

Taking stock of progressives in spoken English: Where are the patterns?

Ute Römer (University of Hanover, Germany)

The paper is based on a large-scale corpus-driven analysis of more than 10,000 progressive form tokens (i.e. constructions of the TO BE + V-*ing* type, such as '*re finishing* and *was working*) of 100 high-frequency English verbs. The aim is to take stock of the use of progressives in spoken British native-speaker English (selected corpora are the 10 million word spoken part of the British National Corpus and the 20 million word spoken subsection of the Bank of English, 'brspok').

Following researchers who stress the importance of contextual approaches to the study of language along the lines of J.R. Firth and J.McH. Sinclair, I argue that the careful examination of verbal contexts (or cotexts) of language items in use is absolutely central in linguistic analysis, and see new massive evidence as the prerequisite for new appropriate descriptions of language structures, in this case of the English progressive construction. It will be explored whether the patterns that emerge from the contextual analysis of large amounts of progressive forms are valid for progressives in general (i.e. for all 100 examined -*ing* forms) or whether the patterns are strongly lexically determined and hence different for each individual form. In other words, the central question will be "Is there a *purely grammatical* or rather a *lexical-grammatical* progressive?"

In order to tackle this question, I will look at three important types of co-selection:

- past progressives (i.e. combinations of -*ing* forms and *was/were*)
- the pattern *I'm V-ing*
- progressives and negation.

After the determination of average distributions of significant patterns (based on all 10,000 concordance lines taken together), an analysis of progressive concordances of the 100 individual verb forms will show how many of these verbs do or do not in fact show a "prototypical" progressive behaviour.