Situation aspect combined with grammatical aspect: some examples, and a few questions.

'It is generally accepted [...] that any discussion of aspect from a semantic point of view must also take account of what we are referring to as the character of particular verbs.' (Lyons 1977: 706)

Abstract: This paper, aimed at Agrégation students, is a presentation of what can happen in English when situation aspect is combined with grammatical aspect. A few known examples are analysed, and some questions are brought to the reader’s attention. The main focus is on BE + V-ING, although some remarks on HAVE + V-EN and the combination of HAVE + V-EN and BE + V-ING have been included. The chapter is organised around three main poles which can be dealt with separately as more elements are combined: 1) situation aspect and its characteristics/definition(s), 2) the combination of situation aspect (as discussed) and grammatical aspect, and 3) the analysis of a few contextualised examples, in which the elements discussed before are applied and the role of ‘context’ is taken into account.

The aim of these few pages is to examine the interaction between situation, or ‘lexical’, aspect, and grammatical aspect: we will go over some definitions, discuss some of the issues raised and pore over a few examples. The ‘nature’ of the verb, or of the situation depicted, has an influence on the compatibility with other forms and/ or the interpretation of the combination of a given verb, or verb phrase, and grammatical aspect: what type of influence, how, and when? To what extent can a list of cases be drawn, and what are they? What are the recurrent patterns, or to what extent are they truly recurrent, and why? To answer some of these questions, we will first briefly recall the opposition that is traditionally made between ‘situation’ (and/or ‘lexical’ aspect, Aktionsart) and ‘grammatical’ aspect. We will then review some typologies of situations, more specifically that of Vendler, which is probably the most cited and used. The interaction of situation with grammatical aspect will then be dealt with, focusing more specifically on BE + V-ING, although some elements about HAVE V-EN and the combination between BE + V-ING and HAVE + V-EN will be included. A few examples will then be analysed in context. The purpose of the paper (written for Agrégation students¹) is to provide the reader with an overview of certain of the issues at stake, focusing on some of the most central and recurrent ones, and to draw attention to some questions that can be raised.

1. ‘Situation’ aspect vs. grammatical aspect.

A general opposition can be made, first, between ‘situation’ aspect (or ‘lexical’ aspect, Aktionsart) and ‘grammatical’ aspect.

¹ Agrégation students have to be aware of the central issues (including certain recent ones) raised in the literature, to be able to ask informed questions and analyse examples in relation to what they know: this is therefore what the attention will be directed to in this paper.
Situation aspect, generally speaking, has to do with the type of situation that is described: is it a state? An event? Does it last? Does it have a natural end?

What is at stake is the ‘inherent aspectual (i.e. semantic aspectual) properties of various classes of lexical items’ (Comrie 1976: 41).

whereas

Grammatical aspect is normally used to refer to grammatical forms whose function is to mark aspect: in English, traditionally HAVE + V-EN and BE + V-ING.

Situation aspect, therefore, may not necessarily be limited in number nor (explicitly) marked in language, while grammatical aspect corresponds more closely to aspectual distinctions that are ‘grammaticalized in language’ (Lyons 1977: 705).

Nonetheless, as will be seen, the two dimensions come to be closely intertwined, so that the question of what aspectual distinctions are truly relevant in language is one that can, and probably even must, be raised.

It can be recalled briefly that aspect itself has to do with ‘different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation’ (Comrie 1976: 3). This is a general, and usual, definition; as phrased by Comrie, it is based (cf. Comrie 1976: 3, note 1) on Holt’s formulation: ‘les manières diverses de concevoir l’écoulement du procès même’ (Holt 1943: 6), although Comrie avoids the term ‘procès/process’ since states are also involved. The internal temporal constituency of a situation includes whether it is ongoing, whether it has stopped/ reached an end/ is seen as a complete(d) event, or is only just starting (for instance). Perfectivity and imperfectivity are traditional labels that are used in the grammar of languages (Russian, in particular) to refer to certain aspectual distinctions; the terms may also be used to refer to more general concepts as well, with difficulties as to how they can be defined and truly applied to given individual languages. ‘Perfective’ in Russian might not correspond to what could be thought to be ‘perfective’ in another language, English for example, and ‘perfective’ is not the same thing as ‘perfect’ 3. Lyons (1977) makes several lists of types of meaning associated to aspect, and mentions in particular: duration, completion, habituality, iteration, momentariness, inception and termination (p. 707).

The distinctions between tense, aspect and mood (‘TAM’) correspond to well-known oppositions, but may also turn out to be complex. On paper, there is a neat distinction between tense, which both Comrie (1976) and Lyons (1977) note is ‘deictic’: tense has to do with the location of the action in relation to the moment of utterance (or a shifted zero point, for relative tense). Aspect, as was recalled before, deals with the internal temporal constituency of an event, and mood is the term that is normally used to refer to forms that express the (evaluative) point of view of the speaker on the situation described. Nevertheless certain verb forms, in certain languages, may combine tense and aspect: the French indicative imperfect (‘imparfait de l’indicatif’) is a known example. BE + V-ING is often recognized to have ‘modal’ uses in English, and there can be discussions about whether a given form and/ or use (neatly) falls under one of the categories, or straddles several: it is therefore

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2 See discussion below.
3 i.e., what is called ‘perfect’ does not necessarily correspond to what is elsewhere called ‘perfective’, i.e. ‘viewed as a complete event/situation’, in certain languages and/ or language descriptions.
4 Cf. ‘It has often been pointed out that the English perfect has certain uses which make it more like a tense than an aspect, and there is something to be said for this view.’ (Lyons 1977: 715), or: «Traditionally, in works that make a
not unusual to speak in terms of ‘TAM’ forms of a given language when referring to the different conjugation forms when no detailed analysis of what falls under what category is at stake, or when the porosity of the classes to which such or such a marker is under scrutiny.

2. Situation aspect, lexical aspect, Aktionsart, ‘aspectual character’, ‘inherent meaning’…

‘Situation aspect’

The term ‘situation’ is used in Comrie’s definition of aspect cited before (‘different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation’, our italics) so as to avoid the term ‘process’ which only includes certain cases and is therefore is too narrow: states must also be taken into account. ‘Situation’ therefore can be a term that encompasses all types of cases, be they processes or states, or even types of processes. The term should not be too narrow, since various types may be involved.

‘Situation’ may, nevertheless, tend to refer to the extralinguistic ‘event’ that is being described, and therefore not be truly (intra)linguistic (the same is said of ‘Aktionsart’ by Lyons, p. 706). Comrie opposes ‘predication’ and ‘situation’ (Comrie 1976: 47, note 1), but it can be slightly unclear whether ‘situation’ refers to the linguistic message delivered or the situation of reference (the denotatum of the sentence). This may not necessarily have a direct impact on the typology itself, but has, at least, theoretical implications.

‘Lexical aspect’

‘Situation aspect’ has also been called ‘lexical aspect’. But speaking in terms of ‘lexical aspect’ tends to lay emphasis on the role of the individual word, or lexeme: normally, lexical aspect is the type of aspect that is, or at least is supposed to be, ‘intrinsically’ attached to a given verb. Hence: kick is a punctual verb, be refers to a state and run to a normally durative process. Lexical aspect is normally found in the word, therefore the focus may seem to be more on the linguistic form than on the circumstances, but reference may in fact (also) be made to what the verb refers to, as was partly done in the preceding sentence – so the difference with ‘situation’ aspect in this regard may not be entirely straightforward. A more basic, known difficulty with the term ‘lexical aspect’ is that it seems to assume that aspect is attached to the use of one word, the verb, when, in fact, aspect may be construed at the level of the verb phrase (modifiers, complements), or even the whole sentence (quantification, specificity/genericity of reference), or, perhaps, even beyond the sentence:

When we are talking about the aspectual character of verbs, we must be careful to make it clear that the term ‘verb’ in this context denotes expression classes and not merely lexeme-classes.

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5 “‘Aktionsart’ is in itself a very unsatisfactory term, in that […] it is more naturally applied to the denotata of verbs, rather than to some semantic property of the verbs themselves’ (Lyons 1976: 706). See quotation below on ‘aspectual character’.

6 ‘Strictly, these verbs involve predications, rather than situations, which are telic, since the addition of an indefinitely plural subject, for instance, means that the whole situation is not telic, as in some children eat their food up’ (italics added).

7 ‘Refers to’ can be opposed to ‘is a X verb’.

8 See for instance Examples 1-2, Section 6.
As is well known, *read* is a durative process that has no natural ending, but *read a book*, because of the presence of *a book*, which in itself has a beginning and an end, has a natural ending. *Be a triangle*, in *A triangle is a polygon with three sides* is a state, but is also potentially a permanent/atemporal… state; *be 15* in *He’ll be 15 tomorrow* is a state, but not a ‘permanent’ one. Lexical aspect therefore draws attention to the word, when it may not just be a question of individual words, but rather of ‘expressions’.

**Aktionsart**

A traditional term that is used to refer to internal meaning of verbs or verb phrases/predications is ‘*Aktionsart*’ (types of action, in German). The term is regularly used, but also, because it has had broad as well as narrower uses, sometimes avoided. Comrie (1976) thus makes little use of the word and justifies it by saying that the term has sometimes been used as a generic cover term for ‘situation/lexical aspect’, but that it has also been used more specifically to refer to lexical aspect when it is marked by certain affixes, so that, to refer to types of situations, another term should probably be preferred:

In addition to the term ‘aspect’, some linguists also make use of the term ‘aktionsart’ (plural: aktionsarten): this is a German word meaning ‘kinds of action’, and although there have been numerous attempts to coin an English equivalent, none of these has become generally accepted. The distinction between aspect and aktionsart is drawn in at least the following two quite different ways. The first distinction is between aspect as grammaticalisation of the relevant semantic distinctions, while aktionsart represents lexicalisation of the distinctions, irrespective of how these distinctions are lexicalised; this use of aktionsart is similar to the notion of inherent meaning […]. The second distinction, which is that used by most Slavists, and often by scholars in Slavonic countries writing on other languages, is between aspect as grammaticalisation of the semantic distinction, and aktionsart as lexicalisation of the distinction provided that the lexicalisation is by means of derivational morphology […]. This restriction of the use of the term ‘aktionsart’ in Slavonic linguistics was introduced by Agrell (1908); a comprehensive account of the aktionsarten of Russian, in this sense, is given by Isačenko (1962: 385-418); for Bulgarian, see Ivanova (1974). In view of the confusion that can be caused by these two rather different senses of aktionsart, this term will not be used in the present book.

(Comrie 1976: 6-7)

**Other terms, e.g. ‘aspectual character’ (Lyons 1977), ‘inherent meaning’ (Comrie 1976)…**

Other terms may be used to refer to the type of event/situation that a verb or a verb phrase ‘encodes’. Another one is ‘aspectual character’, which can be found in the following quotation:

A distinction is sometimes drawn between aspect and Aktionsart. The specialized employment of the German term ‘Aktionsart’ (which, in origin, meant nothing more than ‘kind of action’) rests upon one or other of two more general distinctions: (i) the distinction between grammaticalisation and lexicalisation, and (ii) the distinction, within morphology, between inflection and derivation. The fact that neither of these two distinctions is itself relevant, coupled with the further fact that, insofar as they are partially, but not wholly, coincident, some scholars operate with the one and some scholars with the other, has been responsible for a good deal of confusion in the use of the term ‘Aktionsart’ (cf. Comrie 1976: 6). Partly for this reason and partly because ‘Aktionsart’ is in itself a very unsatisfactory term, in that (a) it is more naturally applied to the denotata of verbs, rather than to some semantic property of the verbs themselves, and (b) the terms ‘action’ (traditional though it is in this sense) is too narrow, we will make no further use of the term ‘Aktionsart’. We will introduce instead the term ‘aspectual character’.
Comrie himself uses the term ‘inherent meaning’ as the title of the section devoted to some of these questions (Comrie 1976, ch. 2). Other labels may be used (e.g. ‘actionality’, or ‘Aspect1’, Desclés and Guentcheva 20129, among other possible examples). The same questions, none the less, tend to be asked, and account for these distinctions:

- Is the type of ‘situation’ attached to the verb, the verb phrase, a level that is larger than the verb phrase?
- Should it be ascribed to the linguistic form itself, or to the situation/ ‘event’ it refers to?
- (and, as well, potentially) How is it constructed: via complementation, derivational morphology, compounding…?

3. The ontological classification of situations (some questions)

Irrespective of the term used (we will use ‘situation aspect’ here to have one consistent term, as it is probably one of the broadest labels), the question is that of the ontological subclassification of situations and the impact it has on linguistic formulations10. Obviously, a number of issues are raised: we will focus here on recurrent patterns and known cases, but will also draw attention to some questions.

There is often no one-to-one correspondence between the use of a given verb and the fact that it denotes such and such a ‘type of situation’. The reasons for this are manifold, one of it being the plasticity of meaning: most verbs, if not all, are polysemous, or at least have several uses. The meaning may also be modified in relation to the construction the verb falls in (reach in reach the summit is different from reach for in I reached for my purse), what accompanies the verb (a prefix, a particle) and the complementation, as well as the whole of the predication at stake: I read a book is bounded in time, but They read books all the time is not.

Speaking about an event is, also, not necessarily ‘copying’ the characteristics of an external event (if there is, even, a possibility of doing that): thinking about events is representing the events, and speaking about them is organizing a construed version of reality in a way that is congruent with the language, and vice versa. Language has categories: these may correspond to certain categories of thought, and (but) the formulation itself may be constrained by what forms the language licences. Lyons (1977: 710) mentions the example of the reign of a monarch, which can be considered a long period of time in which the speaker is located, or, from a more general, historical point of view, a dot on a chronological line:

Looked at from one point of view, a thirty-year reign is just as much an event as is a sudden explosion or a flash of lightning. It all depends on whether the person who refers to the situation in question is concerned to treat it in one way rather than the other.

He links it to the possibility of what he calls ‘stylistic’ variation in language:

10 A discussion of ontological categories of situations is in itself a (fascinating) philosophical endeavour; it will be restrained here to certain cases, primarily those that will allow us to raise a few questions and/ or that may have an impact on the way people speak about situations.
It [...] accounts for certain stylistic nuances associated with the use of one aspect rather than another in particular languages.

This may nevertheless not simply be ‘stylistic’, if stylistic here is taken to be peripheral, ‘marked’, linked to certain registers, but, rather, be a central characteristic of language. Yet the fact that there is variation does not mean that there are no recurrent cases:

The fact that there is an element of subjectivity invoked in subclassification of situations as events, states and processes does not invalidate the temporal distinctions upon which this subclassification is based. If a situation is represented in one way rather than another, then it becomes subject to the logic of temporal relations which determines the acceptability of certain combinations and the inacceptability of others (cf. Miller & Johnson-Laird 197611; 442ff).

(Lyons 1977: 710)

The role of context (i.e. context, as in the broader environment of what is being said, as well as ‘co-text’, what accompanies the form linguistically) has to be taken into account: Comrie notes that, in a classroom environment for instance, read may not just be a general activity but correspond to a reading session, so a moment of reading, so that John has read may come to mean ‘he has completed his turn’. This would not be the case if reading was to be thought of as a recreational activity while someone is on holidays, for instance (no ‘turns’ are normally involved then). Comrie notes that Dowty (1972) commented that he was not able to find any unbounded activity verb that was never bounded in a given environment.

There are, nevertheless, types of situations, some of which being currently recognised, even if, as will be seen, there also are discussions of what modifications that should be brought to them and what parameters should be taken into account (i.e., as having an impact on language use, in general, or in an individual language). The most commonly cited typology of situations is probably that of Vendler (1967).

4. Types of situations.

4.1. (Sub-)types of situations. Vendler.

The main idea behind the reflection on such classifications is that there are categories of situations, and that a given verb/phrase will typically fall under one of them:

The aspectual character of a verb, or more simply its character, will be that part of its meaning whereby it (normally) denotes one kind of situation rather than another. For example, know differs from recognize in English, or kennen differs from erkennen in German or znatj from uznatj in Russian, by virtue of its aspectual character. Know (like kennen and znatj) normally denotes a state, whereas recognize (like erkennen and uznatj) normally denotes an event.

(Lyons 1977: 706)

In his well-known typology, Vendler opposes four types of cases:

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STATE</th>
<th>No beginning, no end; supposed(^\text{12}) to be homogeneous (= the same in every 'point')</th>
<th>e.g. know, love, desire, dominate…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACTIVITY</td>
<td>An event that takes time (duration), but has no natural endpoint(^\text{13})</td>
<td>e.g. run, walk, push (a cart along), observe…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACCOMPLISHMENT</td>
<td>An event that takes time (duration), and has a natural endpoint</td>
<td>e.g. build (a house), cross (the road), persuade…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACHIEVEMENT</td>
<td>A punctual (?)(^\text{14}) event, no duration</td>
<td>e.g. recognize, die, find, win (the race), reach (the summit), knock (once, on the door)…</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Vendler’s typology.

The verbs are cited as base forms and not included in any verb phrase and/ or sentence yet, although it should be noted that some elements of context have already had to be added (cf. indications on transitivity), for clarification. It could be possible to represent the distinction graphically thus, with the line representing the passing of time, closed square brackets indicating boundedness and open ones that a boundary can be reached, but has not necessarily been reached (and/ or\(^\text{15}\) may not correspond to a ‘natural’ boundary):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STATE</th>
<th>No beginning, no end; homogeneous (= the same in every 'point')</th>
<th>-------------------------------</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACTIVITY</td>
<td>An event that takes time (duration), but has no natural endpoint: this event has a starting point, and can stop, but has no natural endpoint</td>
<td>------[-----------------------------(I)------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACCOMPLISHMENT</td>
<td>An event that takes time (duration), and has a natural endpoint (and, necessarily, a beginning)</td>
<td>------[-----------------------------(I)------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACHIEVEMENT</td>
<td>A punctual (?) event, no duration The beginning is synchronous with the end, no internal duration</td>
<td>-------------------------------[-------------------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Vendler’s typology (with a visual representation of the different cases).

4.2. Telic/atelic

\(^{12}\) See below.

\(^{13}\) Again, see below.

\(^{14}\) See below.

\(^{15}\) See below (again). These distinctions are gradually explained and/ or discussed in the course of the paper.
Another central dimension of situation types is that of telicity. Although the term may, in fact, also be complicated to define (and put into use) if the particulars of its applicability are examined, the basic definition is linked to the presence of a natural endpoint or not:

- A telic event\(^{16}\) has a natural endpoint;
- An atelic event (and/or situation) does not have one.

Accomplishments are normally telic by definition: if you persuade someone, at the end of the persuading event they have to have been persuaded, or else, it is impossible to say ‘I persuaded them’. Some punctual events can perhaps be telic, too: at least, they seem to suppose that an inherent endpoint has been reached – such is the case of die, recognize, find, reach. But others are clearly not, or at least less clearly so: although it is punctual, knock does not really seem to suppose that any ‘natural endpoint’ has been reached\(^{17}\). Another important dimension, again, is that verb complementation, and/or context, can affect the telicity of a verb: read is an activity in She was sitting outside, reading, but read a (the, this\(^{18}\)) book is an accomplishment, She has read this book being telic. Certain particles have been analysed to ‘transform’ an atelic verb into a telic one; the opposition between drink, as in He’s drinking milk, and drink up, as in Drink your milk up, have been described in terms of telicity vs atelicity. Comrie defines the telic/atelic opposition thus:

We may [...] contrast [...] some of the semantic aspectual properties of the situations described by the two sentences John is singing and John is making a chair. Both refer to durative situations, since both singing and making a chair are situations that can, indeed must, be conceived of as lasting a certain amount of time; moreover, it is possible for both of these situations to last for a short or for a long time, depending, for instance, on John's stamina when it comes to singing, and the speed with which he makes chairs. However, there is an important difference between these two types of situations with regard to their internal structure. In the second example, there comes eventually a point at which John completes the action of making a chair, the chair is ready, and at this point the situation described by make a chair must of necessity come to an end; moreover, until this point is reached, the situation described by make a chair cannot come to an end, but can only be broken off part way through. This is not true of the situation described by John is singing: John can stop singing at any point, and it will still be true that he has sung, even if he has not completed the song or songs he set out to sing. Thus the situation described by ‘make a chair’ has built into it a terminal point, namely that point at which the chair is complete, when it automatically terminates; the situation described by sing has no such terminal point, and can be protracted indefinitely or broken off at any point. Situations like that described by make a chair are called telic, those like that described by sing atelic.

(Comrie 1976 : 44)

The question of what a ‘natural endpoint’ constitutes may be quickly clarified here: run is normally atelic, because it is possible (on paper) to go on running ‘forever’. Now in reality, of course, there will probably be a moment when the running has to stop; human bodies are not made for incessant running. The difference is that there is no moment when someone can say they have ‘finished’ running: an activity can be stopped, at any moment, but there is no one moment when one can say that the runner has exhausted their running capacity once and for all. Again, running a mile, or running a marathon, is different: when the end of the mile has been reached or when a distance of 26.219 miles has been covered, then the given run is over. The same can be said of eat (as a general activity) and eat an apple: when the apple has been eaten, there is no apple left to be eaten, and so the situation has reached its ‘natural end’.

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\(^{16}\) Telicity affects events by default, not states, hence the choice of ‘events’ here, and not ‘situations’.

\(^{17}\) The possibility of recognizing certain complementary cases, and/or (sub-)categories, is mentioned later.

\(^{18}\) A* also has generic uses: in these examples, the interpretation of ‘a’ tends to be specific.
There are traditional ways of testing a verb/verb phrase/proposition for telicity. Here are two of them:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tests for telicity</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>In X/for X (e.g. in ten years/for ten years)</em></td>
<td>He sang (has sung) for an hour/ <em>in an hour</em> (atelic)</td>
<td>Compatibility with in X vs for X is an indicator of telicity: if a time adverbial of the in + (GN/ indication of duration) can be used, the situation is telic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>He (has) built a house <em>/for three months/</em> in three months (telic)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Finish vs stop**

|  | He stopped singing/ /stopped finishing singing (atelic) | With stop, the end occurs at a random point, after which it could have gone on; there is no inherent endpoint. For *He finished singing, finish* is only acceptable if there is a known period of time in which he was supposed to sing, therefore, if it is telic in the situation. |
|  | *He finished singing the song* is OK | Another example could be: |
|  | *He stopped building the house* | *He stopped building the house* |
|  | *He finished building the house* | The natural endpoint has been reached. *Build the house* is telic. |

|  |  |
|  |  |

**Table 3. Two tests for telicity** (apart from compatibility with grammatical aspect, seen in Section 5).

4.3. **Other cases?**

Other categories may be used, some of which are more comprehensive than the four categories that have just been presented, some more precise. Here are a few other possibilities:

**4.3.1. Possible other typologies**

Comrie and Lyons partly use the three-way opposition between state, process and event, but (in 1976 and 1977) defined them slightly differently, for instance:

**States** are static, i.e. continue as before unless changed, whereas **events** and **processes** are dynamic, i.e. require a continual input of energy if they are not to come to an end. **Events** are dynamic situations viewed as a complete whole (perfectively), whereas **processes** are dynamic situations viewed in progress, from within (imperfectively)

(Comrie 1976: 13; our bold characters & italics)

while Lyons (1977: 703-718, § 15.6) defines them thus:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EVENTS</th>
<th>PROCESSES</th>
<th>STATES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-extended dynamic situations that occur, momentarily, in time.</td>
<td>Extended dynamic situations that last, or endure, through time.</td>
<td>Last, or endure, in time (cf. processes), but they are homogeneous throughout the period of their existence.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 4a. Main types of situations in Lyons (1977)**
Lyons made a further distinction between acts and activities, using agentivity as a criterion:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACTS</th>
<th>ACTIVITIES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agent-controlled events</td>
<td>Agent-controlled processes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 4b. Main types of situations in Lyons (1977), completed.**

(Lyon’s typology was therefore based on three criteria:

- homogeneity – states vs events and processes;
- durativity vs momentariness – events vs processes and states, and
- agent control – acts and activities vs the rest.

In the classification proposed in Huddleston and Pullum (p. 118), Vendler’s categories can be recognized, but the organization of the categories in relation to others is slightly modified:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STATES (static)</th>
<th>OCCURRENCES (dynamic)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PROCESSES (durative)</td>
<td>ACHIEVEMENTS (punctual)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACTIVITIES (atelic)</td>
<td>ACCOMPLISHMENTS (telic)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 5. Types of situations in Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 118)**

They also recognize further cases, some of which will be mentioned in the paragraphs below. The classification proposed in Quirk et al (2010: 200) is (apparently?) much more detailed, although the main cases can be found again once it is noticed that a number of subcategories are introduced because the [+/- agentive] feature is almost systematically factored in:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STATIVE</th>
<th>QUALITY</th>
<th>QUALITY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>STATE</td>
<td>( \text{be tall, have two legs, be a mammal} )</td>
<td>( \text{be angry, be ill, love (t), resemble (t), think (that), own (t)} )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STANCE</td>
<td>( \text{live, stand, lie, sit} )</td>
<td>( \text{} )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DYNAMIC</td>
<td>DURATIVE</td>
<td>DURATIVE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GOINGS-ON</td>
<td>( \text{rain, snow, boil, shine, glow...} )</td>
<td>( \text{drink, sew, write, hunt, play(t), talk...} )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACTIVITIES</td>
<td>( \text{} )</td>
<td>( \text{} )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSIVE</td>
<td>( \text{ripen, grow up, improve, separate, turn red} )</td>
<td>( \text{write (t), eat (t), drink (t), fill up (t), discover (t)} )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOMENTARY</td>
<td>( \text{sneeze, explode, blink, flash, bounce} )</td>
<td>( \text{} )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NON-CONCLUSIVE</td>
<td>( \text{} )</td>
<td>( \text{} )</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{19}\) Also see Huddleston and Pullum.

\(^{20}\) \(t\) means ‘transitive’.
The ‘conclusiveness’ criterion corresponds to telicity; the distinction of several types of punctual situations, or states, is also found in other approaches.

4.3.2. What’s ‘punctuality’?

Vendler’s typology is thus frequently used, but one series of questions has to do with the definition of punctuals, and the question of whether ‘achievements’ form (just) one category. It has already been noticed that although *die*, *recognise*, *reach* are punctual (inasmuch as there is no duration involved, the beginning ‘is’ the end and vice-versa), they also seem to suppose that a boundary has been reached – once you die, you cannot die again\(^{21}\) –, whereas *knock*, or *cough*, are punctual, but have no such implication: you can knock or cough several times, including in a row. This has given rise to the opposition between ‘*semelfactives*’ and, in particular, ‘*extendable achievements*’. ‘Semelfactives’ are punctual events, or events that are perceived as such, with no identifiable ‘result’. Smith (1997) defines them thus:

> Semelfactives are single-stage events\(^{22}\) with no result or outcome. They have the features Dynamic, Atelic, Instantaneous. Typical examples are *knock on the door*, *hiccup*, *flap a wing*. Semelfactives are the simplest type of event consisting only of the occurrence.

(Smith 1997: 29; our bold characters)

They may therefore be repeated, while *die*, *recognise*, *reach* normally cannot. In the following quotation, Comrie introduces a further opposition between ‘semelfactives’ and ‘iterative’:

> We may introduce the terms ‘*semelfactive*’ to refer to a situation that takes place once and once only (e.g. one single cough), and ‘*iterative*’ to refer to a situation that is repeated (e.g. a series of coughs).

(Comrie 1976 : 42 ; our bold characters)

Another aspect of the question is that certain punctual situations seem to involve a (possible) preparatory phase (cf. ‘*extendable achievements*’), while others cannot. Such is the case of ‘dying’, as exemplified, for instance, by the title of the Faulkner novel *As I Lay Dying*: *die* is the moment that marks the transition between life and death, but dying may also be construed as having a preparatory phase, which is what the title of the novel brings to mind. The punctuality of the situations the verbs normally refer to has led Comrie, and others, to bring into doubt the possibility of (truly) calling punctual events ‘telic’, because of the absence of an event that leads to the culminating point that is the inherent endpoint (true ‘telic’ verbs having to suppose a gradual development in time leading to the end):

---

\(^{21}\) ‘Die’ having certain specificities, since it is truly ‘final’, as well as supposing a result – once someone has died, they cannot die (ever) again. This is not true of all events that involve ‘a natural endpoint’.

\(^{22}\) i.e. (here) instantaneous ; they have no internal duration and no internal phases.
In expressions referring to telic situations it is important that there should be both a process leading up to the terminal point as well as the terminal point. Thus the example quoted above, *John reached the summit*, is not telic, since one cannot speak of the process leading up to John's reaching the summit by saying John is reaching the summit. In general, it is easy to distinguish telic situations from those Vendler calls achievements, though there are some difficult cases.

(Comrie 1976 : 47 ; our bold characters)

Huddleston and Pullum speak in terms of ‘quasi-telicity’ for achievements (p. 121), because of the fact that achievements cannot be prolonged in time, and therefore the idea that they could otherwise be ‘prolonged’ does not arise.

It may be added as a complementary remark that for ‘punctuals’, the lack of duration may not be a total absence of time passing:

Objections have been raised to this analysis of verbs like *cough*, on the grounds that in fact the single act of coughing, for instance, is not punctual in the strict sense, but rather refers to a situation that lasts for a very short time.

(Comrie 1976 : 42)

In real, material life, total absence of duration may be an idealisation, and therefore a perception, a construal, rather than (‘objective’) reality – there may be the presence a minimal amount of time that may be considered to count for nothing, its duration being considered negligible:

Single-stage events are conceptualized as instantaneous. They may involve a discernible period of time, but this does not disturb our notion of them.

(Smith 1997: 29)

but may not be strictly speaking absent:

The question would then arise as to whether there are any kinds of situation which, even if slowed down, would have to be strictly punctual. Clearly coughing would not enter this category, and it is in fact difficult to think of clear examples that would. One possible example would be a situation of the sort described in the sentence *John reached the summit of the mountain*: here there is one moment when John had not yet reached the summit, and another moment when he had, with no time intervening between the two. No matter how slowly one presented the film of John's mountaineering exploits, the interval between these two moments would always be zero.

(Comrie 1976 : 43)

4.3.3. What's a state?

Another series of questions can be raised about states. General definitions of states usually indicate that states are non-eventive (i.e., stative), and that they designate a stable property of the subject, the default case of a stable property being that it has no beginning, no end, and does not evolve in time:

States have no internal temporal structure: they are the same throughout their duration, having no distinguishable phases.

(Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 119)

Yet although this may only be true in some cases, like (these examples are borrowed from Huddleston and Pullum) *2+2 is four, God is omnipotent, The sun rises in the East*, the category of ‘stative’ verbs may call for further distinctions. Mathematical or logical truths, like *2 + 2 is four*, may truly correspond to the definition of a (basic) state, as well as statements about entities conceived of as eternal (*God is omnipotent*). But there are a number of cases in which states are not
stable: a number of states are, in fact, transient states, as, for example, is the case for: She is a child, She is a trainee (these two examples are also quoted by Huddleston and Pullum). In fact, most states may be: He is a teacher supposes that there is normally at least a moment when he has started being a teacher and a moment when he will stop; He is sad, he was relieved (to hear that in the end, it was not true), are also transient states. In fact, all propositions involving mortal beings (or perishable objects) are, technically speaking, transient, although they may be taken to be stable within a given point of reference: they count for a certain period of time, at most the entirety of the life of the subject. In this case, they may be said to be stable, but only within a certain frame of reference (so that perception and construal can play a role here, too). Even utterances which are sometimes taken as typical examples of ‘présent de vérité générale’ (‘general truths’) are, in fact, historically situated: The U.K. is a country is a general statement, but the situation has a beginning, and may have an end (cf. Yugoslavia). Whether such a predicate as ‘love’ is a good example of a state which is ‘the same throughout [its] duration, with no distinguishable phases’, is a theoretical question that may not have a clear-cut, unique answer.

A number of cases can therefore technically be distinguished, such as, for instance:
- **States that are made of episodes**: for instance, pain may be stable throughout, but may also be made of calmer moments and peaks. The internal homogeneity may be one that is perceived as a construal of what is generally the case, but all ‘points’ are not necessarily similar, although the differences may be averaged out when a general statement about them is made.
- **States that in fact have a beginning and a possible end**: e.g. The U.K. is a (European) country;
- **States that are stable, but proceed from a change of state**, so that there was a different state of affairs prior to the current state: e.g. He is dead;
- **States that can have a gradual (internal) evolution**: e.g. understand may be a punctual verb (and therefore not a state, but an achievement), but may also be considered a state (I understand her ≈ I’m in agreement with her). But it may also refer to a gradual process (so may be no longer truly a state), e.g. I understand it better and better every day, I love her more each day, etc.

The last case shows that the opposition between states and other types of situations are sometimes clear-cut, sometimes less so:
- **Transitions between states** tend to be achievements, e.g. recognise (‘come to know’);
- **Transient and/or resultant states** may be perceived as ‘events’ (?), e.g. Stop being rude (which is comparable to Stop acting rudely);
- Certain repeated activities, in particular, can also be considered to amount to states, e.g. He teaches in a secondary school is potentially equivalent, or at least close to, He is a teacher in a secondary school, She cycles to work can be close to She is someone, or even maybe, the kind of person, who cycles to work23: the recurrent activity is used to characterise the subject;
- Certain bounded states amount to occurrences (cf. Huddleton and Pullum 2002: 119, ‘state-occurrences’), the example given being She reigned for thirty years, so that a state combined with, or associated to, a change of state may also amount to an ‘occurrence’ rather than a true state.

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23 Although cycle to work is here a recurring activity rather than a permanent one: the activity does not seem to need to be permanent to characterise the subject. It nevertheless tends to have to be something that is typical enough, or significant enough, for it to work as a defining characteristic.
The opposition introduced by Quirk et al. between qualities, states and stance is linked to some of these distinctions. According to languages (and/or contexts of use?), these characteristics can have an impact on what combinations and verb forms are allowed.

### 4.3.4. Degree and accomplishments

Another dimension that needs to be taken into account is that of the role of degree (scalarity)\(^{24}\) in accomplishments, more specifically. Accomplishments have a beginning and an end, and internal duration; they also have a natural endpoint. In a number of cases, this will mean that the internal duration is not stable, but is made of a series of steps which gradually lead to the natural endpoint: hence, the presence of ‘degrees’. Eating an apple is an accomplishment that has a natural endpoint: at the end of the event, the eating is done, and there is no apple left. But the eating is a series of steps that gradually lead to the disappearance of the apple: not all stages in the internal duration are equivalent, they gradually lead towards the end. In the case of apple eating, it can even be seen that the eating event gradually evolves as the apple itself evolves – the evolution of the eating and that of the apple, as an object, are synchronous (the more eating there is, the less apple). In this case, the apple is called an ‘incremental theme’: ‘incremental’, because the event evolves by increments, and the object itself, the theme, is affected incrementally, in a manner that is synchronised with the activity of eating. This may also have an impact on the way such events are verbalised.

### 4.3.5. A typology of iterative situations?

Building on the questions raised by the existence of possible repetition in coughing and knocking, and on a reflection on the fact that She cycles to work tends to mean that she does it repeatedly (rather than that it is a ‘permanent’ activity), Huddleston and Pullum also propose a typology of iterative (repetitive) events, which they suggest can be subsumed under the term ‘multiple situations’:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ITERATIVE</th>
<th>REPEATED</th>
<th>SERIAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>She knocked at the door (more than once).</td>
<td>She saw him twice last week.</td>
<td>She usually mows the lawn herself. (frequency; it is habitual)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


For iterative multiplicity, each of the parts is an achievement (knock, nod, wink), whereas repeated and serial multiplicity do not necessarily involve achievements. For serial multiple situations, the ‘overall situation’ amounts to a state: it becomes a possibly defining characteristic of the subject. These dimensions also have to be taken into account to decide what type of situation may be a stake, and, again, it can have an impact on the way these situations are verbalised in language, and more particularly, here, in English.

### 4.3.6. Aspectual verbs

A few final remarks for this section can be made about ‘aspectual verbs’: these are verbs whose (central) lexical meaning is aspectual, in particular, they can be used to make reference to the phases involved in a situation, in particular the beginning\(^{25}\) (inchoative), or the end (terminative). The case of finish and stop was already mentioned since the compatibility with one and/or the other can be

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\(^{24}\) Scalarity is the fact that a scale is present, i.e. a series of degrees.

\(^{25}\) Cf. ‘inception’, Lyons, mentioned in Section 1, and ‘termination’, for terminative verbs, ibidem.
used as a test for telicity; begin and start (as well as commence, and a few others) are examples of inchoative verbs. The existence of verbs whose role is to express iteration (keep on Ving?) or habituality (e.g., be used to Ving), can also be pointed out, and their identity of ‘aspectual verbs’ can be discussed. Some verbs combined with tense and/or grammatical markers can receive an inchoative interpretation, too; this will be mentioned in particular in Section 6, in the analysis of certain examples.

5. The combination of situation types and grammatical aspect

We focus more closely on BE + V-ING, although a few (here, more secondary) remarks will be made on the combination of the types of situations with HAVE + V-EN, HAVE + V-EN + BE + VING, and ‘zero’ aspect. The ‘aspectual’ values of BE + V-ING will also be taken into account primarily.

5.1. With BE + VING

In this presentation, we will take the view that that BE + V-ING is an aspectual marker which centrally marks imperfectivity, so that an event has started, but the end has not been reached yet/ is not taken into account, so that there is a focus on the ‘inside’ phase of the situation: a location point is present somewhere and allows for this. (Other values, like the ‘modal’, or ‘anaphoric’, value(s) of BE + V-ING will not be discussed here.) So BE + V-ING itself could be represented thus:

-------------------[--------------------------------- -------------[--------------------------

Fig 1. A possible visual representation of BE + V-ING (‘imperfectivity’)

The situation is ‘viewed from within’, or there is at least some ‘focus on some feature of the internal temporal structure or on some subinterval of time within the whole’ (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 124). The viewpoint is here crucial, i.e. the location in relation to the state/event being described.

Starting from this, a comparison can be made with the properties of the types of situations mentioned above, the main aim of this section being to show how ‘one and the same aspect [can] be interpreted differently according to the character of the verb’ (Lyons 1977: 713).

5.1.1. BE + V-ING and STATES.

As is known, BE + V-ING is not supposed to be compatible with states. (‘True’) states having ‘no internal temporal structure’ and being ‘the same throughout their duration, with no distinguishable phases’, and BE + V-ING supposing that some temporal structure is present (the situation is seen

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26 This, in itself, could of course be the object of a separate discussion, which will not be started here since it is not the primary object of this presentation.
‘from within’, there also has to be a starting point), it is only logical that states are not good candidates for compatibility with BE + V-ING:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>BE V-ING</th>
<th>- &gt; Normally incompatible</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The inner structure does not normally allow for compatibility with BE + V-ING</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8. BE V + -ING and states

The states that are truly incompatible with BE + V-ING should therefore normally at least include stable states, those that have no internal temporal structure and suppose no temporal interval, and no evolution, so that

* God is not existing.
* 2+2 are being 4.

are, normally, truly impossible utterances. On paper, temporary states ought to be more easily compatible with BE + V-ING, since they suppose the presence of some interval of time, but in English, the states that may be attributed to temporary entities (beings, ...), but are supposed to be true at all times for these entities (for instance, in the course of their lifespan), seem to be considered, or (re)analysed as, ‘stable’ states, even if technically, they are not:

She is a human being.

(*She is being a human being). States that only characterize the referent of the subject temporarily may perhaps seem to be (even) better candidates, but, in English\(^27\), again they are not:

She is happy. / *She is being happy.
She is pregnant. / *She is being pregnant.
She is 10 years old. / *She is being ten years old.

The case of:

You’re (just) being kind.
You are being silly.

is well-known: in these examples, it is often assumed that a ‘reclassification’ takes place: a paraphrase in ‘behave’ is supposed to be possible. The preceding utterances can be paraphrased as ‘you are behaving in a kind manner’, ‘you are behaving in a silly way’/ ‘your current behaviour is silly’). It need not be intentional: ‘You are being silly’ is not necessarily something that ‘you’ does intentionally, but may have to be at least partly ‘controllable’ by the subject (vs. necessarily intentional), i.e., seen as a type of situation (not necessarily a ‘behaviour’?) which can start and be put an end to.

\(^{27}\) Some languages would have special word forms here, and potentially treat the preceding category differently, too.
Several sub-types of ‘stative’ verbs can also have specific compatibility possibilities with BE + V-ING. The case of **verbs of opinion** can be highlighted:

- **Wait – I’m thinking.**
- **I was thinking** that maybe we could phone them first.

In the first case, ‘think’ may be considered to have been ‘reclassified’, or, in fact, to be used, as an activity verb (‘What are you doing?’ / ‘I’m thinking’); in the second occurrence, the same reasoning could perhaps be made, but this type of use has also been seen as a ‘tentative’ use. The impression of tentativeness can be a consequence of showing that it is only an ongoing process, and not a stable state: the opinion is presented as a process the thinker is going through, which has not reached an end yet. Quirk et al. (2000: 203) note that the effect is clearer in the past tense (*I was thinking, maybe we could phone her in the end?*).

**Verbs of opinion** are classified by Quirk et al. within the category of ‘private’ states, which also include **verbs of (unintentional)** perception. Such verbs may of course be used in the BE + V-ING form, although, as in other cases, their polysemy, and/or contextual uses, also have to be taken into account. In these two examples proposed by Quirk et al. (2000: 206):

- **I need some spectacles. I’m not seeing things so well these days.**
- **‘Did you hear a bell ring just then?’**
- **‘No, I can’t hear a thing.’**
- **‘There it goes again!’**
- **‘(Oh yes), I’m hearing it now.’**

the use of a BE + V-ING form, according to Quirk et al., allows for a stronger ‘focus on perception’, and an ‘ongoing process’. The fact that ‘these days’ and ‘now’ are used in each example also means that a focus is made on a limited interval (the perception is contrastively opposed to that which has occurred elsewhere). In He was seeing stars, the focus could be on repetitiveness (they go round and round over his head, metaphorically), and/or the example could be analysed as a recategorisation into an activity. But see is not a ‘true’ dynamic event: ‘What are you doing?’ / *I’m seeing these photographs* (Quirk et al., p. 204).

**Verbs of appearing** may also be used with BE + V-ING. Larreya and Rivière (2019), Huddleston and Pullum (2002), and Quirk et al. (2000) all note that the difference may not be obvious between a sentence in a simple and a BE + V-ING form:

- **He looks good today.**
- **He’s looking good today.**

An insistence on transience may be at stake, and/or one may be more ‘emphatic’ than the other. The same can sometimes be said for certain **verbs of sensation**:

- **I feel a bit sick this morning.**
I’m feeling a bit sick this morning.

The difference is not always clear (*It hurts*/ *It is hurting*): the focus can, or could, be on the fact that the interval is limited in time with the BE + V-ING form, but both forms are possible to describe a feeling located as ‘current’ in a situation. Quirk and al. and Huddleston and Pullum all suggest that verbs of stance/position verbs (of the *sit, lie, stand* type, see 4.3.1.) are also compatible with both the simple form and the BE + V-ING form, with sometimes unclear differences – this time both the simple form and the BE + V-ING form being potentially ‘durative’:

*I have sat there for over two hours now.*  
*I have been sitting here for over two hours now.*

Quirk et al. point that these verbs may form a ‘transition’ with active types:

Because of its intermediate status, the stance type illustrates an element of gradience [...] in the stative/dynamic contrast.  

(Quirk et al. 2002: 206).

The status of verbs of stance (and of perception, sensation...) as stative or having, at least sometimes, also an ‘intermediary’ status may thus be discussed.

Apart from the (sub-)types of verbs that have to be taken into account, a context of use which is regularly singled out is when ‘more and more’ or other phrases indicating that a quantitative/qualitative evolution is at stake are used (cases of ‘waxing and waning’, in Huddleston and Pullum’s terms), as their presence can make certain stative verbs compatible with BE + V-ING:

*She is resembling her mother.*  
*She is resembling her mother more and more (every day).*

‘More and more’ supposes that there is a focus on a given interval of time as opposed to another time frame which functions as a reference point: adding ‘more and more’ thus emphasizes the fact that the comparison is rooted within a given interval, which, in turn, can make it compatible with a BE + V-ING form.

In all those cases, it should be noted that, if it is possible and/ or does anything in terms of temporality, when combined with states BE + V-ING tends to ‘reduce’ the length of time in which what is presented is true, and not make it ‘last’ (its value is therefore not ‘durative’ here), contrary to what may sometimes, perhaps, appear to be the case in other examples. The values of BE + V-ING, and the labels that are used to describe them, ought to be attached at least to the situation types, as well as other contextual issues, when they cannot be considered general characteristics (or, part of the ‘definition’) of what BE + V-ING ‘generally’ does.

5.1.2. BE + V-ING and punctual verbs/ situations.

Punctual verbs are normally not compatible with BE + V-ING forms either: being punctual, they lack the internal temporal structure that is normally required for compatibility with BE + V-ING.

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31 In the example they give, HAVE + V-EN is used in combination with BE + V-ING, so that the analysis may have to be different: see Section 5.3.
Table 10. BE + V-ING and punctual verbs/situations.

Some achievements are nevertheless compatible with BE + V-ING. The sub-types that were mentioned above can be recalled here:

- that of punctual situations (change-of-state) with a preparatory phase (of the ‘die’ type): ‘extendable achievements’;
- that of repeatable punctual situations (‘semelfactives’ and/or ‘iteratives’).

Punctual situations with a preparatory phase include verbs like *die*, which were mentioned earlier.

He was dying.

is possible, but it does not refer to the act of dying itself, but to the preparatory phase leading to death. The situation then gains an internal temporal structure (and is no longer ‘truly’ punctual) because of the presence of the preparatory phase:

Table 11. BE VING and extendable achievements.

Comrie, in particular, writes that in English, it nevertheless tends to imply that the person is going to die later: the preparatory phase seems to have to lead, necessarily, to the final state, making

? He was dying, but finally he did not die.

abnormal. A preparatory phase is also brought to the fore in:

We’re arriving.
They are winning the race.

Verbs like *knock* and *kick* normally do not give rise to the same interpretation. When used in the BE + V-ING form, they tend to be interpreted as repeated actions, or ‘iteratives’:
He knocked on the door. (once – or several times --\(^{32}\))
He was knocking on the door. (necessarily several times)

He kicked her in the shin.
He was kicking her in the shin (repeatedly).

### Table 12. BE + V-ING and semelfactives/iteratives.

**5.1.2. BE + V-ING and accomplishments.**

Accomplishments are compatible with BE + V-ING, and when they are used in combination it implies that the event has not reached its final point yet:

*He wrote a book.* (the book is finished)
*He was writing a book.* (does not imply that the book is finished)

### Table 13. BE + V-ING and accomplishments.

BE + V-ING being a way of focusing on the internal temporal structure of the event, the emphasis is on the period before the natural endpoint has been reached. The event itself remains telic, but the endpoint has not been reached.

**5.1.3. BE + V-ING and activities.**

None of the BE + V-ING or ‘BE + V-ING-less’ versions are telic; BE + V-ING allows for a focus on the internal temporal structure of the event, while the absence of BE + V-ING means that the action is seen as a whole.

\(^{32}\) See example below.
Activities are ‘naturally’ compatible with BE + V-ING: the representations used show that the internal temporal structure as well as the boundaries that are present (activities are events, they have started, but they have no natural endpoint) make activities highly compatible, in theory, with BE + V-ING. The differences may therefore be less striking than with accomplishments, since any point in the internal temporal structure is supposed to be representative of the existence of the activity, there is no gradual evolution/ no telicity. This means that:

*He was working.* (BE + V-ING + activity)

is known to entail: *He has worked*\(^{33}\), while

*He was writing a novel.* (BE + V-ING + accomplishment)

does not mean that *He has written a novel*, since no endpoint has been reached. The opposition between simple and BE + V-ING forms which is sometimes perceived to be the ‘usual’ one is in fact more easily found with activities: when BE + V-ING is used with activities, there is a ‘focus on the internal structure of the action’ – with activities, this internal structure is potentially present in all cases, but when BE + V-ING is used, the situation is viewed from within. The impression that it may be ‘durative’ may be more specifically felt in such cases – as well, perhaps, as for the iterative cases found with punctuals, repetition being nevertheless more precise than just ‘duration’ –; the focus, is, in fact, on the ongoing event rather than on a ‘lasting’ one. With the simple form, the event is normally seen as a whole/ in its entirety (‘perfective’, in this sense):

‘What did he do during the holidays?’
‘He read and went for walks.’

*vs. He was reading when someone rang at the door.*

### 5.2. With HAVE + V-EN

#### 5.2.1. HAVE + V-EN, BE + V-ING, situation types and entailments.

The entailments mentioned in the preceding paragraphs show that the BE + V-ING forms may suppose that their HAVE + V-EN counterpart is also true or not, according to the situation types, the cases at hand being more specifically:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACTIVITIES</th>
<th>I was working ---&gt; I have worked.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACCOMPLISHMENTS</td>
<td>I was writing a novel (\X)---&gt; I have written a novel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EXTENDABLE ACHIEVEMENTS</td>
<td>He was dying (\X)---&gt; He has died</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(\text{but, maybe: he probably will / is going to die})</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 15. BE + V-ING, HAVE + V-EN, situation types and entailments.

\(^{33}\) See Section 5.2.
The presence of telicity (or quasi-telicity) accounts for this: when BE + V-ING is applied to a verb (or verb phrase, etc.) that refers to a situation having a natural endpoint, the endpoint has not been reached.

5.2.2. HAVE + V-EN and accomplishments.

Accomplishments are telic: when they are used with HAVE + V-EN, the endpoint has normally been reached:

A perfective form referring to a telic situation implies attainment of the terminal point of that situation.  
*I have written a novel* implies that the novel exists.  

(Comrie 1976: 46)

5.2.3. HAVE + V-EN and other telic/final situations.

As was said in 5.2.1., this may be extended further to all telic (and/or ‘final’) situations:

La conclusion est […] considérée comme atteinte. Celle-ci étant atteinte, l’état qui résulte obligatoirement de l’action est valable au moment du point de vue:\(^{34}\):

\[\begin{align*}
&I’ve\; lost\; the\; keys\; (état:\; I\; have\; no\; keys\; now.) \\
&Our\; guests\; have\; arrived.\; (état:\; Our\; guests\; are\; here.) \\
&I’ve\; written\; two\; letters\; (état:\; The\; two\; letters\; exist.)
\end{align*}\]

(Larreya and Rivièr 2019: 67-68)

*Lose the keys* and *write two letters* are accomplishments, *arrive* is an achievement, but supposes a result (‘be there’).

5.2.4. HAVE + V-EN and activities.

Activities are not normally compatible with (simple) HAVE + V-EN forms\(^ {35} \) but tend to require a combined use of BE + V-ING and HAVE + V-EN:

\[\begin{align*}
&?\; Rodney\; has\; run. \\
&?\; Grace\; has\; played\; the\; guitar. \\
&?\; It\; has\; rained. \\
&?\; I’ve\; written\; letters.
\end{align*}\]

(based on HAVE + -EN and BE + V-ING examples given in Larreya and Rivièr 2019: 68)

Larreya and Rivièr (p. 69) nevertheless point out that there are certain cases in which such utterances are possible. With activities, the simple HAVE + V-EN forms can be found when the focus is on the fact that the event has (actually) taken place: it is possible to paraphrase the effect of the utterance by saying ‘It’s (finally/ already) happened’. Something might have suggested that the event actually never took place or was never going to take place: in this case, the sentence in the simple HAVE + V-EN form indicates that it did.

Finally, it has rained.

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\(^{34}\) ‘The conclusion… is thought to have been reached. Because it has been reached, the state that necessarily results from the action is valid at the time of reference’.

\(^{35}\) So, see 5.3.
Another example quoted in Larreya and Rivière (2019: 69) is:

*He has run.*

which could be used in the following context: *Well, you see, finally he has run! And we thought he wasn’t even able to walk!* In this case, someone was, for instance, recovering from injuries and their running abilities were a cause of concern: in spite of this, the ‘running’ event did happen.

### 5.2.5. HAVE V-EN and states.

The compatibility of states with HAVE + V-EN is not straightforward, since (or when) they have no boundaries and no internal structure. Nevertheless, some states can be compatible with a HAVE + V-EN form, as, again, Larreya and Rivière (p. 68) point out:

*The boss has been away.*

*I've had the measles.*

The focus is on the state leading to a possible result: *I have had the measles* implying, for instance, ‘so I can’t catch the disease again’. Saying *the boss has been away* may be a way of justifying some of the consequences: ‘so we have not been able to answer you’, ‘so I have been doing all the work’ (Larreya et Rivière 2019: 68). Larreya and Rivière also consider the case of *He has taught English* (*‘teach English’ is an activity, but can also be considered a state if/when it is equivalent or close to ‘be an English teacher’*): *He has been an English teacher*, again, means that the focus is on the result it has on his behaviour or current state of knowledge, for instance (so he knows about English, so he corrects people all the time...). In all these cases, what is at stake is the consequences of such (here, temporary) states on a current situation at a moment that has been taken as a point of reference.

### 5.3. With HAVE + V-EN + BE + V-ING

HAVE + V-EN and BE + V-ING can of course be used conjointly: what is the effect of the situation type on possible combinations? A few general characteristics of the opposition may be recalled first, with certain differences then being brought to the fore.

#### 5.3.1. General opposition between the simple HAVE + V-EN and the HAVE + V-EN + BE + V-ING form (?)

Le principe général du choix entre les deux formes est le suivant: le présent parfait simple représente une focalisation sur les *effets directs* de l’action […] tandis que le présent parfait en BE + V-ING focalise sur *l’action elle-même* […], par exemple pour dire en quoi elle a consisté36.

(Larreya et Rivière 2019: 66; bold characters in the original)

The simple HAVE + V-EN form focuses on the (intrinsic) result of the action, whereas HAVE + V-EN + BE + V-ING focuses on the results linked to the situation seen as an activity; the following examples can also be found in Larreya and Rivière (2019):

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36 ‘The general rule for the choice between the two forms is the following: the simple present perfect implies that there is a focus on the direct effects of the action, while the BE + V-ING present perfect implies that there is a focus on the action itself, for instance, to say what it was’. 
Susie has eaten ice cream. (There is no ice cream left.)
Susie has been eating ice cream.
(Shes has ice cream all over her face, she is feeling sick, there is ice cream all over the floor)

Bill has washed the car. (The car is clean.)
Bill has been washing the car. (His clothes are soaked, the garage door is still open)

What have you done? (What is the result of your action?)
What have you been doing?
(You look terrible, your homework is not finished although it should be)

5.3.2. HAVE V-EN, HAVE-EN + BE V-ING and situation types

The situation types, as well as the presence/ absence of an adjunct indicating duration, which introduces a clear boundary, can have an impact on what forms are possible; quantification and negation can also modify the situation type involved and therefore the possibility of compatibility with BE + V-ING (Larreya and Rivière 2019). This is a possible attempt at a synthesis:

- Events with a natural endpoint (be they achievements or accomplishments) and states tend to call for a default simple HAVE + V-EN form, while activities tend to call for a combined HAVE + V-EN + BE V-ING form.

- When the choice is possible, the focus may be on a ‘direct’ result (HAVE + V-EN) or on more indirect results of the activity (HAVE + V-EN + BE + V-ING).

- Because they indicate the presence of a possible boundary, the presence of elements referring to a given interval have to be taken into account; the role of negation and/or quantification should also be examined.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Case A</strong></th>
<th><strong>Case B</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Normally: (simple) HAVE VEN</td>
<td>combination necessary: HAVE V-EN + BE V-ING</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/ Events with a natural endpoint (achievements or accomplishments)</td>
<td>(or BE V-ING preferred)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I've lost my keys.</td>
<td>Activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(*? I've been losing my keys)</td>
<td>It has been raining.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I've arrived.</td>
<td>(? It has rained)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(*? I've been arriving)</td>
<td>He has been running.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I've written two letters.</td>
<td>(? He has run)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(*? I've been writing two letters)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/ States.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The boss has been away.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(*The boss has been being away (??))</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I've had the measles</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(*? I've been having the measles)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

37 See Larreya and Rivière 2019 for this section.
Exc. It has (finally/ already) happened: focus on the happening of the event
Finally, it has rained.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case C</th>
<th>A choice is possible</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A change in focus in introduced, and/ or the situation type may be affected</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HAVE VEN</th>
<th>HAVE VEN + BE VING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The endpoint has been reached; ‘natural result’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susie has eaten ice cream.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill has washed the car.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on internal structure: other results</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susie has been eating ice cream.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill has been washing the car.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 16a: Situation types and HAVE + V-EN + BE + V-ING; no duration adjunct

In the presence of a duration adjunct: the presence of an adverbial of duration can introduce a bounded interval.

- Events with a natural endpoint may then become more easily compatible with the HAVE + V-EN + BE + V-ING combination, since there is a focus on an interval of time and, therefore, not necessarily on the result.

With the HAVE + V-EN + BE + V-ING form, the focus is no longer on the natural endpoint, which may therefore be conceived as not having (yet) been reached.

- States remain little compatible with HAVE + V-EN + BE + V-ING, and activities still are little compatible with simple HAVE + V-EN forms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>+ INDICATION OF DURATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(i.e., there is an explicit mention of an interval, e.g. for two years, since 1982)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case A</th>
<th>NO combination possible: JUST (simple) HAVE + V-EN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>States (some?)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’ve known her for ten years.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*I’ve been knowing her for ten years.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’ve believed this for years.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*I’ve been believing this for years.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case B</th>
<th>combination necessary: HAVE + V-EN + BE + V-ING (or BE + V-ING preferred)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Activities normally + BE + V-ING</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He has been running for an hour.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(He has run for an hour would indicate that it was his intention, a goal, and so is telic)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case C</th>
<th>A choice is possible</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Durative events with a natural endpoint</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adding BE + V-ING indicates that the endpoint has not been reached:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She’s been writing that novel for two years now.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(→ The novel is still unfinished)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 16b: Situation types and HAVE + V-EN + BE + V-ING; with duration adjunct

Quantification/negation: quantification and negation can change the situation type and thus have an impact on the compatibility with the combined aspecual form (Larreya and Rivière 2019). ‘Write two letters’ being an accomplishment, and ‘write letters’ being an activity, the following combinations are preferred:
I’ve written two letters. (?/* I’ve been writing two letters) (Case A, Table 16a)
I’ve been writing letters. (? I’ve written letters) (Case B/C, Table 16a)

Quantification can be implicit: if a number of letters is hinted at in the context, there can be an equivalence with a sentence in which a quantifier is used; if the focus is on the experience of the speaker (What do you mean? I’ve written letters before!), a simple form is possible. In:

Ten thousand refugees have crossed the border.
Many refugees have been crossing the borders.

(still mentioned in Larreya and Rivière 2019), the presence of a precise number means that crossing the border is an accomplishment (this count has been reached), while a vague number makes it a repeated and multiple activity. Since ‘an non-occurring action is equivalent to a state’ (Larreya and Rivière 2019: nothing has taken place), the following combinations are also preferred:

The committee has been meeting for months. /*? The committee has met for months.
The committee hasn’t met for months. /*The committee hasn’t been meeting for months.

5.4. Zero aspectual forms and situation types.

What happens when no grammatical marker is present? Two answers may be given to this question, and they are different:

- ‘Zero aspect’ is, per se, perfective, i.e. the situation is seen ‘as a whole’;

  (AND/OR)

- ‘Zero aspect’ is neutral, so that the situation aspect shines through and is left to influence the interpretation of the verb phrase on its own (a state is a state, an accomplishment is an accomplishment, etc.)

Although they may be different, the two answers are not incompatible: situation aspect continues to play a role in sentences in which no grammatical aspectual marker is used (She is a teacher is a state, She ran ten miles yesterday is an accomplishment, etc.). There is no focus on the internal temporal structure of an activity, for instance, and punctual events are supposed to be punctual, and not repetitive. But saying that the ‘zero’ aspect has a (perfective) value or that the intrinsic value of the verb/ verb phrase/ situation shines through is not the same: the question will not be examined here, but the question can be kept in mind.

6. The interaction between situation type, grammatical aspect and context: some further examples

The type of situation may (also) be construed at the level of the situation, not just the ‘(type of) action’ (‘run’, ‘jump’), and, in language, at the level of the utterance, or perhaps even of a series of utterances. A few examples will now be analysed contextually, which will allow for a applied use of some of the elements discussed before, and may raise a few (final) additional questions. Here are, therefore, a few examples of a random nature, but which illustrate several other cases and may open further discussions.

Example 1
Art students emerged, subduing the flesh in their endeavour to find a good light, elusive and nearly as unattainable as the Grail itself. Commercial Oxford, too, awoke; shops opened and buses ran; the streets were thronged with traffic.


The interpretation that should be given to ran is of interest. It is probably to be given an inchoative interpretation, i.e. ran can be paraphrased as ‘began to run’ – there is a focus on the initial phase, vs the internal duration of the activity or the activity per se. Run, in this acceptation (for buses, ‘circulate’, ‘go (on their rounds)’), is an activity: it has a beginning, an internal duration, no natural endpoint. The verb is used in the simple preterite: a combination with BE + V-ING (cf. preceding pages) would probably imply that an internal viewpoint is privileged – it has started to run, but the viewpoint adopted means that there is an interest in the ongoing process: buses were running, the streets were thronged with traffic. The implication would probably be that someone is watching the scene, and that the internal viewpoint is theirs (temporal and subjective point of reference). Zero aspectual forms are often taken to be ‘perfective’, i.e. there is a focus on the activity as a whole, the activity happened, there is no focus on its internal phases (e.g. ‘Was there a strike?’/ ‘No, the buses ran.’). And yet here, zero (grammatical) aspect means that an inchoative interpretation probably has to be privileged. Why?

This example shows how aspect is not necessarily just computed at the level of the verb or the verb phrase, but the predication as a whole, and here, it is also necessary to take into account the section of the paragraph in which the verb form is used. It should be noted that this does not mean that it is just ‘contextual’ if this is taken to mean various and therefore totally unpredictable: there are parameters to be taken into account, but this example is a reminder of the fact that it is not just the verb that has to be taken into account, or in this case even the verb phrase, but several elements that function as possible parameters (type of situation, type of verb that expresses it, verb complementation, prefixes/ particles, type of subject – cf. agentivity --, and, sometimes, as is the case here, the sequence of events depicted rather than just one event). Ran is here placed in a sequence of clauses that function together, and the first two verbs are, in fact, inchoative: awake, which means ‘come to be awake’, is inchoative, and focuses on a change of state and the emergence of a new one, and the same is true of open (‘open’ something or, here, ‘open’ used unaccusatively, meaning ‘make something open’, or ‘come to be open’). Emerge, used in the preceding sentence and the same section of the paragraph, also has these implications (‘appear’, ‘come to be present’). Ran is therefore to be understood within this series of events, and, although no (grammatical or lexical) mark makes it obvious, comes to be interpreted in the same way. To illustrate further the differences at stake, it could be pointed out that the translation into French, for instance, would not be in the imparfait de l’indicatif, but something indicating that this is a (gradual) beginning would have to be present: something like les rues se remplirent de véhicules, rather than étaient remplies, the same being true of ran above (L’Oxford des magasins se réveilla aussi: les magasins ouvrirent, les bus se mirent à circuler, et les rues se remplirent de véhicules.) The simple past used with an activity verb is not incompatible with it: ran marks that there is an activity taking place in the past/ fictional time of reference of the paragraph; the other clauses with which it is used (the last two segments are openly coordinated) means that an inchoative interpretation tend to be privileged, i.e. the activity is just starting.

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38 Except if it is seen as ‘a run’, with an starting hour and an end.
39 The aim here is just to illustrate the meaning(s) at stake, make it/ them easier to grasp (for speakers of French).
40 Since it is a recurring process, in French a ‘re-’ prefix could, and should probably, be added, and would even be obligatory if other wordings were to be chosen (e.g. la circulation des bus reprit).
It should be noted that *were* is also to be interpreted as punctual here for roughly the same reasons (*were* is a state, but is here interpreted as the initial stages of this state). This is possible since <be thronged> for a street is a state, but a state that potentially has a beginning and an end, and could even be thought of as having a gradual evolution (cf. types of states/ discussion of what 'states' may be above).

**Example 2**

From behind one of the booths, Sharman ducked and **ran**: ran to the tethered canvas at the far end, clawing for an exit. There was none.


The same verb is used here, and in the same tense/grammatical aspect: it is conjugated in the simple preterite. But although it is the same verb, it is not used in the same way, with the same type of subject as in Example 1, and it does not refer to the same type of activity: it is used as a manner-of-motion verb for animates (‘move, quickly, on two feet’). Besides, the interpretation is different. In the first occurrence, **ran** is an activity and, again, can in this context be interpreted as inchoative: Sharman was not running before, he ducks ‘and’ then does something else, which means that an inchoative interpretation can be favoured (‘he started to run’). In the second occurrence, the verb phrase is ‘run to the tethered canvas at the far end’: there is a goal, and an endpoint, and therefore ‘run... end’ is an accomplishment. In this case, **ran** means that the activity took place and has normally reached its end: he claws for an exit after reaching the canvas at the far end.

**Example 3**

Fen rang off. He was not prepared to discuss *Measure for Measure* at the moment. While he was considering what he had learned the bell rang in the call-box, and he lifted the receiver. ‘Hello,’ he said. ‘Yes, this is Fen. Oh, it’s you, Evans. You’ve been quick.’ ‘Traced it easily,’ said the disembodied spokesman of Somerset House.


*Be* is a stative verb, and is here used in the present perfect. ‘Quick’ nevertheless refers to a length of time, and the length of time that it took to do whatever was to be done. An interval is created, and there is a possibility of evaluating the time passed between a given moment, when the action started, and the ‘now’ of the speaker. ‘Be quick’ could be, to a certain extent, considered to be equivalent to ‘you’ve acted quickly’, but is still an evaluation of the inner capacities of a given individual against the backdrop of a certain situation that has a beginning and an end.

**Example 4**

Fen walked briskly up the short asphalt path which led to the door. Seeing a notice requiring him to knock and ring, he **knocked** and rang. He waited; **knocked** again; rang again; and eventually, receiving no answer, walked out of sight round the side of the house […]


*Knock* is supposed to be a semelfactive: in the simple preterite, it tends to mean ‘once’, although it can mean once or several times (‘I knocked and knocked again for a few minutes’), while in the preterite + BE + V-ING form, it tends to involve repetition (‘I was knocking on the door’ normally means ‘several times’; see above). The question here could be of whether **knocked** in this case is to be interpreted as a single knock each time, or several: it could be either, the answer to this having to do with pragmatics – do people knock on a door once or several times to attract attention? The form
can either mean once or several times, but several times that count as ‘knocking once’, i.e. perform an act of drawing someone’s attention through knocking on a door. An ‘act of knocking’ took place, in each occurrence.

**Example 5**

The walls were cream, the curtains and carpet dark green. There were rows of books on the low shelves, Chinese miniatures on the walls, and a few rather dilapidated plaques and busts of English writers on the mantelpiece. A large, untidy flat-topped desk, with two telephones, **stood** against the windows of the north wall.

And in one of the luxurious armchairs **sat** Richard Cadogan, his face wearing the look of a hunted man.


Verbs of stance, or of position (*sit, lie, stand*) can be considered to be states (and/or intermediary between states and activities), in which case their combination with **BE + V-ING** raise recurrent issues; they can also be activities (**He spend the whole day practising standing on a bike (?)**), and, also, punctual events (**He stood up** suddenly). **Stand up**/ **sit down** are more clearly resultative, but **stand** and **sit** (used on their own) can be too; the use of **BE + V-ING** tends to describe a drawn out location, but the bare forms can be used too in this case (**He looked up**: **John stood/ was standing by the window...**). The interpretation is clearly not dynamic here: the localisation of the desk must be stable, and, also, Richard was already sitting in the armchair. How is this interpreted? A desk does not move easily, so that in the first case, it is probably the most obvious interpretation. The beginning of the paragraph is also a (stative) description, **was standing** could also perhaps bring a more agentive interpretation to mind. In the second sentence, Richard Cadogan is a human being, and as such is more likely to be sitting in armchairs but also getting up, and **Richard Cadogan was sitting in one of the luxurious armchairs** is perfectly acceptable. */ And in one of the luxurious armchairs was sitting Richard Cadogan* is nevertheless not. The inverted construction is used to introduce the location in space of an element that was not localised before, here Richard Cadogan. The **BE + V-ING** could be used if the narrator describes Cadogan’s location in space from his/ her viewpoint (**A large, untidy flat-topped desk, with two telephones, stood against the windows of the north wall./ Richard Cadogan was sitting in one of the luxurious armchairs**). The bare form therefore ‘simply’ indicates (the existence of) a location, the **BE + V-ING** form supposing the presence of someone’s viewpoint in the scene, i.e. a focus on the internal structure of the situation in which the bearer of the point of view locates him/ herself.

**Example 6**

41 His destination was the Marie Rose Galleries, where his friend Ian Gore was having his first show in five years. By the note in his pocket, the opening had been over for two hours. But this didn't bother him. After twenty-five years, Ian was used to his lateness, and Fire understood Ian's mood swings.

I wonder how he **looks**, he thought, as a doorway caught his eye. For all its pretensions, he liked Soho. The brickwork reminded him of London and the ironwork reminded him of older parts of Kingston. He liked the scale of it. It was low. One could see the sky without trying.


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41 This is an excerpt from a text used in a translation/grammar class at Université de Lorraine. I thank Barbara Schmidt, who found it, for allowing me to use it here.
Verbs of appearing can be used in the simple (‘You look well (today)’) or the BE + V-ING form (‘You’re looking good (today)’). In this passage the simple present is used, so that a first impression could be that ‘looks’ here could mean ‘in general’, and that the simple present is used in combination with a (stable/semi-stable) state to refer to a general, stable, stative situation. But the paragraph preceding the occurrence (as well as the rest of the passage, not reproduced here) informs the reader that Ian Gore is ‘a friend’. The narrator therefore knows what Ian Gore looks like: what he does not know is how Ian Gore looks ‘these days’. Why is the simple form used? I wonder how he is looking does not seem to be quite acceptable in this context: the narrator is trying to think of what his friend looks like, generally, these days, rather than how he ‘is looking’ on this specific day, so that, perhaps, the statement remains, partly, a generic statement. Yet it is clear that it bears on a given period of time, and is not general – the presence of a time interval in English does not seem to be enough to account for the (necessary) use of BE V-ING (cf. ‘The U.K. is a country’, ‘He is dead’). The verb remains in the simple form even though, in fact, the qualification is only valid for a given period of time – at least, it is the case here.

Example 7
Where did you go? he would ask meekly.
What did you want now?
Silently he would point at the uro-bag dangling at the side of the bed. It’s begun hurting again – the needle, he would murmur plaintively and she would lose her head.
You bet, Just. You bet it’s hurting again. I’ll go on hurting, Jus. And can’t I go downstairs for a minute? Forgodssake! It’s always your sickness, your digestion, cough, sleeplessness, blood pressure, haemoglobin, constipation! How ‘bout me? Am I incapable of illness?


Verbs referring to sensations can be used in the simple form or with BE + V-ING, including when reference is made to a current situation (It hurts/It’s hurting), with differences in meaning that are sometimes difficult to discriminate. Some cases may have to do with re-elaboration (the speaker is telling the addressee how they verbalise/perceive... a given situation); in this example, the use of BE + V-ING can be linked to the fact that the pain is not a stable, uniform sensation: there are moments of more intense pain; pain can gradually increase or decrease. ‘It’s begun hurting again’, a few lines above our occurrence, verbalises this quite plainly: in this case, the use of BE + V-ING can be correlated to the presence of moments of pain within a more general time span, and ‘It’s hurting again’ is an assertion about one of these moments, the ongoing one, as opposed to others. This, nevertheless, supposes that states can be sub-divided into phases (or that ‘hurt’ becomes an activity here, to some extent). The use of BE + V-ING would be based on the presence of such phases (or episodes) in this example.

Example 8
‘Can you tell us anything about times?’
Sally shook her head.
‘I’m sorry. It was all some time between eleven and twelve – I heard midnight striking as I walked home.’


---

42 Again, in French, it would probably be preferable to add ‘maintenant’ in this case: ‘Je me demande à quoi il ressemble maintenant’ vs ‘Je me demande à quoi il ressemble’: ‘je me demande à quoi il ressemble’ would be truly generic and not quite acceptable since being a friend of Ian Gore, the narrator must have known at least how he looked before.
Walk is an activity verb, but, combined with home which indicates a goal, and an endpoint, is here used as an accomplishment. A simple form used with an accomplishment verb tends to mean that the endpoint has been reached (I left the office and walked home), while a BE + V-ING form tends to imply that the endpoint has not been reached (I left the office and was walking home when I remembered I had to buy milk). In this example, nevertheless, I walked home does not imply that the speaker has arrived there: Sally heard the church clock on her way home, so while she ‘was walking’ home (cf. ‘I was walking home when I heard midnight striking’ vs *‘I walked home when I heard midnight striking’). In this case, the use of as allows for a correct reading of the situation, and BE + V-ING would, to some extent, be redundant, but redundancy is not necessarily avoided in all constructions. I heard midnight striking as I was walking home seems to be a possible paraphrase of the initial sentence; as thwarts the telic reading. In this case, the subordinator (as well as the verb, verb form...) introduces scalarity, and plays a role in the aspectual interpretation of the utterance.

7. Conclusions

What has been explored here is the interaction between situation aspect and grammatical aspect: although there are intricacies and more complex cases, it has been shown that there are also recurrent cases and parameters at stake. Thinking in terms of these interactions also makes it possible to go beyond the (supposed?) contradictions between analyses of BE + V-ING in terms of ‘durative’, ‘progressive’, ‘repetitive’...: some of these values can be present contextually in relation to other parameters which make a given interpretation possible. This, in turn, can have implications on the analysis of the grammatical aspectual markers more generally: do they have one meaning, and/or central meaning? How can the different contextual interpretations be reconciled, or at least accounted for? Here is what Comrie (1976) wrote about this:

It might be thought that the ideal would be to establish for each language-particular category a general characterisation of its meaning such that each one of its individual uses would be predictable from this general characterisation (and, equally, one would be able to predict when not to use the form in question), and there would be no need to speak of only partial correspondence between formal categories and semantic distinctions. To take this as one's starting-point is, of course, to beg the whole question of the degree of complexity of the relation between formal categories and semantic distinctions. An alternative approach would be to try and provide the simplest possible characterisation of this relation: in cases where there is a general meaning from which all individual uses are predictable, then this will indeed be the simplest characterisation of the relation, but this approach does not prejudge the question of whether or not there is a single general meaning. [...] Where we [Comrie, in his book] speak of a given category having several meanings, the possibility is not excluded that subsequent work may show that these various meanings are in fact different manifestations of one general meaning, or at least of a smaller number of meanings. Where a form is said to have more than one meaning, it is often the case that one of these meanings seems more central, more typical than the others. In such cases, it is usual to speak of this central meaning as the basic meaning. In certain cases the existence of both basic and secondary meanings can be shown to be the result of a historical process where the basic meaning is the original meaning, while secondary meanings have been acquired as extensions of this original meaning, often leading ultimately to the same form acquiring a new basic meaning much wider than the original basic meaning, and incorporating a number of uses that were originally secondary meanings. (Comrie 1976: 10-11)

In the analysis, it seems important to identify and analyse what parameters may be at stake, know about the different existing definitions and categories and some of the questions that are raised, analyse the occurrences as precisely as possible, in themselves, and in relation to the general issue (s) that have to be discussed.

References cited