

## “Progressive Aspect” in Dutch

### 1. Introduction\*

In this paper I will concentrate on the semantic difference between simple verbs and progressive-like verb formations as exemplified in sentences (1) and (2).

- (1) Jan schreef een brief  
Jan wrote a letter  
'Jan wrote/was writing a letter'
  
- (2) a. Jan was een brief aan het schrijven  
Jan was a letter at the write (inf)  
'Jan was writing a letter'
- b. Jan zat een brief te schrijven  
Jan sat a letter at write (inf)  
'Jan sat writing a letter'

The semantic distinction between such sentences has often been described in terms of aspect. (1) is then said to be aspectually unmarked, while (2a) and (2b) are claimed to be marked for "imperfective" or, more specifically, "progressive" aspect (e.g. Comrie 1976; Ebert 1989). The terminology used refers to the fact that in (2a) and (2b) the writing is presented as being in progress at some time in the past; the letter is not claimed to have been finished (in fact, it may never be finished). (1) may imply that the letter actually got finished (translation: 'Jan wrote a letter'), but it also allows the 'progressive' interpretation that is obligatory in the case of (2a) and (2b) (translation: 'Jan was writing a letter'). This shows that in Dutch progressive meaning is not systematically linked up with one particular linguistic form - as is evidenced by the two possible translations of (1) in English.

In this paper I will claim that the formal difference between sentences like (1) and (2) does correspond to a systematic semantic difference. In the first section I will show that the verb formations in (2a) and (2b) are in fact locative expressions. With regard to the interpretation of such locative expressions in narrative texts, I will show that the notion 'background' (as discussed by e.g. Hopper 1979; Reinhart 1984) does not suffice to distinguish these from their unmarked counterparts. In the last section I will propose an alternative analysis. It will be shown that the difference in interpretation between these sentences can be systematically described in terms of the extent to which the activity is presented as a contextually salient event (for the notion 'salience' see e.g. Sidner 1983; Janssen 1989). This semantic difference can be shown to correspond to the formal difference between these sentences in an approach that distinguishes between the interpretation of finite and non-finite verb forms.

## 2. Locative expressions

With regard to their form as well as their meaning, the verb formations in (3) share some striking characteristics with expressions that are used to denote the place where an entity is located.

- (3) a. aan het infinitief zijn  
       at the infinitive to be  
       b. zitten/staan/liggen/lopen te infinitief  
       to sit/stand/lie/walk at infinitive

Compare (4) and (5). These sentences each consist of a finite form of zijn 'to be' or staan 'to be standing' and a prepositional phrase. In (4) this prepositional phrase refers to a concrete location, in (5) it refers to an activity.

- (4) a. hij is in de keuken  
       he is in the kitchen  
       'he is in the kitchen'  
       b. hij staat in de keuken  
       he stands in the kitchen  
       'he is standing in the kitchen'  
       (5) a. hij is aan het koken  
       he is at the cook (inf)  
       'he is cooking'  
       b. hij staat te koken  
       he stands at cook (inf)  
       'he stands cooking'

As for the expression in (3a), this similarity has already been noted by Overdiep (1937:354), who states that basically the combination with aan is a locative one (cf. also Comrie 1976:99). Dealing with the expressions in (3b) Leys (1985) makes similar remarks, referring to the infinitives in these expressions as 'locatieve bepalingen' (locative adjuncts). The resemblance can be further illustrated by the Dutch translations in (6). Like the expressions in (3), the prepositional phrases in (6) are all used as Dutch equivalents of the English Progressive, the only difference being the degree to which these forms have been nominalized.

- (6) a. hij was nu in afwachting van de uitslag (p.78)  
       he was now in awaiting of the results  
       'now he was waiting the results' (p.80)  
       b. ondertussen was Nora druk in de weer (p.97)  
       meanwhile was Nora busy in the "work" (subst)  
       'all the while Nora was working' (p.99)  
       c. [...] lag hij in een diepe gelukkige slaap (p.171)  
       lay he in a deep happy sleep (subst)  
       'he was deeply and happily sleeping' (p.169)  
       d. hij was op zoek naar genie (p.131)  
       he was on search to genius  
       'he was looking for genius' (p.131)

(taken from the novel Under the eye of the clock by Christopher Nolan, London 1987 and its translation De tijd zal het leren, Amsterdam 1989)

The examples under (4), (5) and (6) have a number of formal similarities. In all cases a finite form of a stative verb (zijn, staan, liggen) occurs, followed by a preposition and a nominal form (i.e. nominal to a higher or lesser degree). As for the interpretive resemblance, the meaning of the finite form in all these sentences could be described as 'to be located/situated'. The prepositional phrases one could think of as referring to a location where someone is being situated. While in (4) the location is a concrete one, in (5) and (6) the term location has to be understood as abstract. Within 'localist' theories of aspect, which consider situations to be conceptualized as spatial objects (e.g. Anderson 1973), the meaning of imperfective/progressive aspect has been described as 'being in/on/at a situation' (cf. Dik 1987: 65-68; Brinton 1988: 112-114). The use of prepositional phrases with aan and te 'at' in the verb formations in (3) shows that in Dutch, as in many other languages, this parallelism is not just a semantic one, but is also expressed formally.

In terms of 'Aktionsart' the verb formations in (3), as well as the concrete locative expressions exemplified in (4), exhibit the aspectual properties of states. Thus, just like combinations of zijn 'to be' and an adjective, like ziek zijn 'to be ill' in (7a) and (7b), they can be called stative: the situations expressed in these sentences are presented as continuing at a certain moment in time; no reference is made to a starting point or end point of the situation (as opposed to event sentences, which present situations as taking place in its entirety at a particular moment or interval). Because the finite form liep 'walked' in (7a) is given such a stative interpretation, the activity expressed in the locative phrase in (7a), hoesten 'to cough', is necessarily interpreted as happening several times (iteratively). The interpretive effect is comparable to that of adding to the unmarked form of the verb an adverb explicitly referring to a stretch of time, such as voortdurend 'continuously' in (7b).

- (7) a. Piet was ziek en liep te hoesten  
Piet was ill and walked at cough (inf)  
'Piet was ill and was coughing'
- b. Piet was ziek en hoestte voortdurend  
Piet was ill and coughed continuously  
'Piet was ill and coughed continuously'

Note that coordination of a (clearly stative) nominal predicate and a locative expression in (7a) produces a wholly acceptable combination. The stative character of these verb formations becomes especially relevant in context, as will be shown in the next section. Here I will consider what consequences an analysis of these verb formations as stative locative expressions has for their interpretation in narrative texts.

### 3. The interpretation of locative verb formations in narrative texts

#### 3.1 Foreground/background

Several studies dealing with the distinction between foreground and background in narrative texts (e.g. Hopper 1979; Dry 1981; Reinhart 1984) consider related concepts as 'imperfectivity' and 'stativity' to be markers of background-information. The term foreground is used to refer to the sequence of ordered events in a narrative, i.e. to the actual story; the term background is used to refer to all the information that is not part of this sequence of events (the distinction is comparable to that between narration and description). As an illustration of this distinction consider (8).

Only the two events referred to in the underlined sentence are assumed to serve as foreground. Interpretively these events are considered to be temporally sequential; as such they are part of the 'story-line'.

- (8) In de tuin staan strandstoelen van rood/wit gestreept linnen. Uit de keuken waaiert de geur van matzeballensoep. Opa draagt een zwart streepjespak met een brede witte gummiboord. Zijn das hangt aan een elastiekje. Zijn snorpunten zijn omhooggekruld. Hij loopt met gereedschap te rammelen. Moeder is in de keuken bezig. De klimop heeft bijna de hele zijmuur met zijn glimmend groen versierd. Moeder draagt een lange witte jurk met een gebloemd schort erover. Tante staat op uit de strandstoel en vraagt of ze moeder kan helpen.

(taken from the novel De kip die over de soep vloog by Frans Pointl, Amsterdam 1990)

'In the garden there are beachchairs of red and white striped linen. Floating from the kitchen is the smell of matzosoup. Grandfather is wearing a black, striped suit with a broad white rubber collar. His tie is hanging from a piece of elastic. The tips of his moustache have been curled up. He is walking around rattling with some tools. Mother is busy in the kitchen. Shiny green ivy has decorated almost the entire side-wall. Mother is wearing a long white dress with a flowered apron. Aunt Jet gets up from the beachchair and asks if she could help mother.'

The situations referred to in the sentences preceding the underlined sentence are not considered to be part of the story-line. These situations all 'hold' at a certain time, namely at the time the foreground events take place. Therefore, they are assumed to serve as background to these foreground events. Sentences representing background-information can thus be called stative in the sense that they do not suggest progress in narrative time.

As for the locative verb formations I am concerned with, note that hij liep met gereedschap te rammelen ('he is walking around rattling with some tools') in (8, line 5) forms a natural part of this descriptive fragment providing background-information. It can now be explained why these verb formations could be considered as markers of background. When combined with a clause that is interpreted as non-stative the events in these expressions are interpreted as continuing while the foregrounded event takes place. These events are therefore not interpreted as happening sequentially, but as overlapping (to some extent). Once again, this applies to both abstract and concrete stative locative expressions, as is shown in (9a) and (9b).

- (9) a. toen Jan binnenkwam, lag Piet in bed  
when Jan entered, lay Piet in bed  
'when Jan entered, Piet was lying in bed'
- b. toen Jan binnenkwam, was Piet een brief aan het schrijven/  
zat Piet een brief te schrijven  
when Jan entered, was Piet a letter at the write/sat Piet a letter at write  
'when Jan entered, Piet was writing a letter/sat writing a letter'
- c. toen Jan binnenkwam, schreef Piet een brief  
when Jan entered, wrote Piet a letter  
'when Jan entered, Piet wrote/was writing a letter'

Both in (9a) and (9b) Jan's entrance is interpretively situated within the state that Piet is in. The state of lying in the bed and writing the letter respectively, can therefore be considered to represent background information. There is no movement of narrative time suggested within these sentences.

Although the notion background may clarify a typical use of (stative) locative expressions in narrative texts, it does not suffice to distinguish between the interpretation of these verb formations and that of their unmarked counterparts, such as schreef in (9c). The main clause in this sentence, containing an 'unmarked' verb form, may be interpreted non-statively. Piet is then considered to start writing the letter after Jan's entrance. In fact, a relation of causation between the two events is suggested. The events are interpreted as happening sequentially and both could be considered foregrounded. In this interpretation narrative time does move forward within the sentence.

At the same time, the main clause does not exclude a stative interpretation; like in (9b) the writing of the letter is then considered to be in progress when Jan enters the room. Piet's activity is considered to be background-information. This interpretation of the main clause in (9a) is preferred to the non-static one, probably because it is hard to imagine a functional relation between the two events. Conversely, in the case of toen zij binnenkwam, schonk hij de wijn in ('when he entered, she poured in the wine') the more probable interpretation of the main clause would be the non-stative one (though the stative one would also be possible).

The interpretive difference between sentences like (9b) and (9c) cannot be explained in terms of the foreground/background distinction only, (9c) being preferably interpreted in the same way as (9b). The notion background could be used to distinguish between these sentences if an aspectual meaning like 'imperfectivity' were systematically linked to a locative expression. As stated in the introduction, this is not the case in Dutch. In the next section I will show that the difference between sentences like (1) and (2), as well as between (9b) and (9c), can be systematically explained in an approach that distinguishes between the interpretation of finite and non-finite verbs.

### 3.2 Contextual salience

The question that remains to be answered is: what is the semantic distinction corresponding systematically to the formal differences between sentences like (1) and (2), repeated below as (10) and (11)? A comparison with the semantic difference between past and perfect tense forms as treated by Janssen (1989; 1991a; 1991b) will be clarifying.

- (10) Jan schreef een brief  
Jan wrote a letter  
'Jan wrote/was writing a letter'
- (11) a. Jan was een brief aan het schrijven  
Jan was a letter at the write (inf)  
'Jan was writing a letter'
- b. Jan zat een brief te schrijven  
Jan sat a letter at write (inf)  
'Jan sat writing a letter'
- (12) Jan heeft een brief geschreven  
Jan has a letter written  
'Jan has written a letter'

The comparison is made on the following grounds. While in (10) the activity of writing is described by means of a finite verb, in (11) and (12) the finite verb is an auxiliary. The non-finite main verb in (11a) and (11b) is part of a prepositional phrase; in (12) it is expressed with a past participle. It is precisely the difference in content of the finite verb that is claimed by Janssen (1989; 1991a; 1991b) to explain the semantic difference between preterit and perfect in Dutch. To explain this, Janssen (1991a) characterizes the semantic function of the finite verb as cited in (13).

- (13) By using a finite verb, the speaker indicates that the event mentioned by means of this verb is salient to him from his vantage point, which is given either contextually or cotextually (Janssen 1991a).

This analysis distinguishes between the interpretation of finite and non-finite verbs. It is only the finite verb that is considered to be used deictically (in the same sense that demonstratives are - cf. Janssen 1991a). An event expressed in a finite verb is therefore considered to be somehow contextually salient. As in the simple past tense it is the main verb that is mentioned with the finite verb, Janssen (1991b) states that "the use and interpretation of the preterit in Dutch require the background of a close-fitting scene in which the event referred to is embedded." The quotation shows that salience has to be understood in a discourse-organizational sense. For an event to be presented as salient at a certain point means that it is viewed as being embedded in the scene that is presented in the context. Salience, then, can only be determined in relation to other events presented in the narrative; it always has to be understood as contextual salience. It should be noted that salience is considered to be a property of the way language-users choose (either consciously or not) to present an event at a certain point. In a narrative, an event presented as non-salient may nevertheless appear to be important or even crucial to the plot of the story at a later stage. In that case, however, we are dealing with a property of the event itself and no longer a property of the way this event is chosen to be presented relative to other events.

Now consider the interpretive difference between (14a) and (14b) as an illustration of the relevance of this analysis to the verb formations I am concerned with.

- (14a) Oom hurkte, nam de arm van de man en telde diens polsslagen terwijl hij op zijn horloge keek.  
(De kip die over de soep vloog, p.19)  
'Uncle squatted down, took the arm of the man and counted the pulses while he looked at his watch.'
- (14b) Oom hurkte, nam de arm van de man en telde diens polsslagen terwijl hij op zijn horloge zat te kijken/aan het kijken was.  
'Uncle squatted down, took the arm of the man and counted the pulses while he sat/was looking at his watch.'

By using the finite verb keek 'looked' in (14a) the speaker presents the looking at the watch as contextually salient. The activity is indeed interpreted as being embedded in the scene that is contextually presented: a functional relation with the counting of the pulses can be inferred. In (14b), however, the looking at the watch is presented with a non-finite verb form in the prepositional phrase; therefore there is no indication for a conspicuous relation between the two events.

The interpretive difference between sentences like (10) and (11) can now be formulated as follows. In (10) the writing of the letter is presented as a contextually salient event, while in (11) it is presented as non-salient in relation to other events presented in the context. From the viewpoint of the interpreter, the main-verb event being expressed with a non-finite verb form could now be considered as a signal that the event should not be 'fitted' directly into the scene presented as salient by the preceding. In accordance with the locative analysis presented in section 2 the degree of salience attributed to the event expressed in the prepositional part of a locative verb formation can be compared to that generally attributed to concrete locations in narratives: its relevance is not expected to extend beyond the clause it appears in. It may come as no surprise that, just like concrete locative expressions, these locative verb formations are most typically used to introduce participants. In these cases the activity presented in the prepositional phrase merely functions as a means to 'locate' a participant. In this respect the use of a locative verb formation in the underlined sentence in (15) can be regarded as a typical case.

- (15) Voor de zoveelste maal bladerde ze dat fotoalbum door. Een morbide zelfkwelling waarbij ze, wit weggetrokken, af en toe iets onverstaanbaars mompelde.

Ik zat aan de huiskamertafel het nieuwste model van de Packard, de Clipper, voorzichtig uit te knippen, toen ze me riep. Ik stond op en ging naast haar staan. Ze wees op een foto. Een grote zonnehoed waaronder ogen die een nooit beantwoorde vraag schenen te stellen.

(De kip die over de soep vloog, p.32)

'For the hundredth time she turned over the leaves of this photo album. A morbid self-torture, during which she now and then mumbled something unintelligible. I sat at the table, cutting the latest model of the Packard, the Clipper, when she called me. I got up and stood beside her. She pointed at a picture. A big sun hat under which there were eyes, seemingly asking a question that had never been answered.'

The activity expressed in the prepositional phrase, the cutting of the car-model, is not seen as contextually salient - no more than the table in the same clause is. The activity is only mentioned to introduce the boy at the scene and to somehow account for his presence in the room. The only event that is salient in relation to the other events is the boy 'being present' (in a sitting position), i.e. the interpretive function of the finite verb form.

Can it now also be explained why in the first sentence of (15) the activity the mother is engaged in is expressed with a simple verb? When dealing with first sentences salience can hardly be defined as 'fitting directly into the context' as the context has yet to be established. Nevertheless, I would claim that by presenting the activity with a finite form, it is somehow being viewed by the speaker/narrator as salient. In (15) the salience of the picture-book the mother is reading in can be demonstrated by the fact that it is the theme of the fragment (15, line 5 and further). Consider also (16).

- (16) Ze was brood aan het bakken en luisterde tegelijkertijd naar Beethovens Mondscheinsonate, en toen hij zag hoe zijn moeder ervan genoot, ging Joseph meeluisteren. (De tijd zal het leren, p.43)

She was baking bread while at the same time listening to Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata, and seeing how much his mother was enjoying it Joseph listened too. (Under the eye of the clock, p.47)

The activities of the mother presented in the first sentence of this fragment could both be considered to be in progress and to be serving as background-information. It is, however, only the first activity that is presented with a locative verb formation. Corresponding to this formal difference, a different degree of salience is attributed to these events: the baking of the bread can be considered to be backgrounded to a higher degree than is the listening to the music. It is the last activity that is presented as the more salient one as is illustrated by the reference of ervan: it immediately becomes the theme of the fragment. Note that the semantic distinction between the simple verb and the locative verb formation in (16), as well as in (14) and (15), could not be explained in terms of aspect or the distinction between foreground and background as discussed in section 3.1.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to show that the semantic difference between simple verbs and progressive-like verb formations in Dutch cannot be systematically described in terms of aspect only. The simple verb, allowing a 'progressive' interpretation, can represent background-information to foregrounded events in the same way that locative verb formations can. The notion of contextual salience, introduced in the last section, seems to offer more of an explanation, as it is independent of the foreground/background distinction. Furthermore, I have argued, if the semantic difference is described in terms of contextual salience, it can be systematically linked to a formal difference between these verb forms, provided that a distinction is made between the interpretation of finite and non-finite verbs.

\* The research for this paper was carried out when I worked as a student-assistent to the program "Functioneel Taalonderzoek: Grammatica en Pragmatiek" (VU lett 88/10). I would like to thank the participants in this program for giving me this opportunity and especially Theo Janssen for his stimulating comments on an earlier version of this paper. Thanks also to Evelien Keiser for correcting my English.

#### References

- Anderson, J.  
1973 An essay concerning aspect Den Haag.
- Brinton, L.  
1988 The development of English aspectual systems Cambridge.
- Comrie, B.  
1976 Aspect, Cambridge etc.



Dik, S.C.

- 1987 'Copula Auxiliariation: How and Why?', in: M. Harris & P. Ramat Historical Development of Auxiliaries. Berlin etc.

Dry, H.

- 1981 'Sentence aspect and the movement of narrative time', in: Text 1, 233-240.

Ebert, K.

- 1989 'Aspektmarkierung im Fering und verwandten Sprachen', in: W. Abraham & Th. Janssen (eds.) Tempus - Aspekt - Modus, Tübingen, 293-322.

Hopper, P.J.

- 1979 'Some observations on the typology of focus and aspect in narrative language', in: Studies in Language 3, 37-64.

Janssen, Th. A.J.M.

- 1989 'Preteritum of perfectum? O tempora, o sores!', in: Neerlandica Extra Muros Nr. 59, 50- 60.
- 1991a 'Tenses and demonstratives: conspecific categories', in: R.A. Geiger & B. Rudzka-Ostyn (eds.) Conceptualisations and mental processing in language (Cognitive Linguistics Research 2), Berlin etc. [in press].
- 1991b 'Preterit as definite description', in: J. Gvozdanovic & Th. A.J.M. Janssen (eds.) The function of tense in texts, Amsterdam etc. [in press].

Leijs, O.

- 1985 'De konstruktie staan te + infinitief en verwante konstrukties', in: Verslagen en mededelingen van de koninklijke Akademie voor Nederlandse taal- en letterkunde, 265-277.

Overdiep, G.S.

- 1937 Stilistische Grammatica, Zwolle.

Reinhart, T.

- 1984 'Principles of Gestalt perception in the temporal organization of narrative texts', in: Linguistics 22, 779-809.

Sidner, C.L.

- 1983 'Focusing in the comprehension of definite anaphora', in: M. Brady & R.C. Berwick (eds.) Computational models of discourse, Cambridge etc., 267-330.