

Social and Functional Uses of the Present Progressive

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The last decade in ESL/EFL teaching has seen a movement away from grammar-based to notion/function-based syllabus design and communicative methodology. The focus of instruction has been appropriateness of use. However, for learners to become proficient users they need to acquire both the grammatical (including syntax, phonology and semantics) system of English and the functional system (i.e., how the linguistic resources are used in particular contexts). This requires that teachers and textbooks present language not as isolated lists of either grammatical rules or functions, but as an integrated system. To do this, we need a better understanding of the relationship between form and function. As there is no one-to-one correspondence between structure and use, so too there is no one-to-one correspondence between one function and surface representation. The relationship is far more complex. As a start in this direction, I examined the use of the present progressive in real world situations to determine what functions it fulfills in actual use.

Traditional Descriptions

Traditionally, present progressive has been considered easy to teach since it is easy to demonstrate and is regular in form. Before examining its actual use, I examined how the present progressive functions in textbooks and grammar books.

Textbook Descriptions

In grammar-based courses, the present progressive is usually presented by asking students what various people are doing at that time. Thus, we have drills such as...

Teacher: What am I doing? (while pacing up and down the room)

Student: You're walking.

Teacher: What is Juan doing? (pointing to a student who is reading a book)

Student: He's reading.

Similar drills revolve around describing pictures in texts or from magazines. From such practice, students are led to believe that the present progressive is used to describe an action going on at the moment of description and that the action is probably visible to both speaker and hearer.

Grammar Book Descriptions

According to Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik (1985, p. 198),

The meaning of the progressive can be separated into three components, not all of which need to be present in a given instance:

1. the happening has DURATION
2. the happening has LIMITED duration
3. the happening is NOT NECESSARILY COMPLETE.

According to Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1983, p. 63), the present progressive is used for (i) event/action in progress, (ii) temporary activity, (iii) repetition or iteration in a series of similar ongoing activities, (iv) future, and (v) emotional comment on present habit (usually co-occurring with 'always' or 'forever').

The Data

Over a period of six months, I collected every use of the present progressive I consciously heard. The data come from casual conversations, meetings, and service encounters. All aspects of the context in which the example occurred were recorded. I then categorized the data according to function.

Functions of the Present Progressive

The following list of functions is not necessarily exhaustive, but represents the range of functions for which the present progressive is used in actual speech. It demonstrates that this aspect carries affective meaning, and almost always negative affect; it does not simply describe an ongoing action. The examples below come from real data, but have been presented without the false starts, pauses etc. that actually occurred. In each example, the present progressive form is underlined.

Accusing (with request)

The present progressive's use for accusing can take the form "What are you doing?" As has been well documented in research on classroom language (e.g., Cazden, John, and Hymes, 1972), the

speaker is not asking an information question, but is accusing the person of some wrongdoing, and often also requesting the person cease the wrongdoing. In the second example below, the speaker is accusing B of wrongdoing, but also demanding an explanation.

1. Teacher: Johnny, what are you doing?
Johnny: Nothing.
Teacher: You were talking. You should have been listening.
2. A: What're you looking at me like that for?
B: There's something different about you, but I don't know what it is. Is that a new dress?
A: No.
B: Oh. I know. It's your hair. You've had it cut.
A: No.
B: I give up.
A: I've lost 10 pounds.

Apologizing

In example 3, the teacher is expressing intention, but is also apologizing that she will not be able to accompany the students back since she is going a different way.

3. Teacher: I'm going this way. Do you all know how to get back?

Complaining

Complaining was the major use of the present progressive in the data. However, most examples include an additional function. In example 4, there are only complaints, made at a homeowners meeting that was discussing the traffic problems in the neighborhood. Example 5, on the other hand, is a complaint and a

request to do something about it, similar to example 1 above, while example 6 demonstrates one conventional way of complaining about pain.

4. A: They're constantly speeding on Macintosh

B: They're just doing a survey. They're doing a survey for signs.

A: It means directing all the traffic through one street.

B: That's already happening in Apple Creek.

5. Mother: Why are you standing there dripping water on the carpet?

Child: Sorry. I'll go get changed.

6. A: How're you feeling?

B: Not too good. My tooth's bothering me.

A: Why don't you go to the dentist?

B: I hate going to the dentist.

A: Me too. But, if your tooth's troubling you . . .

Explaining

In example 7, the father is accusing someone of making a mess and complaining about it, but his wife also interprets it as a request for an explanation and so she responds using the present progressive to explain.

7. Father: What's this mess? (said in the yard as he's about to mow lawn)

Mother: Oh, the kids're building a tree house.

Expressing Surprise

Example 8, while it takes the form of the accusations discussed earlier was used in a telephone conversation between A and

B. B had just received a phone call from A., in which she said she was at a resort several hundred miles away. B did not know A was going there and, in fact, was expecting A and her husband for dinner the next week. Thus, B expresses surprise. She is neither complaining nor accusing since the purpose of A's phone call was to say they wouldn't be coming for dinner.

8. A: It's Susan. I'm calling from Ventura.

B: What are you doing up there?

Having fun away from the kids, I guess?

A: Yes. It's really great down here. I thought I'd better let you know that we wouldn't be able to see you this week.

Expressing Intention

Often the present progressive is used only for expressing intention and does not carry any additional affective meaning such as in the apology in example 3. This use of the present progressive is discussed in textbooks and grammar books as a means of expressing future.

9. A: We're going to Guido's tonight. I hear it's a really great restaurant.

Giving Excuse

In example 10, the secretary uses the present progressive to indicate why she doesn't know when John will be back.

10. A: Can I speak to John?

B: He's not in right now.

A: Oh. This is Bill. When'll he be back?

B: I'm not sure. He's having lunch with a client. Can I take a message?

Pre-sequences

A major use of the present progressive in these data was as a pre-sequence. Pre-sequences are used as introductions to a speech act. Two types of pre-sequences occur: introducing a request and introducing an offer.

a) Introducing a Request

In example 11, A asks the question as a pre-sequence to making a request that the listener take something to Encina Hall for him. In example 12, the conventional use of "Are you doing anything?" is used as a pre-sequence to requesting help. In example 13, the pre-sequence takes the form of giving information.

11. A: Are you going over to Encina Hall again?
 B: No. I just went over to get the checks. It was a once in a lifetime thing.
 A: Oh. I just asked because...
12. A: Are you doing anything?
 B: Nothing important. Why?
 A: Do you think you could help me...
13. A: I'm looking for the cane picnic baskets that were advertised. Can you tell me where they are?
 B: Yes. They're in housewares on the second floor.

b) Introducing an Offer

As well as functioning as a pre-sequence to a request, the present progressive can also be used as a pre-sequence to an offer as in example 14.

14. A: What're you doing this weekend?

B: Oh. I've got a lot of work to do.

A: Why don't you come camping with us?

B: To tell you the truth, I really hate camping.

Making an Offer

Example 15 differs from introducing an offer since no actual offer was made. "I'm going up to the store now" acts as an offer by itself. This is probably possible only because this was a conversation between husband and wife and so could rely on implicit meanings. In this particular case, the husband and wife have previous conversations on which to draw, conversations in which whoever went to the store asked whether the other person needed anything. Thus, in this case, "I'm going to the store now" was sufficient for the husband to reply by asking her to buy some wine.

15. A: I'm going up to the store now.
 B: Can you get some wine? We're almost out.

Specific to Genre

Some uses are specific to the particular genre, including telephoning, writing postcards, and making letter tapes.

(i) Telephone: Establishing Purpose

One special use of the present progressive is on the telephone, where it functions as a pre-sequence to a request or as the request itself. It can function as the request itself because it has become semi-conventionalized. Thus, it is better treated separately from the pre-sequences described above.

16. A: I'm calling about your advertisement for a cook.

17. A: Berry Manufacturing Company.

B: I'm enquiring about the job as assembler.

A: We're setting up interviews for that. I could have you come in today about 6:30 or tomorrow around 10:30.

B: 6:30 would be fine.

A: All right. May I have your name please?

Notice also here the use of "We're setting up interviews", which as Quirk et al. state, must be treated separately from expressing intention (example 9) since it describes an event for which preparations are already underway. In other words, the company does not intend to set up interviews; they are already in the process of doing so.

(ii) Postcard: Giving Information

Writing postcards is one conventionalized use of the present progressive that simply describes an ongoing activity or an intended one.

18. We're at the Grand Canyon. We're staying at the lodge. It's really marvelous. It's a bit cold, though. Have done lots of hiking. Tomorrow we're taking a hike down the canyon. Next stop Zion.

(iii) Letter Tape: Setting the Scene

In speaking onto tape as a letter, speakers often describe the setting for the listener as in example 19.

19. A: I'm sitting in the yard, watching the birds...

Set Phrases

In addition to the above functions, are set phrases that act as phatic communication. These include:

How're you feeling?

How're you/things going?

What're you doing?

Conclusion

From this partial analysis of the functions of the present progressive, we can see that there is no one-to-one correspondence between form and function. Further, we can see that traditional descriptions of this aspect fail to account for the range of functions it performs in actual use. In both our teaching and our textbooks, we need to cover the range of uses so that students do not assume that present progressive merely describes an action going on at present or expresses future. Further, this analysis shows that we need to work with authentic material or material based on authentic use. The examples given here could be used as dialogues in teaching the particular functions and the present progressive. Further, we need to expand this analysis and we also need to determine the function of other syntactic forms.

References

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