



1999

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Recommended Citation

Mesthrie, Rajend (1999) "Syntactic change in progress: Semi-auxiliary busy in South African English.," *University of Pennsylvania Working Papers in Linguistics*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 2 , Article 6.
Available at: <https://repository.upenn.edu/pwpl/vol6/iss2/6>

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Syntactic change in progress: Semi-auxiliary busy in South African English.

Syntactic Change in Progress: Semi-Auxiliary *busy* in South African English¹

Rajend Mesthrie

"I'm busy going crazy."

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1 Introduction

A prominent lexico-grammatical element in South African English (henceforth SAE) is *busy*, used together with the usual *be* + *-ing* of standard English to mark ongoing activity. Its existence on the borderline of lexis and grammar can be seen from its being just about the only grammatical marker to have an entry in the *Dictionary of South African English on Historical Principles* (DOSAEHP). The entry in the earlier fourth edition of the *Dictionary of South African English* (DOSAE) is as follows (edited slightly for illustrative purposes):

busy adj. substandard. Used redundantly in SAE with an *-ing* form of certain forms to indicate progressive, signifying "engaged in" or equivalent. [translation *besig (om te)* which in Afrikaans verb phrases expresses the 'continuous present' or progressive aspect of a verb].

I rushed in and found the two infants busy having convulsions - as though there were not enough troubles. K. McMagh *Dinner of Herbs* 1968.

There was a sign on the kitchen door saying 'Do not disturb me, am busy praying. *Sunday Times* 28.10.90.²

This phenomenon was first examined in some detail a decade ago by Lass and Wright. Their characterisation (1986:213-4) was as follows:

¹ Earlier versions of this paper were read at the Linguistics Society of Southern Africa Conference (Potchefstroom, July 1998) and N-WAVE (October 1998). My thanks go to the participants for helpful comments and to the following persons for passing on their data to me: P. Silva and L. Pienaar (Dictionary Unit, Rhodes University) & L. Pierce and C. Jeffery (The Corpus of South African English).

² DOSAE has *disturbed* not *disturb*. I have resisted the [*sic*] for this typo, which would distract from the point being made.

In [SAE] (as in Afrikaans) for instance, one may be described as being busy waiting, thinking, wondering, quite appropriately. This suggests that *busy* functions simply as a progressive marker, without the restriction that the lexical verb denoting the activity be overtly busy. The overall sense of the construction in [SAE] is minimally different from what we might term the simple progressive as in *I am relaxing* and *I am working*. The busy construction, if anything, emphasizes that the subject is in the process of, or in the midst of, or occupied with the experience of relaxing or working. It then specifically excludes any suggestion of endpoints.

I have little or no modification to this characterisation, but would like to attempt a more detailed appraisal of the contexts which favour *busy* in the light of further data. The data base of this study is a varied one, comprising the following:

- (a) Material gleaned from current newspapers and (to a lesser extent) radio and television.
- (b) Sentences from the speech of Capetonians in a variety of settings which were diarised with as much social and contextual background information as possible.
- (c) Sentences from the published dictionaries of the Dictionary Unit of Rhodes University (DOSAE and DOSAEHP), as well as unpublished sentences from their corpus, kindly made available to me.
- (d) Letters housed in the Cape Archives, written by first generation British settlers in the eastern Cape to the governor in Cape Town.
- (e) My own detailed corpora pertaining to contemporary spoken Black and Indian English of South Africa.

In addition, I have begun compiling an international comparative corpus on *busy*, based on the Corpus of South African English (originally part of the International Corpus of English - ICE) and on available British and U.S. corpora. Since this work is still in progress, it will not be reported here.

2 A Historical Perspective

Lass and Wright were concerned with making a general point about the relative influences of endogenous developments in language change versus contact phenomena. In particular, they showed that while *busy* was usually assumed to be calqued on the Afrikaans progressive *besig om te* + V ('*busy*

to + V'), the history was somewhat more complicated. Citing examples like Dickens' *She was busy preparing breakfast* (David Copperfield 1897:425), the authors suggest that we are dealing with a development that is a complex interaction of endogeny and exogeny. The structural use of (*busy* + V + *-ing*) is a continuation of an English pattern, with the main (and significant) influence from Afrikaans being a lifting of the restriction of *busy* to collocation with activity verbs.

Lass and Wright did not provide any examples from early South African English in support of their position. It is now possible to confirm via two databases of early South African English that their conclusions are essentially correct. The first corpus (examined by Mesthrie and West 1995) comprises the extensive letters written by first generation British settlers in the eastern Cape to the governor in Cape Town. Although our search was neither complete nor computer-assisted, we feel safe in concluding that *busy* in its present form was rarely used by this group (in fact we failed to find a single attestation in the numerous letters we perused).³ However, we did not feel confident enough to conclude that *busy* was categorically absent in Settler speech. This position seems vindicated by the second corpus of interest to this study: the list of citations in the published version of DOSAEHP as well as the more numerous citations that remained unpublished. The earliest citation in this corpus is from the travels of George Thompson (1827:92):

- (1) When we had outspanned at mid-day, and were busy cooking a mutton chop for dinner, we were startled by the appearance of two lions...

To assist in our description and analysis, we will use 'BUSY' (in small caps and single inverted commas) to denote a semantic reading of the word *busy* that coincides with the Concise Oxford Dictionary's sense of 'occupied, working, engaged, with attention concentrated' and 'NON-BUSY' for a semantic reading that largely excludes these meanings, especially the 'working' and 'attention concentrated' part. Sentence 1 above seems to refer to 'BUSY' activity. Another example from the same text (Thompson 1827: 98) shows an activity that seems ambiguous between 'BUSY' and 'NON-BUSY' activity.

- (2) The part pierced by the arrows he had cut out and thrown away; the rest of the carcase he and his family had carried to their hut, and were busy feasting on it.

³ Because of the age and state of the materials photocopying is not allowed; the corpus was too vast to copy out manually or on computer, given our lack of resources.

The next citations are from the published journal of Rev. Appleyard (1971), a missionary with the Wesleyan Society:

- (3) They had just slaughtered a beast at the great place and were busy preparing for eating. (8 May 1841).

That this denotes 'BUSY' activity can be seen in the subsequent line of the journal:

- (4) The breast, according to custom, was allotted to the chief and his great men, whom we found sitting under the fence of the calf kraal, whilst all his men were busy in the cattle kraal.

Appleyard is thus a traditional user of *busy* with activity verbs; indeed we find a more traditional example (now archaic) in his journal, showing *busy* in a locative sense:

- (5) I have been very busy since the District [meeting] in compiling a Kaffer grammer (sic) according to my own views. (27 June 1842).

The only other nineteenth-century citations we find in the DOSAEHP files are as follows:

- (6) One good thing we have, i.e. a coal fire; Jim is busy roasting his coffee over it. (Roche, *On Trek in the Transvaal*, 1878:321).
- (7) The people are busy considering the question of union with the Transvaal Republic under President Pretorius (*Cape Monthly Magazine*, 21 Jan 1859, p12).

These nineteenth-century examples allow us the following conclusions, which are consonant with Lass and Wright's predictions. *Busy* was part of the early input into SAE (the language of visitors, missionaries and settlers); it mainly denoted 'BUSY' activities; but there was an option in the system for it to be stretched to cover activities that could only in a loose sense be construed as 'BUSY'. By contrast, the illustrations from the twentieth century show an explosion of examples of *busy* with 'NON-BUSY' verbs. Lass and Wright (1986:214-219) attribute the semantics/pragmatics, but not the syntax of the construction to influence from Afrikaans. However, even the concession to the semantic influence of Afrikaans might be premature. It is true that Afrikaans speakers sometimes feel compelled to translate (or

'transfer') the *besig om te* construction when speaking English. However, this frequently results in the non-standard construction (even for South Africa) *busy to V*. Such interlanguage forms sometimes turn up in the competent L2 writing of Afrikaans speakers, as in *A new programme was busy to develop* (= 'A new programme was busy developing/being developed'). An early example of this sort comes from the pen of an Afrikaans speaking bureaucrat working for the newly established British administration in the Cape in 1815. In a document with an otherwise more-or-less standard English grammar, the sentence given as (8) below occurs:

- (8) ...they are very busy to collect a whole body of Kaffers to assist them in their project. (J.F. van de Graaff, letter to Major Fraser, 10 Nov 1815)

However tempting it is to see such a sentence as a forerunner to semi-auxiliary *busy*, there is a need for caution for three reasons: firstly, a sentence like (8) has *busy* as an adjective (qualified by the intensifier *very*), rather than as a semi-auxiliary. Secondly, the verb form is the infinitive, not the participial of L1 SAE. The third reason has to do with comparative dialectology, rather than the structure of the construction. Sentences with semi-auxiliary are increasingly turning up in U.S. English, in genres that are marked as satirical or humorous:

- (9) Pointed threats, they bluff with scorn
 Suicide remarks are torn
 from the fool's gold mouthpiece
 the hollow horn plays wasted words
 proves to warn
 That he not busy being born
 Is busy dying
 (R. Zimmerman, *It's All Right Ma, I'm Only Bleeding*)
- (10) She's busy fighting with my dad now. Can she call you back later?
 (*Dennis the Menace* cartoon, H. Ketcham)
- (11) While you were busy being convinced it turns out we were late for class.
 (*Jughead* Comic, F. Doyle).

Sentence (12) taken from a newspaper in Berkeley is, however, devoid of a stylistically marked context:

- (12) This industrious pumpkin spider set up camp near Chancellor Berhdahl's steps at University House. At this time of year, many of its relatives are busy emerging from pumpkin patches, which is where they got their name. (Berkeleyan, Oct 28-Nov 3, 1998).

In sentence (12), the collocation of *busy* with *emerging* marks a 'NON-BUSY' activity in a rather South African way. This would appear to weaken the case for Afrikaans influence over the SAE construction. In future work I intend to make more detailed comparisons based on corpora from various parts of the English speaking world, in order to ascertain whether we are dealing with a historical continuation or independent developments in the U.S. and South Africa.

3 A Grammatical Analysis

In the rest of this paper I offer a preliminary synchronic analysis of *busy* in SAE, with particular focus on the lexical and grammatical contexts in which it is already in use. This will feed into a brief discussion of its diachronic paths of grammaticalisation. The analysis will cover the range of verb types, semantic features and case roles that feature in the *busy* environment. As far as possible I will limit myself to actually attested examples from a variety of oral and written sources in SAE. But as is customary in modern syntax, it will also be necessary to stretch the analysis further by devising hypothetical test cases. These will be indicated where they occur; the majority of sentences in this paper are actually attested.

3.1 Stative versus Dynamic Verbs

The distinction between stative and dynamic verbs is an obvious candidate to use in refining our understanding of the use of *busy*. We might expect that dynamic verbs (defined as those that take *be* + *-ing* progressives and admit of imperative forms - e.g. *She was eating cake; Eat cake!*) easily collocate with *busy*; while stative verbs (defined as those that don't admit *be* + *-ing* progressives or imperatives - e.g. **She was understanding Greek; *Understand Greek!*) should disallow collocations with *busy*. Whilst this is true as a first approximation, there are some finer details that can be teased out by paying closer attention to sub-types within each broad class and to differences in dialect use within SAE.

A semantic classification of verbs that I find particularly helpful here is that of Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik (1972:93-97). They divide

dynamic verbs into the following classes:

Activity verbs: (*abandon, ask, beg, call, drink, etc.*)

Process verbs: (*change, deteriorate, grow, mature, slow down etc.*)

Verbs of bodily sensation: (*ache, feel, hurt, itch, etc.*)

Transitional event verbs: (*arrive, die, fall, land, leave etc.*)

Momentary verbs: (*hit, jump, kick, knock, nod, etc.*)

The list involves prototypical meanings and uses of the verbs; one of the problems associated with such a classification is that verbs may be used in more than one way; e.g. *change* as a (intransitive) process verb or (transitive) activity verb. By the norms of the definition in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* for formal standard English only activity verbs allow *busy + be + -ing* constructions. This is not true of SAE where four of the categories collocate with *busy* without any problem for most speakers. Thus one may speak of people (or things) *busy drinking* (activity); *busy deteriorating* (process); *busy landing* (transitional); and *busy jumping* (momentary). These will become apparent in the course of our illustrations in the rest of the paper. The one doubtful case concerns verbs of bodily sensation. I have no data to prove or disprove the point, but my first impression is that 'BUSY-NESS' stops here. Sentences like the hypothetical (13)-(15) admit (*be + -ing*), but not - I think - (*busy + be + -ing*), even in SAE. However, in the light of data that might seem even more strange (see e.g. 26 and 29 below), but which are in fact attested in SAE, I will use the syntactician's category of judgement of 'questionable' rather than 'outright unacceptable'.

(13) */? I'm busy feeling sick.

(14) */? My tummy is busy aching.

(15) */? My nose is busy itching.

I propose the following hierarchy for the semantics of verb that collocate with *busy* verbs in SAE:

ACTIVITY > MOMENTARY > TRANSITIONAL EVENT > PROCESS >
BODILY SENSATION.

If verified by a corpus count, this hierarchy would also be a useful heuristic for cross-dialectal comparisons of the semantics of *busy*. Formal, standard British English stops at the first level; SAE goes all the way. It would be a matter of no great surprise to learn of other varieties falling

somewhere in between (including informal varieties of British English).

To come to stative verbs, SAE disallows any collocation of these with *busy*. This applies to both sub-types of stative verbs defined by Quirk et al (1972:96): verbs of perception/cognition (e.g. *understand, love*) and relational verbs (*belong, concern*). This may seem self-evident given that the semantics of *busy* in SAE is that of 'in the process of', whilst stative verbs exclude processes from their denotation. The low position on the hierarchy for verbs of bodily sensation is unsurprising because, although they allow *be* + *-ing*, they are on the semantic borderline between stative and dynamic: *c/f I'm feeling sick* versus *I feel sick*.

There is one variety of English in South Africa that does allow stative verbs to take *be* + *-ing* endings. The following sentences are attested in Black South African English:

(16) I am knowing about it for a long time.

(17) He is having a cold.

(18) I am understanding it now.

I suspect that equivalents with *busy are* ungrammatical even in black South African English.

(19) *I am busy knowing about it for a long time.

(20) *He is busy having a cold.

(21) *I am busy understanding it now.

If this is so, then for the sociolect in question the distinction between stative and non-stative shows up better by collocations with *busy*, rather than *be* + *-ing*.

3.2 Subject Types

In formal, standard British English *busy* takes [+human] subjects only, though one can imagine metaphoric contexts in which this restriction is relaxed, with animals and perhaps modern machines acting in 'BUSY' human ways. In contrast, although [+ HUMAN] in SAE comes at the top of a hierarchy of the semantic features of 'BUSY' subjects, other features like [+ANIMAL], [+MACHINE], [+ (OTHER) INANIMATE] and [+DUMMY SUBJECT] are not excluded in 'ordinary' speech. As this will become

evident in the examples in the ensuing section, I will not illustrate this claim here.

3.3 Semantic Roles

A good way of analysing the diffusion of *busy* in SAE is via a study of the semantic roles played by its subjects. Of course semantic roles are not independent of the notion 'type of verb', as categorised above, though we shall see that they do add to our understanding of *busy*.

3.3.1 AGENT

This is the expected role of NP subjects that take *busy* in international English. Sentences like the following form the vast majority in my corpus, showing AGENT to be the least marked case:

- (22) Two young men were busy kicking in the display windows of a large departmental store when an AA patrolman appeared on the scene. (*Weekend Argus*, 1 April 1978).
- (23) He was busy calling the union boys a hypocritical elite and a lot of other names. (N. Gordimer, *A Guest of Honour*, 1971:316).
- (24) 584 Merino ewes with lambs (or busy lambing) (*Daily Dispatch* 1 December, 1986).

It should be clear that in SAE *busy* shows generalisation from 'BUSY' AGENTS to AGENTS in the process of doing things. It may also occur quite naturally, though less frequently, with other semantic roles.

3.3.2 PATIENT

Busy allows PATIENT subjects in active as well as passive sentences.

- (25) You're busy losing weight! (Small talk with barman by University of Cape Town professor, 1998)
- (26) The woman was very bad indeed, wrecked and racked on the golden vine, sodden beyond sensibility and busy dying. S.A. Botha, *Frontline*, 10 February 1990. (DOSAEHP 1996:129)

The collocation *busy dying*, which has been described as bizarre by an

overseas colleague, is not unique to sentence (26). In late 1993 there was a news broadcast on national television in which a policeman describing a gruesome murder said, in a state of agitation, that by the time he got to the scene the victim *was busy dying* (noted independently by Roger Lass and myself).

The PATIENT role may also occur with passive sentences:

(27) Brand new home, busy being completed, comprising three bedrooms, lounge, diningroom... (*Evening Post* 28 July 1977).

(28) At that time my children were busy being born. (L2 Cape Flats English speaker to R.M.)

(29) The Cohens were busy being divorced in court. (*Best Jewish Jokes* 1968:11)⁴

PATIENTS in ergative constructions also occur, though they are rare:

(30) The plane is busy boarding now. (L2 Black English speaker)

Sentences 31 and 32 are hypothetical ergative sentences that I suggest are acceptable in SAE:

(31) The ball was busy rolling down the hill.

(32) The potatoes are busy cooking.

3.3.3 Other Semantic Roles

It is surprising how many of Fillmore's cases (1968) do not idiomatically co-occur with progressive aspect. Only at a pinch, given a suitable context, would one accept progressive versions of some of Fillmore's famous sentences:

(33) The key was opening the door. (Instrument)

(34) The hammer was breaking the window. (Instrument)

(35) The wind was opening the door. (Force)

⁴ This joke book was published in the U.K., though it is clear that there is a strong South African connection involved. Streets of Johannesburg as well as South African currency (rands) are mentioned without contextualisation.

(36) The snow was ruining the garden. (Force)

How do these roles interact with *busy*? I do not have any examples of INSTRUMENT in my corpus; but presumably a context that allows any of (33) and (34) would allow an SAE colloquial equivalent with *busy*. One example with FORCE occurs in the DOSAEHP collection:

(37) It is busy snowing here at the moment (postcard from South African visitor in London).

Presumably, it is not just dummy FORCE subjects that behave this way; the hypothetical example (38) below seems possible in SAE:

(38) The rain is busy falling on the hilltops.

More generally, hypothetical sentence (39) with a 'FORCE' subject seems possible in SAE, given an appropriate context:

(39) The wind was busy opening and shutting the door.

Like FORCE and INSTRUMENT, the EXPERIENCER role (associated with cognitive or psychological verbs) does not appear to favour progressive *be + -ing* in standard English.

(40) John heard an explosion.

(41) *John was hearing an explosion

(42) Jill was angry.

(43) Jill was being angry (grammatical as AGENT putting on an act, not as EXPERIENCER).

No attestations of *busy* with EXPERIENCER roles occurs in my corpus. People are said to be *busy* listening to the news (AGENT), but not, to my knowledge, to be **busy hearing the news* (EXPERIENCER).

Sentence (44) shows the ESSIVE role in SAE (associated with being and becoming).

(44) He slows down only while the robot is *busy* turning red.

I paraphrase the sentence to mean the robot (= 'traffic light') was in the

process of becoming red. A hierarchy for case roles that favour *busy* can be tentatively posited:

AGENT > PATIENT > FORCE (dummy subjects) > INSTRUMENT >
ESSSIVE

4 Further Grammaticalisation in SAE

We might say that *busy* in SAE is busy being grammaticalised. In the history of English it was originally used as an adjective followed by the preposition *in* plus a verbal noun in *-ing*. The preposition was dropped, and the resulting construction reinterpreted as *busy* (adj.) plus verb + participle. Thus Jane Austen could write (45), where 'busy' is used ironically. Nevertheless the status of *busy* is that of adjective, as evidenced by the intensifier *very*.

(45) Our whole Neighbourhood is at present very busy grieving over poor Mrs Martin, who has totally failed in her business, and had very lately an execution in her house. (Letter from Jane austen to Cassandra, 25 October 1800, cited by Lass and Wright 1986:217)

In SAE *busy* it is being bleached of the 'BUSY' meaning and turned into an auxiliary verb denoting ongoing activity plus verb + participle. This is evident in its prosody; it is unstressed, and disallows the pause that is characteristic of a phrase like *busy, working in the garden* in older standard British English. Furthermore one cannot say idiomatically the hypothetical sentence 40 in SAE:

(46) *It's very busy snowing here at the moment.

As a grammatical morpheme indicating progressive activity rather than a content morpheme indicating necessarily 'BUSY' activity, it collocates with almost any subject that allows ordinary progressive aspect. In the mid- to late 1990s several interesting sentences are turning up showing further degrees of grammaticalisation, and an almost complete bleaching of *busy* in its semi-auxiliary contexts. This is evident in sentences (47)-(50):

(47) RM: I think he's quite young?

S.B. Yes, I think he's still busy studying. (= 'Yes, I think he's still a student')

- (48) I am currently busy compiling the Arts Orientation Guide (University of Cape Town, Arts Students' Council letter, 1996).
- (49) Our flight attendant is busy getting permission for take off at the moment. (South African Airways steward, 1998).
- (50) I'm busy becoming acquainted with my data (Graduate student to R.M. 1998)

The use of adverbials (*still, currently, at the moment*) in (47)-(49) and the collocation of busy with the process verb *becoming* in (50) suggest that not only has *busy* been completely bleached of its 'BUSY' semantics, but that speakers feel the need to supply adverbial material stressing the present progressive nature of their utterance. A further degree of grammaticalisation is suggested by the exchange in (51):

- (51) R.M.: Is it [= a piece of electrical cord] frayed?
S.: Yah, it's busy.

What S. intended (as a repetition of my question showed) was 'Yes, it's busy being frayed'. This participation in an elliptical construction with be, shows that to a large extent, *busy + be + -ing* is equivalent to *be + -ing*.

5 Conclusion

There are many loose ends which still need to be tied up in this preliminary study. A broader data base involving international corpora is being constructed. Closer attention also needs to be paid to social and stylistic factors: sub-groupings like L1 or L2 speakers; hyper-casual or relatively neutral style, written or oral speech etc.

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