Aspect meets modality: A semantic analysis of the German *am*-progressive

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Abstract

This paper presents a corpus-based analysis of the semantics of the German *am* V-inf *sein* construction or *am*-progressive. Like its English counterpart and many other progressive constructions in the world's languages, the *am*-progressive is shown to display not only a variety of aspecto-temporal uses but also a range of (inter)subjective qualifications, such as intensification, irritation and evasiveness. These (inter)subjective connotations are argued to reflect the *am*-progressive's core meaning of epistemic contingency, which we believe is instantiated in all of its uses.[*]

Keywords: am-progressive, progressive aspect, (inter)subjective uses, German

1. Introduction.

The present study sets out to demonstrate that the German progressive, canonically expressed by means of *am* V-inf *sein* ('at V-inf be') and henceforth referred to as the *am*-progressive,[1] can be used to indicate that a certain situation somehow runs counter to the conceptualizer's expectations or norms. These uses do not constitute a German idiosyncrasy: many (present) progressive constructions in various languages seem to be particularly disposed to expressing meanings of non-canonicity. This has been demonstrated most convincingly for the English progressive, which has, as many authors have noted, a puzzlingly wide array of uses. Its most prototypical function is to refer to dynamic situations (i.e. events) going on at reference time, yet in addition the progressive is shown to appear with futurate events, with temporary habits, and has been said to evoke a range of (inter)subjective readings which reflect the speaker's attitude towards the epistemic status of the proposition or towards the hearer. According to De Wit & Brisard (2014), such (inter)subjective uses directly instantiate the basic meaning of epistemic contingency of the English present progressive.[2] That is, events reported by means

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[1] Although there are other progressive constructions (e.g. *beim* V-inf *sein*, V-inf *sein*), we focus solely on the *am*-progressive, which is the most frequently and widely used progressive construction in German.

[2] The claim that there is a link between aspect and modality is also put forward by Abraham (2008) and Leiss (2000, 2008), who posit that there is a clear affinity between imperfective aspect and epistemic modality. However, this 'aspect-modality-interface' is accounted for in different terms than in this paper. According to Leiss (2000), it is the imperfective's general backgrounding function that is being reinterpreted and as such gives rise to epistemic readings.

of the progressive are argued to be non-structural: real though they may be, they are not readily "assimilable to the [speaker's] mental sets of the moment" on the basis of general knowledge or previous experience (cf. Slobin & Aksu 1982:195 on the Turkish –*miş* perfect). Consider, for instance, examples 1 and 2.[3]

(1) And_ the fish weren't running this year, you know, it's like everywhere. Nothing'**s doing** what it's supposed to, anymore, anywhere.

(2) [In a discussion between a professor and his students about the discourse of civil rights activist Jesse Jackson:] Well, he says minorities. He's smart, he talks about minorities. But he'**s** really **talking** about African Americans.

In 1, the speaker is referring to a temporally extended situation, which could in principle be reported by means of the simple present, yet instead the progressive is used to stress the atypicality of the denoted situation. Often, this atypical nature leads to a sense of irritation on the part of the speaker. In 2, the speaker first uses a simple present, presumably to refer to the expected interpretation, but then switches to the progressive to emphasize the *actual* situation and to contrast it with what is commonly assumed. This use of the English progressive to spell out not readily interpretable states of affairs has been coined the 'interpretative' use by Ljung (1980). These and similar uses of the English progressive have furthermore been described and analyzed by Calver (1946), Dowty (1975), Goldsmith & Woisetschlaeger (1982), Williams (2002), and De Wit & Brisard (2014).

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[3] Examples 1 and 2 have been attested by De Wit & Brisard (2014) in the Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English, Part 1.

The progressive in French, expressed by means of *être en train de* ('be in the style/motion of')[4] + V-inf, is less grammaticalized than its English counterpart (for one, its use is not obligatory when reporting present-time events, which also allow a simple-present construal). Yet, as demonstrated by De Wit & Patard (2013) and De Wit et al. (2013), its range of uses does not only include aspecto-temporal usage types, but also (inter)subjective ones, just like its English equivalent. This is illustrated in the following example.[5]

(3) Ça fait un an que je **suis en train de faire** un truc qui est incroyable. Je sais pas si tu te rends compte.

'For a year I've been doing this incredible thing. I don't know if you realize.'

Although it would be possible to use the simple present in 3, the outstanding characteristics of the situation referred to make it more favorable to a progressive construal. This sense of atypicality associated with the French progressive has also been observed by Franckel (1989) and Lachaux (2005).

There are indications that in other languages, too, the progressive is predisposed to epistemic readings of counterexpectation. Güldemann (2003) demonstrates that focus and progressivity are often expressed isomorphically in Bantu languages. Although focality and epistemic notions of incongruity are not quite the same (in the sense that what is in focus is not necessarily incongruous in the eyes of the speaker), they do exhibit some similarity in

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[4] It is difficult to offer a literal translation for *être en train de*, since the noun *train* is quite polysemous.

[5] Example 3 has been taken from the CLAPI corpus (*Corpus de Langue Parlée en Interactions*) by De Wit & Patard (2013).

that, typically, events that are considered divergent in some way are also put in focus. Closer to German, it appears that certain Dutch posture verb constructions (such as *zitten te* ('sit to') + V-inf), which are used to express progressivity, are also naturally used to convey a sense of atypicality, as illustrated in example 4 (adopted from Lemmens 2005).

(4)   Verzorgers van een dierenasiel in Engeland **stonden** wel heel vreemd **te kijken** toen ze de post open maakten.

'Keepers of an animal shelter in England were looking quite surprised when they opened the mail.'

In this paper, we demonstrate on the basis of a detailed corpus study that, in spite of its low degree of grammaticalization, the German *am*-progressive is not only used to express various aspecto-temporal meanings, but also to generate pragmatic notions of (inter)subjectivity, just like progressive constructions in other languages. The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 addresses the main semantic and formal properties of the German *am*-progressive. Section 3 discusses the selection of corpus data for our study, the results of which are presented in section 4. Finally, section 5 provides a summary of the main findings.

2. The German *am*-Progressive.

Until the late twentieth century, the *am*-progressive received little attention in German linguistics, often being discarded as a regionalism[6] or substandard speech (see e.g. Erben

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[6] In earlier studies, the *am*-progressive is often referred to as the 'rheinische' or 'westfälische Verlaufsform', i.e. the progressive from the Rhineland or Westphalia.

1972:75 fn. 230, Duden 1995:91 fn. 1). Studies from the late 1990s onwards, however, have shown that the *am*-progressive is now well established in large parts of Germany, Austria and Switzerland (Reimann 1998, Krause 2002, Elspaß & Müller 2003, Van Pottelberge 2004). Although the construction is no longer regarded as substandard, its use is still primarily associated with spoken language (Duden 2005:434) and speakers' acceptability judgments of specific progressive utterances can differ. Restrictions underlying the use of the *am*-progressive have therefore been the primary topic of interest in previous studies, either in comparison to competing progressive constructions in German (e.g. Krause 2002, Van Pottelberge 2004, Gárgyán 2014) and/or Germanic or European equivalents (e.g. Bertinetto et al. 2000, Ebert 2000, Krause 1997, 2002, Van Pottelberge 2004, Behrens et al. 2013). These studies have shown (among other things) that the German *am*-progressive is indeed subject to severe syntactic restrictions in that it typically features verbs in intransitive or absolute usage. Direct objects seem to be allowed in certain regions only (see Elspaß & Müller 2003 for an overview), whereas constructions with incorporated objects constitute a productive, yet not frequently used alternative. In the *Kleines Wörterbuch der Verlaufsformen im Deutschen* (Engelberg et al. 2013), which contains 4,138 examples of the *am*-progressive, only 12 instances co-occur with a direct object, as in example 5, and 88 carry an incorporated object, as in example 6.[7]

(5)   […] bestätigte Thomas Burri, der bereits <u>das nächste Programm</u> **am Vorbereiten ist**.

       '[…] confirmed Thomas Burri, who is already preparing the next program.'

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[7] See section 3 for more information on the dictionary of progressive forms (Engelberg et al. 2013).

(6) Seine Frau **war** […] **am Knöpfeannähen**, Kroll […] **am Hemdenbügeln** und

Fernsehschauen.

'His wife was sewing buttons, Kroll was ironing shirts and watching television.'

As to the function of the *am*-progressive, the literature quite unanimously agrees on an

analysis of the *am*-progressive as a marker of internal perspective, which allows language

users to portray a particular activity or situation as ongoing, as in progress, whereby the

temporal boundaries of the depicted situation are defocused (e.g. Zifonun et al. 1997:1877;

Reimann 1998:10, Krause 2002:25, Duden 2005:417–418, Behrens et al. 2013). Van

Pottelberge (2004:329, 2005:169, 2007:109) assumes one function for the German

progressive, i.e. expressing the course of an action ("Verlauf der Verbalhandlung"), which he

does not further elaborate on. The assumption of a straightforward meaning of the *am*-

progressive on the one hand, and the traditional focus on formal aspects on the other hand,

seem not to have encouraged adequate analyses of the semantic variety that the *am*-

progressive portrays. Gárgyán (2014:85–87) constitutes a notable exception, as she lists eight

different function types of the *am*-progressive, the first of which is described as the

continuousness of an activity ("das Anhalten […] einer Handlung"). Other functions include

presenting a situation from an internal perspective, the expression of limited duration, the

expression of a background scene, habituality, iterativity, future reference and

intensity/emotional tension. Unfortunately, Gárgyán neither explains the various distinctions

nor does she try to relate them to each other.

In what follows, De Wit & Brisard's (2014) analysis, which discusses the various

aspecto-temporal and (inter)subjective uses of the English present progressive and unites

them in a semantic network, is applied to German corpus data. Before embarking on the

presentation of the findings, we elaborate on the compilation and categorization of the corpus data.

3. Corpus and Methodology.

The data for this study are gathered from the *Kleines Wörterbuch der Verlaufsformen im Deutschen* (Engelberg et al. 2013), an online dictionary which contains 5,026 examples of three types of progressive forms in German (the *am*-progressive accounts for 82% of all cases). Engelberg et al.'s (2013) dictionary originates from extensive searches in the German Reference Corpus (*DeReKo*, IDS-Mannheim) conducted in 2009.[8] Due to the periphrastic form of the *am*-progressive and its low frequency, previous studies on the basis of *DeReKo* (e.g. Van Pottelberge 2004, Gárgyán 2014) were rather restricted.[9] For instance, Gárgyán's (2014) collection of progressive examples in *DeReKo* is based on searches for specific verbs (e.g. the verb *arbeiten* ('to work')), and therefore cannot provide a satisfactory account of the semantic subtleties of the progressive. By searching for partial structures such as "*am *ieren*", "*am aus*en*" and "*am ver*en*", Van Pottelberge (2004) was able to examine a wider range of verbs, yet he, too, misses out on a considerable number of verbs that can be combined with the *am*-progressive. Engelberg et al.'s (2013) project was the first to counterbalance this common distortion. For the *am*-progressive, utterances were searched

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[8] Note that at the time of the corpus searches, the German Reference Corpus contained ca. 3.5 billion words (see www1.ids-mannheim.de/kl/projekte/korpora/archiv.html#Textorganisation).

[9] For a discussion of the methodological difficulties involved in using corpora such as *DeReKo* for the empirical study of the *am*-progressive, see Van Pottelberge (2004:181–182).

containing a form of the lemma *sein* ('to be') within a distance of five words to a sequence like "*am A*en*" (repeated for all letters of the alphabet), the results of which were then manually sorted out. The final product is an online dictionary connected to a database of examples with a few sorting options (main verb, presence of an object, presence of an incorporated object, presence of a reflexive pronoun and country). For the purposes of our study, we extracted a total of 419 examples, i.e. approximately 10% of all the *am*-progressives in the dictionary (4,138). These examples all constitute direct quotes[10] and can therefore be considered near to spoken language. As such, this sample allows us to examine the *am*-progressive on a larger scale presuming that its use in written standard language is more heavily restricted, whereas its use in spoken language can be assumed to display more semantic and formal variation.

Each of the examples has been analyzed semantically according to the classification employed by De Wit & Brisard (2014). De Wit & Brisard (2014) propose a semantic network for the English present progressive, in which each node constitutes a certain aspecto-temporal

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[10] To obtain direct quotes with the *am*-progressive from the database we entered a double quotation mark and ticked off the *am V sein* setting, which generated 685 sentences. Next, we selected all the sentences in which the *am*-progressive fell within the quotation marks (428 sentences). Thus, our corpus consists of direct quotes only, but not necessarily all the direct quotes in the dictionary since this approach only yields the sentences in which the quotation mark falls within the immediate context of the progressive form (i.e. the sentence in which the progressive form occurs). All sentences and the extra contextual information were then extracted for annotation. During annotation 9 sentences proved to be irrelevant and were not taken into account for analysis, leaving a total of 419 sentences.

or (inter)subjective usage type.[11] A critical claim they put forward is that the English present progressive is modal at the most basic level of analysis (see also De Wit et al. 2013 for a similar analysis of the French present progressive). That is, the meaning of epistemic contingency is analyzed as the construction's core meaning, instantiated in any of its uses. The crucial difference between the English simple present and present progressive is that the latter always involves situations whose occurrence at the time of speaking could not be fully predicted: real though they may be, these situations have a phenomenal/contingent (as opposed to a structural/necessary) status in the speaker's conception of current reality (Goldsmith & Woisetschlaeger 1982).

According to De Wit & Brisard (2014:68), this meaning of contingency is intrinsically connected to the dynamicity and boundedness of the events that the progressive by definition involves. That is, a defining characteristic of progressive constructions in any language, including German, is that they select dynamic verbs, which by definition denote bounded situations, in the sense of Langacker (1991:93). Langacker (1991:93) argues that dynamic situations are bounded to the extent that they "typically occur in 'bounded episodes' rather

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[11] Our use of the term '(inter)subjective' applies to those expressions that De Wit & Brisard (2014) originally labelled 'modal usage types' (as opposed to aspecto-temporal usage types) or usage types featuring 'modal connotations'. These are statements involving explicit indications of a particular attitude of the speaker towards the epistemic (divergent) status of the situation or towards the interlocutor. In this paper, we reserve the term 'modal' for the progressive's basic modal meaning of epistemic contingency, which applies to all instances (purely aspecto-temporal and (inter)subjective uses alike), and the notion of '(inter)subjectivity' for those expressions that feature any of the typical (inter)subjective connotations such as irritation and intensification.

than continuing indefinitely". This also holds true for so-called *activities*, which do not involve inherent boundaries (e.g. *walk*, *sleep*, *wear* (*a sweater*), *dream*, *swim*) and are therefore not regarded as bounded in the Vendlerian tradition. Thus, in Langacker's view, boundedness is connected to the basic distinction between dynamic (bounded) and stative (unbounded) situations rather than to their telic or atelic character.[12] Telicity, then, refers to the situation's *inherent* endpoint. Crucially, progressives impose an internal perspective on these dynamic situations, such that their boundaries are out of focus, yet those boundaries are still part of the overall semantic configuration of progressive aspect (since, again, it only collocates with dynamic predicates). This results in a less than complete view on a dynamic situation that is by definition not consolidated in the speaker's conception of reality: its (not necessarily predictable) further development and final boundary are out of sight, i.e. this situation is not fully known.

The contingent status of progressive situations is most clearly reflected in English in those instances in which the use of the progressive is not required for aspecto-temporal reasons, such as 1 and, especially, the interpretative use in 2. The primary trigger for using the progressive in such cases is some (inter)subjective purpose: a simple-present construal would yield a more factual, less 'outstanding' presentation. Although De Wit & Brisard (2014:84–86) distinguish some purely (inter)subjective uses (such as the INTERPRETATIVE use), which directly instantiate the meaning of epistemic contingency, the large majority of examples are (also) aspecto-temporal, since the English progressive is obligatorily used to report present-time events. As we will demonstrate, this is different for the German

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[12] In English (unlike German), it is not impossible to use the progressive with certain stative verbs (as in *I'm loving it*), but in those cases the originally stative verb takes on a more dynamic meaning, and is effectively coerced into a dynamic verb (Michaelis 2004).

progressive, which is not obligatory and whose use might thus be primarily motivated by a need to convey an (inter)subjective meaning. Let us, before embarking on those German data, briefly look into the usage types attested by De Wit & Brisard (2014) for the English present progressive, since they serve to guide our German corpus study.

The most prototypical and most frequently occurring aspecto-temporal usage type of the English present progressive is CURRENT ONGOINGNESS. In examples classified as part of this category, the progressive is solely used to present events as currently ongoing, without any additional qualifications. Other, more specific aspecto-temporal usage types are analyzed as extensions of this prototypical meaning of current ongoingness, slightly qualifying it. With the category HISTORICAL PRESENT, events that are actually ongoing at some past reference point are construed as if they occurred in the present (typically for reasons of narrative vividness). Similarly, the category FUTURATE involves events that will actually take place in the future but whose future occurrence has been arranged in the present. TEMPORARY VALIDITY and LIMITED DURATION are particularly concerned with the ongoing event's temporal boundaries. In the case of TEMPORARY VALIDITY, these boundaries are emphasized: thus, the event is explicitly said to be ongoing only for a specific span of time. On the other hand, with LIMITED DURATION, the situational boundaries are backgrounded. Examples belonging to the category of LIMITED DURATION could be paraphrased by means of English *keep on*. While the previous categories all involve singular ongoing situations, the categories ITERATION and HABITUAL involve a series of *repeated* events. The difference between the two is that, with the former, events are rapidly repeated within a short time span overlapping with the time of speaking, while the latter involves a larger temporal interval between the various subevents that make up the habit. It is important to note that each of these aspecto-temporal uses are still considered to be basically modal in the sense that they by definition involve contingent situations. This core meaning of contingency gives rise to (inter)subjective

connotations of SURPRISE, TENTATIVENESS, IRRITATION, and INTENSIFICATION that frequently accompany the aspecto-temporal uses of the English present progressive.

Building on De Wit & Brisard's (2014) definitions and classification, we will categorize the uses of the German *am*-progressive into various aspecto-temporal categories and identify the (inter)subjective connotations accompanying these uses, thereby also relying on contextual cues. We share De Wit & Brisard's (2014:69) contention that such contextual cues elaborate semantic elements present in the meaning of the progressive construction. Since such an elaboration can only take place if the meaning of the contextual element is compatible with that of the grammatical construction, we regard context as a reliable indication of the presence of a certain meaning element (such as surprise or temporary validity) (see also Langacker 1987:304–306). Although we model our corpus analysis on De Wit & Brisard's, we of course leave open the option of finding other usage types or connotations that are not relevant for English. For example, the connotation of EVASIVENESS, which we will show is particularly entrenched in German, was not explicitly discerned for English by De Wit & Brisard (2014), although it is closely related to their TENTATIVENESS. Additional differences are that (i) we do not solely concentrate on present-tense uses, but instead also take into account past-progressive instances, and that (ii) we do not distinguish purely (inter)subjective usage types, since each example of the *am*-progressive can also be categorized as instantiating a specific aspecto-temporal category (see section 4.2).

4. Findings.

4.1. *Aspecto-Temporal Usage Types.*

Table 1 presents an overview of the various aspecto-temporal usage types. It shows that in about 40% of all selected items, the *am*-progressive gives rise to particular (inter)subjective qualifications related to its basic meaning of epistemic contingency. Before elaborating on these, we will briefly discuss the different aspecto-temporal categories.

<INSERT Table 1 HERE>

From table 1, it can be inferred that the intersection of the prototypical category ONGOINGNESS and NO CONNOTATION contains the largest number of examples: in roughly four out of ten cases in our corpus the speaker uses the *am*-progressive to refer to ongoing events without any additional aspecto-temporal or (inter)subjective qualifications, as in 7. This category thus constitutes the most entrenched use of the *am*-progressive. We further attest HABITUAL and ITERATIVE situations, as exemplified in 8 and 9 respectively, and utterances which emphasize the duration of a process (LIMITED DURATION), as in 10, or its TEMPORARY VALIDITY, as in 11. Contextual clues are often indicative of a particular aspecto-temporal interpretation; we have underlined them in the examples below.

(7) "Ich habe eine Woche lang DVDs gesichtet und **bin** <u>gerade</u> **am Schreiben**", erzählt er.

'"I have been sorting out DVDs for a week and now I'm writing", he said.'

(8) "Sie **waren** <u>immer</u> nur **am Arbeiten**", erzählt Francisco.

'"They were always only working", Francisco says.'

(9) Angelika Hoffmann z. B., die "nur <u>noch</u> **am Kofferpacken ist**", weil sie laufend Reisen gewinnt, meint […].

'Angelika Hoffmann, for instance, who "is doing nothing but packing suitcases", because she's winning trips all the time, says: […]'

(10) "Wir **sind** <u>schon länger</u> **am Überlegen**, eine Konstruktion zu finden, um an die Börse

zu gehen", erklärte der findige Geschäftsmann […].

'"We have been thinking for quite some time now to find a construction to go public",

the resourceful business man said […].'

(11) "<u>Seit einem Jahr</u> **bin** ich **am Organisieren**", sagt Wirnsberger […].

'"I have been organizing for a year", Wirnsberger says […].'

Present progressive forms referring to future events were classified as FUTURATE uses. In our

corpus, FUTURATE is the most marginal category of all aspecto-temporal uses, as it seems to

appear exclusively in conditional contexts. In 12a, for instance, the speaker uses the

progressive to refer to an event that is to happen in the future. A simple present, however,

would be felicitous as well (compare 12b). Still, the latter sentence does not necessarily

convey that the speaker wants to quit at a point when he is winning races, i.e. when he is at

the very peak of his career, since 12b could also refer to the speaker having won a specific

race.

(12) a. "Ich werde in der Formel 1 aufhören, wenn ich **am Gewinnen bin**, nicht am

Verlieren", sagte er.

'"I will quit Formula 1, when I'm winning, not when I'm losing", he said.'

b. Ich werde in der Formel 1 aufhören, wenn ich **gewinne**, nicht wenn ich verliere.

'I will quit Formula 1, when I'm winning / I win, not when I'm losing / I lose.'

Previous authors have claimed that the German *am*-progressive most naturally combines with

dynamic and atelic predicates, that is, dynamic verbs that do not involve an inherent endpoint

(see, for instance, Krause's (1997, 2002) and Gárgyán's (2014) discussion of semantic

constraints on the main verb in terms of Vendler's (1957/1967) typology of verb classes).

This is clearly reflected in the top ten of most frequent verbs in our sample. The most

frequent one is the non-telic activity verb *laufen* 'to run, to be ongoing' (27 instances),

followed by *überlegen* 'to consider, to think over' (21 instances), *verzweifeln* 'to despair' (16

instances), *verhandeln* 'to negotiate' (15 instances), *kochen* 'to cook' (14 instances), *arbeiten*

'to work' (11 instances), *kämpfen* 'to fight' (8 instances) and *wachsen* 'to grow' (8 instances),

as illustrated in examples 13 to 17.

(13) "Vorplanungen **sind am Laufen**" […]

      '"Preliminary planning is running" […]'

(14) "Ich **bin am Überlegen**", sagt Barczikowski.

      '"I'm thinking it over", Barczikowski says.'

(15) "Wir **sind am Verzweifeln**", klagte Hausberger […]

      '"We are desperate", Hausberger complained […]'

(16) Im EU-Parlament **ist** "die Volksseele **am Kochen**".

      'In the EU Parliament, the "soul of the people is boiling".'

(17) "Die Gesamtdotation steht noch nicht fest, da wir noch **am Verhandeln sind**" […]

      '"The overall allocation is still unknown, as we are still negotiating" […]'

Two verbs among the ten most frequent verbs denote telic events, i.e. events evolving an

inherent endpoint: *kippen* 'to tip over' (12 instances) and *verhungern* 'to die of starvation' (9

instances). In our entire sample, telic verbs feature in one fifth of all the progressive

occurrences, as is shown in table 2.

<INSERT Table 2 HERE>

When a progressive construction is used with such telic predicates, it is left unspecified whether the endpoint is or will actually be reached. Most verbs involving an inherent endpoint (68 out of 90) are prefixed intransitive verbs (in the generative literature, they would be termed 'unaccusative verbs') like *verdursten* 'die of thirst', *verhungern* 'starve', *verschwinden* 'disappear', *verrecken* 'to peg out', *verrotten* 'to rot', *ersticken* 'choke', *ertrinken* 'drown', *erfrieren* 'freeze to death', *absterben* 'to die off', *zerbrechen* 'break', *zerfallen* 'fall into ruin, disintegrate' and *zusammenbrechen* 'collapse', which build the perfect tense with *sein* 'to be' and typically carry a fatality meaning, as illustrated in examples 18 to 20.

(18) "Einmal mußte das Boot bereits seine Tüchtigkeit unter Beweis stellen, als ein älterer Mann […] **am Ertrinken war**", erklärte Reimann.

'"The boat has already had to prove its efficiency once, as […] an elderly man was drowning", said Reimann.'

(19) "Japan **ist am Verschwinden**".

'"Japan is disappearing".'

(20) "Du **bist** halb **am Erfrieren**!"

'"You are in the midst of freezing to death (i.e. you are freezing)!"'

Interestingly, in some of these examples the *am*-progressive cannot be considered a mere alternative to the aspectually more neutral simple tense. This is particularly clear with past-tense forms, where the *am*-progressive is semantically different from the simple past tense in the sense that the former renders the reported event as incomplete (21a), whereas the latter typically evokes a completeness reading (21b). The simple past of telic verbs is, in other

words, not fully neutral with respect to (in)completion. In our sample, this is reflected in the increased association of past-tense progressives with telic predicates as compared to present-tense uses, i.e. 32% of the past progressives in our corpus involve a sense of incompletion (as opposed to 19% of the present progressives).[13]

(21) a. "Sie **waren am Erfrieren** und **Verhungern**", sagt Kriminalinspektor Gösta Hellberg.

'"They were freezing and starving", says Detective Inspector Gösta Hellberg.'

b. Sie **erfroren** und **verhungerten**.

'They froze and starved to death.'

When dealing with telic verbs, it thus seems that the past progressive is a viable *grammatical* means to indicate that someone 'almost V-ed'.[14] This context might be considered a possible locus for further grammaticalization of the *am*-progressive.

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[13] Note that the perfect, which has evolved into a true past tense in German (Nübling et al. 2006:247) reinforces the completion reading of telic predicates. There is, in other words, a very clear semantic difference between the past *am*-progressive typically invoking a non-completion reading, on the one hand, and the perfect, on the other: *Sie war gestern am Ertrinken* 'Yesterday she was drowning' is clearly different from *Sie ist gestern ertrunken* 'She drowned yesterday'.

[14] In her work on auxiliation, Kuteva (2001:75–112) argues for the existence of a cross-linguistically attested "avertive gram", i.e. a construction that is used in past contexts only and which indicates that something "*was on the verge of V-ing but did not V*".

In present-time contexts, telic verbs in the simple present have been argued to evoke a future reading; a present reading of telic verbs is said to be only possible with a progressive form, which then focuses on the process preceding the actual change of state (Reimann 1998:13–14). This opposition is illustrated in the constructed examples 22a and 22b. Even though Reimann seems to make a valuable point for some cases, her position is too extreme, since present-tense instances of telic *am*-progressives give rise to both future and present-time readings (as in 22a). The present progressive (22b), however, seems to underscore the idea of present incompletion, i.e. of not reaching the event's final boundary at this very moment.

(22)   a. Das Ozonloch **verschwindet** <u>gerade/bald.</u>

 'The ozone hole is disappearing/will soon disappear.'

 b. Das Ozonloch **ist** <u>gerade/?bald</u> **am Verschwinden**.

 'The ozone hole is disappearing/?will soon disappear.'

In sum, the aspecto-temporal uses found in the corpus are in line with Gárgyán's (2014) function types of the *am*-progressive (see section 2). As shown in section 3, the aspecto-temporal usage types can be analyzed as extensions of ONGOINGNESS. We also found that with telic predicates, the progressive is used to underscore the idea of incompletion, which is less pronounced when using the simple present and typically absent when using the simple past or perfect.

4.2.   Subjective and Intersubjective Uses.

This part of the analysis concentrates on the (inter)subjective connotations that accompany many uses of the *am*-progressive. Recall that De Wit & Brisard (2014) analyze the basic meaning of the English present progressive in terms of epistemic contingency and that an analogous account is proposed by De Wit & Patard (2013) and De Wit et al. (2013) for the French present progressive. Since the association of progressivity with backgrounded boundaries and dynamicity is a universal phenomenon – the cross-linguistic progressive gram by definition only collocates with dynamic verbs – we assume that the basic meaning of contingency is also relevant for the semantic analysis of the German *am*-progressive, and we predict that this meaning is reflected in the frequent occurrence of (inter)subjective readings. This prediction is borne out: in our corpus, 40% of all progressive tokens feature some kind of non-aspectual qualification. In those cases, the speaker expresses her subjective attitude, e.g. a feeling of irritation or surprise, at a situation that diverges from what is expected.

<INSERT Table 3 HERE>

As observed in section 3, we speak of *connotations* rather than proper usage types, since each example that evokes an (inter)subjective interpretation can also be classified as instantiating a particular aspecto-temporal category. It is important to emphasize, however, that there are quite a few examples in which the motivation for using the progressive is not (primarily) aspecto-temporal, but serves some (inter)subjective purpose. Since the use of the German progressive (like that of the French progressive) is generally not grammatically obligatory, we presume that, even when there is an additional sense of ongoingness, the use of the progressive can be properly *triggered* by subjective considerations.

The different (inter)subjective connotations, some of which could also be discerned in the examples in the previous section, will be discussed in more detail below. For this group of

examples, it is shown that the German progressive is most often found in contexts that involve a sense of INTENSITY, IRRITATION or EVASIVENESS.

A sense of INTENSIFICATION of the described event is manifested in a total of 58 sentences (13.84%). Consider the following examples, in which the progressive underscores the intensity of the situation at hand.

(23) "Wir **sind** zur Zeit heftig **am Berechnen**", erklärt Steuerberater Günther Pöschl, […]

'"At the moment, we are calculating fiercely", tax consultant Günther Pöschl said, […]'

(24) "Die **sind** so **am Kämpfen**, daß die mich gar nicht wahrnehmen", sagt Schultze […]

'"They are so busy struggling that they don't even notice me", Schultze says […]'

It is not impossible to use the simple present in examples such as 23 and 24, yet in that case the sense of intensity would be less conspicuously present.

Closely related to intensification are emotional overtones of IRRITATION, which constitutes a well-established and frequently discussed usage type of the English present progressive. An oft-cited example in this respect is *John is silly* vs *John is being silly* (see Nehls 1974:109), where the former characterization is construed as structural (John is a silly person), while the latter is temporal, i.e. contingent (John is behaving as a silly person at the moment). The atypicality of the situation might lead to irritation on the part of the speaker, which can be expressed by using the progressive, rather than the simple present, which is neutral in this respect. In fact, such a sense of irritation can be discerned in 10% of all utterances in our sample. Consider, for instance, the following examples.

(25) Viele haben sich über die Fülle an Informationen beklagt, die von der

Gesundheitsdirektion verlangt wurden. <u>Überspitzt gesagt</u> **waren** die Leute "nur noch

am Erheben statt **am Arbeiten**", wie sich ein Spitalvertreter ausdrückt.

'Many have complained about the wealth of information that has been requested by the

Health Department. To put it bluntly, people were "merely collecting data instead of

working", as a hospital representative put it.'

(26) "Der Kiez **ist am Kippen, am Verslumen**", sagte Linda Ising aus der Schloßstraße.

Gegen dieses Wort wehrte sich Wissel: "Der Kiez hat Probleme, verslumt ist er nicht."

'"The neighborhood is falling apart (lit. 'tilting'), is becoming a slum", Linda Ising

from the Schloßstraße said. These words were disputed by Wissel: "The neighborhood

has its problems, but it is not a slum."'

In 25, it is evident from the writer's comments that the person quoted is irritated by the

designated events. This can be deduced from the topicalized phrase *überspitzt gesagt* ('to put

it bluntly'). Example 26 is interesting because the progressive and simple form are

juxtaposed, which illustrates how a particular aspectual construal reflects the speaker's

subjective conception of reality. Thus, the simple present used by Wissel ought to present his

judgment as more objective, in contrast with the emotionality of Linda Ising's utterance,

where the progressive is used to voice the speaker's irritation about the current events. In

these examples, the progressive construal reflects the speaker's irritation, rather than being

motivated by mere aspecto-temporal considerations.

Both INTENSIFICATION and IRRITATION seem to be involved in the use of the colloquial

die Kacke ist am Dampfen, as in 27, which translates as 'this means trouble' (lit. 'the shit is

steaming'). Note that this expression only works in the progressive form; *die Kacke dampft* is

not correct. In this context, it is also revealing that although the Dutch equivalent of *die*

Kacke ist am Dampfen, viz. *de poppen zijn/gaan aan het dansen* (lit. 'the puppets are/start dancing'), draws on entirely different lexical sources, the progressive element is equally obligatory.

(27) Seit Einführung des achtjährigen Abiturs (G8) sei auch das Ladenburger Carl-Benz-Gymnasium faktisch eine Ganztagesschule, die eine Mensa brauche. Es bedürfe "enorm viel Engagements", um künftig an die erforderlichen Mittel zu kommen. "G8-mäßig **ist die Kacke** sowieso **am Dampfen**: Die Eltern sind sauer", weiß Sckerl.
'Since the introduction of the eight-year Abitur [equivalent to British A-levels] (G8) the Ladenburg Carl-Benz-Gymnasium practically turned into a full-day school, which needs a cafeteria. It would require "a tremendous commitment" to get the necessary funds in the future. "What the G8 is concerned, the shit's hit the fan anyway: parents are furious", Sckerl knows.'

The third (inter)subjective expression type, which we call EVASIVENESS, was attested 61 times (14.56%) and is largely restricted to present-time contexts. In English, the present progressive enables the speaker to soften a statement that – when using the simple form – would sound harsher or more definite (De Wit & Brisard 2014:83). In our data, too, the present progressive is systematically exploited to create a sense of vagueness and lack of commitment. The category thus covers tentative and evasive statements, which, like sentences characterized by INTENSIFICATION or IRRITATION, have a contingent quality, i.e. the proposition is depicted as a "non-structural part of […] reality" (De Wit & Brisard 2014:83). By depicting a situation as such, the speaker is less committed to the full realization of this situation. In the following examples, the progressive can be said to underscore the contingency of the situation as qualified by the speaker.

(28)   [Renate Götschl, an alpine ski racer:] "Die Strecke ist interessant, […] hat Wellen, ich

bin noch <u>ein bisschen</u> **am Probieren**", meinte die Steirerin, die bisher in der Abfahrt

ebenfalls hinter ihren Erwartungen geblieben war.

'"The ski slope is interesting, […] has curves, I'm still testing it a little", said the

woman from Styria, who hitherto has not lived up to expectations in the downhill too.'

(29)   (Zürich) gab sich gestern zum Thema Listenverbindungen denn auch <u>sehr vorsichtig</u>.

"Es **ist am Gären**", sagte er nur.

'Obviously, (Zürich) proceeded very carefully about the topic of electoral alliances. "It

is being considered (lit.: 'it is fermenting')", he simply said.'

(30)   Anker […] will sich […] nicht in die Karten schauen lassen. "Wir **sind am**

Überlegen", so Schuster <u>zurückhaltend</u>.

'Anker […] is playing its cards close to its chest. "We are thinking about it", said

Schuster, aloof.'

In example 28, Renate Götschl tries to account for the disappointing results. First, she

describes the slope using the simple present; then she turns to the *am*-progressive to express

that until now she has only been trying, she has not reached the limits of her capacity (note

also the presence of *ein bisschen* 'a little'). In 29 and 30, the writer witnesses a sense of

carefulness on the part of the speaker, indicated by *sehr vorsichtig* 'very carefully' and

zurückhaltend 'aloof, unresponsive': the speaker is deliberately avoiding making any

definitive statements about the topic.

The quoted *am*-progressives function as a kind of hedging devices, which are

"associated […] with a kind of defensiveness, an evasiveness, a sliding out from under.

Hedging in this view is the politician's craft" (Skelton 1997:43). Indeed, in our sample,

evasive statements are regularly expressed by politicians or other officials, representatives of associations and sport coaches. In one particular example, the speaker seems to be ridiculing this common practice by using the *am*-progressive in combination with a non-agentive subject, which creates an ironic effect.

(31) "Wie weit sind die Toilettenanlagen am Wasserturm gediehen?", erkundigte sich SPD-Rat Werner Ueberrein […]. "Das Baugesuch für die Toiletten **ist am Einreichen**", berichtete der Bürgermeister schmunzelnd.

'"How are things developing with the toilets at the water tower?", SPD Council Werner Ueberrein inquired […]. "The planning permission for the toilets is submitting", reported the mayor with a smile.'

Note, finally, that in our corpus, the two most frequently used main verbs in progressive constructions are repeatedly associated with EVASIVENESS, viz. *laufen* and *überlegen* with 27 and 21 instances respectively.

(32) "Es **sind** Gespräche **am Laufen**", kommt aus dem Ilvesheimer Rathaus immerhin ein vages Signal, daß sich […] etwas tut.

'With "Talks are taking place", the Ilvesheim town hall is giving at least a vague indication that something is happening.'

The two remaining categories are only marginally attested in our corpus. In only two examples do we find that the progressive is used to evoke a sense of SURPRISE. The category INTERPRETATIVE, too, is represented by merely a few scattered instances. Consider the following conversation between the director-general and an attorney.

(33) "Der Konsum war schwer krank", meinte am Freitag dessen früherer Generaldirektor

Hermann Gerharter […]. "Der Konsum **war** doch **am Ersticken**!", korrigierte ihn

Staatsanwalt Erich Müller.

'"Consumption was seriously ill", its former Director-General Hermann Gerharter said

on Friday […]. "The consumption was actually choking!", attorney Erich Müller

corrected him.'

The situation is initially rendered in the simple past (*war schwer krank*) by the director-general. By shifting to the progressive (*war doch am Ersticken*), the attorney is correcting what he believes to be a misrepresentation of the facts. In a similar fashion as in example 2 in the introduction to this paper, the *am*-progressive is employed to emphasize what was *really* going on, thereby re-classifying previous portrayals.[15]

5. Conclusion and Future Research.

The findings confirm that the *am*-progressive, like its English counterpart and many other progressive constructions in the world's languages, displays a variety of aspecto-temporal usage types and is susceptible to (inter)subjective readings. Since the German progressive is not as grammaticalized as the progressive in other languages and is not obligatorily used for concurrent event reporting, we even presume that an urge to express (inter)subjective

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[15] It must be added that the *am*-progressive in this example can also be accounted for by referring to the inherent telicity of the verb *ersticken*. A simple past tense (*erstickte*) would imply completion, i.e. choking to death, which cannot be the meaning intended here.

qualifications might properly trigger the use of the *am*-progressive. Our analysis of the aspecto-temporal uses of the *am*-progressive shows that the construction prototypically indicates ONGOINGNESS. More specific extensions of this meaning give rise to other aspecto-temporal categories: HABITUALITY, ITERATIVITY, TEMPORARY VALIDITY, LIMITED DURATION and FUTURATE. The German *am*-progressive is found to carry an (inter)subjective connotation in approximately 40% of the cases. On the basis of our sample, five different subtypes have been discerned. The notions INTENSIFICATION, IRRITATION and EVASIVENESS account for 95.83% of all (inter)subjective readings, whereas the categories SURPRISE and INTERPRETATIVE are only marginally attested. The study thus provides corroborating evidence for the hypothesis that contingency lies at the basis of the progressive's semantics in German too. It might even be argued that the progressive functions as a *mirative* marker in languages such as English, French and German (and possibly other languages as well), i.e. as a construction that is specifically exploited to convey a sense of surprise or atypicality on the part of the speaker (see, among others, DeLancey 1997, 2001, 2012).

Whereas this general observation may hold true across various languages (though to substantiate this claim more studies on other languages are required), there are naturally also language-specific conditions which could affect the use of the progressive. Even if such conditions are not within the scope of the present paper, they constitute an interesting topic for further investigation. We have already indicated that the German progressive can be specifically exploited to convey a meaning of incompletion (especially in the past), and that this use might constitute a potential locus of grammaticalization for the construction. Another interesting question is how the formal characteristics of the German *am*-progressive tie in with the observation that the verbal paradigm in German in general is becoming more analytical, as is shown by the rise of the perfect (cf. example 34a) as an analytical past tense form (see Nübling et al. 2006 and references there) or by the tendency to replace the synthetic

past subjunctive (e.g. *hülfe* 'would help', *kaufte* 'would buy') by an analytical construction

consisting of past subjunctive *würde* + V-inf (*würde helfen, würde kaufen*) (as in 35a). These

analytic structures provide adequate structural patterns to realize the so-called *Verbalklammer*

('brace construction'), a frequently used sentence structure in present-day German, consisting

of a finite verb form in second position and a non-finite verb in final position (Nübling et al.

2006:91).

(34) a. Er **hat** gestern **gelacht**.

  b. Er **lachte** gestern.

   'He laughed yesterday.'

(35) a. Wenn ich Geld hätte, **würde** ich mir eine größere Wohnung **kaufen**.

  b. Wenn ich Geld hätte, **kaufte** ich mir eine größere Wohnung.

   'If I had money, I would buy a bigger apartment.'

(36) a. Er **war** den ganzen Tag am **Lachen**.

  b. Er **lachte** den ganzen Tag.

   'He laughed all day.'

Interestingly, the *am*-progressive displays a similar structural pattern as the perfect or the

analytical past subjunctive: as illustrated in 34–36a, the German perfect, the analytic *würde*-

subjunctive and the *am*-progressive are alike in that they appear in complex two-place

predicate constructions whose first, finite element (*hat*, *würde*, *war*) contains grammatical

information pertaining to tense and mood, whereas the second, clause-final and non-finite

element codes lexical information (Thurmair 1997). As Sieberg (1984, 2002, 2004) has

shown, the German perfect construction (in its function as a past tense form) is preferably

used with simple lexical verbs (e.g. *lachen* in *ich habe laut gelacht*, lit. 'I have loudly

laughed'), whose simple past tense does not realize the brace construction (e.g. *ich lachte laut*, lit. 'I laughed loudly'). The simple past tense, however, still occurs with verbs that normally appear in analytical constructions (like modal and auxiliary constructions) and as such easily comply with the favored brace construction. Past tense modals and auxiliaries typically build a two-piece analytical predicate structure, where (i) the finite verb is "rhythmically simple" ("rhythmisch einfach"), i.e. consisting of only one or two syllables, e.g. *[wollte … ausziehen], [wird… sagen]* (Sieberg 2002:245–246), and (ii) the non-finite verb carries the crucial semantic information. Since the same structural pattern is displayed by the *am*-progressive,[16] the question arises whether these syntactic principles can also (at least partly) account for the use and possible future spread of the *am*-progressive. An element indicating that formal matters indeed play a role in the development of the German *am*-progressive seems to be its outspoken preference for either morphologically simple (e.g. *wachsen* 'grow', *schreiben* 'write', *rechnen* 'calculate', *planen* 'plan', *arbeiten* 'work') or complex but non-separable (e.g. *ermitteln* 'identify', *ersticken* 'choke', *verhandeln* 'negotiate', *verzweifeln* 'despair') verbs, which account for 88% of all *am*-progressives in our corpus. With these verbs, non-analytic 'simple' tense forms typically do not instantiate the preferred structural pattern (e.g. *ich verzweifle, ich verzweifelte*), whereas the *am*-progressive provides a means to realize the brace construction (*ich bin am Verzweifeln/ich war am Verzweifeln*).

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[16] The '*am* V-inf' in essence constitutes one entity since no words can be placed between *am* and the following infinitive, e.g. *[war … am Arbeiten]*. Adverbials always modify the '*am* V-inf'-phrase as a whole. Objects too, when they appear at all, are placed before the '*am* V-inf'-phrase. They can only occur after *am* if they are incorporated, but in that case they are part of the verb.

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Aspecto-temporal uses	(Inter)subjective connotations		Total (n)
	NO CONNOTATION	(INTER)SUBJECTIVE USE	
ONGOING	171	112	**283**
FUTURATE	3	1	**4**
HABITUAL	19	21	**40**
ITERATIVE	13	2	**15**
LIMITED DURATION	35	25	**60**
TEMPORARY VALIDITY	10	7	**17**
Total (n)	**251**	**168**	419
Total (%)	*59.90*	*40.10*	*100*

Table 1. Aspecto-temporal and (inter)subjective uses of *am*-progressives

Aspecto-temporal uses	Telicity		Total (n)
	NO INHERENT ENDPOINT	INHERENT ENDPOINT	
ONGOING	204	79	**283**
FUTURATE	1	3	**4**
HABITUAL	36	4	**40**
ITERATIVE	15	0	**15**
LIMITED DURATION	59	1	**60**
TEMPORARY VALIDITY	14	3	**17**
Total (n)	**329**	**90**	419
Total (%)	*78.52*	*21.48*	*100*

Table 2. Aspecto-temporal uses and verb telicity

Aspecto-temporal uses	(Inter)subjective connotations					
	NO CONNOT.	(INTER)SUBJECTIVE USES				
		INT	IRR	EVA	SUR	INTER
ONGOING	171	42	25	40	2	3
FUTURATE	3	1	0	0	0	0
HABITUAL	19	5	16	0	0	0
ITERATIVE	13	1	0	1	0	0
LIMITED DURATION	35	4	1	20	0	0
TEMPORARY VALIDITY	10	5	0	0	0	2
Total (n)	**251**	**58**	**42**	**61**	**2**	**5**
Total (%)	*59.90*	*13.84*	*10.02*	*14.56*	*0.48*	*1.19*

Table 3. Aspecto-temporal uses and types of (inter)subjective connotations

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