

# Fachfragen

Von einem Schüler wurde kürzlich die Behauptung aufgestellt, daß an Stelle des Satzes 'the house is being built' die Form 'the house is building' gebraucht werden könne. Nachdem er über die Bedeutung des Passivs in der progressiven Aktionsart belehrt worden war, brachte er eine Grammatik mit, die den folgenden Abschnitt enthält:

„Auch im Passiv hat das Englische die Möglichkeit der Darstellung zweier Aktionsarten, der progressiven und der resultativen Aktionsart (des Verlaufs und des Abschlusses).

Statt 'the house is being built' ist auch die Form 'the house is building' möglich; sie ist entstanden aus dem Gerundium: 'the house is on building'.“ Ist meine Ansicht richtig, daß dieses Beispiel nicht hierher gehört, da es mit der progressiven Form nichts zu tun hat und die Schüler dadurch nur verwirrt werden?

Handelt es sich bei diesem Beispiel um eine Ausnahme, oder gibt es weitere Gerundialkonstruktionen dieser Art, die an Stelle des Passivs des Progressivs gebraucht werden können?

DR. MARGARETE EHLERDING ·

GELSENKIRCHEN

If this question is to be answered realistically, one must first of all realise that 'the house is building' is of very rare occurrence indeed in current English, and that most speakers would not find it acceptable in isolation. This of course is true of many instances of the passive progressive, particularly in its more complex past tense forms. The only examples that are regularly used always introduce

further context, usually in the form of a temporal adverbial. Under these circumstances, sentences like 'this estate has been being built now for three years' are acceptable, though still uncommon. One might reduce the phonetic difficulties somewhat by using the form 'this estate has been building now for three years', which is also acceptable, and which means the same thing – but one should note that in this construction one cannot introduce an agent.

It is difficult to explain this latter usage in modern terms: the explanation that it comes from the gerund is not really relevant for a study of modern English, as 'the house is on building' is quite definitely ungrammatical. I can think of three potentially relevant reasons for the usage. First, there may be a tendency to use this form because of the phonetic difficulties already mentioned: the articulation of the passive progressive forms is generally felt to be awkward. Second, there may be some influence from the superficially similar intransitive use of the verb, e. g. 'They've been building all over recently' (i. e. putting up new blocks in all parts of the town), 'The firm's been building for years' (i. e. engaged in the practice of building), or 'We're building' (as said, in a delighted tone of voice, by a builder who has just received a longed-for contract); but of course none of these sentences could take a passive transformation and retain the same sense ('The firm's been being built for years' is very different in meaning), and one does not find inanimate or 'non-personified' subjects in such sentences.

The third, and perhaps most likely reason, is that this use is common in specialist contexts, as a kind of occupational slang, as in 'The tools will be selling by the middle of next week'. This is common in business and industrial circles. The majority of transitive verbs in English do not allow this use (e. g. 'that man's being shot' does not permit 'that man's shooting', and so on), but there are a number of verbs which display a similar pattern to *build* and *sell*. Some commonly-used examples are: *show* ('The film's showing at the Odeon'), *pack* (Those books are packing very nicely'), 'dry' ('The clothes are drying well in that wind'), *open* ('The doors should be opening by now'). A useful treatment of many of these problems may be found in J. Svartvik, *On voice in the English verb* (Mouton, 1966).

DAVID CRYSTAL

# Fachfragen

In *English Grammar, Style, Phraseology* von K. Utz (Hirschgraben) finde ich folgenden Satz (Seite 90, Übung 243): "How long we might have remained in this position ... is impossible to say." Im *Teacher's Book* schlägt Utz vor, in diesen Satz 'it' einzusetzen nach der von ihm zitierten Regel: „Vor unpersönlichen Ausdrücken darf 'it' nicht ausgelassen werden. Nur nach *as* und *than* fällt es weg.“ Deutschbein-Klitscher äußern sich zu dieser Frage wie folgt (S. 209, Nr. 253, 3 Anm. 3): „Das vorausweisende 'it' darf nicht fehlen, wenn es auf einen Infinitiv hinweist, dessen Objekt an der Spitze des Satzes steht, was z. B. beim Relativpronomen die Regel ist. Der Infinitiv muß dann nachgestellt werden.“

M. E. ist in dem von Utz gebrachten Beispiel 'it' überflüssig, da es sich bei "How long we might have remained in this position" um eine *Subject Clause* handelt. Würde der Satz mit dem unpersönlichen Ausdruck beginnen, wäre 'it' unerläßlich.

In Satz 12 derselben Übung von Utz verhält es sich anders: "This is a wish which ... is impossible to fulfil." Hier ist das Objekt vorausgestellt in Form des Relativpronomens (s. Deutschbein), und 'it' ist erforderlich.

O S t R W I L L I W I L D E N · S I M M E R A T H

There are a number of cases in English where the use of 'it' is optional and not obligatory: the question is really a matter of interpretation of the sentence structure as a whole and of relative emphasis within the sentence. In the present case, is the noun clause which is going to be used in initial position the subject of the sentence or the object of the infinitive?



If the 'it' is not introduced, then the clause is being interpreted in the first way; if there is an 'it', then the second interpretation holds, with the important effect of placing the clause in a much more emphatic position. If one looks upon the use of 'it' as governing our interpretation of the rest of the sentence, and *not* the other way round, then the problem disappears. In the other example quoted the problem does not arise, as there is no such similarity between subject and object structures.

It is worth mentioning that there may be a second factor influencing our usage in this

corner of grammar, namely, the question of the *length* of the structures involved. The longer the noun clause, the more likely it is that 'it' will be introduced, e. g. "How long we might have remained in this position, with the sun beating down and the air full of dust, it is impossible to say", where the 'it' performs an important structural role, establishing the onset of the main clause, and would rarely be omitted. But of course it is uncommon for an object to be used in initial position when it reaches such a length.

DAVID CRYSTAL