The king is on huntunge: on the relation between progressive and absentive in Old and Early Modern English


Casper de Groot
University of Amsterdam

Abstract

This paper addresses the diachronic development of two periphrastic constructions in Old and Middle English, *He wæs huntende* and *He wæs on huntunge*, into the progressive in Modern English. The literature on the origin of the progressive offers several hypotheses for explaining the coalescence of the two constructions. This paper offers a new hypothesis based on the consideration that the first construction, consisting of *be* + present participle, developed into the progressive, and that the second construction, consisting of *be* + *on* + verbal noun, was originally a construction denoting absence. The evidence for the coalescence comes from a partial overlap in the semantics of the progressive and the absentive, and the fact that progressives often originate from spatial constructions.¹

1. The scope of the paper

It is a generally accepted view concerning the rise of the progressive in English that the form originates from constructions with present participles used as predicative adjuncts and constructions with *be* + verbal noun. Fischer (1992:251), for instance, states that the stages of development of the progressive in Middle English can still be seen in constructions where it is not clear whether the –*ing*-form is an adjective (1), an appositive participle (2), or whether it is a progressive.

(1) What ladyes fairest been or best daunsyng, (*CT* I.2201 [1: 2203])
(2) Heere is the queene of Fayerye, / With harpe and pipe and symphonye, / Dwellynge in this place. (*CT* VII.814-16 [10: 814-16])

Fischer continues by saying that the reasons for the increase in the use of progressive forms are not clear. In the Early Middle English period their frequency is very low. At the end of the Middle English period the frequency almost doubles and from the beginning of the Modern English period onwards the use of the construction rises astronomically.

¹ I would like to thank Olga Fischer for her attentive reading of my text and her insightful, critical comments.
One possible explanation for the increase of the use of the progressive is based on the following observations made by Visser (1963-73: par. 1018-34). In the Late Old English / Early Middle English period the inflectional endings of the present participle, (inflectional) infinitive, and verbal noun began to be confused. The verbal noun (in Old English ending in –ung) began to develop verbal properties. It is suggested that in connection with a number of phonological changes (see Lass 1992: 145) the two separate Old English constructions in (3) became very similar in Middle English, as in (4), and ultimately coalesced, thus sharply increasing the frequency of the progressive form proper.

(3) he wæs huntende and he wæs on huntunge
(4) *he was huntyng(e) and he was on/an/in/a huntyng(e)

Fischer (1992: 253), however, notes that it is difficult to ascertain such a chronological development in the actual examples. Nehls (1974: 168) suggests the following scenario: the two types (i.e. verbal and nominal –ing as in (4)) were functionally almost equivalent; as a result mixed forms appeared, the progressive finally replaced the on hunting type, which became dialectal and/or non-standard. Dal (1952) postulates that there were two periphrases in Old English, one of a literary nature, the other of a more popular character:

In der altenglischen Zeit haben wir die zwei heterogenen Typen he wæs feohtende und he wæs on feohtinge. Die Konstruktion mit -ing/-ung-Nomen hat der niederen Sprache angehört, und ist nur sehr vereinzelt in die schriftliche Überlieferung eingedrungen … (quoted in Scheffer 1974: 246)

This paper builds on the assumption that the constructions in (3) did indeed develop into the constructions in (4), which then merged into just one type, the present-day progressive. Given the development of two constructions into one, one may wonder what the original nature of the two different constructions was, in particular where they differed, and in what respect they were functionally almost equivalent. I will defend the view that the periphrastic construction with a preposition and the verbal noun was used to indicate somebody’s absence in the sense of “the king is off hunting” (absentive), whereas the other construction was used to express somebody’s involvement in an activity (progressive).

The data used for this purpose come from the existing linguistic literature. No efforts have been made to find other new illustrative examples from the original sources, i.e. the various Old and Middle English manuscripts.

2. Progressive and Absentive

In their paper on the Progressive in the languages of Europe, Bertinetto et al. (2000) distinguish between three types of constructions. I adopt their typology for the discussion of the English data, since it offers a perfect instrument to illustrate the relevant differences which hold between the constructions from different stages of English. The

---

2 The idea of the fusion of two constructions in Middle English goes back at least to Jespersen (1949: 168).
characterization of the three types is as follows (Bertinetto, Ebert and De Groot 2000: 527).

(5)  
   a. Focalized progressive construction, i.e. those expressing the notion of an event viewed as going on at a single point in time; e.g. *When the lamp fell on the table, John was eating his porridge.*
   
   b. Durative progressive construction, i.e. those that are evaluated relative to a larger interval of time; e.g. *Last Tuesday, Mary was giving talks in London.*
   
   c. Absentive construction, i.e. those conveying the meaning of an event occurring in a place (characteristically reserved for a given purpose) displaced from the deictic centre; e.g. *Peter is off buying tickets for the concert.*

Present-day English does not make a threefold distinction, but rather a distinction between (5a) and (5b). The progressive form is employed in both the Focalized progressive and the Durative progressive constructions. An Absentive construction, however, does not occur. Constructions as in (5c), with an overt expression of absence, do not count as grammatical expressions of absence. As we will see below, the situation in Early Middle English seems to differ in that the language makes a distinction between a Durative progressive (5b) and an Absentive (5c) one.

Note that the major difference between the progressive constructions on the one hand and the absentive on the other is that the progressive relates to temporal deixis whereas the absentive relates to spatial deixis. The use of the progressive in English may have a spatial interpretation, but it cannot be considered to be a grammatical expression of absence such as we find in for instance Dutch, Fering, German, Norwegian, Swedish, Italian, Hungarian and Finnish.  

The answer to a question of the type “Where is John?”, where somebody inquires after a place and not an activity, may contain a progressive in English, but not in Dutch (nor in the other languages with a grammatical expression of absence). In Dutch and the other languages, an answer using the Absentive would be appropriate (6b), whereas the progressive would not (6a).

(6)  
   Dutch
   
   a. Progressive
      Jan is aan het boksen.
      John is at the box.INF
      ‘John is boxing.’
   
   b. Absentive
      Jan is boksen.
      John is box.INF
      ‘John is off boxing.’

---

3 English does not have an Absentive in the strict sense, since the particle *off* is used.
4 See De Groot (2000) for a full description of the grammatical aspects of the Absentive in the languages of Europe.
The following examples from Dutch show that from a deictic perspective, the progressive and absentive form a minimal pair. When using the progressive in the main clause (7a), there is a collocation of the action (‘boxing’) and the deictic centre (‘room’), whereas there is a dislocation if the absentive is used (7b). In the latter case, Peter will find the room empty, while John is away boxing:

(7) Dutch
   a. Progressive
      Toen Peter de kamer binnenkwam, was Jan aan het boxen.
      ‘When Peter entered the room, John was boxing (there).’
   b. Absentive
      Toen Peter de kamer binnenkwam, was Jan boksen.
      ‘When Peter entered the room, John was off boxing.’

Before I return to the English data, a few words are needed about the Absentive. The Absentive, as found in at least eight languages of Europe (cf. De Groot 2000), is a grammatical expression of absence. As the examples (6b) and (7b) show, there is no overt element in the expression in Dutch indicating that John is absent. Therefore, the expression is considered to be a grammatical expression: copula ‘be’ together with an infinitive form the grammatical ingredients, in a similar way as the combination of copula ‘be’ + *aan het* + infinitive form the grammatical expression of progressive in Dutch. The absentive contains four types of information: (i) the referent of the subject (=Subj) is absent, (ii) the Subj is involved in an activity, (iii) it is predictable how long the Subj will be absent, and (iv) the Subj will return after a period of time (De Groot 2000: 695). One context in which the absentive is most naturally used is the following question-answer pair (on the phone/at the door): A: “Could I speak with Peter, please”; B: No, sorry, he is off playing football”.

When we return to Old and Early Middle English, we see two constructions which form the basis for the later progressive, namely the construction with the present participle *he was huntende* and the construction with the verbal noun *he was on huntunge*. According to Bertinetto et al. (2000: 530), there is some evidence suggesting that the first examples of progressive constructions could be used in contexts which exclude a purely focalized reading. Consider Old English (Bybee at al. 1994: 135):

(8) Old English (Ælfric, *Lives*, I, 11.52-55)
   Sume *syndan creopende* on eorða mid eallum lichoman,
   Some are creeping on earth with whole body
   swa wurmas doð. Sume gað on twam fotum,
   as worms do. some go on two feet
   as worms do. some go on two feet
   some on feower fotum, sume fleoð mid fyðørum.
   some on four fett some fly with feathers
   some on four fett some fly with feathers
‘Some (animals) creep on the earth with their whole body, just as worms do. Some walk on two feet, some on four, some fly with their wings’.

In contrast to the constructions with the present participle, I will show in the following section that there are good reasons to believe that the construction with be + on + verbal noun in Old and Early Middle English could have been a construction to express absence from the deictic centre.

3. Absentive properties of constructions with a verbal noun

In Ælfric’s Colloquy, we find the following sentence: gyrstædeg ic wes on huntunge (p. 24, 1.68-69). The form is so rare in Old English that Åkerlund (1914: 323), who never came across it, took it to be a ‘ghost-phrase’. In Middle English it is found more often, though by no means as frequently as to be + present participle (Scheffer 1974: 244). In the following example we find a strong clue that the construction with the verbal noun is used to express the dislocation of the king from the deictic centre, i.e. the place where the dialogue takes place.

(9) Middle English (The Romance of Sir Beues of Hamtoun, MS A, ed. E.E.T.S., p. 101, l. 2049/57; bold mine)
And whan þat hende knight Beuoun
Come wiþ outen þe toun,
þar wiþ a palmer he mette,
And swiþe faire he him grette:
‘Palmer’, a sede, ‘whar is þe king?’
‘Sire!’, a seide, ‘an honting
Wiþ kinges fiftene’.
‘And whar’, a seide, ‘is þe quene?’
‘Sire’, a seide, ‘in her bour.’

Note that this fragment contains two questions introduced by whar ‘where’. The interrogatives inquire after the location of the king in (2053), and the queen in (2056). Instead of specifying a place by a noun and preposition, for instance ‘on Burch’ (in Peterborough), the first answer uses a verbal noun and preposition: an honting (2054). From this answer, the Addressee will derive the information that the king is out (not present) and somewhere out in the fields or forest, the place for hunting animals. The answer to the second question, however, specifies the place by a preposition and a noun phrase: in her bour (2057). In other words, the construction with a verbal noun can be used to specify a location in Middle English.

Example (9) contains a firm indication that the use of the verbal noun with the preposition on/an has a meaning of dislocation or absence. In the following subsections more evidence will be brought forward which supports the view that the construction with a verbal noun was indeed used to express somebody’s absence from the deictic centre.
3.1 Esse in venatione glossed by be on huntunge

The oldest example of a construction with the verbal noun is found in Ælfric’s Colloquy (p. 24, 1.67-69; 80). Ælfric wrote the Colloquy as an educational aid for teaching boys Latin. The text consists of a dialogue between a schoolmaster and his pupils. In addition to the Latin text, there is a gloss in Old English. A characteristic of Ælfric’s writing is that he was able to impart liveliness and spontaneity to the dialogue of his questionnaire. In the introduction to the text, the editor even states that ‘to-day the work is chiefly of interest for the picture it presents of the life and activities of the middle and lower classes of Anglo-Saxon society’ (Introduction, p. 1). The following fragment from the Colloquy follows on a conversation with the topic ‘things one is able to do: hunting’.

(10) *Old English* (Ælfric’s *Colloquy*, p. 24, 1.62-70)

Jea, butan nettum huntian ic mæg.  
*Etiam sine retibus uenare possum*

Hu

*Quomodo*

Mid swiftum hundum ic betæce wildeor

*Cum velocibus canibus insequor feras*

Hwilce wildeor swyþost gefehst þu ?

*Quales feras maxime capis*

Ic gefeo heortas 7 baras 7 rann 7 rægan 7 hwilon haran

*Capio ceruos et apros et dammas et capreos et aliando lepores*

Þære þu todæg on huntnoþe ?  

*Fuisti hodie in uenatione ?*

Ic næs, forþam sunnandæg ys, ac gystandæg ic wæs on

*Non fui, quia dominicus dies est, sed heri fui in*

*huntnoþe*

Hwæt gelæhtest þu ?  

*Quid cepisti ?*

‘I can also hunt without nets.’

‘How?’

‘I hunt wild animals with swift dogs.’

‘What kind of wild animals do you mostly catch?’

‘I catch deer, swine, roes, goats and sometimes hares.’

‘Have you been hunting today?’

‘I haven’t, because it’s Sunday, but yesterday I have been hunting.’

‘What did you catch?’

The context in which *on huntunge* in (68-69) is used does not require a progressive kind of expression. If, on the other hand, it could be established that *on huntunge* is a

---

6 There are several alternative forms found in Old English texts, e.g. *huntunge, huntnolde, huntnolfe,* and *huntnaþe.*
progressive, it could be a Durative progressive construction as mentioned in section 2 above. However, in this example it is difficult to evaluate the action relative to a larger interval of time. The construction may also denote the absentive in the sense of ‘have you been out hunting?’ It is not possible to derive the exact interpretation from the context given. The Latin text, however, gives an interesting clue.

The Latin phrase, which corresponds to be on huntunge is esse in venatione. Note that the form uses the preposition in and that the noun venatio is marked by the ablative case -ne. It is important to know that the form esse in venatione with the meaning of ‘being on a hunt’ does not occur in Classical Latin.7 The Latin used in the Colloquy is very similar to Classical Latin but it is a variant of Medieval Latin, or more specifically the Medieval Latin used in England. The author of the Colloquy was most probably not familiar with Classical Latin, but learned, as was quite common in his time, the Medieval variant.8 The meaning of venatio in Medieval Latin in England was different from Classical Latin. It did not mean ‘hunt’ or ‘hunting’, but ‘place for or right of hunting’ (Latham 1965: 506). This explains why the locative expression with in and the ablative could be used, since the word referred to a place and not to an action as in Classical Latin, where one should expect the use of the preposition ad + accusative as a direction towards. Given this information, I conclude that the form esse in venatione in the Colloquy was glossed by be on huntunge in the meaning of ‘be on a hunting place’, hence it was an expression of location. The use of the construction be on huntunge then easily fits in with an absentive interpretation.

3.2. The verbal noun was an abstract noun

Brunner (1962) shows that verbal nouns in –ing/-ung are formed with verbs of class 1 (-ing) and class 2 (-ung), of the weak verb classes. He argues that the verbal nouns are originally abstract nouns, as for instance in the following examples.

(11) hit is … mæra on huntunge heorta and rāna  
‘it is famous by its hunting of deer and reindeer
(12) sēo fēding ūara scēapa  
‘the feeding of the sheep’

On the basis of the following observations, Brunner (1962: 253-58) illustrates how the verbal nouns acquire verbal properties in a later stage.

(13) a. Verbal nouns are used without an article.  
b. Pronouns occur in the Oblique form in stead of the Genitive (possessive).

7 No cases are attested in the Bibliotheca Teubneriane Latina (2002). I thank Rodie Risselada for her help.
8 Arie Wesseling, personal communication.
9 Scheffer (1974: 245) says the following about these constructions: “Verbal nouns with of follow directly from the Old English form ic was on huntunge, especially from faran on huntunge hranes (Ælfric’s Colloquy, p. 30, l, 113/4). Here huntunge is not a verb and is therefore not followed by a direct object, but by an attributive adjunct in the genitive, which was later, owing to the analytical tendency of the language, replaced by an of-adjunct”.

7
8
9

7
8
9
c. Adverbial and prepositional modifiers are in postposition. In the case of verbal nouns, these modifiers precede the noun.

d. Modifiers take the adverbial ending –ly

e. The formation of past tense and passive constructions with the –ing form of have or be + the past participle of the verb.

The development of verbal nouns from abstract nouns to more verbal elements does not in itself say anything about an absentive reading of constructions with a verbal noun. However, the development sketched does not contradict the view that the construction with an abstract (verbal) noun was used to express somebody’s absence. Or even better, it may support the view. Evidence therefore is that nominal elements are prototypically used for spatial orientations, whereas verbal elements are not. When in the course of time the construction developed more verbal properties, the construction became less suitable for expressing absence, and more suitable for expressing ongoing activity. The meaning of the construction grew towards the one with be + present participle, i.e. a progressive meaning.

3.3. The spatial and temporal use of on

In his study on the prepositions at, on, and in in Old and Middle English, Lundskær-Nielsen (1993) shows that on in Old English had a predominantly spatial use. In later stages, the preposition on was used more and more in a temporal sense.

In the entries of the years 892-900 in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle the preposition on occurs 86 times, 55 are in locative constructions, some in idiomatic and possessive constructions and 9 show figurative or abstract use. On is used 13 times in a temporal way. The examples with abstract use are of particular interest here. Lundskær-Nielsen (1993: 93) says the following:

Some of the nine examples here have the general meaning of ‘being on the way’ to some (usually) unspecified place or simply ‘being out’ somewhere; the location is not as clearly defined as in the other categories defined above, so we are dealing with an extended spatial notion. Thus we find on anne siÞ ‘in one journey/voyage’ (893), on fære ‘on the way/march’ and on hergaÞ ‘harrying, on a raid’ (twice) (894).

This fragment contains three very interesting pieces of information. The first one is that of the general meaning of ‘being on the way’, which means absence from the deictic centre. The second one is the ‘extended spatial notion’. Lundskær-Nielsen recognizes that the examples contain both spatial information (a specific place), and deictic information (the place is distinct from the deictic centre). The third one is that the last example, on hergaÞ, counts as a perfect example of a construction with an absentive meaning: “be off harrying”, and “be of on a raid”.

In the entries for the years 1122-1154 in the Peterborough Chronicle, the highest number of occurrences of on (60 out of 157) fall under the heading of temporal usage. On in verbal complements is in the majority of cases used in a purely spatial sense; that is, the main verb of the clause expresses ‘location’ or ‘non-movement’, e.g. þes feorðe
gæges Þæræfter wæs se king Heanri on Roueceastre ‘the fourth day after that King Henry was in Rochester’. However, examples such as Þa tune on Burch ‘the town of Peterborough’ suggest that on could suffer a devaluation of meaning, which Lundskær-Nielsen considers early examples of grammaticalization of locative prepositions. Moreover, the preposition may also be used in directional complements, as in (14):  

(14) Ond Þone eorl he sende to Brigge on heftunge
‘and he sent the earl to Brigg into confinement.’

On the basis of the data presented by Lundskær-Nielsen, it is clear that in the years between 892 and 1154 the preposition on developed from a preposition with a predominant spatial use to a preposition with several usages, with the highest number of occurrences falling under a temporal use.

3.4. The combination with rīdan and owt

Scheffer (1974: 244) mentions that the analogical form with a verbal noun also occurs with other verbs than to be, e.g. with to ride.

(15) Middle English (King Horn, MS C, ed. E.E.T.S., p 29, l. 684; MS L, p. 30, l. 700; MS H)
   a. Be king him rod an huntinge
   b. Bat ich rod on fischinge
   c. Bat ich rod ofysshyng

The examples in (15) have unmistakably an absentive meaning, conveying that “The king rode out hunting” and “I rode out fishing”.

The most convincing example illustrating the absentive nature of the construction with be + on + verbal noun is the following, mentioned by Scheffer (1974: 245), with an overt expression of absence in the word owt ‘out’.

(16) Middle English (Stoner Letters and Papers; ed. Camden Society; 2. 123)
   John Cheynye is owt a hawking
   ‘John Cheynye is out on hawking’

Languages which have the Absentive sometimes show variation between expressions with and without “out”. Dutch is one of the languages where the variation between the two expressions, however, is not free.

---

10 Lundskær-Nielsen (1993: 104)
11 The example already shows the reduction of on (an) to o (a). With ‘hunting’ the first reduction to a is found in the Chronicle of William Gregory 1470 (1, 219): rode a huntynge (Mossé 1938, Vol. II, p. 110).
12 Cf. De Groot 1995 for the distribution of uit ‘out’ in Absentive constructions and further literature. The Absentive with uit in Dutch denotes something “pleasant”.
3.5. Marking Figure or Ground

In explaining the rise of certain periphrastic constructions, Kuteva (2001: 51) introduces the notions of Figure and Ground. In the English sentence ‘The picture is on the wall’, for instance, ‘the picture’ is the Figure and ‘the wall’ the Ground. The linguistic expression of spatial configurations across languages involves a varying degree of precision regarding the information about the Figure and the Ground. The relation between objects in space specifies the geometrical nature of Ground, not the Figure. Ewe, for instance, is one of the languages which provide precise information about the nature and the dimension of the Ground: “The picture is on the wall/on the higher part of the wall/on the top of the wall”, etc. In languages where the Ground is presupposed, the Figure may be specified. This is for instance the case in languages such as Dutch, where postural verbs may be employed in progressive constructions, for instance Jan zit te wachten (John sits to wait ‘John is waiting’) and Jan staat te wachten (John stands to wait ‘John is waiting’). Dutch, however, has both options to mark the Figure (17a) or the Ground (17b).

(17) a. Jan loopt te jagen. ‘Figure’
   John walks to hunt
   ‘John is hunting.’
   b. Jan is op jacht. ‘Ground’
   John is on hunt
   ‘John is out hunting.’

Interestingly, where the Figure is marked, the clause has a progressive meaning, whereas if the Ground is marked, there is an absentive meaning. I do not claim that it will be always the case that an absentive meaning can be derived from constructions where the Ground is marked.\(^{13}\) They merely license an absentive interpretation.

English does not mark the Figure, neither in modern nor in earlier stages of the language. As for the Ground, let us return to the Old and Middle English constructions. No Ground can be established for the construction with be + present participle. There is just the subject and a predicate which consists of an auxiliary verb with a present participle. The second construction with be + on + verbal noun, however, contains a subject, a copula and a non-verbal, i.e. locative predicate. The construction has a Ground specified by the verbal noun, marked by the preposition on. The construction is spatial indeed, and may therefore have the absentive meaning. The difference between the two constructions in that Ground is not relevant to the former but relevant to the latter, supports the view that the two constructions oppose in the sense that the first one has a progressive interpretation and the second one an absentive. Progressives do not necessarily specify a Ground, whereas Absentive constructions most likely do.

\(^{13}\) In fact there is a progressive construction in Dutch where the Ground is marked and not the Figure, as in Jan is aan het boxen [John is at the box.INF] ‘John is boxing.’ However, in present-day Dutch the preposition aan has lost most of its spatial usage.
3.6. Class of verbs

When we look at the verbs from which the verbal nouns are derived, we see that they constitute a homogeneous class. They all denote activities performed in particular places. The verbal nouns we find are for instance ‘hunting’, ‘hawking’, ‘fishing’, ‘harrying’, and ‘fighting’. This again supports the view that the construction with verbal nouns was meant to express someone’s absence from a deictic centre.

3.7. Preliminary conclusions

In this section we have seen that there are at least seven different kinds of arguments that favour the idea that the construction with a verbal noun and a preposition in Old and Middle English was an absentive construction. The arguments taken individually do not make a strong claim; however, all arguments together present a very strong case. Briefly, these arguments are as follows:

(18) a. The construction is found in a dialogue where it is used as an answer to a where question.
   b. The construction is used as the translation of Latin esse in venatione.
   c. The construction is nominal and not verbal.
   d. The preposition has a spatial use.
   e. The construction combines with rīdan ‘ride’ and owt ‘out’.
   f. The construction can be analysed as a construction in which a Ground is marked.
   g. The class of verbs denote highly specific activities performed in particular places.

As mentioned in section 2 above, the absentive as used in a number of present-day languages of Europe contains four types of information: (i) the referent of the subject (=Subj) is absent, (ii) the Subj is involved in an activity, (iii) it is predictable how long the Subj will be absent, and (iv) the Subj will return after a period of time. The examples from Old and Middle English do not all show that they meet these requirements, so that they could count as the Absentive in the modern sense. However, when we consider the dialogue from the Romance of Sir Beues of Hamtoun, the example does fully fit the requirements.

(19) ‘Palmer”, a sede, ‘whar is þe king ?’
    ‘Sire !’ a seide, ‘an honting
    Wiþ kinges fiftene.’

The pilgrim could have answered ‘not here’ or ‘in the countryside’, but he did not. By answering ‘an honting’ he offers the following types of information:
a. The king is not present.
b. Based on pragmatic knowledge, the Addressee will understand that the king will be away for some time (assuming that the king goes on a hunt for a couple of days or even longer).
c. The king will return after the hunt.

When the Absentive is used in languages such as Dutch, all these types of information are contained in the expression.

4. Discussion

In the literature on the rise of the progressive in English, the construction with the present participle is usually taken to be the source construction. One other construction, the one with the verbal noun, began to develop verbal properties. It is suggested that the two constructions were semantically close and that in connection with phonological changes the following two separate Old English constructions he wæs huntende and he wæs on huntunge became very similar in Middle English *he was huntyng(e) and he was on/an/in/a huntyng(e), and ultimately coalesced, thus sharply increasing the frequency of the progressive form proper (cf. Fischer 1992). In this paper I make a case for analysing the construction with the verbal noun as an absentive construction. In section 3, I have given seven reasons why I consider the construction with the verbal noun to be a construction denoting absence from the deictic centre.

Given the claim that the construction with a verbal noun is indeed an Absentive construction, it follows that the construction with the present participle (progressive) and the construction with the verbal noun (absentive) were not semantically close, as suggested in the linguistic literature, i.e. the construction with the verbal noun was not a (kind of) progressive too. Still, constructions denoting a progressive meaning on the one hand and constructions denoting an absentive meaning on the other hand may grow towards each other. The main reason for this is that the progressive and the absentive partially overlap. The progressive may in certain cases denote absence, e.g. in the case of “John is playing tennis”. If the deictic centre is not the tennis court, then in addition to the progressive there will also be an absentive reading. Although the absentive is basically a spatial deictic construction, the construction is, however, often felt to be a kind of progressive. Moreover, in Finnish there is a construction which can have both the progressive and the absentive interpretation. The interpretation of progressive or absentive in Finnish is determined by word order. Within a cognitive construction approach as used in Goldberg (2003) or Verhagen (this volume), I assume that the progressive construction and the absentive construction are closely if not adjacently related in a taxonomy of constructions. In other words, the semantic relation between progressive and absentive may be one of the reasons why the two distinct constructions in Middle English fused into one.

14 As a matter of fact, before using ‘Absentive’ I used to call the construction ‘remote progressive’ (De Groot 1989: 8). De Groot (2000), Ebert (1996), Bertinetto et al. (2000), and Krause (2002) discuss the Absentive under the heading or within the section ‘Progressive’.
As for the second reason, note that many progressive constructions in the languages of the world find their origins in spatial constructions (cf. Bybee et al. 1994 and Krause 2002). A clear example of the spatial origin of the progressive is found in German: *Sie ist beim Skatspielen* [she is at skatplaying] ‘She is playing skat’ (Ebert 1996: 46f; Krause 2002: 44f).\(^{15}\) Given this line of development, the absentive, being a spatial construction, may under certain conditions easily undergo the same process. Evidence for such a development in English is the development of the preposition *on* from spatial in Old English to temporal in Middle English (cf. section 3.3. above). The development could be schematically represented as follows:

\[
\text{(21) absentive} \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{progressive} \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{the king is on (the place for) hunting} \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{the king is hunting}
\]

On the basis of the data available, it is not possible to establish the exact path in which the two constructions melt together. There are two possibilities: (i) the construction with the present participle developed into the progressive; the absentive was reinterpreted as a progressive (cf. 21); the two progressive constructions coalesced, or (ii) both constructions with the present participle and the verbal noun developed into the progressive simultaneously.

Nehls (1974) and Dal (1952) make explicit statements about the difference between the usage of the two constructions. According to Nehls the construction with the verbal noun became dialectal/non-standard. It would be interesting to investigate the dialects of English in which the construction with the verbal noun remained and see what have happened with the constructions and their meaning.

According to Dal the construction with the verbal noun was used in ordinary or sub-standard speech, while the construction with the present participle was used in educated speech. Dal may be right that the two constructions belong to two different modes of language use. These modes, however, are not educated versus ordinary or sub-standard speech, but rather epic or narrative versus dialogue style. Narratives can be structured around one or more time points, to which absolute and relative reference can be made by means of different grammatical tense distinctions. Aspect, which concerns the internal time structure of events, is also often related to the temporal structure of a text, e.g. ‘When John entered the room, Mary was reading a book.’, where the event of reading the book (expressed by the progressive) is located around the time point that John entered the room. In contrast, the absentive relates to a deictic centre, which is often (but not necessarily) determined on the basis of extra linguistic information, e.g. the place where a conversation takes place. That is why we find genuine examples of the constructions with a verbal noun used as an absentive in dialogues only, and that is why we do not find many examples of the construction with the verbal noun in Old English, because the number and size of texts with dialogues is highly restricted. This then explains why the form is very rare in Old English texts.

\(^{15}\) Note that the Absentive in German takes the following form: *Sie ist skatspielen*. [she is skatplaying], ‘She is off playing skat.’
5. Conclusions

In this paper I have shown that Old English in transition to Middle English had a construction with the properties of the Absentive. The view that there is a distinction between the construction with the present participle (progressive) and the construction with the verbal noun (absentive) sheds new light on the relation between the two constructions in Old and Middle English. It makes explicit what the semantic difference between the two constructions is. A partial overlap in the semantics of the progressive and the absentive on the one hand, and the fact that many progressives find their origins in spatial constructions, on the other, motivate the possibility that the two constructions may have coalesced. The distinction between progressive and absentive also explains why the construction with the verbal noun (absentive) is rare in Old English, because the form predominantly occurs in dialogues, a form which is rare in old texts.

From a theoretical point of view, the data and the analysis offer interesting new material for the study of aspect and Aktionsart, the relation between progressive and absentive, grammaticalization and the history of the English language.

References


**Sources**


