

The indefinite use of the Present Perfect Progressive and its emotional effects

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In comparison with the Present Perfect (PP), the Present Perfect Progressive (PPP) has not received so much attention (e.g. Depraetere and Reed (D&R) 2000; Williams 2002). It has been said that the indefinite use—describing a situation that has occurred before speech time (S)—of the PPP often expresses “explanatory” functions (D&R 2000), as in *I have been working all day*, and carries strong emotions like surprise, disgust, impatience (Jespersen 1961; Onions 1932), as in *Tom has been painting the ceiling. (I couldn't sleep well, so I'm irritated now.)*; this is not the case with the indefinite use of the PP. Few studies have systematically considered these points. This paper explores why the indefinite use of the PPP tends to show such emotional effects based on the general theory of tense proposed by Wada (2001, 2009, 2013), which has systematically analyzed the PP and other tense forms in English.

In this theory, auxiliary verbs denote their own event times and the past participle refers to a situation prior to a certain time. The PP has a basic temporal schema where the event time of the past participle (E₂) is prior to that of perfect *have* (E₁), which coincides with S. Two cognitive criteria are operative in distinguishing four subcategories of the PP, but what is relevant here is the Perfective-Continuous criterion, which describes the relation between the two event times with the concepts of separation and merger. In the case of separation, E₂ is separate from (prior to) E₁, which coincides with S and receives a temporal focus (TF), a focus directed at the most salient part of a temporal schema (cf. Langacker's “profile”). This type of PP indicates either a direct resultant state of the situation involved (i.e. the entailment type) or an indirect one (i.e. the conversational implicature type). In the case of merger, E₂ continues up to E₁, which coincides with S and receives a TF; the state (E₁) implied at S is illustrated in *I've lived in this neighbourhood since I was a kid (and this is where I'm living now)*.

Considered along these lines, the basic temporal schema of the PPP has the event times of perfect *have* (E₁), past participle *been* (E₂) and present participle *-ing* (E₃). E₂ is prior to E₁, which coincides with S. E₃ is unbounded because the present participle expresses imperfectivity (Langacker 2008). E₂ merely serves as the time of orientation for E₃ because progressive *be* refers to a schematic situation (Langacker 2008). On these bases, we first present the temporal schema of the continuative use. A situation associated with E₃ can extend into the future due to its imperfectivity and E₃ continues up to S when it merges with E₁. The PPP must be used for past situations described by non-stative verbs to reach S. Now we present the temporal schema of the indefinite use. In this use, to represent the past situations as bounded before S, we have two options: the PP and the PPP. The PP is the unmarked choice and the resultant state (E₁) at S is foregrounded because E₁ receives a TF. Thus, to differentiate the two indefinite uses, the speaker of the PPP—the marked choice—usually pays his/her attention to the past situation, the TF being directed at that part of E₃ encompassing E₂. E₃ connects only indirectly with E₁ via E₂ and there is no guarantee that the past situation itself is completed; E₁ thus cannot describe a direct resultant state but rather an indirect one. The TF's being directed at E₃, together with the existence of an indirect resultant state at S, causes the speaker to zoom in on the past situation in reference to the state at S. For this reason, explanatory effects arise showing how the past situation is related to the speech situation. Because the PPP involves progressive aspect, Williams's (2002) notion of “susceptibility to change”, i.e. a driving force to use progressive aspect, comes into play. What is susceptible to change is usually linked with tentativeness and thus unstability and can, in terms of semantic iconicity, motivate the effect of strong emotions, which are usually tentative and thus unstable. In this way, the indefinite use of the PPP can express explanatory functions and convey implications such as strong emotions at S, i.e. ones deriving from the indirect resultant state at S.

Selected References

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