

Nicholas Smith  
Lancaster University, UK  
[n.i.smith@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:n.i.smith@lancaster.ac.uk)

## **The Divergent Paths of the Progressive Passive in British and American English**

The progressive passive is a comparatively recent grammatical innovation in English. After an initial period of stigmatization, it gained widespread acceptance on both sides of the Atlantic only in the mid- to late nineteenth century (for corpus evidence, see for example Hundt 2004a, Hundt 2004b, Smitterberg 2002).

This paper examines the path of development of the progressive passive, using diachronic corpus data from the early 1930s through to the end of the twentieth century (principally Brown, Frown, Lancaster1931, LOB, FLOB, and BNC). The path can be seen as divergent in three important respects: (i) In British English the progressive passive has continued to spread, whereas in American English its diffusion seems to have reached a plateau (cf. Hundt 2004; Leech and Smith forthcoming). The construction thus appears to represent a rare instance of British English pursuing its own line of development in recent grammatical change, little influenced by contact with American English. (ii) In marked contrast to the progressive passive, the nonprogressive passive has declined dramatically, in both varieties. The much sharper decline in American English suggests a stronger prescriptive reaction to the passive in general in that variety, a factor that may have militated against continuing uptake of the progressive passive. (iii) The synchronic and recent diachronic distributional pattern of progressive passives is far from uniform across the paradigm. They are most frequent, and most significantly increasing, in present tense.

This paper also looks at the functional and stylistic factors that may have promoted the use of the progressive passive in the twentieth century and today. It considers the competition between the progressive passive and other functionally similar forms, and the extent to which frequency shifts observed across the corpora can be explained in terms of social-stylistic and language internal theories of change.

### **References**

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