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# Subjectivity, politeness and progressive form

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**Abstract**

Most grammars emphasize the aspectual function of the progressive, as in *I am running*. But the progressive is also used in examples such as *Mary is being ironical*; *John is being an angel*; *I was hoping you could come to join us for dinner tomorrow*; *I was wondering whether you could help me*. In other words, it does not fulfil an aspectual function, but a function involving a specific interpretation of a situation by the speaker. In this paper, the interpretative function of the progressive will be examined through a particular set of examples illustrating a 'polite' use of the progressive.

## 1 Introduction

Most of the time, the function of the progressive form is analysed in aspectuo-temporal terms. Namely it does not consider the end of an event, i.e. a situation indicating change. This can be illustrated in the following examples:

(1) *I am running* (activity verb).

(2) *I am writing a letter* (accomplishment verb).

(3) *I am reaching the summit* (achievement verb).

But there exist examples in which the progressive form is attributed a totally different function: the speaker gives a particular evaluation of the situation he is involved in. Hence the interpretative function of the progressive form. Here are a few examples:

(4) *I am not speaking to you.*
(context: the speaker is angry at the hearer and no longer wants to hear from him).

(5) *You're so sweet. You're being an angel.*

(6) *I was wondering whether you would like to help me.*

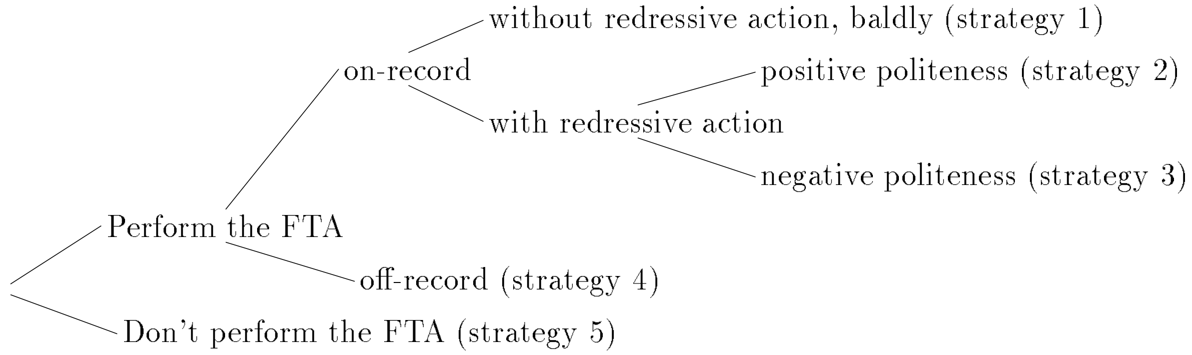


Figure 1: *A brief overview of politeness strategies.*

(7) *I am hoping you will come to visit us soon.*

(8) *I was thinking it might be a good idea if you could join us at the theatre tonight.*

In (4), the speaker gives a specific interpretation of the conversational exchange he has with the hearer, otherwise (4) is a contradiction. In (5), the speaker evaluates the behaviour of the hearer in a metaphorical way. In (6), (7), and (8), we have expressions of politeness.

The purpose of this paper is to examine a particular group of interpretative progressive forms — the group of progressive forms expressing politeness, as in the last three examples. Before identifying the linguistic features involved in a 'polite' use of the progressive form and analysing an example in more detail, we will give a brief overview of recognized politeness strategies.

## 2 A brief overview of recognised politeness strategies

In their analysis of the notion of politeness, Brown & Levinson (1987) focus their attention on the concept of **face**, namely a sort of public 'self-esteem', which comprises two related aspects, called **positive** and **negative** face. Positive face refers to the need by the speaker to be appreciated by others. By contrast, negative face refers to the need by the speaker to be unimpeded.

Very often, the acts performed by the speaker can be felt as an imposition on the hearer's face. Some acts are considered as a threat to the hearer's positive face (when the speaker calls him names, for instance), or as a threat to the hearer's negative face (when the speaker asks the hearer for help, for instance). Such acts are called **Face Threatening Acts** (FTAs) and there exist different strategies for performing them. This can be illustrated by Figure 1 (after Brown & Levinson 1978).

Each strategy on the schema is numbered, the general principle being that the higher the number the more polite the strategy.

One politeness strategy consists in not performing the FTA at all. But then the request is not made (see strategy 5). Another strategy is said to be off-record and can be accounted for as follows:

(9) A: *It's a bit cold in here.*
(context: A wants B to close the door)

The utterance takes the form of a declarative sentence containing no direct link to the service implicitly demanded of the hearer. Here the speaker can sound not coercive and therefore can avoid the responsibility for potentially face-damaging interpretation. This case concerns any example involving metaphor, irony, rhetorical questions, or understatement (see strategy 4).

The other cases we shall look at all deal with the on-record strategies, in which the speaker explicitly mentions the service he is asking for. As opposed to the off-record strategy, the speaker has a choice to perform or not a redressive action that 'gives face' to the hearer. By performing the FTA baldly, without redress, the speaker clearly indicates that a threat is intended to the hearer's negative face. This is what happens when he uses an imperative form as in *Close the door* (see strategy 1). The hearer has then no alternative and can well feel insulted. By contrast, by giving face to the hearer, and then recognizing his wants, the speaker indicates that no threat is intended to his face. Two cases are to be distinguished. First, we can identify the case in which the speaker takes into account the hearer's positive face, which strategy is called positive politeness (see strategy 2), as illustrated below:

(10) *You always do the dishes! I'll do them this time.*

Here, in order to communicate to the hearer that the speaker shares some of his wants, the hearer can exaggerate a few facts. This exaggeration may redress an FTA, simply stressing the sincerity of the speaker's good intentions.

In order to show interest in the hearer, the speaker can also take notice of aspects of the hearer's condition and pay him a compliment, as exemplified below:

(11) *Your dress looks very nice. Where did you buy it?*

As opposed to the strategy of positive politeness, the case of negative politeness refers to the redressive action taken by the speaker to respect the hearer's negative face. The request very often takes the form of a question, as shown in the following:

(12) *Could you close the door?*

(13) *Would you mind closing the door?*

With such questions, the speaker indicates that the hearer is free from imposition, if he wants to be. We can also find examples with a declarative sentence in the progressive form, as in the example *I'm hoping that you will come to see us soon.* This is precisely the example which interests us, since a progressive form is present.

# 3 Linguistic features involved in the negative politeness strategy when the progressive form is used

## 3.1 Nature of the syntactic subject

Because the politeness strategy involves the presence of both speaker and hearer, the first and second-person pronouns are often chosen, as in the following cases:

(14) *What were you wanting?*

(15) *I was hoping you could give me some advice.*

(16) *We're wondering if you have any suggestions.*

## 3.2 Nature of the type of the verb

Furthermore, the choice of the type of verb is also significant. The politeness strategy requires the use of verbs indicating 'private verbs', i.e. states which can only be subjectively verified according to Quirk *et al.* (1985). More especially, in this particular category, only two types of private states are selected: states of emotion or attitude (*wish*, *want*) and intellectual states (*think*, *wonder*). One of the reasons, we think, why this kind of intellectual verb is selected has to do with the Aktionsart of the verbs, indicating a lack of certainty.

## 3.3 Nature of the context

The contrast must also be clearly intersubjective. In the example *I was thinking about my trip to London when somebody knocked on the door*, we notice that despite the use of the first-person subject and that of an intellectual state *think*, the progressive form cannot be interpreted as referring to a politeness strategy. Here the progressive *was thinking* only refers to the ongoing activity of the verb *think*, i.e. the aspectual value of the progressive form. As opposed to this, let us consider the following example: *I was thinking it might be a good idea if you could join us at the theatre tonight.* The context here explicitly involves an intersubjective relation between the speaker *I* and the hearer *you.* The relation is such that it leads us to interpret the utterance as polite. And the progressive form has a polite function, and not an aspectual function.

More needs to be said about the nature of the relationship existing between speaker and hearer when a negative politeness strategy is at stake. Our purpose now is to try to reconstruct the psychological mechanism and see how the progressive form contributes to this politeness strategy.

# 4 Analysis of an example

Let us take an example and analyse it.

(17) A: *I was wondering if you could help me in this maths exercise.*

B: (reading the newspaper): *Yes, certainly.*

The use of the progressive form is often considered more polite than that of the simple form. So let us contrast the two forms: *I wondered if*... versus *I was wondering if.* The important thing to notice in *I wondered if*....is that the past form does not belong to the narrative, and therefore does not refer to factual events. The speaker chooses to present the private state *wonder* as being projected into a fictitious past. Consequently, what is underlined with the fictitious past is the **lack of relevance** of the request introduced by the subordinate clause. This lack of relevance of the request is also corroborated by the choice of the Aktionsart of the verb *wonder*, indicating a lack of certainty.

All this contributes to set up not a temporal, but modal distance between speaker and hearer, in order to modulate the perceived assertiveness of the request. This is exactly what is aimed at in a case of negative politeness. The speaker wants to indicate that he respects the hearer's negative face, i.e. the hearer's need not to be unimpeded. And by the same way, the speaker favours the hearer's capacity of intervention. Thus, the use of the fictitious past sounds appropriate in such circumstances.

What happens when you add the progressive form? In purely aspectual terms, the role of the progressive form consists in not taking into account the end of a situation referring to an event. But here such a definition cannot be applied at the level of discourse. Because the speaker's wish for help has not been achieved yet, you could say that the speaker uses the progressive form to **focus on the absence of consequences** of the private verb *wonder* in the past form. Therefore, the progressive form reinforces the politeness strategy already mentioned by the use of the fictitious past.

Another couple of examples can be contrasted: *I am wondering if* versus *I was wondering if.* If we compare the two examples, we see that there is no use of fictitious past in the example *I am wondering if.* Then there is no modal distance between speaker and hearer. Because of the use of the present, the utterance is located relative to the moment of speech. Because of the presence of the progressive form, the absence of consequence for the request is underlined.

Another couple of examples can be contrasted: *I wonder if* versus *I wondered if.* Both forms are simple forms. Therefore, there is no focus on the absence of consequences for the request. Moreover, only the simple present is used in *I wonder if*, then presenting the request as factual. It is a way of presenting the request objectively and attenuating the intrusion of the presence of the speaker.

# 5 Conclusion

To conclude, we can say that the study of one type of negative politeness has enabled us to shed some light on the presence of subjectivity involved in the use of the progressive form. Given the existence of the aspectuo-temporal function and that of the interpretative function for the progressive form, one might wonder whether these two functions are separate or can coexist. It would be interesting to make the hypothesis that there exists a **superfunction** encapsulating these two functions. This superfunction could be formulated in terms of **the expression by the speaker of discontinuity.** Thus, both subjective and aspectual functions coexist. When the aspectuo-temporal relationship is dominant, the element of discontinuity amounts to the interpretation of the situation by the speaker as a break between the aiming and the actualization of the process. Hence the value of process going on in the following examples:

(18) *I'm singing* (activity verb).

(19) *I'm painting a picture* (accomplishment verb).

When the level of discourse is considered predominant as in the polite use of the progressive form illustrated in (17), the progressive form expresses an element of discontinuity betwen the potential realization of the speaker's wish and the non-realization of the speaker's wish at the moment of the request.

An interesting example which mixes the aspectuo-temporal level and the subjective level in a subtle way can be provided by the study of free indirect speech, as illustrated below:

(20) *John looked through the window. Mary was walking down the street.*

The element of discontinuity is marked at two levels. At the aspectuo-temporal level, the progressive form applied to the verb *walk* shows that the end of the activity is not taken into account. At the discourse level, the presence of the progressive also indicates a shift of perspective, hence the element of discontinuity, from the narrator to the character *John*, thanks to the intermediary use of the verb of perception *look* applied to *John.*

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