

**Adjectival participles or present participles?
On the classification of some dubious examples
from the *Helsinki Corpus***

Paloma NÚÑEZ PERTEJO
Universidade de Santiago de Compostela

ABSTRACT

As a general rule, adjectival participles in *-ing* and *-ing* participles in combination with *be* are not difficult to differentiate from each other in Present-day English. However, in earlier stages of English, some problems may arise concerning the classification of *-ing* forms as adjectival or verbal, since the division between what is adjectival and what is verbal —progressive— was not so clearcut in early Modern English as in Present-day English. This paper offers a series of combinations of *be* + *-ing* retrieved from the early Modern English section of the *Helsinki Corpus*, in which the dubious nature of the *-ing* form — whether adjectival or verbal — makes it difficult to classify such combinations. In some cases, it is possible to resolve the ambiguity by means of the context or by means of different tests, which help to clarify the nature of the form in *-ing*. In some others, however, it is not possible to decipher such ambiguity and the examples are therefore open to a double interpretation. In this connection, we can say that there is a series of constructions along a gradient between what is verbal — progressive — and what is adjectival.

1. INTRODUCTION

As is well known, there are no problems, as a general rule, to distinguish combinations of the type *this is interesting* or *this is boring* from combinations of the type *the bird is singing* or *the dog is running*. In the former case, the *-ing* forms are adjectival, whereas in the latter case the forms in *-ing* are verbal and the combination *be* + *-ing* in *the bird is singing* and *the dog is running* is called ‘progressive’.

There are many adjectives in English ending in *-ing*, which are usually referred to as ‘adjectival participles’ or ‘participial adjectives’ (cf. Visser 1963-1973:1815 and Quirk *et al* 1985:§7.15 respectively), for they resemble

participles in form but behave like ordinary adjectives. As I have just mentioned, it is usually very easy to differentiate this kind of adjectives (or participles) from present participles, at least in Present-day English. However, there are cases in which ambiguity may arise, as in, for example, *she is calculating* (is she calculating *something*? Is she calculating *by nature*?). There exist different ways in which the nature of the form in *-ing* – whether adjectival or verbal – can be clarified. One of them involves the presence of a direct object, which would confirm the verbal nature of the combination, as in *she is calculating our salaries*, but when there is no direct object present, it may be at times a hard task to identify the nature of the form in *-ing*. However, *-ing* forms derived from transitive verbs when found alone without an object are nowadays considered adjectival in nature, so *calculating* in *she is calculating* would be classified as adjectival in Present-day English.

Premodification by *very*, on the other hand, is usually indicative of the adjectival nature of the *-ing* form, as in *she is very calculating*, the same as the use of certain prepositions, as in, for example, *his opinions are shocking to me*, in which *shocking* is clearly adjectival. The absence of the preposition – *his opinions are shocking me* – would lead to the classification of the cluster as progressive, since *me* functions as the direct object of the preceding verb phrase – *are shocking*. There also exist other ways in which the nature of the *-ing* form can be clarified, but they are not so reliable. It has to be said, however, that despite their external similarity, misunderstanding between *-ing* participles and *-ing* adjectives is rare, since we usually have enough criteria to classify these forms under one category or the other.

Therefore, ‘participial adjectives’ or ‘adjectival participles’ should be analyzed as heads of adjectival phrases since they do not form a constituent with the verb in such cases, while present participles will be analyzed as heads of verb phrases and the whole combination *be + -ing* will be referred to as ‘progressive’.

As we shall see in the following sections, in earlier stages of English, the distinction between *-ing* adjectives and *-ing* participles was not so clear-cut, and the line between them was not so easy to draw. In this connection, some of the most ambiguous cases from the early Modern English period will be analyzed, using data retrieved from the early Modern English section of the *Helsinki Corpus* (1500-1710). The situation of both *-ing* participles and *-ing* adjectives in Old and Middle English will be briefly discussed as well, just to throw some light on this particular aspect before delving in the early Modern English examples.

2. -ING PARTICIPLES AND -ING ADJECTIVES IN OLD AND MIDDLE ENGLISH

In Old and Middle English, but especially in Old English, it was more difficult to account for the differences between adjectival and participial constructions than it is in Present-day English on the basis of the more than likely adjectival nature of the present participle, which, as many scholars hold, is said to have originated from a plain, ordinary adjective. For this reason, participles in Old English were very similar to ordinary adjectives, and they could even be declined weak or strong, just like other adjectives. This fact has led some grammarians to the conclusion that *beon/wesan* + *-ende*, which is considered by many the real ancestor of *be* + *-ing*, was formed on the analogy of *beon/wesan* + adjective.

In the course of time, these participles started to increasingly lose their adjectival properties and started to develop verbal characteristics so that they finally became completely integrated within the English verb system.

In order to distinguish present participles from *-ing* adjectives, Denison has proposed a series of tests which may be helpful when dealing with Old and Middle English examples (1993:373-80). Some of them, such as the presence of a direct object or the use of certain prepositions have already been discussed,¹ but some others are relevant for earlier periods, namely:

- modifiers: the use of certain modifiers, such as *hu* 'how', *swa* 'so' or *to* 'too' was indicative of the adjectival nature of the form in *-ende*; others, such as *swiþe* 'much, very', were used to modify both adjectives and participles;

- substitution: the use of *dyde* as a substitute in (1) below suggests that the form in *-ende* is verbal rather than adjectival, and the cluster should be translated as *be sitting*:

- (1) HomS 8 (B/Hom 2) 147 (Traugott 1992:188-189):
Ðonne *beo* we *sittende* be þæm wege, swa se blinda *dyde*
'Then we should *be sitting* at the way-side, as the blind man *did*'.

In turn, the use of the substitute *wæs* (*wesan*) for *dyde* in (2) would suggest that the nature of the *-ende* form is adjectival rather than verbal and the cluster should be translated as *be seated*:

- (2) Ðonne *beo* we *sittende* be þæm wege, swa se blinda *wæs*
'Then we should *be seated* at the way-side, as the blind man *was*'.

¹ The use of other 'tests' when dealing with earlier examples can nevertheless be dangerous (cf., for example, the use of *very* as indicative of adjectival nature).

Examples (3) and (4) are Middle English examples which have been quoted to illustrate some of the difficulties arisen in the classification of *-yng(e)* forms as adjectival or verbal, although the former option seems, perhaps, more likely in both cases:²

- (3) *Canterbury Tales*, I.2201 (Fischer 1992:251):
What ladyes fairest *been* or best *daunsynge*.
- (4) Caxton, *Blanchardyn and Eglantine*, 56, 4 (Åkerlund 1911:44):
And many penoncelles, baners, and standardes that the wynde shok here and there, whereof the golde & the azure *vas gylsteryng* tyl vnto her eyen/ bycause of the bryght bemes of the sonne that spred were vpon them.

3. *-ING* PARTICIPLES AND *-ING* ADJECTIVES IN EARLY MODERN ENGLISH

In spite of the fact that *-ing* participles and *-ing* adjectives are usually easy to classify under one category or the other, there are some examples of *be* + *-ing* combinations in the early Modern English section of the *Helsinki Corpus* that deserve special attention on the basis of their dubious or ambiguous nature. In some cases, the context is very helpful when trying to classify *-ing* forms as verbal or adjectival but, unfortunately, in many others, the context is not enough, and we have to resort to other 'tests', so to speak, which may help in the task of separating true progressives from constructions resembling them. But even with the help of the context and other resources, classifying other examples proves impossible, since the nature of the *-ing* form, whether truly verbal or not, is a debatable question. As has been noted, the division between what is progressive and what is adjectival was not as clearcut in early Modern English as it is in Present-day English and, in this connection, we can say that there was a series of constructions along a 'gradient' between what is truly verbal (progressive) and what is adjectival. The notion of 'gradient' has been defined, among others, by Quirk *et al* (1985:§2.60) as

a scale which relates two categories of description (for example two word classes) in terms of degree of similarity and contrast. At the ends of the scale are items which belong to one category or to another; intermediate positions on the scale are taken by 'in-between' cases — items which fail, in different degrees, to satisfy the criteria for one or the other category.

² In fact, the *Oxford English Dictionary* quotes example number 3 to illustrate the use of *dancing* as a participial adjective, not as a present participle (s.v. *OED dancing* ppl.a [-ING]).

In what follows, we shall examine some of these problematic combinations in detail.

4. *-ING* PARTICIPLES AND *-ING* ADJECTIVES IN THE *HELSINKI CORPUS*

As has been repeatedly mentioned, combinations of *be* + *-ing* in the early Modern English period can still be ambiguous. In some cases, it is easy to decide whether the form in *-ing* is adjectival or verbal, as in the following example from the *Helsinki Corpus* (example 5):

- (5) In the sixt booke. Whatsoeuer Wines be sweete, and also of a readish yellow color, all such *are* sharpe or *biting*, and hote aboue measure.
(|QE1_IS_HANDO_TURNER: PC6V).

Biting is co-ordinated to an ordinary adjective — *sharpe* — so that it seems logical to infer that the *-ing* form is adjectival. However, it should be borne in mind that co-ordination cannot be taken as a necessary indication of categorial identity at this time, since co-ordination was not restricted to constituents of the same grammatical category and, therefore, the presence of the co-ordinator *or* does not guarantee categorial identity between *biting* and *sharpe*. On the other hand, the absence of a direct object does also lead to the classification of *biting* as an adjectival participle and not as a present participle.

Let us also consider the following example from the corpus (example 6):

- (6) And now, I beseech thee, let the power of my LORD be great, according as thou hast spoken, saying, The Lord *is* long *suffering*, and of great mercie, forgiuing iniquitie and transgression, and by no meanes clearing (the guiltie), visiting the iniquity of the fathers vpon the children, vnto the third and fourth generation.
(|QE2_XX_BIBLE_AUTHOLD: PXIV, 1N).

A first approach to the combination *be* + *-ing* in (6) above could lead to the classification of *is ... suffering* as progressive, and *long* would therefore be an adverb modifying the verbal periphrasis (*the Lord is suffering/has been suffering for a long time*). But if we take into account the information gathered from the *Oxford English Dictionary* (henceforth *OED*), we can conclude that *suffering* — when found in combination with *long* — is an adjective with the meaning of ‘bearing provocation or trial with patience’ (s.v. *OED long-suffering* a.):

- (7) 1535 Coverdale *Exod.* xxxiv. 6 Lorde Lorde, God, mercifull and gracious, and *longe sufferinge*.
- (8) 1611 Bible *2 Pet.* iii. 9 The Lorde..*is long-suffring* to vs-ward.

So far, the *-ing* forms analyzed have been classified as adjectival and, much in the same way, other forms can be classified as verbal, since the presence of a direct object makes, for example, (9) progressive:

- (9) When he came, attended by all the young soldiers of any merit, he was infinitely surpriz'd at the beauty of this fair Queen of Night, whose face and person *was so exceeding all he had ever beheld*, that lovely modesty with which she receiv'd him, (|QE3_NI_FICT_BEHN: P155).

Although *exceeding* is recorded in the *OED* as a participial adjective (s.v. *OED exceeding* A.adj.2), the fact that it governs a direct object (the dependent clause *all he had ever beheld*) suggests that the *-ing* form is verbal in nature and hence progressive (s.v. *OED exceed* v.3).

Other examples from the corpus are far more difficult to classify as verbal or adjectival, even with the help of the *OED*. The majority of cases involve verbs that would not be typically found in the progressive in Present-day English, such as *agree*, *accord*, *consent*, *owe*, *differ* and *want*:

- (10) And farthermore euey thyng, kepethe that thyng, that *is agreyng* and *according* to it, ryght as the thynges that be contrarye, corrupteth and dystroyeth it. (|QE1_XX_PHILOBOETHCO: P80).
- (11) And I beseech your Lordship to make that Construction of it; and I humbly beg of your Lordship not to harbour an ill Opinion of me, because of those false Reports that go about of me, relating to my Carriage towards the old King, that I *was* any ways *consenting* to the Death of King (Charles) I. (|QE3_XX_TRI_LISLE: PIV, 122C2).
- (12) He has given a true state of his Debts, and had ordered to pay them all, as far as his Estate that was not settled, could go: and was confident that if all that *was owing* to him were paid to his Executors, his Creditors would be all satisfied. (|QE3_NN_BIA_BURNETROC: P145).
- (13) Therefore that which *is* in its Nature *differing* from the chief Good, cannot be said to be the Good it self: which to think of God would be most impious and profane, since nothing can excel him in Goodness and Worth. (|QE3_XX_PHILO_BOETHPR: P136).
- (14) My mind is with thee howsoever I am forced to be absent from Thee. I see thy care and vigilance and thank Thee; mine *is not wanting* wherein I may. (|QE3_XX_CORP_HOXINDEN: P273).

The main problem of these examples arises from the double nature of the forms in *-ing*. Let us take the case of *agreeing* (10), which may be interpreted as adjectival with the meaning of ‘in conformity with, conformable, corresponding *to* or answering *to*’ (s.v. *OED agreeing* ppl.a. 1):

- (15) a1555 Bradford *Wks.* 189 What is more necessary than meat and drink, or more *agreeing to nature*?

If, on the other hand, the cluster *is agreeing* is classified as progressive, the *-ing* form would correspond to the present participle of the verb *agree* (s.v. *OED agree* IV 14.a.), which also governed *to* in early Modern English:

- (16) 1625 Burges *Pers. Tithes* 50 This Statute *agreeth to the best English Canon Law*.

The interpretation of *according* in the same example (10) seems more complicated. As a participial adjective, it is recorded in the *OED* with the meaning ‘agreeing, corresponding *to*, matching’ (s.v. *OED according* ppl.a. 1):

- (17) 1532 Thynne *Dedic. Chaucer in Animadv.* (1865) 24 Frutefulnessse in wordes wel *accordynge to the matter and purpose*.

According does also admit a verbal interpretation, in which case the meaning of the verb is ‘to agree, be in harmony, be consistent’ (s.v. *OED accord* V. II.7), as in:

- (18) 1542 Boorde *Dyetary* (1870) ix. 250 More meate than *accordeth with nature*.

It should be noted, however, that this sense of *accord* involves the use of *with*, whereas the example from the *Helsinki Corpus* is followed by *to* and not by *with*.

The example with *consent* (11) is also difficult to classify. If the verbal interpretation is adopted, *consent* has the meaning ‘agree to a proposal, request; voluntarily to accede or acquiesce in what another proposes or desires’ (s.v. *OED consent* v.II.6), as in:

- (19) a1533 Ld. Berners *Huon* lxxxiii. 254 He *wold haue consentyd to the deth of Huon*.

(19) is very similar to the example from the *Helsinki Corpus*, since in both cases the object of *consent (to)* is 'the death of someone.' But *consenting* is also recorded as a participial adjective governing *to* (s.v. *OED consenting* ppl.a. 1), with the meaning 'agreeing or giving consent (to a proposal, opinion),' as in:

- (20) 1578 Banister *Hist. Man* i. 14 The wise *are* alwayes *consenting vnto truth*.

The same problem arises in the case of *be owing* (example 12), although the participial interpretation seems perhaps more likely to me. *Owing* is found as a participial adjective with the meaning (when referring to things) 'to be paid or rendered; owed, due,' and it is very frequently followed by *to* (s.v. *OED owing* ppl.a. 2). It is significant that the origin of this use is obscure. However, *was owing* can at the same time be interpreted as verbal if the cluster is to be considered 'passival', i.e. it may express passive progressive meanings in combination, thus being equivalent to 'being owed' (s.v. *OED owe* v.II.2.a). Once more, the classification of the cluster as verbal or adjectival is a difficult task on the basis of the dubious nature of the form in *-ing*, which makes it almost impossible to select one possibility rather than the other.

As for *differ* in example 13, the adjectival interpretation seems to be more likely (s.v. *OED differing* ppl.a.1), since the cluster can be replaced by *be* + adjective (*is different*) with no – or perhaps very slight – change of meaning. In fact, the *OED* quotes this sense of *differing* as synonymous with *different*, especially in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

The case of *be wanting* in example (14) is somewhat different from the others that I have just discussed. I would say that it is possible to classify all instances of *be wanting* in the *Helsinki Corpus*, and there are seven, as straightforward cases of progressive periphrases. One of the main problems as regards the use of *want* is that the meaning conveyed by this verb in early Modern English was quite different from its current one. Moreover, *want* in Present-day English does not occur in the progressive and this is why its use in the examples from the *Helsinki Corpus* seems rather unusual. The basic meaning of *want* in the early Modern English examples is 'to be lacking or missing; not to exist' (s.v. *OED want* v.1.a. intrans.). Examples (21) to (25) from the corpus illustrate this meaning of *want*:

- (21) and for everie quarter of a yarde w^{ch} *shalbe wantinge* in lenghte of either sorte of the saide Kersies likewise beinge soulde or offered to be soulde, Twelve pence; ... (QE2_STA_LAW_STAT4: PIV, 859).

- (22) But certaine it is, that vnto the deepe, fruitefull, and operatiue studie of many Scyences, specially Naturall Phylosophy and Physicke, Bookes be not onely the Instrumentals; wherein also the beneficence of men *hath not beene* altogether *wanting*: ... (|QE2_EX_EDUC_BACON: P4R).
- (23) be sur of this you shall have it, though you stay som tim for it, in the meantime *let* no respect *be wanting* to your housband and his mother, with the rest of his frends, in this you shall gain yourself a good reput ... (|QE2_XX_CORP_PEYTON: P87).
- (24) But if we will in good earnest apply our selves to the practice of Religion, and the obedience of God's Holy Laws, his Grace *will* never *be wanting* to us to so good a purpose. (|QE3_IR_SERM_TILLOTS: PII: II452).
- (25) My Lord — my Girl's young, (Hoyden) is young, my Lord; but this I must say for her, what she wants in Art, she has by Nature; what she wants in Experience, she has in Breeding; and what's *wanting* in her Age, is made good in her Constitution. (|QE3_XX_COME_VANBR: PI, 59).

According to the *OED*, this use of *want* has been rare since the seventeenth century, although some of examples just quoted belong to that century. In Present-day English, *want* is not found with this meaning any more.

A different meaning of *want* is involved in examples (26) and (27) from the corpus:

- (26) The King has directed me to attend him tomorrow about the matters of yr Excellencie's last letter and I *shall not bee wanting* to acquainte you with his Ma^{ties} pleasure so soon as I know itt, and in ye meane time I desire yr Excellency will continue to mee ye happinesse of being esteemed. (|QE3_XX_CORO_OSBORNE: P22).
- (27) My mind is with thee howsoever I am forced to be absent from Thee. I see thy care and vigilance and thank Thee; mine *is not wanting* wherein I may. (|QE3_XX_CORP_HOXINDEN: P273).

Here *want* can be interpreted as 'to fail to do something' (s.v. *OED want* v. 1.e. intrans), as in the following example from the *OED* (28):

- (28) 1576 Common Conditions 216 (Brooke) Like beggers wee liue and *want to pay rent*.

There should be no problems as regards the classification of the *be wanting* examples as progressive, at least in this period. It must be

acknowledged, however, that the fact that the verb is intransitive in most cases does not contribute to clarifying the status of the *-ing* forms.

Other examples from the *Helsinki Corpus* also deserve an independent treatment, especially because they have been classified as straightforward instances of the progressive by Rissanen (1999:221-22). In my opinion, it is not so clear whether the *-ing* form in such cases is adjectival or verbal. Let us see these examples in detail:

- (29) (*T.I.*) The hapiest meeting that our soules could wish for Here's the Ring ready, I *am beholding* vnto your Fathers hast, h'as kept this howre. (|QE2_XX_COME_MIDDLET: P28).
- (30) whiche at the time of Araignment of the Parties so accused (if they *be* then *liuing*) shall be brought in Person before the said Partie accused, (|QE1_XX_TRI_THROCKM, PI, 68.C2).

Beholding in (29) above can be interpreted as verbal and adjectival. Rissanen (1999:221), however, selects the former option, i.e. the classification of the cluster as progressive, to illustrate the idea that the progressive does not have to form a frame for another, shorter action, since “instances without an expressed frame [...] are in the majority.” But if the latter option is selected, *beholding* should then be classified as a participial adjective with the meaning ‘under obligation, indebted, beholden’ (s.v. *OED beholding* ppl.a. 1), as in the following examples from the *OED*:

- (31) 1598 Shakes. Merry W. i. i. 283 A Iustice of peace sometime *may be beholding to his friend*, for a Man.
- (32) 1662 H. More Antid. Ath. i. vi. (1712) 19 We have some Ideas that *we are not beholding to our Senses* for.

Rissanen also classifies *living* in *be liuing* above (30) as a true progressive, in which *live* can be interpreted as a verb of state. The use of the progressive with such verbs, as we know, is not very common, but in this particular case it may emphasize the temporary character of the state, or it can even call the attention to the more actional features of the verb.

However, it is difficult to know whether *be living* can be interpreted as progressive within this specific context. It is true that *live* is quite frequently found in the progressive in Present-day English, as in *Mary is living in London*, but it is difficult to decide whether (30) can be classified as verbal or adjectival. If the verbal option is selected, the cluster should be classified as progressive (s.v. *OED live* v. 1a. intrans.), but if the adjectival option is preferred, *be living* would then be equivalent to *be alive* (s.v. *OED living* ppl.a. 1). Similar difficulties arise as regards the classification of the rest of examples including *be living*:

- (33) (*Throckmorton.*) M. (Croftes) *is* yet *liuing*, and is here this day; how hapneth it he is not brought Face to Face to justifie this matter, neither hathe bin of all this time? (|QE1_XX_TRI_THROCKM, PI, 66.C2).
- (34) (*Throckmorton.*) But what doth the principall Author of thys matter say against me, I mean the Lord (Thomas Grey), who *is* yet *liuing*? (|QE1_XX_TRI_THROCKM, PI, 70.C1).
- (35) Provided alwaies, That this Acte nor any thinge therein conteyned, shall extende to any person or persons whose Husband or Wife shalbe continuallie remayninge beyond the Seas by the space of seven yeeres together, or whose Husband or Wife shall absent hym or her selfe the one from the other by the space of seaven yeeres together, in any part within his Majesties Dominions, the one of them not knowinge the other *to be livinge* within that tyme. (|QE2_STA_LAW_STAT4: PIV, 1028).
- (36) And if you fish for a Carp with Gentles, then put upon your hook a small piece of Scarlet about this bigness, it being soked in, or anointed with (Oyl of Peter), called by some (Oyl of the Rock); and if your Gentles be put two or three dayes before into a box or horn anointed with honey, and so put upon your hook as to preserve them *to be living*, you are as like to kill this crafty fish this way as any other. (|QE3_IS_HANDO_WALTON: P298).
- (37) (*Tom.*) Why how now Huswife, do you snap at me? do you grudge me my Victuals? Pray Madam Joan, what is it to you how much I eat and drink, do I not provide it? be it known to you Joan, that your Mistris when she *was living*, would not have said so much to me poor Soul. (|QE3_NI_FICT_PENNY: P267).

5. CONCLUSIONS

Separating true progressives from constructions resembling them, especially from combinations of *be* + participial adjectives in *-ing*, has not always been an easy task, at least in earlier stages of English. This paper has shown that there were a number of constructions in the early Modern English period which are difficult to classify as adjectival or verbal. In some cases, there are certain ‘tests’ that have been of help to clarify the real nature of the *-ing* forms. In other cases, the *Oxford English Dictionary* has been a priceless tool in deciphering the status of such forms. Unfortunately, as some examples retrieved from the *Helsinki Corpus* show, there exist some dubious combinations in which it is not possible to resolve the ambiguity of those forms, since both interpretations — adjectival and verbal — seem plausible. Only in the latter case, i.e. in cases in which the combination consists of a

form of *be* + the present participle of a lexical verb, can the combination be classified as 'progressive'.

One of the most important conclusions derived from this paper is that there existed a series of constructions in early Modern English along a 'gradient' between what is adjectival and what is verbal (progressive). Some of these constructions were closer to the adjectival end while some others were closer to the verbal end. I have decided to include all of them in my classification of progressive constructions in the *Helsinki Corpus*, for they all admit a verbal interpretation, at least according to the information gathered from the *OED*, but we should not forget the fact that they also admit an adjectival interpretation, in which case the combination would not be progressive.

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Author's address:

Universidade de Santiago de Compostela
Facultade de Filoxía
E-15782 Santiago de Compostela, Spain
iapaloma@usc.es