

## Expressing Duration and Temporal Relationships by Means of the Present Perfect Progressive

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Résumé de l'article

Le *Present Perfect Progressive* exprime souvent une activité se déroulant jusqu'au présent comme dans *He has been speaking for two hours*. Dans ce cas, le sujet est situé après une partie de l'évènement, d'où l'impression d'une activité inachevée. Dans certains cas, cependant, la partie accomplie de l'évènement représente la quasi-totalité de l'évènement, comme nous le verrons dans cet article. Enfin, le *Present Perfect Progressive* peut exprimer un évènement venant tout juste de se terminer. Dans ce cas, le sujet est situé après la durée entière de l'évènement. Le présent article vise donc à répondre à la question suivante: comment peut-on évoquer différents moments de la durée d'un évènement – et exprimer ainsi différents types d'évènements? Comme nous le verrons, la réponse réside dans la manière de représenter l'évènement exprimé par le participe présent.

## EXPRESSING DURATION AND TEMPORAL RELATIONSHIPS BY MEANS OF THE PRESENT PERFECT PROGRESSIVE

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### 1. Introduction

The Perfect Progressive is the most complex verbal form of modern English. As many grammarians have observed, the form can express an activity reaching up to the present (cf. Leech 1971:44; Ota, 1963:95; Charleston, 1960:235), as in:

(1) The Browns have been living in that flat since their marriage.

Leech 1971:44

or one that has stopped in a recent past:

(2) You've been fighting again. ('I can tell from your black eye')

Ibid.:46

The form can thus depict two different relationships of the activity with time, i.e. one in the present and one in the past. In both the above, however, the event expressed by the verb "is represented as being somehow incomplete" (Hirtle 1975:103), something morphologically indicated by the present participle suffix '-ing'. This impression of incompleteness associated with the idea of aftermath, or result phase makes us view the subject as situated after only part of the event. Thus in (1) above, the idea of the subject's being after part of the event suggests that they are still living in that flat, while in (2) it depicts an accompanying effect of the activity where the black eye is felt to have arisen not at the end of the fighting but at some point during the event's coming-to-be phase or developmental phase. As we shall see, situating the subject after part of the event can evoke different moments of the duration of the event and so depict the subject after a variable portion of the activity expressed by the verb.

## 2. Unfinished Event: possible continuation

The result of representing the aftermath of an event felt as imperfective can give rise to the impression of possible continuation of the activity, as in:

- (3) When the fish came, and Georges had gently poured out the wine, Mr. Aked's tongue was loosed.

'And how *has* the Muse *been behaving* herself?' he began. Richard told him, with as little circumlocution as pride would allow, the history of the last few sterile months.

Bennett 1973: 53

The speaker is inquiring about an activity that has lasted up to the moment of speaking with the possibility of continuing after that moment. Here, the sentence *Richard told him [...] the history of the last few sterile months* does bring out the fact that the activity stretches up to the present moment. By using the Perfect Progressive, the speaker situates the subject after the event expressed by the present participle which always represents an event as "partly realized" (Hirtle 1975:20), whence the impression of something incomplete, non-conclusive. The use of the Perfect Simple here *How has the Muse behaved herself?* would situate the subject after the past participle event, an event referred to as "wholly realized" (Ibid.) and so would suggest that, for some reason, the Muse has finished behaving. In this case, one can imagine a person who has just returned home after a long trip abroad using the Perfect Simple as a means of inquiring about her behaviour during his absence for example. Thus here, what distinguishes the Perfect Progressive from the Perfect Simple is not the idea of an aftermath or result phase - both forms evoke one - but the image of imperfectivity associated with the progressive. Fenn (1987: 55) describes this opposition in the following fashion:

*However, the SF [Simple Form] version appears to function in context as more of a "concluding" or summarizing reference, placing the stress on the idea of a whole unit of time filled with the activity. The EF [Expanded Form] seems to emphasize the activity itself; whereas the SF reference is more "static", "factual", the EF seems to shift the focus on the ongoingness of the activity, and thus lend the reference more of a dynamic quality.*

Thus, in our example, the impression of "ongoingness of the activity", of a "non-concluding" reference is certainly dominant in the speaker's mind. By situating the subject after part of the event the speaker inquires about her behaviour so far, hence the non-concluding, non-summarizing tone of the question.

The idea of “ongoingness of the activity” is also clearly depicted in the following example:

- (4) Look, only one of these kittens *has been running* on Duracell.

T.V. ad

where the speaker uttered the sentence while the mechanical toy-kittens were actually rolling across the floor, thus mentally interrupting the activity to situate the subject after part of the event, in its result phase. By doing so, he suggests that the activity has been in progress for a considerable time (retrospective view of the event) and so points to the impending power failure of the other batteries and, by the same token, to the durability of the Duracell batteries. Indeed here, the speaker could easily have used the Simple Progressive *is running*; however, with it he could only have referred us to the unfolding of the event (no retrospective view being possible) and so would have failed to evoke a long-drawn-out activity.

In the following example, it is the “ongoingness” of the intention which is brought out:

- (5) “I came to ask you to produce your two wards,” said Mr. Sycamore abruptly, “because Mr. Oswald Sydenham lands at Southampton tonight.”  
 “He *has always been coming*.”  
 “This time he has come.”

Wells 1918:198

The imperfective character of the activity suggests that the subject has never realized his intention. One way of paraphrasing the example would be ‘He has always been intending to come’ with the implication that this announcement of his coming need not be taken too seriously. This contrasts sharply with the answer *This time he has come* which represents the intention – and by the same token the actual coming – as completely realized.

With verbs evoking an act of communication, the impression of imperfectivity gives rise to some interesting nuances. Thus, in the following example, the speaker uses the Perfect Progressive to keep the subject open for discussion:

- (6) But before Lysistrata could reply, a tall and remarkably beautiful girl in the middle of the room rose and began to speak [...] ‘I don’t want to say anything against what Lady Lysistrata *has been saying*,’ she declared, ‘because everybody is entitled to their own opinions. But I would like to ask her what does she mean by saying that the war is wicked?’

Linklater 1938:141

By representing the *saying* as incomplete, the speaker avoids suggesting a “concluding or summarizing” impression, thus keeping the subject open so she can invite Lady Lysistrata to make her view more explicit, hence the impression of an unsuccessful act of communication. The Perfect Simple *What Lady Lysistrata has said* would declare the event over and so would have the effect of dismissing the subject.

Similarly, in the following example the incompleteness of the activity conveys a non-concluding impression, hence the evocation of an unsuccessful action, or as Jespersen (1961:196) calls it an “attempted or ineffectual action”:

(7) He has not heard what you *have been saying* now.

Jespersen 1961:196

Obviously the subject has, for some reason, failed to receive the message, hence the expression of an act of communication that has not produced its intended effect. A like nuance can be found in the following examples where the non-concluding impression conveyed by the imperfective activity also suggests an unsuccessful or ineffectual act of communication:

(8) “I’m jolly well sure I won’t be an earl if you refuse to be a countess.

That is the first stipulation I shall make.”

Polly looked at him mistily.

“Do you really like me as much as that?”

“Do I really ...” Tony choked. “*Haven’t you been listening?*”

he demanded indignantly.

Wodehouse 1958:114

(9) “I’m engaged!”

“Engaged?”

Absolutely. To Luella, only daughter of J. Throgmorton Beamish, of New York City.”

Freddie was duly impressed.

“You don’t say!”

“I do say. I’ve just *been saying*.”

Wodehouse Ibid.:72

In these examples the impression of unsuccessful communication brings about either indignation (8), or impatience (9), on the part of the speaker.

In the following example, the imperfective character of the activity suggests a difficult process of communication:

(10) This sexual integrity towards which women seem to be moving from

that conception of status entirely sexual which the romantic tradition imposed upon them is entangled with certain other moral dispositions. *I have been trying* to state them, not very successfully, because they are so interwoven.

Wells 1926:713

However here we cannot say that the subject has failed to state them, that his attempt has been totally unsuccessful since he has managed to state them, though not as successfully as he would have wished. And it is precisely because he is not fully satisfied with the result – he sees his attempt as partly successful – that he represents the event as imperfective. The idea of ‘possible continuation of the activity’ suggests here that the subject’s attempt is not final, definitive. Similarly in:

(11) “The innate faculty is strong enough in them to make them dislike discord in music; but they haven’t the wits to develop that other innate faculty [...] Come with me”, Gumbriel Senior added, getting up from his chair, “and I’ll show you something that will illustrate what *I’ve been saying*.”

Huxley 1948:134

the speaker feels that the person addressed might not have fully grasped the idea and so uses the Perfect Progressive to leave room to add to what he has said. The phrase *I’ll show you something that will illustrate...* suggests that the speaker is indeed going to make his point clearer through a visual representation, thereby actualizing the possibility of continuation.

Since some of the examples just examined involve an emotional reaction (cf. especially (8),(9), and (10)), it is a good time to deal with the claim of a number of grammarians that the Perfect Progressive lends an emotional colouring to events. For example, Charleston (1960:235) suggests that duration up to the present, as in *She’s been singing for an hour already* “may set free emotions on the part of the speaker.” Clearly, this example could express impatience at the excessive duration of the activity, as the temporal adverb *already* suggests, but this impression is not to be attributed to the verb form alone. Rather, it is the whole context, of which the verb is only part, which serves to express emotion here. As a matter of fact, the deletion of the adverb would turn the sentence into a quite unemotional utterance. In fact, there are even cases where the Perfect Progressive gives rise to less emotional colouring than the Perfect Simple. As Charleston (1955:277) suggests:

*What have you been doing to Mary?* sounds less like an accusation than: *What have you done to Mary?* The expanded forms usually leave room for an additional mental observation.

Indeed, both sentences express an accusation, but it is the degree of blame implied that varies. With the Perfect Simple, the speaker represents the transcendence of the whole event and so accuses the person addressed of being totally responsible for the effects observed in Mary, her present state. However, with the Perfect Progressive the speaker represents the transcendence of only part of the event and so holds the person addressed responsible for only part of the reprehensible activity.

Similarly in the following example, the progressive suggests a lighter accusation:

(12) We were poor and therefore slow to call a doctor. On the third day of my fever they called him. [...] Sharp footsteps disciplined the stairs and a fat man wearing a brown vest and carrying a fat brown bag entered with my mother. He glanced at me and turned to my mother and in an acid country voice asked, “What *have you been doing* to this child?”

Updike 1963:126

Here, the doctor holds the mother responsible for the present state of her daughter, but the imperfective nature of the activity suggests something non-conclusive, non-summarizing, where no final result is thought of, whereas the Perfect Simple would express something conclusive and so would imply a more serious accusation. As Poutsma (1921:64) points out:

*In the perfect and pluperfect tenses the expanded form often implies a secondary notion that the action has not reached its conclusion and will, therefore, be continued or have to be continued, as distinguished from the unexpanded form which often implies that a certain result has been attained.*

Turning now to other uses, we shall see that the impression of non-conclusiveness, imperfectivity associated with the progressive is present everywhere. Thus in:

(13) He went to take a bath. It never occurred to me that anyone would be taking a bath as late as this. And I was in the drawing-room, when he burst in shouting: “Madeline, that blasted Fink-Nottle *has been filling* my bathtub with tadpoles!”

Wodehouse 1962a: 168

the view of a few tadpoles in the bathtub suggests that the bathtub has been partly filled (partly realized outcome), an impression expressed by the Perfect Progressive. The Perfect Simple *has filled*, however, would declare the filling complete (fully realized outcome) and so would suggest that there are more than just a few tadpoles in the bathtub.

In the following example evoking a mental event, the impression of imperfection also points to a result yet to be finalized:

- (14) “Of course we both know you think of me as ‘that poor little dub, Mrs. What’s-her-name, D.T.’s secretary-”  
 “Why, really-”  
 “–or perhaps you hadn’t thought of me at all. I’m naturally quite a silent little dub, but I’ve *been learning* that it’s silly to be silent in business”.
- Lewis 1917:291

Here, the speaker has obviously not finished learning, not reached a final state of knowledge about how to behave in business. Thus the suggestion is that the speaker has now acquired some experience about how to behave in business - with the possibility of gaining more - and so might not be the silent little dub she used to be, an acquisition which would not be suggested by the Simple Progressive / *am learning*. Therefore, the subject’s present state of experience might be called a partly realized outcome since some but not all of the experience has now been acquired by the speaker.

In the next example, the speaker first represents the event as unfinished, imperfective, then later represents it as finished, complete:

- (15) His voice had its accustomed ironic tone. “So they’ve *been persuading* you, David, my son? ‘Take your father away, David Herries. He stinks in our nose, he is warlock and dirty liver and murderer may be. Remove his carcass or we will remove if for you.’ They’ve persuaded you, David but there must be more than a word before they can move me.”
- Walpole 1930:199

Here, although the speaker already knows that David has now been persuaded (cf. *They’ve persuaded you*), he first represents the persuading as unfinished, as though David had not been fully persuaded yet (partly realized outcome), to give him the opportunity to imitate their reasonings before evoking the end result *They’ve persuaded you*.

Similarly, in the following examples the idea of a partly realized outcome is dominant in the mind of the speaker:

- (16) “I have an idea, Paul. It *has been growing* all the time we have been talking together. Let’s see if it means anything to you.”

Mason 1923:41

- (17) “Sam,” he said, “do you know what I think?”  
 “No,” said Sam.

Sir Mallaby removed his cigar and spoke impressively. “I’ve *been turning* the whole thing over in my mind, and the conclusion I have come to is that there is more in this Windles business than meets the eye. [...] What do you think?”

Wodehouse 1956a:98

In (16), the evocation of an incomplete process of *growing* points to an outcome that has not been fully realized and so suggests that the idea may well grow more when they discuss it. Likewise in (17), the unsettled nature of the conclusion arrived at calls for an imperfective representation of its formation and so suggests that the “whole thing” will have to be further turned over in his mind to see if there is really more in this “Windles business” than meets the eye.

In the following example, the effect of evoking the result phase of the event has an ‘emphatic’ effect. It is as if the weight of the accomplished portion of the event was brought to bear on the present moment:

(18) “You’re coming, darling?” I pleaded. I could not keep the longing back: she had to hear it. “You must come. I’ve *been counting* on it.”  
“I’ll come.”

Snow 1950:184

By using the Perfect Progressive, the speaker falls back on a retrospective view of the event to add weight to his desire to see her come. The use of the Simple Progressive *I’m counting* would only evoke the speaker’s wishes at this very moment and so would fail to convey the impression of a firmly rooted desire.

In the following example, the imperfective activity of *scoring* is first represented in its aftermath, then in its developmental phase:

(19) HORACE. I’m sure it doesn’t too.  
HESTER. How much have you lost, Hector?  
HECTOR. We haven’t worked it out yet, dear.  
JANET (who *has been scoring*) Four hundred and seventy – that’s four and six pence.  
JOHN (who is also scoring). Five hundred and two.  
HORACE. Five hundred and two, that’s five shillings.

Milne 1931:103

Truly, the difference between the Perfect Progressive and the Simple Progressive here is very slight. In both cases the writer could have used either of the two forms without bringing about a major change of meaning. However,

by first representing the aftermath of the activity, the writer suggests that Janet is seen in the result phase of keeping the score up to then and so can give the score immediately. However, by representing the activity in its coming-to-be phase the writer suggests that John is still realizing the scoring and is on the verge of providing them with the score. Thus here, it seems that the choice of forms depends upon whether or not the subject has in mind the knowledge of the score (present outcome) at the moment of speaking.

Among the various impressions suggested by the Perfect Progressive, that of repeated activity often arises. Again here, it is the idea of unfinished activity and possible continuation of the event that gives rise to this impression. This situation is perhaps best depicted by momentary events. As Bauer (1970:196) points out:

*Put in the progressive aspect, such actions are normally understood to have occurred repeatedly because a 'momentaneous action in progress' would be inconceivable: He has been pressing the button/ Somebody has been knocking at my window.*

A moment's reflection on the make up of verbs expressing momentaneous events reveals that they require to be actualized from beginning to end in order to achieve existence. Thus it is impossible to have an incomplete act of *pressing (a button)* just as it is impossible to have an incomplete act of *hitting, winking, or pecking* for example, because actualizing one instant of the event amounts to actualizing the whole event. In other words, with these events, the developmental phase (beginning, middle, and end) is so short that it cannot be perceived as incomplete. Thus, when used in the Perfect Progressive, the only way of dividing the event into an *already* and a *not yet* is to view it as repeated where the series of already realized occurrences of the event suggests possible further recurrences in the aftermath.

In the following example the impression of imperfective activity, repetition so far, suggests that the terminology proposed is tentative, not fixed:

(20) Man like any other living creature must change with new conditions, and this, if he is to go on, must be the direction of his change. The new stage of human experience demands what I *have already been calling* a new adult phase, and conceivably also a new post-adult phase, in the normal life, based on broader and sounder common ideas [...]

Wells 1926:550

Here, the expressions *new adult phase* and *new post adult phase* are obviously new terms to describe the new stage of human experience and so may or may not be adopted as the final terminology. The Perfect Simple *What I have*

*already called*, however, would evoke the transcendence of the whole event and so would suggest that the terminology used has been adopted as the way to describe the new stage of human experience.

Finally, in the following example the imperfective activity of *asking for* gives rise to different expressive effects depending upon whether it is seen as a single event, or a repeated event:

(21) “What do you mean, on the brink of the tomb?”

“On the brink of the tomb,” repeated Ricky firmly. “And I am not going to shove you into it by giving you the slosh on the jaw which you *have been asking for* with every word you have uttered.”

Wodehouse 1962b: 133

Thus here the imperfective character of the activity suggests either a gradual, bit-by-bit process of asking for it with every word (single event) where the combination, grouping of all the words together amounts to asking for a slosh on the jaw; or that each word actually conveyed the whole message, asked for a slosh on the jaw (repeated event), in which case an impression of hyperbole arises.

### 3. Nearly Finished Event: Possible Conclusion

We have seen in the examples examined so far that whenever the speaker uses the Perfect Progressive he/she necessarily represents the subject after some but not all of the lexical impressions of the event. However, as we shall now see, there are cases which give the impression that almost all of the lexical impressions of the event have been realized in time, thus depicting the subject after nearly the whole event. The following is a typical case:

(22) He loses all confidence in his drawing. [...] Charley *has been gradually recovering* his aplomb. Now he draws himself up and says in an easy tone, using his best English: “It’s rotten, miss. I don’t know why I did it.”

Cary 1961:52

Here the subject has recovered almost all of his aplomb, and is on the verge of recovering all of it. In fact, the “easy tone” of his remark indicates that he has at this point recovered it. The use of the Simple Progressive *is gradually recovering his aplomb* would focus our attention upon the ongoing activity without summing it up, so to speak, into a result, thus failing to declare resultatively what has been accomplished so far. As a consequence, the form

could only suggest that Charley is in the midst of recovering his aplomb and so could not express a nearly finished event. The Perfect Simple *has gradually recovered his aplomb* would evoke the transcendence of the whole event and so would suggest that Charley has now regained full confidence. Consequently, the form would not create the ‘foretelling’, ‘anticipatory’ effect of the Perfect Progressive, would not point to the impending end of the event.

Similarly in:

(23) LATIMER. Lost your luggage. How excessively annoying!

(Anxiously) My dear Leonard, what is it?

LEONARD. (whose face *has been shaping* for it for some seconds):

A-tish-oo!

Milne 1939:160

the Perfect Progressive depicts the subject on the very verge of sneezing - an event that will necessarily put an end to the *shaping* - and so stresses the impending end of the event. By evoking the length of the activity, the writer suggests a long build-up and so points to a powerful upcoming sneeze. The deletion of the phrase *for some seconds* would somewhat weaken the impression that the end is very close and so might mar the expressive effect intended.

Likewise in:

(24) She turned to Harriet and said:

“*I have been paying* you a very long visit. But before I go, I should much like to have the pleasure of hearing you play.”

Harraden 1908:99

the speaker points to the impending end of a long visit and so suggests that it is high time she left. However, by representing the visit as nearly finished she enables herself to introduce a last-minute request which, if granted, will lengthen her visit. Though suggesting that it is high time she left, the speaker depicts herself as still engaged in the activity so as to prolong it, an impression suggesting that she is in no hurry to leave.

Conversely, in the following example the impression of the subject being still engaged in the activity suggests that she is in a hurry to leave:

(25) ...Goodness gracious! – What’s that? It’s the clock striking! And here *I’ve been keeping* you awake. Oh, madam, you ought to have stopped me. Can I tuck in your feet? I always tuck in my lady’s feet, every night, just the same. And she says, “Good night, Ellen”.

Mansfield 1923:255

This impression of ‘great haste to go’ arises from the realization that the activity of *keeping you awake* has extended up to the moment of speaking while it should have ended some time ago. Being now in a hurry to leave, the subject is on the verge of putting an end to the event, hence the representation of the activity as nearly finished.

Similarly in

(26) *I have been* for some time *persuading* my aunt to let me wear them [jewels]. I fancy I’m very near succeeding.

Jespersen, 1961:196

the idea of the subject being *very near succeeding* suggests that the aunt has almost been convinced and is on the verge of allowing her niece to wear the jewels, hence the suggestion of a long, difficult process that will come to an end very shortly.

The impression of the event being almost over is also dominant in (27).

(27) MOLLY. I’m going to drink to women – poor things!  
ALEC (who *has been opening* another bottle). Not yet. Here you are.  
(Fills glasses).

Buyskens 1968:185

Here the writer uses the Perfect Progressive to point to the fact that Alec is near the end of the event – something the Simple Progressive would fail to convey – but must complete it to provide service. The Perfect Simple *has opened*, however, would express a completed, finished event (present result: the now opened bottle) and so would suggest that Alec is ready to fill glasses’.

In the following example, the impression of nearly finished activity suggests that the speaker is at the end of the day:

(28) “Well, Mrs. Pluepott, how are you?”  
“Thank you, I’m just above [sic] the same, Mr. Lidderdale. Kindly take a chair.”  
“I mustn’t stay a moment. I’ve *been having* a day off, and must get back to my duties.”

Mackenzie 1924:73

Here, the event is represented as not quite finished because the speaker considers that he has yet to return to his duties to declare the day over. By doing so, the speaker shows that he views the present moment as if it were part of the day off to suggest that the activity has unrolled up to the moment of speaking.

The use of the Perfect Simple *I've had a day off* would indicate that the event is now over and so would not evoke the speaker's intention to end the day.

In the following example, the speaker uses the Perfect Progressive to foreshadow a new situation;

(29) "What? What? Why, certainly! Frankness has always been my middle name!"

"I hope so. Governor, I find I'm of no use on the Informer, at Fort Beulah. As you probably know, *I've been breaking in* Emil Staubmeyer as my successor. Well, he's quite competent to take hold now, and I want to quit. I'm really just in his way."

Lewis 1935:298

By representing the activity as nearly finished, the speaker enables himself to report an activity already known to the Governor without giving away the news that the result has been achieved, that Emil is now quite competent, an impression arising from the representation of almost all of the lexical content of the event as actualized in time. The Perfect Simple / *have broken in* would be infelicitous here since it would already indicate that the result has been achieved and so could not serve to introduce a new situation. As for the Simple Progressive / *am breaking in*, it would not be possible since it would suggest that Emil is still being broken in and so cannot be quite competent yet.

In the next example, the Perfect Progressive is used as part of concluding remarks to a T.V. show and so necessarily refers us to a nearly finished event:

(30) You've *been watching* Ski-Tips brought to you by Mont-Tremblant.

T.V. ad

By making the announcement at the very end of the broadcast, the speaker represents the event as almost totally transcended so as to include his announcement as part of the program. By doing so, the announcer enables himself to identify the program to an audience still "engrossed" in it, conditioned by the activity. A like nuance can also be found in the following comment concluding the satirical BBC radio programme "Beyond our Ken" (Fenn 1987:61):

(31) You *have been listening* to, or just missed a sort of radio show which is beyond our ken.

where again the announcer considers his comment, his signing off as part of the program and so uses the Perfect Progressive. By doing so, he enables himself to point to the end of the event without dismissing the event, thereby depicting the subject as still "engrossed" in the activity, "wrapped up in it".

We have seen in this section that the speaker using the Perfect Progressive evokes or points to the end of the event without representing the event as totally transcended, hence the suggestion of a nearly finished event. As with cases of “unfinished event” examined earlier, the activity is seen to stretch up to the present and offers the possibility of continuing into that moment. However, as we shall see in the following section, the idea of activity reaching up to the present can also give rise to the impression that the event has just ended.

#### 4. Just Finished Event: Event Over

The impression of the event having just ended comes out clearly in the following example.

- (32) Bill passed a hand over his throbbing brow. “Jeeves,” he said, “I hardly know how to begin. Have you an aspirin about you?”  
 “Certainly, m’lord. I *have just been taking* one myself.” He produced a small tin box, and held it out.

Wodehouse 1954:186

The speaker has obviously taken the aspirin. Though actually finished, the activity is represented as if it were incomplete to explain why Jeeves happens to have some aspirin on him, an outcome that can only be felt as contingent, accidental. The Perfect Simple / *have just taken one myself* would evoke the transcendence of the whole event and so could only refer us to the “inevitable outcome” (Korrel 1988:107) of the event, namely that he has now taken his aspirin. Consequently, the form could not serve to explain why he happens to have some aspirin on him.

A similar situation is exemplified in (33).

- (33) He was proceeding up Broadway after leaving the store when he encountered Reggie van Tuyl, who was drifting along in somnambulist fashion near Thirty-Ninth Street.  
 “Hullo, Reggie old thing!” said Archie.  
 “Hullo!” said Reggie, a man of few words. “I’ve *just been buying* a book for Bill Brewster,” went on Archie.

Wodehouse 1965:130

The speaker has now bought the book (just finished event); yet he represents the activity as incomplete to point to an accidental effect arising from it, namely his being near Thirty-Ninth Street and so explains why he happens to

be there. The Perfect Simple *I've just bought a book* would evoke an “inevitable outcome” and so could only point to the fact that he has now purchased the book (present result). Consequently, the form could not serve to explain why he happens to be near Thirty-Ninth Street.

In the following example, the activity is represented as imperfective so the speaker can express his feelings.

(34) Captain Biggar came bustling through the French window, humming a Swahili wedding march.

“Where’s my Rosie?” he asked.

“Upstairs,” said Bill. “She’ll be down in a minute. She’s just *been telling* us the news – congratulations, Captain.”

“Thank you, thank you.”

Wodehouse 1954:219

Here the speaker has obviously been told the news and now knows it. Yet he represents the activity as incomplete to bring out the effect it has on him, and so motivates his congratulations. A similar state of affairs is exemplified in (35).

(35) SIR HARRIS. Do you know what you were brought here to do?

KATE. *I have just been learning*. You have been made a knight, and I was summoned to answer the messages of congratulation.

Buysens 1968:184

Though over, the activity is represented as incomplete as a means of opening the subject so she can tell what she knows (cf. *You have been made a knight...*). The Perfect Simple *I've just learnt* would provide a complete view of the event and so would have the effect of dismissing the subject.

Similarly, in the following example the impression that the activity could have gone on suggests that the speaker has had a hard time voicing her opinion:

(36) [...] for after all I am your mother, though I know it’s the fashion now to think that children know more than their parents, and in my opinion you ought to put your foot down. There! I’ve said what I’ve *been wanting* to say for a week, and if you jump down my throat, well, then you must, and that’s all there is to it.”

Mackenzie 1919:240

Although she has just put an end to her wanting by voicing her opinion, the speaker uses the Perfect Progressive to suggest that the activity could well

have continued had she not summoned up the courage to finally speak. The same sudden ending of an activity is felt in the following example:

(37) “What!” cried Dr. Ramsay, jumping up. “You don’t mean to say you’ve found some one! Are you engaged? Oh, I see, I see. You’ve *been having* a little joke with me. Why didn’t you tell me that Bertha was engaged all the time, Miss Ley?”

Maugham 1920:30

By suddenly realizing (cf. *Oh, I see, I see*) that the joke has been going on, the speaker hereby interrupts the activity and so uses the Perfect Progressive. Again here, the impression is that the activity could well have continued had he not realized that they were playing a joke on him.

We have seen in all the examples examined so far that the activity expressed by the verb has unfolded up to the present, hence the impression that the activity was unfinished, nearly finished, or just finished. As we shall now see, there are cases where the activity has unfolded up to a recent past, thus depicting the subject some time after the event.

## 5. Recently Finished Event

The progressive form of the Perfect is often used to express a recent past activity whose effects are persisting in the present. As Leech and Svartvik (1975: 67) point out:

*The Perfect Progressive, like the simple perfect, can suggest that the results of the activity remain in the present: You’ve been fighting! (i.e. I can see that you have been fighting, because you have a black eye, torn clothes, etc.). In such cases the activity has continued up to a recent past, not up to the present.*

In this example, the black eye and the torn clothes are seen as “consequences of the act’s having been in progress” (Fenn 1987:125) and so are felt as having arisen somewhere during the activity.

The impression of a recently finished event whose effects have not been “triggered by the final instant of the action” (Hirtle 1975:118) is dominant in:

(38) “Someone *has been sitting* in my chair.”  
 “How do you know?”  
 “It’s still warm.”

Alexander et coll. 1975:91

where the warmness, being merely an accompanying effect of the sitting, can only be felt as having been brought into existence by the event's coming-to-be phase, an impression calling for the Perfect Progressive.

A similar example appears in (39).

- (39) The sound of his voice had a remarkable effect on the athlete. Sir Buckstone stopped in mid-stride as if he had been hit by a bullet, then bounced toward him with consternation written on his every feature. "Joe! What are you doing here?" "I've *been paying* my bill, and am now waiting for a cab to take me up the mountainside."

Wodehouse 1956b:9

The speaker has obviously now paid his bill but represents the activity as incomplete to explain his presence, why he happens to be there, an outcome which can only be felt as arising from the activity of *paying his bill*. The Perfect Simple *I've paid my bill* could only suggest that the bill has now been paid and so could not serve to explain the subject's presence "here". In like manner, we have the following example.

- (40) "Dahlia!" he exclaimed. "I thought I heard your voice. What are you doing up at this hour?" "Bertie had a headache," replied the old relative, a quick thinker. "I *have been giving* him an aspirin. The head a little better now, Bertie?"

Wodehouse 1962c:111

Obviously the speaker has now given him the aspirin. Yet she represents the activity as incomplete to explain her presence, why she is up at this hour, which again is a contingent effect of giving Bertie an aspirin.

Likewise, in the following examples the Perfect Progressive expresses recently finished events whose effects can only be felt as something not totally predictable from the causal event:

- (41) And that reminds me, I've a curious old German book [...] about the prejudices against the Jews, and the stories used to be told against 'em, and what do you think one was? Why, that they're punished with a bad odour in their bodies; and that, says the author, date 1715 (I've just *been pricing and marking* the book this very morning) – that is true, for the ancients spoke of it.

Eliot 1966:398

- (42) Sophia wandered about, a prey ripe for the Evil One. "Oh," she exclaimed joyously – even ecstatically – looking behind the cheval

glass, “here’s mother’s new skirt! Miss Dunn’s *been putting* the gimp on it! Oh, mother, what a proud thing you will be!”

Constance heard swishings behind the glass.

“What are you doing, Sophia?”

“Nothing.”

“You surely aren’t putting that skirt on?”

“Why not?”

Bennett 1910:9

Although the book has now been priced and marked, and the gimp put on, the speaker uses the progressive to evoke side effects, namely in (41) his knowledge of the date 1715, an effect that arose not after he had priced and marked the book, but while he was pricing and marking it, and in (42) the resulting presence of the skirt behind the cheval glass, which can only be felt as an accompanying, fortuitous effect of putting the gimp on it. Again here, the Perfect Progressive has an explanatory function since it provides the cause of the outcomes thus perceived. Being generated by the developmental phase of the event, the outcomes can only be explained through a verb form that situates the subject after part of the event, that evokes a result of its development, hence the use of the Perfect Progressive.

This draws to a close our discussion of the meanings of the Present Perfect Progressive.

## 6. Conclusion

We have seen that the idea of incompleteness, imperfectivity is at the very core of all the uses of the form since the subject is always situated after part of the event. This impression of the subject’s being situated after *part* of the activity suggests:

(i) that the event has unfolded up to the present and so presents us with (a) the possibility of continuation (unfinished event); (b) the possibility of conclusion (nearly finished event); (c) the end of the event (just finished event).

(ii) that the event has unfolded up to a recent past (recently finished event) and has produced effects that are persisting in the present.

This examination of the progressive form of the perfect has also shown that the idea of result phase or aftermath is by no means incompatible with the impression of imperfectivity expressed by the progressive form of the lexical event. In all the cases examined, the Perfect Progressive provides us with a retrospective view of an event felt as being somehow incomplete, imperfective;

a view which can give rise to extremely subtle expressive effects and shades of meaning in discourse.

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