

# THE SUPPORT ROLE OF AUXILIARIES

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## INTRODUCTION

Hewson (1997) clearly illustrates the 'typological shift to configurational syntax' giving rise to the prepositional phrase in Indo-European languages. It is further suggested in the same article that something parallel has occurred with the development of compound forms in the verb. For prepositional phrases and verb compounds to come into being, new syntactic relationships must have been established between their components. The present note is an attempt to throw light on these relationships in the verb phrase.

The English verb is well known for the number of verb compounds it gives rise to—eight in the past tense of the indicative<sup>1</sup>, apart from the modal auxiliaries. One intriguing point about a verb compound construction like the one in *He is being facetious* is that it is often considered to be one verb even though it is made up of two words each with its own syntactic characteristics. In fact, to contrast it with a simple verb, a verb compound is generally described as formed by the use of an auxiliary and a nonfinite form of a full verb. Describing verb compounds in terms of the forms involved in this way, or simply as 'complex verb phrases' (Quirk et al., 1985: 151) is so straightforward that there seems to be little further to say on the subject, until one comes across examples like the following, listed as progressives in Visser (1973: 1958):

- (1) He had tried to be like him and found that that was not being a man at all.
- (2) 'I just didn't want to be, well, too underhand about everything.'  
'It's not being underhand. It's just having a friend one can talk to and say things to...'

These, of course, are examples, not of the progressive, but of the copula with the *-ing* form as complement, a construction which is not at all the same as a verb compound.

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<sup>1</sup> Thus, in contrast with the simple form *It ate* we find: *It did eat, It was eaten, It was eating, It was being eaten, It had eaten, It had been eaten, It had been eating, and even It had been being eaten.*

This copula construction can perhaps be more clearly distinguished from the progressive when it has a noun phrase as subject, as in the following example, which has to do with a situation in an airport:

- (3) a. The art is spotting types who do not seem  
to be naturally nervous.

Here the complement *spotting types...* does not express an event carried out by the subject, but rather brings out the nature of *the art* so the copula could be replaced by *consists of*. On the other hand, if we replace *the art* by, say, *he*, we would have a progressive and the subject would be understood to be in the process of carrying out the event:

- (3) b. He is spotting types who do not seem  
to be naturally nervous.

The difference between the two constructions can perhaps be best illustrated by means of an ambiguous example like:

- (4) That is making a noise.

We get a sentence with the progressive if we understand the subject to be carrying out the activity expressed by the verb, as in the case where *that* denotes some part in a car engine, but we get a quite different sentence if we understand the subject to be an example of the behavior represented by the complement (= 'that is what I call making a noise').

The point of ambiguous examples like this is that with words ostensibly the same we get different sentences with different meanings because the relation between the event *making (a noise)* and the subject *that*, established by *is*, is not the same in the two readings. Simply naming the two constructions involved—progressive vs. copula + *-ing* complement—recognizes that there is a difference but does not explain what it is. Pointing out the possibility of pronominalizing the complement in the case of the copula gives an interesting difference of syntactic behavior, but does not explain it. In order to explain such differences, we must try to see how the two constructions differ in themselves by getting beyond a formal description in order to discern the meanings expressed by the forms and their syntax. We are thus led to analyze the mental components, the meanings of the units involved in order to discern the difference between the relationships that weave them into separate syntactic constructions. Only in this way can we discern the difference between auxiliary + *-ing* and copula + *-ing*, and so understand how the above ambiguous example can give rise to two different readings.

## THE ANALYSIS

It has often been remarked that BE auxiliary brings no observable lexical meaning to the sentence, that it has been bleached or dematerialized. I have maintained elsewhere (Hirtle 1997) that no auxiliary, not even DO, is completely dematerialized. In order to be a minimal unit of discourse, a word must bring to the sentence both lexical and grammatical meaning, both matter and form in its significate. A highly dematerialized word, then, must retain a minimal lexical content, which, in the case of the primary auxiliaries, consists of the representation of an empty stretch of duration, a content so abstract that it is discernible only through analysis. BE copula brings no observable lexical meaning to the sentence either, and so it is quite understandable why, as far as I know, it has never been argued that these two uses of BE can be distinguished on the basis of their lexical meaning. Nor has any distinction on the basis of their grammatical meaning been made between these two uses, the same tenses, moods, persons, etc., being expressed by both. Thus, until evidence to the contrary arises, one can only assume that, whether used as an auxiliary or as a copula, BE brings the same meaning to the sentence. Similarly for sentence function: Quirk et al. (1985: 79-81) consider BE an 'operator' in both uses because it operates in such a way as to establish a relationship between the predicate and the subject.<sup>2</sup> It seems then that what distinguishes our two constructions is not to be found in either the meaning import or the sentence function of BE.

How about the participle? Is it realized in two different ways? Lexically, the participle appears to be identical in both uses: there is no observable distinction between the notional content of *spotting* in either version of (3), or of *making* in (4). Grammatically, however, we can discern a syntactic difference in what is often called 'control'. As we saw in the above examples, the subject carries out the event in the case of the progressive but not in the case of the copula construction. This difference involving the person of the *-ing* is observable on the level of the sentence meaning, but we must find the prior conditioning factor of which is it a consequence if we are to understand and explain it. Hence we are led to ask: what is there in the

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<sup>2</sup> Provisionally defining OPERATOR as 'first or only auxiliary' (p. 79), they later (p. 81) include the copula as an 'exception' to this definition, so the essential idea seems to be that an operator 'performs an 'operational' function in relating a positive declarative structure to another major structure in the language' (p. 80).

grammatical makeup of the *-ing* form which permits such a different syntactic relationship?

To my knowledge, the only study attempting to describe the morphological makeup of a nonfinite form is Duffley (1992), which focuses on the infinitive insofar as tense and person are concerned. Here, only considerations involving the representation of grammatical person, the condition governing 'control', will be discussed. After an examination of examples, Duffley argues that we never experience, nor can we even imagine, an event going on without some sort of spatial support.

...how can one conceive an event as something taking place in time without also conceiving at least virtually someone or something realizing it (or undergoing its realization, as in the passive)? From this postulate about the general nature of the verb based on our experience of happenings, one can deduce the necessary presence of a spatial support in the mental representation signified by the infinitive. (Duffley 1992: 140)

Thus the infinitive interiorizes a representation of person (= spatial support), but person in a generalized or virtual form where the rank (first, second, third) is not determined. Since the same argument can be applied to the participles, I shall assume here that a spatial support of the process is represented in the *-ing* form, that person is one of the grammatical components of its morphological makeup. As in the infinitive, however, it is person undetermined insofar as rank is concerned. The same holds for the past participle, and in fact, on this basis we can distinguish the nonfinite forms from the tenses of the other moods, each of which incorporates a representation of person distinguishable for rank. Furthermore, we can distinguish between the three nonfinite forms on the basis of where the spatial support is situated with regard to the duration, before, during and after the event's realization, as is illustrated by the triangles in Figure 1.

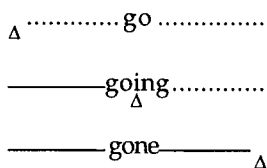


Figure 1

Although Duffley (1992) also makes it clear that these nonfinite forms are minimally formed insofar as their place in time with regard to the present—their tense—is concerned, our concern here is with the minimal representation of person they incorporate, and particularly the effect of leav-

ing undetermined the event's place in space with regard to the speaker. This means that the *-ing* form can be used in a sentence with no grammatical determination of its spatial support as in both (3a), where the spotting may be carried out by anyone possessing *the art*, and in (4) with *-ing* understood as complement of the copula, where someone capable of the behavior is implied but not designated by the subject. On the other hand, it may be used with a determination of its spatial support as in (3b) and in (4) with *-ing* understood as part of the progressive: it is the subject which carries out the event. In each case the participle is part of the predicate and so its event is made incident to the subject, but since the results are clearly not the same this relationship of incidence must somehow be realized differently. This is the point I want to explore: how the relation between the *-ing* form and the subject of the sentence is established. If we can discern a distinction in the syntactic operations involved here it will provide the grammatical condition underlying the observed difference of sentence meaning.

In the case of the copula construction, the complement is related to the subject by means of the copula. That is to say, before the verb is predicated of the subject, the meaning import of the *-ing* (with its adjuncts) is made incident to the finite verb, as depicted in Figure 2.



Figure 2

The resulting complex of meaning, the predicate, is then made incident to the subject by the finite verb, as in Figure 3.

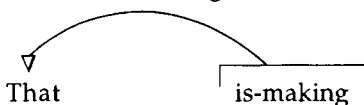


Figure 3

In this way, the copula establishes a relationship between the lexical imports of two sentence components, complement and subject, which otherwise would not be syntactically related, and in this respect fulfills a function analogous to that of a preposition. It differs from a preposition, however, since it establishes the relationship in time, and not just in space. The various logical relationships that can be expressed by the copula construction bear witness to the fact that the link between subject and

complement is lexical in nature, depending essentially upon the notional relation between the two. Thus in (3a) the complement defines the subject, tells what sort of activity *the art* consists of, whereas in (4) taken as constituting what is sometimes called a predicative sentence, the complement depicts the subject as a typical case or example of the activity. Because this is essentially a lexical relationship, in neither of these sentences can the subject be understood as carrying out the *-ing* event. On the other hand, the subject does ensure the persistence in time of the notional relationship established by the copula. This role, whereby the subject is represented as carrying out, or at least conditioning, whatever a finite verb expresses seems to be inherent in the very notion of finiteness which permits the subject-predicate relationship and leads us to attribute the person of the subject to the verb.

In the case of the progressive, as in that of the copula construction, the nonfinite form is first made incident to the finite form and the outcome of this is then made incident to the subject, as in Figure 3. However the resulting sentence is different in that we understand the subject to be carrying out the event. This indicates that with the progressive there is a closer link between the noun phrase and the *-ing* form, that the former designates the spatial support of the event expressed by the latter. Incapable of taking a subject on its own, it is only in combination with the auxiliary that the participle can be related to a noun phrase as its subject. There seems to be only one explanation for this: that the operation of incidence relating the *-ing* form to the auxiliary is somehow different from the one relating it to the copula (cf. Figure 2), and this difference appears to be that, in relating its lexical import to the support provided by the auxiliary, the participle assumes, takes on, the person of the auxiliary. This is the hypothesis I want to explore briefly to see if it can provide the explanation we are seeking.

#### THE HYPOTHESIS

I am thus proposing that making the participle incident to the auxiliary not only relates its meaning to that of the auxiliary, as in the copula construction, but also provides the participle with the person of the auxiliary. That is to say, this hypothesis for the progressive entails a relationship which is both notional and categorial, both lexical and grammatical incidence, because it leads to completing the grammatical forming of the *-ing* insofar as person is concerned. This clearly distinguishes the syntactic operation instituting the progressive from that

involved in the copula construction, which is only notional in character, as we have just seen.

This hypothesis also helps us to understand why the auxiliary can provide a support only for participles whereas the copula can accept a lexical import with a wide variety of grammatical forms: substantives, adjectives, prepositional phrases, clauses, etc. If the role of the auxiliary is to provide the event with a personal support such that it can be identified with that of the subject, then the lexical import must be formed grammatically in such a way that it can accept this determination of person. We have seen that the participle incorporates a minimal representation of person, undetermined for rank. It is therefore a form which leaves room for further determination insofar as person (and tense) is concerned and in this is to be distinguished from the other forms found with the copula.<sup>3</sup>

The hypothesis that the progressive form is constituted by an operation of incidence involving both the lexical and the grammatical can also help us to understand why the progressive is usually considered a single verb even though it is made up of two words.<sup>4</sup> The grammatical incidence which results in the two words having the same grammatical person—and, it might be pointed out, the same tense—has the effect of binding them together into a single grammatical form of discourse. As a consequence of this incidence, the dematerialized auxiliary is rematerialized, so to speak, by the lexical import of the participle, and the minimally formed participle finds a complement of grammatical formation by taking on the categories of the auxiliary. This two-way relationship can

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<sup>3</sup> The other nonfinite forms are in the same situation with regard to person, as we have seen, and so the past participle can also be used with auxiliary BE to form another compound verb, the passive, as well as with HAVE. The infinitive cannot be used with BE because of its particular nature but can of course be used with DO.

<sup>4</sup> Some would maintain that there are two verbs in a progressive form, whereas grammars usually consider that the progressive constitutes one verb. The different points of view are based on two ways of understanding the term verb. Taken as naming a sentence function, it is obvious that the progressive constitutes a single syntactic unit; understanding verb as naming a mental program in tongue for forming a timeword, it is equally obvious that the progressive is made up of two such words resulting from activating two distinct programs within the part of speech verb.

be symbolized as follows<sup>5</sup>, where M stands for lexical matter, F for grammatical form, q for a given quantity and dp for determined person:

participle:	M (q)	+	F (- dp)
auxiliary:	M (- q)	+	F (dp)
verb compound:	M	+	F

The fact that the *-ing* complement remains grammatically distinct from the copula insofar as person is concerned may well help us to understand why it can be pronominalized: represented as a distinct entity, the event with its spatial support can be depicted abstractly by a pronominal element. The *-ing* of the progressive being grammatically integrated into the auxiliary to the point of being understood as one word of discourse, its event cannot be represented separately from the auxiliary<sup>6</sup>. In any case, the question of pronominalization here constitutes an area of usage to be explored in greater detail from the viewpoint of how person is represented.

A final consideration concerns the actual calling to mind of the participle during the act of language. Whether BE is to be understood as auxiliary or as copula depends not on BE itself but on the type of relationship established between it and the *-ing* by the operation of incidence, the type of support role it is called upon to fulfill. What is it that determines whether the event as represented by the participle requires a formal completion or whether its minimal grammatical formation suffices for the needs of discourse? The determining factor appears to be the adequacy with which the participle can represent the occurrence which is part of the speaker's intended message. Granted that the speaker wishes to represent some occurrence whose development is perceived as partly but not fully accomplished, the *-ing* form must be resorted to. In the case where the intended message brings to mind no particular spatial support for the occurrence, the participle with its minimally formed person is quite adequate to represent it. Where, however, the representation of a particular spatial support (and place in time) is called for, the participle will be felt inadequate and a determination of person will be sought in the

<sup>5</sup> This manner of presenting the relationship is a development of that found in Guillaume (1992: 27ff).

<sup>6</sup> Except, of course, by some pronominal element calling for its representation, as in: *He's what?*, a pronominalization which could be a recall of either the verb compound or the copula construction.



auxiliary support. Thus the syntax of the resulting sentence is, as always, conditioned by what speakers have in mind to talk about and by the means at their disposal—here the system of the verb in tongue—to represent and express what they want to say about it.

## CONCLUSION

This, then, is a hypothesis which permits us to understand the observable difference between the two constructions and so provides an explanation for it in terms of the grammatical systems involved. If the participle assumes the person of the finite verb, it will partake of its finiteness and so be made incident to the noun phrase as its subject; if the participle does not take on the person of the finite verb, it will remain nonfinite and be made incident to the noun phrase, through the copula, as an import of meaning, like any other complement. This hypothesis, which explains why it makes no sense to cite (1) and (2) as examples of the progressive, has proved adequate to explain those cases of copula + *-ing* vs. progressive which have come to hand so far, but a more systematic search for examples is called for to test it. Furthermore, since it has implications for problems other than those discussed here, it will be useful before we finish to situate this hypothesis within the wider framework of the verb.

The first such problem, tense, is more a lacuna than an implication since we have skirted around it. The participle gives a representation of tense as something potential, as undetermined, in the sense that, although it provides a representation both of an event and of endless universe time, it does not actually situate the event at a given place in universe time. When the participle is a component of the progressive, however, its event's place in time is that of the auxiliary, but this is not so when the participle provides a complement for the copula. The syntactic processes here would thus seem to be similar to those described above for person, but since a description of them would involve us in a discussion of the system of mood and the way each mood relates the event to universe time—and may even involve discussing the problem of space-time relationship within the verb itself—it will not be undertaken here.

An immediate implication of the proposed hypothesis concerns the use of BE with the other participle. As a nonfinite form arising in the quasinominal mood, the past participle is also provided with only a minimal representation of person by its morphogenesis and so it is not surprising to find it used both as a component of a verb compound and as a

complement of the copula. When the participle evokes the unfolding of the event retrospectively, it combines with BE auxiliary to form a passive verb. It seems that the incidence involves both the lexical and the grammatical because we again observe that the subject is the spatial support of the participle's event, undergoing it rather than carrying it out because of the voice. When the past participle represents a state arising from the event but not the unfolding of the event itself, it is used with the copula to attribute this resulting state to the subject. This construction, misleadingly called the 'resultative passive' by some authors, can easily be confused with the passive and ambiguous examples abound:

- (5) a. It was cooked. (in a microwave oven)  
b. It was cooked. (and sitting on the table)

This, then, is an area of usage to be examined in the light of the hypothesis.

Although DO and HAVE have no use similar to the copula use of BE to contrast with, it does seem plausible that the analysis presented above can be applied to both of them in their auxiliary use. In fact, it may well turn out that our hypothesis provides the characteristic discriminating verb compounds from quasi-compounds on the one hand, and from the simple verb on the other. Should this prove to be the case, it will constitute a major step forward in our understanding both of the English verb as a system of representation and of the shift to 'configurational syntax' in the verb.

The fact that a problem as limited in scope as that posed by (4) can ultimately lead to a consideration of the most general dichotomy in the English verb, that between simple and compound, bears witness to the systematic nature of tongue. As such it throws further light on the most general system in tongue, the system of the word, indicating that this system, which informs every language process, can be exploited in such a way that what is often considered a single word in discourse is made up of two or more words in tongue. This helps us to understand more clearly why absolutely everything we want to express through language must first be represented in a form permitted by the word potential of our tongue.

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