

## **Auxiliary Selection – Syntactico-Semantic Interfaces in English and Romanian**

Denisa DRĂGUȘIN\*

**Abstract:** The present study presents the issue of auxiliary selection in English and Romanian, aiming to underline the specificities of the two languages, and contrast them in terms of differences and similarities as regards auxiliary selection. We analyse the restrictions in the selection of the progressive/imperfective and perfective aspects (that is, the auxiliaries *have* or *be*) with different semantic classes of verbs (states, processes, activities) in English, and the difference of selection for perfective and imperfective in Romanian by contrast with the English selection. Furthermore, the present paper also illustrates the differences in auxiliary passive selection between Romanian and English.

**Keywords:** auxiliary, selection, syntactico-semantic interface, aspect

### **1. The Progressive in English**

Historically speaking, the progressive aspect has never really existed. Gradually, language has evolved and because of the evolution of language in the past centuries, Jespersen concluded that the progressive originally comes from structures like *I am a-reading*, where the form in *-ing* is not the participle but the verbal noun, and *a*, that was later on dropped, is actually the preposition *on*. Some of Jespersen's examples on the on/a + -ing construction are:

*They had been a fighting. (They had been fighting.)*  
*A knight that had been on huntynge. (A knight that had been hunting.).*

In the modern period, the use of the progressive forms has been constantly gaining ground and this may be considered one of the points in which the language has gained in nice distinctions and logical precision. (Jespersen 1931:177)

---

\* Assistant Professor, PhD, Spiru Haret University, Bucharest, Romania.

The concept of aspect implies the existence of initial and final endpoints (perfect) in the mind of the speaker or the focusing on some internal stages of the event (progressive). Therefore, the progressive aspect focuses on internal stages of events and it includes neither the initial endpoint nor the final one. Moreover, Jespersen sees the progressive aspect as showing *a durative, protracted action*, focusing on a “*framed interval*”, as stated above, and presenting *an action that is incomplete*.

The sense of the progressive aspectual form is that of *a process unfolding at a certain reference time (RT)*, which means that it began before the respective RT, and it may very well continue after the RT. Let's take for example the sentence in (1):

- (1) She was playing the piano, [when her mother came in.]

In the sentence above, the role of the RT (*when her mother came in*) is to ‘anchor’ in time the actual situation, giving the speaker a frame interval. The playing of the piano surely began before the RT, and the intuition is that it may continue after the coming in of the mother. However, there are clear situations where the action ceases at the RT as in the example below.

- (2) She was playing the piano, when she had a heart attack.

In the situation above, it is very clear that the action cannot extend beyond the RT.

As we have stated before, the sense of a progressive verb phrase is to denote a processes that unfolds at a certain RT. However, there are certain aspectual classes of verb phrases that are restricted in their interaction with the progressive aspectual forms. No analysis of the English progressive can be satisfactory if it is not compatible with the analysis of aspectual verb phrases, given the semantic effects of the combination between a verb phrase class (i.e. states, processes, events) and the sense of the progressive aspect.

### 1.1.1. Process verb phrases and the progressive

The process verb phrases can be described as additive and subdivisible, which means that they can be rendered in the progressive aspect at a certain RT. Consider the following examples:

- (3) a. It was crowing three times at dawn.  
b. The old man was unconscious and groaning.  
c. He was grumbling all the time.

The sentence in (3a) presents a process VP with an expressed RT, while (3b)'s Reference Time is covert. In (3c), the adverbial phrase is durative, emphasizing the unfolding in time of the process the sentence describes.

However, there are some non-durative or instantaneous processes which cannot be used in the progressive in order to denote a single instance of the respective process – this is a semantic trait of this subclass that includes processes that cannot be described as happening in stages. If these non-durative processes occur in the progressive then, the sense is that of repeated process over the interval of time the sentence refers to (see examples in (4)).

- (4) a. The child was jumping up and down.  
b. He was knocking at the door [when he heard a strange noise.]

There is another subclass of momentary verbs that are, semantically, verbs of assertion like: *accept*, *pronounce*, *declare*, *deny*, *beg*, *call*, *dare*, etc. They are also called “performative” verbs, and they have such a use only in the first person, present tense form. Such verbs do not occur in the progressive.

- (5) a. I declare war.  
b. I pronounce you husband and wife.  
c. Well, it doesn't fit – not if you are accepting Mrs. North's evidence.

We can conclude by saying that process VPs occur in the progressive aspect to indicate, with respect to a certain RT, that the process the sentence is about is unfolding at the respective RT, and that non-durative or momentary processes do not occur in the progressive aspect when they indicate one single instance of the respective process; in the progressive aspectual form the sense is that of a repeated process.

### 1.1.2. Event verb phrases and the progressive

Event verb phrases split into *accomplishments* and *achievements*.

*Accomplishments* consist of a durative part, with successive stages and a natural endpoint, which is a change of state. *Achievements* are instantaneous events that consist of a single stage, which results in a change of state. There is this paradox in the usage of the progressive with event verbs, as the progressive implies a durative and incomplete action, without an endpoint, which means that this combination results in a recategorization.

- (6) a. The world was slowly turning into gold.  
b. She was picking up the pieces of a broken tea-cup.  
c. We were constantly receiving letters of appreciation.  
d. New guests were continually arriving.

All the event verb phrases, both accomplishments (6a, b) and achievements (6c, d), are recategorized into simple processes unfolding in time at a certain RT, when they appear in the progressive aspect.

### 1.1.3. State verb phrases and the progressive

State verbs are thought to be atemporal, which means that normally, that is, when they describe a property of the external argument, they cannot appear in the progressive. However, there are instances in which state verbs are used in the progressive aspect and they denote a temporary trait of the external argument. Thus, the difference in semantics between (7a) and (7b).

- (7) a. John is a fool.  
b. John is being a fool.

In the first sentence, the verb describes a property of Jack, while in the second, the process is unfolding at the RT, that is, *Jack is acting foolishly*, meaning that he is not normally a fool. Other state verbs, such as those that indicate mental cognition: *know, believe, think, regret, trust, hope, imagine, wonder*, do not freely appear in the progressive, but when they do, they do not denote the characteristic states of individual-level objects, but of stage-level individuals.

- (8) a. I believe she is innocent.  
b. I trust her.  
c. Mary is knowing more and more about Physics these days.  
d. She was wondering to herself how it was she had not heard of his arrival.

Perception verbs like *see, hear, smell, taste, feel* are states denoting a characteristic propensity for an object-level individual, and they do not occur in the progressive. If they do, there is a change of their interpretation from state denoting predicates to processes that occur in time.

- (9) a. The soup tastes good.  
b. The cloth feels soft.  
c. I was feeling the material.  
d. When you play you are hearing things I am deaf to.

The sentences in (9c, d) indicate an experience that is unfolding at a certain RT, an experience that is a process that goes on for a certain amount of time. For these sentences we can interpret the VPs as attributing an intention to the subject NP, while in the sentences in (9a, b) this interpretation does not exist.

The emotive verb phrases like *love, hate, like, dislike, rejoice, want, desire*, etc, have a non-temporary character, so they do not generally occur in the progressive aspect. If they do, they are interpreted as processes unfolding at a certain RT, being true of a certain spatially and temporally limited stage of an individual.

- (10) a. John loves Mary.

- b. I like music.
- c. I am missing you dreadfully.
- d. I was hating you all the time.

The progressive aspect is also used in habitual sentences with emotional overtone, that is, habits that are annoying for the ones around those that have it.

- (11) a. He is always coming late.  
b. They are always smoking in the toilet.

The whole discussion above pictures instances of the use of the auxiliary BE in the progressive and the situations it is selected in, either in a present time reference or past time reference.

## 2. The Imperfective in Romanian

The Romanian imperfective is associated with the temporal values of the verb forms of *Imperfect*, which is not formed by means of any auxiliary, thus having no restrictions, and the Present tense.

- (12) a. Citeam o carte când a intrat Ana. [past time reference – the interpretation of result is blocked]  
b. Citesc o carte. [present time reference – the interpretation of result is blocked]

## 3. The Perfective in English

The distinction between perfective and imperfective aspects is that perfectivity indicates the view of a situation as a single whole, without distinction of the various separate phases that make up the situation, and imperfectivity pays essential attention to the internal structure of the situation. In other words, semantically speaking, the perfective includes both endpoints (initial and final) of the situation and it is not presented as durative, while the imperfective/progressive focuses on some internal stages of the situation and its durative value. That is why we cannot agree with the statement that “perfective forms indicate situations of short duration, while imperfective forms indicate situations of long duration”, because it is not a matter of time span but of focus. Consider the examples in (13):

- (13) a. He was reading the *Times*, when John saw him.  
b. He has read the *Times*.

In the examples above, there is this clear distinction of focus. In (13a), the sentence focuses on the stage of the reading in which *John saw him*, while in (13b), the sentence focuses on the reading of the newspaper as a whole.

Our discussion regarding the perfective aspect is valuable, as it is formed by using the auxiliary HAVE, carrying the inflectional markers, and the past participle of the lexical verb. Thus, we can point out the instances in which the auxiliary HAVE is selected for the formation of the perfective aspect and which verb phrases can appear in the perfective.

### 3.1. States, Processes and Events in the Perfective Aspect

In the perfective aspect, states, processes and events act similarly, allowing different interpretations, as coined by different linguists, also depending on the intrinsic semantic of the verb used in the sentence.

Events and processes act similarly when used in the perfective aspect, having a resultative interpretation, as shown in (14):

- (14) a. She has broken the chair. (accomplishment)  
b. I have found a penny under the bed. (achievement)  
c. I have driven home. (process)

In (15), states, processes and events used together with a frequency adverb in the perfective allow an experiential reading of the sentences.

- (15) a. I have read the book five times.  
b. I have walked to the park very often this week.  
c. I have found cats sitting on my car too many times to still care about scratches.  
d. I have seen him before.

However, only state verb phrases used with durative adverbial phrases can have a continuative interpretation in sentences in the perfective aspectual form. For events and processes, this interpretation is rendered by means of the progressive aspect. Consider the examples in (16):

- (16) a. I have been here since Friday.  
b. I have hated it ever since.  
c. She's always wanted to go to Rome.

## 4. The Perfective in Romanian

In Romanian, the perfective aspect is associated with the temporal values of the following verb forms: *Perfect compus*, (which is formed using the auxiliary *a avea* (have) and the past participle of the lexical verb), *Mai mult ca perfect* (corresponding to the English Past Perfect) and *Viitor Anterior* (which is formed by means of two auxiliaries, *a vrea* and *a fi*, and which corresponds to the English Future Perfect). There

are no restrictions related to the use of the perfective in Romanian. Consider the examples in (17):

- (17) a. Mihai a plecat la Paris de două ori.  
b. Andrei i-a dat cartea profesoarei.  
c. Iulia a răspuns corect la întrebare.  
d. Citisem cartea înainte de a vedea ecranizarea ei spectaculoasă.  
e. Voi pleca după ce îmi voi fi scris un bilet de adio.

### 5. The Passive Voice in English

In English, the Passive voice is formed by using the auxiliary verb *to be* bearing the inflectional markers of the lexical verb in the Active Voice and the past participle of the lexical verb. The Object is promoted into Subject position and the Subject of the sentence in the Active voice becomes the Agent of the sentence in the Passive.

There are certain types of verbs that do not allow Passive constructions. For example, simple intransitive verbs cannot undergo passivization as they do not have an internal argument to be promoted into Subject position.

- (18a) a. The earthquake happened last year.  
→ \*The earthquake was happened last year.

However, prepositional intransitives, that is, verbs which have an indirect internal argument, do passivize. The NP moves out of the PP, leaving the preposition *in situ*.

- (18b) a. The manager asked for the files.  
→ The files were asked for *t* (by the manager).  
b. Someone must talk to Mary.  
→ Mary must be talked to *t* (by someone).  
c. You can rely on me.  
→ I can be relied on *t*.

Transitive verbs, be them simple or complex, allow passivization, promoting either the DO or the IO into the Subject position. Consider the following examples:

- (19) a. John gave a book to Mary.  
→ Mary was given a book.  
→ A book was given to Mary.

There is also the case of the prepositional passive, where the object of a preposition can be promoted into Subject position, leaving the preposition stranded, but as we will see, it is not always possible. Let us see the examples below given by Pullum:

- (20) a. Someone has slept in this bunk. → This bunk has been slept in.  
b. Someone has slept above this bunk. → ?This bunk has been slept above.

The second sentence is barely acceptable because *sleeping above the bunk* does not change its state.

It is not possible to promote a Prepositional Object if the verb also has a Direct Object; thus, the passive has to be rendered by promoting the Direct Object as in (20):

- (21) a. Someone has put a child in this bunk.  
→ A child has been put in this bunk.  
→ \*This bunk has been put a child in.

Moreover, transitive verbs that express possession cannot occur in the progressive as shown in the examples below:

- (22) a. They have a nice house. → \*A nice house is had (by them).  
b. She possesses good communication skills.  
→ \*Good communication skills are possessed by her.

Regarding passivization in relation to the nature of the Direct Object in the active voice, if the DO is a reciprocal or a reflexive pronoun or if it is a non-finite clause, passivization is blocked. Consider the examples in (23):

- (23) a. John and Mary love each other. → \*Each other are loved.  
b. I could see myself in the mirror. → \*Myself could be seen in the mirror.  
c. He began opening all the books. → \*Opening all the books was begun.

## 6. The Passive Voice in Romanian

In Romanian, as opposed to English, intransitive verbs do not undergo passivization, irrespective of their type. Transitive verbs can appear in the passive voice, but there are also restrictions for some of these verbs. For example, verbs that show different types of relation (*a avea, a posedea, a conține, a comporta, a costa, a necesita, etc.*) (24a) or verbs of perception (*a simți, a dura, a îndura, a îngâmfa, a frige, a răbda, a mânca, a ustura, etc.*) (24b).

- (24) a. Cutia conține zece păpuși. → \*Zece păpuși sunt conținute de cutie.  
b. Mă doare capul. → \*Capul îmi este durut.

So, in Romanian, as a rule, passivization affects only transitive verbs with Agent Subjects. Nevertheless, there are transitive verbs which assign the theta-role of Experiencer (25 a, b) or Beneficiary (25 c, d) to their Subjects, and which allow passivization:

- (25) a. Ion o iubește pe Maria. → Maria este iubită de Ion.  
b. Ion o urăște pe Maria. → Maria este urâtă de Ion.  
c. Ion a pierdut portofelul. → Portofelul a fost pierdut de Ion.  
d. Ion a găsit portofelul. → Portofelul a fost găsit de Ion.



There are many verbs that can undergo two types of passivization, the one presented above, and another one, called *reflexiv pasiv* (*reflexive passive*), that is formed by using a reflexive pronoun in the accusative case.

- (26) a. Aici au fost construite două blocuri.  
b. Aici s-au construit două blocuri.

As opposed to English, in which a ditransitive verb may produce two passive sentences of the same type, promoting to Subject position its Direct Object, and Indirect Object respectively, in Romanian we get two different types of passivization:

- (27) a. Ion i-a dat o carte Mariei.  
→ Mariei i s-a dat o carte. (reflexive passivization)  
→ \*Maria este dată o carte.  
→ Cartea i-a fost dată Mariei.  
b. Ion i-a cântat Mariei un cântec.  
→ Mariei i s-a cântat un cântec. (reflexive passivization)  
→ \*Maria a fost cântată un cântec.  
→ Un cântec i-a fost cântat Mariei.

So, when promoting the Indirect Object to Subject position in passivization, Romanian accepts the reflexive passivization only.

Therefore, considering the information above, we can conclude that there are many similarities and differences in auxiliary selection between Romanian and English.

## 7. Conclusions

We have argued that auxiliary selection depends on the semantic and syntactic class of verbs an auxiliary appears with, one of the conclusions being that if certain classes of verbs appear in the progressive, recategorization has to take place, as it is the case with *achievement*, *state*, *accomplishment* verb phrases.

Furthermore, the use of auxiliaries in English and Romanian differs as it is the case with the progressive aspect, which in English is rendered by means of the auxiliary *be*, while in Romanian, the imperfective aspect is rendered by means of the tense *Imperfect* (for past time reference) and *Prezent* (for present time reference), neither of which are formed by means of any auxiliaries.

The passive auxiliary is another issue we have addressed, and we can conclude that the English passive selection differs from the Romanian one in that the latter is more restrictive as regards the syntactic category of the verb selection, on the one hand, and on the other hand Romanian frequently uses the *reflexive-passivization*, syntactic process which is not present in English.

## References

1. Avram, Larisa. *English Syntax, The structure of root clauses*, Editura Oscar Print, București, 2003.
2. Bentley Delia, Thorhallur Eythorsson, *Auxiliary selection and the semantics of unaccusativity*, *Lingua*. 2003.
3. Chomsky, Noam. *Syntactic structures*. The Hague: Mouton. 1957
4. Crăiniceanu, Ilinca, *Elements of English Morphology*, Editura Fundația România de mâine, București. 2007.
5. Șerban, Domnica, *The Syntax of English Predications*, Editura Fundația România de mâine, București, 2006.
6. \*\*\*, *Gramatica Limbii Române*, Editura Academiei Române, București, 2008.
7. \*\*\*, <http://limbaromana.md/index.php?go=articole&printversion=1&n=92>