

Factors influencing the acceptability of stative progressives in British and American English: A questionnaire-based study

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Even though stative verbs are generally believed to be incompatible with the progressive (see Quirk et al. 1985: 203), recent corpus studies and popular advertisement slogans suggest that stative progressives appear to be rising in acceptability. In this talk, I will present the results of a questionnaire study which examines whether the acceptance of these structures is influenced by sociolinguistic factors and adverbial complementation.

Recent studies based on corpora, such as ARCHER, LSAC and COCA, have observed an increase of stative progressives in the last decades (Kranich 2010, Levin 2013). Even though some theorists have labelled this change as a conglomeration of mere exceptions to the rule (Mair 2006), it is often either attributed to the semantic qualities of such structures, specifically their ability to express emotions and intensity, or to context-dependent variables, such as first-person pronoun subjects and adverbial intensification (Levin 2013, Gavis 1999).

In a questionnaire study involving 104 BrE and 53 AmE participants, several variables were tested to assess the acceptance of stative progressive structures. For this purpose, five stative verbs (*love, hate, like, want, know*) were used in positive and negated test sentences containing either none or one of four intensifying adverbs (*so, really, totally, absolutely*). After completing a form containing sociolinguistic data, such as age and gender, participants then rated the acceptability of each sentence on a Likert five-point-scale.

The descriptive analyses (including the statistical exploration of the results) point to the wide-spread acceptance of the progressive with states of emotion in both of the investigated varieties of English. Most notably, the highest acceptance rates were found amongst male participants and in the youngest age groups of AmE and BrE as well as the oldest age group of AmE. Therefore, this linguistic phenomenon seems to be more established in the English language than previous research suggested, while its use with certain adverbs is potentially governed by underlying linguistic (e.g. rhythmic and semantic) principles. For instance, the anticipated acceptability boost could only be seen with certain intensifiers (specifically with *really*), which however exhibited the same patterns across verbs and test groups. The results of this study thus trigger important research questions for more comprehensive and fine-grained follow-up studies.

References

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