Growing use of progressive forms with stative verbs, bolded in (1), where previously only simple tenses (ST), underlined in (1), were allowed, is an oft-cited example of change in contemporary English (Aitchison 1991; Jespersen 1933; Potter 1975, among others). This putative encroachment of the progressive on the domain of ST should presumably result in the restructuring of the stative paradigm, with the progressive either taking over some of ST’s functions or developing new ones of its own.

(1) I know what I’m thinking and they’re all thinking the same thing. (QEC/QC/021/163)

The relationship between progressives and their simple counterparts has, however, never been clearly defined, especially with statives. While some semanticians put forward that the progressive gives states a dynamic reading (Smith 1983), other linguists (e.g., Jorgensen 1990, 1991; Quirk et al. 1973; Ota 1963) ascribe a plethora of “subtle shades of meaning” (Scheffer 1975: 110) to progressive statives (PS). Still others suggest that PS may have acquired the functions traditionally associated with the progressive in active verbs, most notably as a marker of durative aspect (see Walker 2000, 2001).

This paper is the first variationist study of the alternation between simple and PS forms in contemporary mainstream English usage, as instantiated by a subset of the Corpus of Spoken Quebec English (Poplack et al. in press) comprised of natural speech data from speakers hailing from different regions of Canada, and ranging between 18 and 97 years of age. We investigate claims of change in progress in apparent time by invoking the structure of variant choice: to verify whether older and younger speakers share the same system, we analyze 2638 tensed stative verbs, coded according to linguistic factors put forward specifically for PS or for the progressive in general in the historical and semantic literatures and in variationist studies of non-standard varieties of English.

Results of multivariate analyses performed with GoldVarb 2.1. (Rand & Sankoff 1990) reveal that, irrespective of the age of the informants, the variability is constrained by the same factors that historically determined the distribution of progressives (they are favoured in subordinate clauses and heavily disfavoured in negative sentences), and by the same aspectual considerations outlined for non-statives in contemporary descriptions, as they are indeed preferred with durative states, and eschewed in habitual utterances, and are promoted by temporal adverbs. Further, the expression of particular semantic or dynamic readings emerges as a minor function of PS at best. Against this overall stability, there is nevertheless one unexpected locus of change: while for older speakers deictic subjects (which comprise more than 60% of the data) disfavour the progressive, this effect is lost among younger speakers. We thus argue that the tense/aspect system of statives has conformed to that of their active counterparts for at least the past century, with PS confined to the same highly circumscribed contexts and to the same role as with non-statives. Their recent spread to deictic subjects may however now herald their expansion.
REFERENCES


