

Recent change and variation in the British English use of the progressive passive¹

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1 Introduction

Recent corpus-based studies (e.g. Mair and Hundt 1995; Smith 2002; Hundt 2004) suggest that use of the progressive has undergone a significant increase in recent British English (BrE) and American English (AmE). However, the expansion appears to be limited to particular combinations – e.g. with present tense and passive voice – rather than to be evenly spread across the verb paradigm. Moreover the areas of growth are not identical in the two regional varieties.

We examine the development of the progressive passive² (e.g. *the TV is being repaired*) further in this paper, basing our study on the Brown family of corpora (Brown, Frown, LOB and FLOB) and focusing on the present progressive passive, since as with the active progressive, it is in the present tense alternant that changes have been most significant (Smith 2002).

At the level of overall frequency, additional evidence will be adduced from other corpora (BNC, ICE-GB) to identify the genres that enjoy the highest use of progressive passives. We suggest, that in BrE at least, expanding use of the progressive passive has been led by the media in its various forms.

The progressive passive is a comparatively recent innovation within the paradigm, coming into existence a little over two centuries ago. It is therefore interesting also to consider whether recent corpus data provides evidence of continuing grammaticalization of the construction, e.g. a spreading out to different classes of verb and subject, or to more complex formal combinations.

We begin our investigation with a brief historical background on the progressive passive, and some alternative constructions that convey similar meaning. We then discuss methodological aspects of the study, such as how the progressive passive and related constructions were retrieved from the corpora, and what yardsticks were used to measure their frequency. The diachronic and genre-based distribution of these constructions in the 1960s–1990s British English corpora is presented in Section 4. Section 5 compares the rate of use of

agent-passives with agentless passives. Finally, we consider some factors that may have played a part in the advance of the progressive passive in BrE, and held it in check in AmE.

2 Background to the progressive passive and rival constructions

There is no apparent special meaning in the combination of the progressive and the passive, as illustrated in (1), and unsurprisingly most grammars of Present-Day English omit comment on the combined construction.

- (1) Last night's break-in *is being investigated* by the police.

Where comment has been made, for example in Biber et al. (1999: 483), it is described as a predictable synthesis of the meaning of the progressive – presenting a situation as being in progress at a given time – and the meaning of the passive – presenting a situation from the perspective of an affected participant.

In view of the apparently predictable characteristics of the progressive passive, it is perhaps surprising that the first known undisputed example does not occur until the late eighteenth century (cf. (2)); and that, for much of the nineteenth century, it encountered a great deal of prescriptive reaction on both sides of the Atlantic (see e.g. Marsh 1872: 649; Bain 1891: 188–189, cited in Baugh and Cable 1978: 293; Scheffer 1975: 266–268).

- (2) I have received the speech and the address of the House of Lords; probably, that of the House of Commons *was being debated* when the post went out. (1772 J. Harris, in Ser. Letters 1st Earl Malmesbury, Vol. I, p264, 8 December; first cited in Warner (1995: 539))

Possible explanations for the late acceptance are suggested by Denison (1993, 1998) and Warner (1995, 1997). Essentially they argue that in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the introduction of three-verb patterns such as *is being built* would have widely been perceived as odd: they would have had a different syntactic analysis, with *being* analysed as a main verb rather than an auxiliary.³ Moreover, many contemporary commentators viewed the new progressive passive as unnecessary on the grounds that there already existed an alternative progressive construction which, although active in form, fulfilled the same kind of perspectival shift as a progressive passive. Modern-day scholars (e.g. Visser 1973; Denison 1993, 1998; Hundt 2004; Smitterberg 2005) often call this specialized, ergative use the 'passival'.⁴ The standard example cited, (3), is equivalent to the modern-day progressive passive (4).

- (3) The house *is building*.
- (4) The house *is being built*.

Corpus studies by Arnaud (2002), Hundt (2004) and Smitterberg (2005) agree that the passival had already begun to decline in popularity in the early nineteenth century, and by the middle of the century passivals were outnumbered by progressive passives in British English.

Early attestations of the progressive passive, such as (2), in private letters and diaries suggest that it emerged initially in less formal contexts (cf. Scheffer 1975; Denison 1998; Hundt 2004; Smitterberg 2005).⁵ In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries it spread to a much wider array of text types, although different corpora suggest different paths of diversification across styles. Based on the CONCE corpus, Smitterberg (2005: 131) finds that across the nineteenth century as a whole progressive passives were most frequent (in absolute terms, and relative to ordinary active and passival progressives) in science writing. He suggests that the amenability of science texts to passives in general helped foster the use of the progressive passive.⁶ The ARCHER corpus, by contrast, shows no occurrences of the progressive passive in science until the twentieth century (Hundt 2004: 118). Rather, it is newspaper reportage (a genre not covered in Smitterberg's corpus) that has the highest use of the construction, followed by journals (in the sense of diaries, rather than academic journals). Hundt's data suggest that newspaper reportage is the only genre in ARCHER where there is a clear pattern of continuing growth from the nineteenth through the twentieth centuries.

Hundt (2004) views the diffusion of the progressive passive as illustrating a process of grammaticalization. For instance, a weakening of a constraint on inanimate subjects in the ordinary active progressive probably provided favourable conditions for the acceptance of the progressive passive. Presumably this was because the shift of perspective entailed by a passive, from that of an active to an affected participant, is more likely to favour inanimate subjects. Hundt also applies Hopper's (1991) notion of 'layering' to describe the co-existence of and competition between the passival and the progressive passive.⁷ She cites the appearance of more complex auxiliary combinations with the progressive passive (e.g. with the perfect aspect and modal auxiliaries) as evidence of the 'final grammaticalization' of the progressive passive (Hundt 2004: 98). Her twentieth-century examples in fact come from the LOB corpus:

- (5) a rare state in our stationary process *will* just as likely *be being approached* as being departed from. (LOB J18, learned)

- (6) the seeds of any amount of trouble are sown, the harvest of which *may* still *be being reaped* at forty or fifty. (LOB D06, religion)

Hundt's arguments seem plausible, and are well supported by empirical findings. However, for recent developments, we would like to explore the competition faced by the progressive passive in wider terms than are considered in her layering account. The antiquated ring of examples like (3), together with Hundt's own findings, suggest that passivals are a very minor player indeed in the late twentieth century. More likely competitors to the progressive passive in contemporary English are:

- the non-progressive (or simple) BE-passive, cf. (7) and
- the progressive and non-progressive of the GET-passive, cf. (8), and
- the active progressive, especially when it is used transitively and with a generalized subject pronoun (*you/we/they/one*), cf. (10).

(7) The painting *is insured* for £10 million.

(8) John *is getting paid* a huge salary.

(9) I *got bitten* on the arm.

(10) They're *digging up* the road outside.

The first of these constructions is generally considered to be more marked as formal, and the latter two as more colloquial, than the progressive passive formed with BE. Baugh and Cable (1978: 336–7), for example, suggest that the GET-passive came into existence partly because the BE-passive was liable to be perceived as 'too static' (cf. *he is hurt*), and passives formed with *become* (e.g. *he became hurt*) too formal. Most sources state that it did not gain widespread acceptance until the nineteenth century. The first attested examples of the progressive combining with the GET-passive occur as recently as the first half of the twentieth century (Hundt 2004: 99, using ARCHER). A colloquial flavour is also apparent in impersonal active progressives with subject pronouns *you/we/they*, where the intended referent is generalized and impersonal (cf. Wales 1996; Fludernik 1993).⁸ In transitive use, such clauses are functionally very similar to the agentless passive (cf. Weiner and Labov 1983; Siewierska 1984; Wales 1996). The essential difference is one of information focus. Compare (10), in which the patient (*the road*) is the focus of the utterance, and the agentless pas-

sive (11) in which the verb takes the focal position and the patient is in unmarked topic position (cf. Siewierska 1984: 247).

(11) The road *is being dug up* outside.

In a study of American conversation, Weiner and Labov (1983: 34) argue that active (transitive) clauses with a generalized subject “are obviously the major choice for the active alternant of agentless passives”.

The informal flavour of GET-passive and impersonal active progressive makes them especially relevant to the question of colloquialization, which has arguably been a contributing factor in the recent expansion of the progressive in written English (see Mair and Hundt 1995; Smith 2002).

3 Methodology

3.1 Retrieval of progressive passives and other constructions

In order to retrieve progressive passives from the Brown family corpora, we first tagged the corpora for part-of-speech (i.e. grammatical word class) using CLAWS4 (Garside and Smith 1997) and the Template Tagger software (Fligelstone et al. 1996).⁹ Each POS-tagged corpus was indexed for the Corpus Query Processor (Christ 1994), and a query then run for the pattern [BE + *being* + past participle], i.e. the three key elements of the progressive passive. We allowed for a variety of optional tags (e.g. representing adverbs and negative particles), which may be repeated, to intervene within this sequence.¹⁰ The variability built into the query expression gives it reasonably good coverage, picking up cases like:

(12) The resulting phenomena *are* only now *being investigated* on an industrial basis. (LOB J78, learned writing)

However, it is likely a handful of cases will have been missed where more complex tag patterns intervene between BE and *being*, or between *being* and the past participle. The retrieval will also be a little more accurate for LOB and FLOB, in which the POS-tags have been hand-corrected, than for Brown and Frown, which have not been post-edited (see note 8).

To retrieve progressive passives from the BNC, we used BNCweb+CQP (Hoffmann and Evert 2006) with an almost identical query term.¹¹ Progressive passives in the ICE-GB corpus were retrieved using the POS-annotations and ICECUP query software provided with the corpus. We did also explore the newly released Diachronic Corpus of Present-Day Spoken English (DCPSE),¹²

containing British English from the 1950s to the 1990s, but the number of examples retrieved was far too small to draw any conclusions about diachronic developments in speech.

Subsequently we exported each concordance into a database program, so as to filter out false hits and add interpretive codes on each instance of the construction (see 3.3).

3.2 *Frequency measures*

One of the problematic issues in quantitative corpus-based studies is the basis on which to measure the frequency of a linguistic phenomenon x . Essentially a decision needs to be made whether to count the frequency of x relative to a stretch of text (e.g. per thousand or per million words), or to relativise the frequency to that of other linguistic features (y , z etc.). For extensive discussion, see e.g. Ball (1994), Nelson et al. (2002: 260f.) and, with respect to the progressive, Smitterberg (2005: 39–53). The problem is comparable to that encountered in variationist sociolinguistics under the heading of ‘variant fields’ or ‘the envelope of variability’. However, in the syntactic domain, there is often a rather ill-defined set of alternatives to consider.

We have already reviewed some possible alternatives in section 2 above. The choices can be even more complex, however, and are not simply a matter of a straight contest between active and passive, progressive and non-progressive. If the sentence is reformulated sufficiently, other constructions can be construed as conveying something similar to a progressive passive. In particular contexts, reduced relative clauses (also known as ‘WHIZ-deletions’) and abstract nominalizations, for example, can be seen as conveying the same content as progressive (and non-progressive) passives, albeit in a compressed form:

- (13) a. Labour policy ... confirmed the increasing *marginalisation* of hardliners in the labour movement (FLOB A01)
- b. Labour policy ... confirmed that hardliners in the labour movement *are increasingly being* marginalised

- (14) a. He said the proposition *backed* by the NUM was ambiguous (FLOB A01)
- b. He said the proposition that *is being backed* by the NUM was ambiguous

In a future study we aim to examine more closely the extent to which replacements by the progressive passive, as in the (b) sentences above, are possible in each corpus. For the present investigation, we will focus on (i) frequency of the

progressive passive per million words, and (ii) competition between the progressive passive and other constructions that are realized by finite verb phrases. In this respect we broadly follow the recommendation of Smitterberg (2005: 48–50), to use more than one measure of the frequency of a construction, if practicable, so as to obtain more reliable results.

3.3 Parameters to investigate

In an attempt to shed more light on areas in which use of the progressive passive has developed in written BrE, we classified the instances retrieved from the corpora with respect to the following parameters:

- (a) presence or absence of an agent phrase,
- (b) information status of the subject as given, new or inferable,
- (c) animacy of the subject,
- (d) the semantic role of the subject,
- (e) the semantic domain of the main verb (cf. Biber et al. 1999).

Our more detailed analysis focuses on the present progressive passive, because – as shown below – it is the part of the paradigm that has undergone the most significant change in frequency between LOB and FLOB. The first four parameters are widely considered to be important factors in the use of the passive in general (see e.g. Prince 1981; Granger 1983; Siewierska 1984; Biber et al. 1999). However, only in the case of (a) and (d) did our findings show potentially significant trends, which were mostly limited to the press genres. Parameter (e) was included because Smith's (2002) study of *active* present progressives in LOB and FLOB found possible evidence of an increase in two verb types – mental and communication verbs – relative to the other types.

Arguably, it would also have been worth examining the influence of Aktionsart category on the use of the progressive passive. Nehls (1984: 272) claims that in Present-Day English, when passivizing situations that are viewed as ongoing, speakers must use the progressive passive if the verb is telic; however, if the verb is atelic, either progressive or non-progressive passive may be used. We do not, however, report our analyses of telicity here, because we were unable to arrive at a clear categorization of the corpus data with respect to this parameter.¹³

4 Frequency distribution of progressive BE-passive and rival constructions

4.1 Distribution of progressive BE-passive in recent BrE

The distribution of the progressive BE-passive varies significantly between present and past formations. The *present* progressive passive shows a consistent pattern of increase from 1961 to 1991 (see Figure 1), averaging 30 per cent, while the passive of the *past* progressive remains roughly the same, and at a much lower level (Figure 2).

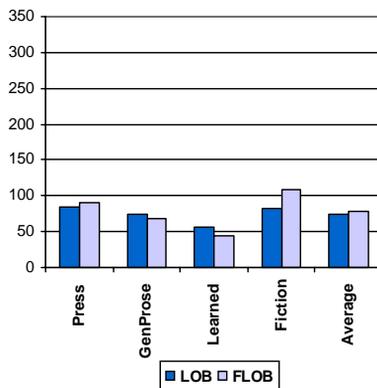
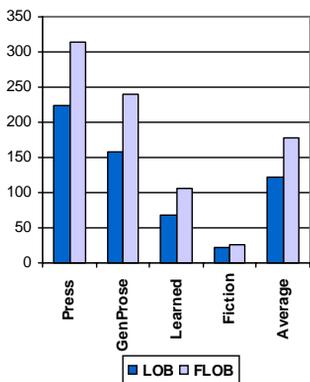


Figure 1: Present progressive passive in LOB and FLOB: frequencies per million words

Figure 2: Past progressive passive in LOB and FLOB: frequencies per million words

Note that there is little evidence of extension of the progressive passive to other parts of the paradigm, although there are isolated examples in the Brown family of modal auxiliary + *be being* + past participle. Besides two cases in LOB (see (5) and (6) above), there is the following sole example in FLOB:

- (15) So the news that a second park-and-ride route *could be being introduced* for trial period at Clifton Moor north of the city should be welcomed. (FLOB B18, editorials)

The relative scarcity of such combinations may be because they are perceived to be cumbersome, particularly with the juxtaposition of BE and *being* (see e.g. Denison 1993: 429–431).

Whatever the origins of the progressive passive, its spread in the latter part of the twentieth century seems – at least in the case of the present progressive passive – not to be due to colloquial influence. In LOB and FLOB the present progressive passive is rare in speech quotations and contracted forms, but prevalent in factual and comparatively formal types of discourse, particularly those concerned with matters of current interest. This is supported by data from a range of corpora including, in addition to LOB and FLOB, the ICE-GB and the BNC (see Table 1, and Figure 1 above).¹⁴

Table 1: Present progressive passive: highest and lowest ranking genres in ICE-GB and BNC corpora (W: denotes written genres, S: denotes spoken genres)

Genres in ICE-GB	Frequency per million words	Genres in BNC	Frequency per million words
W: press editorials	434	W: broadcast news script	654
S: broadcast news (script)	466	W: institutional documents	549
S: broadcast discussions	364	S: broadcast news	494
W: business letters	328	S: broadcast documentary	457
W: press news reports	289	W: newspaper (science news)	456
S: parliamentary debates	285	W: professional letters	379
S: unscripted speech	121	S: unscripted speech	71
S: conversation	113	S: conversation	39
W: private letters	97		

Synchronically, the genres with the highest frequency in LOB/FLOB are the press sections of reportage and editorials (sections A and B of the corpora), skills and hobbies (section E), and official documents and parliamentary debates (section H).¹⁵ A similar picture is presented by the ICE-GB corpus, where usage is again high in reportage and editorials, together with administrative and regulatory texts (the category closest to LOB/FLOB section H), as well as business letters. A factual, formal bias is supported by the fact that the highest ranking

spoken genres in ICE-GB are broadcast news reports, broadcast discussions and parliamentary debates.¹⁶ There is moreover a high level of consistency when we compare the findings with the BNC. The following are representative examples from these corpora:

- (16) At the final party Amersham Inner Wheel will provide refreshments, and plans *are being made* for an exhibition of Scottish dancing. (LOB A42, reportage)
- (17) The importance of wind energy has been recognised by several governments and *is being* actively *encouraged* in Germany, the Netherlands and Denmark, where it now generates 2 per cent of electricity. (FLOB B09, editorials:letters)
- (18) As I understand it people in the City *are still being laid* off. White collared jobs *are being lost* right left and centre (ICEGB S1B-021 #125:2:A-126:2:A)
- (19) I'm concerned that er people *are not being* brought to justice. (BNC HMG 37, spoken documentary)

4.2 *Distribution of rival constructions*

4.2.1 *Non-progressive BE-passive*

The buoyancy of the progressive passive shown above is all the more striking against the background of a dramatic fall in usage of the non-progressive passive (see Appendix Table 7). The decline of the latter is pervasive across all tense combinations, but for the sake of comparability with the progressive passive above, we demonstrate it here in the present and past tenses only (Figure 3 and Figure 4).¹⁷

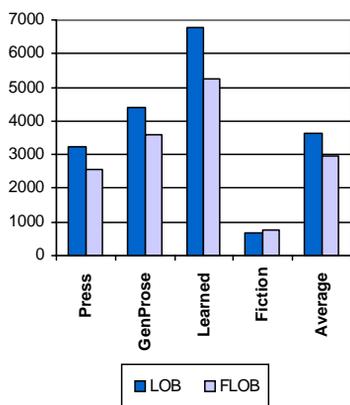


Figure 3: Present non-progressive passive in LOB and FLOB: frequencies per million words

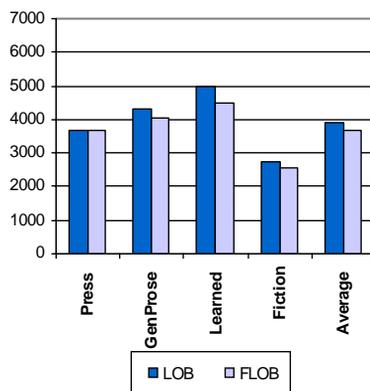


Figure 4: Past non-progressive passive in LOB and FLOB: frequencies per million words

From the scale of the charts, it is immediately apparent that the reduction in non-progressive passives easily dwarfs any gains made over the same period by progressive passives. Evidently, the diachronic developments in BrE cannot simply be reduced to a pattern of one passivization strategy replacing another.

4.2.2 Passival

As expected, clear examples of passivals are extremely rare in both corpora, supporting Bolinger's (1968: 130f.) claim that we are outside the period in which the passival is productive. One plausible candidate is (20), from LOB. The example seems to be passival as it is difficult to render with non-progressive forms (e.g. *which has already worked up*).

- (20) We can't afford to increase our costs in Africa – we simply can't afford it. I don't mean just our direct military costs. I'm thinking of the African Boycott which *is* already *working up*. (LOB K03, general fiction)

Other examples of such use (which is sometimes called 'mediopassive' or 'middle') occur in both corpora, but appear not to be confined to the progressive; cf. (21) and (22):

- (21) A Conakry-Prague air service *is opening up*, a Communist-controlled school for African trade union leaders is open already. (LOB B20, editorials)
- (22) It's fortunate that the five police procedurals that I wrote during my marriage *are still selling* well. (FLOB K29, general fiction)

The near-absence of passivals in Present-Day English corpora supports Hundt's (2004) and Smitterberg's (2005) observations that the demise began well before the start of the twentieth century. Hundt (2004: 91) suggests the construction is nowadays almost limited to use with a few verbs, such as *do*, *play*, *print*, *ship* and *show* (e.g. *the film is showing nationwide*). In sum, the passival appears to have had negligible effect on recent use of the progressive passive.

4.2.3 GET-passive: Progressive and non-progressive

As Hundt (2004) has shown, instances of the GET-passive progressive in LOB and FLOB (as well as Brown and Frown) are still at a low level. Only four instances and three instances respectively occur in LOB and FLOB. The most frequent participle used is *married*.¹⁸ Examples with GET *married* and other participles lend support to the view that GET-passives are not quite functionally equivalent to BE-passives. This is because the subjects of GET-passives are typically more actively involved in the realization of the event. Example (25) is however, a clear substitute for a progressive BE-passive.

- (23) Michael tried again. "*Is she getting married?*" (LOB P28, romantic fiction)
- (24) FEWER single people *are getting married* ... according to the latest official statistics. (FLOB A11, reportage)
- (25) ... but my point is that all Waterloo pupils *are getting blamed*. (LOB B23, editorial:letters)

The few occurrences of the progressive GET-passive are hardly surprising in view of the fact that GET-passives in general, and indeed most uses of GET, show limited use in LOB and FLOB (cf. Table 2 and Smith 2005: 130). One reason for this may be that the verb GET still encounters prescriptive resistance, and is perhaps considered *too* colloquial to be freely admitted in most varieties of published text (see Johansson and Oksefjell 1996: 58).

Table 2: GET-passives in LOB and FLOB

Genre	LOB (1961)		FLOB (1991)	
	Raw freq	Freq per million words	Raw freq	Freq per million words
Press	9	51	16	90
Gen prose	24	58	31	75
Learned	2	12	4	25
Fiction	39	152	35	136
Total	74	73	86	85

4.2.4 Active progressive

A brief look at the frequencies of the active progressive shows a similar pattern to that of the progressive passive formed with BE (cf. 4.1). Once again, changes have been most significant in the present tense alternant, with an increase of nearly 30 per cent (Smith 2002: 320; see also Appendix Table 8). In the past tense the active progressive has, as in the passive, made no significant progress, and perhaps even suffered a minor decline.¹⁹

It may be that the same conditions that favour the progressive passive also favour the progressive active, rather than that one voice realisation of the progressive is ousting another. Clearly it would be beneficial to examine the characteristics of the active progressives more closely, such as the rate of transitive and passivizable use.

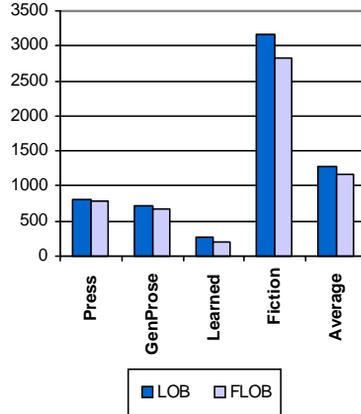
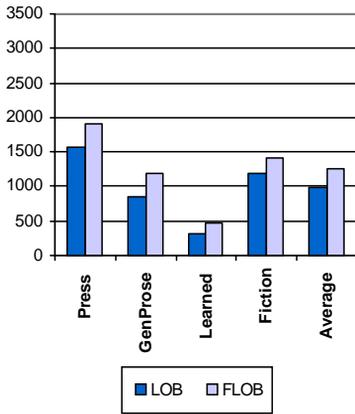


Figure 5: Present progressive active in LOB and FLOB: frequencies per million words

Figure 6: Past progressive active in LOB and FLOB: frequencies per million words

For the present study, we have limited our investigation of active use of the progressive to present progressives with a generalized pronoun as subject. The pronoun *you* can be highly generalized, referring to ‘any human individual’ (Halliday and Hasan 1976: 53); cf. example (26) and (27). Alternatively *you* may, in written texts, refer to anyone who happens to be the reader; cf. (28). The latter kind is noted by Wales (1996: 79) to be especially common in instructional texts. One third of all the examples in the LOB/FLOB active progressives occur in category E (skills, trades and hobbies).

- (26) “The fun of portrait painting,” she added, “is in trying to assess and understand the temperament of the people *you are painting*.” (LOB C15, reviews)
- (27) He said there had been previous vandal attacks but added: “When it gets to petrol bombing I think *you are talking* about a different category from breaking windows ...” (FLOB A34, reportage)
- (28) TIP Avoid the tendency to over fit. If *you are making* a dressmaker suit, the fit should be easy, not tight. If *you are making* an off-the-

shoulder style, remember that you need to save room for the lining, underlining and boning. (FLOB E04, skills and hobbies)

Most such cases are replaceable by progressive passives, but some, e.g. (27), sound unnatural in the passive; cf. (29);

(29) ? ... a different category from breaking windows *is being talked about*.

The more generalized use of *you* has almost doubled in frequency between LOB and FLOB, increasing from 19 to 35 cases. The number of cases which arguably could be substituted for a progressive passive, without altering the structure of the sentence, rose from nine to 16.

Examples such as (26) and (27) above demonstrate, moreover, that use of the present progressive with generic *you* is not limited to the “scene-setting portion of a mini-tale”, as Kitagawa and Lehrer (1990: 749) have argued. (27), for instance, illustrates the use of the progressive to foreground an interpretation of a situation that has been mentioned or is inferable from the context (see e.g. Buysens 1968, Ljung 1980).

The use of *we* as subject of an active progressive may similarly evoke varying degrees of generality:

(30) *We are taking* every step to ensure that we command our full share of the available market (LOB H28, company reports)

(31) Their only concern is to get away without being caught. And *we are making* it easy for them. (FLOB B13, editorials)

Generalized *we* with the active present progressive has increased even further than *you*, from 31 to 80 instances. Of these, 12 and 28 cases respectively are substitutable for progressive passives. With these totals combined, generalized subject uses of the active progressive stand out as an increasingly important alternative to the progressive passive.

5 *Agentful and agentless passives*

Among agentful passives we included cases where the entity contained within the *by*-phrase was inanimate, but represented as ‘responsible’ for the action concerned; cf. (32):

(32) ...even management *is being taken over* by computers... (FLOB F16, popular lore)

However, where the entity in the *by*-phrase could be interpreted as either the inanimate agent or the instrument – what Svartvik (1966: 104–105) calls ‘janus-agents’ – the example was not counted as an agentful passive. (See example (33).) Janus-agents accounted for less than 5 per cent of cases in each corpus.

- (33) Now he *is being tempted* by Beeching-sized offers to leave politics ... (LOB B08, editorials)
 - a. Now they *are tempting* him with Beeching-sized offers to leave politics (‘Beeching-sized offers’ = instrument)
 - b. Now Beeching-sized offers *are tempting* him to leave politics (‘Beeching-sized offers’ = agent)

Both agentful and agentless progressive passives occur more frequently in FLOB, but only with the latter type does the increase reach a level of significance ($p < .01$). The low number of occurrences of agentful passives makes it difficult to reach a clear conclusion either about their diachronic movement or their proportional rate of use. At 10.6 per cent and 11.2 per cent in LOB and FLOB respectively, the proportional rate is noticeably lower than for passives in general in these corpora, and also lower than figures quoted elsewhere (Svartvik 1966: 141; Givón 1993: 50).

Table 3: Agentless present progressive passives, as a proportion of all present progressive passives, in LOB and FLOB

Genre	LOB (1961)		FLOB (1991)	
	Raw frequency	Proportion of pres prog passive	Raw frequency	Proportion of pres prog passive
Press	33	82.5%	48	85.7%
Gen prose	59	89.4%	90	90.9%
Learned	9	81.8%	16	94.1%
Fiction	4	66.7%	6	85.7%
Total	105	85.4%	160	89.4%

Table 4: Present progressive passives with agents expressed (as a proportion of all present progressive passives) in LOB and FLOB

Genre	LOB (1961)		FLOB (1991)	
	Raw frequency	Proportion of pres prog passive	Raw frequency	Proportion of pres prog passive
Press	6	15.0%	7	12.5%
Gen prose	4	6.1%	11	11.1%
Learned	1	9.1%	1	5.9%
Fiction	2	33.3%	1	14.3%
Total	13	10.6%	20	11.2%

On the other hand, the clear increase of the agentless variety is in dramatic contrast to the declining popularity of agentless *non-progressive* passives; cf. Table 5. The latter have fallen away much more emphatically than their agentful counterparts. This suggests that the progressive passive is likely to have been gaining – at least in part – at the expense of the non-progressive passive.

Table 5: Agentless non-progressive passives, as a proportion of all non-progressive passives, in LOB and FLOB (estimated figures)²⁰

Genre	LOB (1961)		FLOB (1991)	
	Raw frequency	Proportion of non-prog passive	Raw frequency	Proportion of non-prog passive
Press	1940	84.2%	1693	83.4%
Gen prose	5364	86.6%	4649	85.5%
Learned	2775	84.8%	2373	85.6%
Fiction	1417	90.5%	1306	87.4%
Total	11496	86.2%	10021	85.4%

In certain text-types identifying the agent is straightforward. In many news reportage texts, for example, the unexpressed agent is typically some kind of organisational authority, such as the government, the police, etc.:

- (34) The cause of the blaze *is being investigated*. (FLOB A36, reportage)

In science texts, the agent is typically the researcher(s), who is (are) also the author(s) of the article. However, in other text types there are frequently no clues as to the identity of the agent, or the reason why it has been omitted; cf. (35):

- (35) ...the inhabitants must have a viable means of earning a living, now that they *are being* increasingly *drawn* into a moneyed society. (FLOB E27, skills and hobbies)

It is difficult to establish the validity of Bolinger's claim that the agentless passive is used for purposes of deception (see 6.3 below). Clearly, specialist knowledge of the context of the situation being described would be necessary to determine how far this applies. Analysis of the LOB and FLOB corpora suggests that the most likely reasons for omission of the agent are that it is considered to be irrelevant, or inferable.

6 Probable factors contributing to the spread of progressive passives

In this section we review some potential areas of growth in the use of the progressive passive. The 'factors' are put forward speculatively, on account of the low frequencies of data once we break down the progressive passive in LOB/FLOB into subcategories.

6.1 Contribution of the media

The findings reported in 4.1 show media genres at the forefront of use of the progressive passive. It is therefore possible that the mass media in their various forms have contributed either directly or indirectly to the spread of the construction. Although, as mentioned earlier, the progressive passive was initially promoted as an informal variant, Hundt's (2004: 109) data from the ARCHER corpus show that, since the second half of the nineteenth century, it has been most populous in newspapers. The wide circulation enjoyed by newspapers in Britain may have helped to spread usage of the progressive passive to other registers, especially semi-formal printed genres. We might speculate further that, as current affairs programmes on television and radio became more commonplace, these new media have been an additional factor in promoting use of the construction.

6.2 Grammaticalization

Studies on grammaticalization usually employ a much wider time-frame than the thirty years offered by LOB and FLOB, Brown and Frown. For this reason, the putative signs of grammaticalization that we discuss here are provisional in nature.²¹

No evidence has been found of the progressive passive increasing its range of functions since the 1960s. However, grammaticalization may be evidenced in the increasingly wide range of contexts in which the construction is used, for example:

- (a) In the press sections of the corpora, there are signs of growing use of the progressive passive with a non-patient subject, i.e. a subject that does not carry the role of patient or affected participant in a corresponding active clause (see e.g. (36)). Instances of non-patient subjects have increased from three in LOB press (7.5 per cent) to 21 in FLOB press (37.5 per cent). Given the recent emergence of the progressive passive in English grammar, one would expect the construction to share the same trait as passives in general, that is, to be predominantly used with a patient subject. The increase in non-patient subjects in the 1960s-1990s corpora suggests therefore a widening of domains of use, in accordance with grammaticalization theory (Hopper and Traugott 1993: 36, Bybee et al. 1994: 136).
- (b) Again in the press sections, the progressive passive occurs increasingly with verbs of communication (one clear case in LOB press; 14 clear cases in FLOB press). A similar development was observed in the present progressive active (see 5.4.1). This too may reflect the progressive generalizing in its domains of use. Frequencies of progressive passives in other semantic classes of verb were too low to draw any conclusions.

Examples of the two above phenomena include the eventive subject *extensive enquiries* in (36) and the communication verb *tell* in (37):

- (36) Extensive inquiries *are now being conducted* throughout London. (FLOB A24, reportage)
- (37) We *are forever being told* about increased competition from overseas once the Single market comes into being next year. (FLOB B26, editorials)

These developments are more in evidence in the press genres (where they are statistically significant) than in the other categories, supporting the view that the media may be leading the diffusion of the change.

6.3 Dialect contact

We can probably discount contact with American English as a factor in promoting British English use of the progressive passive. As indicated in Hundt (2004) and Appendix Table 10, the progressive passive in the Brown and Frown corpora shows a decline that is significant ($p < .01$) when measured against the corpora as a whole. This is mainly attributable to a decline of the present progressive passive (Figure 7), contrasting sharply with the trends for printed British English shown in LOB and FLOB (Figure 1 and Figure 2):

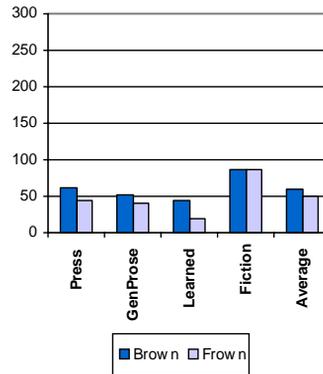
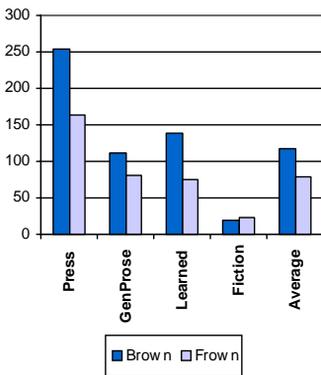


Figure 7: Present progressive passive in Brown and Frown: frequencies per million words

Figure 8: Past progressive passive in Brown and Frown: frequencies per million words

In fact, Hundt’s (2004) analysis of ARCHER indicates that, throughout its history, the progressive passive has never enjoyed the same level of popularity in BrE as in AmE. Thus, it appears to buck the usual trend of linguistic innovations spreading faster in American than in British English.²² It will be interesting to see (a) the extent to which this trend is due to AmE preferring more informal alternatives to the progressive passive, and (b) whether this point of divergence between the two regional varieties continues in the twenty-first century.

One factor in the lack of recent success of the progressive passive may be that in AmE it has perhaps suffered from a stronger prescriptive reaction in the United States to use of the passive *in general*, i.e. whether progressive or not. Elena Seoane (personal communication) reports that prescriptive resistance to the passive has been especially strong in the USA since the 1980s. Style guides and grammars generally advise writers to cut down on the passive wherever possible (see e.g. Strunk and White 2000: 18; Zinsser 2001: 68). Zinsser's bestselling guide to non-fiction writing, for example, states:

Use active verbs unless there is no comfortable way to get around using a passive verb. The difference between an active verb style and a passive verb style – in clarity and vigor – is the difference between life and death for a writer. (Zinsser 2001: 68)

Another objection to the passive discussed by Bolinger is the perception that, in its agentless form, it is liable to be used deceptively, in the sense that “the speaker deliberately plays on the indeterminacy of reference [...] for some underhand purpose” (Granger 1983: 314, discussing Bolinger 1980: 384f.). Although we could find no clear examples of ‘deceptive’ passives in the Brown family corpora, the above view may nevertheless contribute towards dissuading speakers and writers from using the passive.

7 Conclusion

Measuring the frequency, and changes in frequency, of constructions like the progressive passive is rather complex, because of the difficulty of determining the full range of competing expressions, and contexts where they compete. However, it is likely that the progressive passive continued to expand in use in recent British English, on the basis of its frequency per million words in LOB and FLOB, and comparable frequencies of probable competitors in the verb phrase. Use of the progressive passive appears to be sensitive to tense, in that it occurs most often in the present tense, and its frequency increases only in that tense.

Since the progressive active shows a similar rate of increase in the present tense, and lack of growth in the past tense, it may be that the spread of the progressive passive in BrE is largely attributable to expansion in the territory of the progressive *in general*.

Progressive passives are neither markedly colloquial nor markedly formal; they tend to predominate in factually-based and semi-formal genres, especially

those concerned with current affairs, or at least matters of current interest. On the basis of text types in LOB, FLOB, BNC and ICE-GB, it is hypothesized that the diffusion of the construction in twentieth-century British English has been led by the media in its various forms (newspapers, TV, radio etc.). It seems to be the British rather than the American media that have promoted the change, since the Brown and Frown data, together with Hundt's findings in the ARCHER corpus, show a fall in progressive passives in American English. We suggest this decline could be linked to a stronger prescriptive reaction in the USA to passives *as a whole*, which may have had a 'dampening effect' on the progressive passive.

The analysis moreover confirmed that the passival, a forerunner of the progressive passive, is all but extinct in the late twentieth century. Meanwhile the progressive GET-passive remains highly constrained in published written texts. A more serious competitor to the progressive BE-passive is the active progressive with a generalized subject pronoun (*you, they, we*). They appear to be increasingly acceptable in cases where writers seek a more colloquial tone than is normally conveyed by the progressive passive.

Finally, several parameters were explored to see if some explanation could be attempted for the continuing expansion of the progressive passive. The conclusions are necessarily tentative because of the small quantity of data. Two possible factors are an increase of verbs in the communication domain, and an expanding use of non-patient participants in subject position. The changes may represent ongoing effects of grammaticalization, and contribute to the overall increasing frequency of the progressive passive.

Notes

1. We would like to thank Marianne Hundt for her invaluable comments on an earlier draft of this paper. We acknowledge the support of The Leverhulme Trust (Grant number F/00 185/J).
2. Unless stated otherwise, 'progressive passive' refers to the construction formed with BE rather than GET.
3. Both Warner (1995, 1997) and Denison (1998) argue that BE changed its syntactic status as a result of systemic pressure from other verbs (e.g. DO) being reanalysed as auxiliaries around the same period.
4. A distinct term such as 'passival' seems preferable here to terms such as mediopassive, middle voice, and ergative because these latter have wider application, and are not limited to the progressive.

5. According to Pratt and Denison (2000), the early take-up of the progressive passive in Britain was partly due to a network of writers centred around Coleridge and Southey. (Southey is the source of one of the first known examples; cf. (2)).
6. Smitherberg emphasises, however, that the low number of occurrences of progressive passives in his data means that the results need to be treated with caution.
7. Hundt (2004: 104) also observes that “the passival declines in frequency even before the progressive passive is first used”.
8. Unless, that is, the subject happens to be *one*: e.g. *One is always getting blamed for other people's mistakes*.
9. The postediting of the FLOB corpus was carried out at the University of Freiburg. Regrettably we were not able to incorporate findings from the newly postedited version of Frown, also undertaken at Freiburg, in time for inclusion in this paper. The version of LOB used in this study was the original postedited version produced by Johansson et al. (1978), but with the original tags mapped to a new tagset that is being applied uniformly across the Brown family of corpora.
10. The query run in CQP to retrieve present and past progressive passives was:
 - (i) [pos = "VAB[MRZ]|VABD[RZ]"] [pos = "XX|R.*|MD"]{0,4} [pos = "AT|APPGE"]? [pos = "JJ.*"]? [pos = "PPH1|PP.*S.*|PPY|NP.*|D.*|NN.*"]{0,3} [word = "being|bein|"%c] [pos = "R.*|MD|XX"]{0,4} [pos = "V.*N"]
and for modal + progressive passive:
 - (ii) [pos = "VM"] [pos = "XX|R.*|MD"]{0,4} [pos = "AT|APPGE"]? [pos = "JJ.*"]? [pos = "PPH1|PP.*S.*|PPY|NP.*|D.*|NN.*"]{0,3} [pos = "VABI"] [pos = "R.*|MD|XX"]{0,4} [word = "being|bein|"%c] [pos = "R.*|MD|XX"]{0,4} [pos = "V.*N"]For the query syntax of CQP see:
<http://www.ims.uni-stuttgart.de/projekte/CorpusWorkbench/CQPTutorial/cqp-tutorial.pdf>
For a full list of POS-tags in the tagged versions of LOB, FLOB, Brown and Frown, see:
<http://www.comp.lancs.ac.uk/ucrel/claws>
11. Although the BNC was, like the Brown family corpora, POS-tagged with CLAWS4 (Garside and Smith 1997) and Template Tagger (Fligelstone et al. 1996), a slightly different tagset was used, and so the CQP query needed to be modified slightly. The query run in BNCweb+CQP was:

(iii) [pos = "VB[BZD]"] [pos = "XX0|AV0|ORD"]{0,4} [pos = "AT0|DPS"]{0,1} [pos = "AJ.*"]{0,1} [pos = "PNP|NP.*|D.*|NN.*"]{0,3} [pos = "XX0|AV0|ORD"]{0,4} [word = "being|bein"%"%c] [pos = "XX0|AV0|ORD"]{0,4} [pos = "VVN-AJ0"]

For a full list of POS-tags see: <http://www.comp.lancs.ac.uk/ucrel/claws>

12. See <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/english-usage/projects/dcpse/>.
13. For discussion of this practical problem, see Smith (2005: 59, 117).
14. In the progressive passive, fewer than 10 per cent of occurrences are in direct speech quotations; in the active, more than a third of cases are in quotations.
15. Newspaper reportage also enjoys a relatively high frequency of past tense progressive passives.
16. Note that LOB and FLOB implicitly treat parliamentary debates as written language, whereas the ICE corpora take them to be spoken.
17. The figures provided here for non-progressive passives are estimated, based on automatic retrieval from a part-of-speech tagged and postedited version of the two corpora. The CQP query was:

(iv) ([pos = "VAB[MRZ]|VABD[RZ]"] [pos = "XX|R.*|MD" & pos != "RL"]{0,4} [pos = "AT.*|APPGE"]? [pos = "JJ.*"]? [pos = "PPH1|PP.*S.*|PPY|NP.*|D.*|NN.*"]? [pos="R.*|MD|XX"]{0,4} [pos = "VVN|VVDN|VVHN"]) | ([pos="VM|V.H.*"] [pos="R.*|MD|XX"]{0,4} [pos="PPH1|PP.*S.*|PPY|NP.*|D.*|NN.*"]? [pos="R.*|MD|XX"]{0,4} [pos="VABI|VABN"] [pos="R.*|MD|XX"]{0,4} [pos="VVN|VVDN|VVHN"])
18. Even these examples are not universally accepted as passives. Some scholars (e.g. Huddleston and Pullum 2002) exclude *GET married*, *GET engaged* etc. from the category of passives.
19. The overall recorded decline is significant at $p < .05$.
20. Frequencies are estimated, based on a modified version of the automatic retrieval algorithm in (iv).
21. We are attempting to compensate for this limitation by extending the sampling range of the Brown family corpora back in time, to the beginning of the twentieth century (see Leech and Smith 2005). Results from the new material will be reported in future publications.
22. Hundt (2004: 111), examining contemporary reference works on American English, finds no signs of prescriptive resistance to the progressive passive in that variety.

23. Asterisks in this column indicate the level of statistical significance, based on the log likelihood test. * equates to $p < .05$, ** to $p < .01$, and *** to $p < .001$.

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Appendix: Frequencies of progressive and non-progressive passives in the Brown family corpora

Table 6: Progressive passives in LOB and FLOB: all tense forms combined

Genre	LOB (1961)		FLOB (1991)		Rate of change ^a
	Raw freq	Per million words	Raw freq	Per million words	
Press	55	310	73	410	+32.1%
Gen prose	98	237	127	307	* +29.6%
Learned	21	132	24	150	+13.7%
Fiction	27	105	35	136	+29.1%
Total	201	200	259	257	** +28.5%

*a. Asterisks in this column indicate the level of statistical significance, based on the log likelihood test. * equates to $p < .05$, ** to $p < .01$, and *** to $p < .001$.*

Table 7: Non-progressives passives in LOB and FLOB: all finite tense forms combined

Genre	LOB (1961)		FLOB (1991)		Rate of change
	Raw freq	Per million words	Raw freq	Per million words	
Press	1999	11244	1710	9594	*** -14.7%
Gen prose	5481	13221	4678	11366	*** -14.0%
Learned	2971	18484	2474	15449	*** -16.4%
Fiction	1313	5119	1246	4845	-5.3%
Total	11764	11652	10108	10037	*** -13.9%

Table 8: Present progressive active in LOB and FLOB

Genre	LOB (1961)		FLOB (1991)		Rate of change
	Raw freq	Per million words	Raw freq	Per million words	
Press	279	1569	339	1902	* +21.2%
Gen prose	352	849	491	1193	*** +40.5%
Learned	51	317	77	481	* +51.5%
Fiction	303	1181	366	1423	* +20.5%
Total	985	976	1273	1264	*** +29.6%

Table 9: Progressives in LOB and FLOB: all tense forms combined

Genre	LOB (1961)		FLOB (1991)		Rate of change
	Raw freq	Per million words	Raw freq	Per million words	
Press	575	3244	680	3817	** +17.7%
Gen prose	892	2158	1047	2534	*** +17.4%
Learned	134	844	152	952	+12.8%
Fiction	1331	5199	1323	5146	-1.0%
Total	2932	2916	3202	3176	*** +8.9%

Table 10: Progressive passives in Brown and Frown: all tense forms combined

Genre	Brown (1961)		Frown (1992)		Rate of change
	Raw freq	Per million words	Raw freq	Per million words	
Press	56	316	37	208	** -34.3%
Gen prose	66	170	50	121	-28.9%
Learned	29	183	15	94	* -48.6%
Fiction	27	105	28	109	+3.3%
Total	178	177	130	129	** -27.2%

Table 11: Non-progressive passives in Brown and Frown: all finite tense forms combined

Genre	Brown (1961)		Frown (1992)		Rate of change
	Raw freq	Per million words	Raw freq	Per million words	
Press	1686	9424	1235	6898	*** -26.8%
Gen prose	4670	11177	3807	9159	*** -18.1%
Learned	2803	17419	2094	12975	***-25.5%
Fiction	1218	4745	1176	4570	-3.7%
Total	10377	10230	8312	8202	*** -19.8%

Table 12: Present progressive active in Brown and Frown

Genre	Brown (1961)		Frown (1992)		Rate of change
	Raw freq	Per million words	Raw freq	Per million words	
Press	287	1619	342	1920	* +18.6%
Gen prose	379	917	436	1055	* +15.1%
Learned	87	548	78	489	-10.8%
Fiction	243	949	460	1789	*** +88.5%
Total	996	991	1316	1305	*** +31.8%

Table 13: Progressives in Brown and Frown: all tense forms combined

Genre	Brown (1961)		Frown (1992)		Rate of change
	Raw freq	Per million words	Raw freq	Per million words	
Press	555	3131	617	3464	+10.6%
Gen prose	834	2018	901	2181	+8.1%
Learned	198	1247	143	896	** -28.2%
Fiction	1210	4727	1387	5395	*** +14.1%
Total	2797	2782	3048	3024	** +8.7%

