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81.            Be -ing:    A Synchronic and Diachronic Study

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
1.0. Introduction.	1
1.1. Format.	1
1.2. Terms.	1
2.0. Transformational analysis of Modern English <u>be -ing</u> .	2
2.1. <u>be -ing</u> as $\phi_v$ .	2
2.2. Other recent analyses.	2
2.2.1. Joos.	2
2.2.2. Lakoff.	3
2.3. <u>be -ing</u> as $\phi_s$ .	3
2.3.1. <u>-ing</u> occurs with all V.	3
2.3.2. <u>be -ing</u> paraphrased.	3
2.3.3. Decomposition of <u>be -ing</u> .	4
2.3.4. Advantages.	5
2.3.5. Passive of <u>be -ing</u> .	7
2.4. <u>be going to</u>	8
2.5. Participial and adjectival <u>-ing</u> .	9
2.6. Summary	12
3.0. Historical analysis of <u>be -ing</u> .	13
3.1. Introduction.	13
3.2. The controversy.	14
3.3. Background.	17
3.3.1. OE <u>beon/wesan</u> + present participle.	17
3.3.2. OE, ME <u>-ind(e)</u> distinct from OE, ME <u>-ing(e)</u> .	18
3.3.3. Development of $N_d$ .	19
3.3.4. OE, ME <u>be a-</u> <u>-ing</u> as source of NE <u>be -ing</u> .	20
3.4. Development of NE <u>be -ing</u> .	20
3.4.1. Active voice.	20
3.4.2. Passive voice.	22
3.5. Development of OE, ME <u>be</u> + present participle.	23
4.0. Conclusion.	25
Notes.	27
Bibliography.	30

## Be -ing: A Synchronic and Diachronic Study

### 1.0. Introduction.

#### 1.1. Format.

The construction be -ing in English has for a long time been of interest to grammarians from both the synchronic and the diachronic points of view. Much has been written on it, but a review of the literature will show that many questions have been left unanswered. In this paper, an attempt will be made to analyze the construction transformationally, which to my knowledge, has not yet been done at length.<sup>1</sup> Then the historical data will be reviewed, and the traditional theories concerning the development of be -ing will be compared and a new or modified theory proposed. It should be understood that, while the historical analysis put forth in this paper may depend to some extent on the validity of the transformational analysis of the construction in Modern English, the converse is not true, that is, the transformational analysis proposed is independent of the validity of the historical analysis. In the transformational analysis, no attempt is made to say what has occurred in time.

#### 1.2. Terms.

One rather annoying although minor problem which faces anyone who wants to work on the be -ing construction is what to call it. There have been almost as many terms as linguists studying it: progressive form (Curme, Kruisinga, van der Gaaf), definite tense (Sweet, Åkerlund), continuous form or tense (NED), expanded form or tense (Jespersen), forme périphrastique or FP (Mossé), and so forth. Agreeing in essence with Mossé, who writes: "Le mieux est donc d'adopter un terme qui ne préjuge rien du contenu même de la périphrase,"<sup>2</sup> I have chosen, unimaginatively perhaps, simply to refer to the construction as be -ing. This term is meant to denote constructions of the type of (1) and (2) and not those of the type of (3) and (4):

- (1) John is reading a book.
- (2) Mary is speaking.
- (3) This book is (very) interesting.
- (4) Bob is (quite) boring.

2.1. be -ing as  $\phi_V$ .

In Mathematical Structures of Language, Harris analyzes be -ing as a verb operator or  $\phi_V$ , such that

- (5) He studies.  
(by  $\phi_V$ ) → (6) He is studying.<sup>3</sup>

Such an analysis presents certain problems. First, it presents -ing in be -ing as unrelated to other occurrences of -ing. This is inevitable, since the domain of be -ing is a subset of that of -ing and, more important, since be -ing carries a different meaning from that of -ing and, if we merged them, the semantics would no longer be automatic. This is an unfortunate situation, however. As Harris says:

...given that Upon his signing the letter,...,  
I know of his signing the letter, His signing  
of the letter was meticulous, He is signing  
the letter, are all transforms of He signs  
the letter, we would like to find, if possible,  
a single base operator which is responsible for  
the trace -ing in all these transforms.<sup>4</sup>

Another problem in considering be -ing a verb operator was touched upon in the preceding paragraph, that is, that it operates only on certain verbs, a subset of those on which -ing operates. Thus we find:

- (7) John's knowing German proved to be an asset.  
but (8)✗ John is knowing German.  
(9) A child's wanting to play is normal.  
but (10)✗ A child is wanting to play.  
(11) Hating people can be disastrous for a politician.  
but (12)✗ A politician is hating people.

Although the verbs on which be -ing can operate may be classed as "active" (see 2.2.), there is no alternative to listing them, that is, there is no attempt to relate to other linguistic facts the fact that be -ing may operate only on certain verbs.

2.2. Other recent analyses.

2.2.1. Joos.

In his 1964 work The English Verb, Joos gives a completely traditional description and explanation of be -ing, which he calls by the term "temporary aspect." I think his treatment is interesting simply because it is so recent and, at the same

time, so traditional. After giving a detailed description of the precise meaning or meanings of the construction, he divides English verbs into two (overlapping) classes, "status verbs" and "process verbs", and then proceeds to enumerate the former and subdivide them on semantic grounds ("psychic state" and "relation").<sup>5</sup> There is no attempt to relate be -ing to other forms of -ing or to anything syntactic, for that matter.

### 2.2.2. Lakoff.

In his 1966 paper "Stative Adjectives and Verbs in English," Lakoff comes up against be -ing, which he calls the "progressive auxiliary." His result is surprisingly similar to all traditional grammarians preceding him: he divides verbs (and adjectives) into two classes, "stative" and "non-stative" and writes: "...the value for the property STATIVE must be indicated in the lexicon for each verb and adjective. It is not a surface property, but rather an inherent property of both verbs and adjectives."<sup>6</sup> Thus we find ourselves in a situation similar to those above. Although Lakoff is not dependent on actual verb-lists, his grammar is dependent on the appearance of the property STATIVE in the lexicon in order for it to generate all and only grammatical sentences containing be -ing.

### 2.3. be -ing as $\phi_s$ .

#### 2.3.1. -ing occurs with all V.

As has been mentioned above, the restrictions which be -ing imposes on verbs are not imposed by -ing in other constructions. Thus:

(13)  $\nexists$  A man is having money.

but (14) A man's having money may make him nervous.

(15)  $\nexists$  John is liking to dance.

but (16) John's liking to dance is exaggerated.

Therefore, it is apparent that there is no inherent incompatibility between the -ing form and certain verbs.

#### 2.3.2. be -ing paraphrased.

If we present a speaker of English with two sentences which were identical except that one contained be -ing, it is unlikely that he would accept them as paraphrases of each other, e.g.,

(17) I drive to work.

↔ (18) I am driving to work.<sup>7</sup>

A paraphrase of (18) would have to contain (17) plus additional information. A more acceptable paraphrase of (18) would be:

(19) My driving to work is an act. I am engaged in the act of (my) driving to work.

Of immediate interest is the occurrence of -ing, as a nominalizing suffix, in the paraphrase. It is the claim of this paper that it is the nominalizing transformation which is responsible for the trace -ing in be -ing as well as in other nominalized verbs. This is the single base operator, perhaps, of which Harris spoke (see 2.1).

### 2.3.3. Decomposition of be -ing.

Now we may give a rough decomposition of a sentence in which be -ing occurs:

(20) John is writing a letter.

→ (by  $\varphi_z$ ) (21) John is (engaged) in writing a letter.

→ (by  $\varphi_z$ ) (22) John is (engaged) in the act of (or; which is) writing a letter.

→ (by  $\varphi_z$ ) (23) John is (engaged) in the act of (or; which is).

John's writing a letter.

→ (by  $\varphi_c, \varphi_z$ ) (24) John is (engaged) in an act (such that) the act is John's writing a letter.

→ (by  $\varphi_s$ ) (25) An act is John's writing a letter.

→ (by  $\varphi_p$ ) (26) John's writing a letter is an act.

→ (by  $\varphi_s$ ) (27) John writes a letter.

Thus (in a reverse decomposition), we start with a kernel,

a)  $N_i \text{ t } V (\Omega)$ ,

on whose nominalization operates a  $\varphi_s$ ,

b)  $N_i$ 's t Ving ( $\Omega$ ) is an act.

At this stage already, two very important developments can be noted. First, the suffix -ing has been introduced in the ordinary way, as the trace of a nominalizing transformation, by means of which the sentence is fitted into the container. Second,

it is at this point that the so-called "stative" verbs are blocked, since although

(28) John's knowing French...

occurs,

(29)  $\nexists$  John's knowing French is an act.

will not occur. Eventually, a sentence operator operates on (b), producing:

(c)  $N_i$  is (engaged) is an act such that  $\underline{b(N_i - \Sigma)}$ .

At this point, the derivation becomes admittedly clumsy, but the major problem, to my mind, is that the subject of the sentence operator in (c) must have the same referend as the subject of the elementary sentence (a). It will be shown later that until fairly recently if the subject of the elementary sentence (a) was indefinite, the subject of the sentence operator (c) could have the same referend as the object of the elementary sentence (a):

(30) The house is building.

But this may have something to do with the analogic products discussed by Harris.<sup>8</sup>

Another problem lies in our choice of words which are ultimately zeroed. I have chosen act, for example, but at times process may be more to the point. Furthermore, I hesitate to actually posit 'engaged', since it is definitely arguable that this is not an elementary form, and the inclusion of a nonelementary form would only complicate matters further.

#### 2.3.4. Advantages.

The analysis of be -ing as a  $\phi_s$  or, rather, as the result of a series of transformations including  $\phi_s$ , has several advantages. One, the most important, perhaps, is that the -ing of be -ing is shown to be the same as the nominalizing -ing in its transformational history. We are still left, however, with unrelated occurrences of -ing as adjectival suffix and/or participle suffix ('and/or' because it seems that these two have but one transformational history, see 2.5.):

(31) This book is very amusing.

(32) John is willing to work hard.

(33) The job will go to the woman knowing how to type.

Some apparent participial constructions are traceable, however, to be -ing or to simple nominalizing transformations:

(34) Walking down the street, I heard a bird sing.

→ (35) While I was walking down the street, I heard  
a bird sing.

- (36) John got sick eating ice-cream.  
→ (37) John's eating ice-cream caused John to get sick.

It may be possible ultimately to provide a single source for all occurrences of -ing, but so far I have not been able to do so. In passing, one may note that the Spanish construction estar + Vndo, which has often been compared to be -ing, has confused many people since it is not a real translation of the English construction. Without going into detail at the present time, I would simply like to suggest that the Spanish is actually 'to be' + the present participle, similar to what is found in Old and Middle English, but totally different from Modern English be -ing. (The similarity between the Spanish and pre-Modern English forms is not surprising as the latter was very probably a loan translation of the Latin; see 3.3.1.)

Another advantage of the decomposition of be -ing presented in 2.3.3. is that, with a good deal of polishing, it can fit into Harris' system of report and morphophonemics. Naturally, a sentence like:

- (38) A man is writing a letter.

would not be in the synonymless and paraphraseless sublanguage. Instead, one would find there something like the following kernel and operators:

- (39) A man writes a letter.  
(40) \_\_\_\_\_ is an act.  
(41) \_\_\_\_\_ is (engaged) in an act \_\_\_\_\_.

In the natural language, (39)-(41) would be paraphrastically transformed by means of morphophonemics (mainly nominalizations and zeroings) into (38).

A third advantage inherent in the second is that the semantics is entirely predictable from its underlying kernel and operators, which is in accordance with Harris' statement: "Almost everything that there is to say about the meaning of a sentence can...be obtained directly from the meanings and positions of the component  $\phi$ , K."<sup>9</sup>

A fourth advantage of this decomposition is that, finally, we can do away with lists of verbs on which be -ing does or does not operate, since (40) would block those verbs which do not occur with be -ing, that is, since we do not have

- (42) Knowing French is an act.,

we cannot get

- (43)  $\bar{A}$  John is knowing French.

To put it more accurately, sentences (42) and (43) have corresponding positions in an



acceptability grading. Although their absolute degrees of acceptance may be different ((42) may very well be judged to be of a higher degree of wellformedness than (43)), their relative degree of acceptance is the same, e.g.,

- |                         |                     |
|-------------------------|---------------------|
| A.1. Knowing is an act. | B.1'. I am knowing. |
| 2. Hearing is an act.   | 2'. I am hearing.   |
| 3. Running is an act.   | 3'. I am running.   |

Of the three word-sequences in A, 1 has the lowest degree of acceptance, 3 has the highest, and 2 is somewhere in between. The same order applies to the word-sequences in B. One may argue that what we are dealing with here is not acceptability but truth value, since the respective acceptability gradings of A(1)-(3) coincide exactly with their respective truth or falsehood, A(1) being the least acceptable and the least true, A(3) the most acceptable and the truest, A(2) falling between the two, both in truth and acceptability. The answer, I believe, is that for sentences containing classifiers, something related to truth value (as perceived) and acceptability happen to coincide. This does not mean that we are depending on truth; sentences such as A(1) can still be judged to be of low acceptability due to word choice or word subclass, just as sentences like The book chewed the cup, without reference to truth value. Note that the low acceptability of The book chewed the cup may perhaps be traced to an unacceptable (and also false) classifier-containing sentence in its decomposition: The book is animate.<sup>10</sup>

#### 2.3.5. Passive of be -ing.

- (44) John is praising Bill.  
(45) Bill is being praised by John.

One difficulty in analyzing the passive of be -ing is that, while we can say that -ing in (44) is obtained from

- (46) John's praising Bill is an act.,

we certainly cannot claim that -ing in (45) is similarly derived from some

- (47) ?Bill's being praised by John is an act.

What we are up against here, it seems, is a clear-cut case of an analogic product as described by Harris: "...a product of transformations which relate[s] two sentence forms  $A \rightarrow B$  has been extended to a sentence form  $A'$  to obtain  $B'$ .  $A'$  is the same sequence of word classes as  $A$ , but has not the same word subclasses,"<sup>11</sup> or "...if a transformational relation exists between two sentence forms  $A(x_1)$ ,  $B(x_1)$  which con-

tain some subclass  $x_1$  of a word class  $x$ , then given the same sentence form  $A(x_2)$  of a similar subclass  $x_2$  of  $x$ , it is possible to obtain  $B(x_2)$ :

$$\begin{array}{ccc} A(x_1) & & B(x_1) \\ A(x_2) & & \\ \hline & & B(x_2)''^{12} \end{array}$$

Thus, given  $A(x_1)$  John has praised Bill  $\leftrightarrow$   $B(x_1)$  Bill has been praised by John, where  $x_1$  is has praised  $\leftrightarrow$  has been praised (by), a subclass of  $x = V$ , and  $A(x_2)$  John is praising Bill, where  $x_2$  is is praising, we get by means of analogy  $B(x_2)$  Bill is being praised by John. It is interesting to note that such an analogic product has not been formed for all tense operators; be -ing occurs in the passive only in the present and past tenses:

- (48) John is/was praising Bill.
- $\leftrightarrow$  (49) Bill is/was being praised by John.
- but (50) John has been/will be/ ... praising Bill.
- $\nleftrightarrow$  (51) ~~Bill~~ Bill has been/will be/ ... being praised by John.

As we shall see later, the passive of be -ing is an extremely recent creation in English, which may very well explain its not having been extended to all tenses.

#### 2.4. be going to.

One of the problems with which we are faced in this analysis is that of be going to in such sentences as:

- (52) John is going to die soon.
- (53) Mary is going to be a good teacher.

First, we do not get the sentences

- (54) ~~John~~ John goes to die soon.
- (55) ~~Mary~~ Mary goes to be a good teacher.

These could be accounted for, however, simply as cases where the intermediate products do not exist as sentences of the language.<sup>13</sup> Second, and more troublesome, is the fact that we certainly do not have:

- (56) ~~(John's)~~ (John's) going to die soon is an act.
- (57) ~~(Mary's)~~ (Mary's) going to be a good teacher is an act.

so that, even though we can explain (54) and (55), we cannot obtain (52) and (53) in

the normal way. Furthermore, we do not get -ing nominalizations of (54) or (55) occurring with any sentence operators whatsoever:

(58) † John's going to die is certain.

(59) † I approve of Mary's going to be a teacher.

This, by the way, is the only verb which I have found in the English language which has an -s in the third person singular and which cannot be nominalized with -ing.

(Of course, go in its other readings can be nominalized:

(60) John's going home surprised me.)

In addition, unlike be -ing, be going to does not occur with many auxiliaries (i.e., with those verbs which do not have -s in the third person singular). Cf.

(61) I will be speaking tomorrow.

(62) † I will be going to speak tomorrow.

(63) I ought to be reading this book.

(64) † I ought to be going to read this book.

(65) You should not have been fighting.

(66) † You should not have been going to fight.

(It goes without saying that (62), (64), and (66) are all more or less acceptable if going is given the reading of 'going there'.) Furthermore, it does not seem to occur as a participle either, except in the reading of 'going there':

(67) † I saw a man going to die.

(68) † Going to die, John drew up his will.

In this respect also, it is unlike all other verbs with -s in the third person singular.

For these reasons, I feel that it is perhaps best, although somewhat clumsy, to treat be going to as a single auxiliary, similar to will, shall, can, etc., since it behaves like them. Then, we could consider it to be a primitive *f*, in spite of the fact that it is composed of more than one morpheme, just as (a) building, although morphologically derived, is considered to be a syntactically and transformationally primitive *N*.<sup>14</sup>

## 2.5. Participial and adjectival -ing.

As was noted above (2.3.4), be -ing as decomposed in this paper is not related to certain other occurrences of -ing, notably the participial and adjectival -ing.<sup>15</sup> This area requires a good deal more study than it can be given here, but I should

like to suggest tentatively that the latter two may be closely interrelated and can perhaps be analyzed in the following way. First, it is obvious that the participle, when not traceable to be -ing, can be paraphrased by the appropriate subject followed by the verb in a finite form:

- (69) The woman knowing how to type will get the job.  
↔ (70) The woman who knows how to type will get the job.  
(71) I'll give it to the family having the most children.  
↔ (72) I'll give it to the family which has the most children.  
(73) A truly dedicated doctor, loving his work and not caring about money, is hard to find.  
↔ (74) A truly dedicated doctor, who loves his work and does not care about money, is hard to find.

Thus it seems that when one sentence is embedded in another by means of a relative clause transformation, the subject of the embedded sentence may be zeroed, in which case the verb takes the nonfinite ending -ing. It is interesting that some sentences are ambiguous: the -ing may be this nonfinite marker or, on the other hand, it may be the trace of be -ing, since the subject and be of a sentence containing be -ing may also be zeroed when it is embedded in another sentence by means of a relative clause transformation:

- (75) The woman typing best will get the job.  
↙ (76) The woman who types best will get the job.  
↘ (77) The woman who is typing best will get the job.  
(78) I'll give it to the man running the fastest.  
↙ (79) I'll give it to the man who runs the fastest.  
↘ (80) I'll give it to the man who is running the fastest.  
(81) A greedy doctor, making lots of money, is not hard to find.  
↙ (82) A greedy doctor, who makes lots of money, is not hard to find.  
↘ (83) A greedy doctor, who is making lots of money, is not hard to find.

Many adjectives with -ing seem similar to participles in that they are paraphrasable by finite verbs on which be -ing has not operated:

- (84) an amusing story  
↔ (85) A story that amuses N

- but ↗ (86)<sup>o</sup> a story that is amusing N  
(87) a shocking tale  
↔ (88) a tale that shocks N  
but ↗ (89)<sup>o</sup> a tale that is shocking N  
(90) a tempting meal  
↔ (91) a meal that tempts N  
but ↗ (92)<sup>o</sup> a meal that is tempting N

Other adjectives like those above are: surprising, alluring, irritating, aggravating, annoying, pleasing, etc. These adjectives all have one other feature in common: their underlying verbs take a human object.

The second class of adjectives that are paraphrasable by finite verbs without be -ing is that class of verbs which do not occur with be -ing in any event, that is, those for which Ving is an act is of very low acceptability, e.g.

- (93) a knowing smile  
↔ (94) a smile that knows Ω  
but ↗ (95) † a smile that is knowing Ω  
(96) a loving wife  
↔ (97) a wife that loves Ω  
but ↗ (98) † a wife that is loving Ω  
(99) an underlying verb  
↔ (100) a verb that underlies Ω  
but ↗ (101) † a verb that is underlying Ω

Adjectives whose underlying verbs do not take a human object but do occur with be -ing are generally decomposable into be -ing:

- (102) a crying child  
↔ (103) a child that is crying  
but ↗ (104)<sup>o</sup> a child that cries  
(105) a burning house  
↔ (106) a house that is burning  
but ↗ (107)<sup>o</sup> a house that burns  
(108) a roaring beast  
↔ (109) a beast that is roaring  
but ↗ (110)<sup>o</sup> a beast that roars

Ambiguity seems to arise in only a few cases, for example:

- (111) a dancing bear  
 ↙ ↘  
 (112) a bear that dances  
 ↙ ↘  
 (113) a bear that is dancing
- (114) a racing car  
 ↙ ↘  
 (115) a car that races  
 ↙ ↘  
 (116) a car that is racing
- (117) a hunting dog  
 ↙ ↘  
 (118) a dog that hunts  
 ↙ ↘  
 (119) a dog that is hunting

For this group, however, the ambiguity is more noticeable on paper than in speech, since it is compound nouns with their characteristic intonation pattern that are paraphrasable by (112), (115), (118), whereas it is ordinary adjective-noun phrases that are paraphrasable by (113), (116), (119).

Thus it appears that adjectival -ing can be traced to either be -ing or to a common source with participial -ing, depending on the class (in terms of distribution) to which the verb underlying the individual adjective belongs:

- |                            |                    |
|----------------------------|--------------------|
| I. Participial <u>-ing</u> | II. <u>Be -ing</u> |
| 1. N V N <sub>hum</sub>    | 1. all other V     |
| or 2. A Ving is an act.    |                    |
| or 3. compound noun (A N)  |                    |

There remain many other interesting problems concerning adjectival -ing which deserve more time and attention than is appropriate here; among them, the fact that certain adjectives (e.g. catching as in Epilepsy is not catching) are passive in meaning, the fact that, for certain adjectives, the underlying verb is not at present in the language (e.g. willing, appetizing), and the fact that not all prenominal adjectives with -ing can also appear in sentences of the form N t be A. (It seems at first glance that adjectives of type II above, i.e. those adjectives containing the trace of be -ing, cannot occur as predicate adjectives, whereas those adjectives of types I(1) and I(2) can, the adjective of type I(3) being, of course, inseparable from its noun.)

## 2.6. Summary.

Until now, we have examined the construction be -ing in Modern English from a purely synchronic point of view, and we have proposed an analysis whereby the construction is the product of a series of transformations operating ultimately on an

elementary sentence or kernel of the form N t V ( $\Omega$ ). By means of these transformations, several problems connected with previous analyses disappear: the morpheme -ing is shown to be the trace of an early nominalizing transformation, and those verbs which do not occur with be -ing turn out to be those which have the lowest degree of acceptability very early in the transformational history of the sentence, that is, at the moment the first sentence operator operates, and they are thereby predictable without additional semantic information (e.g. verb-lists). In fact, no additional semantic data are necessary at any stage of the decomposition since the meaning of the sentence is obtainable from the meaning and ordering of its kernel sentence and operators. Certain problems still remain, however, such as the fact that the nominalizing -ing is not related to the verbal (or adjectival) -ing, and also that be going to cannot be decomposed in the way suggested for be -ing. A tentative solution to the latter problem was offered: the treatment of be going to as an auxiliary, produced in toto by a single tense operator.

Several large areas related to be -ing have been ignored here due to lack of time. Among them are: (a) a study of constructions containing one of a (finite) set of verbs plus Ving, e.g.

(120) Some came running.

(121) John burst out laughing.

(122) The old man lay dying.

(123) When did you start having nightmares?<sup>16</sup>

and (b) the relation between be -ing and tense. The latter point was touched upon in connection with the passive (2.3.5), but there remains much to be said, particularly in the area of the possible interdependence of tense and be -ing in conjoined sentences.<sup>17</sup>

### 3.0. Historical analysis of be -ing.

#### 3.1. Introduction.

In this section, be -ing will be studied from the diachronic point of view, with special attention given to its occurrence in Middle English. First, a survey will be made of the major theories which have been put forth to explain the origin of this construction. These theories will then be examined in the light of evidence gathered in a scanning of over 18,000 lines of Old, Middle, and early Modern English texts, and certain conclusions will be drawn concerning their adequacy. I shall then attempt to formulate or expand what seems to be the most accurate description

of the situation, using certain methods of both historical linguistics and transformational grammar.

### 3.2. The controversy.

At one extreme, we find the theory that the Modern English (henceforth NE) be -ing did not "develop" in Middle English (henceforth ME) but that it is simply a continuation of the Old English (henceforth OE) construction beon/wesan ('to be') + present participle. Such an interpretation underlies Sweet's discussion:

The periphrastic forms corresponding to the Modern English is writing, was writing are in frequent use in Old-English, but are only vaguely differentiated from the simple form.

They were no doubt originally formed on the analogy of the combination of the verb 'be' with adjectives, so that such a periphrase as hīe woeron blissiende 'they were rejoicing' was felt to be intermediate between hīe blissodon 'they rejoiced' and hīe woeron blipe 'they were glad'.<sup>18</sup>

Van der Gaaf, in his 1930 article on what he calls the progressive form, also is of the opinion that NE be -ing is traceable to OE beon/wesan + present participle.

The progressive form never really disappeared; it only underwent a morphological change, which may, after all, be phonetic. Why, then, should all sorts of juggling tricks be resorted to, in order to account for the occurrence of this construction, which I consider to be English 'pure and undefiled', in thirteenth century and later texts?<sup>19</sup>

Another grammarian who presents the same viewpoint is Curme, who finds that not only is be -ing not a recent innovation but also that it is already present in Gothic.<sup>20</sup>

This view was widely held, with minor differences. Some felt that the original participle of the construction underwent sound change, -inde > -inge; others felt that the change was morphological: the participial ending -inde was replaced by the nominal ending -inge; others ignored this aspect of the problem.

At the other extreme, we find Jespersen, who in his earlier writings attributes be -ing to a ME construction be + preposition (on or in) + the verbal noun in -ing, but he soon changes to a position somewhere between the two. In



A Modern English Grammar, he recounts his successive opinions of be -ing:

...historical considerations...led me to assert in the first edition of Growth (1905, p. 205) that the periphrastic tenses "seem to have little, if anything, to do with the OE he wæs feohtende"; I explained the modern forms as "aphetic for I am a-reading where a represents the preposition on, and the form in -ing is not the participle, but the noun.

He goes on to say that in the second edition (1912), he modified this "too sweeping assertion" thus: "...they [forms of be -ing] are to a great extent due to the old construction I am a-reading." He then states his present (1931) theory:

I may define my position in this way: the modern English expanded theses are in some vague way a continuation of the old combinations of the auxiliary verb and the participle in -ende; but after this ending had been changed into -inge and had thus become identical with that of the verbal substantive, an amalgamation took place of this construction and the combination be on + the sb, in which on had become a and was then dropped.<sup>21</sup>

Such a blending theory is also held by several other grammarians, with different emphases. Goedsche feels that be -ing goes back primarily to OE beon/wesan + present participle (which he explains as a translation of the Latin), but that the construction be + on + verbal substantive later merged with it.<sup>22</sup> Mossé is of the same opinion.<sup>23</sup> The New English Dictionary (see BE<sup>15</sup>) also considers be -ing to be a blend of the two constructions, but also does not appear to give special importance to one or the other.

Of all these theories, only the first, that NE be -ing is the direct descendent of OE beon/wesan + present participle, is easily refutable, if by direct descendent one means that NE be -ing is subject to the same rules as the OE construction. In none of the sentences that follow would be -ing normally be used today:

(124) AElfric, Hom. I, 276, Hi naeron aefre  
wunigende, ac God hi gesceop.

'They were not ever existing, for God  
made them.'

(125) AElfric, Hexam. 41, Full dysig byð se

mann...se ðe nele gelufan ðæt se lifigenda God aefre waere wunigende.

'Full foolish is the man...who does not wish to believe that the living God was always existing.'

- (126) AElfric, Hom. I, 250, We beoð haebbende ðæs ðe we aer hopedon.

'We were having what we expected.'

When we get to ME, we find many more sentences in which be + present participle does not correspond exactly to be -ing:

- (127) c.1100, Old Eng. Hom., p. 95, he dude þæt heo weren birnende on Godes willan....

'he did [it] that they were burning [zealous] in God's will.'

- (128) c.1175, Cott. Hom. 225, Adam þa wes wuniende on þeses life.

'Adam was living there in this life.'

- (129) a.1300, Cursor M., 15665, Beo wakand ai in orisun.

'Be ever waking [alert] in prayer.'

- (130) c.1303, Robert Mannyng of Brunne, Handlyng Synne, 4127-28, Above the erþe þey were stynkyng/þat to the beres deþ were consentyng.

'Above the earth [i.e., while still alive] they were stinking [foul] who were consenting [agreeable] to the bear's death.'

- (131) a.1349, Richard Rolle of Hampole, The Bee and the Stork, 17-18, Arestotill sais þat þe bees are feghtande agaynes him þat will drawe

þaire hony fra thaym.

'Aristotle says that the bees are fighting with him who wants to draw their honey from them.'

- (132) 1340, Dan Michel's Ayenbite of Inwit, p. 157,

þe dyeuel yzizþ ... þe stat of þe manne and hys manyere and his complexioun and to huet uice he ys mest bouz inde.

'The devil knows...the state of (the) man  
and his manner and his complexion and to  
what vice he is most bowing [prone].

One could cite many other examples, but these should be sufficient to show that NE be -ing is not the product of the same rules as OE or even ME be + present participle. Now we shall try to reconstruct the historical development of NE be -ing.

### 3.3. Background.

#### 3.3.1. OE beon/wesan + present participle.

In OE texts, we find fairly frequently a construction consisting of the verb for 'be' plus the present participle, several examples of which have been cited above (3.2.). It has been noted by many that this construction was used to translate the corresponding Latin construction, and it is often considered to have been a loan translation of the latter. Mossé, in fact, considers the construction to be originally a loan translation in all Germanic: "...en ancien germanique la périphrase composée du verbe 'être' et du participe présent était d'importation étrangère (grecque pour le gotique, latine pour les autres dialectes), et...ce tour avait échoué partout sauf en vieil-anglais."<sup>24</sup> The construction was used with many verbs, most frequently, however, with those verbs corresponding to 'live', 'dwell', 'exist' right down to ME. One syntactic feature of the OE and ME construction that distinguishes it from NE be -ing is that it often occurs in parallel construction with one or more adjectives, e.g.,

(133) a.1200, Proclamation of Henry III, 21, Beo  
stedefaest and lestinde.

(134) 1340, Dan Michel's Ayenbite of Inwit, p. 96,  
þe floures were þe holy þoztes þet alle  
were uayre and oneste and berinde frut.  
'The flowers were holy thoughts that were  
all fair and honest and bearing fruit.'

(135) Ibid., pp. 104-05, alneway he ys bezide and  
naz t chonginde.  
'Always he is firm and not changing.'

Furthermore, in many sentences such as these and also often when no other adjectives are present, text editors are forced to gloss 'be' + present parti-

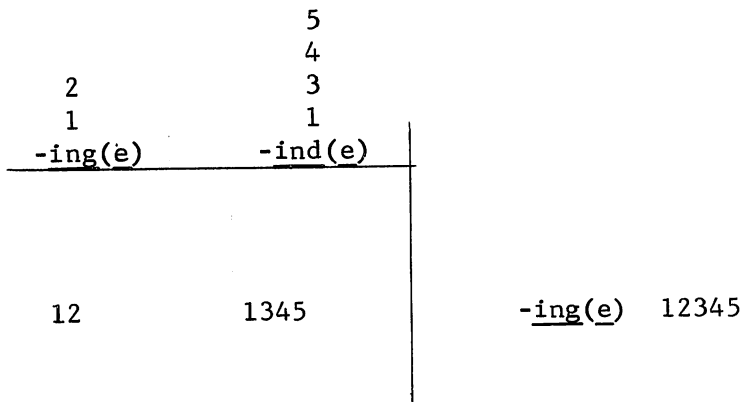
ciple as 'be' + adjective. This explains the bracketed glosses in 3.2. These points and several others (such as the fact that the relative word order of OE and ME be + present participle is freer than that of NE be -ing) lead one to conclude that OE and at least some ME be + present participle are certainly not the sole ancestor of NE be -ing, if the two are related at all.

3.3.2. OE, ME -ind(e) distinct from OE, ME -ing(e).

At this point, we must take into consideration the morphology of OE and ME to the extent that it is relevant here. It has already been mentioned (3.2.) that the OE and ME present participle ending was -ind(e). The suffix -ing(e), at that time, was the mark of the verbal substantive or nominalized verb, as it still is. At least as late as 1340, we find this distinction:

- (136) Ayenbite of Inwit, p. 216, He is wel uoul an  
 stinkinde zed in þe byetinge.  
 'He is a very foul and stinking seed in the  
 begetting.'

As has been noted above, some grammarians dismissed this difference by simply postulating a sound change, -ind(e) > -ing(e), in order to derive be -ing from be + present participle. While it is obvious that this sound change took place, it does not seem sufficient to account for the syntactic differences between the two constructions discussed in 3.3.1. In any event, by the fifteenth century a merger took place (in most dialects), leading to the disappearance of -ind(e):



- Environments: 1. #V\_#1  
 2. the V\_ of N (= Noun)  
 3. N be V\_ (= Verb, Adjective)  
 4. the V\_ N (= Adjective)  
 5. #V\_ N, ... (= Verb)

3.3.3. Development of N<sub>d</sub>.

In Adjectives and Nominalizations, Zeno Vendler distinguishes two types of nominalizations in -ing. One, which he calls a (d) nominalization or N<sub>d</sub>, is formed by adding -'s to the subject and -ing to the verb, which retains its verb-like complements.<sup>25</sup>

N V + → N's Ving +

(137) John wins the race easily. → John's winning  
the race easily

The second nominalization ending in -ing Vendler calls an (e) nominalization or N<sub>e</sub>. It also adds -'s to the subject and -ing to the verb, but it takes noun-like complements instead of verb-like ones, precedes its objects with of, and can replace N's with the.<sup>26</sup>

N V + → { the } Ving of +  
                                  { N's }

(138) John wins the race easily. → { John's } easy  
  { The }  
  winning of the race

(An example of these two nominalizations side by side occurred at a lecture recently delivered at the University of Pennsylvania. Printed signs publicizing the lecture read Problems in the Writing of a History of Linguistics, while handouts distributed at the lecture bore the title Problems in Writing a History of Linguistics.)

Vendler goes on to speculate on the history of the nominalizations by saying: "...we cannot avoid the impression that there is a current change in the language towards substituting e nominals for d nominals in most contexts."<sup>27</sup> The actual situation, however, is precisely the contrary. The (e) or "strong" nominalization is by far the older of the two (originally, in fact, the only carrier of the suffix -ing(e) in English), while the (d) or "weak" nominalization does not appear until the second half of the fourteenth century and then only in very limited use. The New English Dictionary notes that the two nominalizations were not completely separated down to the seventeenth century and cites such mixed constructions as:

(139) Sidney, Arcadia I. iv. 15b, to fall to a  
sodain straitning them.

(140) Ibid. I. xii. 56b, by the well choosing of  
your commandements

We shall see below that the development of the (d) or "weak" nominalization is of great importance in the development of NE be -ing.

3.3.4. OE, ME be a- -ing as source of NE be -ing.

Already in OE, one finds occurrences of a form be a- -ing, as in:

- (141) AElfric, WW 1.92, gyrstandaeg ic waes  
on huntunge  
'yesterday I was a-hunting'

In ME, it is quite well attested, not only with verbs for 'be' but also with verbs corresponding to 'ride', 'go', etc. It is generally considered that the original form contained on, occasionally in, which weakened to a-. What is crucial here is that this form existed long before the participle ending had changed to -ing; therefore, there can be no doubt that what occurs in this construction is a nominalization. Secondly, and even more important, every example I have found of this construction would be rendered in NE by be -ing. (One may check, for example, the numerous examples cited by Mossé, HFP, pp. 107-28, to see the closeness of these two constructions.) This is in contradistinction to OE, ME be + present participle, which just as often as not would be translated as a NE "simple" tense. This leads one to suspect that the source of NE be -ing is not OE, ME be + present participle at all, but OE, ME be a- -ing.

3.4. Development of NE be -ing.

3.4.1. Active voice.

Now we may offer a tentative description of the development of NE be -ing, in the light of what we have examined. OE and early ME had two distinctly different constructions, be + present participle and be a- -ing. Their differences were formal, in that the former had the participial suffix -ind(e), while the latter had the nominalizing suffix -ing(e). They were also syntactically different in that there seems to have been no (obvious)restrictions on what verbs could occur in the former construction, whereas the latter construction appears to have had rather definite restrictions. Furthermore, while the former, since it is a verb, directly governs an object, as in:

- (142) c.1000, AElfric, Hom. I, 250, We beoð  
haebbende ðæs ðe we aer hopedon.,

there is no case I have found in which the latter directly governs an object before the fifteenth century. We do find examples, however, of be a- -ing of +, the of characteristic of the (e) nominalization discussed above:

(143) 1396, Book of London English, 234.20, *Pe*  
 ȝomen of Schordych þat þere were in  
 amending of here berseles.

The two constructions also seem to differ in origin. We know for certain that be + present participle was a Latin loan translation and, originally at least, was highly learned. Therefore, it is naturally well attested in the literature, much of it being directly translated from Latin, or indirectly via French. To say that be a- -ing, on the other hand, is a native construction which was frequent in the spoken language is speculative. However, the evidence does seem to point in this direction. The mere fact that it does appear from time to time in the literature since OE shows that it has been in the language for a long time. Furthermore, it has been noted that this construction has been preserved in the non-literary language: "De bonne heure, ce tour [be a- -ing] a été considéré comme vulgaire ou dialectal."<sup>28</sup> In view of this, one could infer that we are dealing with two overlapping dialects. The construction be + present participle was predominantly a part of the upper (literary) dialect, while a construction with different although not totally unrelated uses, be a- -ing (of +), occurred predominantly in the lower (vulgar) dialect. Thus we have during a certain period which we shall call Stage I the following situation:

Stage I:	<u>Upper</u>		<u>Lower</u>
	be -ind(e)	(+)	<u>be a- -ing(e)</u> (of +)

At a certain point, for perhaps totally unrelated reasons (or perhaps not), the suffixes became identical:

Stage II:	<u>Upper</u>		<u>Lower</u>
	<u>be -ing(e)</u>	(+)	<u>be a- -ing(e)</u> (of +)

At this point, the speakers of the upper dialect (who, of course, also used the lower dialect or a variation of it in speaking) reinterpreted the second construction as being a variant of the first, while retaining its original selectional restrictions and meaning. At about the same time, we find the appearance of the (d) or "weak" nominalization described above. This may have been an independent development, further encouraging the reinterpretation of the construction, since it is a more "verbal" nominalization and does not contain of. Or, on the other hand, it may have been a result of this reinterpretation. In any event, it appears to be closely related. Thus we arrive at the next stage:

Stage III:	<u>Upper</u>	<u>Lower</u>
	<u>be -ing(e)</u> (+ )	<u>be a- -ing(e)</u> (+ )

At this point, after the disappearance of of, the only thing left to distinguish the two constructions was the particle a- ( on or in), and, as we have seen, this too was dropped everywhere except in dialectal speech, that is to say, everywhere except in the speech of those who had never reinterpreted the construction on the pattern of the literary construction be + present participle. This is perhaps the theory behind Jespersen's "amalgamation" or the NED's "blend" or Goedsche's "merger." It is perhaps better described as a folk etymology, albeit by the learned folk, of a common native construction.

### 3.4.2. Passive voice.

The development of the formal passive of be -ing is worthy of attention because it is so recent. Originally, the passive of the construction was identical with the active. Mossé, still trying to relate be -ing to OE, ME be + present participle, finds four examples of the latter construction in OE having an active form but a passive meaning, adding: "Mais en vieil-anglais les exemples en sont rares et douteux."<sup>29</sup> He finds a few more in ME, beginning with the fourteenth century, but finally notes that this construction (active form, passive meaning) begins to occur regularly only in the sixteenth century.<sup>30</sup> This coincides precisely with the point in time (early NE) when we are no longer dealing with a participle but with an underlying nominalization which, although learnedly reinterpreted as a verb, still retains certain features of the noun. Thus it is perfectly acceptable for the early NE speaker to say:

(144) The house is building.

← (145) The house is in (the process of) building.

This is what is brought out by Jespersen, "A concomitant cause of the use of the active form in a more or less passive sense may have been the doublesidedness [i.e., nominal vs. verbal] of the form in -ing."<sup>31</sup>

It is not until as late as the nineteenth century that a formal passive was introduced, created on the analogy of sentences containing ordinary verbs, the -ing form finally fully entrenched in the minds of the speakers as a verbal. And it is not until the twentieth century that the formal passive was completely accepted by so-called purists. It should be noted that the formal passive has never been extended beyond the present and past tenses (see 2.3.5.). It is possible that such an



extension may still occur, although I fail to see any tendencies in this direction at the present time. Mossé quotes the following dialogue from Harper's Weekly, January 1883, which I am reproducing here although it is fairly long, since it illustrates the nineteenth-century purist's opposition to the new construction, and, at the same time, it demonstrates how the construction is not extended beyond the present and past tenses (i.e., does not occur with most modals), both in a most amusing manner:

Old Gentl. Are there any houses building in your village?  
Young Lady. No Sir, there is a new house being built for Mr. Smith, but it is the carpenters who are building.  
Old Gentl. True, I sit corrected. To be building is certainly a different thing from to be being built. And how long has Mr. Smith's house been being built?  
Young Lady. (looks puzzled for a moment, and then answers rather abruptly) Nearly a year.  
Old Gentl. How much longer do you think it will be being built?  
Young Lady. (explosively) Don't know.  
Old Gentl. I should think Mr. Smith would be annoyed by its being so long being built, for the house he now occupies being old, he must leave it, and the new one being only being built, instead of being built, as he expected, he cannot...  
Here the gentleman perceived that the lady had disappeared.<sup>32</sup>

### 3.5. Development of OE, ME be + present participle.

If we accept the explanation given above of the history of NE be -ing, we are still left wondering what has become of OE, ME be + present participle. There are, obviously, two possibilities: either it still exists as it was or it does not. It seems that Mossé, the NED, and others believe that it does, or at least that is what one infers from their description of how the two older constructions "meet" in the modern construction. If this were the case, however, we should find modern constructions similar to OE, ME be + present participle, that is, modern constructions not subject to the restrictions on verb, cooccurrences, etc. to which only the older nominal construction appears to have been subject, and not the older participial construction. The fact is that we do not find such constructions. We can no longer say:

- (146) † The bees are fighting against those  
who want to draw their honey from them.

as a variant or paraphrase of:

- (147) The bees fight against those who want to  
draw their honey from them.,

just as we cannot say:

- (148) † John is knowing French.

I think that Mossé's error in this respect was due to an imperfect knowledge of English, illustrated in the following lines: "Le catalogue des emplois de la FP...ne représente pas autre chose que des tendances. Jamais ces emplois ne sont absolument imposées par la grammaire de l'anglais: l'usage de la FP est facultatif" [underlining mine].<sup>32</sup> One has only to listen to someone just learning English to know how obligatory or, on the other hand, how ungrammatical be -ing often is, in spite of the fact that the rules are difficult if not impossible to formulate consciously.

Nevertheless, it appears that although OE, ME be + present participle no longer occurs as it once did, it may have left a trace in NE, the participial clause. If we wish to decompose:

- (149) John will write a book relating language to culture.  
or (150) Bees, fighting only against those who want their  
honey, are generally peaceful.,

we find the following underlying sentences:

- (151) †\*John will write a book which will be relating  
language to culture.  
(152) \* Bees, who are fighting only against those who  
want their honey, are generally peaceful.

It is here perhaps that we find the trace of OE, ME be + present participle, then as now more or less a variant of the "simple" tenses.

Of course, it should be noted that the participial clauses may also at times be decomposed into be -ing:

- (153) The boy crossing the street was hit by a car.  
← (154) The boy who was (in the act of) crossing the  
street was hit by a car

### 3.6. Summary.

There has been a great deal of doubt and controversy concerning the historical development of NE be -ing, some grammarians maintaining that it is a direct descendent of OE, ME be + present participle, others that it is a direct descendent of (OE), ME be a- -ing (of), still others that it derives from both.

The first theory, however, falls through when we compare actual instances of OE, ME be + present participle with their NE glosses, since the OE, ME construction is only randomly translated as NE be -ing. Furthermore, we find instances of the OE, ME construction for which the corresponding NE construction is not only not its translation but is not even grammatical.

The second theory is faulty by omission, since it does not explain the formal changes which be -ing has obviously undergone such as the loss of a- and of and, more important, the creation of the formal passive.

The third theory can be interpreted in several ways. If it means that both constructions developed independently into two homonymous constructions, be -ing, then it is false for the same reasons as theories one and two. The position taken in this paper, on the other hand, proposes a different interpretation of this theory. What we have tried to show is that be -ing is actually derived from be a- -ing, which has been reinterpreted as be + present participle. In other words, we are dealing with Harris' analogic transformations (see 2.3.5.), this time in a diachronic framework as an explanation of an example of language change. The formulation of the modern passive only several generations ago provides us with further examples of analogic transformations not yet carried out to their greatest possible extent.

It goes without saying that the theory suggested in this paper is only tentative. A more intensive study of OE, ME, early NE, and NE is necessary before any conclusive results can be reached. Furthermore, it might prove fruitful to examine other English dialects, in particular Northern English or Scotch, where the present participle suffix (-and(e)) did not merge with the nominalizing suffix (-ing(e)).

### 4.0. Conclusion.

It is with strong reservations that this brief paragraph is included; both the synchronic and diachronic analyses suggested in this paper are too tentative to permit us to draw any conclusions concerning their interrelation. It is in this tentative spirit then that I am pointing out what has perhaps been obvious all along: the diachronic analysis seems to support the synchronic one in that both diachronic-

ally and synchronically we have found a nominalization underlying be -ing. Of course, synchronic syntactic analyses are and should be independent of diachronic data, but it is extremely striking and interesting when they appear to coincide.<sup>34</sup>

Notes

<sup>1</sup>Although Lakoff is a generative-transformational linguist, his work on be -ing is more traditional than transformational. See below.

<sup>2</sup>Ferdinand Mossé, Histoire de la forme périphrastique 'être' + participe présent en germanique [HFP], vol. II, 1935, p. xi.

<sup>3</sup>Zellig S. Harris, Mathematical Structures of Language [MSL], 1968, p. 66.

<sup>4</sup>Harris, MSL, p. 85.

<sup>5</sup>Martin Joos, The English Verb, Ch. V, "Aspect, Tense, and Phase," 1964.

<sup>6</sup>George Lakoff, "Stative Adjectives and Verbs in English," 1966, p. 14.

<sup>7</sup>Dr. Hiž has pointed out that although

(17) I drive to work.

(27) John writes a letter.

may be kernels, they are morphologically too weak to stand alone as sentences without the addition of an adverb. This raises many interesting problems concerning the definition of sentence and concerning the so-called present tense, since the following would appear to be fully acceptable as sentences:

(17') I drove to work.

(27') John wrote a letter.

In this paper, however, we shall ignore the problem and simply refer to constructions like (17) and (27) as kernels. This will be possible for several reasons. First, the examples in this paper are given only arbitrarily in the present tense for the sake of consistency and simplicity. Actually, tense operators seem to operate independently (or nearly so) of be -ing operators. Second, the decomposition of be -ing proposed in this paper in no way depends on (17) or (27) having sentencehood.

<sup>8</sup>Harris, MSL, pp. 92-97.

<sup>9</sup>Harris, MSL, p. 211.

<sup>10</sup>For a more complete discussion of acceptability gradings, see Harris, MSL, Ch. 4.1.

<sup>11</sup>Harris, MSL, p. 95.

<sup>12</sup>Harris, MSL, p. 96.

<sup>13</sup>Harris, MSL, p. 92.

<sup>14</sup>Harris, MSL, p. 208.

<sup>15</sup>Since my writing of this paper, Dr. Harris has proposed an alternative approach which provides for a common source, the nominalized form, for all -ing, including what is referred to here as participial and adjectival -ing. For example, an amusing story would be derivable not from a story that amuses (N) but from something on the order of a story that has the effect of amusing.

<sup>16</sup>See Otto Jespersen, A Modern English Grammar on Historical Principles [MEG], Part IV, pp. 169ff.

<sup>17</sup>For a discussion of be -ing in relation to time, see Jespersen, MEG, IV, pp. 178-90.

<sup>18</sup>Henry Sweet, A New English Grammar, Logical and Historical, Vol. II, p. 96.

<sup>19</sup>W. van der Gaaf, "Some Notes on the History of the Progressive Form," Neophilologus 15, 1930, p. 205.

<sup>20</sup>George O. Curme, "Development of the Progressiv [sic] Form in Germanic," PMLA XXVII, 1913, p. 166.

<sup>21</sup>Jespersen, MEG, IV, pp. 168-69.

<sup>22</sup>C. Rudolf Goedsche, "Terminate Aspect of the Expanded Form," JEGP XXXI, 1932, p. 477

<sup>23</sup>Mossé, HFP, II, p. 101.

<sup>24</sup>Mossé, HFP, II, Ch. VIII.

<sup>25</sup>Zeno Vendler, Adjectives and Nominalizations, 1968, p. 42.

<sup>26</sup>Vendler, pp. 49ff.

<sup>27</sup>Vendler, pp. 51ff.

<sup>28</sup>Mossé, HFP, II, p. 112.

<sup>29</sup>Mossé, HFP, II, p. 137.

<sup>30</sup>Mossé, HFP, II, p. 138.

<sup>31</sup>Jespersen, MEG, III, p. 351.

<sup>32</sup>Mossé, HFP, II, p. 158.

<sup>33</sup>Mossé, HFP, II, p. 269.

<sup>34</sup>I am very much indebted to Dr. Zellig S. Harris for his guidance and for his insightful suggestions. I am also grateful to Dr. Henry Hiz and Dr. Henry M. Hoenigswald for their criticism of an earlier version of this paper.

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