

The House is Building: Active Progressive with Passive Meaning

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper tries to account for the origin and historical development of the active progressive used with passive sense. It is a well-known fact that English made use of several different morphological devices to express the passive meaning in the progressive, at least until the ‘true’ progressive passive, *is being* + past participle, entered the language in the late Modern English period. An analysis of these different morphological devices will be provided in this paper, but with special reference to the so-called «covert passive» (Strang 1982: 440), of the type *the house is building*, in other words, active progressive with passive meaning, which apparently enjoyed its greatest popularity in the early Modern English period (eModE), but especially in the late 18th century. It took some time, however, to replace this construction with the genuine progressive passive of the type *the house is being built*, although the ‘new’ model was definitely established in the English language in the course of the 19th century and has been adopted as a recognised feature of verbal syntax.

2. *THE HOUSE IS BUILDING* (ACTIVE PROGRESSIVE WITH PASSIVE MEANING)

As has been stated above, a form such as *the house is building*, although not formally passive,¹ since there is no *be* + past participle, could be interpreted as conveying passive meaning, at least until it is replaced by the true progressive passive (*the house is being built*). According to Visser (1963-1973), constructions of this type were already in use in Old English (OE). Mitchell (1976), however, asserted that the equivalent of the idiom *the house is building* did not occur in OE, for it is difficult to interpret the nature of the present participle in those examples offered by Visser (§1875, pp 2008 ff).

Nehls (1988: 186-188) holds that after the loss of the OE auxiliary *weorðan* for the expression of the passive of action in the 12th century, the only auxiliary available for the formation of the passive in English was *be* (from OE *beon*).² Thenceforth, the context was the only means of establishing a formal distinction between the passive of action and the passive of state. Seemingly, at the beginning of the Middle English period (eME), the active form of the progressive was sometimes used to express an action in progress with a passive sense, although there are scholars who consider the existence of such pattern highly unlikely, at least until the beginning of the eModE period (cf. Raith 1951, and more explicitly, Denison 1993). The period in which this form seems to have enjoyed its greatest popularity was the 18th century, although active progressives

¹ Visser (1963-1973: 1872, §1872, p. 2005) finds the label ‘passive’ inappropriate to refer to this construction, since the passive form usually consists of the verb *to be* followed by the past participle of another verb. To account for the differences between a normal, active progressive and an active progressive with passive sense, he suggests the term ‘passival’ to refer to the second.

² OE *weorðan* + past participle was the usual way of expressing a passive of action, while passives of state were generally rendered by means of *beon/wesan* + past participle.

with passive meaning have been attested from the 16th to the 19th centuries. Even later, in Present-Day English (PE), we find a few stereotyped expressions which may give the impression of having become well-established idioms of the English language, such as *something is wanting* or *missing*, *dinner is cooking*, *the book is reprinting*, etc. These phrases constitute a kind of idiomatic substitute for *is wanted*, *is missed*, *is cooked* and so on, which, as a general rule, are not used in speech.

2.1. ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT

There seem to be two plausible sources in the origin of this construction: (i) a prepositional, also known as gerundial construction of the type *to be in/on doing* and (ii) the ordinary progressive. A mixed origin, which would result from the mixture or blending of these two sources, has also been suggested, with each source contributing to the development of the so-called «covert passive».

2.1.1. THE PREPOSITIONAL PATTERN

Jespersen (1933) maintains that a construction such as *the house is building* “is easily accounted for if we start from *is on (a) building*, which meant ‘is in (under) construction’” (p. 269). *On* and *an* seem to be the most common prepositions, since hardly any examples with *at* have been recorded.¹ The pattern with *in* is perhaps the most frequent one from 1300 onwards, apparently due to French influence. Instances with *under*, on the other hand, are extremely rare.

The final pattern is reached by means of the weakening of the preposition (*on*, *an*, *in*) to just *a* (*the house is abuilding*), and this *a* is finally lost through aphesis. The passive meaning derives from the fact that the noun in *-ing*, like other verbal nouns, is considered neither active nor passive in itself, so that *is on/in/a building* may mean both “is engaged in the act of building” (active) and “is being built” (passive).² Supporters of this theory are, among others, Jespersen (1933, 1909-1949: IV) and Dal (1952). Elsness (1994: 16) considers that this prepositional pattern lends itself better for the expression of passive meaning and also that it appears to have been closer to PE progressive meaning.

2.1.2. THE ORDINARY PROGRESSIVE

Mossé (1938), Nehls (1974) and Scheffer (1975), among other scholars, firmly believe that the origin of this construction cannot be derived from the prepositional or gerundial type, for the form in *-ing* is not a verbal noun, but a present participle. Moreover, those who defend this view take it for granted that the present participle with passive meaning was attested in all Germanic languages as well as English. Scheffer (1975: 254) goes further when he states that “the progressive, ..., was in existence before the other forms, also in its passive meaning.” He exaggerates, however, when he asserts that the active progressive with passive meaning was already found at the beginning of the Middle English period, around 1100 (390-391). Despite these opinions, it is generally agreed that both forms, i.e. the ordinary progressive and the prepositional pattern influenced each other during the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, with the logical conclusion that “the progressive coalesced with the other forms and replaced them” (Scheffer, 1975: 254).

2.1.3. THE ‘BLENDING’ THEORY

Both Åkerlund (1914) and Visser (1963-1973) argue that both sources made a contribution, although the latter considers the prepositional/gerundial construction more likely to have influenced the final pattern. If this source, i.e. the *on/in/a building* type, is adopted, the progressive passive would then get its meaning from the neutrality of the verbal noun and its form by the weakening

¹ Examples with *upon* have also been attested in later stages of language. They could be used to convey a normal, active progressive meaning or a *be going to do* meaning.

² Cf. Jespersen (1909-1949: IV, p. 205).

and disappearance of the preposition. If, on the contrary, the other source, i.e. the ordinary progressive, is adopted, two facts may account for its usage: one is the ‘ergative’ or ‘medio-passive’ use of the lexical verb, and the other is the ellipsis of the reflexive pronoun, such as *itself* in *the house is building itself*. Earlier grammarians postulated that the active progressive could have acquired its passive sense through the analogy of the expanded form with the ‘neutro’ or ‘pseudo-passive’ value of certain active verbs such as *sell* in *the book sells well*. Åkerlund (1914) considered that the problem had to do with the transitive or intransitive function of the lexical verb, because of the freedom of the English language to use the same verb in different contexts: reflexive, transitive, intransitive, causative, etc. From an example such as *the book is selling well*, in which a transitive verb is used in an intransitive way, the use of the progressive passive could extend to other cases even though the verb still had transitive force. Jespersen (1909-1949: IV), however, believes that this ‘neutro’ or ‘pseudo-passive’ use is not found in those verbs that most frequently occur in the passive progressive. The test is to check whether it is possible to use the verb intransitively outside the expanded forms or not. Although *the house is building* is frequent, *the house builds* is impossible to find, so that this explanation does only account for a few examples. Denison (1993: 392-393) also comments on the possibility that ergative verbs influenced this pattern and, concerning ‘medio-passive’ verbs, which he regards as a special use of ergative verbs, he states the following:

... this resembles the passival in requiring its subject NP to be non-agentive, but differs from it in perhaps implying that the subject makes a major contribution to the course or outcome of the action, (p. 392).

However, he considers it highly unlikely that the ‘medio-passive’ has influenced the passive progressive because of the examples included in Visser which seem to correspond to the ‘medio-passive’ (§ 168-169), only three occur before 1600. Jespersen (1909-1949: IV), despite admitting that this ‘medio-passive’ use may have influenced our pattern, thinks that it is unimportant compared with the importance of the prepositional model, which, for him, is the chief source of the construction (p. 234), and which had much to do with the growing use of continuous tenses in the 16th and 17th centuries.

In ME the coalescence of both types -the active progressive and the prepositional pattern- accounts for the increase in use of *the house is building*, especially after the process of weakening and dropping of the preposition had taken place, for the active progressive supersedes the other form in the expression of passive meaning. It took some time, however, to replace the *on/in/a* + verbal noun pattern by the active progressive, so that it was possible to find both forms alongside.

3. ALTERNATIVES FOR THE EXPRESSION OF PASSIVE, PROGRESSIVE MEANING

Apart from the «covert passive», i.e. active progressive with passive meaning of the type *the house is building*, there existed other different ways through which this passive progressive meaning could be conveyed, to wit:

a) The prepositional, gerundial construction *on/in/an/a* + verbal noun (type *to be in/on/an/ a doing*): this pattern has also been mentioned as a possible source in the origin and later development of the active progressive with passive meaning. Apparently, it was much more common for the progressive to convey passive meaning if the main verb was preceded by a preposition, or at least by a prepositional remnant. In the course of the 16th century, this preposition dropped out, and the resulting pattern was formally identical to that of a normal progressive. However, it was possible to find this “older” model along with the other types that were in use at that time (*the house is building*, *the house was built*). In the course of the 18th century, this prepositional pattern was already on the decline and tended to be obsolete.

The following is an example of a prepositional construction with a clear passive meaning:

(1) ... the kinges coronation, of which the time appointed then so nere approached, that the pageauntes and suttelties *were in making* day and night at westminster, and much vitale killed therefore, that afterward was cast away ...

(HE1, Thomas More, *The History of King Richard III*, pp 46-47, [Elsness 1994: 16]).

b) Ordinary, non-progressive passive: passive meaning may also be expressed by means of an ordinary, non-progressive passive, that is, a form of *to be* followed by the past participle of a lexical verb. This is the usual form, at least until the eModE period, where it occurs along with the type *the house is building*, which is more frequent thereafter, especially during the 18th century, as was noted earlier.

In the following example we can see how a passive progressive meaning is signalled without explicit progressive marking:

(2) ... he found that the coach had sunk greatly on one side, though it *was still dragged* forward by the horses; ... (1838-1839, Charles Dickens, *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*, v. 52.14, [Denison 1993: 389]).

4. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE *BEING* + PAST PARTICIPLE PATTERN

It seems likely that with the increasing frequency of the progressive from the late Middle English period (IME) onwards, the need for a more explicit form of progressive passive arose. According to Scheffer (1975: 262), this new pattern would not have been possible if the combination *being built* had not already been known. Before the final pattern was reached, he points out some intermediate stages which could have paved the way for the new construction:

- the pattern with *upon*: (3) ‘... He tells me that Mr. Shepley *is upon being turned away* from my Lord’s family” (March 1669, Samuel Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, [Scheffer 1975: 263]).
- the appositional progressive: (4) “... Sir Guy Carlton is four hours *being examined*” [Scheffer 1975: 261-262]. Nehls (1988: 187) quotes this very same example as the first instance of the passive type *something is being done*. The existence of this passive appositive participle seems to be a prerequisite for the evolution of the passive progressive, together with the passive gerund.
- the use of the passive gerund after *near*: (5) “... the little money I had was very near *being all exhausted*” (1776, O. Goldsmith, *The Vicar of Wakefield*, p. 226, [Scheffer 1975: 263]).

The ‘new’ form did not find an easy way to establish itself in the language. At first, grammarians began to object to it, since they believed it was a clumsy device, “an outrage upon English idiom, to be detested, abhorred, execrated” (Jespersen 1933: 269), especially the combination of *be* + *being*, which was felt heavy at times. One of the reasons adduced for the objection to this new form was, among other possible explanations, that the combination *is being* + a predicative adjective was not in use at that time. The combination of both progressive and passive aspects was also felt inadequate, at least until the eModE period.

At the beginning of the 19th century the use of this new model became more frequent, especially in colloquial speech and in private letters from the so-called young generation of writers (Southey, Coleridge, the Shelleys, Lamb, etc). Seemingly, the first example is attested in a letter by Southey:

(6) ... a fellow whose uppermost grinder *is being torn out* by the roots by a mutton-fisted barber ... (1795, C. C. Southey, *Life and Correspondence I*, p. 249.24, [Denison 1993: 428]).¹

¹ Elsness (1994: 15) notes a remarkably early instance of a progressive construction with passive syntax (nearly 200 years earlier than the example from Southey): “Also in what Coast or part of heauen, the Sunne, Moone, or any other starre *is* at any time *being mounted* about the Horizon, as whether it bee Southeast or Northeast, ...” (HE2, 1597 Blundevile, *A Brieffe Description*, ..., p. 155R). The example, however, seems difficult to classify, for it might well be a passive present participle or a passive gerund.

Despite its frequency, the new pattern was not unanimously welcome, and there was considerable opposition on the part of those who viewed the combination *is being* as highly problematic. Some scholars claimed that the old pattern, i.e. the active progressive, should be retained when the subject was inanimate, as in *the house is building*, but not when the subject was animate, as in *the lady is dressing*, for it could be interpreted either as active (*the lady is dressing herself*), or as passive (*the lady is being dressed*). This practice, however, was not followed by English writers. Another reason postulated to account for the difficulties this form had to overcome in order to establish itself in the language was the awkwardness of the compound tenses *-will have been being built, will be being built, shall/should be being built ...-* These forms, however, do not frequently occur in speech, for the active progressive is rarely required in other tenses than the present and the preterite, while in the passive they are even more rarely found.¹

A good illustration of the awkwardness of this new form and its possible combinations may be seen in the following dialogue between a young lady-teacher, and an old gentleman published in *Harper's Weekly* (January 1883):

Old Gentleman: Are there any houses *building* in your village?

Young Lady: No Sir, there is a new house *being built* for Mr. Smith, but it is the carpenters who *are building*.

Gentleman: True, I sit corrected. *To be building* is certainly a different thing from *to be being built*. And how long has Mr. Smith's house *been being built*?

Lady (looks puzzled for a moment, and then answers rather abruptly): Nearly a year.

Gentleman: How much longer do you think it *will be being built*?

Lady (explosive): Don't know.

Gentleman: I should think Mr. Smith would be annoyed by its *being so long being built*, for the house he now occupies being old, he must leave it, and the new one *being only being built*, instead of *being built* as he expected, ... (at this moment he notices that the lady has disappeared).²

Visser (1963-1973: § 1881) asserts that it is at the beginning of the 20th century that the new form is completely settled in the language, and not earlier, owing to the decline of the older models which, on the other hand, did not completely disappear. Denison (1993: 415) maintains that there is alternation between the already mentioned «covert passive» and the new type *is being* + past participle. In structural analogy to the type *something is being done*, the structure *is being silly* developed, at about the end of the 19th century, although its use remains very rare, even in PE, and can be replaced by *he is silly*.³ At about the same time the same construction, this time followed by an NP, is found (type *he is being a fool*).

5. CONCLUSION

The active/passive contrasts within the periphrastic system were deficiently shown, at least at early stages of language, for the mentioned system lacked such contrast of forms. Until the appearance, at the end of the 18th century, of the pattern *something is being done*, to express a passive progressive meaning of this kind, we had either to do without explicit progressive marking or to do without explicit passive marking. In the first case, a normal passive construction, i.e. a form of *to*

¹ Strang (1970: 99), however, finds these forms (*has/had been being* + past participle) quite normal, but contrary to what might be supposed, they belong more to spoken than to written English.

² This dialogue has been taken from Scheffer (1975: 267-268), who, in his turn, quotes it from J. Storm (1892), *Englische Philologie*, Leipzig.

³ *He is being silly*, however, expresses a moral or mental transitory state, something which is not permanent but particular of a certain moment or time. This transitoriness is not present in the ordinary *he is silly* pattern.

be + past participle, was used to convey this combination of passive, progressive meaning. In the second case, a most remarkable construction, the so-called «covert passive», that is, active progressive with passive meaning illustrated in *the house is building*, was defined as a passive without any formal marker. It was much more frequent for the «covert passive» to render passive meaning if the main verb was preceded by a preposition (*on, an, in*), or at least by a prepositional remnant (*a*), which was dropped in the course of the 16th century, so that there were no longer any formal differences between this prepositional pattern and the ordinary progressive. None of these constructions (the prepositional, the «covert passive» and the normal, non-progressive passive) disappeared immediately, but co-existed for a time until the true progressive passive entered the English language and ousted them all. Some of them are even kept in a few PE expressions (*wanting, missing, owing, cooking*). Later, and in structural analogy to the true progressive passive, combinations of *be* + predicative adjective and *be* + NP were found. However, more complex combinations involving perfect/modal, passive and progressive auxiliaries (types *had been being built, shall be being built, will be being built*) are not found until the 20th century, and even then they are very rarely found, although their appearance constitutes the generalisation of the auxiliary system in both progressive and passive aspects.

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