



## A contrastive analysis of progressive aspect in English and Persian

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### ABSTRACT

This study is an attempt to find the differences of the progressive aspect in English and Persian, concerning both form and function. To find such differences, first, the structure and the functions of progressive forms in English and Persian are compared and contrasted. And it is explained how differences in grammatical and lexical aspects in these languages account for a higher frequency of progressive forms in English. Then, all the past progressive verbs in a selected English text are compared with their counterparts in the Persian translation text. The selected texts consist of 11 chapters of the English novel 'Jane Eyre' by Charlotte Bronte (1950) and its Persian translation by Mohammad Taghi Bahrani-harran (1998). The data shows a clearly higher frequency of progressive form in English compared with the Persian. Based on the contrastive analysis done the reasons for such difference are; differences in functions related to lexical aspects inherited in verbs, employing an imperfective form in the Persian system which has no grammatical realization in English, expressing progressive meaning through lexical realization in some Persian sentences, and impermissibility of negative progressive form in Persian.

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### Introduction

Both English and Persian, the two languages which are concerned in this research, include the categories of tense and aspect in their grammar systems. However, based on the studies on the verb system in Persian (Taleghani 2008; Lambton 1961; Farahani 1990) and in English (Declerck 2006; Comrie 1985; Reichenbach 1947) to name a few, they do not share all the specifications of the categories. As Baht (1999) points out, different languages benefit from the tense and aspect system to a different extent. While Persian signals both imperfective and progressive aspects morphologically, in English only progressive aspect is expressed grammatically. Thus, in many cases where English employs the progressive form, in Persian the same situation is expressed through imperfective one, which is represented by the prefix *mi-* to the verb stem. The following is one such example from the parallel texts of this study. (Throughout this paper, the number in parentheses following each English and Persian sentence shows the page of the selected text from which the sample is taken):

- 1) What *were you opening the window for?* (p. 29)  
*bāraye che pānjāre ra bāz mi-kārd-i?* (p. 39)  
*for what window-OM open Imp-make-PAST-2sg*

In the Persian text the verb *bāz kārdān* (open) is used in imperfective form, *bāz mi-kārd-i*, though a progressive form is also available in the Persian system, i.e. *dāstī bāz mi-kārd-i*, and can be optionally used in the same sentence. Description of the imperfective and progressive structures in the Persian grammar is given in section 4 below.

This study, a contrastive analysis by nature, investigates into the similarities and differences between Progressive Aspect in English and Persian, as far as the form and function are concerned. To achieve the objective of the study, the researchers compared and contrasted past progressive forms in English and Persian. This analysis will yield results that can be useful for

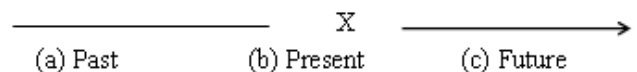
linguistic studies as well as pedagogical and translational purposes. As James (1981: 63) states, contrastive analysis procedure consists of two steps: first description and then comparison. For the description phase, since a great deal of literature concerning this issue is available, a review of the literature will meet the need. This is done in the following section. Then the functions of this tense form in the two languages in question will be compared and contrasted as for the comparison step.

### Review of Literature

As Declerck (2006:25) states, tense, aspect and modality interact with each other to form a verb phrase. Past progressive, for instance, is formed through the interaction of past *tense* and progressive *aspect*. Therefore, these two concepts will be briefly reviewed in the next section.

### Tense and Aspect

Tense is different from time in that the former refers to a grammatical entity, and the latter conveys the general meaning of time. Time is language independent and is the same for all human beings while tense appears in different forms in different languages. Jespersen (1969: 230) believes that time is one dimensional for us; hence, it can be demonstrated on a straight line as follows:



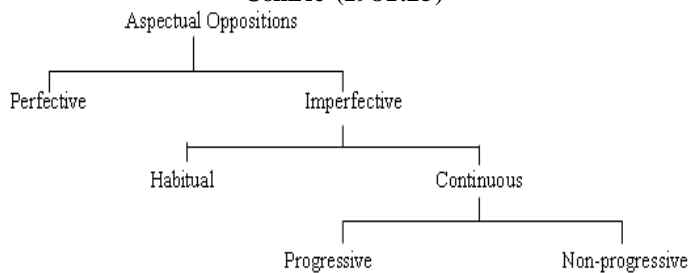
In fact, time is divided into two parts: past and future. The joint point is called the present which is an abstract entity without a distinct dimension, just like a geometrical point. The same idea is stated by Quirk et al (1972:84) where they add that this perception of the time is universal since it is extra-linguistic and exists independently of any language. We insert this entity into languages via a category called tense. Therefore, as Comrie (1985:9) defines "tense is grammaticalized expression of

location in time.” And past tense, for instance, according to Comrie (Ibid: 41) is the location in time just before to the present moment. Other deductions about temporal location that are made on the basis of individual sentences in the past tense are the result of factors other than simply the choice of tense.

Bhat (1999) points out that failure in differentiation of tense (temporal location) and aspect (temporal structure) has caused some linguists to give a complex description of tense. He (Ibid: 13) defines tense as “an inflectional marker of the verb used for denoting the *temporal location* of an event (or situation)”. Tense, as Declerck (2006:22) states, “denotes the form taken by the verb to locate the situation referred to in time.”

Aspect shows the *temporal structure* of an event, i.e. how the event occurs in time. Declerck (Ibid: 28) states that aspects indicate different structures of actualizing situations. In addition, different aspects may be shown by different markers in various languages. The aspect may be signaled by a grammatical marker, or may be indicated by the whole composition of a sentence. Linguists have proposed different classifications of aspects. Bhat (1999:44) classifies various types of distinctions that aspectual system can contribute to the verb phrase in three groups, “namely (i) perfectives and imperfectives, (ii) ingressive, progressives, egressive and resultatives, and (iii) semelfactives, iteratives, habituales and frequentatives”. Comrie (1981:3) defines aspects as “different ways of viewing the internal temporal consistency of a situation”. He starts his classification of aspects with two binary opposites; perfective and imperfective aspect. The important distinction of which is that “the imperfective pays essential attention to the internal structure of the situation” (Ibid: 16), while perfective does not have an explicit reference to this internal structure. He (Ibid: 25) gives “the most typical subdivisions of imperfectivity” in a diagram as follows:

**Diagram 1- Classification of Aspectual Oppositions by Comrie (1981:25)**



A brief review of these aspectual notions will be given in the next sections, except for the habitual and continuous aspects which are not related to the subject of this paper.

### Perfective and Imperfective

Bhat (1999: 45) says, “The most important aspectual distinction that occurs in the grammars of natural languages is the one between perfective and imperfective.” Perfective aspect refers to viewing an event as a whole unit from the outside, while imperfective refers to viewing it from the inside as on-going or habitual. In English a verb form is either perfective or imperfective depending on the context. This can be illustrated by the two sentences below:

2 a) *I returned the book to her; she **received** it quietly and ... (p. 50)*

b) *I had a prospect of getting a new situation where the salary would be double what I now **received**. (p. 94)*

Though having the same grammatical form, the verb ‘received’, regarding the context, in (2a) reflects a perfective situation, and in (2b) an imperfective situation.

In Persian, however, imperfective aspect is morphologically marked by the prefix *mi-* in the present and past tense forms (Lambton 1961; Mahootian 1997; Taleghani 2008). In the translated text, the verb ‘received’ in the example (2) is rendered into two different morphological forms, distinguishing imperfective meaning by the prefix *mi-*. The first is translated into perfective form ‘*gereft*’ (p. 66) and the second into the imperfective form ‘*mi-gereft-æm*’ (p. 123).

### Progressive and Non-progressive

Ingressive, progressive, and egressive aspects are different forms of imperfective. Ingressive refers to the beginning of a situation and egressive to the terminate point. Some languages have markers for such references, but English and Persian lack such a special verb form to convey this meaning. As Declerck (2006:29) points out in English, only progressive aspect is systematically expressed by special verb markers. In a sentence like, *I was walking home* the progressive aspect is grammaticalized by an auxiliary, BE, and an inflectional morpheme –ING. This indicates that the situation is represented as ongoing, i.e. as being in its ‘middle’. In Persian, many linguists like Lambton (1961), Mahootian (1997), Meshkatodini (1991), and Taleghani (2008), agree on describing the colloquial progressive structure as a combination of the auxiliary verb *dashtæn* (have) plus the imperfective form of the main verb, e.g.: *dasht-æm mi-raft-æm* meaning *I was going*. Another construction which is labeled as progressive form by some traditional grammarians like (Natel Khanlari, 1998) is restricted to the formal usage of the language. This formal progressive structure is formed from a prepositional phrase, namely *dar hale* (in the process of), plus the infinitive form of the main verb, plus a finite form of the auxiliary *budæn* (be); a structure which means ‘being in the process of doing something.’

### Methodology

In this paper, first the structure of past progressive tense in English and Persian system will be described, based on Declerck’s definition and classification of the English tense forms (Declerck, 2006), and Anvari & Givi’s (2010) in Persian. In addition Comrie’s classification of the grammatical aspects, given in the diagram (1) above, will be the framework of the study since it can best account for the aspectual systems of the two languages under study. As mentioned earlier, there is no agreement among Persian linguists about the formal construction of progressive form, yet to be inclusive, this research will take both forms, colloquial and formal, into account. Then, to find the differences in frequency and functions of progressive form occurrence in the two languages, all the past progressive verbs in 11 chapters of the source text are compared with that of the same parts of the translated one. To randomize the data collection, these chapters were chosen from different parts of the book; chapters 1 to 4, 16 to 19, and 36 to 38.

### Comparison and Contrast

The past progressive forms in the two language systems can be compared and contrasted from both structural and functional point of view. The structural and functional differences of the forms are given below:

### The Structure of Past Progressive Form

In English, the progressive aspect is grammaticalized through the auxiliary verb ‘be’ together with the main verb followed by –ing suffix. This auxiliary is inflected to indicate

grammatical categories including tense, person and number. Thus the sentence structure of a past progressive sentence will be as follows:

Sub + was/were + (adverb) + Verb-ing

Example: She was standing.

In Persian, as mentioned earlier, there are two grammatical forms to represent past progressive; one formal and the other colloquial construction. The structure of each type, followed by an example, is illustrated below:

#### The Structure of Persian Formal Past Progressive:

In the formal past progressive, the main verb occurs in infinitive form followed by a certain prepositional phrase, namely *dær hal-e* (in the process of), then comes the simple past form of the auxiliary verb *budæn* (be). The object, if any, appears between the main verb and the auxiliary. This structure can be demonstrated as follows:

Sub + *dær hal-e* (= in the process of) + Infinitive Verb + (Object) + Past Form of *budæn* (= be).

Example:

3a) *Eliza dær hal-e pushedæn-e kolah-æsh bud.*

[*Eliza*] [*in*] [*process-off*] [*put on-off*] [*bonnet-her*] [*was*]  
(Gloss)

In this structure the word *mæshqul-e* (=busy) also may be used instead of the phrase *dær hal-e*, with the same meaning. As it is used in the verb phrase *mæshqul-e bærraq kærdaen-e* in the Persian text (p. 219) for the progressive verb form *was polishing* in the English text (p. 165).

The Persian formal progressive is similar to the English one as in both systems the auxiliary 'be' (*budæn* the Persian equivalent) is used, and it is in agreement with the tense and the subject. The main morphological difference is that the main verb is in the infinitive form in Persian while it is inflected in English, receiving an *-ing* suffix. This type of Persian progressive form, however, is used rarely and is limited to formal register. The Persian Formal Progressive exemplifies what Comrie (1976: 98) calls 'locative expression' and exemplifies by 'he is in the process of getting up.'

The sentence (3a) above is suggested by the present writer as a possible translation of the sentence 'Eliza was putting on her bonnet' from the source text (p. 28). However, in the selected corpus, this sentence is translated into the colloquial past progressive, which is more common, as follows.

#### The Structure of Persian Colloquial Past Progressive:

The colloquial past progressive verb form is composed of simple past form of the auxiliary verb *dashtæn* (have) and the imperfective past form of the main verb, with the possible object between these two. The structure of this form is as follows:

Sub + Past Form of *dashtæn* (= have) + (Object) + Imp Past Form of Verb

Example:

3b) *Eliza dasht kolah-æsh ra mi-pushid.* (p. 37)

[*Eliza*] [*have-PAST-3sg*] [*process-off*] [*put on-off*] [*OM*]  
[*bonnet-her*] [*was*] (Gloss)

(OM stands for the object marker which follows a definite object in Persian.)

In this construction, both the auxiliary verb, *dashtæn* (have), and the main verb are in agreement with the subject.

#### Negative Progressive Form

One specific characteristic of Persian colloquial progressive is that it does not appear in negative form. Many Persian linguists mention this fact, like Meshkatodini (2011: 55-61), and Taleghani (2008: 11). Therefore, a negative English sentence

like (4a) below cannot be translated as sentences (4b) or (4c) below, rather it is normally shifted to a non-progressive imperfective form, as sentence (4d).

4a) "I was not dreaming," ... (p. 165)

4b) \**næ-dashtæn xab mi-didæm* (negative present prog.)  
[*Neg-had-1sg*] [*dream*] [*Imp-see- PAST-1sg*] (Gloss)

4c) \**dashtæn xab ne-mi-didæm* (negative present prog.)  
[*had-1sg*] [*dream*] [*Neg-imp-see-PAST-1sg*] (Gloss)

4d) *xab ne-mi-didæm* (p. 219) (negative imperfective past)

[*dream*] [*Neg-imp-see-PAST-1sg*] (Gloss)

(Asterisk mark shows unacceptable construction.)

#### Functional similarities and differences

As Comrie (1981: 38) stressed, "In English the meaning of the Progressive has extended well beyond the original definition of progressivity", and English system employs progressive forms in an unusually wider range than many other languages. This is also stressed by Michaelis (1998: 40), as she says that English lacks the option of overriding inherent perfective aspect through morphological imperfective form, so it relies upon the progressive. In English, as Comrie (1981:37) shows, some stative verbs, like *stand* and *live*, are used in progressive form to contrast with non-progressive, while in many languages which have a progressive form such verbs may not appear in the progressive. He compares the sentence *I live at 6 Railway Cuttings* with *I'm living at 6 Railway Cuttings* and concludes that in English "in such pairs, the non-progressive refers to a more or less permanent state of affairs, whereas the progressive refers to a more temporary state" (Ibid). In Persian, such a distinction is made lexically, rather than grammatically, as shown below:

5a) *mæn dær shomare 6 R.C. zendegi mi-kon-æm.*  
(Imperfective Present)

I at number 6 R.C. live. (Literal Translation)

5b) *mæn felææn dær shomare 6 R.C. zendegi mi-kon-æm.*  
(Imperfective Present)

I temporarily at number 6 R.C. live. (Literal Translation)

As it is seen, the temporary state of the situation is represented by the adverb *felææn* (=temporarily) in (5b).

In addition, in Persian, there are cases where progressive meaning can optionally be represented lexically. The following sentence is from the selected text:

6) *Mary was cooking the dinner.* (p. 489)

*Mary mæshqul-e tahæye-ye næhar bud.* (p. 649) (Perfective Past)

[*Mary*] [*busy-of*] [*prepare-of*] [*dinner*] [*be-PAST-3sg*]  
(Gloss)

Another important difference in employing progressive forms in the two languages is related to the differences in lexical aspects of the so-called equivalent verbs. A group of verbs like *sleep*, *sit*, and *stand* which are considered stative in English, and very commonly occur in progressive forms, do not occur in progressive form to express progressive meaning. As Abolhasani (2011:110) stresses, they have three phases in Persian; the phase of 'process' before the actual event, the phase of transition which shows changing from one situation to another. This phase has no duration, i.e. is punctual. The third phase is the stative situation which lasts for some time. In Persian, only the first phase of such verbs can be used in progressive form, and such a form, as Abolhasani (Ibid) states, represents the 'prospective aspect' rather than the progressivity. Prospective aspect, as Comrie states, refers to "a state of being about to do something"

and is typically expressed with *to be going to*, *to be about to*, *to be on the point of* in English (Comrie, 1981: 64). Therefore, with this group of verbs while in English the progressive forms express the situation is being in progress, in Persian such a form only represents a process in which a situation is going to start. Employing the progressive form to express prospective aspect in Persian, also, is very common with punctual verbs like *oftadæn*, *shekæstæn*, *chekidæn*, (fall, break, drop) etc. (Abolhasani, 2011). The functional meaning of a Persian sentence like *dare mi-xabe* (literally meaning he is sleeping), is completely different from the English sentence *he is sleeping*. In fact, this Persian sentence means *he is about to fall asleep*. This is why some English progressive sentences are translated to a non-progressive form in Persian, as shown in the following example:

7) *She was standing*. (p. 467) (English - Past Prog)

*zu istade bud* (p. 619) (Persian - Past Perfect)

*She had stood up*. (back translation)

In some languages, like English, as Comrie (1981:33) stressed, the use of progressive forms is obligatory to express progressive meaning, while "in others the use of the specifically progressive forms is optional." Besides the lexical representation of progressive meaning, as was illustrated in the example (6) above, Persian employs imperfective aspect as a more inclusive form which does not exclude the progressive meaning. Therefore, in many cases where the English system uses progressive form, Persian system can express the same meaning either through imperfective or progressive form optionally. A great number of the past progressive verb forms in the source text of this study were rendered into imperfective past, as it was already shown in the example number (1).

#### Findings and Conclusions

Searching the two parallel texts, we found 66 cases of past progressive form in the English text, while only 10 cases were found in the Persian text, all in the positive form. Only in one case, the progressive form is employed in the Persian text for a non-progressive English verb. For the 66 English past progressive verbs, the equivalents in the Persian text consist of: 9 past progressives, 7 present progressives, 25 non-progressive imperfectives, 3 other tense forms with progressive meaning (lexically progressive), and 23 cases of shift leading to other tense forms or even shift of category or rank, in which verb forms are shifted to other forms. These findings are shown in table (1) below:

**Table 1- Comparison of Past Progressive Verbs in the English Text with Their Equivalents in the Persian Text**

	English Past Prog	Persian Equivalents Provided				
		Past Prog	Present Prog	Past Imp	Lexical Prog	Shift
Number	66	9	7	25	2	23
Percentage	100	13.5	10.5	38	3	35

As it can be observed in the table, 7 cases of the English past progressives have been rendered to the present progressive in the translated text. Difference of the tense in these cases is due to the grammatical rule called sequence of tense (Comrie, 1985:104), according to which in English if the verb of the main clause is in the past tense, the verb in the subordinate clause also will appear in a past tense form. Since tense is not of the main concern in this study, these cases can be considered of the same aspectual form. The example (8) below is one such case.

8) *I knew of what he was thinking*. (p. 484) (English - Past Prog)

*mi-danest-æm raje be che chizi daræd fekr mi-konæd*. (p. 643) (Persian - Present Prog)

*I knew about what he is thinking*. (back translation)

Therefore, it can be concluded that from the 66 past progressive verbs, 16 cases (24%) are rendered to the same aspectual form. However, this shows a great difference in frequency of progressive aspect in the two languages.

#### Results

Based on the comparison and contrast done above, this difference of frequency can be accounted for by some facts:

1) Since Persian system benefits from imperfective aspect, which does not exclude progressivity, the morphological progressive form is only optionally used. This is proved by 25 cases of past imperfective forms given for the English progressives.

2) Because of the differences in lexical aspects of the so-called equivalent verbs, progressive forms are impermissible with some verbs in Persian, while in English they are commonly used in progressive. The example (7) above illustrate the matter.

3) In the Persian system, progressive meaning can optionally be represented by lexical words rather than the grammatical structure. As shown in example (6) above.

4) English negative progressive forms have no correspondence in the Persian progressive system. While the English text contains 2 negative past progressive verb forms, in the Persian text a shift to other tense forms, past imperfective in this case, is obligatory.

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