

Functional convergence and extension in contact: Syntactic and semantics attributes of the progressive aspect in Pennsylvania Dutch

Joshua R. Brown

University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire

Michael T. Putnam

Penn State University

I. Overview

In this paper, we discuss some peculiarities of progressive aspect in Pennsylvania Dutch (hereafter, PD). Recent research Huffines (1986), Louden (1988), Burridge (1992), and Fuller (1996) (contra Reed (1947)) demonstrates that the incorporation of elements of English progressive aspect in PD allows stative predicates to appear with progressive aspect (which is ungrammatical in English):

- (1) Ich bin am wotte fer sell.
I am on want for that
Intended: ‘I am wanting that.’ (Burridge 1992:212)
- (2) Ich bin am Sache besser versteh.
I am on things better understand
Intended: ‘I am better at understanding things.’ (Burridge 1992:212)

Here we discuss:

- How this development connects with other research in contact linguistic literature pertaining to semantics-discourse properties, and
- How the particular syntactic structures and semantic description of progressive aspect present an ideal interface platform for such changes to take place.

II. Aspect in contact

Research by Silva-Corvalán (1994/2000, 1993), Toribio (2004), and Sánchez (2003, 2004) suggests that one of the most permeable features of grammars can be found at the semantic and discourse-pragmatic level (cf. Sánchez’ *Functional Convergence Hypothesis*). Furthermore, the extension of progressive aspect to stative predicates (which, again, are not possible in standard American English), is evidenced in the formation of creole languages such as Hawaiian Creole.

III. The syntax and semantics of progressive aspect in PG

The syntactic structure of the progressive of PD assume the following form (copula + PREP + INF):

- (3) sei + am + infinitive
be + on + infinitive

Here we adopt Higginbotham’s (2009) observation that the origin of the English progressive is a nominal construction with a gerundive object, as in (4):

(4) John is at [PRO crossing the street]

The prepositional head ‘at’ has its own position for events e , and will take the complement as an argument. The PD syntactic structure including progressive aspect follows this pattern (cf. (1) – (3)). Following Landman (1992), we conjecture that the interpretation of the complement is as follows:

(5) $\hat{\lambda}(e, e') \text{ PRO cross the street } (e, e')$

In conclusion, the preposition ‘at’ expresses a relation between events e and properties of events P . Semantically, following Landman (1992) and Higginbotham (2009), we label this structural head as Prog(ressive)P , and denote Prog along the lines of the following formulation (example from Higginbotham 2009:139):

(6) John is eating chow mein.

(7) $[\exists e \approx u] \text{ Prog}(e, \hat{\lambda}e' \text{ eat}(\text{John}, \text{chow mein}, e'))$

In this paper, we discuss how the syntactic structure of the progressive in PD (similar to (4) above), the semantics of Prog , and the interface between these two elements have all undergone alterations over time. On a larger scale, our findings address a fundamental question in contact linguistics concerning German-American heritage languages such as PD. Simply put, our data suggest that, even after centuries of contact, only the semantics of PD in this instance has undergone change (which is predicted according to Sánchez’ *Functional Convergence Hypothesis*). In sum, PD has not simply adopted the English system.