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Some observations on the pragmatics of the progressive*

I. Introduction

Putting it in the most general terms, the central problems for a pragmatic analysis of verbal aspect could be summed up as follows. First, languages provide evidence for positing some arguably universal conceptual categories, usually called situation types (states, processes, achievements and accomplishments). Second: (a) the linguistic meaning of a language particular aspectual category often does not strictly correlate with a given situation type, and (b) the presumed linguistic meaning of a category is related to the interpretations which that category receives in use in ways which are not obvious and need spelling out. Let me illustrate (a) and (b) in turn.

(1) A: How did Jane spend the morning?

    B: Oh, she read her new book all morning. I suppose she is still at it.

The VP *read a book* is usually assumed to be of the accomplishment type (i.e. defined as *delimited,* involving *complex change* and *duration).* However, the VP in this example cannot be taken to encode the aspectual feature *delimited.* If it did, the second utterance in (1B) would contradict the first, which is not the case. So, if (a) holds good, how are we to decide what is the contribution of the linguistically encoded meaning conveyed by the utterance in which that expression is used? Answer: by addressing point (b), in other words, by looking for a meaning compatible with all contexts in which the expression is used, such that that meaning provides for a reasoned derivation of the interpretations that arise in use.

The crucial question about (1) is: how to explain the 'standard' inference from the linguistically encoded meaning of the VP to the accomplishment predicate reading (i.e., the inference from, roughly, *[process verb + singular count noun]* to the concept of *[delimited event])?* However, this article does not focus on the relation between linguistically encoded meaning and the explicit conceptual content of the utterance. Suffice it to point out that, according to relevance theory, the role of pragmatics in establishing the propositional content of the utterance is not

confined to reference assignment and disambiguation, but is in fact far more significant than that (cf. Sperber and Wilson 1986: ch. 4, section 3 (S&W hereafter)). A detailed discussion of the role of the principle of relevance in bridging the gap between the logical form (the output of linguistic decoding) of an utterance and its explicit content is given in Carston (1988). I have suggested elsewhere (Žegarac 1991) the lines along which the approach could be extended to the analysis of situation type aspect in English. In what follows I look mainly at the relation between the meaning of the progressive construction and the implicated overtones which arise in its use. Consider the examples in (2):

(2a) Peter is being a good boy.

(2b) (?/*) It was being a good September, quite warm in the sun, so I took my time, glancing through the papers, occasionally halting mid-stride to mull over a joke or the better to marvel at a pin-up.

(Martin Amis, *The Rachel Papers,* 28-29)[1]

Why is the progressive relatively incompatible with state predicates? Why is (2a) more readily acceptable than (2b)? The linguistic meaning of the construction may well be something like *ongoing process,* but in order to vindicate this view, a reasoned account of the various shades of meaning of the progressive which arise in use has to be given. So how are the overtones of *reproof* in (3), *insincerity* in (4) and *limited duration* in (5) to be explained?

(3) Old Lily is always feeding the pigeons.

(4) John is being polite.

(5) John is living in Muswell Hill.

These overtones have been much discussed in the literature, but I don't know of any successful attempt at preserving a reasonably austere semantics for the progressive, while giving a satisfactory explanation of how they arise.

First, I consider several characterisations of the linguistic meaning of the progressive, and I argue that this construction linguistically encodes *reference to a non-delimited event instantiating the property denoted hi the predicate* (section 2). I then proceed to give a relevance-theoretic account of the overtones exemplified by (2) to (5) (section 3).

2. The meaning of the progressive

There are several proposals about the contribution of the linguistic meaning of the progressive to the interpretation of the utterances in which it occurs which may seem plausible. Let me briefly consider some of them.

2.1. Perceptible evidence

Goldsmith and Woisetschlaeger (1982) (G&W hereafter) argue that the semantics of the progressive construction is twofold. First, the progressive encodes the traditionally recognised aspectual feature *non-delimited.* Second, G&W point out that the progressive in (6a) describes the situation *phenomenally,* on the basis of its manifestations, as opposed to the simple in (6b), which describes it structurally, i.e. as a property applying to the subject irrespective of any actual events.

(6a) John is walking to school.

(6b) John walks to school.

According to G&W the *phenomenal* meaning of the progressive is closely linked with what they call its *evidential* meaning illustrated by the contrast between (7a) and (7b):

(7a) The engine doesn't smoke anymore.

(7b) The engine isn't smoking anymore.

While (7a) can be used felicitously to describe the functioning of the engine on the basis of the speaker's *knowledge,* (7b) suggests that the account is based on *evidence* of the engine's actual functioning at the time of communication. Since G&W take the *evidence/knowledge* contrast to be a basic semantic distinction, their observations on (7b) show that these authors take *evidence* (a more precise term would be *perceptible evidence),* as part of the semantics of the progressive. But, however easy it may be to find examples which seemingly lend support to this proposal, it is equally easy to find compelling ones which disconfirm it. One can certainly use the progressive in talking about an event and deny that one has *perceptible evidence* of its occurrence, while asserting one's belief that the event being described is actually taking place.

(8) I think my kettle is boiling in the kitchen (although we can't hear anything
in the living room). I switched it on five minutes ago.

My knowledge that *my kettle takes about five minutes to boil* may be sufficient
evidence for my belief that *my kettle is actually boiling.* The progressive is the
appropriate form, although the availability of *perceptible evidence* is precluded.
One might still take the view that merely *evidence,* rather than *perceptible
evidence,* is the appropriate term. However, this is not a viable alternative, because
it would fail to discriminate between the progressive and the simple. Both
statements (7a) and (7b) may be understood as based on evidence, but they describe
different states of affairs. In (7a) the engine needn't actually be working at the time
of speech, whereas (7b) would normally be used in describing the actual
functioning of the engine at the time of the utterance. So it would appear that the
progressive encodes some information about the situation described by the
utterance.

2.2. Limited duration
An apparently plausible proposal due to Leech (1971) is that the progressive
indicates, by virtue of its linguistic meaning, *limited extension of the situation in
time.* Utterances like *John is living in Muswell Hill,* for instance, are so readily and
so regularly interpreted as conveying the idea of temporariness (absent in their
counterparts with the simple) that the inclination to consider *limited duration* an
intrinsic part of the meaning of the progressive may seem natural enough. Apart
from considerable intuitive appeal, this would make it possible pragmatically to
explain in a fairly straightforward way a number of other overtones associated with
the use of the progressive, such as *dynamicness* and *temporal definiteness.* But
Leech's proposal faces some serious difficulties. As G&W (1982: 84—85*)* point out,
it is perfectly possible to use the progressive while denying that the state of affairs
described is of *limited duration.* Thus, the utterances, *Nelson 's column now stands
on Trafalgar Square and it is likely to stay there forever,* and *Nelson 's column is
now standing on Trafalgar Square and it is likely to stay there forever,* are both
acceptable. Of course, they convey slightly different overtones, and one utterance

may be preferred to the other, depending on the context. The point is that, if *limited duration* were part of the linguistic meaning of the progressive, an utterance in which temporariness is explicitly denied should not be acceptable with the progressive form. One could take the view that *limited duration* is the conventionalised meaning of the progressive of the verb *live,* in (5).[2] It is almost as if *be living in a place* means *live temporarily in a place.* I think two observations are in order here. First, even if *limited duration* is conventionalised in this case, a pragmatic explanation of how it came to be conventionalised should be given. Second, the overtone of *limited duration* is not confined to the predicate *be living.* Thus, the progressive *be standing* may indeed be used to convey this shade of meaning (though, perhaps less saliently so than the progressive of *live).* So, several issues are at stake here. How does the overtone arise? Why is it more salient with some verbs than with others? Is the overtone of *limited duration* conventionalised in the progressive *be living?* I get back to these questions later (section 3.3).

2.3. Experientiality

The progressive often conveys the idea of experiential involvement in the situation described by the utterance. Whitaker (1983) gives this marching song as an example of the progressive used to give the impression of eyewitness testimony of future events:

(9) She'll be coming round the mountain,

   When she comes,

   She'll be wearing silk pyjamas,

   When she comes,

   She'll be riding six white horses,

   When she comes…

It is, of course, very difficult to maintain the view that *experientiality* is part of the linguistic meaning of the progressive. Objections similar to the ones raised against *perceptible evidence,* and *limited duration* as part of the linguistic meaning of the progressive could be adduced against *experientiality* as well. But a pragmatic account ought to be able to explain how the overtone of experientiality arises. For

such an account to be possible a detailed analysis of the interpretation of the simple and the progressive in relation to tense would have to be given.

2.4. Is the progressive a stative construction?

The suggestion that the answer might be 'yes' seems not only counterintuitive to me, but is extremely hard to argue for. If I consider this possibility here, it is mainly because this proposal has been repeatedly put forward and maintained by a number of authors over the last ten years or so (cf. Vlach 1981, Herweg 1991). The following are the main arguments in support of this view. First, the temporal interpretation of state verbs in some linguistic contexts is very similar to that of process verbs in the progressive.

The examples in (10) are due to Vlach (1981).

(l0a) Max was here when I arrived.

(l0b) Max was running when I arrived.

In (l0a) the time of the speaker's arrival falls within the time span of Max's being present at the place referred to by *here.* In (l0b) the time of the speaker's arrival falls within the time span of Max's running. The similarity in the temporal interpretations of the state predicate *be here* and the process predicate *run* is determined by the use of the progressive in (l0b). The utterance with the simple corresponding to (l0b) has different temporal interpretations.

(11) Max ran when I arrived.

On the most salient reading of (11) Max's running immediately follows the speaker's arrival. Furthermore, it seems impossible to find a suitably convoluted context in which (11) would have the temporal reading characteristic of (l0b). Should we then conclude, as Vlach (1981) does, that the progressive construction turns an event predicate into a state predicate? Not necessarily. The parallel temporal interpretations of (l0a) and (l0b) might be explained in terms of some semantic feature other than stativity. The decision whether the progressive is a stative construction depends not only on its putative similarities with state predicates, but also on an appreciation of the differences. Suppose (as I did in section 2.1) that the progressive encodes *nondelimitedness.* On the assumption that

state predicates do not encode reference to endpoints (cf. Smith 1983, 1986) the similarity between (l0a) and (l0b) is easy to explain. More interestingly, the difference in the temporal readings available for pairs of utterances like (12a) and (12b) could be explained on this view, but not on Vlach's.

(l2a) Macbeth believed in ghosts when he saw Banquo.

(12b) ?Macbeth was believing in ghosts when he saw Banquo.

While *believe* in (12a) may easily have an inceptive reading, on which seeing Banquo immediately precedes, or is simultaneous with, the inception of Macbeth's believing in ghosts, *be believing* in (12b) must receive a non-inceptive interpretation. This is readily accounted for precisely on the assumption that the simple form of a state verb does not encode reference to endpoints, while the progressive does encode *non-delimitedness*. The contrast between (l2a) and (12b) is, therefore, predicted. Second, Vlach (1981: 286—287) gives historical evidence for the view that the progressive is a stative construction.

(13) John is *on/at/a-* hunting.

Arguably, the progressive has evolved from constructions like (13), where *on, at, a-* are prepositions, and *hunting* a gerundive noun phrase. Vlach (1981: 287) claims that 'the modern progressive has at least very nearly the same meaning as the older construction', so that (13) can be paraphrased as: *John is in the process of hunting.* In other words, the progressive represents a process as a state. I do not find this argument compelling. There is in modern English a choice, as shown in (14) and (15):

(14) The plane is flying.

(15) The plane is in flight.

Now, (14) and (15) are (more or less) near synonyms, very much like (13) and its paraphrase suggested by Vlach. But for all the similarities between them, these utterances are not quite synonymous. Intuitively the difference is that (14) describes *the flying of the plane* as an ongoing event, while (15) describes it somewhat statively (due to the locative preposition *in* followed by the noun *flight).*

So, if the progressive is a stative construction, the intuitively clear difference between (14) and (15) remains unaccounted for.

Third, Herweg (1991: 970—971) claims that states are 'temporally unbounded', and are, therefore, prevented from 'being located within a time span'. Thus, if the progressive is a stative construction, the unacceptability of (16) and (17) is explained in the same terms.

(16) *Peter stood on the beach twice this morning.

(17) *Peter was walking along the shore twice this morning.

But, whatever the difficulty in interpreting (16) and (17) may be due to, it is not stativity. Consider (18):

(18) I was ill twice last month.

The predicate *be ill* is a stative one, and yet (18) is acceptable, which it should not be, if Herweg were right. Therefore, (16) and (17) cannot be taken as lending support to the claim that the progressive is a stative construction.

Fourth, it is possible to argue on syntactic grounds that the progressive is a stative construction, because in the progressive the *-ing* predicate appears as the complement of the state verb *be*. However, it is far from clear that *be* in the progressive has any stative meaning. It may just be an auxiliary whose function is to carry tense and agreement features.

Finally, when a state verb is used in the progressive it usually receives an event-like, dynamic interpretation. As far as I can see, this cannot be explained on the view that the progressive is a stative construction.

2.5. Reference to instantiations of properties

The discussion in the following sections rests on the view that the meaning of the progressive is adequately and fairly exhaustively defined in terms of reference to a non-delimited event instantiating the property denoted by the predicate. Let me highlight the intuitions behind this claim by looking at the well-attested similarity between temporal and anaphoric expressions (cf. Partee 1984, Carston 1988). Consider the following examples:

(19) She gave him her key and he opened the door.

(taken from Carston 1988: 161)

An utterance of (19) may be used to convey a thought like (20):

(20) She$_1$ gave him$_2$ [her$_1$ key]$_3$ at t and he$_2$ opened the door at $t+n$ using [the key]$_3$

It is clear that the proposition expressed by (19), cannot plausibly be taken to be fully linguistically encoded. Temporal interpretation, reference assignment to the pronouns *he* and *she,* as well as the assumption that the door was opened with the key, are all determined by pragmatic enrichment.

Carston (1988: 161) makes two observations which seem particularly important in connection with the similarity between the interpretation of personal pronouns and tense forms. First, just as the linguistic meaning of pronouns does not fully determine their referents, the temporal information encoded by tense forms does not fully determine what moments in time they refer to. Therefore, the t and the $t+n$ in (20) are pragmatically established. The past tense forms *gave* and *opened* probably explicitly indicate that past events are being talked about. At which times in the past the events occurred is, again, determined inferentially. Second, the linguistic meanings of the tense forms in (20) are best taken to be even less specific than the meanings of personal pronouns, as shown by examples like (21). (originally due to Partee):

(21) I didn't turn off the stove.

(taken from Carston 1988: 161)

While the personal pronouns *she* and *he* are used to refer to particular individuals, the utterance (21) is not necessarily taken to mean that there is some specific moment of time in the past at which the speaker did not turn off the stove. The linguistic meaning of tense forms appears to be more like that of indefinite than definite pronouns. It is sometimes inferentially narrowed down to pick out particular moments (or intervals), and sometimes not. Thus, the utterance *Someone has eaten the cake* may be taken to mean either that some specific individual has eaten the cake, or simply as indefinite. Tense forms in the simple aspect provide no more than fairly rough guidelines on the basis of which the temporal interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance is to be derived. Consider now (22), the counterpart of (21) with the progressive aspect:

(22) I wasn't turning off the stove.

Unlike (21), (22) would normally be understood as referring to some particular moment at which the speaker claims not to have been engaged in the activity of turning off the stove. Also, the implicature *The speaker was doing something else at the particular time referred to in the utterance,* is, characteristically, more salient when the progressive is used. So, either the progressive encodes reference to particular moments (or intervals) of time, or the temporal definiteness of (22) must be derivative upon some other semantic feature of the progressive. Well, there are uses of the progressive which can hardly be said to be compatible with definite temporal reference as the primary linguistic meaning of the construction. Thus, the progressive appears quite commonly in the present perfect (e.g. *It's been raining again),* although the perfect does not take definite temporal specifiers *(*I've been to the cinema yesterday).* Of course, individual events are (unlike states) intrinsically associated with specific time. So, a linguistic form which grammaticalises reference to an individual event also implies the existence of a specific time at which the event occurs.

Let's assume that the linguistic meaning of the progressive is correctly and fairly exhaustively defined in terms of *non-delimitedness* on the one hand, and *reference to an event instantiating the property denoted by the predicate,* on the other. All predicates denote properties: *feed the pigeons, be polite, live in Muswell Hill,* and *be good* are all properties. Some of these properties are more readily thought of and talked about as instantiated, i.e. as being actualised as events, than others. The contribution of the progressive to the meaning of the predicate is that it refers to a *non-delimited event instantiating the property denoted by the predicate.* I assume that the simple aspect is unspecified with regard to both *(non-)delimitedness* and *instantiation.* Since reference to a particular event implies a particular time, the temporal definiteness of (22) receives a straightforward explanation.

The sometimes strong intuitions about *perceptible evidence* etc. as an intrinsic part of the meaning of the progressive stem from people's encyclopaedic knowledge about instantiations of properties, in other words, happenings or events: they take time to happen, they involve change, have beginnings and endings, and they are characteristically

represented on the basis of perception. Which of these features pertaining to encyclopaedic knowledge about events will be more salient (i.e. more accessible), will vary from utterance to utterance and from context to context. This explains why the ideas of *perceptible evidence, limited duration,* and *experientiality,* for example, are sometimes more and sometimes less prominent. The following is an attempt at spelling out in more detail how these and other overtones arise.

3. Relevance theory and the overtones of *mild reproof, insencerity* and *temporariness*

The following account of the overtones illustrated in the examples (2) to (5) draws on the relevance-theoretic notion of optimal relevance, on the one hand, and the role of loose use and interpretive (attributive) use in utterance interpretation, on the other hand.

An utterance is optimally relevant if and only if it achieves adequate effects for no unjustifiable effort. Clearly, utterances in the simple and the progressive describe very similar situations, and hence give rise to very similar effects. The progressive, however, is linguistically more complex than the simple, and a speaker aiming at optimal relevance will use it only if she intends to achieve more effects than would have been derived from the corresponding simple. Thus the very choice of the progressive over the simple alerts the hearer to an extra set of intended effects. Which effects are found will depend, on the one hand, on the range of accessible contexts, and on the other, on such additional features as loose use and interpretive use, as I will attempt to show.

2.1. Mild reproof

Two elements seem to combine to give rise to the shade of meaning of *mild reproof* in (23). The first one is the impression that the event is being talked about as experienced, the second is that utterances like (23) and (24) are examples of hyperbole.

(23a) Old Lily is always feeding the pigeons.

(23b) Old Lily always feeds the pigeons.

(24a) The baby is always crying. (24b) The baby always cries.

By virtue of pointing indexically, as it were, to instantiations of properties, the progressive refers to something observable, capable of being represented on the basis of perception. Therefore, the speaker who uses (23a) or (24a) may be understood as talking about her personal experience, and this may be exploited by the hearer in making inferences about the intended meaning of the utterance. The contrast between (24a) and (24b) is of particular interest in this connection. The propositional form of both utterances conveys the information that *the baby cries at all (relevant) times,* but only (24a) is really strongly felt as expressing the speaker's attitude toward the situation described by the utterance. Shades of meaning such as *annoyance, nervousness, dissatisfaction* and the like, are more prominent in (24a) than in (24b). If the speaker of (23a) or (24a) intended merely to describe the characteristic behaviours of *Old Lily* and *the baby,* the utterances with the simple would be more appropriate, since explicit reference to individual instances of these activities would cost more effort without yielding any further contextual effects in the initial context. It is the assumption that the speaker of (23a) and (24a) is aiming at optimal relevance (i.e. adequate effects for no unjustifiable effort) which leads the addressee to include in the context some propositions about the speaker's being related to the situations *via* experience, and to derive the corresponding conclusions. How does this experiential quality of the progressive give rise to more specific impressions of *reproof,* and *disapproval?* The answer partly follows from the fact that (23a) and (24a) are examples of hyperbole. In the light of highly accessible encyclopaedic information about people and feeding animals or crying babies, the hearer will interpret these utterances as being used *loosely,* rather than literally. On S&W's view, the propositional form of an utterance is an interpretation of a thought of the speaker's. An utterance is said to be used literally, when its propositional form and the thought of the speaker which it purports to represent are identical — when they share all logical and contextual implications when processed in the intended context. An utterance is used loosely when its propositional form shares some (but not all) logical and contextual implications with the thought it represents. Metaphor is a variety of loose use;

hyperbole is another. The crucial point for an account of the examples (23a) and (24a) is that relevance theory does not regard loose use as a departure from the norm, but takes literalness, hyperbole and metaphor to be on a continuum with strict identity between proposition expressed and thought interpreted at one end, and the vaguest degrees of resemblance at the other. In this respect a relevance-theoretic analysis departs from most other pragmatic accounts which endorse the maxim of truthfulness and, consequently, take literalness as the norm. On S&W's view, in the process of utterance interpretation a less than literal (i.e. loose or metaphorical) understanding is generally considered first, with a literal interpretation being selected only when a less than literal one would be inconsistent with the principle of relevance (cf. S&W 1986: 233—234; Wilson and Sperber 1988: 142-145. The overtones of mild reproof and disapproval in (23a) and (24a) arise as a result of the hearer's search for optimal relevance in the context of general assumptions about *feeding pigeons* and *crying babies.* What could the speaker have intended to communicate by talking about Old Lily's feeding the pigeons as one continuous event, or a series of continuous events (depending on how one interprets (23a)), and by using the adverbial *always?* How frequent and intense must the baby's crying be to be worth describing as one prolonged event? The overtones are hypotheses which the hearer makes in the process of utterance interpretation. For Old Lily's feeding of the pigeons to be worth talking about as a continuous event taking place over a time sufficiently long to be worth referring to by the adverbial *always,* the speaker must have intended to communicate her attitude towards Old Lily's/the baby's characteristic behaviour. The impression of reproof derives from a number of weak implicatures thus obtained: *Old Lily spends more time feeding the pigeons than a sensible person would do, Pigeons are not nice birds, Pigeons know how to find food and needn't be fed by people, Pigeons are a nuisance and a health hazard* .... Of course, this account does not stipulate that the overtone of reproof is always equally salient, or that it is always communicated. Which interpretation the utterance receives is largely determined by contextual factors, such as encyclopaedic knowledge and the linguistic context. For example, in an utterance like *When I am going home from work, Old Lily is always feeding the pigeons in*

the park, the progressive describes an event (feeding the pigeons) regularly overlapping with another event (going back from work). Nor will the overtone of reproof arise in case it is mutually manifest to the interlocutors that the speaker absolutely adores pigeons, and could have used the utterance (23a) only in admiration.

Similar considerations play a part in the interpretation of (24a). Given the widely held assumptions about the persistence of a baby's crying and the effect this has on people, an utterance in which a continuous event of crying extending over a very long time is predicated of a baby, will predictably convey an impression consisting of propositions such as: *The baby cries so much that the speaker can hardly bear it, The speaker disapproves of the baby's crying, The speaker is feeling apologetic about the noise made by the baby.* The feeling that terms such as *reproof or disapproval* (and the like) fail to capture fully the overtones associated with the progressives in (23a) and (24a) is due to these overtones' being impressions, to their being made up of a range of propositions which have simultaneously become more salient, and, therefore, cannot be expressed in one word. Which assumptions will be part of the impression crucially depends on the context against which the utterance is interpreted. For example, if no unpleasant noise is heard at the time of communication, (24a) is not likely to be interpreted as an apology. The crux of the matter is that by using a comparatively simple utterance the speaker causes a great number of hypotheses to become simultaneously more salient to the hearer. The overtones are a function of the context brought to bear in the interpretation process. The account of the implication of insincerity in (4) illustrates the same point.

3.2. Insincerity

The predicates *be polite* and *love the fruit salad* denote properties which cannot easily be talked about in terms of their instantiations, because they are conceptualised as patently non-instantiable. The property *be polite* pertains to character, and *love* to emotional disposition. This affects the interpretations of (25) and (26):

(25) John is being polite.

(26) Mary is loving the fruit salad.

The linguistic meaning of (25) and (26) is roughly paraphrased as: *John is instantiating the property 'be polite',* and *Mary is instantiating the property 'love fruit salad'*. The ideas of *an instantiation of a trait of character,* in (25), and *an instantiation of an emotion,* in (26), are closely related in one's encyclopaedic knowledge to the idea of *behaviour.* Hence, both (25) and (26) strongly suggest that the speaker is actually talking about behaviour. To see that this is so, consider the following scenario:

Three people A, B and C are engaged in a conversation. A says something to B, and B takes offence at what A has just said. C realises that A had intended to be kind to B, and that A's utterance can be interpreted as expressing genuine politeness. Therefore, C says to B:

(27) A is being polite.

The use of the progressive gives B easy access to hypotheses such as: *A's utterance was an act of genuine politeness.* The progressive in (27) may easily be the optimally relevant form here, because it is a very economical way of attributing polite behaviour on a specific occasion to someone. By using the progressive the speaker invites the hearer to conceptualise the property of *being polite* as an event, thereby making more accessible other assumptions about A: *A said what he said because A is a polite person, A did it out of kindness, B should not be offended.* A more economical way of achieving the intended effects is, in fact, not easy to think of. Let's assume that C uses (28):

(28) A is behaving politely.

The speaker who said (28) would lay greater emphasis on *behaviour,* and the utterance would give rise to slightly different contextual effects than (27). For example, the initial context would include more assumptions about A's behaviour on other occasions, and might give rise to implicatures like: *A 's behaviour has changed, Although A is behaving politely, it is not possible to tell whether A is genuinely polite, A is rather conscious of the need to show good manners,* etc. What about the overtone of *insincerity* typically associated with (25)?

In an earlier paper (Žegarac 1989) I suggested that the overtone of insincerity arises as an implicature in roughly the following way. By saying that *John is instantiating politeness,* the speaker indicates that she is not fully committed to the stronger claim *John is polite,* which, if the speaker truly believed it, would be more relevant (cf. G&W 1982). Hence the implicature that the speaker does not actually believe that *John's behaviour is genuinely polite.* There are a number of problems with this account.[3] First, the speaker may well have doubts about the general statement, *John is a polite person,* while believing that *John is genuinely acting politely on a particular occasion.* It is indeed possible for the speaker explicitly to express the thought that *John is genuinely acting politely on a given occasion,* thereby implicating that she is not committed to the general claim: *John is a polite person.* Second, on the *insincerity* reading of (25), the speaker is taken to be distancing herself not merely, or not at all, from the stronger claim *(John is a polite person)* but primarily from the weaker one *(John is acting in a genuinely polite way).* The speaker of (25) seemingly expresses a thought like *John is instantiating politeness at the moment.* It is perfectly conceivable that the hearer has highly accessible knowledge about (a) people's frequent inclination to assume a polite manner without being genuinely polite, (b) John's character, (c) the speaker's general opinion of John, and the like. When such encyclopaedic information is brought to bear on the interpretation of (25), the understanding on which the utterance represents, not a belief of the speaker's, but rather, a thought that the speaker wishes to attribute to others, while distancing herself from this belief with ridicule and scorn, will be highly accessible, and may easily be optimally relevant to the hearer. (For a detailed account of this type of attributive use and irony see Wilson and Sperber 1988: 145—147.) This interpretation would give rise to implicatures such as: *John is insincere, John is desperate to make a good impression, John is making a great effort to conceal his real feelings, Only a fool could believe that John is really acting politely,* etc. Some other, more straightforward formulation, would fail to communicate all these implicatures as economically as (25). Example (26), illustrates the same points:

(26) Mary is loving the fruit salad.

Why is (26) so suggestive of Mary's behaviour as expressing the great and genuine pleasure she finds in eating a particular fruit salad? Because, given generally held

assumptions about fruit salad as a favourite dessert, the most likely immediately accessible context upon hearing (26) will be one which includes the assumption: *Mary loves fruit salad,* or, at least, the context does not include a proposition like: *There are reasons to believe that Mary doesn't like fruit salad.* If (26) is less likely to be interpreted as expressing insincerity than (25), it is precisely because the contexts in which this interpretation would be optimally relevant are characteristically less accessible. By phrasing the utterance in such a way that it draws attention to the subject's behaviour, while predicating the property *love the fruit salad,* the speaker strengthens the hearer's existing assumptions about Mary's love for fruit salad, thereby instructing him to concentrate on Mary's actual behaviour, her loving the particular fruit salad which she happens to be eating. This is how implicatures like the following are derived: *Mary is completely absorbed in eating the fruit salad, Mary finds the speaker's salad particularly good, One should make fruit salad when one invites Mary, My fruit salad is particularly good this time.*

Given a different setting, the import of (26) will be different. For example, if Mary didn't like fruit salad on some previous occasion, (26) may again be more appropriate than the corresponding utterance with the simple. It is the contrast between Mary's past and present behaviour that is relevant here. The simple present would, possibly misleadingly, suggest that the speaker has conclusive evidence of *Mary's love for fruit salad.* By using the progressive, she may avoid committing herself to that claim. Similarly, if it is mutually manifest to the speaker and to the hearer that Mary hates fruit salad, the utterance will be understood as somewhat ironical.

Example (2a), *Peter is being a good boy,* would receive the same explanation as the two discussed here. It is also easy to see why (2b), *?It was being a good September …,* is less acceptable than (2a).

(29a) It was a good September.

(29b) ?It was being a good September

In order to explain why (2a) and (29a) are perfectly acceptable, whereas (29b) is somewhat odd, one needs to think of the difference between *being good* as a state,

and *being good* as an event. The property *be good* is not easily conceptualised as an event, and when it is so construed, the subject referent is readily understood as an agent. So, in *Peter is being a good boy,* the subject referent is readily understood as behaving in a good way. In (29a), the property is not predicated as an event, so the interpretation on which September is construed as the agent is not salient. Therefore, the hearer does not invest the extra processing effort involved in considering an interpretation which would normally fail to yield adequate contextual effects in any easily accessible context, and (29a) is more acceptable than (29b). My main point is that the contrast between (2a) and (2b) can be successfully and naturally explained on the view that the progressive, by virtue of its linguistic meaning, makes reference to an event instantiating the property denoted by the predicate.

The examples examined so far involve implicatures deriving from the increased effort required by the progressive, interacting with loose use and attributive use. The overtone of temporariness differs in this respect from the first two.

3.3. Limited duration

The overtone of temporariness is particularly salient in examples like (30):

(30a) John is living in Muswell Hill.

(30b) John lives in Muswell Hill.

Whether the speaker uses (30a) or (30b), the idea conveyed is that *John is a resident of Muswell Hill at the time of communication.* The meaning of (30a) is roughly: *An event of John's living in Muswell Hill obtains at speech time.* It contrasts with the meaning of (30b), which is something like: *The property 'live in Muswell Hill' applies to John at the time of speech.* Generally speaking, if there is no evidence to the contrary, the property *live in X* is taken as relatively stable, nearly synonymous with *be an inhabitant of X.* By using the progressive in talking about such properties the speaker invites the hearer to form a representation of the property *live in Muswell Hill* as an ongoing event. The overtone of limited duration arises in the process of utterance interpretation in context. The hearer forms hypotheses about what the speaker aiming at optimal relevance intended to communicate by using the progressive and stops at the first interpretation which seems plausible to

him, i.e. the first one which he finds consistent with the principle of relevance: *John is temporarily an inhabitant of Muswell Hill.* Since the expression *be living in X* is frequently used to convey the idea of temporariness, this interpretation may have become so highly accessible that the meaning of *limited duration* appears to be conventionalised. If it actually is conventionalised, then, whatever the context, it should not be possible to make the assertion (30a), while denying the temporariness of the event. I am not sure whether this is the case, and leave the possibility open.

In other utterances, the overtone of temporariness associated with instantiations of properties does not arise at all. Consider (31):

(3la) The Earth is turning on its axis.

(31b) The Earth turns on its axis.

In the light of common knowledge that an everlasting property of the Earth is spoken about explicitly as an ongoing event, the implicature of limited duration as part of the intended meaning will not be derived. I think that some people find utterances like these slightly odd precisely because they explicitly depict as instantiated, and, therefore, transient, events normally taken to be everlasting. If the speaker has the intention to convey the idea of temporariness, she would have had to do so explicitly, as, in this case, the hearer could not be expected to be able easily to access the context required for the interpretation of the utterance. In the most likely easily accessible context, by referring to the event indexically, as it were, the speaker will lead the hearer to construct some assumptions about the relevance of the internal structure of the process itself, and to interpret the utterance in the context of these assumptions. Thus, the progressive in (31a) may give rise to anticipatory hypotheses about the relation between the phases of the earth's revolution and other events which are related to it in a relevant way. The use of the progressive would then reduce the processing effort required for the interpretation of the utterances to follow. (e.g. in a classroom situation where the teacher is explaining the revolution of the earth in relation to the changes of day and night).

4. Conclusion

I hope to have shown how, given a fairly simple characterisation of the meaning of the progressive, relevance theory provides a natural explanation for some aspects of its meaning which arise in use. Admittedly, the analysis proposed here needs a lot of honing. However, if it proved plausible, the approach could, I hope, be extended to other uses of the progressive as well as of the simple, and would have significant ramifications for the study of aspect in general.

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NOTES

1 Billy Clark drew my attention to this example.

2 John Lyons pointed out the possibility that the overtone of *limited duration* is conventionalised in the meaning of the predicate *be living*.

3. Deirdre Wilson impressed upon me that the overtone of *insincerity* is plausibly explained interms of attributive use.