

STATIVE VERBS AND THE PROGRESSIVE ASPECT IN ENGLISH

JOANNA ŚMIECIŃSKA
Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań

ABSTRACT

The use of stative verbs in the progressive forms in English has been commonly recognised as exceptional and rather infrequent (Comrie 1981; Quirk et al. 1972). The unacceptability of 'progressive statives' has been ascribed to the semantics of stative verbs and viewed as independent of the context in which such verbs occur. However, in a more recent study, Kakietek (1997) proposes a fully contextual analysis of stative verbs, suggesting that, in the light of the ever increasing popularity of the progressive with verbs labelled as stative, stative verbs no longer constitute a homogenous group; rather, they admit a full range of applicable grammatical forms, depending on the context. The present paper reports on a survey held among young educated native speakers of American English from Slippery Rock University, Pennsylvania, undertaken in an attempt at examining the extent to which the meaning (*feature marking*) of the verb imposes the choice of the aspectual forms in which it can appear. It follows from the data that there is a strong tendency among the young native speakers to accept the 'progressive statives' in appropriate contexts. Context is not, however, the sole factor in the choice of the grammatical form, and, for many a speaker, the semantic stativity of the verb still imposes its grammatical form.

1. Introduction

The actual use of the progressive aspect in English has been traditionally viewed and investigated in a close relation to the semantics of the verbs appearing in the relevant constructions. The progressive is primarily used to express duration and temporary validity of the action, thus, verbs denoting states, rather than actions, are highly unlikely to be used in this form. As such, these verbs are frequently assumed to lack the progressive forms and to be, by definition, incapable of ever appearing in the progressive. The advocates of such an approach (among others, Comrie 1976; Lakoff 1970; Leech 1971) usually provide lists of verbs which they consider stative, appended with sets of apparent "irregularities". One cannot fail to notice, however, that the number of such exceptions, i.e. the use of stative verbs in the progressive

form, has been on the increase for the past decades, and that sentences like *I am understanding* or *I am liking it* are not infrequent in popular American TV series, commercials, magazines or books. In fact, in his recent study on the use of stative verbs in English, Kakietek (1997) reaches a conclusion that stative verbs do not constitute a separate syntactic category, and that they can freely take the progressive forms in appropriate contexts.

This paper presents the outcome of an experimental study carried out in an attempt at examining the extent to which the meaning (feature marking) of the so-called stative verbs in present day American English imposes the choice of the aspectual forms in which they appear. The paper is organised along the following lines: a short sketch on the use of the progressive in English and the main characteristics of stative verbs are presented in section 2. This is followed by a detailed description of the experiment and the analyses of the data gathered in sections 3 and 4 respectively.

2. The progressive and the stative verbs

The differences between the progressive and non-progressive in English are classically referred to as *aspectual*, that is describing different characters or modes of the action. Aspect can be described as “any of the several groups of forms in the conjugation of the verb which serve to denote the manner in which the action denoted by the verb is considered as being carried out” (Strang 1968: 143). The progressive is used to express duration, temporary validity or heightened temporary relevance. It emphasises the action predicated by the verb with reference to a contextually defined moment or period in time. It forms a timeframe, and has an imperfective character. It is a grammatically weightier form than the non-progressive to draw special attention to the predication and the nature of the activity expressed by the verb in the progressive.

Hirtle (1968) distinguishes between *states* and *actions* and restricts the possibility of using the progressive to *actions* alone, as it is only with *actions* that the lexical content is open to variation from instant to instant. In *states*, on the other hand, every instant involves the same lexical content. This is expressed in symbols in (1) below:

$$(1) \text{ State } I_1 = I_2 = I_3 = \dots = I_n = i$$

$$\text{Action } I_1 + I_2 + I_3 + \dots + I_n = i$$

where I_n stands for the event at the n^{th} instant of its existence, and i is a symbol of the whole event. States are assumed to take the non-progressive and actions the progressive verb forms.

The above analysis of the progressive is closely related to the linguistic and pragmatic context, i.e. it is the context that is assumed to be responsible for the use of the progressive or non-progressive verb forms. However, as it is argued in Comrie (1973), Joos (1964), Ota (1963), among others, certain lexemes express unlimited duration in themselves and as such are hardly ever used in the progressive. Thus the

choice of the aspectual form is assumed to also depend on the semantic content of the verbs used and not only on the context. Such verbs are called *statal* by Ota (1963), as “they denote states, not processes” (p.116). Among the *statal* verbs Ota lists *think, know, remember, seem, be*, etc. The terms *status* and *stative* are also used to refer to these verbs, the latter being probably the most common term used, among others, in Quirk et al (1972) and Comrie (1973). An exhaustive list of as many as 140 verbs marked as stative in, what may be called, their basic meanings, in several grammar handbooks (remarkably by Joos (1964), Jespersen (1931), Quirk et al (1972) and Hornby (1954)) is provided by Scheffer (1975).

Constructions with stative verbs used in the progressive are recognised as ungrammatical irrespective of the context by many authors. Comrie (1976: 35) states that “stative verbs do not have progressive forms since this would involve an internal contradiction between the stativity of the verb and the nonstativity essential to the progressive”. A similar stance is supported by Lakoff’s (1970) verb typology, where the semantically stative verbs are considered to be also syntactically stative (nonactive). Thus stative verbs are assumed to be marked as +stative as opposed to process verbs which are –stative. The ungrammaticality of sentences like *He is knowing the answer* then comes from the fact that a +stative verb is used in a –stative context.

However, according to Scheffer (1975) in a corpus of several contemporary British and American novels that he analysed in detail, many of the allegedly stative verbs were nevertheless used in the progressive. A similar observation is made by Kakietek (1997) based on the corpus of several British and American contemporary novels, detective stories, scientific texts, and popular dailies and weeklies that he analysed. To accommodate sentences like *I am adoring it* or *He was hearing her flat wistful voice*, which are not at all infrequent, with the traditional assumptions on the status of stative verbs, some authors, for instance Hirtle (1967), Quirk et al (1972) or Vendler (1968) speak of stative and dynamic *uses* of certain verbs, rather than of stative and dynamic verbs. This seems, however, to be a slightly circular step, as, with such qualification, any verb can have a stative or dynamic *use*, depending on the context, and in principle there would not be a justification for distinguishing a separate class of stative verbs at all.

This is precisely the conclusion drawn by Kakietek in his (1997) study of stative verbs. Kakietek points to the increasing use of the progressive, with verbs traditionally labelled as stative, in present day British and American English and states that “the overwhelming majority of statives when used under appropriate circumstances are quite free to take the Progressive and cannot be viewed as constituting a separate syntactic category” (p. 85).

One can get a similar impression browsing through the Internet, watching American television or listening to casual conversations among young native speakers of American English.

To verify the validity of Kakietek's conclusions, and so, to check to what extent the meaning (feature marking) of the lexical verb imposes the choice of the grammatical form, a survey on the acceptability of progressive sentences with the so called stative verbs was carried out among young American English speakers. Following is the detailed report of the survey.

3. The survey

The survey was carried out in February 2002 in Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania, US, among the students of the Slippery Rock University.

3.1. The questionnaire

After a close examination of the lists of stative verbs from Scheffer (1975), a sample group of roughly 30 verbs assumed to be statives by the majority of the authors quoted by Scheffer was selected. This number was further narrowed down to the total of fourteen verbs, based on their frequency in Brown Corpus and Collins Cobuild Corpus of spoken English. In addition, attention was paid to selecting a relatively varied sample, thus, verbs like *love* and *detest* although frequent, were not used, as they may be viewed as resembling *like* and *hate* which did appear in the sample. As a result of the selection, the following verbs were used in the survey: *appear, believe, cost, doubt, hate, hear, intend, know, like, look, see, understand* and *want*. All of these verbs appear in progressive forms in the corpus analysed by Kakietek (1997). From the sources quoted by Kakietek in Appendix I (pp. 96-109) a selection of 16 sentences was made. Each sentence contained a stative verb in the progressive form in a context generally assumed to be characteristic of *process* or *dynamic* verbs (see Table 1 below).

The questionnaire consisted of two parts with the total of eleven sentences in the first. In part one there was a total of eleven sentences, among which sentences (1), (2), (5) and (8) were 'distractors'. The subjects were asked to mark the sentences as *a) right/grammatically correct, b) not too correct, but rather acceptable* or *c) wrong/grammatically incorrect*. For all the ungrammatical sentences they were asked to underline the part of the sentence responsible for the ungrammaticality. As far as the distracting sentences are concerned, sentence (1) wasn't supposed to pose any grammaticality judgement problems, sentence (2) exemplified concord violation and sentence (5) contained a 'dangling' modifier, a subjectless present participle adverbial clause modifying the main clause. In sentence (8) double negation occurred.

In part two of the questionnaire the subjects were asked to choose between simple and progressive verb forms in each sentence. If they thought that both forms were possible and yielded grammatical constructions they had a possibility of checking both. There were no distractors in part two, but one sentence, numbered (11) in part one, reappeared in part two, with no number. The reason for placing the same sentence twice was to judge the reliability of the subjects who chose not to put any comments on questionnaires. As will be shown, of three subjects who did not justify

Table 1. The questionnaire

Part I.

- (1). The girl is now a student at a large university.
- (2). She don't know where to go. Help her, please!
- (3). I'm actually liking this play.
- (4). I felt I was appearing an irresolute commander to those people who were watching me more or less critically.
- (5). Finding the door unlocked, an opportunity to escape appeared at last.
- (6). I suppose he was hating the scarf and thinking I had no glamour.
- (7). I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Jody had done the same thing to Lauren that John had done to me.
- (8). They don't know nothing about it, I can assure you.
- (9). I'm understanding trace theory at last.
- (10). I was seeing him different than when he came first.
- (11). Is she still liking England?

Part II.

- (12). Peter a) is believing b) believes in ghosts these days.
- (13). Good food a) is costing b) costs more and more nowadays.
- (14). I a) am not doubting b) don't doubt your word, but...
- (15). What a) were you intending b) did you intend to do in America before we decided we weren't going there?
- (16). Never mind. But that'll be your friend, it's her all right, and no doubt it's the gentleman too but I wouldn't a) be knowing b) know his name.
- (17). And while he talked I a) was liking b) liked him more and more.
a) Is she still liking b) Does she still like/England?
- (18). The grass a) was looking b) looked beautiful, flowers were brilliant, most of the wartime damage gone.
- (19). But his only response was a slight shake of the hand and almost apologetic expression on his face, which indicated to me that he
a) was not understanding b) did not understand
- (20). He was offered to do some work on a site in the Sudan, and though he had a) been wanting b) wanted to work in Africa again, he said no.

their answers, one proved to be highly inconsistent judging the sentence *Is she still liking England?* as ungrammatical in part one and checking the progressive form for the same sentence as the only possibility in part two.

3.2. Collection of data

30 students at Slippery Rock University, Pennsylvania aged from 19 to 26 filled out the questionnaires. Most of the respondents justified their answers, and offered possible corrections. Some provided comments concerning the differences between written and spoken language pointing to the unquestionably higher flexibility of the latter. In the questionnaire the distinction was not made explicit. The subjects were to judge for themselves whether they should treat the sentences as examples of written or spoken English. This strategy may raise some objections, but was preferred to choosing one variety written or spoken, which could be an encouragement to treating all the structures as examples of casual, sloppy, but acceptable speech if the spoken variety were to be chosen, or forcing a very conservative grammaticality judgement for the written language. With the problem not made explicit, the possibility of grading the acceptability judgements made by the subjects seemed greater. Thus, for instance, in casual spoken English, the sentence *She don't know where to go* (no. (2)) is quite frequent and could be grouped on a par with *I am not doubting your word* (no. (14)) as *rather acceptable*, on the other hand in written English both sentences would probably be ruled out.

Of the 30 questionnaires filled out one was excluded from the survey for the reasons mentioned above (the high inconsistency of the answers), thus a total of 29 questionnaires were analysed. In addition, three questionnaires were incomplete (one with two, and one with a single answer missing).

4. The analysis of the data

4.1. The Distractors

Sentences (2) and (8) were marked as ungrammatical by all twenty-nine subjects. As many as four subjects graded sentence (1) as either ungrammatical or not too correct due to the placement of the adverbial *now* in between the subject and the predicate in this sentence. Seven subjects ruled out sentence (5), correctly pointing to the dangling modifier as the reason for the ungrammaticality. The aim of placing this sentence on the questionnaire was, among others, to single out the respondents with relatively conservative judgements. Despite the strong prescriptivist urge aimed at recognising and rephrasing sentences with dangling modifiers, many people find it very difficult. That is why the grammaticality judgements by the subjects who were able to recognise the problem in sentence (5), can be seen as slightly more conservative than the judgements made by the remaining students. It will be quite interesting to see then that these subjects marked many of the progressive forms used in the survey sentences as grammatical.

4.2. The results

To present the results of the survey in a binary *right/wrong* format all the *b)* answers in part one of the questionnaire were ignored. In part two, all the instances where both forms were chosen were marked as *right*. In fact, only one sentence, number (17) on the questionnaire, was checked as the only possibility by three subjects. The quantitative results of the survey are presented in Tables 2 and 3.

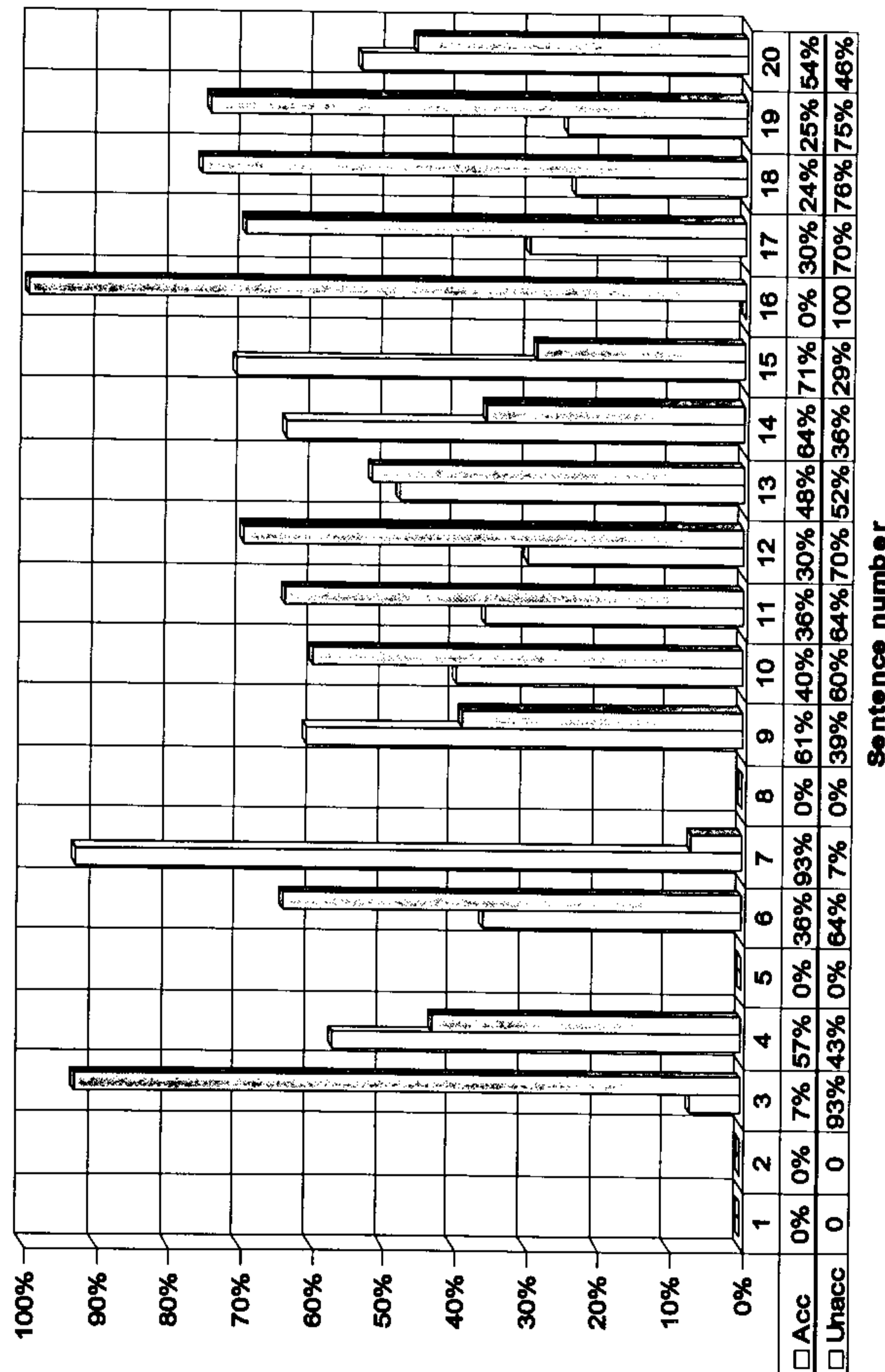
Table 2. *Acceptable/unacceptable* ratings of sentences 1 through 20

| Sentence number | acceptable | % | unacceptable | % |
|-----------------|------------|-----|--------------|------|
| 1 | – | – | – | – |
| 2 | – | – | – | – |
| 3 | 1 | 7% | 14 | 93% |
| 4 | 12 | 57% | 9 | 43% |
| 5 | – | – | – | – |
| 6 | 10 | 36% | 18 | 64% |
| 7 | 26 | 93% | 3 | 7% |
| 8 | – | – | – | – |
| 9 | 14 | 61% | 9 | 39% |
| 10 | 9 | 40% | 13 | 60% |
| 11 | 9 | 36% | 16 | 64% |
| 12 | 8 | 30% | 21 | 70% |
| 13 | 14 | 48% | 15 | 52% |
| 14 | 18 | 64% | 10 | 36% |
| 15 | 20 | 71% | 8 | 29% |
| 16 | 0 | 0% | 28 | 100% |
| 17 | 8 | 30% | 21 | 70% |
| 18 | 7 | 24% | 22 | 76% |
| 19 | 7 | 25% | 21 | 75% |
| 20 | 14 | 54% | 12 | 46% |
| | total 177 | 42% | total 240 | 58% |

5. Conclusions

As can be seen, the results of the survey point to a relatively high acceptability of stative verbs in the progressive among the respondents. In as many as six sentences the progressive forms ranged higher than their non-progressive counterparts, and on the average in as much as 42% of cases the progressive was recognized as grammatical. The judgements varied depending on the kind of verb used (compare for example sentences (7) and (16)) and also, in the case of one verb, on the context (sentences (11) and (17) both contain a progressive form of the verb *like*, but their ratings differ significantly).

Table 3. A graphic representation of the results in percentages



It must, however, be said, in the view of the data, that the very fact that stative verbs occur in the progressive in various corpora and everyday speech does not seem sufficient to postulate a fully contextual analysis of these verbs in present day American English. Many speakers still find the relevant constructions rather awkward. Thus, contrary to Kakietek's postulations, no matter how convincing a context one invents, for many native speakers the kind of the verbs used, or actually its meaning, still imposes the form of the grammatical construction in which it appears.

Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that there is a strong tendency among young native speakers to accept the 'progressive statives' in appropriate contexts. This, in turn, contradicts the traditionally held view which recognizes statives in the progressive as exceptional and commonly unacceptable.

REFERENCES

- Comrie, B. 1973. "The ergative: Variations on a theme". *Lingua* 32. 239-253.
 Comrie, B. 1976. "The syntax of action nominals: a cross-language study". *Lingua* 40. 177-201.
 Comrie, B. 1981. *Aspect: An introduction to the study of verbal aspect and related problems*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
 Hirtle, W. 1967. *The simple and the progressive forms*. Quebec: Les presses de Universite Laval.
 Hornby, A. 1954. *A guide to pattern in usage in English*. London: Oxford. University Press.
 Jespersen, O. 1931. *A modern English grammar*. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd.
 Joos, M. 1964. *The English verb*. Madison and Milwaukee: The University of Wisconsin Press.
 Kakietek, P. 1997. *The syntax and semantics of English stative verbs*. Warszawa: Energia.
 Lakoff, G. 1970. *Irregularity in syntax*. New York: Holt, Reinhart-Winston.
 Ota, A. 1963. *Tense and aspect in present day American English*. Tokyo: Kenkyusha.
 Quirk, R., S. Greenbaum, G. Leech and J. Svartvik. 1972. *A grammar of contemporary English*. London: Longman.
 Strang, B. 1968. *Modern English structure*. London: Edward Arnold.
 Scheffer, J. 1975. *The progressive in English*. Amsterdam: North Holland.
 Vendler, Z. 1967. "Verbs and times". In Vendler, Z. (ed.), *Linguistics in philosophy*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. 97-121.