Copular verb 'Be' in the Progressive Followed by Subject Predicative in Present-Day English

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Summary

This master's thesis is a corpus-based investigation of an atypical progressive construction which has been characterized as a fairly recent phenomenon in the English language. The construction in question is used as a means to describe behaviour, and it consists of a form of the verb *BE* followed by *being* and a subject predicative. An example of this construction is a sentence such as:

*She **is being difficult***.

My material consists of results from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and the British National Corpus (BNC). My investigation consisted of finding out how common this construction is compared to the total use of the progressive in Present-day English. I continued by investigating what kind of adjectives, adjective phrases and noun phrases which function as subject predicatives. I looked at the various text categories in the two corpora to see in what kind of texts this construction most often appears. I also focused on what kind of meanings this construction is used to express, which verb form *BE* most often appears in and what kind of subject types that most often occur in this construction. Since I found it very interesting to see whether this construction is most frequently used to describe oneself or others in positive or negative ways, I also investigated what the various subject types were used to express. By comparing the results from these two corpora, I was able to find out about regional differences in the use of this construction. COCA also provided me with the opportunity to see the development this construction has experienced in the time period from 1990-2012.

I selected eleven adjectives and noun phrases which functioned as subject predicatives from each corpora to investigate further. What I found from my investigation of this construction was that it is not frequently used in Present-day English, but that it has seen an increase in frequency in American English from 1990-2012. Adjectives and adjective phrases are most frequently used as the subject predicative. *BE* most often occurs in the present tense and the

most frequent subject type is the 3rd person singular. The 3rd person singular subject type was most often described in a positive way by the adjectives and adjective phrases investigated in both COCA and the BNC, but it was most frequently described in a negative way by the noun phrases in both corpora. This construction is most frequently found in spoken material and fictional texts. With regard to meaning, I found that the adjectives and adjective phrases functioning as subject predicatives that I investigated further in American English are most frequently used to express positive meanings, while the noun phrases I investigated further were most frequently used to express negative meanings. In British English I found that the adjectives, adjective phrases and noun phrases I investigated further were most often used to express negative meanings. I also found that this construction is generally more frequent in British English than in American English.

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The process of writing and finishing this master's thesis has been a strenuous, but educational endeavour. When I first started, I eagerly created a schedule of things to do and how long I anticipated that they would take. Already after the first month, that schedule had to be changed because I was running behind. After several months of feeling like I was always two steps behind my goals, a good friend told me that if I had no problems what so ever as far as keeping up with the original schedule went, then I had not set my aim high enough. I found this to be a huge comfort, and as the saying goes, the proof is in the pudding. I managed to finish on time. Learning how to search for material in the corpora, how to process the results, and finally writing about what I had found has been very rewarding. It has enabled me to investigate things that I am curious about in the English language by myself.

I would like to give a great thanks to my supervisor, Professor Johan Elsness. He has been a great source of inspiration, and without his help, advice, knowledge and expertise, I doubt that I would have become so interested in corpus linguistics. During the process of writing this thesis, he has been available, patient, interested and encouraging, and I am forever grateful.

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Happy reading!

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1   Introduction

Apart from modality and tense, aspect is one of the most researched categories in the grammar of the verb phrase. For a number of reasons, the English progressive has been the subject of considerable scholarly interest. First, it is unclear how it originated. Second, over the last several centuries it has developed a rather complex set of meanings. Third, the progressive in the English language has experienced a rapid increase in frequency during the Modern English period (Leech et al. 2009: 118). Many rules have been suggested to describe the form and behaviour of the English progressive. Language is dynamic and has always been subject to influence caused by changes in political regimes, immigration, emigration, foreign connections, tourism, media, business, etc. As such, the language develops. Studies have shown that the grammaticalization process of the progressive has developed, and new uses of the progressive are becoming apparent in the language. Grammaticalization is a process where constructions based on lexical words become bleached of their semantic content over a period of centuries, and they begin to behave like grammatical constructions (Hopper and Traugott 1993). The changes that the progressive has undergone since Old English times can profitably be discussed within grammaticalization theory. Grammaticalization was first defined as the development by which lexical items become grammatical. In more recent work a somewhat extended view of grammaticalization is generally taken (Kranich 2010: 2). It can be defined as the development from lexical to grammatical forms, and from grammatical forms to even more grammatical forms. "More grammatical" in this context may be paraphrased as "fulfilling more clearly defined grammatical functions" (Heine and Kuteva 2002: 2). There is a reasonable amount of agreement that the progressive aspect has undergone a substantial growth in use in late Modern English, and that changes are still going on (Smith 2002: 317). The English progressive may be extending to a wider, less restricted use, where contingent and make-believe states are acceptable if they can be associated with a continuing input of energy, and thus with the dynamic nature of the progressive (Comrie 1976: 37).

2   The Progressive Aspect

2.1 Tense and Aspect

Tense relates the time of the situation referred to to some other time, usually to the moment of speech, also called the deictic zero point. The tenses found in the English language are present, past and future, although there is some disagreement about whether or not the future tense should in fact be called a tense. A situation described in the present tense is typically located temporally as simultaneous with the moment of speech. One described in the past tense is typically located prior to the moment of speaking, whereas a situation described in the future is located subsequent to the moment of speech. Since tense locates the time of a situation relative to the situation of the utterance, we may describe tense as deictic (Comrie 1976: 2).

Aspect is quite different from this. When studying the aspectual functions of the progressive, it is necessary to define the term aspect. The widely-used definition given by Comrie (1976) is :

> Aspects are different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation. The perfective looks at the situation from outside […] whereas the imperfective looks at the situation from inside (Comrie 1976: 3).

This definition has been criticized by Bache (1997), who points out that it is the speaker who chooses to look at a situation in either of these two ways (Bache 1997: 258).

  1   He **was** **reading**.

2 He **read**.

The difference between examples 1 and 2 is not one of tense, since they are both clear cases of the past tense. It is in this sense that we can talk of aspect as different from tense, and that perfective and imperfective meaning should be treated as aspectual (Comrie 1976: 3). Perfective meaning entails that a situation is viewed from outside, without necessarily distinguishing any of the internal structure of the situation. Imperfective meaning entails that a situation is viewed from the inside. As such it is concerned with the internal structure of the situation, since it can both look backwards towards the start of the situation, and look forwards to the end of the situation, and is equally appropriate if the situation is one that lasts through all time, without a beginning or an end (Comrie 1976: 4).

Aspect is not unconnected with time, but it is concerned with time in a very different way from tense. Tense is a deictic category, it locates situations in time with reference to the deictic zero point. Aspect is not concerned with relating the time of the situation to any other point in time, but rather with the internal temporal constituency of the situation. The difference can be defined as one between situation-external time (tense) and situation-internal time (aspect) (Comrie 1976: 5).

2.2 The Basic Function of the Progressive

The progressive in Present-day English is generally understood as a realization of the grammatical category of aspect (Kranich 2010: 1). It is sometimes disputed whether or not the term "progressive" adequately captures the meaning of the English construction. Still, the term is the most widely used and recognized label (Leech et al. 2009: 119). The progressive aspect describes an event or state of affairs which is in progress, or continuing, at the time indicated by the rest of the verb phrase (Biber et al. 1999: 460). It is usually associated with action or dynamic situations (Comrie 1976: 35-37). The term progressive aspect is generally used to describe the form of a verbal construction which has a form of *TO BE* + the present participle (*ing*-participle). It has imperfective meaning and indicates duration. The general

characterization of imperfectivity can be said to be an explicit reference to the internal temporal structure of a situation, viewing a situation from within (Comrie 1976: 24). In short, if a situation is referred to imperfectively, the reference is to the internal temporal structure of the situation, and there is no implication that the situation has been completed (Elsness 1994: 6). This distinguishes it from the non-durative "event present". It also indicates that the duration is limited, which distinguishes it from the "state present", and it indicates that the situation need not be complete, which again distinguishes it from the "event present". The progressive stretches the time-span of an "event verb", but compresses the time-span of a "state verb" because action expressed by the progressive does not need to be complete. It is important to underline that this is a matter of psychological, not necessarily real time (Leech 2004: 18-19).

Of all the different basic meanings attributed to the progressive that of duration is found most often in the literature (Scheffer 1975: 21). The progressive indicates activity with duration, while the non-progressive merely reports activity. The progressive indicates an activity or state that is still incomplete, but whose termination can be expected, as in:

3   It **is raining**.

This is why we can call the progressive an aspect with imperfective meaning, incompleteness is implied (Scheffer 1975: 33-35). Here are two examples to illustrate this:

4   I **have read** Hamlet.

5   I **have been reading** Hamlet.

Example 4 indicates a result, and cannot truthfully be said by anyone who has not read the play through from beginning to end. Example 5 does not say anything about whether "I" have

finished the play or whether it was ever his or her intention to read the whole play, it merely describes an indefinite activity (Scheffer 1975: 36).

On what grounds does a speaker choose between the progressive and the non-progressive in cases where both the progressive and the non-progressive would serve the purpose? When the progressive is used it is because the explicit expression of temporary validity is considered to be relevant. When the progressive is used with modifiers like *always*, *ever*, *constantly*, etc. *always* does not mean "at all times in the history of the world" as in example 6:

   6   The sun **always** **rises** in the east.

It means "at all times we are now concerned with", in other words: all the times that are relevant to the predication.

The progressive has been called the conscious form of the verb because it implies not only that the mind is attentive to what is going on, but it also implies the subjective feelings of interest, dislike, impatience etc. which grant emotional colouring to the progressive form. The simple form, on the other hand, is often used when the duration of the action is irrelevant. The choice of form depends on the speaker's view of the matters (Scheffer 1975: 39-40).

The progressive expresses duration, forms a time-frame, is used descriptively and subjectively, has an imperfective character and expresses temporary validity because it is used to emphasize the action, state or occurrence predicated by the verb with reference to a contextually defined moment or period in time. It is used as a grammatically weightier form than the non-progressive to draw special attention to the predication, to the nature of the activity, that being an action, a state or an occurrence expressed by the verb in the progressive.

7 I **have** **been** **paying** **and** **receiving** calls almost every day for the last fortnight.

In example 7, it is not the progressive that gives the sentence its durative character, but the fact that the paying and receiving of calls lasted a fortnight.

8 I **have paid** several calls during the last fortnight.

In example 8, the non-progressive is used because it is not the activity of paying the calls which is emphasized, but the result. The sentence expresses satisfaction with an obligation discharged, or dissatisfaction with time wasted.

9 He **was** **writing** when I entered.

In example 9, the activity predicated by *was writing* is emphasized by its being expressed in the progressive, in relation to the other activity, that of entering. The progressive naturally endows emphasis to the verb.

10 The bride **wore** a white silk gown.

11 The bride **was** **wearing** a white silk gown.

In example 10 the attention is directed to the bride and the gown, whereas in example 11, the activity of *wearing* takes on relatively more importance than the predication *wore* could provide (Scheffer 1075: 40-41).With regard to imperfectivity, the exact aspectual meaning may depend on the context and what character the emphasized activity assumes.

12 I **painted** the table this morning.

13 I **was** **painting** the table this morning.

The distinction between examples 12 and 13 may be one of perfectivity vs. imperfectivity. The progressive cannot ordinarily be used in order to express perfectivity. However, it is not a completely clear distinction because the context given is not sufficient to decide.

14 I **was** **painting** the house this morning.

In example 14 the imperfectivity seems quite clear, not only owing to the use of the progressive, but because the context is more informative. It is unlikely that anyone would be able to paint a whole house in just one morning. It is, of course, possible to say:

15 I **painted** the house this morning.

Example 15 does not necessarily imply that the painting was completed, it simply reports the activity. It then again depends on the context whether the activity is regarded as completed or not (Scheffer 1975: 42).

The progressive provides an inside view of a situation. The present progressive is used to describe activities or events that are currently in progress or about to take place:

16 I **am working**.

The past progressive describes events that were in progress or about to take place at a time in the past:

    17 I **was** **working** (Leech 2004: 18).

The present perfect progressive is used to describe a temporary situation leading up to the present moment:

    18 I **have** **been** **working** (Biber et al. 1999: 470).

The past perfect progressive is used to describe a temporary situation in the past leading up to a different moment in the past:

    19 Sam **had** **been** **drinking** (Leech 2004: 48-52)

The emphasizing effect of the progressive makes it especially applicable in emotional contexts. What has been called "the emotional progressive" is used to give an emotional colouring to the sentence, to express feelings like annoyance, irritation, impatience, indignation, surprise, intensity, weariness at constant repetition, etc. The emotional progressive can be emphasized by *always* and its synonyms *constantly*, *continually*, *forever*, etc. The repetition expressed by these adverbs strengthens the emotional colouring of the progressive, the repetition in itself often being a source of irritation, boredom or similar feelings, as in:

    20 She **is** **always** **following** me around.

21 She **<u>never</u> <u>stops</u> <u>talking</u>** about her cat.

Whether in these cases the progressive itself expresses the emotional colouring is open to interpretation. It seems highly probable that it is the combination of *always* etc. plus the progressive that provides the element of often rather contemptuous feeling. Not every combination of *always* with a progressive provides emotional colouring, it can just indicate repeated and sporadic activity (Scheffer 1975: 91-92).

The different ways in which the progressive has been investigated with regard to meaning can be roughly grouped as follows (Smith 2002: 321):

  a) Situation type and aspectual meaning. The focus is on the complex interaction between the progressive and the inherent meaning of a verb representing different situation types, for example states, processes and achievements. The meanings are typically divided according to the notions of 1) durativity, 2) telicity and 3) agentivity.

1) Durativity refers to the fact that the given situation lasts for a certain period of time (Comrie 1976: 41).

2) Telicity concerns the question of whether or not the situation involves a terminal point. A telic situation is one that involves a process that leads up to a well-defined terminal point, beyond which the process cannot continue. The use of a telic predicate in the present progressive denotes an event with an endpoint that is not yet reached, such as:

22 John **<u>is</u> <u>making</u>** a chair.

A non-durative predicate entails a repeated or habitual event (Comrie 1976: 44-45).

3) Agentivity normally involves the referent of the subject of a situation. The progressive was originally confined to either human subjects or subjects that are otherwise capable of agentivity (quasi-human or animal), but spread to nonagentive subjects during the later stages of grammaticalization in Modern English. Features of agentivity are assigned in the context of a sentence. The central characteristic of an agent is that it has the primary responsibility for the occurrence of the action of the predicate (Hundt 2003: 47-49).

b) Semantic classes of verbs. The focus incorporates aspectual notions like state verbs and event verbs, but it may also relate to more specific domains such as physical activity, mental processing, communication, and relationships.

c) Pragmatic meanings. Pragmatic meanings of the progressive include its use by speakers to express a subjective attitude as in:

23 You**'re always moaning**.

It also includes the way by which speakers use the progressive to interpret situations as in:

24 […] when Paul Gascoigne says he will not be happy until he stops playing football, he **is talking** rot (FLOB A09).

d) Other uses. Other uses, such as future reference can be seen in examples such as:

25 He**'s coming** tomorrow (Smith 2002: 321).

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2.3 New Uses of the Progressive

In Present-day English, the progressive is typically used with dynamic rather than stative verbs, but sometimes this distinction can be difficult to draw. There are a lot of verbs that would be classified as stative, but which combine with the progressive (Elsness 1994: 19). Leech (2004) has divided verbs that are generally incompatible with the progressive, also known as "anti-progressive" verbs, into four rough semantic categories:

Verbs of inert perception. These are verbs such as *feel, hear, see, smell, taste,* etc. The term "inert" can be used for these common verbs to distinguish perception of the kind denoted by "see", where the perceiver is merely passively perceptive, from that of "look at", where one is actively directing one's attention towards an object. The perception is automatic.

Verbs of inert cognition. These are verbs such as *believe, forget, guess, think, imagine, know, suppose, understand,* etc. These verbs are inert because they do not involve conscious effort or intention. The simple present in this case refers to a mental state, and so belongs to the category "state", even though a limitation on the duration of the state may be implied. For example one would be more likely to say:

26 I think she **is getting** upset,

rather than

27 I **am thinking** she is getting upset.

Verbs of attitude. These are verbs such as *hate, hope, intend, like, love, prefer, regret, want, wish, enjoy,* etc. These are similar to verbs of inert cognition, but some of these can more easily occur in the progressive if the emphasis is on temporariness or tentativeness.

State verbs of having and being. These are verbs such as *be, belong to, contain, consist of, cost, depend on, deserve, have, matter, own, resemble,* etc. They include as part of their meaning the notion of "having" or "being".

However, many of these anti-progressive verbs can occur with the progressive in special contexts (Leech 2004: 25-27).

Comrie (1976) divides verbs into two categories, stative and non-stative verbs. Stative verbs do not have a progressive form according to him, and he says it is not generally possible in English to use progressive forms of verbs of inert perception. However, he also says that this is related to how active or dynamic the process of perception is. If there is a continuing input of energy, a less restricted use is possible. For instance, the verb *understand* is normally a stative verb. If someone asks you whether or not what they are saying is comprehensible, you would reply:

28 Yes, I **<u>understand</u>**,

not

29 Yes, I **<u>am</u> <u>understanding</u>**.

However, in a sentence like:

30 I **<u>am</u> <u>understanding</u>** more and more about quantum mechanics as each day goes by (Comrie 1976: 36),

a nonstative use of this stative verb is possible since the reference is to the change in the degree of understanding, not to an unchanging state of comprehension. Thus, the verb

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understand does not refer to a state here, but to a developing process. As such, the nonstative use of stative verbs must sometimes be allowed (Comrie 1976: 35-37).

A study performed by Marianne Hundt (2004) suggests that the progressive was initially restricted to animate or agentive subjects and spread to inanimate or nonagentive subjects only during the later stages of grammaticalization in Modern English. Her study shows that the use of the progressive increased significantly during the nineteenth century. It also showed that a weakening of this contextual constraint was one of the conditions for this increase (Hundt 2004). The progressive is possibly still going through a process of extension from its prototypical domain of use with overt activity verbs. There may be a general trend towards relaxing the constraints on certain stative verb classes that previously were highly resistant to the progressive. Increasing numbers of mental and communication verbs may reflect a rise in interpretative uses of the progressive, especially in spoken language (Smith 2002: 323).

The grammatical and functional extension of the English progressive has taken many directions. It is being used in habitual and not just ongoing situations, it combines with verbs that typically express states, such as example 30 from Comrie, it has been adopted as a means of talking about the future with the *be going to* construction, and it is being used to express subjective attitude. These are all developments that have possibly followed as a result of the weakening of the contextual constraint. The spread from animate and agentive subjects to inanimate or nonagentive subjects may have been a factor which has lead to the extension of the progressive into new uses as well (Smith 2002:317).

In habitual situations, the progressive concept of temporariness often applies to the series as a whole, not to the individual events that make up the series. The meaning is "habit in existence over a limited period". The period is often specified by an adverbial expression, as in:

31 **I'm taking** dancing lessons this winter.

An adverbial is, however, not necessary:

32 I**'m taking** dancing lessons.

33 I **take** dancing lessons.

Example 32 suggests a shorter period than example 33, although these are relative concepts.

Another habitual meaning is repetition of events of limited duration. The notion of limited duration then applies to the individual events of which the habit is composed, not to the habit as a whole. The effect of substituting the progressive for the simple present is to stretch the time-span of the event so that it forms a frame around the recurrent event or time-point. Examples:

34 Whenever I pass that house the dog**'s barking**.

35 Don't call them at 7.30 – they**'re normally having dinner** (Leech 2004: 32-33).

The present perfect progressive can be used to refer to a temporary habit up to the present:

36 He**'s been scoring** plenty of goals this season.

37 I**'ve been going** to hospital every week for tests.

It can also be used to stretch the time-span of each event rather than compressing the time-span of the habit as a whole:

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38 Whenever I've seen her, she**'s been wearin**g that preposterous hat (Leech 2004: 51).

Similar to *be going to* + infintive, the present progressive can refer to a future happening anticipated in the present, but there is a slight difference from *be going to*: It is not a present intention or cause, but rather a present arrangement which is characterized by the progressive. This use is termed futurate. A reasonably precise definition of the present progressive futurate is: Future event anticipated by virtue of a present plan, programme or arrangement. Examples:

39 She**'s getting married** this spring.

40 The Chelsea-Arsenal match **is being played** next Saturday.

41 We**'re having** fish for dinner.

42 When **are we going** back to France? (Leech 2004: 61).

The meaning of the progressive has extended well beyond the original definition of progressivity as the combination of continuous meaning and nonstativity. Comrie suggests that the English progressive may be headed in a direction where its basic meaning is to indicate a contingent situation. This includes progressive meaning itself, and also the use of the progressive to indicate a temporary state, and its use to indicate a contingent habitual situation. Though this may be a good description of how the progressive has developed diachronically, it does not give a completely satisfactory characterization of its function in Present-day English. There are several idiosyncrasies in the use of the English progressive that prevent a general meaning being able to account for every single use of this form (Comrie 1976: 38). Since the English progressive is being used in a much greater variety of contexts than just for the expression of dynamic situations at a certain point in time, it is possible to argue that the progressive form in Present-day English cannot be regarded as a prototypical

progressive any longer. At the same time, one must stress that when the progressive is used with stative verbs and in habitual situations, it generally refers only to temporary situations, and as such it is still associated with limited duration (Kranich 2010: 32).

Kranich (2010) suggests that a possible definition of the English progressive needs to contain two elements:

1. Reference is made to an internal part of the situation, excluding its endpoints.

2. The reference is made to a dynamic situation.

However, a definition based on these two elements will also be inadequate, since it will not be able to account for instances such as:

   43 Paul**'s always sleeping** in our apartment (Kranich 2010: 49).

As the language develops, a lot of peculiar cases with verbs in the English progressive are appearing, and will probably continue to appear. This makes it difficult to define one essential meaning which will account for all uses of the progressive verb form. As the language becomes more colloquialized, more exceptions to the rules of the language will most likely become evident.

2.4 The Spread of the Progressive

The origins of the English progressive are as much a matter of debate as its modern-day meanings. By most accounts, however, the main period in the development of the Modern English progressive was from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, during which time it became more or less conventionalized as a marker of progressive aspect (Leech et al. 2009: 120).

Old English is the name given to the earliest recorded stage of the English language, up to approximately 1150 AD when the Middle English period is generally taken to have begun. The Middle English period lasted until about 1500 AD, when what is called the Early Modern English period began. The progressive construction existed in the Old English period. It has been argued that it owes its existence to Latin influence and is mostly found in the language of clergymen who were given the task of translating written works from Latin into English. It rarely occurs in Old English poetry. The rigid organization of the language with its fixed rhythmical pattern would resist the use of the progressive in many cases. Most of the meanings of the progressive in Modern English are also found in Old English, those being imperfectivity, duration, limited duration and "frame-time". As in Modern English the progressive is sometimes used to give special emphasis to the verb in Old English (Scheffer 1975: 205-213). Here is an example of a sentence in Old English cited from Traugott (1972: 90):

44 Of Danai þære ie, seo **is irnende** of norþdæle [Orosius 8.14].

She has translated it into the following:

45 From Danai that river which **is running** from northern part.

The non-progressive would sound:

46 From Danai that river which **runs** from northern part.

"The river running" is a rather permanent state, so the progressive would probably not be used today. The restrictions on the progressive may have been few in early English, and it was only rarely used (Elsness 1994: 7). The Old English progressive construction could express general duration rather than limited duration. As such, it had a less obviously imperfective meaning than the progressive usually expresses in Present-day English (Elsness 1994: 21). Old English used a similarly descriptive character of the progressive, and closely related to this is its subjective character. It is doubtful that habit or repetition was expressed by the progressive in Old English. The use of the progressive to express emotions such as irritation, disgust, vexation and the like also seems rather modern, but the progressive was sometimes used with future meaning. The progressive in Old English appears to have the same overall basic function of emphasizing contextually defined temporal reference as in Modern English. Usage had, however, not become regularized, and the use of the progressive in Old English gives no more than an indication of what it was to become later (Scheffer 1975: 205-213).

The ending of the present participle in Old English was *-ende*. As a result of the phonological confusion of *-n*, *-nd* and *-ng*, the present participle and the verbal noun could sometimes have identical forms. This made it possible to substitute one suffix for another. For a long time *-nd* and *-ng* spellings occur side by side. This is not surprising, as even in today's language educated people may be uncertain about how to spell or pronounce certain words. It is easy to imagine how much more frequently this must have been the case in a time when there was as yet no normalized spelling. In a relatively short time the suffix *-ing* became the regular ending of the present participle. This development was assisted by the fact that *-ing* also became the ending of the gerund, a noun formed from a verb by adding *-ing* as in example 47, where *walking* is a verbal noun formed by the verb *walk*:

47 I enjoy **walking**.

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In Old English many verbal nouns ended in *-ung* (Scheffer 1975: 241-242). Constructions with the gerund *-ung* in Old English are often closer to the progressive meaning in Present-day English. In the course of the Middle English period *-ung* and *-ende* gradually turned into *-ing* (Elsness 1994: 7-8).

From the 15th century on the influence of the London dialect and the language of the great writers is felt. From this time forward the progressive can be traced not only in the language of clerks and writers, but also in private letters and papers. It was still less frequently used than it is today, but it was used in all sorts of language. An indication that the form was used as a continuation of the Old English progressive is given by the similarities between Old English usages and the way the progressive occurs in Middle English. The fact that the same verbs that occurred most frequently in the Old English progressive are the same verbs that occur most frequently in Middle English progressive is one indication. Another indication of continuity in the use of the progressive is given by the various constructions in which it occurred in both Old and Middle English (Scheffer 1975: 214-219).

In Old English and Middle English, the progressive did not have clear grammatical functions, but rather seems to be used for stylistic reasons in many cases, as a means to convey emphasis or to provide a more vivid description. Furthermore, it seems to have been interchangeable with the simple form without a significant change of meaning. Overall, the form was much less frequent and was not obligatory in any context. Its use or its absence vary greatly between individual writers. It seems reasonable to assume that the major developments that led to the clear grammatical functions of the progressive occur after the Early Modern English period. However, investigations of 19th century language use show that even in such a recent period, the progressive is not yet obligatory in all the contexts where it would be in Present-day English (Kranich 2010:1).

The fact that some of the subsidiary meanings of the progressive are of comparatively late development may be one reason why the use of the form is increasing in Modern English. To a certain degree the progressive allows the speaker or writer space to convey subtle shades of

meaning that are felt even if they cannot be expressed in rigid grammatical terms. This freedom makes it possible that in translations from a foreign language one translator uses a progressive where another would feel that a non-progressive would serve the purpose better (Scheffer 1975: 110).

The increasing use of the progressive has brought about abuse by many foreign speakers and writers of English. This is in part caused by the comparatively easy way in which the form is used in negative and interrogative sentences.

48 I do not **read**.

49 Do you **read**?

50 I **am** not **reading**.

51 **Are** you **reading**?

Examples 48 and 49 are considered by some to be much more difficult than examples 50 and 51. Many writers of fiction find the progressive to be a very practical syntactical means of indicating foreignness. This is most obvious with verbs of the type *know* and *like*, whose meanings preclude them from being frequently used in the progressive. For example:

52 How **do you know** he is dead?

53 How **are you knowing** he is dead?

Example 52 is a pretty standard way of asking a question, while example 53 may indicate a non-native speaker of English.

Irishmen are often represented as abusing the progressive. Many of the British immigrants into the United States of America in the 19th century were Irishmen. This may be a reason for the fact that the progressive is found more frequently in American English than in British English (Scheffer 1975: 111-113).

A study performed by Christian Mair and Marianne Hundt (1995) shows that the use of the progressive has become more and more frequent during the past 30 years. They used the Brown quartet of corpora, and discovered that especially in the press sections, the progressive showed a significant rise in frequency over the short sampling period. They suggest that a reason for this might be that the English language is becoming more colloquialized and that written and spoken language are becoming more similar (Mair and Hundt 1995: 118). Colloquialization is the shift in language to a more speech-like style. Speech-like habits are adopted into the written language. It can sometimes explain changes in frequency (Leech et al. 2009: 239).

In a study from 2002, Nicholas Smith further extends the analysis by Mair and Hundt from 1995. His aim was to see whether the patterns observed in press genres hold for other genres of the twin British corpora LOB and FLOB. His results showed that the advancement of the progressive in written British English appears most significant in the present tense, both in active and passive voice. Progressives in the present perfect, past tense with passive voice, and in combination with modal verbs also increased, but to a smaller extent. With regard to text category distribution, he too found that the highest concentration of progressives was in the press reportage genre, and in FLOB only, government documents and industrial reports. Learned and scientific articles had the lowest ratio.

Across the corpora the estimated number of simple present forms also rose, and, while it may be a coincidence, in three of the four text categories in which use of the simple present fell, the present progressive fell too. Although the present tense in English does not directly correlate with present reference time, where occurrences of the simple present are plenty, presumably there will be more opportunities for present progressives to compete with it.

With regard to meaning, Smith limited his quantitative analysis to the semantic domains of the verb and the expression of future meaning. He grouped verbs according to the following semantic domain categories: activity (e.g. *run, draw, take*), communication (e.g. *peak, advise*), mental processing (e.g. *consider, hear, regret*), causation (*e.g. enable, make, force*), occurrence (*happen, become*), existence and relationship (e.g. copulas such as *be, seem* and *appear*) and aspectual verbs (e.g. *begin, continue*).

The distribution of present progressives by semantic domain showed that there was an overall increase in the use of present progressives, but the proportion of activity verbs in the total had declined, while communication and mental verbs had increased.

Smith presents a few explanations for his findings. The progressive could still be going through a process of extension from its prototypical domain of use with overt activity verbs. For instance the dynamicity in activity verbs can be extended by analogy to mental processing of various kinds, and perhaps also to communication. Increasing numbers of mental and communication verbs may reflect a rise in interpretative/subjective uses of the progressive. Subjective uses of the progressive are more common in dialogue than in written language, which indicates the possibility of colloquialization. Also, there may be a general trend towards relaxing the constraints on certain verb classes that previously were highly resistant to the progressive, notably the stative types.

Mair and Hundt (1995) suggest that reference to future events with the progressive is a promising source of increase in the construction. However, there are many problems in

22

distinguishing clear future meaning without contextual clues. The figures Smith obtained suggest that future uses are not a major factor in the rise of the present progressive in LOB and FLOB.

With regard to person of subject, Smith found that third person subjects seemed to be a major source of increase, but the increase disappeared when he discarded examples from quoted speech. Similarly, clause negation in the present progressive has risen slightly, but not significantly, because the frequencies involved were quite low. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there was a strong preference in written narrative for locating a progressive within a subordinate clause. A rising use of the subjective progressive could be responsible for this. Additionally, main clause increase could be a further example of written language imitating speech habits. In quoted speech in LOB and FLOB, two thirds of progressives are in main clauses.

The evidence provided by LOB and FLOB for change in the progressive in recent written British English is that the present tense forms have borne most of the increase. The analysis of present forms has pointed out some areas of growth, namely a rise in non-past forms in general, and a spreading out of verb types, from the domain of activity verbs and notably to mental and communication verbs. There has also been a notable increase in main clause use of the present progressive. Factors that may have influenced these increases are the spread of colloquial speech into written language, and an increase in subjective/ interpretative uses (Smith 2002).

2.5 Copular Verb 'Be' in the Progressive Followed by Subject Predicative

The construction I have investigated is a form of *BE* followed by *being* and a subject predicative. A construction with *BE* in the progressive followed by a subject predicative is described as a fairly recent phenomenon according to Jespersen (1954: 225), and it is not very frequently used in the English language. Jespersen found only two examples before the middle of the 19th century, the earliest being from Keats (c.1817), and the second being a passive:

54 You will be glad to hear … how diligent I have been, and **am being**.

55 A fellow, whose uppermost upper grinder **is being torn out** by a mutton-fisted barber (Southey 1975, cited in Jespersen 1954: 211).

Visser (1973) disagrees with Jespersen (Visser 1973: 2426). His counter-claim is that *BE* in the progressive was widely used with a predicate adjective at the beginning of the 19th century. This claim is based on three examples of the type:

56 This **is being wicked** for wickedness' sake.

57 That**'s being a sponge**r, sir.

58 This **is being too resentful** (Visser 1973: 1956-1958).

In these examples from Visser, *being* is part of a subject predicative, and as such they are not truly examples of the progressive *BE* followed by subject predicative construction. However, *BE* in the progressive with predicate adjective does not become frequent in print until the late

19th century, when the construction with a predicate substantive first appears (Hirtle and Bégin 1990: 2).

The two examples cited from Jespersen can provide good illustrations of representational possibilities of the simple form:

59 A fellow, whose uppermost grinder **was** **torn** **out** by a mutton-fisted barber.

The simple form of the auxiliary in example 59 represents the whole stretch of time involved in tearing out a molar, thereby evoking a developmental, action-like, dynamic event from beginning to end.

60 You will be glad to hear … how diligent I have been, and **am**.

In example 60, the simple form of the copula evokes all the impressions involved in being diligent in only one instant of the event's duration, that corresponding to the moment of speech, and so presents the event as non-developmental and state-like.

In both examples 59 and 60, the simple form is perfective since it provides the stretch of time required to situate all the lexical elements of the event. By contrast, the progressive is imperfective since it always provides a stretch of duration which is not long enough to accommodate all the lexical impressions implied in the event. This comes out clearly in the passive progressive in example 55 from Southey, since it depicts the poor fellow in the middle of the painful experience, with further instants of the event yet to be actualized. The progressive here interrupts the development of the event, thereby leaving the subject waiting for the next instant of its realization. Because it is an imperfective, the progressive is restricted in usage to developmental events, events which involve change or at least are open to change. The progressive cannot express stative events because a stative event is necessarily

complete in its every instant. As such, a state cannot be represented as incomplete in this way. In the case of the copula, the progressive can appear only when the speaker feels that the elements involved take place successively. The speaker does not see the situation as static, he or she sees a behaviour or activity of some sort on the part of the subject. This is the sense of example 54 from Keats (Hirtle and Bégin 1990: 3-4).

Strictly speaking, the progressive construction, which represents a situation as dynamic, cannot be used to describe a state. However, the distinctions between static and dynamic situations is not sharply delimited, and in Present-day English there are a number of environments in which verbs that are normally stative can occur in the progressive. These include cases where the verb *BE* is used agentively:

61 John**'s** **being** **silly**.

In such a case as example 61, the situation no longer represents a pure state (Leech et al. 2009: 129).

Visser gives a long list of verbs that are more or less incompatible with the progressive. What they all have in common is that in their general sense, they do not express a real activity. In order to account for their use in the progressive, one should search for the various senses and sub-senses that have a notion, however slight, of activity (Visser 1973: 1968-1969). Implicit in this comment is the idea that there is one meaning underlying and motivating every use of the progressive, a position that ultimately leads to the view of language as systematic (Hirtle and Bégin 1990: 1).

Quirk et al. (1985) express a point of view which is very different from that of Visser, namely that meaning is not the only factor motivating usage:

"The constraints of the progressive cannot, it seems, be explained entirely in terms of meaning. Since the use of the progressive aspect has been undergoing grammatical extension over the past few hundred years, it is likely that its use is still changing at the present day, and that its description at any one time cannot be totally systematic. This would explain the difficulties faced by those attempting to account in every respect for the conditions for the use of the progressive in terms of semantic generalizations" (Quirk et al. 1985: 202).

The point at issue here is of considerable importance because it calls into question the basis of grammatical explanation and how it can deal with the variation of usage. Should we, as Visser suggests, seek the reason for using a grammatical form in the meaning expressed, or are there other factors conditioning the use of a form as Quirk et al. suggest. That is, should we view language as meaning-expressing activity or as motivated by some other factor(s) (Hirtle and Bégin 1990: 2).

There has been some discussion concerning which adjectives that can be used in the progressive *BE* + subject predicative construction. This is a question that has been commented on by Wood (1962):

"One cannot imagine any circumstances in which we could say "He is being right", but that is because it is not possible to give an outward display of "rightness" as it is of anger and illness" (Wood 1962: 212).

In other words, any adjective that can characterize a behaviour may be found with *BE* in the progressive, and it is risky to lay down rules since they would probably only reflect the limitations of the grammarian's imagination (Hirtle and Bégin 1990: 5). Example 62 suggests a context in which *right* might not be impossible with the progressive:

62 I haven't had children, although I prayed for them, and perhaps it is as well. But Nina! She's known she was mine, and, until now, she's loved to know it. But now she's escaping from me, and she knows that too, and is ashamed. I think I could bear anything but that sense that she herself has that she'**s being wrong** – I hate her to be ashamed (Walpole 1919: 49, cited in Hirtle and Bégin 1990).

In example 62, *wrong* is being used as a predicate adjective with *BE* in the progressive, and it is possible that *right* could be used in the same way in a similar context.

Of more interest are examples that do not express overt behaviour as such. Thus in:

63 "I was sitting quietly in the library, working at the catalogue," she began: and I guessed, by the way the phrases came rolling out, that she **was at last being able** to make use of the material she had prepared (Huxley 1965: 39, cited in Hirtle and Bégin 1990).

The obvious activity of the subject is merely implied. The progressive here suggests a moment-by-moment realization of the conditions making this activity possible, implying that this situation may or may not continue, whereas the simple form *She was at last able to* would merely evoke the static existence of the conditions making the activity possible. It is not about what the subject is doing, the activity in itself, but rather the impression of the activity, whatever it is, extending instant by instant that calls for the imperfective (Hirtle and Bégin 1990: 6).

It is not the systemic meaning of the progressive that changes, but rather the manner of representing the lexeme of *BE*, a lexeme which one usually thinks of as a state. The verb in the progressive evokes an impression of development, of an event open to change. These uses show how an initial impression of overt behaviour can be refined and extended to the point where the verb in the progressive suggests only the impression of possible change or development from instant to instant in the subject's activity. The experience the speaker

wishes to talk about gives rise to the impression of some happening unfolding. Readers of such examples are told by the progressive to present an image of the event as incomplete, as one involving successive phases, some of which have not yet been realized (Hirtle and Bégin 1990: 7).

BE can be used as a copula and may then be followed by a predicative adjective, a predicative noun or a combination of the two, like in the sentence

64 He **was** **being** **a** **charming** **little** **boy**.

A sentence like example 64 can be approached in different ways. It can acquire the meaning of "he was putting on the appearance of being a charming little boy", where the emphasis shifts from an indefinite state of affairs to a definite activity. Another way of approaching it is by noting that the predicative adjective or noun always refers to a temporary quality of the subject. The non-progressive would express a state in this case, which is "actualized" in the progressive and becomes an action. The copula becomes a notional verb, meaning: "Act in the way suggested by the predicative adjective or noun" (Scheffer 1975: 100).

Some adjectives of themselves denote a temporary quality: *Hungry, cross*, *ill*, *furious*, *miserable*, *angry* etc. do not express lasting qualities such as *dull*. With these adjectives the progressive is unusual; it serves to form exceptions to the general rule. The meaning of the progressive, if it is used here, changes in such a way that the quality expressed becomes the object of a certain conscious intention of the speaker, usually stained with satyre, criticism or irony like in:

65 Why doesn't Jack say anything?

Reply:

66 Jack'**'s being cross** because his best girl let him down.

The same can be said of the predicative nouns:

67 She**'s being a grand lady**.

68 He**'s being a policeman**.

Example 67 can be interpreted as "she wants to give the impression that she is a grand lady", and example 68 can be interpreted as "that boy is playing the part of a policeman".

A second group of adjectives expresses a permanent quality: *Mad*, *dead*, *healthy*, etc. They cannot be "actualized". A third group expresses a quality that can be both temporary and permanent, for instance *silly*. People can be permanently *silly*, *friendly* or *clever* etc. or temporarily one of these things.

As a rule this use of the progressive is confined to affirmations in the sphere of human behaviour. The form rarely refers to abstract subjects, and in such cases, personification can often be argued (Scheffer 1975: 101).

The progressive, when used with states, attributes a certain dynamism to the situation referred to:

69 John **is being polite**.

A sentence such as example 69 is an example of a state which is turned into a dynamic situation: It is controlled by an agent and it is temporary (Kranich 2010: 49-50).

Ljung (1980) discusses this type of use in his detailed treatment of unusual contexts of the progressive. With regard to the use of the progressive with stative situations, he comes to the conclusion that progressives can occur with statives when these denote covert properties:

70 Paul **is being rude**.

Thus, a sentence such as example 70 is acceptable. Since behaviour is obviously some kind of event, it is only natural that the progressive can be used with covert predicates and that, when we occasionally find normally overt predicates together with the progressive, we must reinterpret them, if we can, as covert. Speakers base the assertion that "Paul" is being rude on observable behaviour. Whether or not a speaker takes the behaviour in question to mean that "Paul" possesses the property of being rude has a lot to do with the speaker's belief system, how well the speaker knows "Paul" , and what the speaker considers as rude (Ljung 1980: 43).

An objection to this is that in constructions with *BE* in the progressive, the copula has shed its original meaning and has come to denote an activity. The meaning of the progressive is partly durative, partly intensive (Scheffer 1975: 101-102).

As far as *BE* is concerned, it seems that the historical development consisted in adjusting its abstract content to the imperfectivity of the progressive. That is, besides using the copula to evoke merely a single instant of the duration of a state, or even all the instances of such an event, certain speakers felt that it could evoke an instant of the duration of an event which may commence in each succeeding instant. Thus it is not surprising to see the construction

developing first to express some characteristic of the subject as embodied in his or her behaviour, nor to find that nearly all examples have an animate subject. This new use of the progressive seems to have come into being because of some speaker(s) mentally perceiving that *BE* could express a new sense, one which lends itself to a representation as a developmental event. Moreover it appears that this is how the use of the progressive arises with more and more incompatible verbs. It is not the grammatical meaning of the progressive that changes in such cases, that being the way in which the progressive represents an event and how it forms the lexical matter of a verb, but rather a new development in the lexical sense of particular verbs which allows the gradual spread of the progressive (Hirtle and Bégin 1990: 4). Besides its usual meaning involving existence, *BE* can now express both what necessarily follows on existence, behaviour or activity, and what necessarily precedes existence, coming into being. These uses of the progressive can be explained by postulating a single underlying meaning of dynamicity or development (Hirtle and Bégin 1990: 9-10).

BE with an animate subject has become so common in the progressive that it can hardly be considered among the incompatible verbs in contemporary usage. In the progressive, *BE* with an animate subject expresses an activity of the subject (Hirtle and Bégin 1990: 4). This activity can be:

A special type of behaviour:

71 "Something – something that I suppose I may as well point out to you. Because in certain matters – in certain matters you **are** **being a fool.**" (Wells 1918: 490, cited from Hirtle and Bégin 1990).

72 Finding refuge behind a wooden column holding up a loose dirty awning, I watched as the butcher laid the chicken on a wood block and pressed its neck down flat. Thwack he chopped off its head and handed my grandmother the still twitching body. On our way home I would quietly inform my grandmother that come lunch time, I wanted only salad. She said I **was** **being ridiculous** (COCA: Fiction. 2011).

73 You **'re being silly**, she told herself; a man as attractive as Luke Denner would be bound to have many women in his life, any number of girlfriends; hadn't she schooled herself into thinking this at least a hundred times -- ever since that very first meeting (BNC: Fiction).

74 She **was being a fool**, mooning over a handsome man like that. He was a Huntington, her family's enemy, and a distraction she did not need (COCA: Fiction. 2012).

75 Ronald Buzick was a butcher. He was balding, and he was fat, and I suppose I **was being a snob** about the whole thing, but I found it hard to think in romantic terms about a man who spent his days stuffing giblets up chicken butts (COCA: Fiction. 2001).

76 In the course of about twenty-four hours Ed Riverton had been brutally exterminated in Finland -- and his wife had been eliminated with equal brutality in East Anglia, over a thousand miles away. He swallowed the rest of the coffee, managed to grin at Monica, then Evelyn was back on the line.' I know you and Sandy are --' She broke off.' Yes,' Newman replied in a monotone.' I know I **'m being a coward** about this... should tell Sandy myself...' Babbling again.' But I can't bring myself to do it now. Bob, could you possibly tell her yourself?' (BNC: Fiction).

Playing a role:

77 The little lady looked away with a bright, musing look towards the window. **She was being a heroine** in a romance. Hannele could see her being a heroine, playing the chief part in her own life romance (Lawrence 1960: 188, cited from Hirtle and Bégin 1990).

78 I nearly missed the bus this morning, I had to run like billy-o, sure as fate Aunt Annie would say, think yourself lucky you can run. Mabel wouldn't say anything. She'd just look. M. How vile! C. You had to think very careful about what you said. M. Carefully. C. I mean carefully. M. Why didn't you run away? Live in digs? C. I used to think about it. M. Because they were two women on their own. You **were being a gent**. C. Being a charley, more like it. (Pathetic, his attempts at being a cynic.) M. And now they're in Australia making your other relations miserable (BNC: Fiction).

79 Pascoe **was being the lawyer** -- asking for better and more secure evidence (BNC: Fiction).

Example 79 found in the BNC is an interesting case. Most noun phrases functioning as subject predicatives have an indefinite article. This example has a definite article, which contributes to bring out the meaning that "Pascoe" is *playing* the part of a lawyer, rather than *being* a lawyer.

Make-believe:

80 "That's our son … At the moment he**'s being a flying squad car** from Scotland Yard." (Dickson 1954, cited in Visser 1973: 1957).

81 Bib bib bib bib! *(SP:PS032)* I **was being a car** (BNC: Spoken).

82 I can see what he's doing *(SP:PS50T)* he **'s being a zombie**, so he's coming downstairs with two sleeping bags over the top of his head and knocking everything over, just look at it *(SP:PS50U)* Well he can vacuum up again *(SP:PS50T)* He can do the lot (pause) and he can grow up as well, fifteen and he's be-- playing at being zombies *(SP:PS50U)* (BNC: Spoken).

Or simply manifesting one's own nature:

83 If they are genuine portraits, therefore, they tell us something profoundly odd about the home life of Pantaloon; nothing less than this, that as he was on the stage, so he was off it, clothes, powder, and all; he was not acting a part in the harlequinade, he **was merely being himself** (Barrie 1929, cited in Buyssens 1968: 154).

Uses involving activity of the subject, which clearly involve developmental events, are common with *BE* + predicative adjective as well:

84 The Chief Constable **was being as tactful as it was in his nature to be** with Mrs. Castle (Christie 1970: 55, cited in Hirtle and Bégin 1990).

Uses involving personification of an inanimate subject are similar to uses involving an animate subject.

85 The copy machine **is being stubborn** again.

In example 85, the copy machine has been given the human quality of stubbornness, and as such it is treated as an animate subject (Hirtle and Bégin 1990: 4-5).

BE in the progressive with an inanimate subject without personification is (still) a pretty unusual construction in English (Osselton 1980: 453, cited from Hirtle and Bégin 1990).

The progressive as a whole has become very common in present-day English. Searching the COCA for all instances of the progressive with the search string "[vb*] [v?g*]" gave too

many results for the numbers to come up, it occurred more than 10.000.000 times. The same thing happened when I performed a search for present progressives with a 3rd person singular subject with the search string "[vbz*] [v?g*]".

By splitting up the searches I retrieved results for present progressives with 2nd person singular, 1st, 2nd and 3rd person plural subjects with the search string: [vbr*] [v?g*]. This search gave results such as:

86 Look closer, it's two women. They **'re walking** together (COCA: Fiction. 2012).

87 I'm not going to play if you **'re going** to be like that (BNC: Fiction).

I retrieved results for present progressives with a 1st person singular subject with the search string: [vbm*] [v?g*]. This search gave results such as:

88 Okay, I **'m contradicting** myself, but sooner or later good gear is part of the plan (COCA: Magazine. 2012).

89 Please, I **am begging** you, let her free (BNC: Magazine).

I searched for past progressives with the search string: [vbd*] [v?g*]. This provided me with results such as:

90 Hearing the way he **was talking** to my son, I knew that this was it (COCA: Spoken. 2012).

91 The authorities claimed they **were** **conspiring** to overthrow the government (BNC: Magazine).

I searched for infinitive progressives with the search string: [vbi*] [v?g*], and retrieved results such as:

92 They seemed to **be** **looking** up at me (COCA: Fiction. 2012).

93 I think the executive will **be** **discussing** this (BNC: Spoken).

I retrieved results for present perfect progressives with the search string: [vbn*] [v?g*], and retrieved results such as:

94 Since then, some alumni and former players have **been** **questioning** the actions of the trustees (COCA: Newspaper. 2012).

95 I had **been** **preparing** myself for that moment for a long time (BNC: Fiction).

I also retrieved results for the base form of the verb with the search string: [vb0*] [v?g*], which gave me results such as:

96 Got to run, buddy. **Be** **seeing** you when I see you (COCA: Fiction. 2011).

97 **Be** **understanding** if he or she suddenly starts wetting the bed or crying for attention following a bad dream in the night (BNC: Non-academic).

These searches do not include cases with intervening items. They provided me with the results in table 1:

Table 1: All progressives except the present progressive with 3rd person singular subjects in COCA and the BNC

Progressives in COCA		Progressives in the BNC	
Search string	**Per million words**	**Search string**	**Per million words**
[vbr*] [v?g*]	1226,45	[vbr*] [v?g*]	715,05
[vbm*] [v?g*]	270,41	[vbm*] [v?g*]	198,68
[vbd*] [v?g*]	1115,08	[vbd*] [v?g*]	1132,08
[vbn*] [v?g*]	271,06	[vbn*] [v?g*]	233,63
[vbi*] [v?g*]	269,80	[vbi*] [v?g*]	294,40
[vb0*] [v?g*]	0,12	[vb0*] [v?g*]	0,14
Sum	**3152,92**	**Sum**	**2573,98**

Table 2: The development over time of all progressives except the present progressive with 3rd person singular subjects in COCA (PMW)

1990-1994	1995-1999	2000-2004	2005-2009	2010-2012
3053,17	3144,61	3114,33	3199,62	3328,38

Figure 1: The development over time of all progressives except the present progressive with 3rd person singular subjects in COCA[1]. See Table 2.
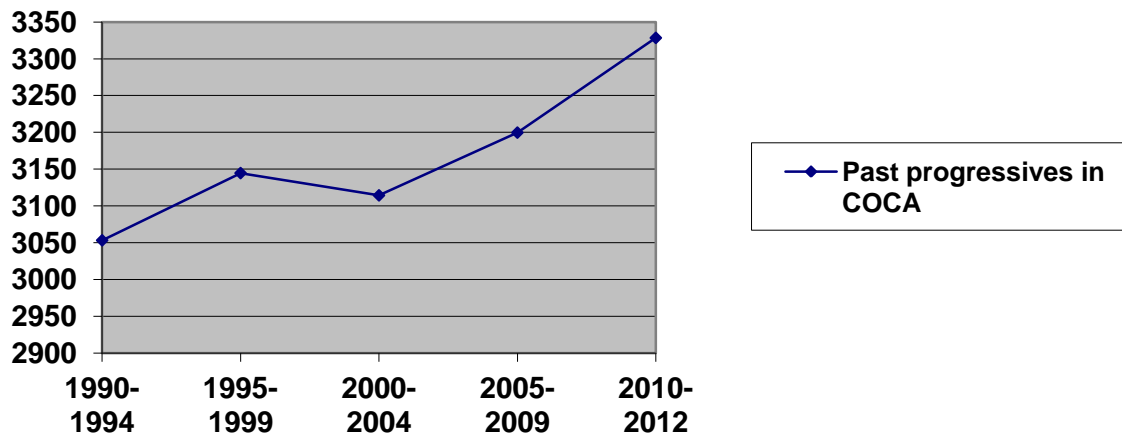
The progressive aspect shows a fairly steady increase in the time-span from 1990-2012 in American English. The use of past progressives, infinitive progressives and the base form of the verb seems to be more common in British English than it is in American English, while the results I retrieved for the present progressives and the present perfect progressives were more frequent in American English. As a whole, the combined results of searches for the progressives showed that it is more frequently used in American English than in British English based on the material I retrieved from COCA and the BNC.

Since the progressive has become very frequent in Present-day English, it is interesting to see what kind of new uses it is spreading to. In the further investigation of the construction with *BE* in the progressive followed by subject predicative, it will also be interesting to see if the results found for all progressives, that being that it is most frequent in American English, and that it has had a steady increase over time, is something we will find with other uses of the progressive as well.

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[1] The BNC does not provide any numbers for development over time, which is why the illustration is only of past progressives in COCA.

2.6 Aims of the Present Study

One of the main reasons for doing research is to find out something more than what is readily apparent from everyday experience and common sense (Sealey 2010: 62). My main objective with this master's thesis is to map the use of the *BE* + *being* + subject predicative construction in Present-day English. The research questions I have operated with are:

1. How common is the use of the *BE* + *being* + subject predicative construction compared to the total use of the progressive?

2. Are there any regional differences between American English and British English?

3. How common are adjectives functioning as subject predicatives compared to noun phrases functioning as subject predicatives in the *BE* + *being* + subject predicative construction?

4. Is there any difference in usage between the various written text categories and the spoken material?

5. Polarity and intended meaning. Is the construction mostly used in negative or positive contexts?

6. How has this construction developed over time?

7. What are the most frequent subject types used, and what kind of meanings are the various subject types most frequently used to express?

8. Which verb form does *BE* most often appear in?

3   Methodology

In this master's thesis I have carried out a corpus-based study using the Corpus of Contemporary American English (Davies 2008) and the British National Corpus (Davies 2004).

It has been argued that a great advantage of using corpora is that they allow analysts to approach the study of language using a proper scientific method. A core principle of Leech's approach within this framework is total accountability (Leech 1992: 112). When carrying out a corpus-based study with a specific theory in mind, it can be easy to unintentionally focus on and pull out only the examples from the corpus that support the theory. The theory can never be shown to be false by such an approach, and as such this approach runs counter to one of the essential features of the scientific method described by Popper ([1934] 2006: 18), that of falsifiability. The principle of total accountability is that we must not select a favourable subset of data in this way. When approaching a corpus with a hypothesis, one way of satisfying falsifiability is to use the entire corpus, and all relevant evidence emerging from analysis of the corpus. This principle is the reason for the quantitative nature of many corpus-based methods. Where there is too much evidence for using the entire corpus, the analyst must at least avoid conscious selection of data. There should be no motivated selection of examples to favour those examples that fit the hypothesis, and no screening out of inconvenient examples. However, there is a criticism to be leveled at such an approach because the corpus itself represents a selection and screening of data. Because of this, any claim of total accountability in corpus linguistics must be moderated. We can only seek total accountability relative to the dataset that we are using, not to the entirety of the language itself (McEnery and Hardie 2012: 15).

In my corpus-based study, I excluded a few examples that were retrieved from initial search strings because they were not examples of the construction I was looking for. These examples are described in chapter 3.3. In the continuation of my corpus searches with more specific search strings, I have included all the data I retrieved from each of the search strings, unless otherwise is explicitly commented upon. It was possible to do this because the construction I

have investigated is not very frequent in the corpora, and so looking at all the data was a manageable task. All the various search strings I used are also listed in chapter 3.3.

3.1 The Corpora Used for the Investigation

The BNC consists of about 100 million words of running text mostly from the 1990s. It has 10 million words of speech and 90 million words of writing. At the time when searches were carried out, COCA consisted of 450 million words from 1990 until 2012. It has a spoken component of 95 million words. The COCA corpus keeps being added to, while the BNC is a finite-size corpus.

One reason why I decided to use these two corpora was that they have both a spoken and a written component, which allowed me to compare the use of the construction in written and spoken British and American English.

3.2 Limitations of the Study

The BNC and COCA do not have the exact same design, and are not from exactly the same time periods. Also, the spoken sections of the two are quite different. The spoken section in the BNC is authentic spoken material, which was often recorded by volunteers who carried small recorders, and recorded normal interactions at home, at school, at work etc. All participants were told either before or after the recording and gave their consent, while the spoken component in COCA is mostly from TV and radio, which is not authentic in the sense that they will often have a manuscript, and the way of speaking will often be more formal. If you know you are being recorded in one way or another, you think more carefully about the things you say than you would in a natural and unconstructed conversation with someone.

COCA is more than four times larger than the BNC. While 100 million words is often enough to give a representative picture, there may be large differences between a corpus of 100

million words and a corpus consisting of 450 million words when it comes to a low-frequency phenomena like the progressive + subject predicative construction. The different sizes of the corpora makes it all the more important to look at normalized frequencies (PMW).

3.3 The Search Procedure in COCA and the BNC

I accessed both COCA and the BNC from http://corpus.byu.edu/. I began by selecting verb. [be] from POS-list, typed in *being* and selected adjective [j*] from POS-list. The initial search string looked like this: "[vb*] being [j*]". It provided me with the first 100 most frequent instances of *BE* followed by *being* and an adjective. *Able* came out as the most frequent adjective in this initial search, but I decided to exclude it from the investigation. *Able* is often followed by *to* and is very frequent in the two corpora, but the examples with *being able* were mostly separate verb phrases to indicate ability, for example:

98 One of the best parts of being a teacher-librarian **is being able to** talk to students about books (COCA: 2009. Spoken).

I also excluded the results with *is being used* from the BNC. These had a high frequency, but *used* was part of the verb phrase, not a subject predicative, for instance in:

99 The word culture **is being used** here in its descriptive, anthropological or sociological sense, rather than its normative literary or artistic sense (BNC: Academic).

 I then looked at all the examples by using the search strings "[vb*] being honest", "[vb*] being cruel", etc. in order to get exact figures.

The finished results are presented in Table 3. I have divided the adjectives into positive and negative categories.

Table 3: First 100 most frequent results from search string [vb*] being [j*][2] in COCA and the BNC [3] (PMW)

Adjectives functioning as subject predicative in COCA		Adjectives functioning as subject predicative in the BNC	
Positive	**Negative**	**Positive**	**Negative**
(0,28): Honest. (0,16): Careful. (0,09): Good, Nice. (0,08): Serious, Polite (0,06): Truthful, Cautious, Funny, Responsible, Generous, Fair (0,05): Modest (0,04): Sincere, Brave, Real, Smart (0,03): Helpful, Successful (0,02): Alive	(0,15): Unfair. (0,09): Rude, Ridiculous, Selfish (0,08): Sarcastic (0,07): Mean, Disingenuous (0,05): Paranoid, Facetious, Stupid, Dishonest (0,04): Difficult, Bad, Unfaithful, Aggressive (0,03): Naive, Irrational (0,02): Disrespectful, Childish	(0,16): Honest, Serious (0,15): Polite (0,13): Careful (0,09): Assertive, Nice (0,08): Cautious, Good (0,06): Televised (0,05): Fanciful, Funny, Realistic (0,04): Generous, Considerate, Consistent, Wise (0,03): Friendly, Optimistic, Rejuvenated, Frank (0,02): Alive, Cost-effective, Effective, Fair	(0,30): Silly (0,21): Unfair (0,19): Stupid (0,17): Rude, Unreasonable (0,13): Ridiculous (0,10): Naughty, Sarcastic (0,09): Foolish, Sick (0,08): Difficult, Selfish (0,07): Horrible, Labelled (0,06): Cruel, Hysterical (0,05): Irresponsible, Nasty, Quiet, Provocative, Uprooted (0,04): Absurd, Evasive, Greedy, Pessimistic (0,03): Over-cautious, Unfaithful (0,02): Cool, Chilly, Discriminating, Homeless, Under-utilised

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[2] No intervening items have been included here.

[3] *Very* came up as the most frequent positive adjective functioning as a subject predicative in the BNC with a normalized frequency of 0,91. It did not actually function as a subject predicative, but as a modifier. It was probably included due to a mistagging in the corpus, so I did not include it in these results.

Sum: 1,43	Sum: 1,1	Sum: 1,51	Sum: 2,54
Sums of forms included in table from COCA: 2,53		Sums of forms included in table from the BNC: 4,05	

Figure 2: Adjectives functioning as subject predicatives in COCA and the BNC (PMW). See Table 3.
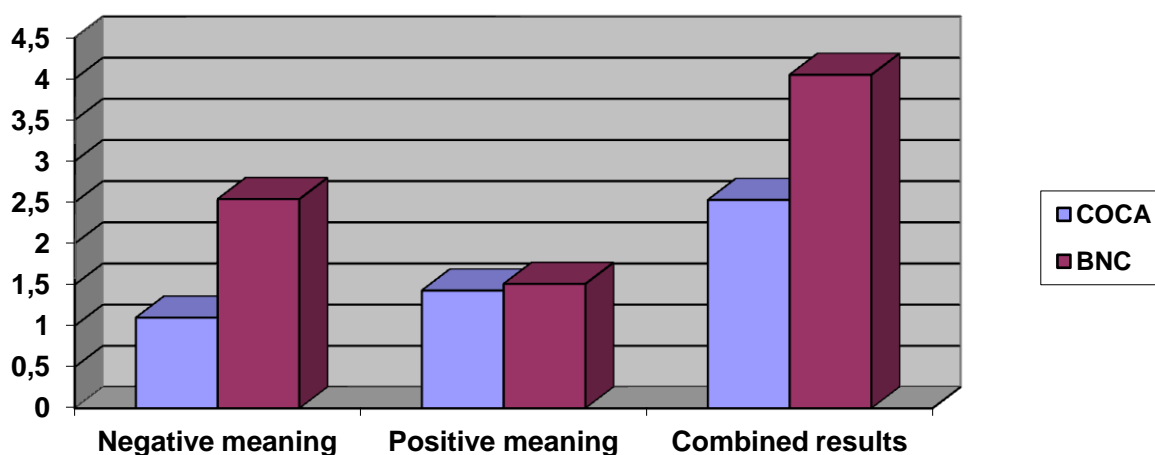
From these search strings I retrieved examples such as:

100   I think the administration **is being cautious**, and I think rightfully cautious (COCA: Spoken. 2011).

101   We want to make sure that **we 're being fair** to American, American workers. We feel like we reached an agreement or made progress in the Senate (COCA: Spoken. 2011).

102   The show I'm on, Morning Joe, was clearly a hit from the start. And a year and a half in, my colleague, Joe Scarborough, was making four times what I was. Why? I was too afraid my bosses would think I **was being difficult** if I asked for a raise (COCA: Magazine. 2011).

103   " Come on, Kred, they **'re being paranoid**! Nobody's ever gon na crack the Hub. "
        (COCA: Fiction. 2010).

104   All right, so maybe she **was being unreasonable** (BNC: Fiction).

105   I only said she's got a nest on her head and she **'s being horrible** (BNC: Spoken).

106   I said, shall I tear them up? and he said, now you **'re being hysterical** (BNC:
        Fiction).

107   Maloney **is being wise** and Lewis should listen to him. There are no real heroes in
        boxing at the moment and Bowe has no other way to go in the end but to fight Lewis,'
        he said (BNC: Newspaper).

Based on these numbers, it seems that this construction with a predicate adjective is more
frequently used in British English than American English. This is interesting because a more
general tendency in linguistic change is that advancement has often come further in American
English than in British English, at least when it comes to the development of the verb phrase
(Elsness 2009: 243-244). At first glance it may appear as if though this construction is most
often used to express positive meanings in COCA, and negative meanings in the BNC, but
this assumption might be premature as the adjectives can also have reversed polarity, for
example in instances such as:

108   " The kids made fun of his accent and the fact that he couldn't understand their
        accent, and then Mrs. Jones actually told him off because he **was n't being polite**
        enough to her or to them! " (COCA: Fiction. 1992).

The kind of meanings that are most frequently expressed will be investigated further in section 5.2.

Table 4: Development over time of adjectives functioning as subject predicative in COCA from search string: [vb*] being [j*] (PMW)

1990-1994	1995-1999	2000-2004	2005-2009	2010-2012
7,42	7,91	7,28	7,75	9,73

Figure 3: Development over time of adjectives functioning as subject predicative in COCA from search string: [vb*] being [j*]. See Table 4.
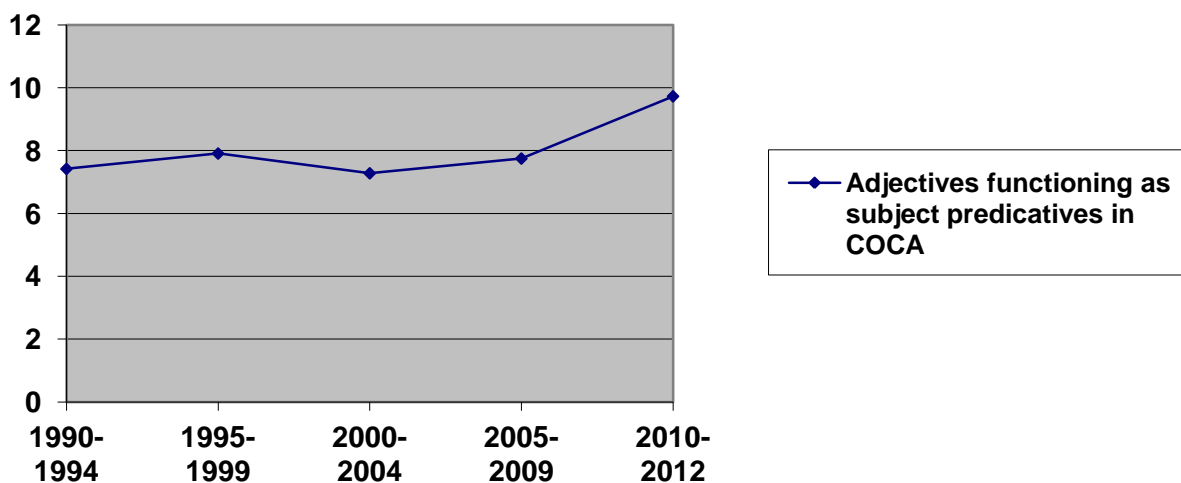
Figure 3 illustrates that there has been an increase in use for this construction in American English from 1990 to 2012. I selected 11 of the most frequent adjectives functioning as subject predicatives from COCA to investigate further.

Table 5: Adjectives and adjective phrases investigated further with all the different search strings listed below in COCA and the BNC[4]

COCA		BNC	
Subject predicative	**Per million words**	**Subject predicative**	**Per million words**
Honest	0,69	Silly	0,52
Careful	0,42	Unfair	0,36
Nice	0,31	Careful	0,34
Unfair	0,25	Honest	0,34
Polite	0,23	Serious	0,34
Silly	0,22	Rude	0,33
Serious	0,19	Polite	0,32
Rude	0,18	Stupid	0,29
Selfish	0,17	Nice	0,25
Sarcastic	0,11	Ridiculous	0,19
Ridiculous	0,1	Sarcastic	0,17
Sum	**2,87**	**Sum**	**3,45**

Honest, *careful*, *nice*, *serious* and *polite* can be considered positive, while *unfair*, *silly*, *rude*, *selfish*, *sarcastic*, *stupid* and *ridiculous* can be considered negative. These initial positive or negative meanings can be reversed in negative sentences, for instance in:

109   He **'s not being honest** with himself (COCA: Spoken. 2004).

110   Yeah, well he **is n't being nice** to me! (BNC: Spoken).

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[4] The figures in this table are results from all of the searches performed with all the different search strings listed below from the written and spoken part combined. These include cases with intervening items.

The search strings I used were: "[vb*] being honest"/ "careful"/ "unfair"/ "silly"/ "ridiculous"/ "nice"/ "serious"/ "rude"/ "sarcastic"/ "selfish"/ "polite"/ "stupid"

These provided me with instances such as:

111   I'm definitely getting sick of writing silly love songs. There's only so many love songs you can write. I'm starting to write about other things, but I **'m being careful** about writing political things' cos it's really easy to sound preachy or too self-righteous in a song. I don't want to f -- up my music by being too political (BNC: Magazine).

In order to include cases with adjective phrases where an intervening adverbial or other item occurs between *being* and the adjective I also did a search with first one and then a second wildcard. Examples of search strings: "[vb*] being * honest", "[vb*] being * * honest", etc. With these search strings I retrieved instances such as:

112   I must say that I think she **is being a little unfair** to her fans (COCA: Magazine. 1998).

113   Your job is to explain to me that I **'m being very silly** (COCA: Fiction. 1991).

114   One friend, who asked not to be named because she didn't want to expose her family's finances, said she and her husband had lost their financial cushion of stocks with the Wall Street collapse. So while her husband still has a job, and she is at home, they **are being much more careful** (COCA: News. 2009).

115   I **'m being perfectly honest**, I didn't know who it was (BNC: Spoken).

In order to include the cases where an intervening adverbial or other item occurs before *being*, I did a search with first one and then a second wildcard before *being*. Examples of these search strings are: "[vb*] * being careful" , "[vb*] ** being careful", etc. These search strings provided me with instances such as:

116   And the camera's 30-millimeter fish-eye lenses easily capture the bothersome exhaust bubbles from the regulator of a cameraman who **'s not being careful** enough (COCA: Magazine. 1999).

To also include cases with adjective phrases where an intervening adverbial or other item comes both before *being* and before the adjective, I performed searches with search strings such as: "[vb*] * being * silly". These searches provided me with instances such as:

117   By such a statement she **was n't being entirely honest**, since she was not answering Shirley's question (COCA: Fiction. 1999).

118   Why had he hidden the fact that she was looking for Mr. Kestrel? Did he think her forward for seeking out Mr. Kestrel that way? If he did, he **was really being very unfair**! (COCA: Fiction. 1993).

119   If drivers **were simply being more careful**, there would be a corresponding decline for pedestrians and rear seat passengers (BNC: Miscellaneous).

A problem with using the wildcard is of course that it allows all intervening words, not just modifiers to the adjectives. However, the results from these search strings were relatively few, even in a corpus as large as COCA. If some unwanted constructions were to have been included, it would not significantly change anything as far as the overall results were concerned. I included all the instances that I retrieved from these additional searches.

I looked at some of the most frequent adjectives functioning as subject predicatives from the BNC and used the results which came up. These are mostly the same adjectives that I investigated from COCA, except that *stupid* has been included instead of *selfish*, because *stupid* in the BNC was more frequent than *selfish*. However, the semantic meaning for both *selfish* and *stupid* is negative, so comparing the use of adjectives functioning as subject predicatives in British English and American English will be relevant.

The results I retrieved with two wildcards before and after *being* were very few. Just like in COCA, most were relevant, but a few were not. I have not excluded the examples that were unwanted in these search strings from the total numbers from the BNC. Because they were so few, they will not significantly change the overall results.

I continued by looking at copular verb *BE* in the progressive followed by a noun phrase. I began by selecting verb. [be] from POS-list, typed in *being* and selected article and noun from POS-list. The initial search string looked like this: [vb*] being [at*] [nn*]. I then continued by looking at each of the examples I retrieved from this original search string by replacing [at*] [nn*] with [at*] fool, [at*] woman, etc. The first 100 most frequent results are presented in Table 6. I have divided the noun phrases into positive and negative categories, although some of the examples can be subject to interpretation. There are a few of the examples I have listed under positive that can be said to be neutral with regard to semantic meaning, for instance *a birder* or *a rabbi* in:

120   So, if you see a white bird with long legs and neck and you can't judge the size, check the color of the beak and feet and you'll know if it's a snowy or a great egret. That **'s being a birder**" (COCA: 1993. News).

121   What was so goddamned interesting to Clean Luke of the nonchurchgoing McCleans about my father **'s being a rabbi**? (COCA: 1991. Fiction).

Table 6: First 100 most frequent results from search string [vb*] being [at*] [nn*] in COCA and the BNC [5] (PMW)

Noun phrases functioning as subject predicative in COCA		Noun phrases functioning as subject predicative in the BNC	
Positive	**Negative**	**Positive**	**Negative**
(0,02): A mom, A woman, The/A mother (0,01): A female, The/A father, A fan, A man, A parent, A leader, A soldier, A rock, A friend, A peacemaker, The/A model/models (<0,01): A writer, A dad, An airport security guard, A trooper, A hero, A grown-up, A participant, A lawyer, A community, A realist, A saint, A painter, A daddy, A number of things, A perfectionist, A novel, A celebrity, A business, A city, A birder, A rabbi, A Jew, A Mormon, A kid	(0,04): A jerk (0,02): The/A fool (0,01): The/A hypocrite, An idiot, An asshole, The/A pain, A victim, A bully, The/A snob, A racist, A dick, A bitch, An alarmist, A nuisance (<0,01): The/A target, A spy, A monster, A bore, The underdog, A demagogue, A hardass, A sin, A punk, A pest, A doormat, A shrew, A repository, A propagandist, A danger, A lazybones, A bloodthirstiness, A bastard, A capitalist, An illusionist, The skunk, The GOP	(0,02): A woman (0,01): A car, A gent, The life, The lawyer, An apprentice, A village, A teacher, A maid, The home, A Christian, A waitress, A seamstress, A man, The kind, The world, The master, An experience, A tactician, A member, A king, A builder, A brick, A boy, The centre, A value, A bridesmaid	(0,02): A bore, A fool, A pig, A pest, A pain, An idiot (0,01): A chippy, A hypocrite, A slob, A sissie, A bessiebrains, A trifle, A scapegoat, A zombie, A widower, A coward, A sleepwalker, A puppeteer, A dick, A tinge, A pickle
Sum: 0,17	**Sum: 0,18**	**Sum: 0,28**	**Sum: 0,27**
Sums of forms included in table from COCA: 0,35		**Sums of forms included in table from the BNC: 0,55**	

---

[5] *A bit* came out as the most frequent positive noun phrase functioning as a subject predicative in the BNC with a normalized frequency of 0,04. It has probably been included due to a mistagging in the corpus, and it did not function as a subject predicative, but as a modifier so I have excluded it from the results.

Figure 4: Noun phrases functioning as subject predicatives in COCA and the BNC (PMW). See Table 6.
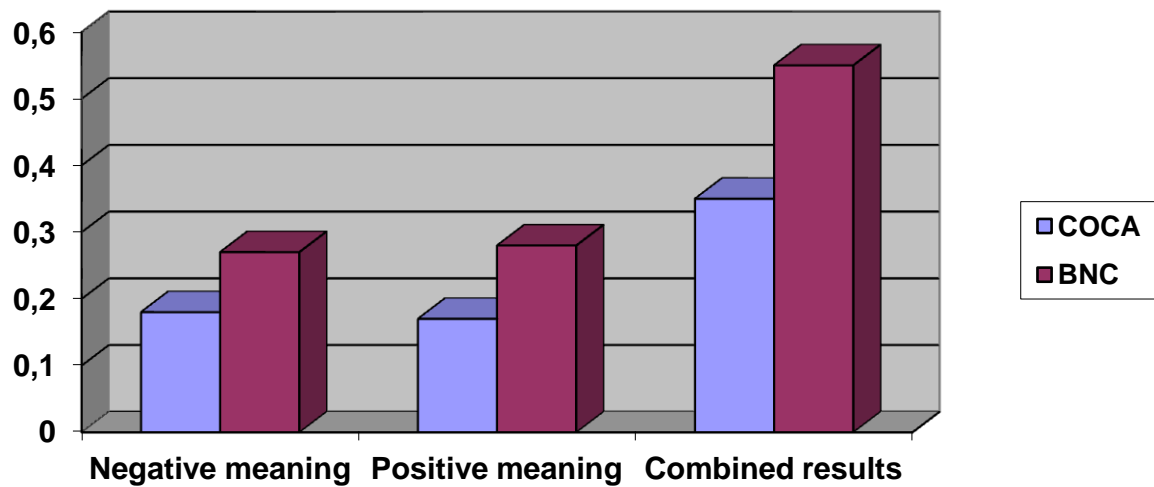
From these search strings I retrieved examples such as:

122   I mean, a parent or a child or a relative will always be the people most involved in our lives, who will send us into the deepest of depressions in some cases. But that's not the same thing as heroism; that **'s being a parent** (COCA: Spoken. 1998).

123   If someone on our team fouls an opponent, we're always going to help him up. That's the sporting thing to do. You pick him back up. The reason I got on that player is because he **was being a baby**. He didn't want to be helped (COCA: Magazine. 2009).

124   Joe **was being a friend** to her, that was all (COCA: Fiction. 1995).

125   Willi was infinitely preferable when they were in a crowd, when he **was being the life** and soul of the party (BNC: Fiction).

126 Howard Kendall expressed that a number of players had let themselves, the club and, more importantly, the fans down. He promised changes against Wimbledon. However, when the squad was announced the only players that were dropped were Ian Snodin (naturally) and Tony Cottee (who **was** **being a** **scapegoat** for the umpteenth time) (BNC: Newspaper).

127 I **'m** **being a** **bridesmaid**. *(SP:PS0W2)* Are you? *(SP:PS0W5)* Yes. *(SP:PS0W2)* Oh, when are you gon na be a bridesmaid? *(SP:PS0W5)* In August. *(SP:PS0W2)* Mm, who's getting married? *(SP:PS0W5)* My uncle (BNC: Spoken).

I also did a search for noun phrases functioning as subject predicatives without an article with the search string "[vb*] being [nn*]". From this search string most of the examples I retrieved were not examples of the construction I have investigated. The most frequent example was *being kind*, such as in:

128 I **was being kind** (COCA: Spoken 2008).

In example 128, *kind* is not a noun, but an adjective, and has probably been included due to a mistagging in the corpus. In many of the other examples, *being* was often a part of the subject predicative, such as in:

129 What helped them the most, they say, **was** **being part** of a group (COCA: Newspaper. 2003).

Due to these reasons, I have not investigated any of the examples from the search string "[vb*] being [nn*]" further.

Table 7: Development over time of noun phrases functioning as subject predicatives in COCA from search string [vb*] being [at*] [nn*] (PMW)

1990-1994	1995-1999	2000-2004	2005-2009	2010-2012
0,61	0,81	0,88	0,97	1,18

Figure 5: Development over time of noun phrases functioning as subject predicatives in COCA from search string [vb*] being [at*] [nn*]. See Table 7.
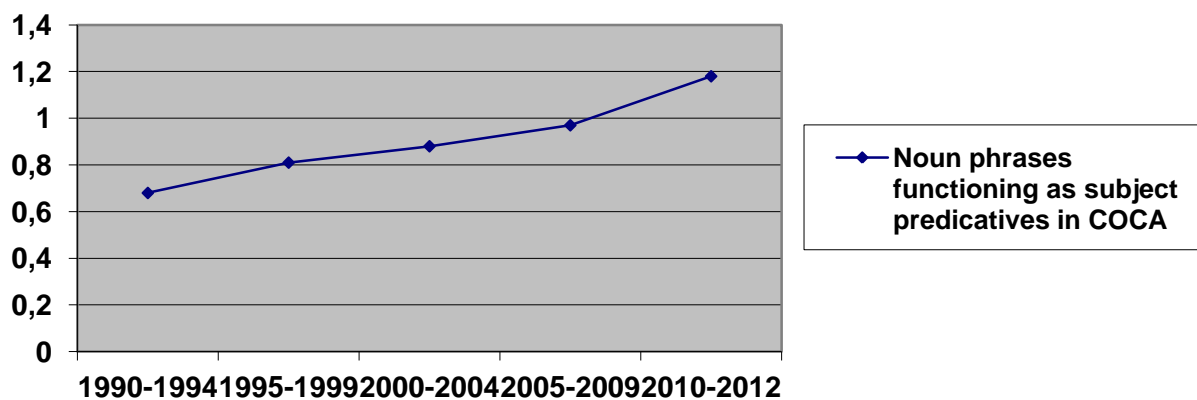
This construction with a noun phrase as a subject predicative has experienced a steady increase in usage in American English from the year 1990 until 2012 based on the numbers from COCA.

Both with adjectives and noun phrases COCA has higher absolute frequencies than the BNC. This is not necessarily because this construction is more common in American English than in British English, it is a result of the difference in size of the two corpora. The BNC has about 100 million words mostly from the 1990s, whereas COCA consists of 450 million words, so the higher frequencies in COCA is nothing more than can be expected when looking at two corpora with different sizes. Because of this difference, I will where possible present normalized frequencies in per million words (PMW) in order to better be able to compare results from the two corpora.

The reason why I include Tables 3 and 6 is to give an impression of what kind of adjectives and noun phrases function as subject predicatives.

In COCA there is a slightly higher frequency of noun phrases with negative meaning, whereas the adjectives had a highest frequency in the positive category. In the BNC there is a slightly higher frequency of noun phrases with positive meaning, while the adjectives occurring in the BNC had the highest frequency in the negative category. Again, the numbers indicate that this construction is more frequent in British English than in American English with noun phrases as well as adjectives functioning as subject predicatives. When comparing Table 1 with Tables 3 and 6, we see from the overall frequencies that this construction makes up only a tiny fraction of the total use of the progressive, although Figures 3 and 5 show that this construction has experienced an increase in the last 22 years. Also, the use of this construction is more frequent with adjectives and adjective phrases functioning as subject predicatives than with noun phrases functioning as subject predicatives in both American English and British English.

I looked more closely at some of the examples that functioned as subject predicatives. There was a majority of negative or neutral noun phrases in COCA and the BNC. By neutral I mean noun phrases like *a mother*, *a father*, *a dad* etc. so instead of continuing by further investigating a selection of the most frequent examples from the original search string as I did with the adjectives, I chose the examples with noun phrases based on their semantic meaning, so that some with positive meaning would also be included and make my selection of noun phrases representative. I decided to further investigate the examples listed in Table 8.

Table 8: Noun phrases investigated further in COCA and the BNC

COCA		BNC	
Subject predicative	**Per million words**	**Subject predicative**	**Per million words**
A jerk	0,06	A woman	0,04
A woman	0,04	A pain	0,03
A fool	0,02	A bore	0,02
An idiot	0,01	A hypocrite	0,02
A pain	0,01	An idiot	0,02
A bully	0,01	A pest	0,02
A racist	0,01	A pig	0,02
A nuisance	0,01	A coward	0,01
A snob	(<0,01)	A gent	0,01
A perfectionist	(<0,01)	A sissie	0,01
A saint	(<0,01),	A slob	0,01
Sum	**0,17**	**Sum**	**0,21**

A woman, *a saint* and *a gent* can be considered positive, while *a jerk*, *a fool*, *an idiot*, *a pain*, *a bully*, *a racist*, *a nuisance*, *a snob*, *a perfectionist*[6] *a bore*, *a hypocrite*, *a pest*, *a pig*, *a coward*, *a sissie* and *a slob* can be considered negative. Again, these initial positive or negative meanings can be reversed, for instance in:

130   At least I **was** **n't** **being a** **hypocrite**. I wasn't being disloyal to anyone (BNC: Fiction).

---

[6] A perfectionist is not necessarily always a negative thing to be, but for this investigation I have classified it as negative. This table includes instances with intervening items.

These were the search strings I used:

"[vb*] being [at*] jerk"/ "idiot"/ "nuisance"/ "racist"/ "fool"/ "bully"/ "woman"/ "saint"/ "pain"/ "snob"/ "perfectionist"/ "bore"/ "hypocrite"/ "pest"/ "pig"/ "coward"/ "gent"/ "sissie"/ "slob".

In order to include the cases where an intervening adverbial or other item occurs between *being* and the noun phrase, I also did a search with first one and then a second wildcard. The search with the second wildcard did not give any usable results, so I have not included those. I used these kinds of search strings: "[vb*] being [at*] * jerk"/ "[vb*] being [at*] * idiot"/ "[vb*] being [at*] * nuisance" "[vb*] being [at*] * pain", etc. These search strings provided examples such as:

131   The kid **was** **being** **an** **obnoxious** **pain** in the butt (COCA: Spoken. 2007).

In order to include the cases where an intervening adverbial or other item occurs before *being*, I did a search with first one and then a second wildcard before *being*. The search with the second wildcard did not give any usable results here either, so I have not included those. The search strings were: "[vb*] * being [at*] jerk"/ "[vb*] * being [at*] idiot"/ "[vb*] * being [at*] nuisance"/ "[vb*] * being [at*] pain", etc.

These searches provided examples such as:

132   " You **are** **really** **being** **a** **pain** today, " (COCA: Fiction. 2011).

To also include examples where an intervening adverbial or other item comes both before *being* and before the noun phrase, I did a search with the following search strings: "**[vb*] ***

58

being [at*] * jerk"/ "[vb*] * being [at*] * idiot"/ "[vb*] * being [at*] * nuisance"/ "[vb*] *
being [at*] * pain", etc. These searches gave examples such as:

133   He **is n't being an unsympathetic jerk** (COCA: Magazine. 2011).

A woman, a pain and *an idiot* were found in both COCA and the BNC, while the rest of the
noun phrases investigated further from the BNC were some of the most frequent examples
with a clear semantic meaning. Only two can be classified as clearly positive, *a woman* and *a
gent*. In COCA I also only investigated two clearly positive noun phrases, so that the
examples that have been investigated from both corpora are semantically within the same
categories.

The reason why I have chosen these adjectives and noun phrases is that they provide a
reasonable semantic spread between positive and negative meanings, which will to some
extent provide me with an insight into what kind of situations this construction is used in.

4   Results

4.1 Adjectives and Adjective Phrases Functioning as Subject Predicatives in COCA and the BNC

Table 9: Results of the adjectives and adjective phrases investigated from the spoken part of COCA and the BNC [7]

COCA		BNC	
Subject predicative	**PMW**	**Subject predicative**	**PMW**
Honest	1,57	Rude	1,73
Careful	0,97	Silly	1,54
Nice	0,51	Serious	1,06
Unfair	0,45	Nice	0,77
Serious	0,34	Careful	0,67
Rude	0,25	Honest	0,67
Polite	0,23	Stupid	0,67
Silly	0,16	Unfair	0,67
Sarcastic	0,12	Polite	0,38
Selfish	0,12	Sarcastic	0,48
Ridiculous	0,05	Ridiculous	0
Sum	**4,77**	**Sum**	**8,64**

As we can see from Table 9, the spoken section of the BNC has almost twice as many instances than COCA of the *BE* in the progressive followed by predicative adjective construction.

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[7] These results include the instances from all the search strings that were carried out, including cases with intervening items.

Table 10: Results of the adjectives and adjective phrases investigated from the written part of COCA and the BNC

COCA		BNC	
Subject predicative	**PMW**	**Subject predicative**	**PMW**
Honest	0,46	Silly	0,40
Nice	0,26	Unfair	0,32
Careful	0,26	Polite	0,31
Polite	0,23	Careful	0,30
Silly	0,20	Honest	0,30
Unfair	0,18	Serious	0,25
Selfish	0,18	Stupid	0,25
Rude	0,17	Ridiculous	0,22
Serious	0,14	Nice	0,19
Ridiculous	0,12	Rude	0,16
Sarcastic	0,12	Sarcastic	0,14
Sum	**2,32**	**Sum**	**2,84**

The written parts of the two corpora do not have the same kind of difference in frequency as the spoken sections, but the BNC has slightly higher frequencies than COCA of this construction in the written section as well.

4.2 Noun Phrases Functioning as Subject Predicatives in COCA and the BNC

Table 11: Results of noun phrases functioning as subject predicative in the spoken section of COCA and the BNC

COCA		BNC	
Subject predicative	**PMW**	**Subject predicative**	**PMW**
A jerk	0,10	A pain	0,20
A bully	0,04	A pig	0,20
A racist	0,04	A pest	0,10
A woman	0,04	A woman	0,10
A pain	0,02	A bore	0
A perfectionist	0,01	A coward	0
A snob	0,01	A gent	0
A fool	0	A hypocrite	0
An idiot	0	An idiot	0
A saint	0	A sissie	0
A nuisance	0	A slob	0
Sum	**0,26**	**Sum**	**0,60**

As was the case with the adjectives and adjective phrases, the spoken part in the BNC contains a little more than twice as many frequencies than the spoken section of COCA of the progressive *BE* followed by predicative noun phrase construction, although the frequencies overall are very low.

Table 12: Results of noun phrases functioning as subject predicative in the written section of COCA and the BNC

COCA		BNC	
Subject predicative	**PMW**	**Subject predicative**	**PMW**
A jerk	0,05	A woman	0,03
A woman	0,04	A bore	0,02
A fool	0,03	A hypocrite	0,02
An idiot	0,02	An idiot	0,02
A pain	0,02	A coward	0,01
A nuisance	0,01	A gent	0,01
A snob	0,01	A pain	0,01
A bully	0,01	A pest	0,01
A perfectionist	0,01	A sissie	0,01
A saint	0,01	A slob	0,01
A racist	0	A pig	0
Sum	**0,21**	**Sum**	**0,15**

In the written section of COCA and the BNC the noun phrases functioning as subject predicatives were more frequent in the written section of COCA.

Figure 6: Chart of the results gathered from COCA and the BNC (PMW). See Tables 5, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12.
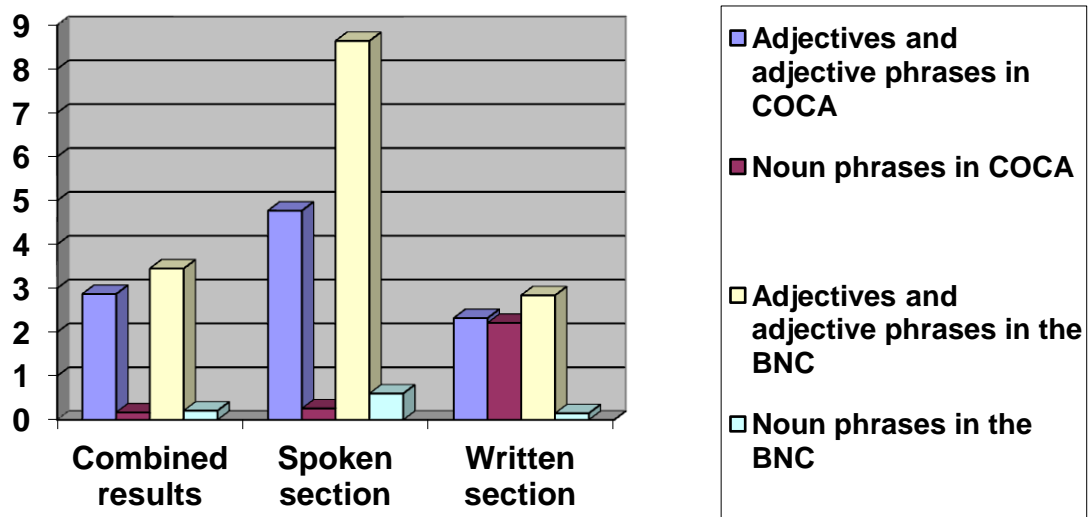

Figure 6 illustrates the combined results of both spoken and written material in COCA and the BNC. Both for adjectives and noun phrases, most of the examples of this construction are found in the spoken section of the two corpora, and the construction is most frequently found in the BNC.

5 The Analysis

5.1 Distribution Across Text Categories

Table 13: Results of adjectives and adjective phrases functioning as subject predicatives in COCA divided into text categories (PMW)

Subject predicative	Fiction	Magazine	Newspaper	Academic	Spoken
Honest	0,86	0,5	0,41	0,08	1,57
Nice	0,74	0,22	0,08	0,01	0,51
Careful	0,49	0,14	0,33	0,06	0,97
Polite	0,65	0,12	0,1	0,04	0,23
Silly	0,67	0,16	0,06	0	0,16
Unfair	0,43	0,15	0,08	0,07	0,45
Selfish	0,31	0,15	0,23	0,01	0,12
Rude	0,41	0,14	0,10	0,03	0,25
Serious	0,37	0,07	0,10	0,03	0,34
Ridiculous	0,43	0,04	0	0,01	0,05
Sarcastic	0,31	0,05	0,07	0,02	0,12
Sum	**5,64**	**1,74**	**1,56**	**0,36**	**4,77**

Based on these results one can conclude that the *BE + being* + subject predicative construction is most frequently used in fictional writing. Examples from the Fiction text category are instances such as:

134   Listen, he said, and I **'m being honest**, if these headers are waiting outside then you'll need all the help you can get (COCA: 2002. Fiction).

135   You **'re being very honest** with me, Kim, and I appreciate it (COCA: 2007. Fiction).

As for the other text categories, the Spoken text category is where the *BE + being* + subject predicative construction is found second most frequently in COCA, with examples such as:

136   The bottom line is, anyone successful in any field of human endeavor will admit, if they **'re being honest**, again, that they've learn more from their failures than they've learned from their successes (COCA: Spoken. 2011)

137   And then I guess everyone who knows anything about therapy, they tell you that if you **'re not being honest** with them, you're not going to get any help. You're wasting your time (COCA: Spoken. 2009).

The Magazine text category only had a few more instances than newspapers. The kind of examples that were found in the Magazine text category were instances such as:

138   " Damn, your dog is fat. What are you feeding him -- gravy? " " I would have never let my kid get away with that. ") And you're not supposed to be offended because, hey, she **'s just being honest** -- and isn't honesty a virtue? Not necessarily. " (COCA: Magazine. 2008).

139   A great story, but a dangerous one in Minnesota. Knowing that the airline was the largest employer in the state, and one of the biggest advertisers in the paper, Meyers did not have to be told to be unusually careful. He faxed his data to airline executives and asked for a comment. Before they got back to him, or the article was even published, airline executives were on local radio releasing the figures and putting their own spin on them. " We **were** **being** **so** **careful** that we let them scoop us on our own exclusive, " says Meyers. When the article appeared it was old news (COCA: Magazine. 1999).

This construction is rarely used in newspapers. Examples from the Newspaper text category are instances such as:

140   "In light of past mistakes, Volgman says, " people **are** **being** **more** **careful** with vitamin D. " And like a lot of physicians -- including specialists and general practitioners -- she always does a blood test to determine D levels before proceeding with treatment (COCA: Newspaper. 2010).

141   " It took awhile, because I **was** **being** **honest** about it, " Linde said of his efforts to sign Coley. " I didn't want to pretend I had knowledge where I didn't. Everybody's different. You have to take a different approach. It's a very emotional and personal sport, very mental, so it's important to establish personal relationships. " (COCA: Newspaper. 1995).

The style in the examples from the Fiction and Spoken text categories is very similar. This may be because fictional writings often contain dialogues of speech between various characters. The examples from the Newspaper text category is more formal than the examples from the Fiction, Spoken and Magazine text categories. There is not a massive difference in frequency between the Magazine and Newspaper text categories in COCA, but there seems to be a difference in style between these two. Instances like example 138 with the use of the word *damn* are quite informal, and may be an indication that magazines in American English have a more colloquial style of writing than newspapers do.

This construction is hardly ever used in academic writings. This is not surprising since academic writings often have a very formal style of writing, keeping to the set rules of grammar and not experimenting with new ways of expressing its contents. Also, since this construction is used to describe behaviour, I would imagine that behaviour is not a topic which is very often discussed in academic writings. Since the Academic text category had the fewest examples of all the text categories in COCA, it is especially interesting to see what kind of examples they are:

142   "Dammit, Norm. I **'m being serious**. " (COCA: Academic. 2007).

143   "I **'m being serious** too. Rabbits go blind." (COCA: Academic. 2007).

Examples 142 and 143 are from the subcategory "miscellaneous" in the Academic text category. Example 142 is an excerpt of direct speech, and the style is not particularly academic. However, they both describe a continuing wish to be taken seriously.

144   One person does the thinking and the problem solving aloud while the other person attentively listens to the thinker's reasoning and asks questions to help make sure that the problem solver **is being careful** and accurate (COCA: Academic. 1991).

145   Many of these people are teachers, so one of my frequent instructions to the experts is to do what you do in a classroom. Whatever you do in your facial expression, your voice inflection, the sincerity of your presentation, your body language, to communicate to people that you **'re being honest**, credible and forthright, do that with that jury (COCA: Academic. 2000).

Examples 144 and 145 are from the "education" subcategory. Example 144 describes the importance of being careful in order to achieve accurateness, while example 145 explains how to behave in order to make people believe that "you" are being honest.

146   I was walking as if in a thick fog, though the sky was clear. Later on, I read in the papers that the world and mankind had begun to decline and the end was near. Lethargy started to appear everywhere. So we felt we all had something in common. In its own way, it was a pity that we **were n't being honest** with one another, weren't sharing our impressions (COCA: Academic. 2007).

147   Hailemariam tells painters, especially those who are more skilled, to note, among other things, the color schemes that are used, the style in which the characters in the narratives are modeled, and the proper positioning of the figures. He also makes it clear, however, that they should never literally copy the images they see in books. Several years ago, Hailemariam mentioned that Aleqa Hailu was taking ideas from African Zion but that he, following Hailemariam' s instructions, **was being careful** to incorporate his own ideas into his images (COCA: Academic. 2009).

Examples 146 and 147 are from the "humanities" subcategory. Example 146 expresses a sense of pity and disappointment about the lack of honesty among a group of people. We get the sense that if they had been more honest with each other, they would have had a lot in common, but due to a lack of sharing, they will not be able to share their experiences and be more closely connected. Example 147 explains the importance of being careful not to copy the work of other artists.

148   Fouls by blacks against whites may be perceived as particularly blatant. # A final
       item which supports the view that the black players were not particularly ill-behaved is
       the nature of the offenses. Approximately thirty percent of the white players' cautions
       were for dissent (verbally objecting to a referee's call or non-call) while none of the
       black players' cautions was. This suggests that the black players **<u>were</u>** **<u>being</u>** **<u>more</u>**
       <u>careful</u> or deferent than the white players. # This study lends support to previous
       studies which have demonstrated the importance of social support in team sports. The
       hostile atmosphere of an away game where such support is lacking can clearly produce
       a dysfunctional aggressive response on the part of visiting players and a less-than-
       objective view on the part of officials (COCA: Academic. 1990).

149   I hope I **<u>am</u>** **<u>being</u>** **<u>unfair</u>**, and that heart-on-their-sleeve Americans will turn out to
       have as much inner strength as stiff-upper-lip Brits (COCA: Academic. 2002).

Examples 148 and 149 are from the "geog/SocSci" subcategory. Example 148 suggests that
black players of team sports are more often subjected to discrimination than white players of
team sports, and so the black players have to be more careful in their every move while
playing. Example 149 describes someone hoping that he or she is being unfair in comparing
Americans to the British, and that the person has perhaps perceived the Americans as inferior
to the British, and hopes that he or she is wrong.

Table 14: Adjectives and adjective phrases functioning as subject predicatives in the BNC divided into text categories (PMW)

Subject predicative	Fiction	Magazine	News Paper	Non-academic	Academic	Miscell aneous	Spoken
Silly	2,02	0	0	0,06	0	0,05	1,50
Unfair	0,94	0,42	0,39	0	0	0,19	0,70
Honest	1,07	0,14	0	0,18	0,14	0,10	0,60
Rude	0,44	0,14	0,10	0	0,07	0,05	1,80
Polite	1,25	0,14	0	0,06	0,14	0,05	0,40
Careful	0,74	0,56	0,10	0,06	0	0,15	0,60
Stupid	0,69	0	0,19	0,12	0	0,19	0,60
Serious	0,32	0,14	0,10	0,06	0	0,29	1
Nice	0,88	0,28	0	0	0	0,05	0,70
Ridiculous	1,00	0	0	0	0	0,05	0
Sarcastic	0,51	0,14	0,10	0	0,07	0	0,40
Sum	**9,86**	**1,96**	**0,98**	**0,54**	**0,42**	**1,17**	**8,3**

The adjectives and adjective phrases functioning as subject predicatives in the BNC have the same kind of distribution that I found in COCA. They are most frequently used in fictional writings and spoken material. It is slightly more frequently used in magazines than in newspapers, and hardly ever used in academic writings.

Examples from the Fiction text category are instances such as:

150   He looked at me hard, realized I **was being honest**, and did as I asked (BNC: Fiction).

151   Diane hadn't been a stunner, but she'd had a pleasant face and a more than tolerably decent body. Would she have allowed him the use of it in any outside circumstance, anywhere that open sexual contact would be anything other than common and unremarkable, and **was** **he** **being** **honest** in trying to tap some dry spring of old feelings to further his own ends now? No, he told himself firmly, you're a working professional. And besides, don't forget, it was she who dumped you in the end (BNC: Fiction).

Examples from the spoken text category:

152   In his speech he **'s** **being** **very** **honest** and saying well look we really need the support blah blah and the-- and then tries to put this er bit in about erm Marxist Leninism (BNC: Spoken).

153   You **'re** **being** **careful** are you? I'm glad to hear it (BNC: Spoken).

Examples from the Magazine text category:

154   Doors previously bolted shut have miraculously swung open, people are not just returning his calls, they're phoning him. And given the power he now wields, he says he **'s** **being** **careful** not to blow it (BNC: Magazine).

155   Because it is patently obvious that Rollins is not bullshitting or manipulating. He **is** **being** **honest** and honesty is such a rare quality in a performer that the audience are stunned (BNC: Magazine).

Examples from the Newspaper text category:

156 ' I think employers look at the disabilities rather than abilities -- and they **are being very unfair** to themselves. They are missing out on a lot of talent in people who I think put more into their job.' (BNC: Newspaper).

157 ' I don't mind a joke but some people are carrying this thing too far, and have even phoned my wife. Some of them **are just being rude**. ' (BNC: Newspaper).

Examples from the Miscellaneous text category:

158 She thought I **was just being silly** as she doesn't believe the rumours (BNC: Miscellaneous).

159 What did his banking colleagues think of his decision?' Some of them were envious,' he says.' Others thought I **was being stupid**. But most were pleased and thought it was all quite exciting.'(BNC: Miscellaneous).

The Non-academic text category has a title which sounds like it may contain all sorts of texts that are not categorized as academic. This is not the case, its subcategories are "socSci", "natSci", "engineering", "arts", "medicine" and "law". Examples from the Non-academic text category:

160 Normal children are usually quite easily satisfied when they know that adults **are being honest** with them (BNC: Non-academic).

161 USL, we know, **is being careful** not to rock the boat as far as Novell is concerned (BNC: Non-academic).

The style in the Fiction and Spoken text categories is similar, but the use of *blah blah* in example 152 may indicate that the Spoken text category is perhaps more colloqial than the Fiction text category. The use of the word *bullshitting* in example 155 may be an indication that magazines in British English also have a more informal style of writing than newspapers do.

Examples from the Academic text category:

162   Know what I mean, I **'m** just **being honest** with ye (BNC: Academic).

The style in example 162 is not one that is usually found in academic writings, but nevertheless it is from the "humanities" sub-category in the BNC, and the subject "I" is reassuring someone of his or her honesty.

163   He is **deliberately being rude** (BNC: Academic)

164   I **'m being polite** because of the recording (BNC: Academic).

Examples 163 and 164 are from the "socSci" sub-category. Example 163 describes someone's being rude on purpose, rather than accidentally having been rude towards someone. Example 164 describes someone being polite because he or she is being recorded, indicating that if it he or she was not being recorded, the topic in question may have been approached in a different way. The style in these two examples is in accordance with what one might expect to find in academic writings. Both examples are very straight forward and explanatory without any unnecessary description.

Table 15: Results of noun phrases functioning as subject predicative from COCA divided into text categories (PMW)

Subject predicative	Fiction	Magazine	Newspaper	Academic	Spoken
A jerk	0,15	0,03	0,01	0	0,10
A woman	0,02	0,08	0,03	0,04	0,04
A fool	0,11	0	0,01	0,01	0
An idiot	0,05	0,02	0,01	0	0
A pain	0,04	0,02	0	0	0,02
A bully	0	0,01	0	0,01	0,04
A racist	0	0	0	0	0,04
A nuisance	0,02	0	0,01	0	0
A snob	0,02	0	0,01	0	0,01
A perfectionist	0,01	0,01	0	0	0,01
A saint	0,01	0,01	0	0	0
Sum	**0,43**	**0,18**	**0,08**	**0,06**	**0,26**

Table 16: Noun phrases functioning as subject predicatives in the BNC divided into text categories[8] (PMW)

Subject predicative	Fiction	Magazine	Newspaper	Spoken
A woman	0,19	0	0	0,10
A pain	0	0	0,10	0,20
A bore	0,13	0	0	0
A hypocrite	0,12	0	0	0
An idiot	0,06	0,14	0	0
A pest	0,06	0	0	0,10
A pig	0	0	0	0,20
A coward	0,06	0	0	0
A gent	0,06	0	0	0
A sissie	0,06	0	0	0
A slob	0	0,14	0	0
Sum	**0,74**	**0,28**	**0,10**	**0,60**

The distributions of the adjectives and the noun phrases functioning as subject predicatives across the two corpora have the same tendencies. Both adjectives and noun phrases have the highest frequency in the Fiction text category. Examples from the Fiction text category are instances such as:

165 " So you don't love me anymore? " I **was being a jerk**, but I knew it, and somehow it made everything a little more bearable (COCA: Fiction. 1997).

166 She was anxious to see the lad settled and she was sorry if she **was being a bore** (BNC: Fiction).

---

[8] There were no examples of noun phrases functioning as subject predicatives in the non-academic, academic or miscellaneous text category from the BNC.

The Spoken text category is the second most frequent with examples such as:

167   I mean, O.J. Simpson is just a guy a lot of people think killed his wife and now he **<u>s</u>**
       [sic] **<u>being a jerk</u>** on the golf course (COCA: Spoken. 2006).

168   Then, he **<u>were being a pig</u>** last night. I says to him, with him breaking down other
       night (pause) his dinner went to dog (BNC: Spoken).

Example 167 is a description of how O.J. Simpson is behaving on the golf course, while example 168 is an example of very non-standard language. It is difficult to grasp the meaning of example 168 because the language is so incoherent.

The noun phrases also behave in the same way as the adjectives with regard to the Magazine and Newspaper text categories. There is a slightly higher frequency in the Magazine text category than in the Newspaper text category.

Example from the Magazine text category:

169   If the cut had been any lower, at the throat instead of the cheek, I would have been
       prosecuting a murder, Camblos says. " Even though Anderson **<u>was arguably being a</u>**
       <u>jerk</u> on the basketball court, he didn't deserve that? (COCA: Magazine. 1999).

Examples from the Newspaper text category:

170   " I had an aversion to playing this sort of high-society matronly type. I think I exaggerated certain things at first, like this lockjaw sort of accent, to distance myself from her. At some point, I realized I **was** **being** **an inverse** **snob** -- that I was caricaturizing her. " (COCA: Newspaper. 1993).

171   If the show isn't happy and one of the artists **is** **being a** **pain** it spreads, particularly if it's a principle artist (BNC: Newspaper).

Example 168 from the Spoken text category in the BNC has a lot of grammatical mistakes, which is not unusual in spoken language, but the style is very colloquial and confusing. Most of the examples from the Fiction text category has a much more grammatically correct manner of presentation than what is found in example 168, as do the examples from the magazine and newspaper text categories.

The Academic text category was the text category with the fewest examples found:

172   James Bond knew that he was not only disobeying orders, or at best dodging them, he **was** **also** **being a** **bloody** **fool** (COCA: 1990. Academic).

Example 172 is from the sub-category "humanities" in the Academic text category from COCA. It describes James Bond's awareness that he is being *a bloody fool*, and it captures quite appropriately his awareness of the fact that he is being a fool, and that he is going to continue to be a fool, probably until his job is done.

Figure 7: The distribution of the adjectives and adjective phrases investigated further functioning as subject predicative across text categories in COCA and the BNC (PMW). See Tables 13 and 14.
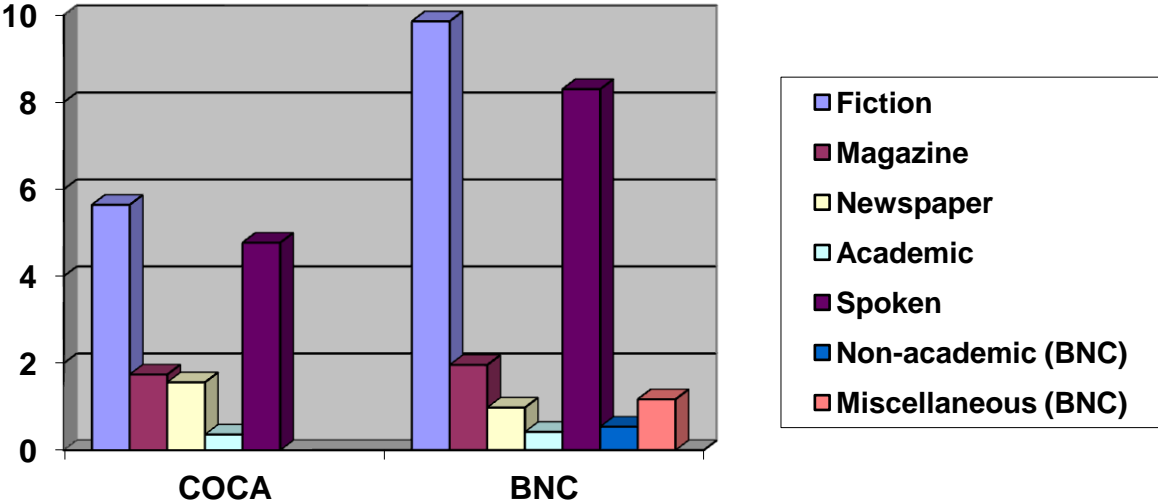

Figure 8: The distribution of the noun phrases investigated further functioning as subject predicative across text categories in COCA and the BNC (PMW). See Tables 15 and 16.
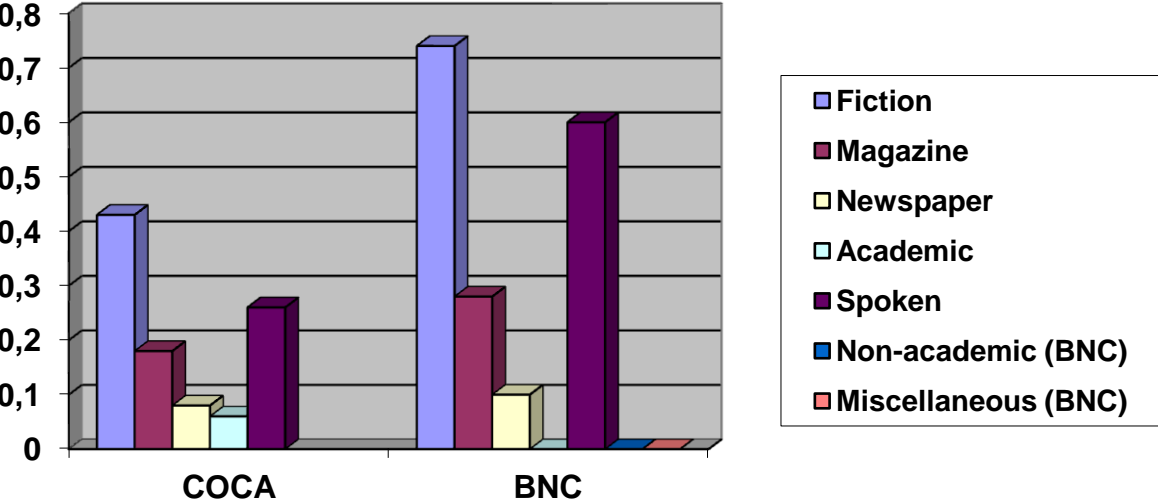
Table 17: Text categories with the most examples of *BE* followed by subject predicative in COCA and the BNC

Adjectives in COCA	Adjectives in the BNC	Noun phrases in COCA	Noun phrases in the BNC
1. Fiction	1. Fiction	1. Fiction	1. Fiction
2. Spoken	2. Spoken	2. Spoken	2. Spoken
3. Magazine	3. Magazine	3. Magazine	3. Magazine
4. Newspaper	4. Miscellaneous	4. Newspaper	4. Newspaper
5. Academic	5. Newspaper	5. Academic	Miscellaneous (0)
	6. Non-Academic		Non-academic (0)
	7. Academic		Academic (0)

While COCA has five text categories, the BNC has seven. The additional two text categories from the BNC are Miscellaneous and Non-academic, and these two cannot be used for comparison with COCA. Both adjectives and noun phrases functioning as subject predicatives in COCA are most frequently found in the Fiction text category, and second most frequently found in the Spoken text category. The Magazine text category is third most frequent, and the Newspaper text category is fourth most frequent. The Academic text category is the least frequent with very few examples.

For the adjectives in the BNC, the text category where the examples are most frequently found is the Fiction text category, and second most frequently they are found in the Spoken text category. The Magazine text category is third most frequent, the Miscellaneous text category is fourth most frequent, then the Newspaper category, Non-academic and Academic follow as fifth, sixth and seventh.

For the noun phrases in the BNC, the Fiction text category has the most examples, the Spoken text category is second most frequent and the Magazine text category is third most frequent, similar to the distribution of the adjectives in the BNC, and both adjectives and noun phrases

in COCA as well. The Newspaper text category is the fourth most frequent, while the Academic, Non-academic and Miscellaneous text categories did not have any examples of noun phrases functioning as subject predicatives in the BNC at all.

Common for all the subject predicatives found in both COCA and the BNC is that they are all most frequently found in the Fiction text category. The Spoken text category has the second highest number of examples, and the Magazine text category has the third highest number of examples of adjectives, adjective phrases and noun phrases functioning as subject predicatives in Present-day English. With regard to style, some of the examples from the spoken section in the BNC are more informal than the examples from the spoken section in COCA. This may be due to the way in which the spoken material was collected in the BNC. It provided the corpus with authentic spoken material, whereas the spoken section of COCA is mostly made up from TV and radio. Other than that, there are no big differences between the examples I found in the two corpora. The Spoken text category is similar to the Fiction text category. The examples in the Magazine text category are sometimes more informal than the examples in the Newspaper text category, and the style in the Academic text category is mostly very formal, except from in a few examples which have probably been included either by mistake, or because they are examples of speech from an academic paper.

5.2 Meaning

With regard to meaning, initial results from COCA would suggest that adjectives functioning as subject predicatives in this construction have a tendency to express positive meanings, while the noun phrases functioning as subject predicatives have a tendency to express negative meanings. Initial results from the BNC showed that the adjectives functioning as subject predicatives had the highest frequency of negative meanings, while the noun phrases functioning as subject predicatives had a slightly higher frequency of positive meanings.

The searches I performed that allowed an intervening item to come in before *being*, had the potential of altering these initial results, since it allowed for words like *not* to be included,

which will change the meaning of the sentence. After having retrieved these results, I looked at each of the examples to establish whether they had positive or negative meanings. After I had done that, I went back to Tables 5 and 8 showing the combined results from COCA and the BNC and subtracted the number of examples I had established did not have their initial positive or negative meaning such as in:

173 He **'s not being selfish**, it's just that there's so much going on in his head (COCA: Magazine. 2012)

174 You've been very good to me. But you **'re not being honest**, not for a moment (BNC: Fiction).

In example 173, "he" is described as *not* being selfish, thus altering the meaning from something negative to something positive. In example 174, "you" is being accused of *not* being honest, which changes the meaning from something initially positive to something negative.

Table 18: Adjectives and adjective phrases functioning as subject predicative according to polarity in COCA and the BNC (raw frequencies)

COCA				BNC			
Subject predicative	**Pos.**	**Neg.**	**Question**	**Subject predicative**	**Pos.**	**Neg.**	**Question**
Honest	255	55	13	Silly	6	43	0
Polite	90	15	2	Unfair	0	32	1
Nice	121	20	6	Honest	20	9	2
Rude	10	76	3	Rude	3	26	1
Silly	3	88	8	Polite	24	2	3
Careful	181	6	2	Careful	26	1	0
Serious	72	5	9	Stupid	1	23	1
Selfish	4	65	9	Serious	21	2	1
Unfair	4	96	13	Nice	19	2	3
Sarcastic	5	44	6	Ridiculous	0	17	0
Ridiculous	0	49	0	Sarcastic	0	13	2
Sum	**745**	**519**	**71**	**Total**	**120**	**170**	**14**

Based on these results, the adjectives and adjective phrases I investigated which function as subject predicatives in American English are most frequently used to express positive meanings, while in British English they are most frequently used to express negative meanings.

Table 19: Noun phrases functioning as subject predicative according to polarity in COCA and the BNC (raw frequencies)

COCA				BNC			
Subject predicative	**Pos.**	**Neg.**	**Question**	**Subject predicative**	**Pos.**	**Neg.**	**Question**
A jerk	2	26	0	A woman	4	0	0
A woman	22	0	0	A pain	0	2	0
A fool	2	10	0	A bore	0	2	0
An idiot	1	7	0	A hypocrite	1	1	0
A pain	0	8	0	An idiot	0	2	0
A bully	0	5	0	A pest	0	2	0
A racist	0	3	1	A pig	0	2	0
A nuisance	0	3	0	A coward	0	1	0
A snob	1	3	0	A gent	1	0	0
A perfectionist	0	3	0	A sissie	0	1	0
A saint	2	0	0	A slob	0	0	1
Sum	**30**	**68**	**1**	**Sum**	**6**	**13**	**1**

The noun phrases functioning as subject predicatives are most frequently used to express negative meanings in both British English and American English.

Figure 9: Distribution between positive and negative meanings for the adjectives, adjective phrases and the noun phrases investigated further functioning as subject predicatives in COCA according to polarity (raw frequencies)9. See Tables 18 and 19.
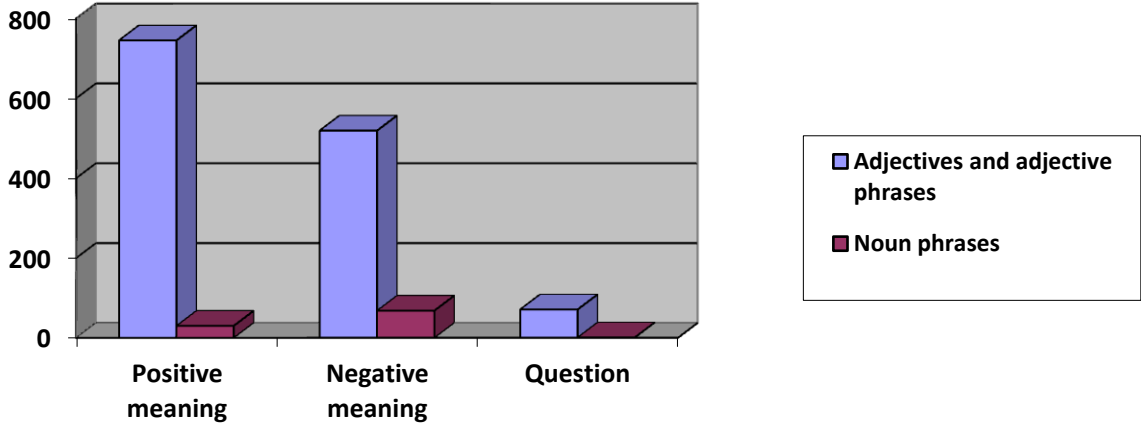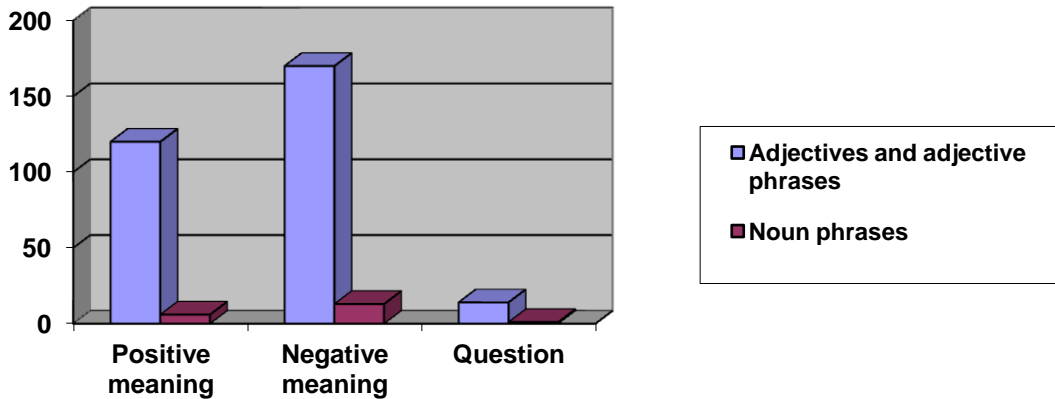

Figure 10: Distribution between positive and negative meanings for the adjectives, adjective phrases and the noun phrases investigated further functioning as subject predicatives from the BNC according to polarity (raw frequencies). See Tables 18 and 19.

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[9] The reason why I have not placed the numbers in the figure from the BNC next to the numbers in the figure from COCA is because they are not normalized frequencies, and my purpose was not to compare the frequencies, but to illustrate the semantic meanings found in the two corpora. COCA has many more actual frequencies than the BNC due to their difference in size.

In the category "positive meaning", I have included sentences such as:

175   You **'re not being silly** (COCA: Fiction. 2011).

Similarly, in the category "negative meaning", I have included sentences such as:

176   You **'re not being honest** (COCA: Fiction. 1994)

Also, the constructions which allow an intervening item before *being* presents the opportunity of asking questions, such as:

177   **Am I being silly**, or are they crossing the line? (COCA: Magazine. 2011)

178   Does it matter to you that he's telling you there are things he needs that he's not getting? Or **is he just being silly**? (COCA: Spoken. 2011).

Adjectives functioning as subject predicatives in COCA are used more often than noun phrases to ask questions. I only found one instance of a noun phrase being used to present a question:

179   That **'s not being a racist**? (COCA: Spoken. 1997).

The results from the BNC show that adjectives, adjective phrases and noun phrases in the BNC are most often used to express negative meanings.

With regard to using this construction for the asking of questions, adjectives are more often used for this purpose than noun phrases in both COCA and the BNC. In the BNC I only found one example of a question being asked with a noun phrase:

180   Why assume that he **is being a slob**? (BNC: Magazine).

Example 180 questions the assumption that someone is being a slob, indicating that "he" has perhaps been a slob in the past, but that the speaker has faith that he has changed his behaviour.

These findings are in accordance with the initial assumption made with the search string "[vb*] being [j*]" and "[vb*] being [at*] [nn*]" as illustrated in Tables 3 and 6.

5.3 Development Over Time

When I looked at the development over time of the *BE* + *being* + subject predicative construction, I could only look at results from COCA, since the BNC does not divide the results into periods of time. COCA divides the time-span of the last 22 years into four separate time periods, 1990-1994, 1995-1999, 2000-2004, 2005-2009 and 2010-2012.

Table 20: Development over time of the adjectives and adjective phrases investigated further functioning as subject predicative in COCA (PMW)

Subject predicative	1990-1994	1995-1999	2000-2004	2005-2009	2010-2012
Honest	0,44	0,60	0,63	0,85	1,23
Nice	0,28	0,31	0,25	0,31	0,61
Careful	0,38	0,39	0,51	0,38	0,38
Polite	0,26	0,23	0,25	0,20	0,25
Silly	0,23	0,19	0,20	0,18	0,34
Unfair	0,33	0,30	0,12	0,26	0,20
Selfish	0,11	0,20	0,25	0,13	0,18
Rude	0,12	0,19	0,17	0,18	0,45
Serious	0,13	0,25	0,19	0,14	0,30
Ridiculous	0,07	0,12	0,09	0,13	0,15
Sarcastic	0,11	0,10	0,14	0,15	0,10
Sum	**2,46**	**2,88**	**2,80**	**2,91**	**4,19**

Based on the results from COCA, the *BE + being* followed by predicative adjective construction has had a slight, but steady increase over the past 22 years in American English.

Table 21: Development over time of the noun phrases investigated further functioning as subject predicatives in COCA (PMW)

Subject predicative	1990-1994	1995-1999	2000-2004	2005-2009	2010-2012
A jerk	0,04	0,05	0,04	0,09	0,12
A woman	0,07	0,06	0,04	0,02	0,06
A fool	0,05	0,02	0	0,01	0,08
An idiot	0,02	0,01	0	0,01	0,08
A pain	0,02	0,01	0,03	0,01	0,02
A bully	0,01	0,02	0	0,01	0,02
A racist	0	0,01	0	0,01	0,04
A nuisance	0,01	0,01	0	0	0,02
A snob	0,01	0,01	0,01	0	0,02
A perfectionist	0	0,02	0,01	0	0
A saint	0,01	0,01	0	0	0
Sum	**0,24**	**0,23**	**0,13**	**0,16**	**0,46**

The *BE + being +* predicative noun phrase construction has not had the same steady kind of increase that the construction with predicative adjective showed. From the years 1995 to 2000-2004, it shows a decrease in frequency before it picks up again in the time period 2005-2009, but the numbers show that it is more frequent in the time period 2010-2012 than it was in the time-period 1990-1994, so it has experienced an overall increase.

Figure 11: Development over time of the adjectives, adjective phrases and noun phrases investigated further functioning as subject predicatives in COCA (PMW). See Tables 20 and 21.
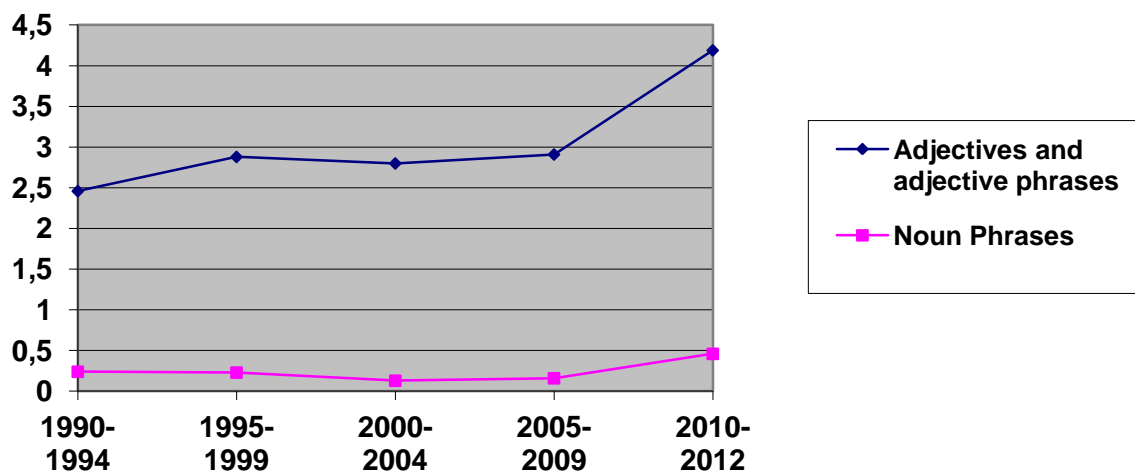

Table 22: Development over time of the adjectives, adjective phrases and noun phrases investigated further functioning as subject predicatives in COCA combined (PMW)

Subject predicatives	1990-1994	1995-1999	2000-2004	2005-2009	2010-2012
Adjectives	2,46	2,88	2,80	2,91	4,19
Noun phrases	0,24	0,23	0,13	0,16	0,46
Sum	**2,7**	**3,11**	**2,93**	**3,07**	**4,65**

Figure 12: Development over time of the adjectives, adjective phrases and noun phrases investigated further functioning as subject predicatives combined in COCA (PMW). See Table 22.
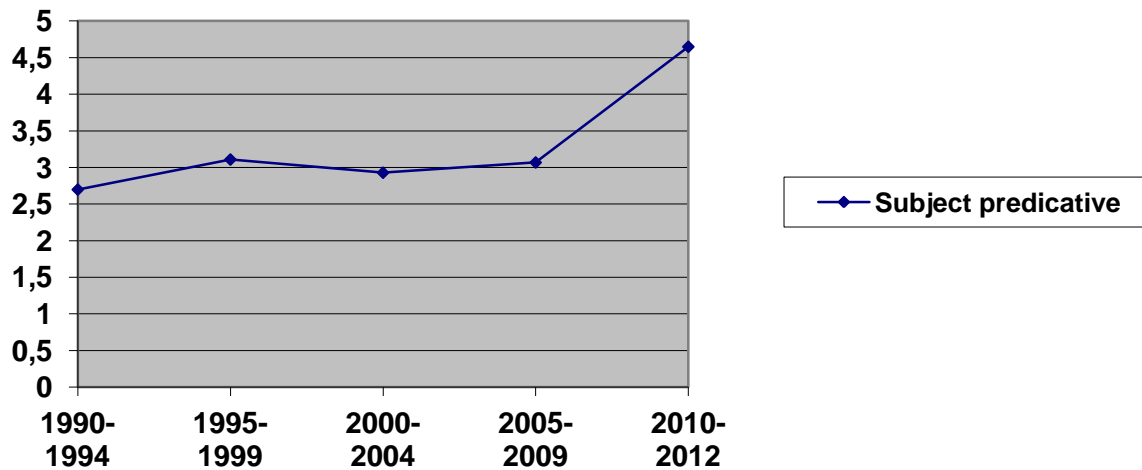
5.4 Subject Type

In order to establish which subject types which are most frequently found in this construction, I performed a manual analysis. I analyzed all the instances I retrieved with the different search strings and established what kind of subject type they had. This includes both personal pronouns such as in example 181 and noun phrases such as in example 182:

181   Your boyfriend is saying that he feels suffocated. Of course, it is a hard message to receive, but **he 's being honest** (COCA: 2002. Magazine).

182   What I've noticed in recent months with all this going on is that **journalists are being far more careful** about who they're promising confidentiality to (COCA: 2004. Spoken).

Table 23: Subject type with adjectives and adjective phrases functioning as subject predicatives in COCA (raw frequencies)

Subject predicative	Singular			Plural		
	1st person	2nd person	3rd person	1st person	2nd person	3rd person
Honest	86	35	119	16	0	35
Careful	27	9	53	16	1	81
Nice	28	27	54	4	4	23
Unfair	21	18	49	7	1	14
Polite	10	8	69	1	1	14
Silly	36	16	37	3	0	5
Rude	19	15	40	2	0	12
Serious	25	18	30	3	0	8
Selfish	26	15	18	8	1	8
Sarcastic	16	9	28	0	0	2
Ridiculous	7	25	12	0	1	2
Sum	**301**	**195**	**509**	**60**	**9**	**204**

Adjectives and adjective phrases functioning as subject predicatives in the *BE + being* subject predicative construction in COCA are most frequently found with a 3rd person singular subject type.

Table 24: Subject type with adjectives and adjective phrases functioning as subject predicatives in the BNC (raw frequencies)

Subject predicative	Singular			Plural		
	1st person	2nd person	3rd person	1st person	2nd person	3rd person
Silly	17	16	12	1	0	3
Unfair	12	2	13	1	1	4
Honest	10	5	11	2	0	3
Rude	4	6	11	0	0	9
Polite	9	1	14	0	0	5
Careful	9	4	7	0	0	7
Stupid	7	7	7	0	0	4
Serious	6	7	9	1	0	1
Nice	1	3	16	0	0	4
Ridiculous	2	9	6	0	0	0
Sarcastic	2	4	9	0	0	0
Sum	**79**	**64**	**115**	**5**	**1**	**40**

Adjectives and adjective phrases functioning as subject predicatives in the BNC are also most frequent with a 3rd person singular subject.

Table 25: Subject type with noun phrases functioning as subject predicative in COCA and the BNC (raw frequencies)

COCA				BNC			
Singular				Singular			
Subject predicative	1st person	2nd person	3rd person	**Subject predicative**	1st person	2nd person	3rd person
A jerk	7	5	15	A woman	0	0	4
A woman	1	0	21	A pain	1	1	1
A fool	2	2	9	A bore	0	0	2
An idiot	1	3	4	A hypocrite	1	0	1
A pain	3	2	4	An idiot	1	0	1
A nuisance	1	0	2	A pest	0	1	1
A snob	3	1	2	A pig	0	0	2
A bully	0	0	5	A coward	1	0	0
A perfectionist	0	0	3	A gent	0	1	0
A saint	0	0	2	A sissie	0	0	1
A racist	0	2	2	A slob	0	0	
Sum	**18**	**15**	**69**	**Sum**	**4**	**3**	**13**

The noun phrases functioning as subject predicatives in COCA and the BNC did not have any plural subject types, but they were also most frequently found with a 3rd person singular subject type.

Figure 13: Subject types functioning as subject predicative in COCA (raw frequencies). See Tables 23 and 25.
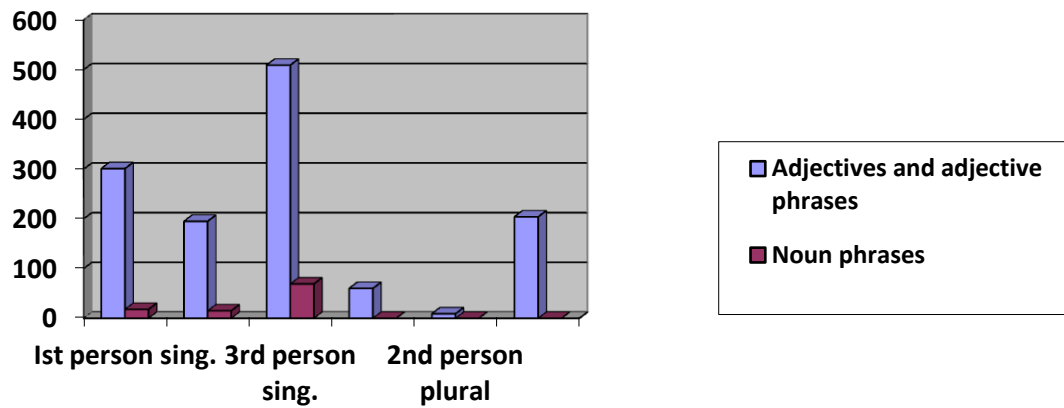

Figure 14: Subject types functioning as subject predicative in the BNC (raw frequencies). See Tables 24 and 25.
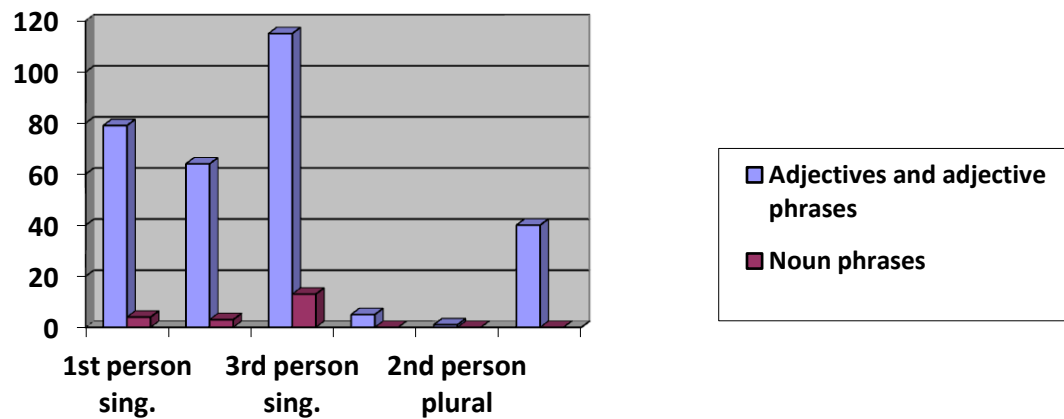
Table 26: The most frequently used subject types with *BE* followed by subject predicative in COCA and the BNC

Subject types with adjectives in COCA	Subject types with adjectives in the BNC	Subject types with noun phrases in COCA	Subject types with noun phrases in the BNC
1. 3rd person singular	1. 3rd person singular	1. 3rd person singular	1. 3rd person singular
2. 1st person singular	2. 1st person singular	2. 1st person singular	2. 1st person singular
3. 3rd person plural	3. 2nd person singular	3. 2nd person singular	3. 2nd person singular
4. 2nd person singular	4. 3rd person plural	No instances	No instances
5. 1st person plural	5. 1st person plural	No instances	No instances
6. 2nd person plural	6. 2nd person plural	No instances	No instances

When establishing whether the instances of "you" found was a 2nd person singular or a 2nd person plural subject type, I looked at the information given from the context in order to analyze them correctly.

In COCA and the BNC adjectives, adjective phrases and noun phrases functioning as subject predicatives most often have a 3rd person singular subject. This indicates that we use it most frequently to describe others in the form of he/ she or it. Examples of this are sentences like:

183   She is, if she **'s being completely honest**, still not entirely sure what a BlackBerry is (COCA: Newspaper. 2010).

184   By such a statement she **was n't being entirely honest**, since she was not answering Shirley's question, yet she wasn't lying either (COCA: Fiction. 1999).

185   He **was** **only** **being** **honest**. I, in turn, informed him that I thought his critical

judgment consisted entirely of bloodyminded revenge on writers who, unlike himself,

had managed to create something people wanted to read (COCA: Fiction. 1999).

The second most frequently used subject type in both corpora with adjectives, adjective

phrases and noun phrases was the first person singular "I". Examples with a first person

singular subject was found in sentences such as:

186   I was not terribly heartbroken to have such a small window of time to nurse. If I **'m**

being **completely** **honest**, I was relieved. I felt lucky that I was even able to have a

child after having cancer. Breast-feeding? It would be a bonus, but not a necessity

(COCA: Magazine. 2010).

187   I don't think I **'m** **being** **ridiculous** (BNC: Fiction).

188   Narrator 2: The thing escapes with its dark cape behind it. SCENE 5 Narrator 3: In

the morning Holmes questions Marstoke. Holmes: Did everyone who went out last

night go in pairs? Marstoke: I think so. Except Brother Caulder. Holmes: I see. That's

very suspicious. He was angry at me before. You didn't go out yourself, Marstoke?

Marstoke: Why, no. Surely, Mr. Holmes, you don't think the killer is one of us?

Holmes: I **'m** **being** **careful**. (COCA: Fiction. 2002).

The third most frequent subject type with adjectives and adjective phrases functioning as

subject predicatives in COCA was a third person plural:

189   " I hear from other owners that Angelos is not very popular, but that no one wants to destroy a good franchise, so they **are being careful**, " Paul said. " There is also a concern that he'll sue them, because he's a very litigious type of person" (COCA: Newspaper. 2001).

190   You know what? People **are being unfair** to the Obama administration. You know, what can a president do? He didn't create the spill (COCA: Spoken. 2010).

191   I take it as a compliment, folks. I -- they **were being nice**. The guy who owns the mule -- it's named after me. It's his number-one mule (COCA: Spoken. 1996).

The third most frequent subject type with noun phrases functioning as subject predicatives in COCA was the 2nd person singular:

192   I don't think you **'re being serious** (COCA: Spoken. 2009).

193   I really don't know why you **'re being sarcastic**, Robert. You're not taking this seriously (COCA: Fiction. 2008).

194   Megan, you know I don't do this on purpose. Why are you acting like this? You **'re being selfish** (COCA: Fiction. 2009)

In the BNC the third most frequent subject type was the 2nd person singular "you" for both the adjectives and the noun phrases functioning as subject predicatives:

195   You **are being stupid** and impertinent, you're beginning to irritate me (BNC: Fiction).

196   If you can call somebody an expert, that means you **'re being rude** to him. erm erm Brian calls us experts at the beginning of the programme erm everyone listening knows we can't all be experts of course on all these things, we're just sort of amateurishly trying to be sensible on these questions (BNC: Spoken).


197   You **'re being a pest** James (BNC: Spoken).

In order to find out what kind of meanings are most frequently expressed with the various subject types, I performed a manual analysis of all the adjectives, adjective phrases and noun phrases I have investigated further consisting of results from all the search strings with and without wildcards. I looked at the subject type in each example I retrieved from COCA and the BNC, and what sort of adjective, adjective phrase or noun phrase functioning as subject predicative it occurred with. I took polarity into consideration, so that sentences with *not* in front of *being* have been counted as the opposite of their initial positive or negative meaning.

Table 27: Subject types occurring in constructions with adjectives and adjective phrases functioning as subject predicatives in COCA and the meanings they are used to express (raw frequencies)

Singular						Plural					
1st person		2nd person		3rd person		1st person		2nd person		3rd person	
Pos.	Neg.	Pos.	Neg.	Pos.	Neg.	Pos.	Neg.	Pos.	Neg.	Pos.	Neg.
171	126	89	108	233	188	36	20	6	3	127	52

Figure 15: Subject types occurring in constructions with adjectives and adjective phrases functioning as subject predicatives in COCA and the meanings they are used to express. See Table 27.
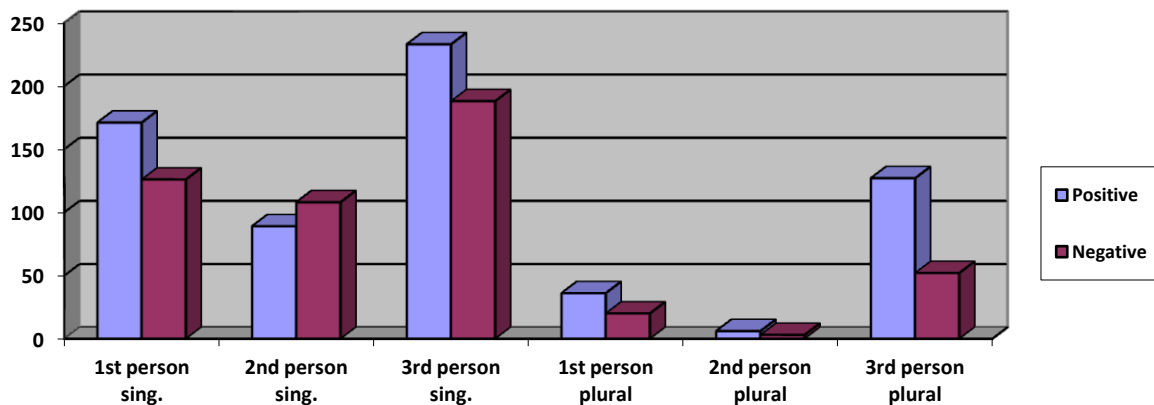

In COCA, all the subject types except for the 2nd person singular are most frequently used to express something positive about oneself or other people's way of behaving. The only subject type most frequently used to express something negative was the 2nd person singular subject "you". This indicates that in American English, the *BE + being* + subject predicative construction is most frequently used to comment on someone's behaviour in a positive way. However, if someone is behaving in a way that is considered to be negative, this construction can also be used to express the speaker's opinion about the behaviour directly towards the person in question. For instance in example 198:

198   "**You 're being ridiculous**. " # " Re-dicky-ulous, " said Dominique, and the women laughed (COCA: Fiction. 2012).

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Table 28: Subject types occurring in constructions with noun phrases functioning as subject predicatives in COCA and the BNC and the meanings they are used to express (raw frequencies)

COCA						BNC					
Singular						Singular					
1st person		2nd person		3rd person		1st person		2nd person		3rd person	
Pos.	Neg.	Pos.	Neg.	Pos.	Neg.	Pos.	Neg.	Pos.	Neg.	Pos.	Neg.
4	13	0	14	24	39	1	3	1	2	4	10

Figure 16: Subject types occurring in constructions with noun phrases functioning as subject predicatives in COCA and the meanings they are used to express (raw frequencies). See Table 28.
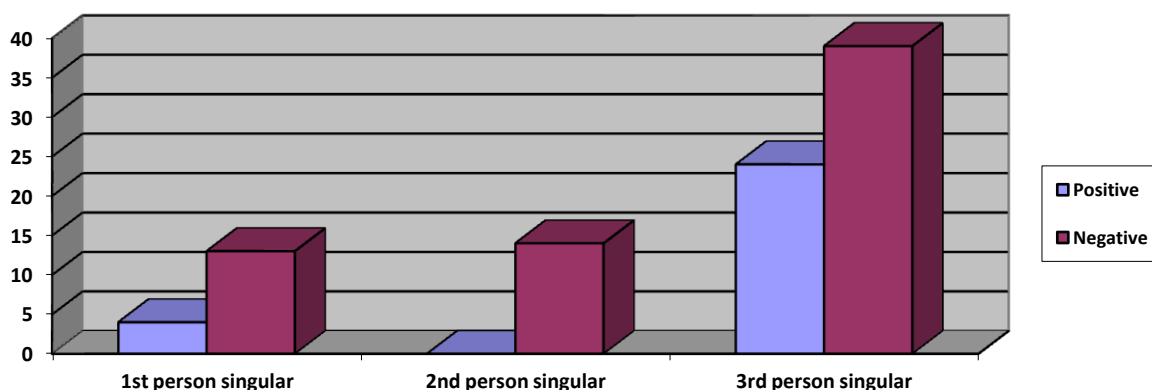
As previously mentioned, COCA did not have any plural subject types in the constructions with the noun phrases functioning as subject predicatives. The singular noun phrases, however, were all most frequently used to express negative meanings. For instance in:

199   He thinks **I 'm being a jerk**, but my wink is sincere (COCA: Fiction. 2003)

200   **You 're being a fool**. Marriage is for women like Jade and Kandace, not you (COCA: Fiction. 2011).

201   " Mom, **Patty 's being a bully** again. " (COCA: Magazine. 1998).

In example 199, the speaker is describing how someone else thinks of him as "a jerk". In example 200, the subject, "you", is being called "a fool" for wanting to get married, while in example 201, the subject "Patty" is being accused of being a bully, and we get the impression from the word *again* that this is not the first time "Patty" behaves like a bully.

Table 29: Subject types occurring in constructions with adjectives and adjective phrases functioning as subject predicatives in the BNC and the meanings they are used to express (raw frequencies)

Singular						Plural					
1st person		2nd person		3rd person		1st person		2nd person		3rd person	
Pos.	Neg.	Pos.	Neg.	Pos.	Neg.	Pos.	Neg.	Pos.	Neg.	Pos.	Neg.
38	44	15	48	61	53	3	2	0	1	16	24

Figure 17: Subject types occurring in constructions with adjectives and adjective phrases functioning as subject predicatives in the BNC and the meanings they are used to express. See Table 29.
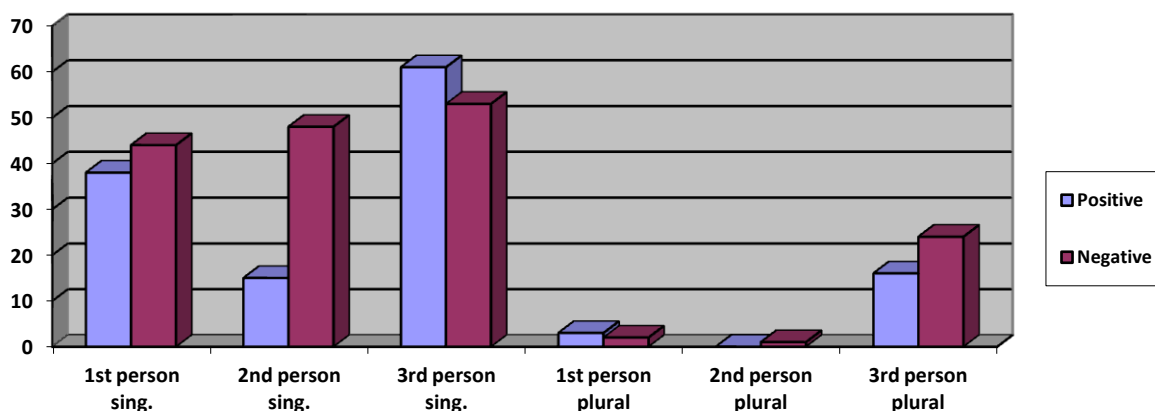

In the BNC, most of the subject types occurring in constructions with adjectives and adjective phrases functioning as subject predicatives were most frequently used to express negative meanings. The exceptions were the 3rd person singular and 1st person plural subject types. These were most frequently used to express positive meanings. Examples:

202   For heaven's sake, Shae, she told herself desperately, **he 's being nice** to you, but don't lose your head over it (BNC: Fiction).

203   It's true, **we 're being honest** (BNC: Spoken).

In example 202, a person named "Shae" is having a dialogue with herself, telling herself not to lose her head because the third person singular subject "he" is being nice to her, while in example 203, a group of people, "we", are reassuring someone else about their honesty.

Figure 18: Subject types occurring in constructions with noun phrases functioning as subject predicatives in the BNC and the meanings they are used to express. See Table 28.
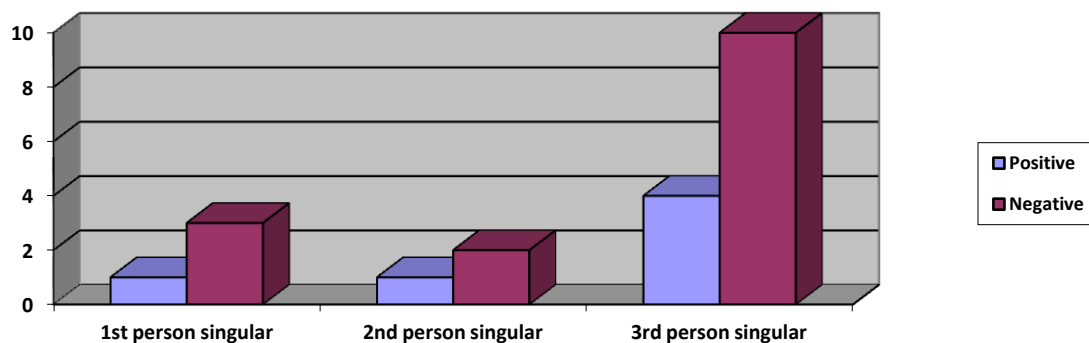
Similar to the noun phrases functioning as subject predicatives in COCA, the noun phrases functioning as subject predicatives in the BNC did not have any plural subject types either. All the singular subject types, however, were used to express negative meanings. Examples:

204   **I 'm being an idiot** (BNC: Fiction).

205   **You 're being a pain**! (BNC: Spoken).

206   **The fellow was being a bore** (BNC: Fiction).

Example 204 shows that this construction can be used to be critical towards oneself as well as it can be used to be critical towards others, as in examples 205 and 206.

5.5 Verb Form in COCA and the BNC

Table 30 shows the distribution of which verb form *BE* appears in with the adjectives and adjective phrases investigated further from COCA. The results are based on all the various search strings I carried out searches with, both with and without wildcards.

Table 30: Forms of *BE* with adjectives and adjective phrases functioning as subject predicative in COCA[10]

Subject predicative	Infinitive progressive	Present progressive	Past progressive
Careful	0	138	51
Honest	0	226	90
Nice	1	98	48
Unfair	0	74	33
Polite	0	43	64
Silly	0	62	37
Rude	0	54	34
Serious	0	56	29
Selfish	0	51	27
Sarcastic	0	23	32
Ridiculous	0	36	13
Sum	**1**	**861**	**458**

The only example of *BE* in the infinitive followed by *being* and a subject predicative found in COCA was with an adjective phrase retrieved with the search string "[vb*] being * nice", and the sentence is as follows:

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[10] Two cases of the present perfect progressive were retrieved, but they were not examples of the construction I am investigating, so I have not included them in this table. The first example was retrieved with the search string "[vb*] being * * rude. The sentence is as follows:

"Some people have been excluded for being rude or mean or egoistic, which only means we talk to them less", Ankana says (COCA: Newspaper. 2001).

Have been excluded is the verb phrase, and as such it is not a suitable example of the *BE* in the progressive with subject predicative construction.

The second example with the present perfect progressive was retrieved with the search string "[vb*] * being * serious", and the sentence is as follows:

"We have always been about being a serious festival", he said, "but one that's not taking itself too seriously where it becomes elitist or snobbish or super-serious" (COCA: Newspaper. 2004).

Have always been is the verb phrase and *being a serious festival* is the subject predicative. As such this example is not a suitable example of the construction I am investigating either.

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207   Well, it doesn't seem like there was much looting and, I mean, people seemed to **be being very nice** to each other (COCA: 2003. Spoken).

Example 207 is not a very common way of expressing the act of behaving nicely, but the meaning is clear enough, even if the sentence is perhaps a bit clumsy. Then again, in spoken language there is not always time to go through every single sentence in one's head before it is said, and sometimes the things we say may come out slightly different from how we would have preferred them to.

The two adjectives functioning as subject predicatives which had a higher frequency of past progressives than present progressives in COCA were the examples with *polite* and *sarcastic*. Based on this, one might assume that describing someone as being polite or sarcastic with this construction is most often done when describing how they have behaved for a period of time in the past, rather than how they are behaving in the present.

In the case with *sarcastic*, there was not much difference in the use of it between present and past progressives. The construction usually just states sarcasm such as in example 208 and 209, or it is questioning sarcasm such as in example 210:

208   But maybe we can relate to each other. Maybe you can understand that when I say, " Everything goes my way, " I **'m being sarcastic**. Not that I'musually dependent on such a primitive form of communication. I'm actually not very cynical at all (COCA: 2009. Fiction).

209   I **was being sarcastic**, Ina (COCA: 2011. Fiction).

210   " I'm tied to a tree. I've been shot with an arrow. But I guess I'm okay. " Hall

twisted in the ropes, trying to see Chang's face. " **Are you being sarcastic**? " " No, sir"

(COCA: 2006. Fiction).

Polite preceded by a past progressive seems to be a fairly reasonable way to state that
someone has behaved politely. Examples:

211   Well, I **was being polite** about it (COCA: 2011. Spoken).

212   She'd made them cultivated, cerebral types after all, and they **were being too polite**

with each other (COCA: 1993. News).

In examples 211 and 212, the past progressive *was/ were being polite* describes the behaviour
of politeness, perhaps a bit defensively in example 211 and a bit accusingly in example 212.
The *too* before *polite* in example 212 indicates that the politeness is not necessarily desired
behaviour from the speaker's point of view. An example of subject predicative *polite* in the
present progressive is also perfectly acceptable:

213   These men, it dawns on Harry, **are being polite** (COCA: 1990. Fiction).

In example 213 with the present progressive, "Harry" seems to have come to some sort of
realization that the men around him are being polite, not necessarily because they want to be,
but because it is the proper way to behave.

214   The two got along so well that Claudia sent Kate one of her necklaces as a gift and
later saw a photo of her wearing it. (Necklace) Ms-BRADBY: And what's really nice is
that if someone says they really love it, you're never quite sure whether they **'re being
polite** or -- but actually it was so nice to see her actually wearing it, which was great
(COCA: 2011. Spoken).

In example 214, *'Re being polite* is used to enforce the feeling of doubt that can be felt when
someone is behaving politely as a response to receiving a gift.

It seems as if though *being polite* combined with the past tense is a way of describing the
behaviour of politeness, for better or worse, for its own sake. When it is used in the present
tense there can sometimes be a bit more emotional colouring, for example of insecurity
behind it, as in the examples 213 and 214 above.

Table 31: Forms of *BE* with adjectives and adjective phrases functioning as subject predicatives in the BNC (raw frequencies)

Subject predicative	Present progressive	Past progressive
Silly	36	13
Unfair	23	10
Honest	18	13
Rude	22	8
Polite[11]	7	21
Careful	18	9
Stupid	19	6
Serious	15	9
Nice	10	14
Ridiculous	10	7
Sarcastic	8	7
Sum	**186**	**117**

The present progressive is the most common verb form found with this construction in both COCA and the BNC. Examples with this construction in the present progressive from the BNC are sentences such as example 215:

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[11] One instance of *BE* in the infinitive progressive was retrieved with the search string "[vb*] being polite":

   *That would **be being polite**, Mr Chairman* (BNC: Spoken).

Being is a part of the subject predicative *being polite*, and as such it is not an example of the construction I have investigated.

215   Certainly you should encourage people to answer questions. (pause) Most people think
        that they **'re being stupid** if they have to ask a question (pause) they think that everyone
        else isn't probably thinking the same thing. Chances are they are (BNC: Spoken).

The examples are typically used to describe a type of behaviour that is taking place at the
present time. Example 215 with *'re being stupid*, describes the feeling of stupidity which can
be felt when someone feels the need to ask a question. For how long the feeling of stupidity
will last is unknown, so it has an end-point that has not yet been reached.

The two adjectives functioning as subject predicatives which were most common in the past
tense from the BNC were *polite* and *nice*.

216   I talked and she talked. She was so interested, she wanted to hear." **She was being
        polite**." (BNC: Fiction).

217   ' How long have you been married?' She knew that **Maggie was being polite**,
        trawling for subjects to pass the time till she could safely move away (BNC: Fiction).

In examples 216 and 217 with *being polite* in the past progressive, the politeness described is
not necessarily a positive thing. Both examples indicate that the subject is being polite and
showing interest because it is the appropriate way to behave, not because the subject actually
takes an interest in the person in question.

218   Even the **teachers were being nice** to him, and he did not understand why (BNC:
        Fiction).

219   **She was being nice** to Pogo only because she didn't want to hurt his feelings (BNC: Fiction).

The examples with *being nice* in the past progressive indicate that the behaviour of niceness can have an ulterior motive. In example 218 we get the feeling that the teachers are being nicer than usual, and that this is not normal behaviour. In example 219, the subject is only being nice to "Pogo" in order to avoid hurting his feelings, not because "Pogo" is someone that the subject would usually behave that nicely towards.

Table 32: Forms of *BE* with noun phrases functioning as subject predicative in COCA and the BNC (raw frequencies)

COCA			BNC		
Subject predicative	**Present progressive**	**Past progressive**	**Subject predicative**	**Present progressive**	**Past progressive**
A jerk	19	9	A woman	3	1
A woman	18	4	A pain	3	0
A fool	6	7	A bore	0	2
An idiot	6	2	A hypocrite	0	2
A pain	8	1	An idiot	2	0
A nuisance	0	3	A pest	1	1
A snob	2	4	A pig	1	1
A bully	4	1	A coward	1	0
A perfectionist	3	0	A gent	0	1
A saint	2	0	A sissie	0	1
A racist	4	0	A slob	1	0
Sum	**72**	**31**	**Sum**	**12**	**9**

Noun phrases functioning as subject predicative only occurred in the present and past progressive. With both adjectives and noun phrases in COCA and the BNC, there is a convincing majority of cases in the present progressive, such as in:

220   Find a way to articulate that that doesn't feel like you **'re being a jerk** (COCA: Spoken. 2011)

221   I **'m probably being a fool** to turn you down (BNC: Fiction).

These results indicate that when using the *BE + being* + subject predicative construction, whether the subject predicative be an adjective, adjective phrase or a noun phrase, it is most frequently used with *BE* in the present tense followed by the progressive aspect in both British English and American English.

Figure 19: Distribution of the verb form *BE* appears in from COCA (raw frequencies). See Tables 30 and 32.
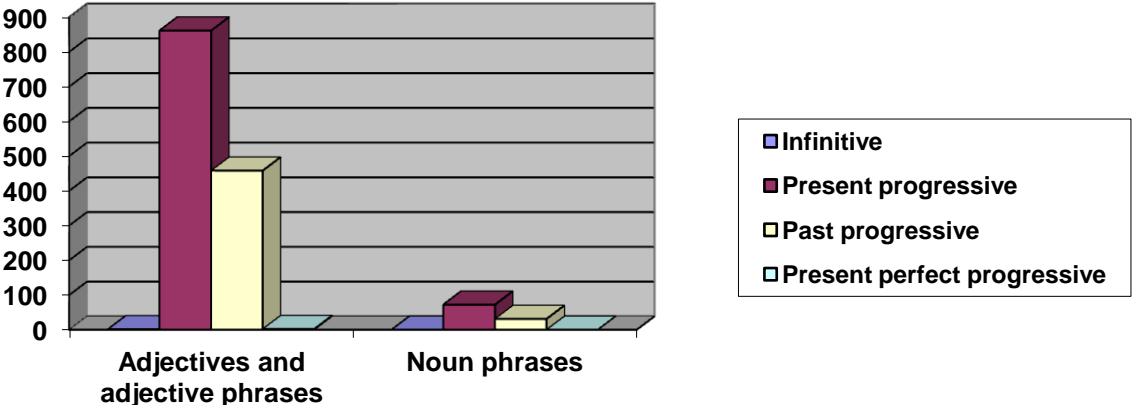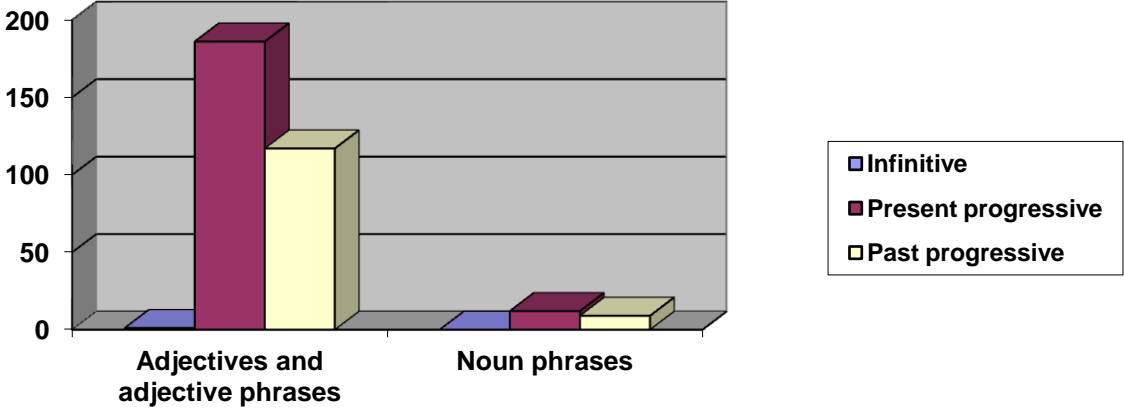
Figure 20: Distribution of the verb form *BE* appears in from the BNC (raw frequencies). See Tables 31 and 32.

6 Conclusion

The meaning of the progressive has extended far beyond its original definition of progressivity as the combination of continuous meaning and nonstativity. There are several exceptions to the rule in the use of the English progressive that prevent a general meaning being able to account for every single use of this form. This is why describing the language in all its basic forms with its exceptions becomes necessary. Grammatical theories are suggested to adapt to the language, but the language does not always adapt to them. When these grammatical theories fall short, it is important to describe the exceptions, and possible reasons for them as well.

The construction I have investigated is an atypical use of the progressive. Scheffer (1975) provides us with two different interpretations of the construction I have investigated to give us a better understanding of how this can be "allowed". The emphasis of the subject predicative can be said to shift from an indefinite state of affairs to a definite activity if one imagines that the subject of the sentence is doing something specific in order to behave in the way described by the subject predicative. It then becomes an action rather than a state. Another way of approaching it is by noting that the predicative adjective or noun always refers to a temporary quality of the subject. The non-progressive would express a state in this case, which is "actualized" in the progressive and becomes an action. The copula becomes a notional verb, meaning: "Act in the way suggested by the predicative adjective or noun". Comrie (1976) suggests that the English progressive may be headed in a direction where its basic meaning is to indicate a contingent situation. This includes progressive meaning itself, the use of the progressive to indicate a temporary state, and its use to indicate a contingent habitual situation.

What I have tried to do in this master's thesis is to describe the use of a grammatical construction in present-day English which has been characterized as a fairly recent phenomenon in the English language by Jespersen (1954), among others. In the progressive, *BE* with an animate subject expresses an activity of the subject, such as a special type of

behaviour. Other uses are also possible, such as playing a role, expressing make-believe and manifesting one's own nature, such as in example 83 (Hirtle and Bégin 1990: 4-5):

> If they are genuine portraits, therefore, they tell us something profoundly odd about the home life of Pantaloon; nothing less than this, that as he was on the stage, so he was off it, clothes, powder, and all; he was not acting a part in the harlequinade, he **was** **merely** **being** **himself** (Barrie 1929, cited in Buyssens 1968: 154).

However, the use of this construction to describe behaviour is by far the most common. As such, any adjective that can characterize a behaviour may be found with *BE* in the progressive.

With regard to the research questions I posted in section 2.6, my findings can be summarised as follows:

1. How common is the *BE+being+* subject predicative construction compared to the total use of the progressive?

The *BE + being +* subject predicative construction is not frequently used in Present-Day English. Compared to the total use of the progressive, this construction only makes up a very tiny fraction. My searches for the progressive as a whole in COCA and the BNC, which include all cases of the progressive except for instances with a 3rd person singular subject, had normalized frequencies of 3152,92 in COCA, and 2573,98 in the BNC (see Table 1). By comparison, the *BE + being +* subject predicative construction had normalized frequencies of 2,88 in COCA and 4,60 in the BNC (see Tables 3 and 6). These figures are for both adjectives and noun phrases functioning as subject predicatives combined. In short, the figures I retrieved for this construction in COCA make up 0,09% of the total amount of the progressives in the corpus. In the BNC, this construction makes up a total of 0,18% of the

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total amount of progressives. This percentage would be even lower if I had been able to retrieve the figures for progressives with 3rd person singular subjects as well.

2. Are there any regional differences between American English and British English?

I discovered a few regional differences between British English and American English in the use of this construction. British English has a higher frequency in the use of this construction than American English, based on numbers from COCA and the BNC. There is also a difference in what kind of meaning this construction is used to express. The first 100 most frequent results from the initial searches indicate that the adjectives that are used as subject predicatives in COCA are mostly used in positive contexts, while the noun phrases are mostly used in negative contexts. The adjectives used as subject predicatives in the BNC are mostly used to express negative meanings, while the noun phrases in the BNC are slightly more frequently used to express positive meanings than negative meanings, but the difference is minimal. Another regional difference I discovered was that the examples I found in the spoken section of the BNC tended to be more colloquial and informal than the examples I found from the spoken section in COCA, although this may not be so much a regional difference as it is a result of the different ways the spoken material in the two corpora was collected.

3. How common are adjectives functioning as subject predicatives compared to noun phrases functioning as subject predicatives in the *BE + being* + subject predicative construction?

The use of adjectives and adjective phrases functioning as subject predicatives is much more common than the use of noun phrases in this construction in both varieties of English. The results from COCA presented in Table 3 show that the adjectives functioning as subject predicatives make up 88 % of the use with this construction while results for the noun phrases presented in Table 6 show that they have a percentage of 12. In the BNC the results from Table 3 show that adjectives functioning as subject predicatives also make up a total of

88 % of the use in the corpus, while results for the noun phrases presented in Table 6 make up 12 %.

4. Is there any difference in usage between the various written text categories and the spoken material?

Common for all the subject predicatives found in both COCA and the BNC is that they are all most frequently found in the Fiction text category. The Spoken text category has the second highest number of examples, and the Magazine text category has the third highest number of examples of adjectives and noun phrases functioning as subject predicatives in Present-day English. The Newspaper text category did not have very many examples, and the Academic text category was the text category with the fewest examples found of this construction. With regard to style, the Spoken text category is similar to the Fiction text category, although genuine spoken material is often slightly more colloquial. The Magazine text category is often slightly more informal than the Newspaper text category, and the style in the Academic text category is very formal.

5. Polarity and intended meaning. Is the construction mostly used in negative or positive contexts?

Here, a pretty clear difference was recorded between COCA and the BNC. As previously mentioned, the first 100 most frequent results from the initial searches indicate that the adjectives that are used as subject predicatives in COCA are mostly used in positive contexts, while the noun phrases are mostly used in negative contexts. The adjectives used as subject predicatives in the BNC are mostly used to express negative meanings, while the noun phrases in the BNC are slightly more frequently used to express positive meanings than negative meanings. I investigated intended meaning and polarity further with the selection of adjectives and noun phrases from COCA and the BNC. Based on these results, the adjectives and adjective phrases I investigated which function as subject predicatives in American

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English are most frequently used to express positive meanings, while in British English they are most frequently used to express negative meanings. The noun phrases I investigated further which function as subject predicatives in Present-day English are most frequently used to express negative meanings in both British English and American English. See further under 7 below.

6. How has this construction developed over time?

My investigations from COCA show that this construction has experienced an increase in usage from 1990 until 2012 in American English. This may be an indication that the use of this construction will continue, and as such perhaps also become more frequent.

7. What are the most frequent subject types used, and what kind of meanings are the various subject types used to express?

Both varieties of English most often use this construction with a 3rd person singular subject. In COCA, all of the subject types except for the 2nd person singular are most frequently used to describe positive ways of behaving. In the BNC, the majority of the subject types occurring in constructions with adjectives functioning as subject predicatives were most frequently used to express negative meanings. The exceptions were the 3rd person singular and 1st person plural subject types. These were most frequently used to express positive meanings. COCA and the BNC did not have any plural subject types occurring in constructions with the noun phrases functioning as subject predicatives. The singular subjects occurring in constructions with noun phrases functioning as subject predicatives, however, were all most frequently used to express negative meanings.

8. Which verb form does *BE* most often appear in?

BE is most frequently found in the present progressive in both COCA and the BNC. The past progressive is also quite common. One example with an infinitive progressive was retrieved from COCA, but other than that I did not find any examples of this construction with *BE* appearing in any other verb form.

There is a general tendency for linguistic change to have advanced further in American English than in British English, at least when it comes to the development of the verb phrase. Other examples of this tendency is the decline of the English present perfect, the use of identical forms for both the preterite and the past participle, and in colloquial usage for once irregular verbs to become regularized (Elsness 2009: 243-244). Studies indicate that American "leadership" is one of the major moving forces on British English (Leech et al. 2009: 253). However, this is not a general rule, and in the case with copular verb *BE* followed by *being* and a subject predicative, British English seems to have the highest frequency in use of this construction, indicating that this construction has advanced further in British English than American English, based on the results from COCA and the BNC.

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