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Unstable Statives – An Observational Study: How British Popular Culture Reveals What is Happening to A Specific Verb Class, and the Possible Reasons for This Development

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Preamble

That a certain class of verb commonly known as 'statives' is undergoing change in terms of the way in which certain verbs of this type are being used in everyday speech is nothing new to the field of linguistics. Much has been written about it, and the author of this paper alone has been preoccupied with the subject for many years now. However, notwithstanding that this change has been fairly widely documented for well over half a century, the present paper has been motivated by the desire to capture the root cause of this change in writing and to establish the linguistic conditions that have enabled it to occur. This is not so much a reductionist venture, negatively conceived, as a quest to determine the primary factors involved in what can seem at times to be a most peculiar phenomenon. The method employed to delimit these causal factors proceeds by a process of elimination, while the provision of evidence adopts the traditional, tried-and-tested method of 'observation and collection'. The stative-specific research papers that examine the current variation constituting the focus of this paper are all from the present century.

Stative verbs and their changing usage

Stative (or state) verbs are a class of verb 'expressing a state or condition rather than an activity or event, such as *be* or *know*, as opposed to *run* or *grow'* (NODE, 2001, p. 1817). They also lack a progressive aspect or continuous form conveyed in English by the periphrastic formula 'AUX *be* + present participle V' (e.g., *I am writing, you are reading, we will be engaging with the words*).[1]

Stative verbs fall into several categories: verbs of perceiving (e.g., *feel, hear, see, smell, sound, taste*), verbs expressing mental or emotional states (e.g., *adore, desire, detest, doubt, hate, prefer, understand, want*) and verbs expressing a relationship or state of being (e.g., *be, belong to, depend on, involve, require, resemble*). Similar taxonomies can be found both in print and

[1] While some languages such as Cantonese discriminate between progressive and continuous aspect – the former being a dynamic description indicating that the action is in progress at the time of speaking (and, by implication, cannot be interrupted), while the latter is a more static description indicating the action is ongoing (and could well be interrupted) – English makes no such distinction. Hence, and for the purposes of this paper with its focus on English, the two terms will be considered synonymous.

online: the three categories above are based on Leech & Svartvik (1994, pp. 74-75), while the British Council offers comparable advice for English language learners based on four categories (i.e., thoughts and opinions, feelings and emotions, senses and perceptions, possession and measurement), with Greenbaum & Quirk (1990) suggesting five, namely relational, cognitive, affective, perception and stance.

If the assertion that the progressive option is unavailable to this verb class is regarded as a 'rule of grammar', i.e., an internal constraint on the grammar, akin to inflection-based verb agreement (concord) or tense harmony (traditionally termed 'sequence of tenses'), and hence that the 'temporary meaning expressed by the progressive aspect' (Leech & Svartvik, 1994, p. 66) ceases to apply, then non-observance of this rule, which seeks to express the temporary sense by ignoring the unique lexical property of this class, can be interpreted as a rule violation. Accordingly, an ungrammatical sentence will be produced in each instance.

And yet we find many examples of such usage in current British English (BE), which has been much in evidence for some time now. Although many instances of use are informal utterances, not formal written statements, the change should not really surprise us: 'The seeds of change are always present in spoken language, and even the social factors that encourage covert and informal maintenance of particular spoken varieties may have the effect of ensuring that different varieties continue to maintain partly independent existence' (Milroy & Milroy, 1999, p. 58). Moreover, while these instances of use are informal utterances, not formal written statements, usage is not restricted to the more casual speech of younger speakers, although, arguably, a case can be made for young speakers having been early adopters due to 'the tendency in each generation to favour certain types of variants present in a language, and importantly, for some speakers to (unconsciously) select the more innovative of these variants' (Hickey, 2010, p. 2).

By way of illustration, two decades ago there was the chart-topper *Do You Really Like It?*, which reached No. 1 spot in the UK Singles Chart in 2001 for the group DJ Pied Piper and the Masters of Ceremonies and which might well be taken to represent 'the voice of youth'. Part of its memorable refrain runs 'We're lovin' it, lovin' it, lovin' it. We're lovin' it like this'. On the other hand, where age is concerned, we might cite a couple of more recent examples of quotations from celebrities that appeared in print in the *Radio Times* column 'What I'm Watching': 'My wife and I are loving *Killing Eve*' from popular historian and TV presenter Dan Snow (aged 40) and 'I'm loving the Attenborough series *Dynasties*' from singer and guest columnist Lesley Garrett (aged 63), from November and December 2018 respectively – along with the statement from musician and singer-songwriter Sir Paul McCartney (aged 77), made in an interview that also appeared in the *Radio Times* and was published in October 2019 regarding the 50th anniversary of the Beatles' *Abbey Road* album, 'We were just loving being together, playing together and feeding off each other. [...] [The younger Paul today] would be loving the fact that he was still here.' Evidently, the practice of applying the continuous form with stative verbs, especially the verb *love*, is not restricted to age.[2] Nor is lack of education a barrier.

Further examples from the British media reveal this. In the satirical magazine *Private Eye,* issue 1526 of 17–30 July, 2020, regarding the 2-minute limit on speeches in the House of Lords

[2] All ages given here refer to the speaker's age at the time of utterance.

during the Covid crisis, we read 'Lord Maginnis expressed "disgust" at this smothering of debate. [...] The government got its business, of course. Its whips are loving lockdown' (p. 15). In similar fashion, speaking to an interviewee via video link, TV journalist Charlie Stayt (aged 58) stated on 27 November, 2020 on BBC's *Breakfast* news programme in regard to her office, 'Shirley, I'm quite liking that [...] leather chair look'. Likewise, on BBC Radio 3's *Unclassified* on April 22, 2021 (at 38:19 minutes in), presenter Elizabeth Alker (aged 38) said about composer-performers Laura Cannell and Kate Ellis, 'I'm loving walking through this year with them.' In addition, Cambridge-educated journalist and presenter Andrew Marr (aged 61) said on the BBC's *The Andrew Marr Show* of Sunday, 27 June, 2021, when interviewing Mayor of London Sadiq Khan about the rising violent crime figures for the capital, 'I'm still not understanding why things have gone wrong' (at 25:00 minutes in) and, similarly, British Meat Processors Association (BMPA) Chief Executive Nick Allen, when interviewed by the BBC on 15 October, 2021 regarding problems in the food supply chain, said that some governmental departments 'are [...] not really understanding the real problems'. Finally, Cambridge-educated TV presenter and novelist Richard Osman (aged 51) said to one contestant on the BBC quiz show *Richard Osman's House of Games* broadcast on 24 November, 2021, 'The other three are hating to see this.'

Is a rule violation as defined above actually occurring here? It would seem so, although, given the adage that rules are there to be broken and the fact that, linguistically, rules are known to change as speakers adapt them to their own communicative ends and even to differ across varieties, perhaps our focus would be better served by regarding this current development in language use as being brought about by the verbal iterations of a speech community. Clearly, certain speakers of English in switching from Present Simple to Present Continuous are now favouring a more complex form for certain verbs that hitherto only had one form available, certainly in the written standard. This is at first glance puzzling. Yet before we attempt an explanation for this phenomenon, which appears to represent a significant evolution in language use, let us begin by looking at the nature of the progressive aspect itself.

The nature of the progressive

The progressive is used to highlight a particular aspect of temporal meaning or express a specific temporal relation, namely action in progress as opposed to repetitive or habitual action. In present-day English, use of the progressive to describe an action that is ongoing at the time of speaking is obligatory (cf. Mair, 2010, p. 6). Cross-linguistically, while all natural languages are capable of expressing the notion of activity in progress, by no means do the majority employ a grammaticized way of articulating this.[3] That is to say, not all will employ grammatical morphemes (such as affixes and auxiliaries) to indicate the progressive aspect. Hence,

[3] Standard German, for instance, only employs the simple tense, although there are German dialects that might explicitly suggest activity in progress by periphrastic means. For example, in contrast to standard German's *Ich schlief gerade*, meaning *I was asleep just now*, where any sense of continuity is implicit, in parts of the Rhineland *Ich war am Schlafen,* literally **I was at (the) sleeping*, spells out the ongoing nature of the event. Here it is the predication of the prepositional phrase involving a gerund that conveys the progressive sense. Dutch also employs the same means with *Ik was aan het slapen* or, similarly, by employing a postural verb, with *Ik lag te slapen* (*I lay to sleep). Mair (2012) describes this first method of rendering the progressive aspect periphrastically as 'weakly grammaticalized' (p. 2), although he stresses, 'Ideally, crosslinguistic comparisons should not be based on exhaustive inventories of the various ways languages have of conveying progressive aspectuality, but rather focus on strongly grammaticalized, conventional and if possible even obligatory constructions' (p. 7).

the feature present in those that do – and English is one of these and, as a result, fairly unusual among the Germanic languages – may be described as 'marked', 'markedness' being defined as an asymmetric relation between two values whereby the unmarked one is the more frequent. Arguably more unusual still is the fact that, for those languages that make use of the progressive, a discrete class of verbs exists, namely stative verbs, which are not permitted to adopt the continuous form (for the obvious reason that the activity they describe is non-dynamic). Consequently, for certain speakers to now employ this form makes the form highly marked indeed, albeit 'locally marked', i.e., 'unusual within the context of a single language' (Hickey, 2010, p. 5).

Change factors

Why might such adoption of a most uncommon English verbal form be occurring? To answer this question, perhaps it is worth taking a more 'apophatic' approach initially, that is to say, to adopt a process of elimination, for if we can define what the 'progressive stative' is *not* by ruling out certain explanations, this will reduce the field significantly, permitting us to arrive at a more realistic conclusion.

Morphological erosion

Given that the progressive form is structurally more complex than the simple stative in English, it cannot be argued, for instance, that the current development is attributable to morphological erosion, a known factor in language change. Inflections are not disappearing, as they are known to have done diachronically in English vis-à-vis its Germanic roots; if anything, the morphemes are increasing in number with the switch from simple to compound tense. This is not to claim, however, that adopters of the progressive stative or stative progressive, as it is more commonly called, are not looking to adopt a more regular (and currently popular) form, the progressive being available to the majority of English verbs, after all, if not to this verb class. Nor is it to say, given such availability, that use of the stative progressive is not due to convenience or ease of processing despite its greater structural complexity. It still begs the question, though, why the simpler, one-word form is now dispreferred among a group of speakers.

We shall return to this conundrum presently, but before we do, let us examine another known reason for language change: acquisition.

Acquisition

Though we can acknowledge that there is a change in value involved in current use regarding the lexical properties of at least some stative verbs, i.e., [- progressive] → [+ progressive], the change does not seem to relate to the traditional parameter-(re)setting argument expressed in a generative grammar perspective such as the Universal Grammar (UG) paradigm with its principles-and-parameters approach. This is because the question of learner acquisition, in the strict sense of acquiring an unknown language for the first time, does not apply: neither first language (L1) nor second language (L2) acquisition, in fact. If we adopt the Roberts (2007) definition of parameters as 'the principle construct in the analysis of cross-linguistic variation,

both synchronic and diachronic' (p. 453) and permit variation to include intralinguistic change, parameters would certainly appear to play a part. However, parameters are set by learners taking their cue, as it were, from the evidence available, the primary linguistic data (PLD). To quote Roberts again: 'it seems reasonable to take the view that cues, i.e., triggers [...], are provided by the input; parameters are specified by UG and are set by the learner on the basis of the interaction of cues/triggers and [the invariant principles of] UG)' (244). Given that the change is not the result of imperfect learning, either by L1 learners seeking to acquire their native language (i.e., intergenerationally) or by L2 learners looking to acquire another (second or foreign) language, parameter resetting must be discounted. This applies no less if the reason for syntactical change is the application of abductive reasoning to the PLD, as Roberts contends, whereby the 'combination of primary linguistic data [...] and Universal Grammar may lead the learner to abduce a system which is distinct from that underlying the primary linguistic data by reanalysis' (2007, p. 445), because convergence on the progressive form either by natural acquisition or learning is not at issue here.[4] Instead, we have speakers of all ages adopting a form *additional* to the one they already have at their disposal. The 'prime mover' of linguistic change, language acquisition, can therefore be discounted.

Language variety

For a similar reason, where the demographic of adopters of the stative progressive is concerned, the novel form cannot be said to be derived from another, distinctive, variety of English where the variety employs a non-standard form. One thinks, for example, of the Cockney use of *done* for *did*, the colloquial possessive *us* of Northern BE meaning *our*, and the construction *me know* instead of *I know* found in Caribbean English. The stative progressive might be an increasingly used variant but it does not constitute a feature of a particular dialect or language variety. It is certainly non-standard, nonetheless, akin to other non-standard forms currently heard, such as *between you and I or what if it was* (the former having been around since Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, the latter fast becoming the norm for the subjunctive at the present time). Whether it will ultimately become the successful 'young cuckoo' ousting the previous occupant from the nest, as these other forms seem to be doing, remains an open question.[5]

[4] Abductive reasoning or inference to the best explanation, as it sometimes called, is the process of choosing the hypothesis that best explains the available data. Unlike deductive and inductive reasoning, the premises do not support the conclusion. Anderson first described the role of 'abductive innovation' in relation to language change via L1 acquisition thus: 'Abduction proceeds from an observed result, invokes a law, and infers that something may be the case. [...] The conclusions reached by abductive inference afford none of the security offered by induction and deduction. Since abductive inference goes beyond what is given to suggest that something may be the case, it is always a weak argument, sometimes a reasonable guess, but often a mere surmise. [...] In acquiring his language, a learner observes the verbal activity of his elders, construes it as a "result"–as the output of a grammar–and guesses at what that grammar might be. He has little positive knowledge or experience, comparable to what we use in our everyday abductive reasoning, to provide his major premise in this process. What he has, however, is a more reliable set of "laws", which he shares with all members of his species, viz. the properties of his constitution that completely determine the nature of linguis-tic structure, and hence the relation between a grammar and its output.' (Anderson, 1971973, pp. 775-776).

[5] The reference to Shakespeare can be found in Aitchison (1998, p. 16) along with the description of the 'young cuckoo' model of language change (pp. 17-18).

On this matter of the likely persistence of the stative progressive among BE speakers, it might be useful to enquire, before proceeding to investigate the source, what motivates speakers to adopt it. As mentioned earlier, why should they prefer a more complex verbal form to the one-word standard?

Speaker motivation

Speaker motivation can be rooted in several factors: expressivity, fashion, prestige and the desire for regularity. It is conceivable that all may apply in this case. Taking the last one first, while there can be no doubt that ascribing a [+ progressive] value to stative verbs such as *love* and *like* makes for regularization of the verbal system, it would seem that, in this case, last is indeed least because the convenience for speakers of having things regular (by removing irregularities in the system) is, psychologically, unlikely to be high on their list of priorities and, in terms of face-saving, may even come across to the listener as a fondness for laziness in their speech where none exists. More likely is the desire for expressivity, which, according to Roberts, 'is a factor in language change alongside the drive for simplicity' (p. 276), in this instance emanating from the need to express a current or ongoing feeling. Linked to this is the probability that the stative progressive is for some speakers a stylistic device used to express a fashionable way of speaking, and this in turn might well be associated with the wish to sound up to the minute and 'on trend'. Similarly, for both speakers and listeners, a stylish turn of phrase can create the impression that the speaker is socially upward-moving, thereby according them the social prestige that they may actually lack. This is also true of speakers who affect an accent in order to set themselves apart from others. In this regard, one thinks of how some Northern BE speakers will employ the BATH phoneme to present themselves as being well educated, where TRAP is normally the phoneme used to represent the short or flat 'a' sound in the North of England, BATH being more southern and a feature of Received Pronunciation, the prestige BE accent per se. In a similar vein, Trask (2010) records how French enjoyed enormous prestige in England following the Norman Conquest of the 11th century, with many French words subsequently displacing their native English equivalents. He notes, 'there is no doubt that prestige is an immensely important force in language change' (p. 31).

Source of the stative progressive

Though the factors in the preceding paragraph might help to clarify the motivation of adopters of the stative progressive, they do not account for the latter's origin.

Sarah McKeown, writing for the web-based Macmillan Dictionary Blog, is of the opinion that '*It's all Justin Timberlake's fault*' (emphasis in the original), explaining that it was popular entertainer Justin Timberlake's song *I'm lovin' it* of 2003 that was chosen by a US multinational fast food chain for its new global marketing campaign which initially 'rode roughshod over decades of cast-iron grammatical certainty'. Although, as stated above, there was an introduction of the stative progressive to the world of popular entertainment two years earlier with *Do You Really Like It?*, there can be no doubting the fact that it was the global reach of the new slogan that was the crucial factor in achieving widespread acceptance of it. The company even deployed the title sentence as its new tagline, thereby reinforcing the verb form at the visual

level (even though the sentence was written in lower case). In addition, the advert was accentuated by a highly recognizable and very catchy jingle: the by now famous 'Ba Da Ba Ba Bah'[6] . Finally, the 'i'm lovin' it' campaign was extremely long-running by advertising standards, lasting well over a decade, thus strengthening familiarity with and receptivity for use of the stative progressive even more, as well as providing the time to establish 'lovin' it' as a formulaic expression. Van Lancker Sidtis (2010) defines a formulaic expression as follows: 'The best operational definition for formulaic expressions is an exclusionary one [...]; that is, formulaic expressions have in common that they are not newly created from the operation of grammatical rules on lexical items. They are holistically acquired and used in a language community based on shared knowledge of the stereotyped, canonical form, the conventionalized meaning, and conditions of use' (p. 4). In other words, the formula has become fixed in the mind of the speaker as a common linguistic device available for use *in full knowledge of* the standard form. The notion of formulaic speech does not necessarily extend to other instances of stative progressive use, of course, but it is worth considering in the context of 'loving' mentioned here.

Hence, while it might not be a feature of a discrete variety of English, by and large the stative progressive does appear to have been very much influenced by what has happened in one particular variety, namely American English (AE), where it is still very much in evidence and where, arguably, use of the progressive (if not the stative progressive specifically) is more conspicuous in everyday speech than in Britain. To quote two examples (as yet) unlikely to be found in British English: Jules Mann-Stewart, mother of American actress Kristen Stewart, on the latter's romantic relationship with a woman, was quoted in the *Sunday Mirror* of 13 June, 2015 as saying, 'What's not to be accepting about her now having a girlfriend?'[7] Similarly, in the 2019 US TV film *Secrets at the Lake* (broadcast in the UK as *Murders at the Lake*), the adolescent character Katie, on entering her holiday home for the first time, exclaims to her mother, 'How are we affording this place?'[8] Both of which are striking examples of the progressive being used where ordinarily they are not (if only because the action in question cannot be narrowly understood as being 'in progress'). Couple the strong AE incidence with the influence of the transatlantic music (garage, hip-hop and R&B) scene and what we seem to have currently is an example of intralinguistic convergence in this area due to dialect–dialect contact between the AE and BE varieties. It can thus be claimed that the BE phenomenon is predicated on contact-induced borrowing, primarily in the direction of BE from AE, but not exclusively.

[6] About which, see the first entry on social media platform Twitter. Available online at <https://twitter.com/mcdonalds/status/349578035600687105?lang=en> (Accessed on August 30, 2021).

[7] The statement can be found online at <https://www.mirror.co.uk/3am/celebrity-news/kristen-stewart-forgets-robert-pattinson-5878721> (Accessed on May 7, 2021), where it can be seen that Stewart Sr. ultimately self-corrects: 'She's happy. She's my daughter, I'm just her mom so she knows I would accept her choices. I've met Kirsten's new girlfriend, I like her. What's not to accept? She's a lovely girl.' (While Australian by birth, Jules Mann-Stewart, having been adopted at an early age by Californian parents, has lived in the US long enough to justify her American credentials.)

[8] The transcript can be read at <https://subslikescript.com/movie/Secrets_at_the_Lake-8564600> (Accessed on August 16, 2021). While not normally listed as a stative verb and usually preceded by a modal auxiliary such as *can* or *could*, the verb *afford* does express the *state* of being able to pay and so is rarely found in the progressive – unless, of course, by using it in such a marked way the speaker is drawing attention to the fact that their habitual state is one of penury; all the same, such usage is very uncommon.

The licensing conditions

To offer a probable source for the change, however, is not the same as identifying the licensing conditions for it; otherwise what we have is something of a just-so argument. And changes do not originate out of nothing. What is it, in short, that enables the change to occur? Pure innovation cannot be the answer because even neologisms are largely created by association with other known lexemes or derivational morphemes and/or the use of 'syllables that sound like word formation elements [...]: sound combinations without [a/any] stable component(s)' (Elsen, 2006, p. 243).[9] Hence, in the present case, there must be a facilitator, something that accounts for the change occurring – although perhaps the notion of association is key (as expounded below). You can *be standing*, say, for a long time at a bus stop waiting for the town centre circular to show, or even be requested to *be upstanding* to welcome an honoured guest, since these involve some activity (and *upstanding* is merely an adjectival descriptor after all), but, despite the examples cited above, it is very rare for someone to claim to *be understanding* a delicate situation, for example, or the gist of an argument, where your state of mind is the focus. Addressed to a bemused foreigner, elderly person or child, the question is always *Do you understand?*, usually spoken with some emphasis and, often, with a raised voice, possibly in a somewhat patronising manner; it is (as yet!) highly unlikely that you would hear anyone say *Are you understanding?*, spoken in whatever manner. So what is it that opens the door to the stative progressive and legitimizes its use?

The answer seems to be that in the cases cited, of *like, love, understand* and *hate* respectively, the new forms are produced by analogy with non-stative verbs that are related semantically, by being of the same category in the first two cases (i.e., 'affective'); by analogy with the verb comprising the stem in the third, albeit here largely with declarative statements usually in the negative (i.e., *not understanding*); and by analogy with the first two cases in the fourth, being also of the same semantic category and the antonym of *love*.

Analogy is a recognised factor in language change. As an indication of the extent to which this has been researched over the years, Trask (2000) cites ten different types of analogy. With respect to its relevance as a concept, De Smet & Fischer (2017) observe that 'It is clear from the literature on language variation and change that analogy is difficult to capture in fixed rules, laws or principles [...].This is probably one of the reasons why analogy has not been prominent as an explanatory factor in generative diachronic studies. More recently, with the rise of usage-based grammar, construction-grammar [CxG] and probabilistic linguistic approaches, the interest in the role of analogy in linguistic change [...] has been revived. Other studies in the areas of language acquisition, cognitive science and language evolution have also pointed to analogical reasoning as a deep-seated cognitive principle at the heart of grammatical organization' (p. 240). To take one example, Milroy & Milroy (1999) show how, on the strength of analogy, speakers may make use of up to three different prepositions, *from*, *to* and *than*, as semantically empty linking particles, to connect the word *different* to its argument: 'In favour of *different from*, we can argue on the analogy of the verb *differ*, which requires

[9] The original reads: 'Silben, die wie Wortbildungselemente klingen [...]: Lautkombinationen ohne stabile Bedeutungskomponente(n)'.

the particle *from* and not *to* [...]. On the other hand, *different to* might be justified on the grounds that it falls into a set of words with comparative meanings such as *similar, equal, superior*, etc. [...]. A third variant, *different than* (which is particularly common in Scotland, Ireland and North America), can also be justified on the analogy of certain comparative uses in English, such as *other than*, or even *better than, worse than*' (p. 14). For her part, Bybee (2015) describes analogy as 'a process by which innovative expressions are based on existing expressions rater than on rules' (p. 93), a notion which helps to explain why class membership of [+ prog] verbs should be expanding to include a certain number of verbs that by grammatical definition should lack this feature and, according to usage guides, have traditionally done so (see, for example, Swan, 2005, pp. 502-503).

One relevant type of analogy is analogical extension, which Trask defines as the 'spread of a linguistic form or pattern, by analogy, to items which formerly were not subject to it' (2000, p. 19). Hence, in this case, the progressive use of *like* and *love* is enabled by analogical extension from *appreciate* and *enjoy*. Often *like* and *love* are used hyperbolically in everyday speech where the non-progressive alternatives would suffice,[10] but they can also operate as a short form for *really appreciate* and *really enjoy*. Hence, sports presenter John Watson's statement on BBC's *Breakfast* programme on 4 October, 2021, 'Brentford are clearly loving life in the Premier League' would conventionally have been rendered as 'Brentford are clearly enjoying life in the Premier League'. The fact that all these verbs are of the same class – namely verbs of mind or emotion, or 'psych verbs' as Roberts (2007) terms them, where the verbal subject 'has the thematic role of Experiencer, the person of whom the psychological state described holds' (p. 151) – makes extension by analogy more likely. Coupled with this – and, arguably, more pertinent as a licensing condition – is the factor of analogical levelling where, allowing for the matter of complexity discussed above, conformity to a dominant pattern occurs at the inflectional level: here, the elimination of the non-progressive form for a discrete number of verbs, thereby aiming to achieve what Haugen terms (defining codification) 'minimal variation in form' (1966, p. 931).

In a recent research project examining attitudes to grammatical variation among educated Thai speakers of English (teachers and students), Thienthong (2022) reports how, where acceptability of language use is concerned, students in particular 'employed analogies with similar grammatical patterns' (p. 549) – to the extent that it is the second highest reason after 'rule' given by students for their linguistic preference. While students' resorting to analogy may be a product of their interlanguage 'because they may not have fully mastered prescriptive rules and hence generalised their grammatical knowledge by analogy in order to simplify irregular usages' (p. 565), the fact remains that analogy is a device employed by speakers in language production which facilitates both the appearance and the acceptance of variant forms.

A secondary facilitating factor in the development of the stative progressive is doubtlessly

[10] The current tendency towards the use of hyperbolic speech in British English is reflected in the use of such lexical items as *impact* in place of *affect*, along with phrases such as *infinitely better* and *vastly superior* (compared to *far better* and *far superior*). Former British prime minister Boris Johnson's fondness for 'boosterism', invariably optimistic in tone, led him to regularly apply epithets such as *fantastic* and *world-beating* to the UK and those UK institutions under the control of his government.

the common use of the gerund. Given that the gerund involves affixation of the suffix <ing> and is identical to the present participle, it is easy to see how the licensing conditions for 'letting in' the stative progressive already obtain to some degree, if only 'by the side door', as it were. Thus any adopter has numerous examples at their disposal ranging from, say, John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* of 1689 to the album *Loving* by the band Loving of 2016, while common expressions such as *not to my liking* and *have a liking for* leave the door even further open. This is not an implausible claim; Granath & Wherrity (2014) argue that the morpheme *-ing* has a synchronically invariant core meaning, since grammatical morphemes are monosemous, i.e. with one basic meaning rather than several. They write, 'The semantically "near empty" copula functions in the progressive construction to ground the verb + *-ing*, i.e., PROCESS, in time. This being the case, we will here suggest a basic meaning of PROCESS IN TIME for the construction as a whole' (p. 11; their emphasis). In fact it is their view that it is this morphemic encoding of the verb's meaning, rather than its grammatical classification, that allows any verb to adopt the progressive, thereby foregoing the necessity to explain away progressive use through reference to a shift in semantic emphasis. Thus, for them, acceptability of usage is not a matter of rule observance according to prescription but of pragmatic, communicative need on the part of speakers.

There is the further probability that if speakers are already making natural use of the progressive aspect in the same sentence or statement, the likelihood of them also including a stative progressive in the construction is increased. For instance, BBC presenter and former champion heptathlete Jessica Ennis-Hill (age 36) referring to Jamaican sprinter Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce's performance at the World Athletics Championships from Eugene, Oregon on 18 July, 2022 stated, 'She's so confident and just loving what she's doing at the moment' – where initial use of (abbreviated) *is* has already laid the foundation for the succeeding verb to add *-ing*, if we follow to its logical conclusion Granath & Wherrity's idea of the auxiliary 'grounding' V.

Similarly, the present participle of a stative can be used in conjunction with another verb phrase quite legitimately. To take one example: when interviewed on the set of the 2011 film version of *Coriolanus*, which he both directed and starred in, the actor Ralph Fiennes explained his involvement by stating, 'I have grown up loving Shakespeare.'[11]

Finally, let us not forget the role of adjectives, both attributive and predicative, in reinforcing the *be* + V-*ing* pattern by association. This can be seen very clearly with *loving*, as in *He is a loving person* and *She is very loving*. The presence of such structures further allows the stative progressive to become conventionalized.

Thus, in the light of other possible explanations seemingly suffering from a lack of fit and consequently being discredited in the course of this analysis, analogy (including use by association) seems to be the only option – if only by default – that offers an adequate explanation for the linguistic phenomenon under review. Analogy seems key. And on this point

[11] For the full text of the interview, see <https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/entertainment/celebrity/ralph-fiennes-reveals-his-passion-for-james-1112576> (Accessed on August 19, 2022).

Mair (2012) makes an interesting comment: 'Sometimes, the marked use of a progressive for a stative verb [...] is not a sign of ongoing change but rather an instance of semantically or pragmatically licensed rule-bending. It may lead to a stative verb being reinterpreted as a dynamic process in a specific context, such as when the prototypically stative verb *love*, denoting a stable affective disposition, is limited to a specified time frame and hence comes to take on the more dynamic meaning of "enjoy"' (p. 8). The temporal and dynamic qualification certainly applies, but whether or not the pragmatic usage Mair refers to here will become a permanent feature of English speech, only time will tell; the development may be only short-term. Current experience, however, suggests that, in view of the increasing frequency discerned, this development might well prove more enduring, at least in informal, often discourse-related contexts, where it is likely to continue to exist as a competing variant equivalent in meaning alongside the stative proper, leading to a recognized situation known as 'layering', after Hopper (1991), where a language can have several ways of expressing the same concept.[12] Hence, it is the contention of this paper that the historically fairly recent addition of the [+progressive] option to certain verbs of the stative verb class suggests there is an ongoing change to document if only because, as Mair himself maintains, there is a 'continuing diachronic dynamic' (p. 11) to the progressive generally. Even if all this change amounts to retrospectively is an increase in relative frequency, the observations made still seem highly relevant, and the contention is no less valid because this paper draws less on the written word and largely on quotation from popular culture and the broadcast media. Indeed, it would seem that the spoken word is precisely the area in which we should be looking, since it is to be expected that more instances of use will be found here because there is greater variability in speech compared to writing, due to the fact that speech has not been subjected to codification to the extent that the written language has and is therefore more open to change. Moreover, the approach of this paper is not to rely solely on electronic corpus data for its findings (for examples of which, see below), but instead to seek out real-world examples from the present period, the likes of which, in the author's experience, can be witnessed regularly. The evidence is by no means anecdotal but empirically based, having its origin in a variety of contexts, not all of which are necessarily informal and some of which can be pinpointed to the second in real time.

Further evidence from research

A much more statistically rich investigation of the stative progressive is that of Rautionaho and Fuchs (2019). As with Mair (2012), the study is (electronic) corpus-driven, but unlike Mair it is conversationally focussed rather than based on written texts. Further, while Mair draws on the data of A Representative Corpus of Historical English Registers (ARCHER), the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and the Diachronic Corpus of Present-Day Spoken English (DCPSE), the Rautionaho & Fuchs study draws on the data provided by the British National Corpus from 1994 and 2014, which is perhaps more relevant to the present paper.

[12] As to 'competing variant', Berg et al. (2020) write, 'Once alternative options are "contemporaries", the possibility of competition arises' (p. 235). Re 'layering': after crediting Givón (1984) with the term, Hopper writes, 'Layering refers to the prominent fact that very often more than one technique is available in a language to serve similar or even identical functions. This formal diversity comes about because when a form or set of forms emerges in a functional domain, it does not immediately (and may never) replace an already existing set of functionally equivalent forms, but rather two sets of forms co-exist' (p. 23).

Most surprisingly, Rautionaho & Fuchs find with respect to *love* that the 'progressive use of LOVE has increased from 0 instances in 1994 before the [fast food] slogan to 9 (0.92 percent of all instances of LOVE) in 2014' (p. 13), explaining that 'the nine instances come from eight different speakers in nine different texts' (p. 14). And although they recognise that 'the semantic restrictions applying to the use of this stative lemma have clearly loosened' (pp. 13-14), their low-frequency finding seems to fly in the face of current experience, where examples of statives being used progressively by various individuals can be heard on British radio and television on a regular basis without having to permanently tune into the radio or TV – and even if the frequency only amounted to once a week, that would be significantly more than the total for the year reported in the decade covered by Rautionaho & Fuchs. This makes one wonder where academic research is heading if providing detailed analyses of linguistic corpora, instead of simply switching on the TV or radio and apprehending with one's own ears, should turn out to be the lesser alternative when it comes to assessing the state of a language. Put simply, if the BNC used by Rautionaho and Fuchs were to still reveal the use of the stative progressive to be so limited today using the same form of sampling as that for 1994-2014, then it cannot be looking in the right place. After all, if one British native speaker out of millions, i.e., the present writer, can find so many instances of the stative progressive in regular use (see Appendix, which does no more than record publicly available speech naturally produced, not overhead conversations, which would add to the number), by proceeding merely as a relatively casual observer on no other systematic basis than simply noting what he chances to hear and read (and not always then) – *chances* being in itself statistically meaningful in such a context in that it suggests the numbers could easily be greater – then something appears to be seriously amiss with how more official sources are approaching their sampled data. Furthermore, no one is claiming that there is anything especially sophisticated about the approach taken here: no 'score' is being recorded, for example, for a specific speaker or social group according to the method first adopted by Labov (1966), whereby the overall use of a particular variant by a speaker is calculated, usually as a percentage, for comparison with other speakers;[13] rather, the present approach – admittedly, quite haphazard in character – merely seeks to indicate the frequency of usage in general, the 'direction of travel' as it were, within the British-English-speaking community.

On this direction of travel, Freund (2016) paints a similar picture to Rautionaho and Fuchs. Likewise focusing on British English, her findings are also corpus-driven, involving 'the British National Corpus (BNC), dating back to 1991-1992, and C12-14, a specially built corpus consisting of speech-like computer-mediated communication (CMC), such as forum discussions and interactive blogs, dated 2012-2014. In the absence of readily accessible spoken data from the very recent period, CMC was considered to display sufficiently similar features to speech, such as colloquial language, unfinished sentences, taboo words, grammar "slips". This made it possible to observe changes in stative-progressive use over a time span of 20-23 years' (p. 54). The phrase 'absence of readily accessible spoken data from the very recent period' is pertinent, because it suggests that any findings might be at variance with real speech – the very speech documented by the present paper. There are zero hits registered for *understand* in the internet-based C12-14 corpus, for instance, in contrast to the two that were easily acquired here. To her credit,

[13] A clear and concise exposition of the method can be found in Labov (1972).

however, Freud admits from the outset that merely drawing on written texts will not get us very far in the investigation of the stative progressive: 'it is generally recognised that change tends to occur first in the spoken language [...], particularly with regard to the conversational type of language investigated here. For this reason, the corpus data was retrieved from informal spoken BrE and speech-like internet data, such as online forum discussions and interactive blogs' (p. 50). Freund further concedes that her research 'was severely limited by the small size of the available corpora' (p. 59) and, unlike Rautionaho & Fuchs, records a statistically significant increase in frequency for love, thereby substantiating the contention of the present paper, which is underpinned more by personal observation. She writes, 'The three sources of data in this study (corpora, survey and student grammars) gave a global picture of *love* as increasing in frequency, salience and scope in the progressive form' (p. 57), explaining 'Within the various contexts, the progressive was adapted to express intensity, transience and humour. Frequently, it was used in conjunction with other sentential elements to fulfil particular communicative needs, such as the expression of tentativeness or contradictory notions' (p. 58). In general, Freund finds, 'certain statives attract progressive aspect in particular contexts, while others remain resistant to it' (p. 59), the cognitive verb know being a particular case of resistance that she cites. This certainly accords with the present writer's experience expressed here. Ultimately, Freund subscribes to the view that 'the progressive is becoming "less aspectual" and, by implication, more subjective' and concludes, 'Given the internal and external pressures on [BE], it seems likely that the use of stative-progressives will expand over time' (p. 59).

To sum up, regardless of whether diachronic change is occurring or not – and overall Rautionaho & Fuchs infer that 'While our results suggest the rise of stative progressives [...] has been halted and is confined to particular lemmata, this increase in the few particular lemmata might [...] suffice to sustain the popular impression of a general, continuing spread' (p. 24) – there can be no doubting that, in relation to the stative verbs documented here, ongoing use of the stative progressive form is very much in evidence and suggestive of significantly more than mere 'popular impression'. Indeed, the author invites anyone to simply, in the time-honoured tradition, prick up their ears, to hear the stative progressive being used by all manner of people on a daily basis across the breadth of Britain. Moreover, given the prominent role of media celebrities and influencers in the daily life of speakers of British English, the stative progressive of these verbs could well pass to the next generation eventually on the strength of abductive reasoning and reanalysis, as described by Roberts (2007). Indeed, there is much evidence to suggest, in particular from studies into standardisation (Hundt, 2009) and the role played by bottom-up or 'grassroots' prescriptivism (Lukač, 2018), that there is every possibility that speakers might eventually make the new variant the norm through regular use.[14] Hundt writes, 'One could go so far as to see in the language producer the sovereign of the language standard (p. 122) and further, 'The main thesis of this article was that in investigating language standards we must look more closely than before at the language sovereign, who [...] has a greater influence on the genesis of language standards than is the case with language codes, language authorities, language experts and model texts' (p. 135). Likewise, Lukač notes, 'in linguists'

[14] The original reads: 'Man könnte soweit gehen, im Sprachproduzenten den Souverän der Sprachnorm zu sehen.' and further 'Die Hauptthese dieses Beitrags war, dass wir bei der Untersuchung von Sprachnormen viel stärker als bisher auf den Sprachsouverän blicken müssen, der [...] stärkeren Einfluss auf die Genese von Sprachnormen hat, als dies bei Sprachkodizes, Sprachnormautoritäten, Sprachexperten und Modelltexten der Fall ist.'

theoretical models of standardisation, speakers have traditionally been marginalised as passive followers of the norms established by language authorities' (p. 5) – both of whom suggest, along with Granath and Wherrity, that it is language speakers who write the rules of acceptable language use, as opposed to the rules limiting their ability to effect language change. Such influence could prove significant in the long term; for the moment, observation indicates that it is analogy with other [+ prog] verbs (and, conceivably, all other forms of the V-*ing* type) that currently provides the licensing conditions for such use and allows the stative progressive to coexist and operate in parallel with the pure stative form, as a competing variant – and with a frequency that seems a long way from zero. This coexistence does not of necessity mean that the stative progressive will be used with the same regularity as the stative proper, for, to quote Granath & Wherrity a final time, 'that some verbs occur infrequently in the progressive is not ultimately due to any inherent incompatibility [with stativity], but rather to the infrequency of the message types which would motivate a speaker to regard such verbs as in progress' (p. 13). Added to this is the acknowledged fact that high-frequency expressions resist change (Bybee, 2015, p. 174), which would indicate that, from a diachronic perspective, levelling in the form of stative replacement is unlikely to occur any time soon. Nevertheless, the bottom line, it appears, is that statives as traditionally understood are evidently unstable, constituting, as this paper has hopefully shown, a notable area of linguistic contention and a noteworthy development to keep a close eye on – and, it should go without saying, both ears alert to – going forward. Authentic speech at work is the issue here.

THE AUTHOR

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Appendix

Recorded instances of use of the stative progressive in British English

The age given (in brackets where known) is the speaker's age at the time of utterance.

Spoken utterances

- 'My wife and I are loving *Killing Eve*' - Dan Snow (40) interviewed in *Radio Times* of 10-16 November 2018
- 'I'm loving the Attenborough series *Dynasties* [...] On radio, I'm loving *The Archers*' - Lesley Garrett (63) interviewed in *Radio Times* of 15-21 December 2018
- 'I'm loving what I'm doing at the moment' - Alex Scott (34) interviewed in *Radio Times* of 6-12 July 2019
- 'I'm already coming out of my shell and I'm hoping that sticks with me' - Dev Griffin (34) interviewed in *Radio Times* of 21-27 September 2019
- 'We were just loving being together, playing together and feeding off each other. [...] [The younger Paul today] would be loving the fact that he was still here.' - Paul McCartney (77) interviewed in *Radio Times* of 28 September-4 October 2019
- 'Shirley, I'm quite liking that [...] leather chair look' - Charlie Stayt (58) on BBC 1's *Breakfast* of 27 November 2020
- 'I'm loving walking through this year with them' - Elizabeth Alker (38) on BBC Radio 3's *Unclassified* of 22 April 2021
- 'I'm loving what I'm seeing [...] 'I like this. I'm really, really liking this. I'm just really in my happy zone now.' - Johnny Vegas () on Channel 4's *Johnny Vegas: Carry On Glamping*, episode 1, broadcast on 5 May 2021, on inspecting a potential purchase and then looking at another
- 'I'm still not understanding why things have gone wrong' - Andrew Marr (61) on BBC 1's *The Andrew Marr Show* of Sunday, 27 June 2021
- 'Brentford are clearly loving life in the Premier League'- John Watson on BBC 1's *Breakfast* of 4 October 2021
- 'other departments who [are (swallowed)], to be quite frank, living in ideological glass towers really and not really understanding the real problems' - Nick Allen interviewed by BBC television on 15 October 2021
- 'The other three are hating to see this' - Richard Osman (51) on BBC 2's *Richard Osman's House of Games* of 24 November 2021
- 'I am wishing him every possible success'- Boris Johnson (57) during Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) in the Commons Chamber on 2 March 2022, referring to Conservative MP Andy Carter's campaign for a new hospital in Warrington
- 'I'm just loving every minute of being back on the pitch with these girls' - Chloe Kelly (24) during the post-match interview of the Women's FA Cup Semi-final broadcast on BBC television on 16 April 2022
- 'It's a pleasure. I'm loving the theme tune' - Nikki Fox (42) on BBC 1's *Sunday Morning Live* on 10 July 2022, on being welcomed as a presenter

- 'She is just loving this environment' - Denise Lewis (49) referring to US heptathlete Anna Hall's performance at the World Athletics Championships from Eugene, Oregon broadcast on BBC television on 18 July 2022
- 'She's so confident and just loving what she's doing at the moment' - Jessica Ennis-Hill (36) referring to Jamaican sprinter Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce's performance at the World Athletics Championships from Eugene, Oregon broadcast on BBC television on 18 July 2022
- 'I'm loving all the photos of Cornwall you're sharing with us on Twitter' - Kate Molleson on BBC Radio 3's *Breakfast* on 25 July 2022
- 'Hanif Kureshi, who wrote *The Buddha of Suburbia*, is incredibly funny about his father coming to Britain and saying to him, "I've just come from India. We've been in turmoil. I want somewhere quiet" and loving the suburbs' - Ian Hislop (62), interviewed about his BBC documentary 'Suburbia' on the YouTube channel PoliticsJOE, posted on 7 September 2022
- 'We're loving our life under him at the moment, so if he gets the job it'll be fantastic.' - Dominic Solanke (25) re Bournemouth caretaker manager Gary O'Neil, stated in a post-match interview on 15 October 2022
- 'And he's done it. Put away nicely. And the Fulham fans are loving it.' - Guy Mowbray (50) re Fulham's penalty kick taker in the match against Manchester City on BBC 1's *Match of the Day* of 5 November 2022
- 'I am very much wanting to try and find some kind of negotiated solution which means that we don't have to put the amendments to a vote'- Theresa Villiers (54) discussing house building policy on BBC 2's *Politics Live* of 30 November 2022
- 'He's loving it out there' - TNT Sports commentator of Rasmus Højlund's performance after his second goal in the Champions League Group Stage match of 8 November 2023
- 'If homelessness is a lifestyle choice, it's the last time I buy a Big Issue. "Help the Homeless"? Aye, help you live your dream, more like. Bugger off! Loving it' - Scottish comedian Jamie MacDonald on the BBC's satirical TV show *Have I Got News For You* of 10 November 2023 in response to the Home Secretary's condemnation of rough sleepers

Written statements

- 'It's one reason why I'm loving *Witnesses* on Wednesdays on Channel 4. It really is a swirl of strange and foggy French plotting' - David Butcher in the article 'Go on, surprise me' in *Radio Times*, 8-14 August 2015, p. 49
- 'Lovin' it at Oldham' - sports headline of the Oldham Evening Chronicle on 14 October 2015, p. 36
- 'Our food is locally sourced and [...] our meat is coming from The Butcher's Quarter on Tib Street' - Joe Byrne (22) interviewed for the article 'Chefs to open new restaurant in city' in the Oldham Times of 13 February 2020
- 'The government got its business, of course. Its whips are loving lockdown.' - *Private Eye*, Issue 1526, of 17–30 July 2020, p. 15
- '[Name of recipient], discover what people are loving on All 4' - Subject of an email distribut-ed by channel4@hi.channel4.com on 10 February 2022
- 'What I like about the way Mick Lynch debates these low IQ/low EQ Tory talkingpointspouting MPs is that he lets them drone on without much facial reaction and then takes them down with facts mixed with gentle scorn. Liking his style.' - Alastair Campbell (65) in a tweet of 22 June 2022

- ‘We must all learn to see the joyful duck who is loving every page of our novel, rather than the cynical rabbit who gave up and took a nap.’ - Text of the cartoon ‘The “Positive Thinking for Authors” Seminar’ by Tom Gauld published in *The Guardian* of 8 April 2023

Extended dialogue

- Tweet interchange from Francesca@Francie2506: ‘Taking a break from the usual politics and social unrest to say, I am loving my trip in beautiful Scotland! Visiting Edinburgh this time! Dont [sic] know why I put off visiting for so long but now I don't wanna leave. Gotta explore the rest of Scotland now!’ And the reply from Love is all you need@MoiraWetherell: ‘As I'm fortunate to call Scotland my home, I often get curious how visitors come to love it here [emo-ji] what makes Scotland so special and enjoyable for you? I love that you're loving it. No doubt you're already planning your next visit [emoji]’ on 13 August 2022
- Interview by LBC Radio presenter James O’Brien (50) of musician Mike Pickering concerning the unsanctioned use of the latter’s music at the 2022 Conservative Party Conference: ‘[Pickering:] Sorry to rant. [O’Brien:] Hey, hey, I’m loving it. Seriously.’ on 5 October 2022
- Dialogue from the episode ‘Lofty’ of the TV series *The Last Detective* from 28 February 2003, when social worker Jemma Duval (Josette Simon) and DC Davies (Peter Davison) are examining an old photograph of a woman:
  ‘Duval: That’s why she’s hating it so much.
  Davies: It’s a prison photograph.’ (34:31–34:35)
- Dialogue from the 2018 short film *Wonderdate*, written by Tim Kay, who plays Man: ‘Kolodon [an angler]: Well, stop texting her [your sweetheart], will you? It’s killing me. Man: Yeah, I’m not exactly loving seeing you dunk your hook in the Thames, mate.’ (05:52–06:00)
- Dialogue from episode 3 of the TV mini series *The Tourist* (which premiered on the BBC on 1 January 2022) spoken by lead character Elliot Stanley (played by Jamie Dorman), who speaks with an Irish accent (at 18:54 in), ‘I’m gonna level with you. I’m not loving this entire situation.’
- Dialogue from episode 5, series 1 of the BBC TV series *Here We Go* (2022), spoken by character Sue Jessop, ‘I have to say, I am really loving it, you know, sitting in a classroom, learning.’
- Dialogue from episode 2, series 2 of the Channel 4 series *The Curse*, which premiered on 27 April 2023, spoken by three small-time crooks hiding out on the Costa del Sol, Spain:
  ‘Mick: This is something else, this gaff.
  Ronnie: It’s nice, yeah.
  Mick: Liking it a lot, mate.’ (18:22–18:26)
  The talk then moves on to selling drugs.
  ‘Phil: This is all sounding very *Scarface*. I am loving this.’ (19:12–19:15)