

VERBAL ASPECT – PROGRESSIVE WITH PERCEPTION VERBS

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ABSTRACT: This study aims at analyzing verbal aspect of the English Language on a cognitive linguistics perspective. Much has been said about aspect, but many authors have utilized examples from introspection. We tested (COMRIE, 1976)'s assumptions on aspect using native speaker's corpus. To answer the question "Does the progressive aspect occur with inert perception verbs HEAR and SEE in English (language in use)?" the online corpus COCA (Corpus of Contemporary American English) was analyzed. Both spoken and written languages were analyzed; results showed that the progressive is used with this kind of verb.

KEY-WORDS: verbal aspect; progressive aspect; perception verbs; corpus linguistics.

RESUMO: Este estudo teve por objetivo analisar o aspecto verbal na língua Inglesa sob uma perspectiva lingüística cognitiva. Muito tem sido dito sobre o aspecto, contudo muitos autores têm utilizado exemplos de introspecção. Testamos as premissas de (COMRIE, 1976) acerca do aspecto verbal usando corpus. Para responder à pergunta "O aspecto progressivo ocorrer com verbos de percepção inertes em Inglês (língua em uso)?", o corpus COCA on-line (Corpus contemporâneo de inglês americano) foi analisado. Ambos os registros oral e escritos foram analisados, e os resultados mostraram que o aspecto progressivo é utilizado com verbos de percepção *hear* e *see*.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: aspecto progressivo; verbos de percepção; linguística de corpus.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper we propose a cognitive interpretation on the use of the present progressive with verbs of perception. To do so, we test Comrie (1976)'s assumptions on aspect using the Corpus of Contemporary American English. Although other authors describe the form and use of aspect, Comrie provided a great contribution to this area, leading other authors on this subject. His assumptions, however, were exemplified with context created from introspection. This fact does not minimize Comrie's findings, however, by testing the author's assumptions with a corpus from language in use, we may have a greater idea on how the English language works.

This study aims at contributing to enrich what has already been said about the topic by answering the question “Does the progressive aspect occur with inert perception verbs in English (language in use)?”, followed by a discussion on the results. As it will be described later, the perception verbs we chose to analyze were HEAR and SEE.

The paper is divided into four sections. You will find in section 2 the theoretical framework, as well as a description on aspect, perfectivity, and progressive aspect. We also analyze Comrie's point of view on the use of progressive in English. In section 3 there will be a description of the corpus (COCA), a brief discussion on the online corpus linguistic tool, and the data selection process. In addition, section 4 will bring a description of the results, contrasting the use of inherent perception verbs HEAR and SEE in both simple present progressive and simple present.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 ASPECT

In this section we will discuss the concepts of aspect, perfectivity, and progressiveness.

There are many definitions of aspect, these definitions can be divided into two distinct groups (BRINTON, 1998). First, there is the group that defines aspect as being the speaker's perspective on a given situation. Second, there is the group which defines aspect as being related to the situation's inner nature, with the dualities punctual x durative, static x dynamic (AZEVEDO, 2002).

The definition we will use to develop this work (COMRIE, 1976) falls in the first group. Our concept of aspect is related to the speaker's view of the "internal constituency of the one situation" (COMRIE, 1976:5). In other words, aspect is concerned with the phases of the situation, such as beginning, middle, end, or the situation as completed. Aspect is, therefore, different from time (present, past, future), since is not deictic. While tense places the situation in a time frame (present, past, future), aspect focuses on the situation itself.

(LYONS, 1979) shares this view and adds that aspect is a grammatical category which is related to the design, or temporal distribution of an action, event or state, and not with its location in time. He goes further by stating that this category does not have an exclusive form, such as other grammatical categories. Because of this, aspect may "merge" with categories of mode and time. Let's take English as an example, with the progressive, you may find in the form "-ing" modality, or aspect. Consider the following situations:

Situation (1)

I am jogging (right now - progressive aspect, on an ongoing action).

Situation (2)

I am jogging (tomorrow – future action).

These two sentences exemplify the broadness of aspect.

TRAVAGLIA (1985) also shares Comrie's view on this definition. He adds that "aspect is a verbal category of time, non-deictic, which marks the situation's duration, or its phases, that can be considered under different points of view". He adds that the points of view may vary, from the situation's phases (beginning, middle, and end) to the situation being completed (completed, not completed).

2.2 PERFECTIVE X IMPERFECTIVE

Authors usually divide aspect into 2 distinct kinds: perfective and imperfective. The difference lays on the attention given to the situation (COMRIE, 1976), since "perfectivity indicates the view of a situation as a single whole, without distinction of the various separate phases that make up that situation; while the imperfective pays essential attention to the internal structure of the situation" (COMRIE, 1976: 16).

The best way to illustrate these aspectual differences is by the following examples:

- He is building a house. (Imperfective aspect)
- He built a house. (Perfective aspect)

While the first example is an ongoing situation, the focus being on the phase of the situation, the second focuses on the completion of the event.

Within the imperfective aspect, there are some important aspectual values. Diagram 1, shown below, indicates the most common subdivision of the imperfective (COMRIE, 1976: 25):

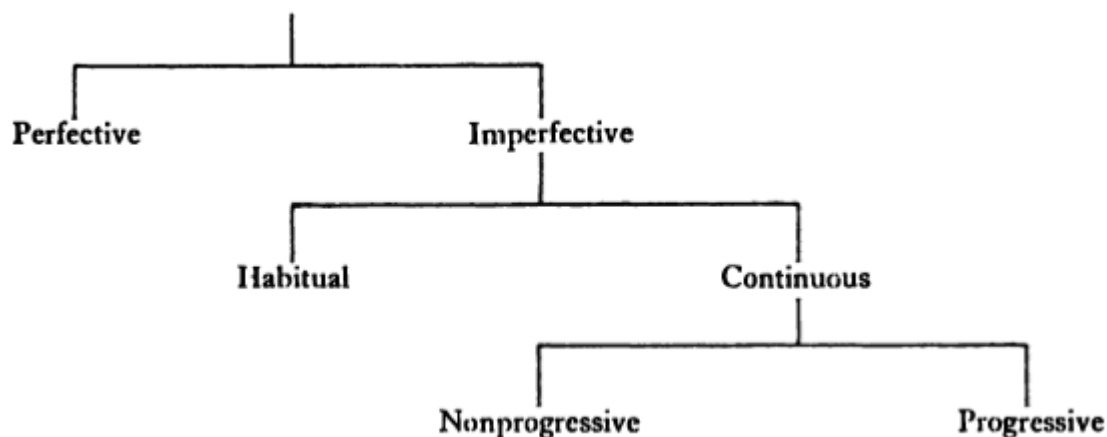


Diagram 1: (COMRIE, 1976: 25)'s Classification of aspectual opposition

In diagram 1, the imperfective aspect may be presented with habit or progressiveness. While the first is said to be a situation that has repeated so many times that it has become a habit, the second is “the combination of progressive meaning and nonstative meaning” (COMRIE, 1976, p. 35).

As a complement to the definitions seen so far in this paper, there is a classification of verbs that help determine the aspectual value of a given situation. In 1957 Vendler writes a paper on aspect and creates a typology, known as Vendler's typology (VENDLER, 1957). In his paper, Vendler classifies the verbs or situation into four classes, taking into consideration whether it is durative, stative and telic¹:

1. State: the situation is durative, does not involve change, and is atelic.
2. Activity: the situation is durative, it involves change, and is atelic.
3. Accomplishment: the situation is durative, it involves change, and is telic
4. Achievement: the situation is nondurative, it involves change, and is telic

¹ For detailed information on telicity, see Vendler's paper, Philosophical review. P. 415-434. In a brief summary-, Hampelié (2013, p. 01) defines telicity. “Essentially, telicity can be defined as the property of the verb phrase (or of the sentence as a whole) which indicates that an action or an event has a clear endpoint or a goal when the goal is reached, the situation comes to an end.”

As we mentioned before, we will analyze the verbs HEAR and SEE. According to this classification (VENDLER, 1957, p. 155), these two verbs are considered state or achievement. However, it is also stated that “seeing cannot be a process. ‘What are you doing?’ can never, in good English, be answered by ‘I am seeing...’ Thus notwithstanding the fact that one might see something for a long period, it does not mean that he ‘is seeing’ that thing for any period, yet it remains true that he sees that thing at all moments during that period.” It is important to notice that in his work, (VENDLER, 1957) also used examples from introspection, which does not undermine his work. This paper only aims at collaborating with examples from the language in use.

2.3 PROGRESSIVE ASPECT

“It is not general possible to use progressive forms of verbs of inert perception like see, hear” (COMRIE, 1976, p.35). This assumption has been repeated many times, not only by Comrie, but by other authors, as we will show. We aim at testing part of (COMRIE, 1976)’s study that is concerned with the restrictions in the use of the progressive aspect. The author gives two examples of sentences that, according to him, would be ungrammatical in English:

“*I am seeing you under the table”.

“*You aren’t hearing”.

When the combination of progressive and stative is possible, the stative verbs change their nature (COMRIE, 1976). “In English, the general rule seems to be that lexically stative verbs can be used nonstatively and appear in the Progressive, while lexically nonstative verbs do not lose their ability to be in the Progressive by being used statively” (COMRIE, 1976, p.35). This seems to be the case for English progressive;

this paper shows that this statement may also be true for the inert perception verbs.

The verbs HEAR, SEE, and UNDERSTAND, according to the author may be used in the progressive aspect only by other languages, such as Portuguese. Comrie (1976) explains that in these languages it is possible to view state verbs as state or dynamic, finally he accepts some non-stative uses of stative verbs, such as UNDERSTAND. Comrie (1976) demonstrates this with the sentence “I am understanding more and more about quantum mechanics as each day goes by” (COMRIE, 1976, p.36), and explains that this use is possible because there is a progression (more and more). This paper tests this assumption with language in use, using corpus linguistics, while trying to find a cognitive reason why speakers use inert perception verbs in the progressive aspect. Many other authors (LEECH, 2004), (DOWNING; LOCKE, 2006), and (CARTER; MCCARTHY, 2007) seem to agree with (COMRIE, 1976) on this subject.

Although (BOOGAART; JANSSEN, 2010) share (COMRIE, 1976)’s definition on aspect, they bring studies which relates aspect with point of view.

In the cognitive linguistic literature on aspect, the focus of attention has shifted from defining aspect in terms of ‘the internal temporal constituency of a situation’ (Comrie 1976: 3) to describing the function of aspectual distinctions at the discourse level. In particular, aspect is said to indicate viewpoint and to play a role in establishing relations across clauses. (BOOGAART;JANSSEN, 2010, p. 817)

In one of these studies, perfectivity is distinguished from imperfectivity by the notion of ground and background. “The perfective aspect is found mainly in kinetic, sequential events which are central to the unfolding of the narrative [...] Imperfective aspect is used typically for backgrounding: situations, descriptions and actions which are simultaneous or overlapping with a perfective event” (Hopper 1979: 58).

Similarly, (FLEISCHMAN, 1985) also points out the use of perfective in sequential events (ground) and the use of imperfective in situations that are happening

in the background.

In a more recent study, analyses differences between simple present and the present progressive are analyzed (DE WI, 2013). Since both are present-tense constructions the author argues: 1. the difference between them is modal, 2. their use indicates that the situation is a conceptualization of the speaker's immediate reality.

In our view, the basic semantic difference between the simple present and the present progressive, which is relevant for all their uses, resides in the consolidated status of an immediately real situation, or the absence of such a status. More particularly, the simple present indicates that a situation constitutes a *structural* part of the speaker's conception of immediate reality: its current reality is to be expected and predicted. The present progressive, on the other hand, construes a situation (real though it may be) as a *contingent* part of the immediate reality, i.e., its presence or actualization is not seen as necessary and could not particularly have been expected or predicted at the time of speaking" (DE WI, 2013, p. 19)

Although these authors have different conceptualizations of aspect, they agree that one of the differences of present simple and present progressive is related to the speaker's realization on an immediate situation. The first, related to a situation that could be expected and predicted, and the second, related to a situation that could not be expected nor predicted.

This paper has two aims: first, confirming the use of progressive aspect with verbs of inert perception SEE and HEAR, second, finding the differences in the use of these verbs in the progressive and non-progressive forms.

3. METHODOLOGY

Inert verbs of perception SEE and HEAR will be analyzed in the language in use. In order to check whether these verbs only occur with a progressive meaning, as Comrie (1976) states, the context of sentences will also be analyzed. The corpus selected for this project is COCA, since it is one of the biggest free online corpus

available.

COCA is an online corpus of English (DAVIS, 2008), one of the biggest in number of words. It is updated regularly, with texts being included each year, since 1990. There are about 520 thousand words in the corpus, distributed among different genres and registers (Spoken, Fiction, Magazine, Newspaper, and Academic). The subdivision presents the following characteristics:

- Spoken: It contains approximately 109 million words, from transcripts of unscripted conversation from more than 150 different TV and radio programs. Such programs include mainstream TV shows: Good Morning America (ABC), Today Show (NBC), 60 Minutes (CBS), Jerry Springer, among others).
- Fiction: It contains approximately 105 million words, from short stories and plays from literary magazines, children's magazines, popular magazines, first chapters of first edition books from 1990 to present, and movie scripts.
- Magazine: It contains approximately 110 million words from about 100 different magazines, from different domains (news, health, home and gardening, women, financial, religion, sports, etc).
- Newspaper: It contains approximately 106 million words from texts from 10 newspapers from across the United States. There are both local and national newspapers, such as USA Today, New York Times, Atlanta Journal Constitution, San Francisco Chronicle, etc.
- Academic journals: It contains approximately 103 million words from about 100 different peer-reviewed journals. The texts selected cover many areas, such as philosophy, psychology, religion, world history,

education, technology, etc.

This corpus is freely accessible, and user friendly. It gives us the possibility of limit searches by frequency and compares frequency of words, phrases, and grammatical constructions by genre.

We decided to divide the data into two groups:

1. Spoken
2. Press (magazine and newspaper).

This division was made because of the corpus' format, since it does not present a division of the registers (spoken, written), neither division by genre. COCA presents a division that mixes both, presenting Oral (register) and fiction/academic/newspaper/magazine (genre). We expect to find significant frequency of the progressive form of the verbs HEAR and SEE in both spoken and press.

In order to come to a conclusion, three steps will be taken: first an analysis of the general frequency of the verbs in all their forms, followed by a comparison of the two groups (spoken and press); second, an analysis and comparison of the frequencies of HEAR and SEE in the progressive aspect; third, an analysis of the concordance lines of each verb in the progressive forms.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

The frequency of the verbs HEAR and SEE in all forms are as follow in Table 1:

Verb	Frequency
Hear	225,943

See	808,965
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Table 1: General frequency of the verbs HEAR and SEE

These are the most frequent perception verbs in the corpus, and, according to Table 1, SEE is the most frequent. Table 2 shows that the form HEARING, most common with the progressive aspect, appears in third place in all the 5 forms of the verb. The search filter used for this selection was [hear].[v*] which brings all forms of the verb in the selection.

	<input type="checkbox"/>	CONTEXT	FREQ	
1	<input type="checkbox"/>	HEARD	56681	
2	<input type="checkbox"/>	HEAR	53637	
3	<input type="checkbox"/>	HEARING	12245	
4	<input type="checkbox"/>	HEARS	2084	
5	<input type="checkbox"/>	HEARED	1	
TOTAL			124648	

Table 2: Frequency of the verbal forms of HEAR in Spoken and Press

(COMRIE, 1976) argues that the present progressive would not be chosen with inert verbs of perception because the speaker would rather choose the present simple form. Although more frequent, the speaker does choose the progressive over other forms as it is indicated further in section 4.1. As shown above, the verb in its base form is used to express different functions:

- **Imperative:** Now hear this, nitwits. (least frequent)
- **Infinitive:** he said, adding that he was disappointed to hear on the radio
- **Bare infinitive:** You'll hear more about that, April.
- **Simple present:** Now, Professor Woodard, we hear a lot about the cost of running advertising.

Table 3 shows that differently from HEAR, the form SEEING, most common

with the progressive aspect appears in fourth place, considering all 5 forms of the verb. The search filter used for this selection was [see].[v*] which brings all forms of the verb in the selection.

	<input type="checkbox"/>	CONTEXT	FREQ	
1	<input type="checkbox"/>	SEE	281152	
2	<input type="checkbox"/>	SEEN	73946	
3	<input type="checkbox"/>	SAW	62817	
4	<input type="checkbox"/>	SEEING	26300	
5	<input type="checkbox"/>	SEES	13563	
		TOTAL	457778	

Table 3: Frequency of the verbal forms of SEE in Spoken and Press

The verb SEE was used in the following functions:

- Imperative: (**see** top tips and sources of information)
- Infinitive: Nevertheless, it is interesting **to see** how non-trivial combinations of local properties can be used
- Bare infinitive: I **will see** you again, then
- Simple present: Now we **see** this phenomenon where we don't hit diminishing returns on additional therapies

Although we could not compare these two uses of the verbs HEAR and SEE, it seems that when choosing the state form (simple present) and the activity form (progressive) there are different cognitive reasons which will be discussed, as follows.

4.1 PROGRESSIVE WITH VERBS HEAR AND SEE

(COMRIE, 1976) argues that the present progressive would not be chosen with inert verbs of perception because the speaker would rather choose the present simple form. Although more frequent, the speaker does choose the progressive over other forms as it will be indicated further in this section.

A first look at the general frequency of the verbs reveals the progressive is used with both perception verbs, as indicated in Table 4.

For the search string, the parameters [be].[v*] hearing were used to bring all the cases of the progressive with HEAR. See Table 4 below.

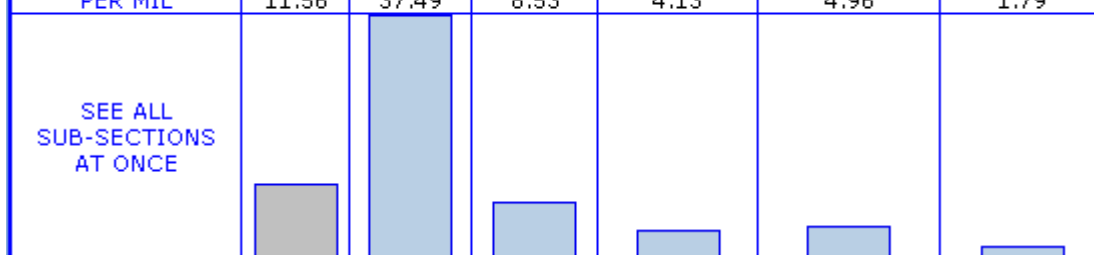
SECTION	ALL	SPOKEN	FICTION	MAGAZINE	NEWSPAPER	ACADEMIC
FREQ	5367	3583	771	395	455	163
PER MIL	11.56	37.49	8.53	4.13	4.96	1.79
SEE ALL SUB-SECTIONS AT ONCE						

Table 4: Progressive with the verb HEAR

Table 4 shows that speakers use the progressive in spoken more than in press. However, we find the progressive in both groups, which indicates that this is not a case of ungrammaticality, the opposite of what Comrie (1976) stated in his early studies on aspect.

Below, are some examples extracted from COCA that shows the use of the verb HEAR with the progressive aspect:

- a) So, this is not just social conservatives. I **'m hearing** from conservatives across the board, economic, foreign policy. (Spoken, Fox)
- b) Let me tell you what I **'m hearing**. (Press, Magazine, Fortune)
- c) The court **is hearing** three cases that have arisen from the dozens of

challenges to the health-care law. (Press, Newspaper, Washington Post)

d) And we **are hearing more and more** doubts about why we are there.

(Spoken, CNN)

e) You no longer hear about Al Qaeda in Iraq. More and more we **'re hearing**

about Iran and Shias. (Press, Magazine, Rolling Stone)

Examples (a), (b) and (c) show that the progressive form is used in a way not related to a process, as in Comrie (1976)'s examples of exception "I'm understanding more and more about..." where the act of understanding increases through the process. In these examples, the speaker shows that the event is happening at the moment of speech (c) or as an indication of repetition (a).

In examples (b) and (d) we found the use of "more and more" as indicated by Comrie (1976), however, the expression "more and more" modifies the objects, not the verb as in Comrie's examples.

Next, searching for the occurrences of the progressive with the verb HEAR, the parameters [be].[v*] seeing was used in the search string in order to bring all the cases of the progressive with see. See Table 5.

SECTION	ALL	SPOKEN	FICTION	MAGAZINE	NEWSPAPER	ACADEMIC
FREQ	12844	6831	2072	1489	1984	468
PER MIL	27.66	71.47	22.91	15.58	21.63	5.14
SEE ALL SUB-SECTIONS AT ONCE						

Table 5: Progressive with the verb SEE

Table 5 shows that, as HEAR, SEE is also more frequent in spoken than press.

SEE also occurs in both spoken and press, and in all cases it presents a higher frequency, when compared to HEAR. Below are some examples extracted from COCA:

- a) So now, you are seeing the rise of political committees because of that new freedom. (Spoken, Fox_Journal)
- b) We are seeing more and more of these devices show up in our classrooms a lot sooner. (Spoken, NPR_NewsNotes)
- c) Soon I was seeing him everywhere. (Press, Magazine, The Saturday Evening Post)
- d) What's happening now is you're seeing more and more places being considered expendable, and more and more people being considered expendable. (Press, Magazine, E : the Environmental Magazine)
- e) We're seeing how much Nick Blackburn's knee has bothered him. (Press, Newspaper, USA Today)
- f) If you've been seeing each other for three to six months, he can't exactly get away with going silent on you. (Press, NewsPaper, Cosmopolitan)

Examples (a), (c) and (e) also show the use of progressive form that is not defended by Comrie (1976). It is interesting to notice speakers (a and d) use of adverb NOW to place the listener/reader to the moment of speech. In examples (b) and (d) there is also the use of adverbial phrase MORE AND MORE, however, as it happened with HEAR, in these examples it modifies the object. It is important to add that MORE AND MORE is not very frequent with these two verbs.

In the data analyzed, it was noted that SEE is also used in the sense of romantic encounters, as in example (f). This use is very frequent, especially in spoken and some magazines with romantic related columns. However, this sense of SEE in the progressive form was not the most frequent.

Verb	All forms	Progressive	Progressive Spoken	Progressive Press
HEAR	225,943	5,367	37.49 per mi	9.09 per mi
SEE	808,965	12,844	71.47 per mi	37.23 per mi

Table 6: Comparison between HEAR and SEE

As observed in Table 6 above, the verb SEE is more frequent in all forms than the verb HEAR (from 100% to 300% more frequent). Despite this difference in frequency, they are similar in the fact that they indicate that progressive with inert perception verbs are more frequent in spoken.

The second part of this analysis will: 1. compare the use of present simple with present progressive, 2. compare the use of past simple with past progressive 3. raise some questions.

As indicated by De Wit and Brisard (2013) there are cognitive reasons why one should use simple or progressive forms. Note the examples below:

- a) **I'm hearing** reports that the prescription medication in her hotel room, in her body, had her name on it. (COCA, Press)
- b) **I hear reports** that there are people inside the office, ready and waiting for those results to start coming in. (COCA, Press)
- c) And **I hear reports** this morning that all over sort of Pennsylvania and New Jersey, there's some gas stations out of gas. (COCA, Press)
- d) Years ago, we **were seeing** a lot of big sales from people who would come out to do canning and preserving. (COCA, Press)
- e) Over the last couple of years, **we saw** two other people lose their jobs for

statements that they made that were perceived to embody bias. (COCA, Press)

What's the difference between examples (a) and (b)? Are they modal, or are they also aspectual? These sentences illustrate this questioning because we have similar contexts: a canonical use of simple present, and a non predicted use as well.

In example (c), the speaker is using the present simple to talk about something from a very recent past (It could still be morning when the reporter gave the news). Would this also occur with the present progressive?

Finally, in examples (d) and (e) there might be an aspectual difference between simple and progressive, more easily seen using the past to contrast them. The first might indicate iteration (sales happening over and over again), while the second would focus on the completion of the actions (people lost their jobs for a reason).

These are only hypothesis; finding the difference between these last five examples, requires an in-depth analysis. The corpus linguistics analysis made in this study was not enough to arrive at a deeper conclusion on this matter.

5. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

We have analyzed inert perception verbs HEAR and SEE in an online corpus COCA, one of the biggest corpus of American English freely available. The data showed us that the verbs HEAR and SEE are used in the progressive forms, although in a lower frequency. It was also pointed out that SEE is more frequent than HEAR in the progressive form, which is predictable because of its higher frequency in general.

Another point investigated was the comparison of the simple form of these verbs

with the progressive forms. This has raised some questions regarding the aspectual differences between these two uses. Although this was one of the objectives of this paper, we could not reach a conclusion regarding these differences. There seems to be a difference in use, but it would require further studies to investigate them.

Finally, our assumption on the use of the progressive aspect with inert perception verbs was different from the one stated by (COMRIE, 1976). We believe that this combination is possible, and used by people in both written and spoken language. He viewed this combination as an ungrammatical instance of English language, as well as a number of authors. The presence of these verbs in progressive form in press may confirm that it does not consist of a case of ungrammatical use of English. On the contrary, the speaker uses the progressive as a way to describe an immediate situation, transforming it into dynamic, even though in a smaller frequency, compared to other instances of the verbs analyzed. We could only benefit from more studies on this subject.

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