RELEVANCE THEORY AND THE MEANING
OF THE ENGLISH PROGRESSIVE

Vladimir ŽEGARAC

Abstract

In this paper an attempt is made to characterise the linguistic meaning of the progressive in terms of reference to instantiations of properties denoted by the predicate. The issues discussed are introduced in section 1. The main assumptions about the meaning of the progressive are given in section 2. Section 3 presents a sketchy outline of relevance theory which provides the framework for the analysis of the contextual implications normally associated with some uses of the progressive, developed in section 4. Section 5 addresses the question of semantic markedness. The meaning of the simple in relation to the meaning of the progressive is discussed in section 6.'

1. Introduction

The issues to be considered here are summed up in the following questions: How is the linguistic meaning of the English progressive to be characterised? How are the overtones of meaning such as 'reproof' in (1), 'insincerity' in (2), and 'temporariness' in (3), related to the linguistic meaning?

(1) Old Lilly is always feeding the pigeons.
(2) John is being polite.
(3) John is living in Muswell Hill.[2]

Why is the progressive often felt to be more appropriate than the simple in the present, and less appropriate in the past tense? How exactly do the meanings of the progressive and of the simple contrast?

2. The meaning of the progressive

2.1 Background

Goldsmith and Woisetschlaeger (1982) (G & W hereafter) claim that the meaning of the progressive construction falls in two semantic domains. The first is aspectual. It deals with the ideas of 'incompletion', or 'lack of temporal contour', usually associated with the progressive, and has no direct bearing on the problems to be considered here. The second domain is, arguably, the 'metaphysical status' of the property denoted by the progressive predicate, and is defined as 'phenomenal' (in that it makes reference to events instantiating a property) and as 'evidential' (in that it makes reference to the evidence of the manifestations of the property). It is argued that the progressive in (4a) describes the situation as a

phenomenon, an ongoing event, as opposed to the simple in (4b), which describes it structurally, as a property applying to the subject irrespective of any actual events.

    (4) a. John is walking to school.
       b. John walks to school.

The evidential meaning of the construction is illustrated by the contrast between (5a) and (5b). While (5a) can be used felicitously to describe the functioning of the engine on the basis of the speaker's knowledge, (5b) suggests that the account is based on, as G & W put it, 'evidence' of the engine's actual functioning at the time of communication.

    (5) a. The engine doesn't smoke anymore.
       b. The engine isn't smoking anymore.

Although the progressive in (5b) and similar examples strongly supports the intuitions behind the idea of 'perceptible evidence' as part of the linguistic meaning of the be + V-ing predicate, I will argue that the opposition between the 'phenomenal' and the 'evidential' meaning is neither tenable nor necessary.

2.2 Properties and instantiations of properties

The account of the progressive to be proposed in the following sections crucially rests on the view that the linguistic meaning of the progressive is correctly and exhaustively defined in terms of reference to an instantiation of the property denoted by the predicate. It is assumed that all predicates describe properties: 'feed the pigeons', 'be polite', 'live in Muswell Hill', and 'walk to school', are all properties. Some of these properties are more readily thought of and talked about as instantiated, i.e. as actualised as events. The contribution of the progressive to the meaning of the predicate is that it points to an instantiation of the property, and contrasts with the simple, which is unmarked in this respect.

The strong intuitions about the meaning of perceptible evidence as being somehow intrinsically related to the progressive stem from people's encyclopaedic knowledge about instantiations of properties, in other words, happenings or events: They take time to take place, they involve change and have endings and beginnings, and are characteristically represented on the basis of perception. Which of these features of meaning pertaining to encyclopaedic knowledge about events will be more salient in which utterance, will vary from utterance to utterance and from context to context. This accounts for the idea of perceptible evidence as being sometimes more and sometimes less prominent. But, can as vague a characterisation of the linguistic meaning of the progressive as the one proposed here provide the basis for a plausible analysis of the presumably pragmatically induced overtones illustrated in (1), (2) and (3)? I propose to argue that it can, and that the relevance theory of Sperber and Wilson (1986) provides the pragmatic framework for an adequate analysis of those as well as other uses of the progressive. Following is a sketchy rendering of the main tenets of the theory.

3. Relevance theory

The central assumption of relevance theory is that one single principle, 'the principle of relevance', makes it possible to answer the main problems about the nature of human communication and cognition. The account of communication developed within relevance theory is essentially inferential. Communication is seen as achieved by providing evidence for an intended hypothesis about the communicator's intentions, and is successful when the audience interprets the evidence on the intended lines.[3]

What is the nature of the process of hypothesis formation? What is its role? What is the context, and what part does it play in utterance interpretation? How is the implicit import of utterances determined? The answers to all these questions lie with the principle of relevance.

The Principle of Relevance

Every act of inferential communication carries a guarantee of its own optimal relevance.

Let me examine briefly the key constituents of the definition: relevance, optimal relevance, and guarantee of optimal relevance. Relevance is defined in terms of the interaction between newly acquired information and one's existing assumptions about the world. New information may interact with already existing assumptions making up the context to give rise to contextual effects, which include the making of hypotheses such as the weak implicatures normally associated with metaphorically used utterances like: "John is a piglet."

Assuming that the speaker could not have intended to convey the idea that John literally is a piglet, the hearer forms hypotheses about what the communicator could have intended to communicate: 'John is untidy', 'John's room is in a mess', ... Intuitively speaking, the metaphor conveys an impression about John, not any single idea, or clearly circumscribed set of ideas about him. In terms of relevance theory, an impression is described as "a noticeable change in one's cognitive environment, ... resulting from relatively small alterations in the manifestness of many assumptions, rather than from the fact that a single assumption or a few new assumptions have all of a sudden become very manifest" (Sperber and Wilson 1986:59; see also Wilson and Sperber, this volume). The overtones of reproof, insincerity and temporariness, discussed in section 4, are felt to be labels for different impressions, rather than single assumptions, and the words used to designate those impressions are only more or less adequate summaries (i.e. incomplete interpretations), of the assumptions making up the impressions typically associated with certain uses of the progressive.

Relevance is not only a function of contextual effects, but also of the processing effort involved in the interpretation of the utterance, including the construction of hypotheses like those just mentioned in connection with metaphor. Essentially, the greater the contextual effects and the smaller the processing effort, the more relevant the new information will be.

The requirement of <u>optimal relevance</u> is satisfied if the utterance (or some other ostensive stimulus) achieves an adequate range of contextual effects at the expenditure of the minimum justifiable processing effort. <u>The guarantee of optimal relevance</u> rests on the view that people naturally assume that other humans who engage in communication with them, use ostensive stimuli which are relevant enough to be worth their attention. It is assumed that the communicator takes the responsibility for using an utterance which is consistent with the principle of relevance, i.e. an utterance which a rational communicator might have expected to be optimally relevant to the hearer, and that human cognitive apparatus is designed in such a way that we spontaneously and unconsciously try to maximise the relevance of information.

Can relevance theory explain the overtones illustrated in the examples (1) to (3)? An attempt is made in the next section to demonstrate that it can and a tentative account is proposed to indicate the way in which a more detailed analysis within the same framework would deal with the issues at stake.

4. Relevance theory and the overtones of 'mild reproof', 'insincerity' and 'temporariness'

4.1 Two elements seem to combine to give rise to the shade of meaning of mild reproof. The first one is the impression that the event is being talked about as experienced, the second is that sentences like (6a) and (7a) are examples of hyperbole.

    (6) a. Old Lilly is always feeding the pigeons.
        b. Old Lilly always feeds the pigeons.

    (7) a. The baby is always crying.
        b. The baby always cries.

In virtue of pointing indexically to instantiations of properties, the progressive refers to something observable, possible to be represented on the basis of perception. Therefore, the speaker who uses (6a) or (7a) may be understood as talking about his personal experience, and this may be exploited by the hearer in making inferences about the speaker's intended meaning of the utterance. The contrast between (7a) and (7b) is of particular interest in this connection. Both utterances literally mean something like: 'An instance of the baby's crying extends over all times, including the time of communication', but only the utterance in (7a) is really strongly felt as expressing the speaker's attitude toward the situation described by the utterance. The shades of meaning such as annoyance, nervousness, dissatisfaction, and the like, are more prominent in (7a) than in (7b). If the speaker intended merely to describe the characteristic behaviour of Old Lilly and the baby, the utterances with the simple would be more relevant, since reference to individual instances of these activities would not have adequate contextual effects in the initial context. It is the assumption that the speaker of (6a) and (7a) is conforming to the guarantee of optimal relevance which leads the addressee to include in the context some assumptions about the speaker's being related to the situations

via experience. How does this experiential quality in the meaning of the progressive give rise to more specific impressions of reproof, disapproval and the like? The answer largely follows from the fact that (6a) and (7a) are examples of hyperbole.

Anyone who knows anything about people and feeding animals or crying babies, cannot fail to realise that a rational communicator could not have intended these utterances to be taken literally. In terms of relevance theory, these utterances are illustrations of loose use. The idea behind this term is that the proposition expressed by an utterance, while being an interpretation of a speaker's thought, is not necessarily a literal interpretation of that thought. Relevance theory departs from other accounts of communication, including Grice's, in that it doesn't regard loose use as a departure from the norm, but takes literalness and metaphor to be on the extreme opposite ends of a continuum. Hyperbole is a case in point. None of the three utterances (6a) and (7a), is adequately interpreted as expressing a literal interpretation of the thought which it purports to represent. Being aware of this, the hearer makes hypotheses about the thoughts which a rational speaker conforming to the principle of relevance may have intended to communicate. This is how (6a) and (7a) come to convey the impressions of mild reproof, or disapproval. They arise as a result of the effort on the part of the hearer to maximise the relevance of contextual assumptions about the speaker's personal experience in the context of hyperbole. The impression of reproof consists of a number of assumptions that the hearer makes about the speaker's intended meaning of (6a) and (7a): 'Old Lilly spends more time feeding the pigeons than a sensible person would do', 'Pigeons are not nice birds', 'Pigeons know how to find food and needn't be fed by people', ... , and: 'The baby cries so much that the speaker can hardly bear it', 'The speaker disapproves of the baby's crying', 'The speaker is feeling apologetic about the noise made by the baby', ... The feeling that terms such as 'reproof' or 'disapproval' fail to capture fully the overtones associated with the progressives in (6a) and (7a) comes from the fact that these overtones are impressions, that they are made up of a range of assumptions which have simultaneously become more salient (or, technically speaking, more manifest), and, therefore, cannot be completely described in one single word. Which assumptions will be part of the impression crucially depends on the context against which the utterance is interpreted for relevance. For example, if no unpleasant noise is heard at the time of communication, (7a) is not likely to be interpreted as an apology. If the hearer is confident that the speaker is very fond of Lilly, the overtone of reproof will, possibly, not arise at all. The crux of the matter is that by using a comparatively simple utterance the speaker invites the hearer to form a great number of hypotheses, and thus significantly alters the latter's cognitive environment in an economical way. The overtones are entirely a function of the context brought to bear on the interpretation of the proposition expressed by the utterance. The account of the implication of insincerity in (2) illustrates the same point.

4.2   The predicates 'be polite' and 'love the fruit salad' denote
properties which cannot be talked about in terms of their instances,
because they are conceptualised as non-instantiable. The property 'be
polite' pertains to character, and 'love' to emotional disposition.
Hence, one would expect it to be somewhat difficult to talk about
these properties in terms of instances.

    (8) John is being polite.
    (9) Mary is loving the fruit salad.

The literal meaning of (8) and (9) is roughly paraphrased as: John is
instantiating the property 'be polite', and Mary is instantiating the
property 'love fruit salad'. As these properties cannot be
instantiated, the hearer can hardly fail to realise that (8) and (9)
are not intended to be interpreted literally, and starts looking for
assumptions about what the speaker might have intended to convey.
This is how both sentences come to be interpreted as talking about
behaviour. The resemblance between the ideas of 'instance of a trait
of character' in (8), and 'instance of an emotion' in (9), and the
concept of 'behaviour' is very striking. Both (8) and (9) strongly
suggest that by using the progressive the speaker is actually talking
about behaviour. It may not be clear how either of the two utterances
can ever be optimally relevant. On the one hand, if the speaker is
really talking about behaviour, it would seem more relevant to do so
explicitly. On the other hand, if he is not, why use the progressive
at all? The following examples show that the use of utterances (8)
and (9) does not necessarily violate the guarantee of optimal
relevance.
    Suppose that three people A, B and C are present at the same
time in the same place. A says something to B, and B takes offence at
what A has just said. C realises that A had intended to be kind to B,
and that A's utterance can be interpreted as expressing genuine
politeness. Therefore, C says to B:

    (10) A is being polite.

By using the progressive, C invites the hearer to form two
hypotheses: (a) A meant to say something polite and (b) A is a polite
person. This makes it possible for B to draw the relevant conclusion
that A's utterance was an act of genuine politeness, a conclusion
which could probably have been derived from 'A is polite' or 'A is
behaving politely' alone, as well as from a conjunction of the two,
but only at the expense of considerable processing effort.
    Utterances like (8) are sometimes understood as implying
insincerity on the part of the subject. This implicature will arise in
case only the assumption that 'John is polite' has relevant cognitive
effects in some context accessible to the hearer, while the
assumption that 'John is behaving politely' does not give access to
any interesting contextual effects in any already existing context
accessible to the hearer. The assumption that the speaker who uses
(10) is   conforming to the principle of relevance, leads to the
contextual assumption in (11):

(11) By saying that A is behaving politely, the speaker
indicates that he is not fully committed to the
stronger claim 'John is polite', which, if the speaker
truly believed it, would be more relevant.

This assumption, when included in the context, gives access to a
number of more or less vague implicatures. A hearer who entertains
the assumption in (11) may easily form various plausible hypotheses
about the thoughts the speaker intended to convey: 'John is
insincere', 'John is desperate to make a good impression', 'John is
making a great effort to conceal his real feelings', ... Some other,
more straightforward formulation, would fail to give rise to so wide
a range of implicatures, and would, consequently be less relevant. The
speaker could use any or all of the implicatures of his actual
utterance instead of that utterance, and explicitly convey what he
means, but that would either involve the loss of other implicatures,
or a great amount of processing effort necessary for the interpret-
ation of an extremely long utterance. The example in (9), repeated
here as (12) illustrates the same point.

(12) Mary is loving the fruit salad.

Why is (12) so suggestive of Mary's behaviour as expressing the
great and genuine pleasure she finds in eating a particular fruit
salad? Because the first assumptions that come to mind about the
situation in which (12) would be used are: 'It is mutually manifest to
both the speaker and to the hearer that Mary does love fruit salad',
or, at least: 'It is mutually manifest to the speaker and to the
hearer that there is no reason to believe that Mary doesn't like
fruit salad'. By phrasing the utterance in such a way that it draws
attention to the subject's behaviour, while directly predicating the
property 'love the fruit salad' the speaker strengthens the hearer's
existing assumptions about Mary's love for fruit salad and also
instructs him to maximise the relevance of the manifestations of
Mary's actual behaviour, her loving the particular fruit salad which
she happens to be eating. This is how implicatures like the following
are derived: 'Mary is completely absorbed in eating the fruit salad',
'Mary finds the speaker's salad particularly good', 'One should make
fruit salad when one invites Mary', 'My fruit salad is particularly
good this time', ...
    Given a different setting, the import of (12) will be different.
For example, if it is mutually manifest to the speaker and to the
hearer that Mary didn't like fruit salad on some previous occasion,
(12) may again be more relevant than the corresponding utterance
with the simple. It is the contrast between Mary's past and present
behaviour that is relevant here. The simple present would, possibly
misleadingly, suggest that the speaker has conclusive evidence that
'Mary loves fruit salad'. By using the progressive he distances
himself from that claim. The examples examined so far involve
implicatures deriving from loose use. The overtone of meaning of
temporariness differs in this respect from the first two.

4.3 The meaning of temporariness is particularly salient in examples like (3), repeated in (13a):

(13) a. John is living in Muswell Hill.
b. John lives in Muswell Hill.

Whether the speaker uses (13a) or (13b), the idea conveyed is that John is a resident of Muswell Hill at the time of communication. Other things being equal, the utterance with the simple form makes a stronger claim and should be more relevant. The meaning of the utterance with the progressive is roughly: An instance of the property 'live in Muswell Hill' applies to John at the time of speech. It contrasts with the meaning of the simple in (13b), which is something like: The property 'live in Muswell Hill' applies to John as typical of him at the time of speech. Generally speaking, if there is no evidence to the contrary, the property 'live in X' is taken as relatively stable, nearly synonymous with 'be an inhabitant of X'. The use of the progressive in talking about such properties highlights the meaning of transience, available to the hearer as part of his encyclopaedic knowledge about events. By using the progressive, the speaker indicates that he considers the otherwise less appropriate form, more appropriate in this particular case. The hearer forms hypotheses about why the speaker has chosen the progressive and stops at the conclusion which seems the most relevant to him, namely, 'John is temporarily residing in Muswell Hill'. In other utterances, the temporariness associated with instantiations of properties is not exploited at all. Consider (14):

(14) a. The Earth is turning on its axis.
b. The Earth turns on its axis.

In the light of common knowledge that an everlasting property of the Earth is spoken about as instantiated, it would not make sense even to consider the implicature of limited duration as part of the intended meaning. If the speaker had the intention to convey the idea of temporariness, he would have had to do so explicitly, as the hearer cannot be expected to think about the event in (14a) as transient. Having no doubts as to the omnitemporal nature of the process, and assuming that the speaker shares his belief, the hearer will exploit the meaning of perceptible evidence in (14a). While (14b) with the simple is taken as a statement of fact, (14a) comes with some implications of the speaker's personal involvement in the situation, his perceptual experience of an everlasting situation, reflected in the implication of the persistence of the process over time. Another issue related to the experiential quality of the progressive, known as the problem of semantic markedness in the progressive (cf. Lyons, 1977:688-9), also receives a natural explanation within the framework of relevance theory.

5. Markedness

It is often observed that the progressive is semantically marked in the past tense and in the futurate <u>will + be V-ing</u> construction, and unmarked in the present tense. The following example is taken from Whitaker (1983):

(15) She'll be coming round the mountain,
      When she comes,
      She'll be wearing silk pyjamas,
      When she comes,
      She'll be riding six white horses,
      When she comes, ...

This song of marching troops is intuitively felt to convey something of eye-witness testimony of an event in the future. Some uses of the progressive in the past tense illustrate the point equally well. Compare (16a) and (16b), for example:

(16) a. It rained yesterday.
      b. It was raining yesterday.

Both (16a) and (16b) are about one or several instances of rain in the past. The difference between the two utterances is that the former merely states that there was an instance of rain, whereas the latter points indexically to that instance. In interpreting an utterance which points indexically to an instantiation of a property in the past, or in the future, the hearer, who is trying to maximise the relevance of the utterance needs to include in the context assumptions about the circumstances in which the particular instance took, or will take, place. These contextual assumptions may be more or less difficult to construct, depending on the available clues. Naturally enough, when the progressive is used in the present tense, all the relevant contextual assumptions will be easily accessible. The instance of raining talked about is simultaneous with the time of communication and with the speaker's and the hearer's awareness of the instantiation of the property which they are talking about.

In terms of relevance theory, semantic markedness would be a function of the processing effort required in the derivation of assumptions necessary for the contextualization of the proposition expressed by the utterance. The greater the processing effort the more semantically marked the utterance. I now propose to show that this account of markedness provides the basis for the characterisation of the meaning of the simple.

6. The meaning of the simple

How exactly does the meaning of the simple differ from the meaning of the progressive? The question will be only tentatively addressed here in the hope that what is said will suffice to indicate that a more detailed analysis is possible.

6.1   The progressive, arguably, always makes reference to an instantiation of a property, while the meaning of the simple seems to vary considerably. In utterances like (4b) (repeated in (17a)), the predicate with the simple present tense form makes no reference to any event at all, and is, in this respect, like verbs of process in the simple present tense, in general. By contrast, the simple past tense form in (16a) (repeated in (17b)), is about one or more instances of rain in the past.

(17) a. John walks to school.
     b. It rained yesterday.

Utterances such as (17a) suggest that the simple is expressive of the meaning of characteristic activity, those like (17b) that it is used merely to state the fact that an event occurred. According to the view adopted here (following Morris 1984:152), all the simple says is that the property applies to the subject referent. This position, however, requires that the difference in meanings of the predicates in (17a) and (17b) receive a pragmatic explanation.

One of the main tenets of relevance theory (cf. Sperber and Wilson (1986), chapter 4, section 3) is that the role of pragmatics in establishing the propositional content of the utterance is not confined to reference assignment and disambiguation, but is, in fact, far more significant than that. A detailed discussion of the point that the logical form of an utterance must often be substantially enriched to arrive at the proposition expressed is given in Carston (1988). The underspecification of temporal reference by the linguistic meaning of the verb form is illustrative in this connection:

(18) a. I have had breakfast.
     b. I have been to Tibet.

The information concerning temporal specification recoverable from the decoding of the linguistic meaning of the utterances in (18) is the same: roughly speaking, for (18a) the speaker has had breakfast at some time in the past, and for (18b) the speaker has been to Tibet at some time in the past. But (18a) and (18b) are normally taken to have very different temporal interpretations. The former is understood as locating the event at some relatively proximate time in the past, the latter as merely stating what it says, that the speaker did visit Tibet. The difference in the meanings of the two utterances follows from the principle of relevance. In every readily conceivable context, (18a) has adequate contextual effects only if understood as intended to convey the idea that the speaker has had breakfast comparatively recently. As opposed to (18a), (18b) may be relevant enough when construed without any assumptions about the lapse between the time of communication and the time of the speaker's visit to Tibet. It is the assumption that the speaker is conforming to the principle of relevance that leads the hearer pragmatically to enrich the logical form of (18a), the output of linguistic decoding, to the level of a proposition like: 'The speaker has had breakfast today'.

The same kind of explanation holds for the habitual meaning of characteristic activity of the simple present. The linguistic meaning of (17a) says that the property 'walk to school' somehow applies to

John. How the property applies to the subject referent is determined by the principle of relevance. It follows from the account of markedness given in section 5 that the progressive is the more relevant form in talking about events simultaneous with the time of communication. Consequently, the use of the simple to describe such events would not be consistent with the principle of relevance. The assumption that the principle has been observed leads the hearer to make a hypothesis about what proposition the speaker could have intended to communicate, and the one consistent with the guarantee of optimal relevance will not involve reference to instantiations of the property denoted by the predicate. In talking about past events, however, the simple is normally the more relevant form. Hence, the interpretation that an instantiation of the property is talked about remains available and highly salient, as in (17b).

I hope to have shown how, given a fairly simple characterisation of the linguistic meaning of the progressive, relevance theory provides a natural explanation for some aspects of its meaning which arise in use. In this section, I have tried to indicate the way in which the analysis can be naturally extended to the simple, as well. If the account proposed is correct, the approach should be expected to have further significant ramifications for the study of verbal aspect in general.

Notes

1. My thanks go to a number of people for their comments on an earlier version of this paper delivered at the LAGB conference in Belfast, April 1989. I am particularly indebted to Neil Smith and Robyn Carston for all the support, encouragement and help they have given me in my work, and, more specifically, for reading and discussing with me the first draft of this paper.

2. The examples (1), (2), (3), (4), (5), (8) and (14) are taken and/or adapted from Goldsmith and Woisetschlaeger (1982). Those in (18) are due to Sperber and Wilson (1986:189).

3. This section is only the barest outline of the theory and largely draws on Wilson and Sperber (1986). A more technical account is given in Sperber and Wilson (1986), chapter 3.

References

Carston R. (1988) "Implicature, explicature and truth-theoretic semantics". In Kempson R. (ed.) Mental Representations Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Goldsmith J. and Woisetschlaeger E. (1982) "The logic of the English progressive", Linguistic Inquiry, Vol. 13, No.1.

Lyons J. (1977) Semantics. Vol.2. Cambridge University Press.

Morris R. (1984) "Aspect, Case and Thematic Structure in English". University of London PhD thesis.

Sperber, D. and Wilson D. 1986. Relevance: Communication and Cognition. Oxford: Blackwell.

Weir, C.E. (1986) "English gerundive constructions". The University of Texas at Austin PhD thesis.

Whitaker, S.F. (1983) "The future progressive - an experiential approach", IRAL, Vol. XXI/2.

Wilson D. and Sperber D. (1986) "An outline of relevance theory". Encontro de Linguistas: Actas. University of Minho, Braga, Portugal. (Also published in: Notes on linguistics 39, (July 1987)).