

STATIVITY AND VARIATION  
IN ENGLISH ADJECTIVES AND NOUNS

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1. *Introduction*

It is now accepted by linguists that no language is monolithic. Language exhibits variability at all levels of analysis: phonetics, grammar, and lexis. The English language is no exception to the phenomenon of variation, notwithstanding the relatively high degree of codification and standardization manifested by the language. Here, for instance, are a few examples of variation in English.

(i) *Phonetic Variation*

Practically every region of the English-speaking world has its own characteristic features of pronunciation. Thus, for example, the spoken English of the USA is rather different from that of Britain, or Canada or Australia. The word 'class', for instance, is pronounced as /klæs/ in most parts of the USA and as /kla:s/ in most parts of England. Similarly 'network' /r/ is retroflex and quite distinct from that of the so-called Received Pronunciation (RP) as would be heard on a BBC newsbroadcast.

Such phonetic variation is also attested *within* each of the major regions mentioned above. For example, the word 'love' is normally read aloud as /lʌv/ by a speaker of RP and as /lʊv/ by a typical Yorkshireman. Even RP is not invariable. Wells, J. C. (1932: 291) has it that "Many RP speakers do have or can have, the sequence /-aɪr-/ in at least some of *irate, ironic, piratical, pyrethrum, direction, spiraea* and other similar words. Equally though, many other RP speakers never have it, pronouncing only /aɪə'reɪt/, /daɪə'rekʃən ~dɪ- ~də-/ etc. So this is a true case of phonotactic/structural/distributional variability in mainstream RP." Obviously phonetic variability of the type illustrated above is nonphonemic, but it sometimes serves the purpose of ingroup solidarity, or some other social function. (Cf. Labov 1963, 1964; Trudgill, P. J. 1974).

(ii) *Lexical Variation*

In the USA the word 'railroad', corresponds to 'railway' in Britain. Similarly 'sidewalk' corresponds to 'pavement'. Other examples are:

- 'call collect' vs. 'reverse charges'  
 'closet' vs. 'cupboard/wardrobe'  
 'duplex' vs. 'semi-detached'  
 (Cf. Bickerton, A. *et al* 1984)

(ii) *Grammatical Variation*

Grammatical variation is much more limited in *Standard English* than phonetic or lexical variation. A few illustrative examples of regional variation in the grammar of English can be cited. For instance, in the USA, people tend to use the form 'gotten' in, say, 'He has gotten a new car' whereas in Britain the attested form is 'got' as in 'He has got a new car.' Likewise, in the USA 'different than' corresponds to British 'different from' (Cf. Leech and Svartvik 1975: 22—23).

Quirk (1970) reports that "A small set of English verbs may take the inflections *-ed* or *-t* for preterit and past participle. The hypothesis that forms in divided usage are not randomly distributed was tested on groups of British and American subjects. The *t*-forms were predominantly selected in participial use and for preterits in contexts suggestive of nondurative ('effective') aspect." In the same study, Quirk found that 'the British and American subjects showed a consistently marked preference for perfects in *-t* as opposed to *-ed* in respect of every verb tested, a preference which reaches a significance of at least the 5 percent level for *spoil, dream, spill, learn, spell, leap, kneel, and smell.*"

A more detailed treatment of variation in grammar appears in Fasold, R. W. and R. W. Shuy (eds.) (1975; 89—183).

2. *Stative Adjectives and Nouns in English*

It has long been recognized that certain verbs do not occur in progressive aspect, e.g. *hear, contain, hold* in the following contexts:

1. I heard a loud noise.  
(\*I am/was hearing a loud noise)
2. A gallon contains eight pints.  
(\*A gallon is containing eight pints)
3. The tank holds a thousand litres.  
(\*The tank is holding a thousand litres)

This subclass of English verbs is usually called 'stative' in contradistinction from the 'nonstative' (or 'dynamic' Cf. Quirk *et al* 1973: 20—21) subclass exemplified by 'play', 'dance' and 'run' in 4—6:

4. She plays basketball.  
(She is/was playing basketball.)
5. They danced.  
(They are/were dancing.)
6. He ran away.  
(He is/was running away.)

Lakoff, G. (1966) was the first to establish a set of criteria of stativity with respect to English verbs and adjectives, thereby providing formal justification for recognizing 'stativity' as a useful construct in English grammar. Lakoff's criteria of stativity include the following (Cf. Quirk, R. *et al* 1972: 94).

(i) Statives (verbs and adjectives) do not admit of command imperatives. Compare nonstative 'slice' and 'careful' with stative 'know' and 'tall' in 7 and 8:

7. Slice the salami.            \*Know that she failed.
8. Be careful.                \*Be tall. (Cf. Quirk, R. *et al* 1972: 265)

(ii) Statives do not take a do-something proform. Compare nonstative 'careful' with stative 'tall' in 9 and 10:

9. What he did to please me was to be careful.
10. \*What he did to please me was to be tall.

(iii) Statives do not occur as complements of certain verbs like 'persuade' and 'remind'. Compare nonstative 11 and 12 with stative 13 and 14:

11. I persuaded John to listen to the music.
12. I persuaded John to be careful.
13. \*I persuaded John to hear the music.
14. \*I persuaded John to be tall.

(iv) Statives do not occur in progressive aspect. Compare nonstative 15 and 16 with stative 17 and 18:

15. He's slicing the salami.
16. He's being careful.
17. \*He's knowing that she failed.
18. \*He's being tall. (Cf. Quirk, R. *et al* 1972: 265)

In his insightful paper, Lakoff has managed to capture certain generalizations having to do with this subclass of English verbs and adjectives. The stative and nonstative constructs do seem to account for several seemingly

unrelated features in English grammar; and, as Sag (1973: 85) notes, 'it is not surprising that Lakoff's suggestions have been generally accepted.'

It must be pointed out at this juncture that English verbs and adjectives are certainly not classifiable into stative and nonstative (or dynamic) in an absolute, categorical manner. The linguistic context is indeed a significant factor in determining the stativity or otherwise of a particular occurrence of a certain verb or adjective. To this effect, Quirk *et al* (1973: 15) says:

'When verbs (either habitually or in certain uses) will not admit the progressive ... they are called STATIVE. When they will admit it ... they are called DYNAMIC. It is normal for verbs to be dynamic and even the minority that are almost stative can usually be given a dynamic use on occasion'.

Sag (1973: 85) provides evidence that 'more than mere binary classification is required to explain the actual behaviour of many of the verbs in question.'

A grammatical model of discrete categorization falls short of accounting for all the facts of stativity which, by its very nature, seems to be subject to variation, and consequently is best handled in terms of a nondiscrete model. An attempt is made in the present paper to study the behaviour of stativity in terms of a quantificational model which, in the words of Bickerton (1973: 23), 'reconciles order with variability'.

But before addressing this question it is in order to point out that stativity-nonstativity is not applicable to English verbs and adjectives only; English nouns also exhibit similar stative-nonstative behaviour. Thus, for example, Quirk *et al* (1973: 14, 21) observes that whereas the noun '*nuisance*' can be used as a dynamic complement of verb 'to be', the noun '*student*' cannot. Compare 19 and 20:

19. He's being a *nuisance* again.  
20. \*The girl is now being a *student*.

The facts are, of course, much more complicated than that, and one is certain that great scholars like G. Lakoff and R. Quirk are not unaware of the complexity of the issue. But for practical purposes, language specialists are always cutting bothersome corners and overlooking seemingly irregular details in a crusade for establishing neat rules and generalizations.

To turn now to the nondiscrete nature of stativity-nonstativity in respect of English adjectives and nouns. It may be noted, in passing, that this phenomenon presents a rather serious problem to the foreign learner of English. In an advanced course in English grammar and usage the issue of stativity-nonstativity of adjectives and nouns will have to be raised. The nonnative learners of English, and even the nonnative teachers, are in no position to make acceptability judgements of the type illustrated in 19 and 20 above, for example. So they naturally refer the matter to native speakers for such decisions.

It was mentioned above that Sag (1973) provides evidence that a mere binary division of English *verbs* into stative and nonstative categories is inadequate. He convincingly argues (1973: 86) that 'the overt syntactic structure may affect progressivizability.' Sag seems to have based his conclusions on his own native intuition; he does not supply any statistics in support of his claims. Not that statistics are essential, or make the claims any better, but in this case it seems that a quantificational study within the variability model is not only convenient but also proper.

At any rate, Sag's study deals with the progressivizability of English stative verbs. The present study addresses the question of the stative-nonstative behaviour of some English adjectives and nouns. It is based on data elicited by means of a questionnaire devised for the purpose. One is not unmindful of the limitations of elicitation techniques in general, but as Labov (1971) has noted, 'questionnaire techniques work best with mature, sophisticated speakers — with those who are used to dealing with the written word, with taking tests, and so on' (Cf. R. R. Butters 1973: 283).

### 3. The Questionnaire

As mentioned above, a questionnaire was designed for eliciting information pertinent to the stative-nonstative behaviour of a sample of English adjectives and nouns (see appendix). From Lakoff's (1966) list of stative adjectives the following nine were selected: *tall, rich, thankful, intelligent, ready, dangerous, impotent, fortunate* and *alive*. In addition eleven seemingly stative nouns were also picked out, namely: *poet, child, Shakespeare, democrat, socialist, Arab, German, policeman, farmer, lawyer, and salesman*. Every one of these adjectives and nouns was inserted in all of the following environments which are generally regarded as favourable to nonstativity, and consequently incompatible with stativity (Cf. Lakoff 1966 and Sag 1973).

1. Be (a)\_\_\_\_. (Command imperative)
2. I persuaded John to be (a) \_\_\_\_\_. (Complement of 'persuade')
3. John is being (a)\_\_\_\_. (Process progressive)
4. At the moment, John is being (a)\_\_\_\_. (Process progressive)
5. Tomorrow, John is being (a)\_\_\_\_. (Future progressive)
6. Nowadays, John is being (a)\_\_\_\_. (Habitual progressive)
7. Anyone being\_\_\_\_\_ will be \_\_\_\_\_ (Reduced Relative Progressive)
8. John is being (a)\_\_\_\_\_ more and more. (Progressive modified by 'more and more')
9. John is being (a)\_\_\_\_\_ rather less now. (Progressive modified by 'rather less now')

The questionnaire was completed individually by twenty-nine British and American *native speakers* of English. The research was done in Jordan where the twenty-nine respondents were at the time involved in teaching English at the University of Jordan and Yarmouk University. They all had a first degree and some of them had an M. A. and/or a Ph. D. degree. The respondents were asked to indicate whether every one of the above adjectives and nouns occurred acceptably in the above-mentioned environments. The response consisted of placing a tick in one of the three columns opposite each adjective/noun. The three columns were headed: 'Acceptable', 'Not Acceptable' and 'Uncertain'. The following instructions were given: 'Please read the following and indicate whether you consider them acceptable or not. If you are uncertain please put a tick in the last column which is headed 'Uncertain'.' The respondents were requested to supply some biographical data having to do with their nationality, qualifications and age. They were given enough time (a week on average) to complete the questionnaire. Perhaps, it is necessary to reiterate that the general assumption which informs this study is that stative adjectives and nouns do not occur acceptably in the above environments. It is worth keeping in mind that some of the 29 respondents, for some reason or other, did not react to certain items, and consequently, *the total is not always 29*.

#### 4. The Findings

##### A. Adjectives

It can be seen that the foregoing nine environments can be grouped into three types:

- a) Command imperatives (1): Be (a)——
- b) Complement of 'persuade' (2): I persuaded John to be (a)——
- c) Progressives (3—9)

As a first step, it seems reasonable to study the behaviour of the adjectives in the first three environments only. Consider Tables (1), (2) and (3):

Table 1

Be	Acceptable	Not Acceptable	Uncertain	Total
tall	9	18	2	29
rich	14	13	2	29
thankful	28	—	—	28
intelligent	19	9	—	28
ready	27	—	—	27
dangerous	16	9	3	28
impotent	9	16	1	26
fortunate	5	20	2	27
alive	18	8	2	28

Table 2

I persuaded John to be ...	Acceptable	Not Acceptable	Uncertain	Total
tall	4	23	2	29
rich	10	18	—	28
thankful	22	3	2	27
intelligent	13	13	2	28
ready	24	1	2	27
dangerous	15	11	3	29
impotent	8	18	1	27
fortunate	3	22	2	27
alive	9	17	2	28

Table 3

John is being ...	Acceptable	Not Acceptable	Uncertain	Total
tall	2	23	2	27
rich	2	25	1	28
thankful	14	13	1	28
intelligent	24	3	1	28
ready	2	24	1	27
dangerous	19	7	2	28
impotent	14	12	1	27
fortunate	10	17	—	27
alive	9	18	—	27

If these tests of stativity are valid, the above tables justify the following conclusions:

1. None of the nine adjectives in question seem to be categorically stative; all of them were endorsed as acceptable in varying measures in the three environments.
2. There is a rather wide range of variability in the distribution of the acceptability/non-acceptability judgments of the native speakers, both in the same environment with respect to all the adjectives, and across the environments with respect to any one of the adjectives.

It is improper and misleading, therefore, to claim, except perhaps tentatively, that these adjectives are stative. The above results rather suggest that the stativity of these adjectives, far from being a discrete feature, is predominantly subject to inherent, probably gradable, variation.

If the mean scores of acceptability are computed for these adjectives in the three environments taken together, the results will be as in Table (4).

Table 4

Adjective	Acceptability score in Environment 1	Acceptability score in Environment 2	Acceptability score in Environment 3	Mean score of Acceptability in Environments 1, 2 and 3
tall	9	4	2	5
rich	14	10	2	8 $\frac{2}{3}$
thankful	28	22	14	21 $\frac{1}{3}$
intelligent	19	13	24	18 $\frac{2}{3}$
ready	27	24	2	17 $\frac{2}{3}$
dangerous	16	15	19	16 $\frac{2}{3}$
impotent	9	8	14	10 $\frac{1}{3}$
fortunate	5	3	10	6
alive	18	9	9	12

In terms of the mean scores of acceptability in these three environments, then, the nine adjectives can be ordered (i.e. graded) from most stative to least stative as follows: *tall*, *fortunate*, *rich*, *impotent*, *alive*, *dangerous*, *ready*, *intelligent*, *thankful*. This means that, of the nine adjectives in question, 'tall' seems to exhibit a relatively high degree of stativity, whereas 'thankful' shows a relatively low degree of stativity. The other seven adjectives are placed between these two in the order shown above. This order may not prove to be constant, but the underlying phenomenon of variation and the nondiscreteness (or squishy) nature of the facts are beyond doubt. One is apparently dealing with a continuum which in all probability is quantifiable.

Now consider the distribution of the acceptability scores of these adjectives over the three environments depicted in Table (5).

Table 5

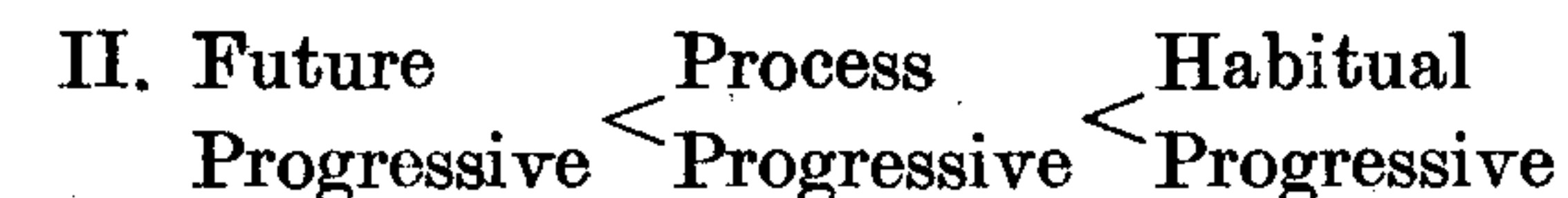
Adjective	Future Progressive: Tomorrow, John is being...	Process Progressive: At the moment, John is being...	Habitual Progressive: Nowadays, John is being
tall	1	3	2
rich	1	3	1
thankful	3	16	13
intelligent	3	19	15
ready	1	5	5
dangerous	3	15	12
impotent	1	9	6
fortunate	2	9	9
alive	2	7	5

Careful examination of the figures in Table (5) reveals that the previous conclusions based on Tables 1, 2, and 3 are borne out here as well. Furthermore, it may be noted that the acceptability of an adjective across the environments in Table (5) tends to improve in a regular manner. In other words, these three

environments constitute an implicational scale such that the acceptability of any one adjective is least in Future Progressive, better in Habitual Progressive and highest in Process Progressive. Thus, in respect of their favourableness to the occurrence of the adjectives, these three environments can be graded as in I:



where the environment to the left of the inequality sign [ $<$ ] is less favourable than the environment to the right of this sign. This finding is not congruent with Sag's (1973:87) implicational hierarchy in respect of 'stative' verbs. According to the latter, the implicational hierarchy is as in II:



In Sag's words 'if a verb occurs in a certain progressive, then it will necessarily be the case that it also occurs in all progressives to the right of it' As mentioned above, Sag's study is not statistical and therefore does not quantify the occurrences in the manner the present study does.

Interestingly, Sag (1973: 87—89) claims that the adverbials 'more and more' and 'rather less now' enhance the acceptability of stative verbs in progressive environments. As he puts it (1973: 87—88) 'some verbs which resist any progressive... suddenly produce grammatical progressives with certain adverbial constructions like *more and more*, *rather less now* and *finally*.' In his implicational hierarchy (1973: 89), the relative order of *Progressive + more and more* with respect to *Future*, *Process* and *Habitual* is as shown in III:



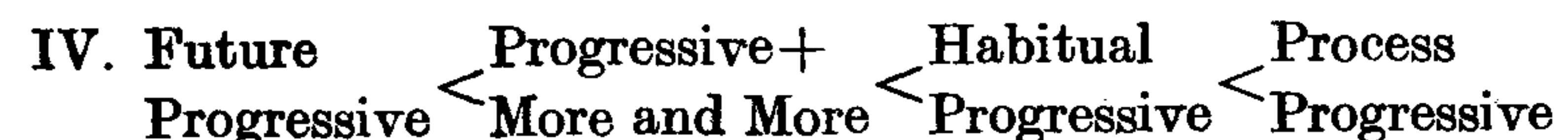
This means that *Progressive + More and More* is the most receptive of the four environments in III.

Sag's conclusion with respect to verbs does not hold good for adjectives. Consider the figures in Table (6):

Table 6. Acceptability Scores in:

Adjective	Future Progressive	Process Progressive	Habitual Progressive	Progressive + More and More
tall	1	3	2	1
rich	1	3	1	1
thankful	3	16	13	11
intelligent	3	19	15	7
ready	1	5	5	4
dangerous	3	15	12	10
impotent	1	9	*6	7
fortunate	2	9	9	8
alive	2	7	*5	6

This table shows that the four environments constitute an implicational hierarchy as in IV (with two irregular cells marked with an asterisk) out of a total of 36 in the entire matrix):



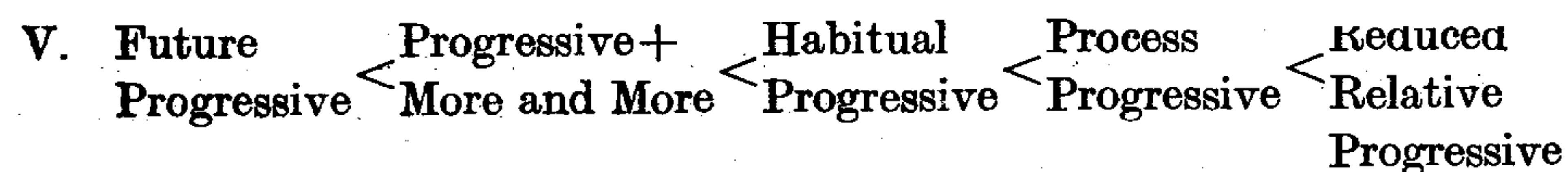
*Progressive+More and More* is not the most favourable of the four environments; it is more favourable than *Future Progressive*, but less favourable than *Habitual Progressive*, and consequently less favourable than *Process Progressive* as well. Hence, it is not unreasonable to conclude that either Sag's statement falls short of the reality of the facts, or the behaviour of the so-called stative verbs is at variance with that of adjectives. If the latter alternative is valid, it will cast more doubt on Lakoff's paper (1966) which claims that adjectives belong to the broader category of verbs.

Finally, a comparison of Table (6) (above) and Table (7) (below) reveals that *Reduced Relative Progressive* is the most tolerant of all the Progressive environments, which confirms Sag's conclusion in this connection.

Table 7

tall	5
rich	13
thankful	19
intelligent	*17
ready	12
dangerous	15
impotent	12
fortunate	9
alive	9

Thus, the implicational scale given in IV can now be extended (as in V) to include the last environment:



Note that there are just three irregular cells out of a total of 45 cells in the entire matrix of Tables (6) and (7). Apart from that, the implicational patterning of the five progressive environments presented in V is remarkably regular.

The implicational hierarchy in Tables (6) and (7) can best be displayed as in Table (8) where the environments are reordered from left to right according to their relative position in V.

Table 8. Acceptability Scores in:

	Future Progressive	Progressive + More and More	Habitual Progressive	Process Progressive	Reduced Relative Progressive
tall	1	1	2	3	5
rich	1	1	1	3	13
thankful	3	11	13	16	19
intelligent	3	7	15	19	*17
ready	1	4	5	5	12
dangerous	3	10	12	15	15
impotent	1	7	*6	9	12
fortunate	2	8	9	9	9
alive	2	6	*5	7	9

## B. Nouns

The stative-nonstative behaviour of English nouns presents a picture similar to that of adjectives. Eleven supposedly stative nouns were put to the test in the framework of the aforementioned questionnaire, namely: *poet, child, Shakespeare, democrat, socialist, Arab, German, policeman, farmer, lawyer, and salesman.*

Consider, first, the behaviour of these nouns in environments 1, 2 and 3 (above); i.e. in

- (1) Be a\_\_\_\_\_.
- (2) I persuaded John to be a\_\_\_\_\_.
- (3) John is being a\_\_\_\_\_.

Tables (9), (10) and (11) show the acceptability scores in respect of these nouns.

Table 9

Be a ...	Acceptable	Not Acceptable	Uncertain	Total
poet	24	2	—	26
child	16	11	—	27
Shakespeare	12	13	3	28
democrat	26	1	—	27
socialist	25	2	—	27
Arab	18	6	2	26
German	17	6	4	27
policeman	26	1	—	27
farmer	27	—	—	27
lawyer	27	—	—	27
salesman	27	—	—	27

Table 10

I persuaded John to be a ...	Acceptable	Not Acceptable	Uncertain	Total
poet	25	1	—	26
child	13	13	1	27
Shakespeare	9	17	1	27
democrat	27	—	—	27
socialist	27	—	—	27
Arab	15	9	3	27
German	14	9	4	27
policeman	27	—	—	27
farmer	27	—	—	27
lawyer	27	—	—	27
salesman	27	—	—	27

Table 11

John is being a ...	Acceptable	Not Acceptable	Uncertain	Total
poet	16	6	4	26
child	20	6	1	27
Shakespeare	7	18	2	27
democrat	14	11	2	27
socialist	13	12	2	27
Arab	16	10	1	27
German	14	10	3	27
policeman	12	13	2	27
farmer	13	11	3	27
lawyer	13	12	2	27
salesman	14	11	2	27

Tables (9), (10) and (11) lead to the following conclusions (Cf. the analogous behaviour of adjectives above):

1. None of the eleven nouns can be said to be categorically stative; every one of them was endorsed as acceptable by some of the respondents in the three environments.
2. The distribution of the acceptability/nonacceptability judgements is characterized by variability in the same environment with respect to all the nouns, and across the environments with respect to a particular noun. Thus 'child', for example, was endorsed as acceptable by 16 (out of a total of 27) respondents in environment (1), 13 in environment (2), and 20 in environment (3). In contrast, 'Shakespeare' received 12, 9 and 7 endorsements in these environments respectively, which indicates that

'Shakespeare' is more stative than 'child', although neither can be said to be completely stative or completely nonstative. Perhaps stativity and nonstativity are two extremes of a continuum and these nouns are mapped out on the continuum in a manner definable with reference to the theoretical criteria used as tests of their stative-nonstative behaviour.

It is interesting to study the behaviour of these nouns in the seven progressive environments (3—9 inclusive) mentioned above. First consider the data presented in Table (12):

Table 12. Acceptability Scores:

Noun	Future Progressive: Tomorrow, John is being a...	Process Progressive: At the moment, John is being a...	Habitual Progressive: Nowadays, John is being a...
poet	8	17	12
child	2	22	13
Shakespeare	2	10	6
democrat	5	14	10
socialist	6	13	12
Arab	4	14	9
German	6	12	7
policeman	6	14	*5
farmer	6	11	8
lawyer	5	12	7
salesman	7	15	10

Evidently, the figures in Table (12) confirm the conclusions drawn from Tables (9), (10) and (11) above. Moreover, the acceptability scores of any of these nouns in these progressive environments exhibit a highly regular pattern. It can be seen that Process Progressive is the most receptive of the three, whereas Future Progressive is the least receptive. In other words, these three environments make an implicational hierarchy as shown in VI (with only one irregular cell):



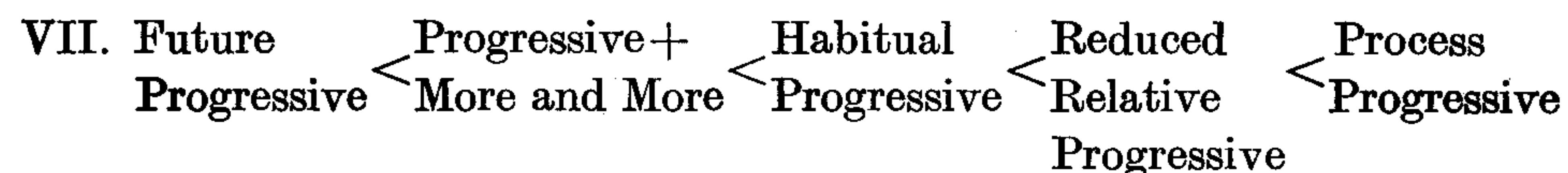
This result is consonant with the corresponding hierarchy in respect of adjectives (Cf. I above), and as before, it is slightly different from Sag's implicational hierarchy with respect to English verbs.

Finally, consider the acceptability scores in Table (13), where the five progressive environments are ordered from left to right according to their degree of receptivity.

Table 13. Acceptability scores:

	Future Progressive	Progressive + More and More	Habitual Progressive	Reduced Relative Progressive	Process Progressive
poet	8	*7	12	14	17
child	2	8	13	*12	22
Shakespeare	2	7	*6	7	10
democrat	5	9	10	14	14
socialist	6	9	12	15	*13
Arab	4	6	9	11	14
German	6	*5	7	9	12
policeman	6	7	*5	10	14
farmer	6	7	8	12	*11
lawyer	5	6	7	12	12
salesman	7	7	10	11	15

There are as many as seven irregular cells in this matrix which, otherwise, displays an implicational hierarchy as in VII:



A cursory glance at VII and V reveals that there is some difference in the relative positions of the environments' implicational hierarchy in respect of nouns and adjectives. For nouns, the most receptive environment is *Process Progressive* (as shown in VII), whereas *Reduced Relative Progressive* is the most favourable for adjectives (as shown in V).

### 5. Conclusions

Despite the limitations of the present study, the following conclusions can be put forward:

1. The so-called stative adjectives/nouns do not constitute a discrete category. Consequently, grammatical models of discrete categorization, including the transformational-generative model, are insufficiently sensitive to the facts, and cannot account for the phenomenon of variability exhibited by the behaviour of these adjectives and nouns.
2. The distribution of the acceptability scores over each of the nine environments is characterized by variation which is amenable to quantification. The acceptability/nonacceptability judgements would probably ultimately

depend upon whether the evaluator could envisage any feasible contexts of use.

3. The empirical evidence adduced above indicates that stativity and non-stativity are perhaps two extremes of a continuum, and the adjectives and nouns in question are mapped out on this continuum in a manner definable with reference to the theoretical criteria used as tests of their stative-nonstative behaviour.
4. Although these adjectives and nouns do share certain syntactic properties, yet the stative behaviour of adjectives is different from that of nouns; the implicational hierarchies in V and VII above are just one exponent of the underlying differences.

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