I discuss two competing theories of the progressive: the theory proposed in Parsons (1980, 1985, 1989, 1990) and the theory proposed in Landman (1992). These theories differ in more than one way. Landman regards the progressive as an intensional operator, while Parsons doesn’t. Moreover, Landman and Parsons disagree on what uninflected predicates denote. For Landman, cross the street has in its denotation complete events of crossing the street; the aspectual contribution of English simple past (perfective aspect) is the identity function. For Parsons, both complete and incomplete events of crossing the street can be in the denotation of the base VP; perfective aspect restricts its denotation to the events that culminate. I present a version of Parsons’s theory that avoids the problems raised by Landman, in particular the problem posed for Parsons by creation verbs. The repaired version and Landman’s theory still differ in the way they analyze uninflected predicates. I present evidence from Slavic languages that both theories are needed. Finally, I discuss some evidence that may favor one or the other approach to the semantics of the English progressive.

1. The Problem of Indirect Access

In the study of tense and aspect, one runs into statements of the following sort:

‘Carnap flew to the moon’ is true iff ‘Carnap fly to the moon’ is true relative to some time t < now.

If ‘Terry build a house’ is true relative to an interval i, there is no proper subinterval of i relative to which ‘Terry build a house’ is true.

If ‘Terry be at home’ is true relative to an interval i, then ‘Terry be at home’ must also be true relative to every subinterval of i.
As these examples show, in analyzing the meaning of temporal and aspectual features, we make assumptions about the truth conditions of uninflected clauses like ‘Carnap fly to the moon’, ‘Terry build a house’ and ‘Terry be at home’. However, we have only indirect evidence of how these sentences are interpreted by native speakers, since they do not occur as independent clauses in English. I’ll refer to the problem of determining the truth conditions of the base sentences that are the input to tense and aspect markers as the problem of indirect access in the semantics of tense and aspect.

Making hypotheses based on indirect evidence is common practice in the natural sciences and I have no intention of arguing that the task of providing a truth-conditional analysis of temporal and aspectual features is hopeless or misconceived because of the problem of indirect access. I’m interested instead in the relevance of this problem for the analysis of the progressive. I’ll argue that the choice between different approaches to the semantics of the progressive that are currently available in the literature involves choosing between different analyses of the meaning of base predicates: to decide which approach to the semantics of the progressive is empirically more adequate, we have to find evidence, even if indirect, that allows us to establish what event types these predicates denote.

I’ll proceed as follows. First, I’ll review two competing theories of the progressive: the theory proposed by Parsons (1980, 1985, 1989, 1990) and the theory proposed by Landman (1992). These theories champion two different approaches to the semantics of the progressive: Landman’s theory regards the progressive as an intensional operator, whereas Parsons’s doesn’t. The reasons put forward by Landman in favor of his theory have nothing to do with the problem of indirect access; they focus, mainly, on the difficulties Parsons’s theory runs into with creation verbs. I’ll argue that these difficulties can be overcome by presenting a repaired version of Parsons’s theory that avoids the problems raised by Landman and other problems as well. The repaired version and Landman’s theory still differ in the way they analyze uninflected predicates. First, I’ll present evidence from Slavic languages that both theories are needed. Then, I’ll come back to English and discuss some evidence that may favor one or the other approach to the semantics of the progressive.

2. Two Theories of the Progressive

2.1. Parsons’s Theory

Parsons suggests the following analysis of the progressive and of the simple past: