

The diachrony of ‘BE + present participle’ in Greek and Old English: multiple paths in language change¹

Thanasis Giannaris
University of Athens
agiannar@phil.uoa.gr

Abstract: This paper aims to discuss some issues in the diachrony of the periphrasis ‘Be + present participle’, as a means of denoting aspectual meanings in Greek and Old English. After a brief presentation of the data and an outline of their history, I present the typological assumptions that frequently explain how these types of constructions develop through time, as well as the problems they present. I argue that the actual historical data may not readily fit to a single neat path of evolution, but, rather, more than one explanatory parameter should be taken into consideration.

Key words: Auxiliary, copula, locative meaning, participle, periphrasis, progressive

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to examine the diachrony of the ‘Be plus present participle’ periphrasis in Greek² and English, focusing on the earlier stages, namely Classical and Hellenistic Greek and Old English (henceforth OE). The term is used with reference to the construction formed by a copula-like verb meaning ‘to be’ and a participle in the place of a predicative complement:

- | Greek | OE |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------|
| (1) a. εἰμί ποιῶν / ποιοῦμενος | b. beon / wæsan sittende |

The similarity between the two, both in form and function, has long ago drawn the attention of the research community and an influence explanation (from Greek onto OE, through Latin) has been put forth to explain a series of difficulties in the history of the English Progressive. The contact issue has been extensively discussed in the relevant literature and it is not touched upon in this article (see Poppe 2003 for a discussion of the contact-related explanation).

2. The data

2.1 English

The grammatical status of the Old English ‘progressive’ or ‘expanded form’³ is a much-debated issue. Most of the controversy derives from the difficulty in identifying a discrete line of diachronic evolution from OE to Present-Day English (see Pertejio 2004).

¹ I am grateful to Robert Crelin, Geoff Horrocks and Elisabeth Traugott for valuable discussion. Also, special thanks go to Petros Karatsareas and Vasiliki Afentoulidou for reading a pre-published version of this paper. Needless to say that all the errors remain my own.

² With the term Greek (unless specified otherwise) I will be referring to the ‘older stages’ of the language, namely Classical and Hellenistic Greek.

³ A term which goes back to Nickel (1966, 1967).

Table 1. The history of the English Progressive

Period ⁴	O.E. (5th-10th c.)	M.E. (10th-15th)	EPDE (16th-18th)	PDE (19th-today)
Form	Beon / wesan + -ende	Be + (on, in) + -ende, -inge, -ing (<ung)	Be + (a) -ing	Be + -ing
Meaning	stative/durative	stative/durative	progressive	progressive

A striking feature of the OE construction is that it was compatible with a wide range of verbs and, *inter alia*, occurred systematically with those which would not normally take the progressive in Modern English. The most frequent ones are listed in table 2 and denote either a generic state or intransitive activities:

Table 2. Predicates most commonly attested in the OE periphrasis

States/change of state	Activities
libban 'live', wunian 'live', sittendan 'sit', growan 'grow', sorgian 'sorrow, grieve', hangian 'shine', gemunan 'remember' etc.	gangan 'go', irnan 'run', winnan 'fight', feochtan 'fight', faran 'travel' etc.

- (2) *þæt seo ea bið flowende ofer eal Ægypta land*
 that this river is flowing over all Egyptian land
 'that this river flows over the Egyptians' land' (Orosius 12. 35)

2. 2 Greek

The periphrasis 'εἰμί + present participle' was a feature of Classical Greek (5th – 4th c. B.C.) and Hellenistic – Roman (3rd c. B.C. – 5th c. A.D.), but then declined in use⁵. We are lacking any detailed study for the Medieval period; in all probability, a marginalization of the construction must have taken place. In Modern Greek the periphrasis arguably survives dialectally (in Tsakonian Greek), having replaced the synthetic form across the verbal paradigm:

Table 3. The history of the Greek periphrasis

Period	ClGr (5 th -4 th c. B.C.)	HRGr (3 rd c. B.C.-5 th c. A.D.)	MedGr ⁶ (6 th -16 th c.)	ModGr (17/18 th -today)
Form	εἰμί + present participle (-ων, -α, -ον/-μενος, -η, -ον)	εἰμί + present participle (-ων, -α, -ον/-μενος, -η, -ον)	non-existent (?)	εἰμί + present participle (-ον/ -α, -ντα) (Tsakonian)
Meaning	stative/durative	stative/ durative		imperfective

Similar to the OE examples, the verbs which are used in the periphrasis mainly denote states or (intransitive) activities (medio-passive or non-transitive active):

⁴ O.E. stands for Old English, M.E. for Middle English, EPDE for Early Present-Day English and PDE for Present-Day English.

⁵ There are several studies for Greek, most importantly those by Björck (1940) and Aerts (1965). Also, cf. Amenta (2003) for a recent account.

⁶ In Early Medieval Greek texts, the construction is attested with almost identical features as in the previous period of the Koiné and perhaps represents a learned form. In Late Medieval vernacular, I found no instances of the construction.

Table 4. Predicates most commonly attested in the Greek periphrasis

States/change of state	Activities
οἰκῶ, κατοικῶ 'dwell', καλῶ 'name', γινώσκω 'know', ἀκμάζω 'bloom', κοιμάμαι, καθεύδω 'sleep', etc.	διώκω 'pursue', πρόσειμι 'go', βαδίζω 'walk', διδάσκω 'teach', πορεύομαι 'proceed' etc.

- (3) καὶ θῆραι πάντων ὅποσα ἐστὶν ἀγρευόμενα θηρία
and preys all-GEN which is being-hunted beasts
 'there is hunting of all manner of beasts in the chase' (Xen. Anab. 5, 3, 9, 1)

In Hellenistic times, the construction occurs far more frequently than in the Classical period, accompanied by a remarkable rise in the use of transitive verbs in the predicative position:

- (4) καὶ ἦν Ἰωάννης οἰκοδομῶν ναοὺς
and was John building temples
 'and John was building temples' (Acta John 44, 6)

3. How 'progressive' 'Be + present participle' is?

3.1. Typological predictions

Previous research on the diachrony of the aspectual periphrases refers to grammaticalization processes as playing a major role in their development. It must be borne in mind that grammaticalization begins either with essentially lexical source material, using open-class categories, becoming reanalyzed to more closed ones, or with a series of changes that the lexical item undergoes on its way to becoming increasingly grammatical (Hopper & Traugott 2003: 2). The view supported in the typological literature (Bybee et al. 1994, Devitt 1994, Heine & Kuteva 2002) is that imperfective 'grams' (i.e. grammatical forms) derive almost exclusively from patterns that involve some element with salient locative meaning and that progressivity is the one to be met first in a nascent aspectual gram. The imperfective meanings occur later via semantic generalization (Comrie 1976: 32):

- (4) progressive > continuous > habitual > imperfective

Progressive aspect is by definition only compatible with verbs denoting activities. Hence the predicates denoting temporary activities collocate earlier with the emerging aspectual construction as compared to those being inherently permanent in their semantics (and not vice versa). As we proceed on the cline, an expansion to other types of predicates takes place (e.g. states or stative events) bringing out the other aspectual readings.

3.2 Idiosyncratic properties of the periphrasis

'Be + present participle' appears to be highly idiosyncratic with regard to the following properties; a typical OE example as the one in (5) can be more aptly described as expressing a generic quality of the subject and not an activity in progress.

- (5) Sume syndan creopende on eorðan mid eallum lichoman,
Some are creeping on earth with their whole body
 'Some creep/ are creepers on the earth with their whole body'
 (Ælfric's Lives, I, II 52)

There are, however, indications that habitual readings are equally possible:

- (6a) καὶ ἦν διδάσκων τὸ καθ' ἡμέραν ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ (N.T. Luc. 19, 47, 1)
and he-was teaching the in day in the temple
 'he used to teach/taught in the temple every day' (N.T. Luc. 19, 47, 1)
- (6b) hwilum wæs on horse sittende, ac oft on his fotum gangende
sometimes was on horse sitting and often on his foot-GEN he-went
 'at times he mounted on horseback, more often he went on foot' (Blicking Homil. 362, 19) (Pertejio 2004: 92)

This is not the case with the usual markers of the progressive:

- (7) ?I am teaching in school every day
 (but: I am teaching in school every day *this year*)

On the basis of OE examples such as (5), Bybee et al. (1994: 135) cannot accommodate in their theory of grammaticalization the fact that the fully-fledged English Progressive developed out of OE sources⁷. According to them, cases like (5) are non-grammaticalized constructions, only marginally connected to aspectual meanings. Thus, the pattern 'be + present participle' does not conform to the diachronic path, whereby progressivity is grammaticalized first and the other meanings emerge later in the process. Their conclusion is supported by the fact that the construction does not include some element with explicit locative meaning (e.g. a preposition), which is considered to be the almost exclusive source for progressive grammatical forms.

Another major issue is that the periphrasis can be interpreted plausibly either as a copular construction, in which the present participle of a lexical verb functions as the subject complement in (8a), or as an analytic verbal complex with, more likely, progressive semantic value (8b), while in other cases both interpretations (copular construction and verb phrase) represent equally plausible alternatives (8c):

- | | Greek | OE |
|------|---|--|
| (8a) | ἔτι εἰμι ζῶν
<i>still I-am living</i>
'I am still alive'
(Sept. Dan. 6, 2, 2) | þe synt on lichomum lifgende (Blick. Hom 275)
<i>are on body living</i>
'(we) who are alive in the body'
(Blick. Hom 275) |
| (8b) | καὶ...ἦν πολεμῶν
<i>and he-was fighting</i>
'and he was fighting' (Sept. Reg. 6, 8, 1) | wæs feohtende
<i>he-was fighting</i>
'he was fighting' (Oros. 30, 18) |
| (8c) | ἦν ἡμέρας τρεῖς μὴ βλέπων
<i>he-was days three not seeing</i>
'he could not see / was blind for three days'
(N.T. Ac. 9, 9, 1) | hio ðystende wæs
<i>she thirsting was</i>
'she was thirsty'
(Oros. 30, 20) |

⁷ Instead, they prefer a different explanation, which would more likely follow the general patterns of grammaticalization starting from a later period (namely the M.E., when the explicitly locative prepositional-based periphrasis developed – cf. Jespersen 1912).

The transitivity of the verb from which the participial form has derived, constitutes the basic criterion for labeling the constructions as 'more' adjectival' or 'more' verbal (Traugott 1992: 189):

- (9) hio ðystende wæs on symbel mannes blodes...geligre fremmende wæs
she thirsting was ... man-GEN blood, fornication performing was
 'she was thirsting ... for a man's blood...she was fornicating' (Oros. 30, 26)

In (9), the first participle (being intransitive) could be taken as expressing state ('always thirsty' rather than 'always thirsting'), whereas the second (transitive) can hardly do so. Greek data behave along the same line:

- (10a) καὶ αὐτὸς ἦν ἐν τῇ πρύμνῃ ... καθεύδων
and he-was in the stern ... sleeping
 'he was sleeping/asleep in the stern' (N.T. Mark. 4, 38, 2)
- (10b) ὁ δὲ Κορνήλιος ἦν προσδοκῶν αὐτοὺς
the PART Cornelius was waiting them
 'Cornelius was waiting upon them' (N.T. Acta 12, 24, 3)

3.3 Reanalysis and participial verbalization

Ziegeler (1999, 2006), in order to account for the problems highlighted in the typological literature, puts forth an analysis of the diachrony of the English Progressive, arguing that the development took place initially through inferences resulting from a reanalysis of a certain type of agent nouns as adjectives. Because of their generic nature, these nouns gradually acquired grammatical aspectual senses of durativity. Thus the following developments might have occurred:

- (11a) Adjective: He is [ruling] (*ruling* is a de-nominal generic adjective = 'he rules/is a ruling one'), e.g. *rælende*; therefore,
 (11b) Participle (or non-finite verbal form): He [is ruling] now (*ruling* is a verbal participle expressing an on-going situation extending over speaker reference time)

Ziegeler's arguments exclude any explicit process of grammaticalization from the change scenario; the construction changed its status from 'copula sentence' to 'verbal periphrasis' through (syntactic and semantic) reanalysis. In this way, she overcomes the thorny alternative of postulating a grammaticalization path from the already semantically bleached copula verb (without explicit locative meaning) into an auxiliary. A closer look, however, to the data (both in English and Greek) reveals that this analysis leaves out an important parameter.

4. The locative source revisited

The exclusion of the locative meaning from the 'Be + present participle' periphrasis has been based on the assumption that the periphrasis derives directly from a copula predication which exhibits the following structure:

- (12) [Copula + participle] > periphrasis

However, there are data that can be interpreted as involving locative semantic nuance, thus pointing to a structural modification of (12):

(13) [Locative copula] + [participle] > periphrasis

According to the latter option, the verb ‘to be’ can be construed not as a copula proper but rather as having a locative and/or existential meaning, whereas the participle is not the copula complement, but a sentential adjunct. An analysis of the construction along the lines of (13) is favoured by the fact that, whenever a locative/existential semantic nuance is involved, a distinctive, durative meaning of the periphrasis can be more readily established as opposed to cases when no such semantic premise exists. For example, if we compare the periphrases in (14.a) and (14.b), we will notice that the second, which involves a locative copula, accords with the progressive reading better than the first, which fluctuates between a verbal and a non-verbal/adjectival reading:

- (14a) οἵτινες ἄρα ἦσαν νομοθεντοῦντες
who therefore they-were legislating
 ‘those who legislated/were legislators’ (Plat. Leges 692b, 2)
- (14b) ἦσαν δὲ αὐτόθι κατοικοῦντες Θρᾷκές τινες
they-were PART there dwelling Thracians some
 ‘some Thracians were living there / there were some Thracians living there’ (Hellan. Fr. 71a, 4)

Such a property is a basic characteristic of the periphrasis in Classical Greek. A brief survey of the periphrases found in Herodotus (5th c. B.C.) reveals that 21 cases involve a locative copula and only 9 do not.

In Hellenistic – Roman Greek this feature is still substantial; the periphrases found in Biblical Greek strongly exhibit structural ambiguity in the interpretation of the copula rather than ambiguity in the adjectival versus verbal status of the participle.

- (15a) καθ’ ἡμέραν ἤμην πρὸς ὑμᾶς ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ διδάσκων
in day I-was to you in the temple teaching
 ‘I was teaching you in the temple every day/ I was every day in the temple teaching you’ (N.T. Marc 14, 49, 2)
- (15b) ἦν γὰρ διδάσκων αὐτοὺς ὥς ἐξουσίαν ἔχων
he-was PART teaching them that power having
 ‘he was teaching them that he had power’ (N.T. Matth. 7, 29, 1).

The relative independence of the elements of the periphrasis may be preserved in the tendency of locative adverbial modification to intervene between the finite verb and the verbal complement. This feature pertains to the strong locative/existential meaning of the be-form and points to a residual bi-clausality of the periphrasis:

- (16) ὅσοι δὲ Κάρων εἰσὶ ἐν Αἰγύπτῳ οἰκέοντες
which PART Kares-GEN are in Egypt dwelling
 ‘those of Kares who live in Egypt’ (Herod. 2, 61, 5)

The difficulty with this sort of data is in identifying to what degree the clause union has occurred. As a rule of thumb, it can be said that the more the verb is individually modified, the more it is understood to function as a lexical verb, whereas a lack of not

shared modification is suggestive of the conceptual union of the two verbal forms. For example in (17), even though the two elements are in absolute adjacency, the locative adverbial is open to be interpreted either with only 'be' or with both 'be' and the participle:

- (17) ἔνθα ἦσαν προφυλάσσουσai νέες τρεῖς Ἑλληνίδες
there were guarding ships three Greek
 'three Greek ships were guarding there / there were three Greek ships,
 guarding' (Herod. 1, 179, 3)

In (18), the locative adverbial modifies the whole construction and thus favours the implementation of the periphrastic reading:

- (18) Καὶ γὰρ ἐγγύς τῆς θύρας ἦδη βαδίζων εἰμι τῆςδ',
And PART close the door-GEN already walking am-I this-GEN
 'and already I was walking close to the door' (Aristoph. Ranae 36)

Elsewhere, a co-existence of spatial and temporal locational modification may be observed (especially in the later stages of the language). See the examples in (19):

- (19) ἦν δὲ τὰς ἡμέρας ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ διδάσκων
he-was PART the days in the temple teaching
 'and he was teaching these days in the temple' (N.T. Luc. 27, 1, 39, 1)

Not surprisingly, this dimension of the periphrasis can also be observed in the OE data. The close interconnection of the residual locative/existential meaning of the verb 'to be' and the temporal adverbials that potentially disambiguate the durative or habitual aspectuality of the periphrasis are systematically found in OE:

- (20a) Lazarus he on byrgenne wæs ful wuniende
Lazarus ... he on tomb was dirty abiding
 'Lazarus ... he was abiding corrupt in the tomb/ he was in the tomb, abiding corrupt' (The Blickling Homilies R 153) (Ziegeler 2006: 64)
 (20b) Æþelwulf cyning...ferde to Rome...þær wæs twelf monaþ wuniende
Æþelwulf king ... went to Rome...there was twelve months living
 'King Æþelwulf...went to Rome...he lived there twelve months' (Ang.Chr. 855)

Noteworthily, in later prose texts, the locative modification recedes in favour of purely temporal expressions, as in (21) below. This fact should be deemed as evidence for the shaping of well-grounded aspectual meanings.

- (21) & þy ilcan geare ferde to Rome ..., & þær was xii monaþ wuniende
and the same year he- proceeded to Rome ..., and there was 12 months staying
 'and the same year he proceeded to Rome ..., and remained there 12 months'
 (Two of the Saxon Chronicles Rarallel, R. 855.4)

To sum up, the data bring back into play the locative source that usually underlies the rise of progressive markers and reveal how it intersects with a non-grammaticalization process (such as the verbal reanalysis of the participial form). The fact that the verbal nature of the participle is more evident in this sort of data indicates that the

locative/existential dimension might have played an important role in the transformation of the adjectival status of the whole construction, as well as the advancing of the verbalization process.

5. Conclusion

The picture we have drawn so far reveals how many more complications arise as compared to those that first meet the eye, when we have to deal with actual historical data. The borders of the diachronic paths along which grammatical constructions develop over time are not watertight. The properties that a construction exhibits in a given period can be shaped by more than one linguistic factor and a painstaking analysis of the historical records is always needed before reaching to any firm conclusion.

References

- Aerts, W. J. (1965). *Periphrastica*. Amsterdam: Hakkert.
- Amenta, L. (2003). *Perifrasi Aspetuali in Greco e in Latino*. FrancoAngeli: Milano.
- Björck, G. (1940). *Ἡ διδασκων. Die periphrastischen Konstruktionen im Griechischen*. Uppsala /Leipzig: Almqvist & Wiksells Boktryckeri-A.-B. / O. Harrassowitz.
- Bybee, J., D. Perkins, & W. Pagliuca. (1994). *The Evolution of Grammar. Tense, Aspect and Modality in the Languages of the World*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Comrie, B. (1976). *Aspect*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Devitt, D. (1994). *Copulas in cross-linguistic perspective. Grammaticalization, synchronic variation and diachronic change*. SUNY.
- Heine, B. & T. Kuteva (2002). *A World Lexicon of Grammaticalization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hopper, P. J. & E. C. Traugott (2003). *Grammaticalization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jespersen, O. (1931). *A Modern English Grammar on Historical Principles* 4. Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard.
- Nickel, G. (1966). *Die Expand Form im Altenglischen: Vorkommen, Funktion und Herkunft der Umschreibung 'Beon / Wesan + Partizip Præsens'*. Neumünster: Karl Wachholtz Verlag.
- Nickel, G. (1967). "An example of syntactic blend in OE". *Indogermanische Forschungen* 72: 261-274.
- Pertejo, P. (2004). *The Progressive in the History of English*. München: Lincom.
- Poppe, E. (2003). "Progress on the Progressive? A Report". In H. Tristram (ed.), *Celtic Englishes III. Proceedings of the Third Potsdam Colloquium on Celtic Englishes, 19-23 September 2001*. Heidelberg: Winter, 65-84.
- Traugott, E. C. (1992). "Syntax". In *The Cambridge History of the English Language*, Vol. I, R. Hogg (ed.), 168-289. Cambridge: CUP.
- Ziegeler, D. (1999). "Agentivity and the history of English Progressive". *TPhS* 97, 51-101.
- Ziegeler, D. (2006). *Interfaces with English Aspect. Diachronic and empirical studies*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.