

Recent Change in the Use of Stative Verbs in the Progressive Form in British English: *I'm loving it*

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This paper considers recent change in the use of stative verbs in the progressive form in conversational British English (BrE). It asks whether there is a pattern to these changes by investigating four semantic categories of stative verbs: relational, cognitive, affective and perceptual. Aarts et al. (2010) state that affective statives, such as *love* and *want*, are already being used often in progressive aspect, and they suggest that some cognitive and relational statives, such as *know*, might follow suit. In the present study, this prediction was tested by making comparative, diachronic searches in two corpora for 25 stative verbs from the four semantic categories outlined above. The corpora dated from 1991-92 and 2012-14 respectively. In addition to the corpus data, the results of an acceptability survey were analysed. Furthermore, changes in the description of progressive use were tracked in popular BrE student grammars of the past thirty years. Overall, the corpus and other findings did *not* support the notion of semantic patterns of change. Rather, the data suggested that particular verbs have been increasing in frequency in certain contexts, irrespective of their semantic category. In particular, the salience of the stative-progressive *loving* was marked in all data sources. Further analysis of concordances revealed 'subjective' uses of progressive *love* and *think*, which appeared to be newly adopted in informal BrE.

1. Introduction

The use of the progressive in English has been increasing in scope and frequency for at least two centuries (Hundt 2004). One contentious area of change in present-day English (PDE) is the expanding use of the progressive with stative verbs, for example:

- (1) (*?)*I'm liking* your new jacket

Traditionally, stative verbs have been described as incompatible with the progressive, because they generally signify passively experienced, unending states. The progressive, on the other hand, is associated with dynamic events, indicating energetic, temporary activity, often (but not always) with a human subject. Sentences such as **The box is containing precious metals* have been viewed as largely unacceptable in British English (BrE).

When McDonald's launched its global advertising campaign in 2003 with the slogan *i'm lovin' it*, the use of the progressive form seemed startling to British ears. Some people dubbed it 'McEnglish', stigmatising it as 'marketing speak'. Twelve years on, however, the slogan is familiar to both a UK and a global audience through persistent multi-media coverage. It appears that, not only has this particular phrase become commonplace in colloquial BrE, but other progressive statives have increased in frequency too.

Much of the research in this area has been carried out using corpora of written texts from the second half of the twentieth century. Yet it is generally recognised that change tends to occur first in the spoken language (Aarts, Close & Wallis 2010), particularly with regard to the conversational type of language investigated here. For this reason, the corpus data was retrieved from informal spoken BrE and speech-like internet data, such as online forum discussions and interactive blogs.

The progressive is made up of the auxiliary verb *be*, which situates the event in past, present or future time, and an *-ing* participle, which expresses, in general terms,

‘ongoingness’ or incompleteness. The progressive is a marker of aspect, which describes how an event unfolds – as distinct from the tense system, which locates it in time. Aspect and tense are interrelated, but discrete elements of the verb phrase.

The progressive is part of the broader English aspectual system, which consists of two distinct categories, often known as ‘grammatical’ and ‘lexical’ aspect. The progressive belongs to the grammatical category, the most salient feature of which is that it is *under the speaker’s control*. The speaker selects auxiliary and main verb inflections, in order to express a personal view of an event as complete, ongoing, beginning, continuing, ending or repeating. For this reason, grammatical aspect is also known as “viewpoint aspect” (Smith, 1983:479). The speaker can choose from perfective forms, denoting complete events (2), and progressive forms (3), signifying events in progress (Brinton 1988):

(2) They **built** a sandcastle

(3) They **were building** a sandcastle when a large wave swept up the beach

In contrast to its grammatical counterpart, lexical aspect denotes intrinsic semantic qualities of the main verb, which are outside the speaker’s control. These qualities relate to: (i) the duration of the event, whether it is short/‘punctual’ or long/‘durative’; (ii) whether it is complete/‘telic’ or incomplete/‘atelic’; (iii) whether it is a state/‘stative’ or an event/‘dynamic’.

The present discussion will limit itself to the stative/dynamic binary, which is of particular relevance here. Brinton (1988) describes states as durative, undifferentiated, unlimited, and not dependent on an active agent (often a human subject). From this standpoint, it is not surprising that stative verbs have been viewed as generally inimical to progressive aspect: their unvarying nature and their lack of agency are at odds with the dynamic qualities of the progressive.

Nevertheless, some stative verbs *do* occur frequently in the progressive, and it is reasonable to ask why. Greenbaum and Quirk (1990: 53-4) offer two possible explanations: (i) stative verbs can be given a dynamic reading; (ii) stative verbs can indicate temporary behaviour or temporariness. These two concepts are illustrated conjointly in the following sentence (adapted from Smith 1983: 498):

(4) She’s **being** silly

Smith proposes that the agentive subject in (4) is actively engaged in the situation of her own volition, and that this allows for a dynamic ‘event reading’ (1983: 498). Additionally, the use of the progressive expresses the temporary nature of the behaviour described (as opposed to the present simple *She’s silly*, which would suggest a permanent character trait). The temporal and dynamic qualities of progressive aspect are often closely linked, as observed here.

It is clear from the above discussion that the nature of the subject plays an important role in progressive aspect. In fact, many elements of sentential composition can influence its use. In the following sentence, for instance, the adjectival complement *particularly bad* and the time adverbial *today* clearly signal the temporary nature of the event and support the use of the progressive (example adapted from Smith 1983: 497):

(5) The river is smelling **particularly bad today**

In addition to its core aspectual functions, the progressive can also be used to express a wide range of emotions and attitudes. These include being polite (6), hedging or softening a proposition (7) and, conversely, intensifying an emotion (8) (adapted from Kesner Bland 1988: 59-67):

- (6) I was hoping you could help me
- (7) Are you liking it here?
- (8) I'm loving my course

The progressive use of the verb *love* for intensification (8) has been one of the most salient recent changes in BrE, probably due to the high visibility of the slogan *i'm lovin' it* over the past twelve years. Cehan (2012) devoted a whole paper to the slogan, in which she analysed its possible interpretations. She suggested (2012:20) that seemingly contradictory, oxymoronic notions are articulated by the use of the stative-progressive: “a constantly renewed state of satisfaction or enjoyment [...] an occurrence in progress that lasts forever [...] and an exceptional state which combines with the thrill and excitement of a (permanently) new experience”.

If the progressive often intensifies the verb *love*, it can have the opposite effect on *think*. The following example from The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA 1996), which Levin (2013: 210-11) describes as “a hedged variant of *I think*”, expresses tentativeness. This is reinforced by the adverbials *maybe* and *a little bit*:

- (9) **I'm thinking** that maybe the Republicans are blowing this up a little bit...

The subjective or non-aspectual functions in sentences (6-9) are sometimes considered to be problematic, as they do not fit easily with the progressive's core meanings of temporariness or incompleteness. Descriptions of progressive usage have been, and continue to be, contentious. A brief review of student grammars over the past thirty years revealed that descriptions have indeed changed significantly (see Table 1). Referring back to Swan's *Basic English Usage* (1984: 169) – a very popular student grammar – Swan stated categorically that “some verbs are **never** used in the progressive form: *I like this music. (NOT ~~I'm liking this music~~).*” Many of the verbs on his proscribed list are now regularly used in the progressive, for example, *like, love, need, think, want*. Today, many student grammars accept the use of such stative-progressives – albeit tentatively (see Table 1). This will undoubtedly encourage L2 speakers to use these forms more often in the future.

Date	Author Publisher	Title	Presentation of the Progressive
1984	Swan, M. OUP	<i>Basic English Usage</i>	Some stative verbs are never used in the progressive: <i>like, love, want, know, remember, think, hear, need, etc.</i>
1991	Willis, D., & Sinclair, J. Collins	<i>Collins Cobuild Student's Grammar</i>	Some stative verbs are not normally used in the progressive, unless they have other, non-stative meanings: <i>I have a car/I'm having a party</i>
1999	Biber et al. Longman	<i>The Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English</i>	Based on corpus data: certain dynamic and stative verbs frequently occur in the progressive: <i>hope, think</i> , while others do not: <i>invent, shrug, like, want</i> (i.e. the use of the progressive is not determined by stativity alone)
2011	Hughes, J. & Jones, C. Heinle	<i>Heinle's Practical Grammar (Level 3 [B1 – B2] FCE)</i>	Contrasts a ‘dynamic’ use of <i>love</i> : <i>I'm loving my new job</i> with a stative use: <i>I love you</i>
2012	Foley, M. & Hall, D. Pearson	<i>My Grammar Lab (Intermediate B1/B2)</i>	Observes that it is becoming more common to use <i>like, love, hate</i> in the progressive in colloquial English: <i>I'm really loving my course!</i> Comments that some people consider this to be incorrect
2013	Hewings, M. CUP	<i>Cambridge Advanced Grammar in Use (Third Edition)</i>	Devotes two pages to contrasting uses of present progressive/simple: e.g. the progressive expresses temporariness: <i>The children are loving having Ella here at the moment</i>

Table 1. Changes in the presentation of the progressive (1984-2013).

A number of explanations have been proposed for the increase in frequency of progressive forms in BrE. Leech et al. (2009) found firm corpus evidence of a general trend towards speech-like informality in written BrE – otherwise known as colloquialisation – in the sharp increase in contractions and present progressive use.

Smith and Leech (2013) linked this trend to the widespread influence of AmE, through the internet and spellcheckers. Levin (2013:) discusses the ‘democratising’ influence of the progressive, in that it often signals a degree of respect towards the interlocutor through politeness and hedging. Granath and Wherrity (2014:) propose the idea of ‘conventionalisation’: the slogan *i’m lovin’ it*, they suggest, has become an accepted (or tolerated) convention through regular exposure and familiarity.

Leech et al.’s (2009) findings support the notion of subjectification, where speakers use progressive aspect to express their emotions and attitudes. This, in turn, lends further weight to Levin’s (2013: 211) observation that the progressive “is becoming less aspectual in PDE” (and, therefore, more subjective). Finally, Leech et al. (2009: 143) advance the intriguing possibility that the progressive is snowballing “under its own momentum”, a process known as generalisation. Levin (2013) concludes that the above factors are most probably interlinked and mutually reinforcing.

The framework for the present study was Greenbaum and Quirk’s (1990: 55-56) stative-verb continuum (Table 2), in which verbs are classified on a scale from stative/unlimited, in category A at the top of the table, to dynamic/punctual in category D at the bottom. Of particular relevance here, the stative sub-categories (a) to (e) appear to be ranked, from an intuitive point of view, in order of decreasing resistance to the progressive. The first four of these are borrowed from Greenbaum and Quirk’s model: (a) states of ‘being’ and ‘having’ (relational verbs); (b) intellectual states (cognitive verbs); (c) states of emotion or attitude (affective verbs); (d) states of perception (perception verbs).

A. STATIVE

States of ‘being’ and ‘having’: *be, contain, depend, have, resemble*

Intellectual states: *believe, know, realise, think, understand*

States of emotion or attitude: *disagree, dislike, like, want, wish*

States of perception: *feel, hear, see, smell, taste*

States of bodily sensation: *ache, feel sick, hurt, itch, tickle*

B. STANCE: *lie, live, sit, stand*

C. DYNAMIC DURATIVE (taking place over a period of time)

Activities performed by inanimate forces: (wind) *blow*, (engine) *run*

Activities performed by animate agents: *dance, eat, play, sing, work*

Processes: *change, deteriorate, grow, ripen, widen*

Accomplishments: *finish* (the book), *knit* (a sweater), *read* (the paper)

D. DYNAMIC PUNCTUAL (with little or no duration)

Momentary events: *bang, nod, tap* (indicate repetition in the progressive)

Transitional events: *arrive, die, drown, land, leave, stop*

Table 2. Greenbaum & Quirk’s stative-verb continuum (1990: 55-56).

Aarts et al. (2010) suggested that the progressive might be extending up through these semantic categories from affective statives, such as *love* and *want*, to those higher up the continuum, for example the cognitive stative *know*. The present study tested this prediction by asking the following questions:

(RQ1) Is the progressive applied to a broader range of stative verbs in current BrE than was the case twenty years ago?

(RQ2) In what ways, if any, did the use of the affective verb *love* and the cognitive stative *think* change from 1991-92 to 2012-14?

2. Method

2.1. Corpus searches

To address the above questions, comparative diachronic searches were made for certain stative verbs in two corpora: the British National Corpus (BNC), dating back to 1991-92, and C12-14, a specially built corpus consisting of speech-like computer-mediated communication (CMC), such as forum discussions and interactive blogs, dated 2012-14. In the absence of readily accessible spoken data from the very recent period, CMC was considered to display sufficiently similar features to speech, such as colloquial language, unfinished sentences, taboo words, grammar ‘slips’. This made it possible to observe changes in stative-progressive use over a time span of 20-23 years. The subject of the searches were the twenty stative verbs listed in Greenbaum and Quirk’s sub-categories (a) to (d) (Table 2, Box A), and a further five stative verbs used in the acceptability survey: *own*, *seem* (relational verbs); *doubt* (cognitive verb); *love*, *prefer* (affective verbs) (see Appendix for survey items).

Of the 100 million tokens available in the BNC, only approximately 10% are dedicated to the spoken medium. For the present investigation, the ‘demographically-sampled’ (BNC-DS) component of the spoken section was selected, as it most closely represents colloquial BrE. It consists of 4.23 million tokens of spontaneous conversations, recorded by 124 volunteers in 38 different locations across the UK, covering all age groups and socio-economic categories.

C12-14 consists of 269 speech-like texts taken from 154 internet sources, and it totals 0.52 million words. Texts for C12-14 were selected according to the following criteria:

- They were dated 2012 or later; most texts were, in fact, dated 2014.
- A mixture of text types and a large number of sources were chosen to give as much variety as possible:
 - 102 discussion threads from 55 forums (37% of the corpus)
 - 87 blogs (35%)
 - 58 comment threads from 6 national and 2 regional newspapers (20%)
 - 22 broadcast transcripts from various radio stations and news channels (8%)
- Texts were colloquial in style and displayed features of spoken English, such as contractions, informal lexis, taboo words, unfinished sentences, and grammatical ‘slips’ associated with spontaneous language.
- Texts were, as far as possible, demonstrably British: individual bloggers identified themselves as British; forums and comment threads were UK-based and aimed primarily at a national or local audience, for example, a comment thread from the *Liverpool Echo*.

C12-14 was edited regularly during its construction to achieve the best possible balance and representativeness. For instance, texts were demographically-sampled according to gender and age group, wherever possible. It is widely recognised, however, that balance and representativeness are loosely defined concepts – particularly in the context of spoken data (Baker, 2009:293) – which are difficult to achieve in practice (McEnery & Hardie, 2012:10-11). Often, a ‘trial-and-error’ approach to corpus building is required, which relies on subjective judgements made by researchers (McEnery & Hardie, 2012); this was, indeed, the case in the present study. As Leech (2007:143-4) acknowledges, it is a matter of degree rather than absolutes, of setting realistic goals regarding balance and representativeness.

Searches in C12-14 were conducted using the open source AntConc software (version 3.4.1w, with thanks to Laurence Anthony of Waseda University, Japan), and the BNC-DS was accessed via the Lancaster University website (bncweb.lancs.ac.uk). Searches in both corpora were cleaned by manually inspecting concordances and removing unwanted items, including (amongst others): present participles in constructions other than the progressive, e.g. *Thinking about it, maybe I will go*; gerunds, e.g. *I’ll send all my loving to you*.

Any instances which were ambiguous or unclear were also rejected. The same principles were applied to all searches in both corpora. Frequency data was normalised to a base of 100,000 words.

2.2. Acceptability survey

To complement the corpus data, opinions were sought in a survey about the acceptability of particular stative-progressive combinations from the four semantic categories. The survey consisted of 32 items (see Appendix): 16 target sentences interspersed with 16 distracters. Each semantic category was represented by 3-5 target sentences, to which 172 participants responded using a five-point Likert scale: 1 completely unacceptable; 2 probably unacceptable; 3 not sure; 4 probably acceptable; 5 completely acceptable. The majority of items were devised specifically for the survey, with the exception of four authentic sentences retrieved from C12-14, plus the inclusion of the phrase *I'm loving it*. Table 3 summarises the target item variables.

Variable	No. of items	Stative verbs/Stative-progressive items
Relational verbs	4	<i>be, contain, own, resemble</i>
Cognitive verbs	4	<i>doubt, know, think, understand</i>
Affective verbs	4/5	<i>disagree, love (x2), prefer, want</i>
Perception verbs	3	<i>hear, smell, taste</i>
Authentic items from C12-14	4	<i>I'm thinking blankets, candles and; The spiders are loving this weather; she's being a really fantastic mum; Are you wanting me to...?</i>

Table 3. Target item variables in the acceptability survey.

2.3. Statistical analysis (log-likelihood tests)

To test the statistical significance of the corpus data, log-likelihood (LL) tests were conducted using the Lancaster University LL Wizard, accessible at <http://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/llwizard.html>

3. Results and discussion

The results and discussion are divided between the two research questions, RQ1 and RQ2, outlined at the end of section 1.

RQ1. Is the progressive applied to a broader range of stative verbs in current BrE than was the case twenty years ago?

According to the corpus findings in this study, the answer to RQ1 was negative. Of the 25 verbs under consideration, none adopted the progressive between the early 1990s and the present day: those with no hits in the BNC-DS also registered no hits in C12-14 (see Table 4). However, whilst there was no evidence of a systematic spread of the progressive within or between semantic categories, particular instances of increasing use were revealed: the perception verb *feel* and the affective verb *love* demonstrated statistically significant increases ($p = <0.001$, Table 4). In addition, the relational verb *be* and the perception verb *hear* showed substantial, if not statistically significant, increases. The relational verb *have* was the only one to generate a statistically significant *decrease* ($p = <0.001$).

<i>Stative-progressive (semantic category)</i>	<i>BNC-DS No. of hits (per 100,000 words in brackets)</i>	<i>C2012-14 No. of hits (per 100,000 words in brackets)</i>	<i>Statistical significance (Log Likelihood in brackets)</i>
<i>BEING/HAVING (Relational verbs)</i>			
BE	ca.218* (5.13)	37 (7.17)	(-3.19): NB: increase close to SSI threshold
CONTAIN	-	-	-
DEPEND	5	-	(1.15)
HAVE	ca.1070* (25.27)	65 (12.60)	(36.76): $p = <0.001$, HSSD
RESEMBLE	-	-	-
<i>INTELLECTUAL (Cognitive verbs)</i>			
BELIEVE	-	-	-
KNOW	1	-	(0.23)
REALIZ(S)E	3 (0.07)	1 (0.19)	(-0.63)
THINK	ca.499* (11.78)	68 (13.17)	(-0.71)
UNDERSTAND	1	-	(0.23)
<i>EMOTION/ATTITUDE (Affective verbs)</i>			
DISAGREE	1	-	(0.23)
DISLIKE	-	-	-
LIKE	3 (0.07)	1 (0.19)	(-0.63)
WANT	30 (0.71)	5 (0.97)	(-0.39)
WISH	3	-	(0.69)
<i>PERCEPTION verbs</i>			
FEEL	143 (3.37)	41 (7.94)	(-19.67): $p = <0.001$, HSSI
HEAR	14 (0.33)	4 (0.77)	(-1.91): Not SSI. Big increase (>100%) but from low base
SEE	69 (1.63)	8 (1.55)	(0.02)
SMELL	2	-	(0.46)
TASTE	2	-	(0.46)
<i>Additional stative-progressives in acceptability survey</i>			
LOVE (Affective)	1 (0.02)	7 (1.35)	(-25.27): $p = <0.001$, HSSI
OWN (Relational)	-	-	-
SEEM (Relational)	-	-	-
DOUBT (Cognitive)	-	-	-
PREFER (Affective)	-	-	-

Table 4. Summary of results.

HSSI = highly statistically-significant increase
 SSI = statistically significant increase
 HSSD = highly statistically-significant decrease
 *Estimated figures based on random sampling of
 10-30% of concordances

Given that the statistically significant findings were limited to three verbs only (*love, feel, have*), it was not possible to come to any firm conclusions. However, the overall pattern of verb frequencies strongly suggested that semantic category is *not* the deciding factor in stative-progressive use. Table 4 shows that each semantic group contained at least one verb with no hits in one or both corpora, and at least one verb with a high number of hits. For example, in the category of cognitive verbs, the progressive form of *know* registered one hit in BNC-DS and no hits in C12-14, whereas progressive *think* had 499 hits in BNC-DS and 68 hits in C12-14. By contrast, the present simple form of *know* in the first person singular registered 6,489 hits in BNC-DS searches and 256 hits in C12-14:

<i>Cognitive stative</i>	<i>Progressive forms in BNC-DS</i>	<i>Progressive forms in C12-14</i>	<i>Simple forms in BNC-DS</i>	<i>Simple forms in C12-14</i>
KNOW	1	-	6489	256
THINK	499	68		

Table 5. Comparative number of hits for *know* (in progressive and simple forms) and *think*.

It is interesting to compare these results with Biber et al.'s (1999) corpus-led descriptions of the verbs *know* and *think*. According to their data, both verbs ranked in the top five lexical verbs overall in English, with particular prominence in conversation: *know* occurred approximately 7,000 times per million words, and *think* about 5,000 times. Despite its high frequency in the present simple and in conversation, *know* does appear to be particularly resistant to progressive aspect in BrE. The findings in the present study did not support Aarts et al.'s (2010) prediction that *know* might begin to be used more often in the progressive.

In addition to the corpus data, findings from the acceptability survey supported the notion that some stative-progressives are becoming more acceptable – or, at least, tolerated – in informal BrE. Of the eight target items which were anticipated to receive a positive response, six were completely or probably acceptable for a large majority of the 172 respondents: 82% for progressive *love* and *think*; 70-75% for *be*, *loving it*, *resemble* and *smell* (see Table 6 for a breakdown of results). It is notable that the two sentences receiving the highest approbation were authentic extracts retrieved from C12-14: *I'm thinking blanket, candles and a lazy evening* and *The spiders are loving this weather*. By contrast, most of the other items were created specifically for the survey.

	<i>Think</i>	<i>Love</i>	<i>Resemble</i>	<i>Loving it</i>	<i>Smell</i>	<i>Be</i>	<i>Doubt</i>	<i>Want</i>
Combined positive responses (completely/probably acceptable)	82%	82%	75%	73.3%	72.7%	69.8%	56.9%	49.4%

Table 6. Acceptability survey data: percentages of positive responses to target items.

In conclusion, the corpus data presented here did not provide any evidence of a broader range of stative-progressives in current, colloquial BrE than was the case twenty years ago. Moreover, there was no evidence that the progressive was spreading within or across semantic sub-categories of stativity. Rather, individual verbs appeared to attract the progressive in particular contexts, irrespective of their semantic type. In the cases of the perception verb *feel* and the affective verb *love*, the increases in frequency were marked.

RQ2. In what ways, if any, did the use of the affective stative *love* and the cognitive stative *think* change from 1991-92 to 2012-14?

LOVE. The three sources of data in this study (corpora, survey and student grammars) gave a global picture of *love* as increasing in frequency, salience and scope in the progressive form. A review of the concordances revealed a single token in BNC-DS and seven in C12-14. Most of these were informal, light-hearted conversations, associated with enjoyment. At least two, including the BNC-DS instance, referred to the weather, a context which often attracts the use of the progressive. The following concordance from C12-14 illustrates the combined aspectual and subjective functions of the progressive, expressing both the temporariness of the fine weather and the intensity of the spiders' (and blogger's) pleasure:

- (10) The spiders are loving this weather, here's one waiting for its lunch to fly in
(caption for photograph on gardener's blog) [Retrieved from C12-14]

The combined expression of transience and intensity was common to several tokens of progressive *love* in C12-14, including two associated with fashion, another context which is ideally suited to progressive usage. The following concordance also demonstrates an example

of elliptical use, where the subject pronoun and auxiliary verb are understood. This appeared to be common among younger users and in contexts associated with enjoyment and pleasure.

(11) Olivia xxx

It really is gorgeous isn't it! i was thinking it was a total autumnal look something really dark and dusky
This palette looks gorgeous, **loving** all the shadows. I'm a huge fan off Sleek eyeshadows... [Retrieved from C12-14]

The final token is a more serious blog by a young grandfather, who expresses conflicting emotions: he is both enjoying the proximity of family and also looking forward to a time when he can have more space. The switching between simple and progressive form reinforces this sense of contradiction, in conjunction with the adverbials *for the moment* and *a bit*, and the conjunction *although* to express contrasting thoughts. Once again, the progressive works together with other linguistic features to create a more complex picture. The text shares a sense of duality with other tokens of progressive *love*.

(12) My other son lives in one room with his girlfriend and there [sic] 10 month old son, yes I am proud to be a granddad and get to see him loads although it will be nice when they can get there [sic] own place as this house is now getting a bit overcrowded but for the moment I am loving it as we are close and live as a family unit of 4 generations... [Retrieved from C12-14]

To sum up, tokens of progressive *love* in the two corpora revealed recurring contextual themes, notably the weather, fashion and personal relationships. Within the various contexts, the progressive was adapted to express intensity, transience and humour. Frequently, it was used in conjunction with other sentential elements to fulfil particular communicative needs, such as the expression of tentativeness or contradictory notions. The sense of oxymoronic duality associated with the slogan *i'm loving it* – as described by Cehan (2012) – may constitute a new usage in BrE, and it may be an example of American influence. In addition, the verb *love* dominated descriptions of stative-progressive use in recent student grammars, and its two appearances in the acceptability survey received very high approval ratings.

THINK. In terms of raw data, the cognitive verb *think* had the second highest number of hits in the BNC-DS searches, and the highest number of hits in C12-14. These findings reflect those of Biber et al. (1999) – as reported in the introductory section – that *think* was the fifth most frequently-occurring lexical verb in their corpus data, and heavily represented in the conversational register.

There were a number of instances of a tentative planning/visualising function of progressive *think* in C12-14. Several tokens followed a syntactic pattern of a list of three or more items preceded by the sentence head *I'm thinking* – without the use of the preposition *of*. In both the following examples, the speaker visualises a future event whilst also expressing some uncertainty:

(13) So tonight is possibly going to be a takeaway if I can convince Tom. I'm **thinking** blanket, candles and a lazy evening. Oh and maybe some nice cheese that I may have picked up from the farm shop – dangerous place! [Retrieved from C12-14]

(14) I'm **thinking** pub, no speeches, no first dance, around forty people and some decent grub. I'll probably avoid all my family and spend my time latched to the side of my new husband, avoiding all small-talk and stuffing my face. [Retrieved from C12-14]

In contrast, there were no clear instances of this usage in the BNC-DS data. There were, however, many tokens of *thinking of* in the earlier corpus. The use of the progressive *without* a preposition to signify *tentative planning/visualising of a future event* would appear to be a fairly recent addition to informal BrE.

On the strength of his corpus data, Levin proposed that *think* “is becoming less aspectual” (2013:211) and more subjective in PDE, given the prominence of tokens similar to those above. The findings from C12-14 would appear to support this claim in a BrE context.

Interestingly, this use of *think* received the highest approval ratings from respondents to the acceptability survey.

4. Concluding remarks

The present study was severely limited by the small size of the available corpora, which produced only two statistically significant increases in frequency in the progressive forms of *love* and *feel*. To explore stative-progressive changes more fully would require corpora on a much larger scale. Moreover, while the CMC data in the more recent corpus are similar to speech, they differ significantly from the live recordings in the BNC: many are monologues, and those with more than one interlocutor are often asynchronous conversations. This, of course, affects language use in myriad ways, for example, the pronoun ‘I’ is far more frequent in the monologue CMC data than in the BNC dialogues. Added to this, achieving balance and representativeness in general spoken corpora is particularly problematic. Despite best efforts in the present study to sample the widest possible range of texts and text types in the construction of C12-14, it is inevitably just a ‘snapshot’ of the websites considered in a relatively short data-gathering period in the autumn of 2014. Nevertheless, the data did produce some findings of note.

According to the results presented here, stative progressive use is *not* spreading systematically within or between semantic categories, and none of the 25 stative verbs investigated have adopted progressive use in the past twenty years. Rather, certain statives attract progressive aspect in particular contexts, while others remain resistant to it – irrespective of semantic class.

Progressive forms of *love* were highly salient in all data sources. It appears that *loving* has established itself in informal BrE, probably through conventionalisation of the advertising slogan (Granath & Wherrity 2014). Whilst *loving* is most often used to intensify a predication, it can also be used to express duality or conflicting emotions. It is possible that this is a new use of *love* in the progressive in colloquial BrE.

Use of progressive forms of *think* to mean ‘tentative plan’ or ‘visualisation of a future event’ appears to be increasing in frequency in informal BrE. In PDE it is often being used without the preposition *of*, and it is typically followed by a list of three or more items visualised by the speaker to create a mental picture of a future event.

The verb *know* remains highly resistant to the progressive, despite being one of the most frequently-occurring verbs in conversational BrE and despite the fact that it is readily ‘inflected in the progressive in several varieties of English.

The data presented here lends weight to Levin’s (2013: 211) assertion that the progressive is becoming ‘less aspectual’ and, by implication, more subjective. This would be an interesting area for further research. Descriptions of stative-progressive use in BrE student grammars over the past thirty years have changed significantly. There is increasing tolerance of stative-progressive combinations, which will undoubtedly encourage L2 speakers to use them more freely in future. Given the internal and external pressures on BrE, it seems likely that the use of stative-progressives will expand over time.

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Appendix: Acceptability Survey Items

1. "Questionnaires are fun."
2. "I've been all round the village looking for Fluffy."
3. "I'm thinking blanket, candles and a lazy evening."
4. "He done it yesterday."
5. "He's resembling his mother more and more."
6. "Are you wanting me to review the product or just make me aware of it?"
7. "It doesn't matter what anyone else thinks."
8. "I wouldn't want to be in his shoes."
9. "Is she a good mother?" "Yes, it's her first time and she's being a really fantastic mum."
10. "She don't want to go to school today."
11. "I'm completely disagreeing with that."
12. "Did you ever go to Cuba?"
13. "This coffee's tasting really good!"
14. "I wish he'd told me earlier."
15. "He looked at me real strange."
16. "Everyone thought it was an innocent mistake, but I was knowing better."
17. "It's difficult getting the kids to eat their greens."
18. "The spiders are loving this weather."
19. "The cheese has been out of the fridge all day and it's smelling a bit high!"
20. "They got used to it after a while."
21. "There's no reply. They mustn't be home."
22. "I'm hearing that you've rejected the company's proposal."
23. "The solicitor is doubting his client's story."
24. "She's preferring strong black coffee, no sugar."
25. "In case you're sick, you should call the office."
26. "Those canisters are containing nitrous oxide."
27. "Keep going – you've nearly finished."
28. "I'm loving it."
29. "This house is different than the others."
30. "My grandmother was owning that house."
31. "He's gotten so tall since our last visit."
32. "This is really difficult – I'm not understanding it at all."

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