8. Evidence for grammaticalization and subjectification

8.1 Evidence for grammaticalization of the progressive

The present section will once more begin with an evaluation of previous studies: first, those claims about evidence for grammaticalization from previous studies which, on the basis of the present results, are not regarded as valid will be presented; then those claims from other scholars will be presented which are supported by the present results. To these findings, further evidence from the present investigation will be added.

In previous work, it has been assumed that the increasing grammaticalization of the progressive would lead to a more and more balanced spread to all genres and to all linguistic contexts. Concerning genre, we saw in 5.2 that Smitterberg (2005) assumes that obligatorification of the aspectual progressive (one component of the grammaticalization process) should be manifest in decreased genre diversity in the frequency of the progressive. However, we saw that the progressive is still preferred in non-expository, more speech-based genres in the 20th century, when it has certainly already acquired obligatory status in some contexts (e.g. ‘Aktuelles Präsens’). This can be related to the functions of the construction, both the aspectual as well as the subjective ones. Concerning the aspectual function, one can presume that these genres have a stronger need for depicting situations in progress. Concerning the subjective functions, the more speech-based genres can be expected to make use of linguistic means of conveying emphasis, speaker attitude, and subjective interpretation more often.

One should also notice that aspectual progressives in PDE occur in a variety of contexts in which they are not obligatory (cf. Nehls 1974: 104-117). Incontrovertible evidence for the obligatorification of the construction in certain contexts can therefore not be gained from a study like Smitterberg’s (2005) or the present one which analyze the use of the progressive only. In order to achieve clear results on the obligatorification process, one would need to conduct a study of all, simple and progressive, verb forms in a given corpus, preferably in a tagged one to make the task feasible. But a study which only takes into account the progressive can nevertheless produce some suggestions as to when obligatorification took place. These suggestions will, however, have to be based on other factors than genre distribution, e.g. on the increase in frequency, which we shall discuss in the present section. From the 19th century uses of the simple form adduced in 7.1.1, it can be gathered that obligatorification is a relatively late development.

The difference between genres, which I assume to be related both to subject-matter and to stylistic conventions, may also caution against results that have been gained on the basis of research on a single genre. Thus, Strang’s (1982) conclusions about the progressive, based exclusively on the use of the
construction in fiction, cannot be fully accepted. We have seen that Strang (1982: 446) suggests that the progressive is first strongly associated with subordinate clause use and then becomes more independent in the 19th century. Such an increasing independence and spread to new contexts could have been indicative of increasing grammaticalization, but on the grounds of the evidence from ARCHER, Strang’s description cannot be regarded as adequate for the general development of the progressive construction, which in the 17th century part of ARCHER already occurs in main clauses 45% of the time.

Smith (2004) has taken balanced distribution across linguistic contexts as a condition for the grammaticalized status of a construction. The fact that the progressive in her corpus (consisting only of private letters) is not evenly distributed across subject types is classified by her as a “lack of stability” (Smith 2004: 172), which is presented as counterevidence to the signs of grammaticalization (Smith 2004: 182). She sees further evidence of this ‘lack of stability’ in the variable use of the progressive with adverbials and with different semantic verb types (Smith 2004: 177-181). As has been pointed out in the discussion of these different linguistic contexts in chapter 6, it is not justified to expect that a grammaticalized marker will necessarily occur in an even distribution across these factors. The subject-matter of the different letters in Smith’s (2004) corpus would surely explain why certain writers use e.g. more first and second person subjects and more figurative verbs in their letters than others. Differences in subject-matter can also be assumed to explain the variation in progressive frequencies between different authors, which Smith (2004: 184) also views as “instability” and a sign “that grammaticalization was not uniform within a dialect or register” (Smith 2004: 184).

One of the benefits of a long-term diachronic study is that it becomes easier to distinguish patterns of variation which cannot be considered evidence of grammaticalization from those which can. We are thus able to see that a more balanced spread across linguistic contexts is evidently not a necessary consequence of a grammaticalization process. The evidence from ARCHER shows for example that the progressive remains much more common in present and past contexts than in combinations with modals or perfect and much more common in the use with activities and accomplishments than with statives. These preferences can be explained by the semantics of the construction. Concerning the spread across the verbal paradigm, it can be expected that a construction used in the majority of cases to refer to situations that are dynamically progressing at TT will occur most commonly in reference to situations which are ongoing either presently or at some particular past reference point. The combination of progressive with perfect, future auxiliary or modal can be used with specific effects arising from the combination, as we have seen, but one cannot expect that such uses would ever constitute a considerable share of the total occurrences of the form. Concerning situation type, as Michaelis (2004) has pointed out, the (aspectual) progressive requires the conceptualization of a situation as an activity. Clearly this is easiest when a situation neutrally belongs to the situation type activity. It is also quite unproblematic with accomplishments (which contain an