

Expressions of epistemic contingency in the use of the English present progressive

Astrid De Wit & Frank Brisard

University of Antwerp

In this paper, we propose a unified account of the semantic polyfunctionality of the present progressive in English (involving temporal, aspectual, and modal usage types) in terms of epistemic contingency or non-necessity. More specifically, by means of a corpus-based study of spoken American English we show how the observed modal usage types can be derived, directly or indirectly, from this construction's most schematic meaning, which we argue is modal as well. This analysis is carried out within the framework of Cognitive Grammar (Langacker 1987, 1991), which provides both the conceptual analytical tools and the theoretical assumptions underlying the analysis.

1. Introduction¹

The semantics of the English progressive, which is used in a notoriously large variety of contexts, occupies a unique position from a cross-linguistic point of view (*cf.* Bertinetto *et al.* 2000). Within the paradigm of the present, moreover, its characteristic interaction with the simple present-tense form has been widely noted and debated, not in the least because it represents a feature that seems fairly exclusively linked to English, among the more familiar European languages. This is probably one of the main reasons why the English progressive has attracted a lot of scholarly attention in the past decades (e.g. Allen 1966, Scheffer 1975, Ljung 1980, Römer 2005; for an overview of recent studies of the progressive aspect in “outer circle” Englishes, see Collins 2008). Most often, however, these studies restrict their semantic analyses to purely aspectual notions of continuity and duration, as illustrated in the following quote by Palmer (1968: 61):

The progressive indicates activity continuing through a period of time. Activity with duration.

¹ The research for this paper was carried out in the context of the ‘Grammaticalization and (Inter)Subjectivity’ project (Belgian Federal Government – Interuniversity Attraction Poles P6/44).

Definitions such as this account for some uses of the English progressive, and as such they constitute a viable characterization of a *part* of the progressive's semantics. Yet, in a number of examples attested in the corpus we have studied, the Santa Barbara corpus of spoken American English (DuBois *et al.* 2000), the use of the progressive does not seem to be primarily motivated by temporal considerations:

- (1) ... Well he says minorities
... He's smart.
He talks about minorities.
But he's really talking about African Americans.

The speaker in (1) first uses the simple present, indicating in this case a habitual action (on the part of Jesse Jackson), and then switches to the present progressive, without there being any temporal reason for doing so: the speaker is still referring to what the subject does in general, not to what is going on at the time of speaking.² Examples such as this, we shall argue, can only be accounted for in terms of the epistemic-modal meaning we propose for the present progressive, and which we define as *contingency in immediate reality*. In our view, this constitutes the basic, most schematic meaning of the English present progressive, of which other, more specific usage types can be derived. We thus propose a unified analysis of the semantics of the polysemous English progressive.³

² Out of context, an alternative interpretation would be possible, in which the speaker refers to a single action in the past, a kind of historical present. But even in this interpretation, the shift to the progressive form would not appear temporally motivated.

³ Given its widespread usage, studies of the English progressive often abstain from establishing a basic meaning for this construction. A notable exception to this is Williams (2002), which discusses the use of the progressive in English in terms of susceptibility to change. In formal-semantic analyses, furthermore, proposals have also been made for a basic *modal* meaning of the progressive operator, as one of 'necessity' (Dowty 1977), in order to solve the problem of "successful completion" with accomplishments (what is called the imperfective paradox; see also Portner 1998). It will become clear further on that our own proposal for a modal semantics of the English present progressive in terms of 'contingency' or '*non-necessity*' both makes different assumptions and aims to solve different problems of analysis.

The use of the term 'modal' to describe certain usage types or some of the connotations figuring in them we consider standard and thus perfectly legitimate, even if, again, it deviates from that in formal approaches (restricted to refer to the description of events in necessary or possible worlds). In the present study, the term comprises references to subject's or speaker's attitude, but also to connotations of surprise and unexpectedness, which we do not so much define as emotional states but rather as epistemic qualifications of real states of affairs. In section 4.3, we also note more traditionally recognized modal uses of the English progressive, involving intention and attenuating uses, among others.

In the second section of this article we shall briefly introduce the approach to tense adopted in Cognitive Grammar (Langacker 1987; 1991), the theory in which we have framed our analysis. Section 3 provides a characterization of the English present progressive in terms of contingency in immediate reality, drawing on Brisard (2002) and Langacker (2009). In the fourth section, we show how various usage types attested in our corpus can be derived from this schematic modal meaning of the present progressive. In section 5, finally, we submit our conclusions.

2. Tense and grounding in Cognitive Grammar

Tense in Cognitive Grammar is crucially defined as an epistemic notion at the most schematic level (Langacker 1991: 240–246). This means that tense markers (as well as certain modal auxiliaries) in English are considered as indicating the status of a situation (a state or an event) with respect to the speaker's conception of reality at the time of speaking. Tense markers are thus regarded as *grounding predications*: they specify the relationship between a profiled situation and the so-called ground, defined as “the speech event, its participants and its immediate circumstances” (Langacker 2002: 7). Note that the ground, in this definition, does not only comprise situations that are actually going on at the time of speaking, but also all the background knowledge of the speaker, which is “always, if implicitly, present at a pre-reflective stage” (Brisard 2002: 265). The canonical temporal distinction between present and past tenses is reinterpreted at a schematic level of definition as “a proximal/distal contrast in the epistemic sphere” (Langacker 1991: 245). Put differently, a present tense indicates that the designated situation is *immediate* to the speaker, i.e., that it belongs to her ground. The past tense, on the other hand, conveys a meaning of *non-immediacy* (within the speaker's model of reality).

The English present-tense paradigm consists of two morphologically distinct constructions: the simple present and the present progressive. Both constructions incorporate the present tense as an essential component, and thus in both cases the grounding relation is one of epistemic immediacy. That is, the simple present as well as the present progressive are used to designate situations that the speaker considers to be real at the time of speaking. Still, as we shall argue in the following sections, the simple and the progressive form each confer a subtly differing modal status upon a situation with respect to the ground.

3. The schematic meanings of the English simple present and the present progressive

In this section we briefly discuss the basic tenets of our analysis of the modal semantics of the English progressive, in opposition to the simple present. Consider the following sentence, containing a simple-present form:

(2) I only **watch** television on Sundays.

In keeping with the conception of tense in Cognitive Grammar, the event of watching referred to in (2) ought to belong to the realm of the speaker's immediate reality, since she uses a present tense. Indeed, the speaker refers to a habit, which is part of her structural world-knowledge and thus by definition part of the ground. Crucial for our analysis is the precise modal status of events construed by means of the simple present: the simple form, as opposed to the progressive, indicates that the designated situation constitutes a *structural reality*, i.e., a *necessary* part of what the speaker conceives of as currently real; it is expected and can be predicted on the basis of the speaker's general knowledge of the world and of certain situation types in it.

The present progressive, as in (3), is similarly used to refer to situations that are considered to be real at the time of speaking:

(3) Be quiet, **I'm watching** television.

In this case, however, the situation, real though it may be, does not constitute a necessary, structural part of the speaker's ground, i.e., it is construed as being *contingent* (which is marked by means of the *-ing* form). In example (3), the speaker is indeed watching television at the time of speaking, but this event does not constitute a structural part of her conception of reality; its occurrence could not have been expected, nor predicted. Events in general and even certain state-like activities, such as sleeping or wearing a shirt, that are explicitly presented as singular (taking place *right now*) and that are therefore non-structural, as in (4), cannot as a rule take the simple present in English:

(4) *John **writes** a letter/**sleeps/wears** a nice shirt right now.

This, too, is in line with the definition we propose for the (simple) present tense as marking a structural reality. As is well-known, the simple present can be used freely with real statives, which by definition denote structural events.

The semantic, essentially modal, opposition between the simple present and the present progressive is illustrated in Figures 1a and 1b, in which C stands for the conceptualizer (the speaker) and P for the profiled situation that belongs to the ground (the state or event rendered by means of the simple present or the present progressive). In Figure 1b, the unconsolidated position of P with respect to the ground is indicated by the use of a circle, instead of a square.

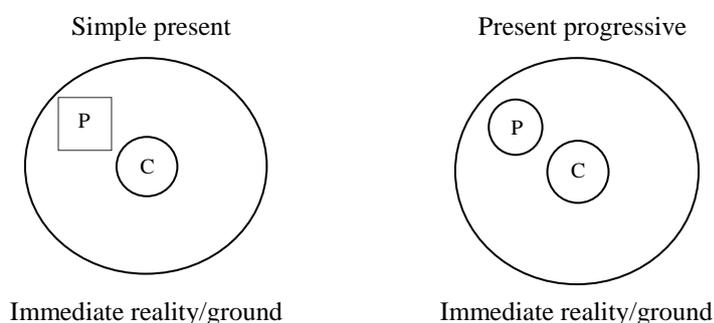


Figure 1a: Structural status of a simple-present construal

Figure 1b: Contingent status of a present-progressive construal

4. Usage types of the English present progressive

In the previous section we have defined the basic, most schematic meaning of the English present progressive as indicating contingency in actuality. Recall that we propose a unified analysis of the semantics of the present progressive, which implies that it should be possible to derive all of its more specific usage types — semantic categories that are frequently described in the relevant literature, such as Temporary Validity or the Futurate use of the progressive — from this abstract characterization. To establish the various contexts in which the progressive is used in present-day English, we have collected 360 instances of present progressives from the Santa Barbara corpus of spoken American English. Each of these forms has then been classified as instantiating a particular category of use, on the basis of a set of strictly defined meaning criteria. In turn, these categories, or usage types, are related to one another to form the semantic network of the English progressive, presented in Figure 2.

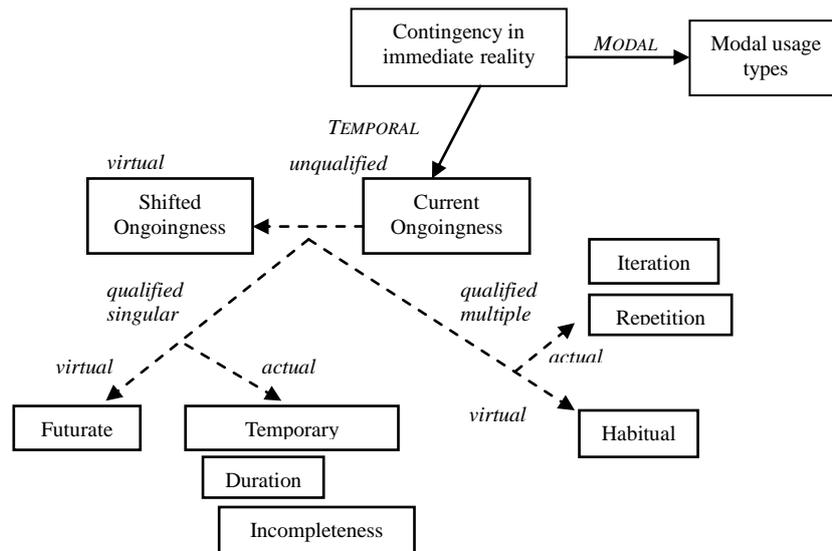


Figure 2: Semantic network of the English present

The basic epistemic meaning of ‘contingency in immediate reality’ branches off into two different clusters: one cluster with temporal usage types, and the other relating to purely modal usage types. That is to say that we consider all temporal usage types (e.g., Current Ongoingness) as instantiations of a basic epistemic meaning, applied to the temporal domain. The relationships between the various usage types involve a number of independently motivated cognitive principles. Starting from the more or less prototypical category of Current Ongoingness, we can say that the meaning of ‘contingency in immediate reality’ is instantiated in a temporal configuration involving the coincidence of an actual event with the time of speaking (ground). Of course, a temporal overlap between an event and the current ground is also at issue, in one way or another, with the other ‘qualified’ temporal uses. The latter can be distinguished from the progressive’s ‘unqualified’ prototype, either on the basis of the relative prominence they confer upon one or both of the boundaries marking the designated event (Temporary Validity, Incompleteness, and Duration), by the fact that they invoke a higher-order construal of repeated situations (Iteration, Repetition, and Habitual), and/or

because they involve a virtual plane of representation (Futurate and Habitual⁴). Shifted Ongoingness is very similar to Current Ongoingness, the only difference being that there is a temporal overlap between an event and some shifted reference point (i.e., a virtual ground), instead of the actual time of speaking.

The temporal usage types all involve, in a more or less explicit way, instantiations of the prototypical meaning of the English present progressive, that is: they all indicate situations that are going on at the time of speaking. At the same time, these temporal usage types also incorporate the basic modal characterization that underlies all uses of the present progressive in English (i.e., we see Current Ongoingness as the most straightforward elaboration of the progressive's epistemic schema: most dynamic events going on 'right now' are contingent in the sense that they should not necessarily have occurred at a particular moment). In the purely epistemic usage types, on the other hand, the use of the progressive is not primarily temporally motivated; that is, it occurs in contexts where, on temporal grounds, one would typically have expected a simple present, as in (1). In section 4.1 we illustrate a few temporal usage types — Current Ongoingness and its direct extensions, Temporary Validity and Duration —, showing how they instantiate the meaning of epistemic contingency. In section 4.2 we look into a number of epistemic connotations associated with the notion of contingency, such as 'surprise' or 'irritation', that frequently accompany uses of the English present progressive. The presence of these connotations constitutes further evidence for the specific modal orientation of the progressive's semantics. Section 4.3, finally, is devoted to purely modal usage types, where any temporal motivation for using progressive forms is highly downplayed, if indeed at all present.

4.1. Temporal usage types of the English present progressive

The first and probably most salient temporal usage type is that of Current Ongoingness. This usage type involves examples in which the progressive is used to indicate that a singular event is actually going on at the time of speaking, without any further qualifications. This is illustrated in example (5):

- (5) Do you want –
You could use the lettuce washer,

⁴ The progressive in English may be used only to refer to 'contingent habits' that are bounded in time in the conceptual background. Thus, *John is writing a letter every day these days* is perfectly fine (cp. **John is writing a letter every day*, which is ungrammatical when meant as the unqualified statement of a habit). Accordingly, we call these *temporary habituals*.

cause Pete's using the colander

Where's the lettuce washer...

You know, the salad spinner thing?

This meaning is related to the modal schema proposed for the present progressive in terms of epistemic contingency. In non-technical terms, one might argue that Pete's using the colander, in example (5), is not a structural part of the speaker's conception of reality: even though he is indeed using the colander at the time of speaking, he need *not necessarily* have been. The event, in other words, could not have been predicted or expected at that particular moment.

Langacker (2001: 255–258) divides the English verbs into two basic aspectual classes: dynamic verbs (called 'perfective' by Langacker; *watch, learn, sing*) and stative verbs (called 'imperfectives'; *know, need, want*). This is done on the basis of their grammatical behavior in the present-tense paradigm. Dynamic verbs involve situations that are construed as bounded within the so-called immediate temporal scope.⁵ Situations designated by stative verbs, on the other hand, are construed as internally homogeneous and unbounded within the immediate temporal scope. This means that stative processes are constant through time: the process persists indefinitely beyond the immediate scope and remains qualitatively identical.⁶ Figures 3a and 3b (taken from Langacker 2001: 257) illustrate these differences between dynamic and stative verbs.

⁵ The overall conceptual content invoked by an expression is called its *maximal scope* (MS) (Langacker 1987: 118-119). The *immediate scope* (IS) is that portion of the maximal scope that is immediately relevant for a given linguistic purpose. It delineates the onstage region, the so-called "general locus of viewing attention". For instance, in the following set of expressions, *body > arm > hand > finger > nail*, each entity constitutes the immediate scope for the next. Thus, one cannot conceive of a nail without evoking, in the background, the conception of a finger.

⁶ Activity verbs like *run* or *wear a shirt*, which do not involve the attainment of an inherent end-point, are traditionally regarded as unbounded, as opposed to accomplishments and achievements (Vendler 1957/1967). Yet, we argue that activities are still bounded in time – even those that have state-like properties, such as *wear a shirt* or *sleep*, which do not involve a change of state (i.e. they can be divided into identical sub-events). The fact that these 'homogeneous activities', as well as 'heterogeneous activities', cannot be combined with the simple present (except in habitual/generic contexts), is at least partly due to the epistemic criterion that one cannot verify an activity unless one also has access to its points of inception and termination (Michaelis 2004: 10-11). Sleeping, for example, "is distinct both from being comatose and from nodding off for a second" (Michaelis 2004: 11). Another, more ontologically motivated reason for regarding homogeneous and heterogeneous activities as bounded comes from the assumption that a speaker on any one occasion is always referring to a concrete episode of, say, running, that will end at *some* point. Thus, both from an epistemological and an ontological perspective, it makes sense to regard activities as bounded events.

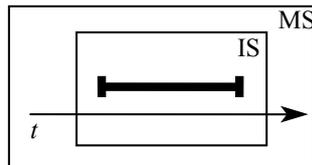


Figure 3(a): Dynamic verb

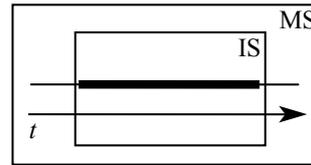


Figure 3(b): Stative verb

In English, the use of the present progressive to refer to situations that are going on at the time of speaking (Current Ongoingness) is typical of dynamic, i.e., bounded, events, such as *to use* in example (5), as opposed to states like *to know*, *to need*, etc. These stative verbs profile unbounded processes and therefore do not meet one of the semantic requirements for using the progressive, viz., that an internal perspective is created on an *inherently bounded* situation. Diagrammatically, this is rendered by having the implied boundaries fall within the expression's MS, as in Figure 4.⁷ It is precisely the obligatory presence of these boundaries that yields the progressive's basic meaning of contingency, given the apparent association (at least for speakers of English) between singular dynamic events and a feeling of general non-necessity accompanying their occurrence at any particular moment within the phenomenal world — and, conversely, between unbounded states and their relatively stable and structural character.

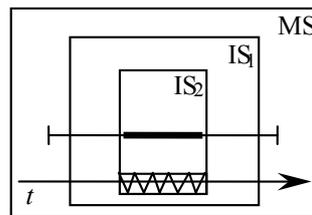


Figure 4: Present progressive

As can be seen in Figure 4, the progressive *-ing* form creates a first immediate scope on the designated situation (IS_1), so that, with dynamic verbs, the boundaries of the original event are effectively backgrounded. Resulting from this internal perspective is an imperfective expression, unbounded and

⁷ Statives can take the present progressive, but only if their semantics is reinterpreted in terms of a more dynamic, change-of-state, and bounded configuration (a case of coercion).

essentially homogeneous *within the boundaries of IS₁*. Next, the present tense grounds the event by imposing a second immediate scope (IS₂) within IS₁. Just like with statives taking the simple present, a representative sample of the resulting homogenized process (the profile in IS₂, in bold) is made to coincide with the time of speaking, as required by the definition of the present tense in Cognitive Grammar (Langacker 2001: 260). This profile is what the present-progressive construction is actually referring to, with the remainder of the relevant semantic material residing in the conceptual background.

From the discussion of the category of Current Ongoingness, it should be clear that the basic epistemic meaning of the present progressive is immanent in its concrete temporal configuration, i.e., that the progressive (with its intimation of obligatory starting and end points imposed on a process) is the construction *par excellence* in English to stress the contingent status of a situation occurring at the time of speaking. As mentioned before, the other temporal usage types also all involve events that are going on at the time of speaking, yet these events are in some way qualified. Insofar as they can be seen as extensions from the progressive's prototypical configuration, these uses instantiate the epistemic schema for the present progressive by definition, while at the same time introducing slight modifications, usually in the degree of salience or prominence assigned to one or more meaning elements. In the case of Temporary Validity, both boundaries are construed with maximal (background) prominence, as can be seen in Figure 5. Compared to Figure 4, it is thus only the level of prominence of two of its non-profiled meaning elements that differs, without anything being added to or subtracted from the original configuration.

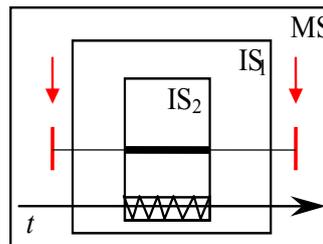


Figure 5: Temporary Validity

This usage type has been fairly frequently attested in our corpus. For some authors, this is actually the basic meaning of the progressive (*cf.* Binnick 1991: 284–285). Only examples in which there are clear contextual indications of

temporariness, such as *this year* in (6), have been classified as belonging to this category:

- (6) So,... **they're kind of suffering that** –
from that this year... Not having that on there

The relative prominence of the boundaries is equally important in the category of Duration, which Palmer (1968: 61) considers as central. In this case, the boundaries of the dynamic process are made highly non-salient. It should be possible to paraphrase instances of this category by means of the collocation *keep on*.

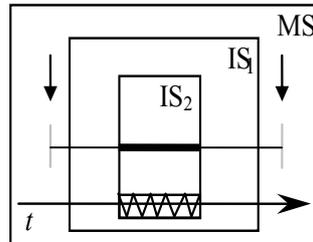


Figure 6: Duration

Again, attestations have been systematically classified as belonging to this category on the basis of contextual cues, such as the presence of *still* in the following example:

- (7) ... and I'm looking through the window
and then **he's still making noises with the paper**,...
and then um... I kinda looked
and then I didn't and I...
kept making like,

Note that there is a clear sense of irritation in this example, whereas example (6) features an event that is construed as somewhat atypical in the speaker's model of reality. In fact, connotations such as surprise or atypicality feature quite frequently among our corpus examples. We propose that this is to be expected, given the modal core of the progressive's semantics. In the following section, we will argue that connotations such as these can be systematically tied to the presence of progressive verb forms in the examples, and that they are thus to be seen as *grammatically* marked (by the progressive) — rather than being some

vague property of the contexts in which progressives (may) appear, or of their interaction.⁸

4.2. *Modal connotations accompanying temporal usage types*

Given the contingent or unconsolidated status of the profiled situation in the speaker's model of immediate reality (the element P in Figure 1b), as encoded by the present progressive, it is not unexpected that a considerable amount of the observations in the corpus have connotations related to the modal meaning of non-necessity, or to its implications (among which, the fact that a given situation marked as such could not have been predicted with absolute certainty at the time of speaking). That is, notions of surprise, atypicality or unexpectedness, irritation or indignation and tentativeness frequently accompany the temporal usage types we have distinguished. In the following example, for instance, speaker B interrupts speaker A by referring to a current event (Current Ongoingness) that is surprising to her:

- (8) A: but she must only –
B: **What is m-... blowing out of there?**
A: Well, that's what happens with that air conditioner.

Similarly, in example (9), as well as in example (6) above, the profiled event is clearly an atypical one in the speaker's conception of reality:

- (9) The fish weren't running this year.
It's like everywhere...
Nothing's doing what it's supposed to,
... anymore.

Example (10), just like (9), involves some manifest irritation on the part of the speaker, an emotion that is canonically more understandable with dynamic, bounded (repetitions of) events, which still carry a potential for change, than with structural, stable situations which the speaker knows or suspects will not change.

- (10) A: I mean, ... **what are they thinking?**
B: I don't know...

⁸ This might be called a *mirative* meaning element, which is present in certain usage types of the progressive (more than in others). Mirativity is a semantic category for which many languages have developed dedicated markers (e.g. DeLancey 1997).

Situations that are construed as unexpected and difficult to predict may arguably be approached with some sense of reservation, some tentativeness, as exemplified in (11):

- (11) If this thing goes like they think it is,
next fall **he's wanting to**,...
start looking at expanding that... storage facility.

In this example, the stative verb *want* is used with the progressive to indicate that the speaker is only making a tentative guess (or is presenting it as such) about the future occurrence of a situation (see also Note 7). This use of the progressive to express tentativeness is also relatively frequent with the stative verb *hope*.

The presence of all these more or less modally colored connotations with the use of the present progressive in English suggests a constant meaning element (for at least some usage types) that may be held to motivate these, directly or indirectly. Seeing this meaning as part and parcel of the progressive's core semantics, which we in fact characterize as being wholly modal in nature, in our eyes constitutes a more economical and in any case unified account of the progressive's polysemy: modal meanings are not treated as being in any way secondary or exceptional, and temporal meanings are first and foremost motivated by an epistemic schema, in line with Cognitive Grammar's general description of 'grounding predications'. We find further support for this position in the way we interpret Kay & Fillmore's (1999) findings with regard to the conventional meaning of the WXDY construction, as in *What's this fly doing in my soup?*. This construction is analyzed as conveying that a situation is judged by the speaker "to be surprising, puzzling, inappropriate, or, as we will say, *incongruous*" (Kay & Fillmore 1999: 4; emphasis in the original). The authors remark that it is indispensable for this "constructional meaning" to arise that a progressive form be present, without which the utterance's "pragmatic force", i.e., the suggestion of incongruity, disappears:

- (12) ? What does this fly do in my soup?

At the same time, they explicitly deny that this force can be tied to any one constituent of the construction, including the present participle *doing* (which they deny gets a progressive reading here). Given the various nuances of something like 'incongruity' showing up in many other contexts of use, it seems more reasonable to us, however, to attribute at least part of the constructional meaning of WXDY to the (obligatory) verb form appearing in it. This does not detract

from Kay & Fillmore's original argument concerning the relevance of a constructional level of interpretation, but it *would* perhaps address the need for a more ample motivation of where such a meaning comes from. More to the point, there is no intrinsic contradiction between having a meaning figure at the level of grammatical constructions, as an 'idiomatic' feature, and simultaneously noting the contribution of one or more constituents (i.e., of the form *doing*, which seems to do more than serve as a dummy 'way-station' between constructional elements).

4.3. *Modal usage types*

Thus far, we have discussed several usage types of the present progressive that specifically elaborate its basic meaning in the temporal domain, as they all involve situations that are going on at the time of speaking. We argue that, at the most schematic level, these usage types indicate that the designated situation is regarded as contingent with respect to the speaker's conception of immediate reality. As we have shown, this modal schema is immanent in the temporal usage types by virtue of the imposition of temporal boundaries upon the profiled situation in the background configuration of the present progressive, which in turn is responsible for its close association with the expression of dynamic, typically unstable and thus less than structural events. In section 4.2, then, we have discussed some modal connotations that frequently accompany certain temporal usage types. Some of the temporal usage types discussed in the previous two sections have traditionally been regarded as expressing a modal meaning, viz., that of an intention attributed to the grammatical subject (13) or to the speaker (14); examples come from or are based on Larreya & Rivière 2002):

- (13) Brian is leaving tomorrow.
- (14) You are not sitting in that armchair!

These forms have been categorized by us as primarily temporal, because of their futurate reference, with a modal connotation (see section 4.2). Other such modal types typically include the use of the progressive form with temporary habituals (15), statives (16), and as a form of attenuation (17), all of which have already been touched upon above as well (in Notes 4 and 7, and section 4.2, respectively):

- (15) He is smoking huge cigars these days.
- (16) He's being extraordinarily kind (for once).
- (17) I'm hoping to borrow some money.

In some cases, however, the unconsolidated status of the profiled situation is really prominent and any temporal notions of current ongoingness (or duration, temporariness, etc.) are highly downplayed, if present at all. In these usage types, the modal meaning of contingency is the primary observable motivation for using a present-progressive form (that is, from the context there seems to be no temporal/aspectual reason not to use a simple present), yielding the “modal usage types” marked separately in Figure 2.

This brings us back to example (1), repeated here in (18):

- (18) ... Well he says minorities
... He's smart.
He talks about minorities.
But he's really talking about African Americans.

In this case, there is no temporal motivation for the speaker's switch to the progressive in the final sentence. It might be strange to see the progressive, which we argue is reserved for the expression of contingent realities, appear in a context which seems to present the exact opposite: the expression of a reality whose certainty the speaker actually wishes to emphasize. But in our view, the present progressive is used here to zoom in on an event represented as (virtually) ongoing, creating the impression of something that may be directly observed in the present (and recall that such directly observed events in the present are typically expressed in English using a progressive form). This event is thereby somehow construed with a greater sense of intensity (also present in iterative/repetitive uses), stressing its actual character in spite of the fact that there is no singular event of *talking* going on at the time of speaking (*cf.* also the epistemic adverb *really*). Contrary to the events in the previous clauses, which are all construed by means of a simple present, the event in the final sentence has a qualified status with respect to the ground: real though it is, the speaker signals that a situation is not to be taken for granted. This usage type is frequently attested with verbs of communication, as in: *So what he's saying is...* or *What I'm trying to say is...* Similarly, in example (19), the speaker emphasizes what she is actually doing:

- (19) I always have somebody that really knows what they're doing,
for the horses **that I'm really really using.**

Again, the speaker refers to a habitual action by means of a present progressive, instead of a simple present, so as to stress its actual nature. Just like in (18), this example prominently features a connotation of intensification. Such intensifying

uses again demonstrate the special connection of the English present progressive with bounded, dynamic events. Usually, these uses highlight the personal involvement and active investment on the part of the subject to keep the event going. Such active investment is not necessary with states, which maintain themselves, so to speak.

Finally, Larreya (1999: 147) has remarked that uses of the English progressive with epistemic adverbs like *really* and *actually* present ‘general truths’ (as in *So the bark is actually helping the plant to survive when there is absolutely no water around?*) and thus violate the rule that these are expressed in English by means of the simple present. It seems, however, that this is true only for a minority of these uses (those appearing in scientific texts or vulgarizations). Still, Larreya does make a valid point when he describes them as involving the re-identification of a reality: it is as if the speaker recreates the exact moment of discovering some true fact (before its consolidation as an accepted truth; cf. Figure 1), and is recreating it as she speaks, i.e., at the time of speaking. Though Larreya and others within the enunciativist tradition who have made similar remarks fail to include this particular usage in a more unified account,⁹ their description of it is in line with our own in terms of a virtual (called “subjective” by Larreya 1999: 148) event going on (possibly on a structural plane) right now. What we add to this is that this use is motivated through various links in the network of the English present progressive with other usage types that include an element of intensity as a semantic feature (i.e., it is not just an arbitrary extension or the instantiation of a vague schematic meaning).

5. Conclusion

In line with the approach to tense and grounding adopted within Cognitive Grammar, we have proposed a unified analysis of the semantics of the English present progressive. At the most schematic level, its meaning is best described in terms of epistemic contingency in the speaker’s conception of reality. That is, in contrast with the simple present tense — which indicates the epistemic necessity of a situation and thus refers to immediate reality in an unqualified way —, the present progressive is used to indicate situations that are real yet not felt to be

⁹ It is not entirely correct to say that, e.g., Larreya & Rivière (2002: 42) do not present something of a unified account of what they call *BE + -ING*, but the schematic meaning they propose is either purely aspectual (in terms of an internal viewpoint), which does not (directly) cover certain modal usage types, or too vague (in terms of the grammatical subject ‘participating’ or being ‘attached’ to an event) to use to motivate all of the concrete meaning types we have distinguished here.

structural by the speaker and, consequently, the relation between the ground and the profiled process does get qualified (which is marked morphologically by means of the *-ing* form). Linguistic data from the Santa Barbara corpus of spoken American English show that temporal as well as purely modal usage types can be derived from this schematic meaning, and that the unconsolidated status of events construed with the present progressive is often reflected in the presence of modal connotations such as ‘surprise’ or ‘irritation’.

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