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J. Halvor Clegg

J. David Rodríguez

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# The Occurrence of Progressive Constructions in Spanish

J. Halvor Clegg and J. David Rodríguez

## Introduction

The progressive construction in Spanish has recently undergone a reevaluation within the paradigm of verb structures. As recently as the sixties authors considered the progressive to be little more than a variant of the simple tenses. William Bull (1968) in his classic work *Time, Tense and the Verb* spends almost no time on the progressives.

In the last two decades, research into the progressive has intensified and it has become obvious that it is more than a mere variant of the simple tenses. The new research has involved syntactic and semantic parameters and has given new insight into the unique functions and meanings of the progressive.

One of the major difficulties encountered in most linguistic research is the appalling lack of empirical data. This is also the case in the research on the progressive. The purpose of this study is to analyze current research in the light of an extensive bank of real language examples. This not only gives us real text, but relative frequency of the phenomenon being studied.

## Review of the Literature

Literature related to the progressive can be divided into three basic categories. These categories are: 1) Formal descriptions; 2) The Progressive, its uses and restrictions; and 3) Comparisons with English and interferences from English.

All of the formal descriptions can be summarized and well represented by the work of Oscar Ozete (1983). Ozete's work is on the uses of the *-ndo* form ("Active participle") in Spanish. He includes four structures: 1) The progressive (*Estar + -ndo*); 2) Adverbials, including the periphrastic forms of the progressive (*ir, venir, andar, etc.*); 3) Adjectival; and 4) The "absolute" construction. He shows that all of these

constructions are either progressives or raisings of progressives.

Solé and Solé (1977) summarize the uses of the progressive by contrasting them with the uses of the simple tenses. The focus of the distinction is the "attention to a specific moment", the "on-going" nature and the use in "actions in progress" of the progressive.

In other literature these same distinctions are commented on with different terminology. Gili y Gaya (1961), Bull (1965), Stockwell, Bowen and Martin (1965), Real Academia Española (1973) (Using Gili y Gaya's wording), Whitley (1986) (Using Bull) and Butt and Benjamin (1988) all use "durative" to describe the uses of the progressive.

In more specialized studies King and Suárez (1980), and Solé (1990) go into semantic distinctions and verb types used with the progressive. The major distinction in verb types is between "Stative" verbs and "Dynamic" (Non-stative) verbs. The major semantic distinctions are Solé's *aspecto evolutivo concurrente*, and King and Suárez's "aspectual focus on the overt, developing and on-going".

Most of the authors cited mention in passing a comparison with and possible interference from English. Among those who comment more extensively is Gili y Gaya (1966). He rejects the use of the progressive rather than the simple present (*estoy estudiando* versus *estudio*) and the use of the passive progressive (*está siendo estudiado*) as being interferences from English in the Spanish of Puerto Rico.

Vásquez (1989) did a study that quantified some of the questions surrounding the use of the progressive in Puerto Rico. She based her orientation on the requirements of the *Norma Culta* project (The study of educated Spanish spoken in the major cities of the Spanish-speaking world). She found 882 *-ndo* forms in the text of the speech of San

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J. Halvor Clegg is an associate professor of Spanish and linguistics at Brigham Young University.

J. David Rodríguez is a graduate student in Spanish linguistics at Brigham Young University.

Juan, Puerto Rico. 624 forms were used in compound constructions (*Estar, ir, venir, + -ndo, etc*) and 258 were used separately. Of the compound constructions there were 443 occurrences of *Estar + -ndo* (71%) and 181 with periphrastic substitutes.

She also includes a section on possible interferences from English. She divides the interferences into three types: 1) *De Nomina* (English form and function but not present in Spanish); 2) *De Distribución* (Parallel form and function but Spanish adapts the English distribution); 3) *De Frecuencia* (Increased frequency from the norm).

The principal *De Nomina* interference is where the progressive is used in place of a simple tense (Gili y Gaya's *estoy estudiando* versus *estudio*). Vázquez found 36 cases (out of 443). The *De Distribución* interferences are where an element is placed between the auxiliary *Estar* and the *-ndo* form (*—ya estaba definitivamente dominando.*) Vázquez found 13 cases (out of 443). The principal *De frecuencia* interference discussed is the progressive passive (*Estar siendo + past participle*). Vázquez found 3 cases (out of 443).

Sánchez (1972), Solé (1977), Studerus (1980) and Lavandera (1981) cite different forms of progressive interference in Chicano Spanish. Chaston (1991) takes them to task for making the assertion that there is excessive use of the imperfect progressive without any quantitative or qualitative evidence. In his own research based on 15 speakers of Chicano Spanish he found that of 546 imperfect indicative situations only 33 (6.04%) appear as imperfect progressives. He points out that "clearly, this 6.04% does not constitute an overall replacement of the imperfect with the progressive form". He also makes an excellent point in considering the contrasting competence among the continuum of Chicano speakers, since some Chicanos learn Spanish as a second language. He goes on to use Solé and Solé's (1977) categories to show that the Chicano usage falls within the parameters of standard Spanish usage.

### Methodology

For this study a Spanish Corpus of spoken samples was used representing approximately 1,300,000 running words of text from the *Habla Culta* project (PILEI). This project represents the educated speech of Buenos Aires, Bogotá, Madrid, México, Santiago de Chile and Caracas. To this was added a similar project done in San José de Costa Rica.

A second corpus was also used representing written educated language. It consists of approximately 1,300,000 running words of text from 15 novels from all over the Spanish-speaking world including countries represented by the *Habla Culta* project. The novels were chosen on the basis of being written by the best authors in those countries from the viewpoint of language and by having been written in the last 25 years.

These two corpora were then processed by the computer program WordCruncher—a program that creates concordances of computerized texts.

Using the WordCruncher program the following forms were separated from the texts:

#### Progressive Constructions

*Estar + -ndo*

*Estar* substitutes (*Ir, Venir + -ndo, etc.*)

Progressives with *Estar* where an element is placed between *Estar* and *-ndo*  
*-ndo* alone

The passive progressive *Estar siendo*

The total occurrence of imperfects and imperfect progressives

The frequency of these constructions was then determined.

#### Results - Frequency of Constructions

Total number of *-ndo* forms

Written 13,242

Spoken 6,807

The occurrence of *-ndo* forms in written usage is almost double that of spoken. Vázquez found 882 forms in the speech of San Juan, Puerto Rico.

Progressive with *Estar*

Written 1,318

Spoken 3,068

The written frequency represents 10% of the total number of *-ndo* forms. The spoken frequency represents 45.1% of the *-ndo* forms. Vázquez found 443 progressives with *Estar* (of 882) or 50.2%. The use of *-ndo* forms in written language is approximately double that in spoken language. Even though there are twice as many occurrences of the *-ndo* form in the written language the *Estar + -ndo* structure is far more likely to occur in spoken language. It should also be noted that the 1,318 occurrences of the progressive in the written samples show that it is used more frequently than generally believed.

*Estar* substitutes (*Ir, Seguir + -ndo, etc.*)

Written		Spoken	
Ir	641	Ir	842
Seguir	614	Seguir	310
Quedar	110	Quedar	30
Andar	95	Andar	54
Venir	59	Venir	75
Continuar	55	Continuar	22
Salir	7	Salir	3
Pasar	3	Pasar	5

The periphrastic substitutes for *Estar + -ndo* totaled 1584 cases (of 13,242) (12.0%) for the writ-

ten sample and 1341 cases (of 6,807) (19.7%) for the spoken sample. *Estar* + *-ndo* totaled 1,318 cases (of 13,242) (10.0%) in the written sample and 3,068 cases (of 6,807) (50.4%) in the spoken sample. These results show that the use of periphrastic substitutes is somewhat higher in the spoken language but not as extensive as the use of the progressive itself. These numbers also show that the use of the verbs *ir* and *venir* is higher in spoken language than in written.

Progressives with *Estar* where an element is placed between *Estar* and *-ndo*

Written	64
Spoken	159

The written samples have an element placed between *Estar* and *-ndo* 4.9% (64 of 1,318) of the time. The oral samples have an element placed between *Estar* and *-ndo* 5.2% (159 of 3,068) of the time. Vásquez found 2.9% (13 of 443) for San Juan. The occurrence of intrusive elements is almost equal in written and spoken usage in our samples.

*-ndo* Alone

Written	10,340
Spoken	3,068

These numbers show that the *-ndo* form alone is used much more (three to one) in the written language than in the spoken language. On a percentage basis, this turns out to be 10,340 of 13,242 cases (78.1%) for the written sample and 3,068 of 6,807 cases (45.1%) for the spoken sample.

The Passive Progressive *Estar siendo*

Written	2
Spoken	14

This form almost doesn't occur in the Spanish language. It does occur more in the spoken language than in the written language. The general usage shown here represents .46% of all cases of *Estar* + *-ndo* in the spoken language and .15% in the written language. The .46% for general spoken Spanish is almost the same as the .68% encountered by Vásquez for San Juan, Puerto Rico, which shows that its frequency of use is general and not an anglicism as indicated by Gili y Gaya and others.

Simple Tense Imperfect Versus Progressive Imperfect in Spoken Language

Total Number of Imperfect Constructions	Number of Imperfect Progressive Constructions	%
22,522	566	2.5%

This comparison was made in order to provide some quantitative evaluation for Chaston's data. The percentages show that the occurrence of the

imperfect progressive is lower in general Spanish than in Chaston's (33 of 546) (6.04%) sample. These data would appear to support the existence of interference from English in Chicano Spanish. Vázquez' mention of interferences of this type is based on a count of the progressive structures that, in Spanish, would "normally" be expressed using the present indicative. Even though such data are not available to correspond to her claims (In many cases the determination as to whether a sentence falls under this category are very subjective.) there is enough evidence to show that sentences of the type *Está estudiando economía política* (Buenos Aires) compared to the "expected" *Estudia economía política* are generally found throughout the Spanish-speaking world.

**Conclusions**

In the reevaluation of the progressive, research has shown that it is more than a mere variant of the simple tenses. Syntactic and semantic parameters have given new insight into the unique functions and meanings of the progressive.

This study provides research in the light of an extensive bank of real language examples along with the relative frequency of the phenomenon being studied.

Frequencies have been provided for the occurrences of the *-ndo* forms, the progressive with *Estar*, the substitutes for *Estar* in progressive structures, where elements are placed between the two verb forms, where *-ndo* is used as a modifier, the passive progressive and the simple tense versus the imperfect progressive usage in both written and spoken language.

The use of the progressive has been found to be prevalent. It occurs regularly in written language but is found to be more common in spoken language. Interferences from English can be shown to exist in the use of the imperfect progressive instead of simple imperfect in Chicano Spanish. The interferences of the placement of elements between the two verb forms of the progressive and the passive progressive proposed by Gili y Gaya and Vásquez have been shown to be general phenomena.

The results of this study show the value of using empirical data to corroborate theoretical principles.

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