

The Progressive Form Without Rules

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INTRODUCTION

Have your students ever felt frustrated in trying to learn English grammar? Have they ever felt baffled by the innumerable rules, sub-rules, special cases, caveats, exceptions and exceptions to the exceptions they are supposed to remember when using English grammar? For that matter, have you never felt the same frustration when your students—the best ones—ask you the inevitable question: Why?

Why don't we use verbs of perception in the progressive?

Why can't you use *some* in a negative sentence?

Why is it wrong to use *will* in a *when*-clause?

Such questions bear witness to an enquiring mind, something that we, as teachers, are supposed to encourage, and yet our answers rarely encourage enquiry. Our stock reply—"It's usage" or "It's a habit in English"—amounts to saying that the reason for usage is usage. The message students get from answers like these is "there is no reason for the idiosyncrasies of grammatical usage"—as though language, unlike any other phenomenon in our universe of experience, consisted of effects without causes. One can understand their frustration when confronted with this sort of nonsense. And as teachers, our own feelings of frustration often arise from a recognition, perhaps barely conscious, of our ignorance in matters grammatical. Why, indeed, do verbs of perception not take the progressive?

This is the problem I want to discuss here: how to teach grammar at intermediate and advanced levels without frustration and boredom, or more simply, how to teach grammar at these levels, because where there is frustration and boredom there is no effective teaching. The problem could be put in a positive fashion—how to teach grammar intelligently. I would like to convince you that if grammar is taught as something to be understood, rather than as something merely to be memorized, it can become one of the most interesting and educative aspects of language teaching and learning (educative in the sense of developing the intellect).

The best way to proceed will be to pick out one question we all have to teach and examine how it is presented in a typical teaching grammar. I shall then try to suggest a more satisfactory way of dealing with the problem by appealing to our understanding of the forms involved. Finally, there will be an opportunity to test some of the ideas put forth by applying them in an exercise.

LANGUAGE AS RULE-GOVERNED BEHAVIOUR

The first point I want to make is this: grammar is generally presented as an open series of arbitrary precepts, a list of unmotivated rules. A brief examination of a recently published teaching grammar intended "for intermediate through advanced students of English as a second language" (Azar 1981:81) illustrates the point quite clearly. Five rules are given to help the student distinguish between the simple present and the present progressive in their non-future uses (the future uses being treated elsewhere):

1. The simple present says that something was true in the past, it is true in the present, and will be true in the future. It is used for *general statements of fact*.
2. The simple present is used to express *habitual or everyday activity*.
3. Certain verbs are not used in the progressive tenses. (See 3-12.) With these verbs, the simple present may indicate a situation that exists right now, at the moment of speaking.
4. The present progressive expresses an activity that is *in progress at the moment of speaking*. It began in the recent past, is continuing at present, and will probably end at some point in the future.
5. Often the activity is of a general nature: something generally in progress this week, this month, this year.

The objection to this way of teaching is that no attempt is made to help the student see the relationship between the rules, between, say, "general statements of fact" and "habitual or everyday activity". Similarly, no indication is given of the link between either of these meanings of the simple form and the third one, "a situation that exists right now". In other words, here we have three separate, apparently unconnected facts of usage which can only strike the student as unmotivated, arbitrary rules to be learned by heart. Indeed, if one seeks an explanation as to why certain verbs are not used in the progressive, the grammar remains mute, refusing to give any reasons, to explain, to generalize. Because the grammar does not yet get beyond the particulars of usage, the list of rules is necessarily incomplete in the sense that it does not cover certain areas of usage which are by no means uncommon or literary. For example, the simple form in an expression like:

He shoots! He scores!

can hardly be said to express a general statement of fact, a habitual activity or a present situation. In a

volume intended for intermediate and advanced students, this failure to account for common areas of usage is a serious shortcoming.

Equally serious is the fact that the grammar does not help the student to distinguish with any precision between the types of event expressed by simple and progressive respectively. How could a student, or a teacher for that matter, tell the difference between "habitual or everyday activity" as in:

I study for two hours every night.

and "activity of a general nature" as in:

John is trying to improve his work habits.

both of which are given as illustrative examples in the grammar? Indeed, one could substitute the progressive in the former sentence:

I am studying for two hours every night.

and the simple form in the latter:

John tries to improve his work habits.

What would the difference between simple and progressive be in each case here? I am not saying that there is no difference of meaning here—on the contrary. (We shall examine this difference later.) But I am saying that the rules given here are of little help in distinguishing between such uses, and that such rules are, therefore, inadequate for intermediate and advanced students.

From the point of view of rules to be learned by the student, things get even worse when we consider those exceptional verbs that are not used in the progressive. We are given a list of twenty-eight such verbs, and the list is by no means complete. Besides, for seven of these verbs the student is confronted with "other uses", that is, contexts where they are used in the progressive (again, one could easily provide more of these exceptions to the exceptions). How is the student expected to learn all these? Remember that this is a grammar for "intermediate through advanced" levels, so that the teacher's task is to introduce the student to more and more of such distinctions of usage. Where does it all end? How much can students take of this laying-down of rules? I am inclined to think that, in presenting grammar as governed by rules in this way, we very rarely, if ever, bring students to an intermediate, let alone advanced, level simply because neither they nor we can memorize the number of facts of usage necessary to do so.

x What has gone wrong here? Why is it that in teaching the simple and progressive tenses we end up with fuzzy distinctions and a plethora of particular facts which no intelligent student will assimilate? To my mind, it is the erroneous role attributed to rules which leads to the problem, the belief that usage is somehow governed or determined by rules. This belief puts

things the wrong way round, because if we examine our idea of what a language rule is we see where a form like the progressive is found. As a consequence, the point of view that usage (i.e., contexts) determines rules could be argued more plausibly than the usual view that rules determine usage. From this it follows that, as a pedagogical device, rules have the fatal disadvantage of being innumerable. There is no limit to the number of rules required to describe the use of the progressive because there is no limit to the number and diversity of contexts in which a form like the progressive may be found.

For most teachers this is probably an astonishing, not to say highly questionable, stance to adopt. After all, if it is true that rules result from usage and not usage from rules, then why do grammarians continue to present usage as if it were governed by rules? Why do they assume that language is a matter of *rule-governed behaviour*? In the final analysis, this attitude results from viewing language in only one of its dimensions, as a set of sentences. In a sentence, of course, a form like the progressive can be seen only in its relations with what accompanies it, can be seen only from the point of view of its use or function. However, unless the grammarian or linguist attempts to view language in its other necessary dimension, where a form can be seen in and for itself before any use in a sentence, then we must expect to have nothing but usage-bound grammars with all their rules and exceptions. Language will continue to be considered rule-governed behaviour and grammars will go on being limited to describing usage in discourse in terms of rules, constraints, exceptions and all the rest of it, as long as we make no attempt to discern a form's nature as it exists prior to the form's functions.

At this point, teachers may wish to raise the objection that when they studied linguistics they were taught that language is governed by rules, or at least can be described by means of rules. To this I would reply that if you were taught only the dimension of a form's uses, but not the dimension of the form in itself, if your linguistics was concerned only with the functions but not with the nature of language entities, then the view of language you were taught is incomplete. If your linguistic studies were concerned only with discourse, your training is inadequate in this respect and the consequences for the teaching of grammar are anything but promising.

Does this mean that rules are of no use at all? Not necessarily. At an elementary level, a rule may well provide an expedient approximation, a useful stop-gap to enable students to begin employing the language. Even at a more advanced level we may have to resort to describing how a form is used if our background in grammar, our linguistic training, fails to give us a knowledge of the nature of the form. If we cannot do any better, we use rules, of course, but we

should recognize that the use of a rule in teaching is a confession of ignorance, ignorance of the nature of the form concerned. We must realize that a rule of usage can never provide an explanation of usage because it describes what results from using a form, not what brings about the use of the form.

MEANING-EXPRESSING ACTIVITY

What then? If the use of a form cannot be satisfactorily taught at more advanced levels by means of rules describing usage, if we are misguided in regarding language as rule-governed behaviour, what is the alternative? I would submit that the view of language as *meaning-expressing activity* provides a far more satisfactory basis both for analyzing and for teaching language. In other words, I maintain that the whole aim of any use of language is to say something about something, to express our ideas, feelings, impressions, et cetera, about some facet of our experience. From this postulate—and it might be remarked in passing that the postulate is far from being implausible—from this postulate it follows that the use of a given word or grammatical form can be justified, explained, only in terms of the meaning it contributes to the making of the sentence. Although such an approach is so far from being revolutionary that it might be considered simply common sense, it does entail a most demanding requirement: that the teacher (and *a fortiori* the writer of the text book) have a clear view of the meaning of a form like the progressive, the meaning it brings to any and every verb where it is used. Once teachers have a clear view of this meaning, which is the motivating factor in the use of the form, they are in a position to explain why the form is used in such-and-such circumstances, but not in others. They will be able to explain, for example, why the progressive form can express activity in progress at the moment of speaking but not habitual or everyday activity. And as students deepen their understanding of this underlying meaning potential, they will become more and more aware of the possibilities open to the form and will gradually develop a finer and finer appreciation of the shades of meaning, the delicate nuances and expressive effects that the form can bring to the sentence. They will, for example, soon see why the progressive may be used with the verb *to think* in:

I am thinking about this grammar.

with the sense of “thoughts going through my mind right now” but not in:

I think he is a kind man.

with the sense of “believe”, as Azar points out (p. 82). And they will take a certain pleasure in learning to distinguish between the meanings of sentences like:

John is trying to improve his work habits.

John tries to improve his work habits.

As you can see, I am making a very audacious, not to say rash, claim: that all the uses of a grammatical form like the progressive can be explained in terms of the one underlying meaning of that form. In other words, I am claiming that the speaker, or writer, uses a form not because of some rule, but because it somehow shapes or molds the particular lexical meaning of the word with its own grammatical meaning. And I shall try to make good this claim by means of a few representative examples—space unfortunately does not permit an extensive examination of usage—but before doing so, I want to pause for a moment to examine a little more closely this notion I have evoked—the meaning of a form.

What I have in mind is the grammatical meaning of the form in itself, independent both of the verb's particular lexical meaning and of the particular context in which it is used. Of course we can never observe the progressive form isolated from lexical meaning and context, so the meaning I am talking about cannot be discerned through direct observation, but only through analysis. Now students cannot be expected to work out this meaning for themselves, nor can teachers, because this analysis is the work of grammarians, of those theorizing grammarians we call linguists. To discern with the mind's eye what cannot be observed directly in physical or mental reality is the job of science. Notice, however, that in proposing that the meaning of the form-in-itself is both knowable by the analyst and known subconsciously by native speakers in such a way as to guide and condition their use of the form, I am proposing that a form like the progressive really does exist somehow prior to any use in actual sentences, as a sort of permanent potential available to the speaker whenever he wants to use it. And when the speaker wants to use it, he actualizes this one grammatical potentiality in accordance with the particular lexical meaning of the verb and the sentence to be constructed.

Thus, what provides the explanatory principle for the use of a form, what lies behind and permits the various nuances and expressive effects which a form gives rise to, is its *potential grammatical meaning*. And so, to understand the idiosyncracies of usage of the progressive we shall appeal, not to a battery of rules, but to the meaning potential of the form and the way it combines with other elements to constitute the meaning of the sentence. The same is true, of course, for the simple form and for each of the other forms that go to make up the verb system. In fact, the system of the verb is a system of grammatical meanings of surprising elegance. Here it is that we find that other dimension of language, the dimension that is missed if we restrict our view to the perceivable dimension of

usage in discourse. Only if we turn our mind's eye to the conceivable dimension of the mental systems in tongue can we hope to have a complete view of language.

Thus, it can be seen that the general way we view language, according to one dimension or according to two dimensions, is cardinal in the sense that how we view each of the particular questions arising in our teaching hinges on it. That is, depending on whether we adopt a theory that says usage is all, or one that says there is an underlying form-in-itself which conditions usage, our idea of how to teach grammar will be either rule-oriented or meaning-oriented. However, since our concern here is not with a general theory of language (for further details, see Guillaume 1973), let us get back to the matter at hand, the meaningful teaching of the progressive form.

PROGRESSIVE AND SIMPLE FORMS

In order to teach the progressive meaningfully, one must, of course, have a clear view of the meaning it brings to the verb, the manner in which it molds or shapes the lexical meaning of the verb. This view can be gained most readily by way of contrast: we shall contrast the progressive with the simple in this respect.

To give a fairly accurate idea of the progressive, we can present it as depicting the process evoked by the verb as only partly realized, as divided between an already-accomplished portion and a not-yet-accomplished portion. This, of course, provides a view of an event which is open to further development, which may undergo some change, before it reaches its end. To help students visualize this view of an action, the following diagram is convenient:



This schema shows an action divided at some point between its beginning (B) and its end (E) so that we see only part of the event, an accomplished portion; the remainder of the event is always left in abeyance: it may or may not be carried to completion. This manner of depicting an event can be illustrated by the following common example, where the progressive expresses a divided action in the past:

At midnight we were eating a sandwich.

Here the progressive tells us that the action had started, but was not completed, at midnight. The important point to remember about the progressive, then, is that it always presents part of an action; it evokes an action as incomplete.

The simple form, on the other hand, provides a view of the whole realization of an action, as the following diagram suggests:



The simple form evokes the accomplishment of an action from beginning to end; it depicts a complete actualization, leaving no room for further development. Thus, in the following example:

At midnight we ate a sandwich.

the simple form evokes the whole action since it tells us that the action started at midnight and unfolded to its end thereafter. The important point to remember here, then, is that the simple form always presents an action as a whole, as something complete.

Thus, the distinction between simple and progressive would seem to be based on that between whole and part, on representing an action as complete or incomplete. This enables us to understand the following sentence:

When the car broke down, we were driving to the village.

as meaning that the breakdown occurred after we had driven part of the way but before we reached the village. This approach also explains why the following sentence does not make much sense:

**When the car broke down, we drove to the village.*

It suggests that we drove our car after it broke down. Again, if we accept that the simple evokes the whole duration of an action and the progressive only part of it, we see why the next two sentences are not equally acceptable:

He walked to the window and opened it.

**He was walking to the window and opened it.*

In the first sentence, the simple form *walked* indicates that the subject got to the end of the action and so was in a position to undertake the subsequent action, opening the window. In the second sentence, however, the progressive leaves the subject in the middle of the action and so gives us the incongruous image of him opening the window before reaching it.

So far, so good. Life as a grammarian and teacher of English would be relatively simple if all verbs conformed to this pattern, but they do not. For example, we can say, using the simple form:

At midnight we were in the kitchen.

and this does not mean that the event "being in the kitchen" began at midnight and unfolded to its end at some time thereafter. On the contrary, it says that we were already there at that moment, thereby implying that we had arrived in the kitchen some time before midnight, but it does not say whether we remained there for any length of time after midnight. In other words, the verb *were* in this sentence does not evoke

the whole duration of the event but only that portion of it that coincides with the moment referred to in the past: midnight. The following diagram helps to suggest this image:



Similarly, in:

When the car broke down, we were on the freeway.

the event "being on the freeway" is seen as existing at the moment of the breakdown, though we must assume it began at some point before and may well have continued for a certain time afterwards. Thus, we can only conclude that the verb does not evoke the whole of the event's duration. And this poses a problem for the neat little distinction between simple and progressive worked out above.

The problem is one encountered by any grammarian who tries to deal with the simple and progressive forms, and can be stated as follows: whereas in many cases the simple evokes an event from beginning to end, and in this respect contrasts markedly with the progressive, which always evokes an incomplete event, in other cases the simple form does not evoke an event from its beginning to its end. Should we then say that in these cases the simple evokes an incomplete event? But this will not do either because the very idea of suggesting that "being in the kitchen" is incomplete at midnight (in the sense that "eating a sandwich" is incomplete at midnight in the other sentence) sounds ludicrous; and to say that "being on the freeway" is somehow incomplete at the moment of the breakdown would make no sense at all, even though "driving to the village" (as expressed by the progressive in a previous example) is felt to be incomplete at that moment. We can only conclude that there is some difference between the events expressed in these sentences by means of the simple form *were*, and those expressed by the progressive *were eating* and *were driving*. A moment's reflection will suffice to suggest to you that we are here confronted with two different ways of presenting a process and this gives rise to two distinct types of event: states and actions. What characterizes an action is that it involves some sort of development or change in the course of its duration, so that if it is interrupted it will appear to be incomplete since the development involved has not reached its end. What characterizes a state, on the other hand, is that there is no development or change involved in the course of its duration, so that, if it is interrupted, it will not appear to be incomplete since there can be no development of the state beyond that point. In fact, every instance of the existence of a state is identical to every other instance. This is why it seems to be a contradiction of terms to

speak of "an incomplete state": no matter how much or how little of its duration you evoke, a state is always complete in itself. A state can only be seen as a whole.

What is the outcome of all this insofar as the progressive form is concerned? If a state can never be seen as incomplete, and if the progressive can evoke events only as incomplete, then it follows that an event represented as a state cannot be expressed by means of the progressive. Or, if you prefer, the progressive can express only events represented as actions, as involving change and development (or the possibility thereof) at some point in their duration. And this, I would maintain, is borne out by the facts: whenever the progressive is used, there is an impression of further possible development, of change in the offing, of the possibility of adding something to that part of the action that has already been actualized. On the other hand, whenever the simple form is used, there is no impression of further possible development, of change in the offing, of the possibility of adding something, and this because the simple form evokes an event either as a state, thereby excluding any possibility of development, or as an action from beginning to end, thereby exhausting all possibility of development. Thus, it seems that the opposition between part and whole, between incomplete and complete, between an event seen as lacking something and an event seen as integral does lie at the basis of the difference between the progressive and simple forms.

TEACHING THE PROGRESSIVE

In proposing this as the underlying meaning distinction between the two forms, I am not suggesting that it makes teaching easy, that all you have to do is announce to your class this part/whole opposition and the job is done. Anyone who has experience in teaching knows that there is no magic formula to make teaching easy. All I claim is that this approach makes teaching possible.

Once teachers grasp the meaning each form imprints on the lexical matter of the verb, they must devise ways and means of getting their students to grasp it. Nor is this a matter of grasping it intellectually only, of seeing it in the abstract, but rather of getting the "feel" of it with as many verbs as possible, of appreciating the expressive effect it brings to numerous and varied contexts. One way of doing this is through exercises of the following type:

In each of the following sentences, indicate if it is possible to use the form in parentheses. Where it is possible, describe the difference in meaning between the two sentences; where not possible, explain why.

1. Water *consists* (*is consisting*) of hydrogen and oxygen.

2. The Russian team has dropped 11 players, many of whom *are pushing (push)* into their mid-thirties.
3. He *shoots (is shooting)!* He *scores (is scoring)!*
4. He *goes (is going)* into the corner!
5. I *study (am studying)* for two hours every night.
6. John *is trying (tries)* to improve his work habits.
7. I *swear (am swearing)* to tell the truth.
8. She *is (is being)* awkward.
9. Ann *speaks (is speaking)* three languages.
10. Look, it's *floating (floats)!*
11. At last I'm *seeing (see)* the Mona Lisa.
12. I *forget (am forgetting)* your name.

In Sentence 1, which is taken from Azar, the progressive form would not be acceptable. The reason for this is that *consists* expresses an event which involves no development or change; that is a state, which, as we have seen, cannot be incomplete because at whatever moment it is evoked (here, the present moment) it is seen as a whole. For a fuller discussion of this use, see my study on the simple and progressive forms (Hirtle 1967:51-55).

In Sentence 2 it would not be possible to use the simple form *push*. The reason for this is that the sentence expresses an event seen as an action (not a state) which at the moment of speaking is incomplete: the players have not yet reached their mid-thirties. It is this view of the event as incomplete which calls for the progressive and excludes the simple form.

In the third example, taken from a hockey broadcast, the progressive form would not be appropriate. Although both *shoots* and *scores* evoke their events as actions going on at the moment of speaking, in this case each of the actions is extremely rapid, so rapid in fact that the commentator has no chance of mentally interrupting them and so he has no choice but to represent them from beginning to end. As a consequence, he sees the whole event and so uses the simple form here.

Sentence 4 is also taken from a hockey broadcast. Here, however, it would be possible to use the progressive *is going*, although this would occasion a slightly different expressive effect. With the simple form the sentence evokes a rapid action seen from beginning to end, as in the example we have just discussed. With the progressive, on the other hand, the action would be seen as incomplete: the subject would be depicted as on his way to the corner with the possibility that he may not get there.

In Sentence 5 the simple form expresses "habitual or everyday activity", as Azar points out. The progressive *am studying* would also be possible here, but

would suggest that the two-hour-a-night schedule is something temporary, that it may or may not go on. That is, the progressive would evoke an incomplete series of occurrences. The simple form, on the other hand, expresses the event as a habit, a custom, which by definition cannot be incomplete. It evokes the possibility of an unlimited number of occurrences. A more detailed account of this sort of usage is to be found in my study (1967: 47-50, 61-62).

Sentence 6, also taken from Azar, is of the same sort. The progressive evokes the subject in the midst of repeated attempts to improve, but whether he will continue his efforts or not is left open to question: the series of occurrences is seen as incomplete. On the other hand, the simple form *tries* would bring in a suggestion of the futility of his efforts, a suggestion which can be seen to arise from the underlying meaning of the simple form in this context. Thus, to be able to view the trying as a habit, as the possibility of an unlimited number of occurrences, the speaker must envisage it with no possibility of non-occurrence, hence with no chance of success (which would put an end to the trying) or of being abandoned.

It is not necessary to treat each of the remaining sentences here since readers can probably work out for themselves the expressive effect of each one and relate it back to the potential meaning of the form. In any case, each use has been discussed in Hirtle (1967: 36-38, 82-83, 50-51, 52-54, 70-74, 76-78). It will be seen that it is the underlying impression of completeness or incompleteness in the particular context which gives rise to the observable expressive effect. That is, it is the nature of the form (its potential meaning) which conditions its use or function (the particular contextual nuance it evokes) in each case.

A word of caution is in order concerning the exercise we have just examined. It has been presented purely for illustrative purposes and so provides examples from various areas of usage. Before presenting an exercise with such diversity in the classroom, each such area should, of course, be explored by means of at least one exercise in order to make students sensitive to its particular expressive effects. Once they get the "feel" of a given use, students benefit from and even enjoy looking for their own examples of it in their reading and listening, thereby enhancing their awareness of the subtleties of the form.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, I should like to summarize what I have tried to do, and to make a few general remarks on the teaching of grammar. First of all, I have tried to show that any attempt to teach the progressive form by describing the circumstances in which it is used is doomed to fail. If pursued far enough to be useful to more advanced students, this approach leads to so many separate rules, exceptions and the like that the

memory and patience of both student and teacher are taxed beyond the limit, and the task is abandoned. When we do use rules to teach some point of grammar, it is really a confession of our own ignorance since it amounts to saying "I do not know the potential meaning of the form, the real reason we use it in this way." Consequently, our teaching will be satisfactory only to the extent that grammarians provide us with a clear view of the potential meaning of each form.

I have also attempted to show that it is possible to teach the use of a grammatical form by showing how its potential meaning is actualized in many different contexts to give various senses and expressive effects. There are two advantages to be drawn from this manner of teaching. First, by encouraging students to make subtler and subtler distinctions of meaning, we make them more and more sensitive to English, and this is surely the practical aim of language teaching. Secondly, making them use their intelligence and not just their memory gives an intellectual challenge to the grammar class. Each new example is an invitation to the student to find the link between the particular sense of the verb in that sentence and the general meaning potential underlying all uses of the form. Grammar can thus be interesting and intellectually stimulating, surely the general aim of all teaching.

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