I) copula be+Present Participle in -ende and (II) copula be+P(reposition)+Derived Nominal in -ung/-ing, Visser (1973). The -ung/ing forms behaved like common nouns. They were modified by adjectives, they co-occurred with demonstratives, and their objects bore genitive Case (2). In Middle English the following changes occur: (a) The participial form changed: -ende had already become -inde in late West Saxon; further, the final /e/ or schwa got lost in levelling and /d/ got lost in consonant cluster reduction. Due to these changes, the form of the participle in (I) and the nominal in (II) became identical. (b) Construction II surfaces with a reduced 'a' before the main verb ('He was a-hunting'), where 'a' is a remnant of the full P 'an'. The change of 'on' to 'an' is found elsewhere. (c) The genitive on the object is re-analysed as of+NP (Visser 1973, Lightfoot 1999). The Modern English mixed nominalization is derived from the Old English derived nominal in -ung, and retains its properties. I propose that the gerund and the progressive of Modern English also have the same source. Evidence for the nominal source of the progressive is provided by the distribution of the construction in earlier stages of the language and in modern varieties of English. Examples containing both the prefix a-, and 'of' (3b) are observed in parallel with constructions lacking (both) 'a-' (3a) and 'of'. Moreover, data from Early Modern English show that earlier uses of progressive are not characterized by the stativity ban typical of the Modern English construction. -ing nominals do not show such a ban either. This ban is also absent from many New English progressives, e.g. Black South African English (4). Furthermore, the nominal pattern of Middle English is preserved in certain English dialects, e.g. the variety spoken in South-West of England (5). But the functional and syntactic confusion between patterns (I) and (II) resulted in a re-analysis of the original nominal form as a verbal one in certain dialects: the nominal being no longer distinct in form from the participle acquired verbal properties as observed in the Standard English progressive. This confusion is also the reason why English has two nominal -ing forms, the gerund and the mixed nominalization. The former developed from the Old English nominal under the influence of the participial pattern. This is a recent distinction, as the two were confused till the early 20th century (6).

3. I propose that the structure of the progressive in South-Western and Middle English includes a PP embedding a derived nominal as the predicate of a small clause complement of 'be': be [XP PP [DP]] (but see van Gelderen 1997). The structure of this DP is that of the mixed nominalization in standard English. It contains D, responsible for the nominal character of the construction, and the functional categories Aspect and v (van Hout & Roeper 1998, Alexiadou 1999). The presence of Aspect and v within the DP creates the 'verbal environment': v provides the eventive reading of the construction (Harley 1995), and Aspect is linked with imperfectivity/limited duration. In standard English, however, the complement of the copula has the form: [XP [AspectP[vP]]]. P and D are absent (cf. Bolinger 1971). Data from other dialects of English will be presented showing that the P of the Middle English pattern is re-analysed as a verbal marker (Appalachian English). The feature specification of v is also a source of variation: v is intransitive in South-western English, but transitive in standard English progressive. Finally, the gerund differs from the mixed nominalization in a similar manner: v is transitive in the former, but not in the latter. Furthermore, though both contain DP, (1b) lacks NumberP, a projection that licenses adjectives (Valois 1991), while (1a) includes such a projection.

Data

- (1) a. The/John's careful hunting of the bear amazed us
b. John's carefully hunting the bear amazed us
c. John is hunting the bear
- (2) oftraedlice raedinga haligra boca
frequent readings holy-gen books-gen
- (3) a. a company of waggish boys were watching of frogs at the side of a pond
b. she had them into the slaughter house, where was a butcher a killing of a sheep
- (4) This is surprising me because I don't see why they have to smile if they don't mean it.
- (5) I were a-peeling of the potatoes
- (6) a. you need not fear the having any of these lords (Shakesp. Merch I.)
b. The gathering of principles out... (Rich. Hooker, Laws of Eccl. 1597)
c. The difficulty in the getting the gold (Sam. Butler Erewhon Revisited, 1902)
d. From the daily reading of the bible (Frederik Harrison, John Ruskin 1902)

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