

The use of the English progressive with verbs of communication: An epistemic analysis

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The semantics of the English progressive is typically analyzed in terms of aspecto-temporal notions such as duration or ongoingness, in contrast with its simplex counterpart, which is said to involve a complete viewpoint on a situation that is stable over time. Yet this distinction in terms of purely aspecto-temporal notions is difficult to maintain if we consider the following examples featuring verbs of communication (attested in the spoken component of the Corpus of Contemporary American English), in which the simple present and the present progressive appear to be interchangeable without there being an aspectual meaning difference:

- (1) a) *All I **am saying** is that if Israel will decide to act, there will be sufficient coordination*
b) *All I **say** is, let this court contest play itself out and I think the state Supreme Court decision may well be dispositive.*
- (2) a) *Is that why you're **asking** for presidential involvement?*
b) *Yes. I -- I understand why you **ask** that question, but I just don't -- I just -- to me, I was there.*
- (3) a) *I'm **telling** you a more tightknit group of people you will be hard pressed to find, strong, proud, caring people with community at its core.*
b) *I **tell** you, the Democrats are going to be watching this very closely.*

It is remarkable that other types of dynamic verb do not appear to exhibit this type of variation (*?All I **do** at this moment is helping out; ?I don't understand why you **speak** to me here; ?I'm promising you, we'll be watching this closely*).

In our study, we investigate these noteworthy aspectual characteristics of *say*, *tell* and *ask* in English on the basis of samples of 200 progressive occurrences per verb in the COCA corpus. For each progressive token, we look for a minimally different simplex counterpart so as to form minimal pairs. We demonstrate that verbs of communication are special in that they often do not appear in reports of concurrent events. In (2), for instance, the asking actually took place right before being reported, and in (1) the speaker is summarizing what (s)he said previously. Thus, while most reports of (present-time) ongoing events obligatorily require the use of the progressive in English, such a temporally motivated obligation is typically lacking with verbs of communication. Why, then, do speakers of English still resort to the progressive with these verbs? The answer to this question lies in another special feature of verbs of communication: they typically come with complements that carry information that is important in the discourse, i.e. reports of what someone has said, told, asked etc. This is the kind of information that speakers typically like to zoom in on, and we argue that the progressive constitutes the excellent grammatical tool to do so, since it construes situations as phenomenal, and thus not entirely predictable (Goldsmith & Woisetschlaeger 1982; De Wit & Brisard 2014). In other words, in order to analyze the aspectual variation displayed in our corpus-based minimal pairs, we rely on cognitive analyses according to which aspectual meaning is not (primarily) temporal, but rather epistemic (De Wit 2017). In our talk, we discuss the various interpretive, performative and narrative usage types of progressive *say*, *tell* and *ask* where this epistemic function is specifically exploited.

References

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