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Progressive aspect in English: developments in early Middle English

The research literature commonly dates the rise of progressive aspect to the early Modern English period, commenting that it is based on Old English constructions either with BE + present participle, or with BE + preposition + gerund; that progressive aspect becomes more common around 1500 AD (Elsness 1994: 8); but that it remains infrequent until the seventeenth century (Algeo 2006: 178).

Old English had a clear formal distinction between the gerund ending *-ung* and the present participle ending *-ende* (Campbell 1959). The modern progressive *-ing* thus seems to derive from the historical gerundial ending. This suggests that the forms and functions of the two categories somehow merged, whether due to phonetic, morphological or other linguistic changes.

This paper purports to present early Middle English instances in which the endings of the two forms are confused, to see whether the available evidence supports the developments proposed for Middle English with respect to the rise of progressive aspect.

References

- Algeo, J. 2006. *The Origins and Development of the English Language* (6th ed.). Wadsworth.
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