

TEACHING THE PROGRESSIVE

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Introduction

It is no secret that, by and large, native speakers of English know surprisingly little about the grammar of their mother tongue. Grammar is rarely taught in schools nowadays in the English-speaking world, and when it does occur, usually involves learning a simplified nomenclature for identifying parts of speech and the subsequent parsing of sentences in isolation, with little regard for how any of this could possibly be meaningful to the students involved. Most native English speakers acquire more knowledge about English grammatical structure through learning a second language themselves than they ever did during their own formal education.

The massive borrowings of English from other languages during its long development, the overlay of old French on the structure of Anglo-Saxon dialects, the imposition of largely inappropriate Latin grammatical categories and nomenclature on Germanic grammatical form, all conspire to cloud our vision of the English language and its structure. Nowhere is this confusion more apparent than in the system of the English verb.

The purpose of this paper is to shed some light on this confusion through the examination of one small, though important, part of the English verb system—the progressive. A complete grammatical analysis of the progressive requires a vehicle of broader scope than can be realized here. The essential nature of the progressive, the various ways in which it is presented in ESL textbooks and grammars, and the inherent drawbacks of these approaches in teaching the progressive have all been thoroughly dealt with elsewhere (see Davies, 1992; Davies, 1986). This paper will continue in the same vein, however, by presenting a detailed and comprehensive methodology for teaching the progressive, one that meets the needs of students and teachers at all levels of ESL instruction. In so doing, we will examine some of our underlying tenets regarding the nature of grammar itself, and how these views influence the ways in which we teach.

Some Principles

Language came into being, one might presume, as a way for man to represent his being in the universe around him. With the dawning of individual consciousness, as man began to think of himself as a separate entity, it became necessary to represent his experiences within certain parameters. This framework was founded on the dual notions of time and space. Indeed, since man cannot grasp infinity, he cannot imagine anything that does not exist in time and space. And it is through the act of language that man represents his place in time and space grammatically.

Any act of language involves two processes: an act of representing experience, and an act of expressing this representation. To achieve this, we bring experience and the desire to express it into contact with a complex system of meaning in the unconscious, an underlying mental program which is activated by our need to express a specific meaning in a certain way. Here we operate a choice among all the potential meanings permanently residing there to express a certain notion as an act of language. For all the diverse expressions in a language, there is an underlying meaning for each existing in this unconscious mental system (see Guillaume, 1973).

Let us now examine in detail a few key principles of language which are a necessary prerequisite to a complete understanding of the teaching methodology for the progressive presented here:

• LANGUAGE HAS TWO LEVELS

There exists not only the physical, manifest side of language, known as discourse, but also an underlying mental program, a highly coherent, unconscious system from which linguistic forms arise.

• GRAMMATICAL FORMS EXIST IN BINARY OPPOSITION

Because it necessarily requires at least two components to form a system, linguistic forms are found in obligatory binary opposition. We operate a choice among these dyadic sets during an act of language.

• ANY GRAMMATICAL FORM HAS A SINGLE, UNDERLYING MEANING

Any linguistic form has a single, underlying meaning residing in the mental system from which linguistic forms arise. This gives rise to a wide range of contextual meanings and expressive effects when actualized in discourse.

Progressive vs Simple

Of utmost importance in coming to terms with the essential nature of the progressive and how to teach the form effectively is the understanding that it functions in obligatory binary opposition to the simple form. They exist together as a contrastive set—there is no understanding the one without the other.

Furthermore, the progressive, like the simple, expresses one underlying impression, one position in a mental system, that can account for all the diverse contextual meanings and expressive effects found in discourse.

In grammatical terms, the simple/progressive opposition can be described as follows: “The simple form is perfective, the progressive form imperfective” (Hirtle, 1967, p. 27). Put more simply, the simple expresses an event which is thought of as being *complete*, as permitting no further additions or changes; the progressive expresses an event which is perceived as being *incomplete*, as lacking something, as leaving room for something to come.

States and Actions

As we have seen, the verb in English provides us with our grammatical representation of time. This is a double representation. Our immediate experience brings us into contact with only the duration of particular happenings. And yet we know that these happenings are situated in a larger stretch of time. We can distinguish, therefore, between time as the container of all events—universe time—and time contained in any event—event time. Of fun-

STATES	ACTIONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • e.g., The house is white. • There is no change in a state — the material content remains constant. • There are no defined limits on the extension into past or future in a state. • In a state every instant is identical to every other. $I_1 = I_2 = I_3 \dots = I_n$ • The whole of a state exists in any instant of its being. • A state is seen as complete whatever its duration. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • e.g., He painted the house. He was painting the house. • In an action there is always some change, some development. • An action always has a beginning and sometimes an end. • In an action every instant is different from every other. $I_1 + I_2 + I_3 \dots = I_n$ • Each instant of an action involves the subject in a slightly different activity. • An action requires a certain stretch of time to be carried out and may be seen as complete or incomplete.

damental importance in understanding the progressive/simple dichotomy is the fact that in English there are two main types of *event*: states and actions.¹

As a result, a state, which is necessarily whole and complete in any instant of its existence, can only be expressed by the simple form. An action, on the other hand, can either be depicted as incomplete, in which case it requires the progressive, or as complete, in which case the simple form is called for. In grammatical terms, “. . .the progressive is limited to the expression of imperfective actions; the simple can express either a perfective action or a state” (Hirtle, 1967, p. 27). For the purposes of teaching the progressive, we can state this premise in the following way:

- Whenever a verb expresses a state, it takes the simple form.
- Whenever a verb expresses an action, it takes the simple form if the action is complete, or the progressive form if the action is incomplete.

Implications for Teaching

Most teaching syllabuses and manuals generally treat the progressive in the same basic way. It is presented at early levels of language instruction as a means of expressing an action in progress at the moment of speaking and this explanation is reinforced with the cue word *now*. Teaching and reference grammars usually expand on this basic meaning of “action in progress” by referring to secondary meanings such as temporariness, limited recurrence, emotional coloring, etc., without ever relating them to the aforementioned primary meaning, and in addition, commonly present lists of verbs or verb classes which are mistakenly said to deny progressive use. As has been amply demonstrated elsewhere (Davies, 1992; Richards, 1981), this approach is, at best, less than helpful for students seeking a uniform basis for learning to guide them through increasingly complex and subtle levels of language learning.

Describing the progressive as a means of expressing an action in progress at the moment of speaking creates the erroneous impression among teachers and students alike that the basic function of the form is linked to distinctions in time. This error is compounded by numerous textbooks which refer to the progressive as a *tense*. In fact, there are only two tenses in English, the past and non-past, and the progressive is certainly not one of them.

Of greater importance, however, is the approach to the grammar of the language being taught in this way. We do not use linguistic forms like the progressive because of some rule we have had to memorize. In language, a grammatical form arises from an unconscious, underlying, mental system which is activated by our need to express a specific meaning in a certain way. The underlying meaning of the grammatical form shapes the lexical content of

the word in a certain way and within a particular context as an act of language. This underlying meaning is actualized in various contexts, giving rise to a wide variety of sometimes contradictory expressive effects in discourse.

Approaches to grammar based on rules of usage implicitly present a one-dimensional view of language and its grammar. From this perspective, language is seen not as a meaning-generating, cohesive, interactive system, but as existing solely on the level of its surface manifestations in discourse. "Action in progress" is *not* the basic function of the progressive, but like temporariness or temporal framing, it is one of the more common expressive effects associated with the form on the level of discourse. In order to guide students and teachers alike through the different stages of language learning as they encounter usage of increasing subtlety and difficulty, we must first determine the underlying meaning of a linguistic form, its nature as it exists prior to its functions and use in the sentence, and then relate usage to this underlying meaning within controlled, well-defined contexts.

Teaching the Progressive

Before examining specific examples in detail, let us reiterate some of the more important principles underlying this approach to teaching the progressive:

- A grammatical form arises from an unconscious, underlying, mental system which is activated by our need to express a specific meaning in a certain way. The underlying meaning of the grammatical form shapes the lexical content of the word in a certain way and within a particular context as an act of language. This underlying meaning is actualized in various contexts, giving rise to a wide variety of expressive effects in discourse.
- The simple form expresses an event which is thought of as being *complete*, as permitting no further additions or changes. The progressive form expresses an event which is perceived as being *incomplete*, as lacking something, as leaving room for something to come.
- A state, which is necessarily whole and complete in any instant of its existence, can only be expressed by the simple form. An action can either be depicted as incomplete, in which case it requires the progressive, or as complete, in which case the simple is called for.

In this approach to teaching the progressive we will be examining the dynamic interaction of three elements: the underlying meaning of the grammatical form, the lexical content of the verb itself, and the context or situation in which this interaction takes place. In all cases, the

progressive is contrasted with the corresponding simple form. Instructions to students might take the following form: "Describe the expressive effect of the progressive form by contrasting it with that of the corresponding simple form." In other words, they are asked to suggest a situation or context in which each of the sentences might be used, and to show the relationship between grammatical form, underlying meaning, and expressive effect.

The examples that follow illustrate most of the commonly encountered uses of the progressive as identified by English grammarians. They have been sequenced or graded in terms of frequency of use and levels of concreteness or abstraction from beginner to advanced levels of language learning. Please note that a detailed grammar analysis of examples is not being offered here (for those interested, such analyses can more readily be found in Davies, 1992; Davies, 1986; Richards, 1981; and in particular, Hirtle, 1967). Instead, sample responses, which are representative of the guidelines and principles outlined above, are provided.

Describe the expressive effect of the progressive form by contrasting it with that of the corresponding simple form in the following examples.²

- (Now) I'm washing my hands. [Action in Progress]

This statement might well be used in response to the question, "What are you doing now?" It is an example of an action in progress and thus incomplete at the moment of speaking. The speaker represents the event as divided, as having an accomplished portion while leaving room for further accomplishment. Like all incomplete actions it requires the progressive form. The corresponding simple form could very well take an adverb such as everyday (e.g., I wash my hands everyday). The event is represented as an habitual activity, as somehow complete, unchanging, constant. As a state, it calls for the simple form.

- She's working at the library (this summer). [Limited Duration / Temporariness]

This example illustrates an activity of limited duration perhaps taking place over a more extended period of time. Since the speaker wishes to represent the event as incomplete in some way, the progressive is used. The impression created is of something temporary. It might be used to indicate a student who is only working at the library as a summer job or somehow in a temporary capacity. If the simple form were used (e.g., She works in the library.), it would indicate an event of unlimited duration, with no limits into the past or future. This would give rise to the impression of an unchanging, permanent state of affairs, one of the prerequisite conditions for use of the simple form. In this case, you would likely be referring to a librarian who has a permanent position at the library.

- I'm getting up at six in the morning. [Limited Recurrence / Limited Repetition]

This sentence indicates activity occurring in a series of discrete actions, ones that have been repeated a number of times, but whose further recurrence is far from assured. This incomplete

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series requires the progressive form. The expressive effect is one of limited recurrence, of a series of actions which may or may not continue. The speaker could be referring to a period of time in which he or she was getting up early to do some writing, for example, but the use of the progressive indicates that the speaker is not completely confident that this activity will continue indefinitely. Were the simple form to be used (e.g., I get up at six in the morning.), it would give the connotation of habitual activity, an unchanging or recurrent series of events which could be thought of as extending indefinitely into the past or future. It gives a contrasting impression of a constancy or permanence, of something the speaker has always done and always will.

- I was cleaning the kitchen this morning. [Unfinished Past Actions]

In this example the action of cleaning is depicted as being in progress but not finished during the time period indicated (this morning). It gives the impression of an activity which was partially accomplished, but leaving room for further accomplishment. It does not indicate that the kitchen is not now clean, but rather that in the mind of the speaker, the cleaning was incomplete, leaving open the possibility of further cleaning to come. Use of the simple form in this instance (e.g., I cleaned the kitchen this morning.) would denote an activity which was finished during the time period. The speaker would use the simple to show that the work was completely finished, leaving no room for the possibility of further activity.

- When the bomb exploded, he was going into the basement. [Temporal Framing]

This sentence illustrates a simple form juxtaposed with a progressive. Here, the feeling is one of simultaneity. The progressive declares the event as already underway at the time of the explosion, but we do not see the completion of the action (i.e., going into the basement). As a result, the possibility of further continuation exists, giving rise to the impression of a more extended action, and hence, the "going" somehow seems to frame the "exploding." This is sometimes referred to as temporal framing, and gives rise to the impression of two events occurring simultaneously. If two simple forms were juxtaposed (e.g., When the bomb exploded, he went into the basement.), it would give an impression of successivity. In other words, the first verb, "exploded," is viewed in its entirety before the second verb, "went," can begin, thus giving rise to the impression that the two events are successive.

- He's leaving tomorrow. [Future Reference]

With the progressive here, a future event (leaving) is anticipated by virtue of a present arrangement. When the progressive is used to refer to future events, the impression is given that the arrangement or intention is under human control and/or control of the speaker. Given the nature of human beings it is therefore open to the possibility of change, and is thus seen as incomplete, naturally calling up the progressive. With the simple form (e.g., He leaves tomorrow.), the arrangements for leaving are seen as complete, with no further possibility of change. This gives rise to the feeling that the future event is scheduled and perhaps beyond human control, resulting in the impression that this is future as fact.

- Johnson's going back into shallow right for the pop-up. [Commentator's English]

This example obviously comes from a sport's broadcast, baseball in this case. The progressive form is used here because the action being described is less rapid and takes a longer time to complete than a pitch, for example. The commentator sees the event as incomplete and has time to divide it into an accomplished portion and a prospective accomplishment, like any other action in progress. The simple form, on the other hand, would be used for commentaries of extremely rapid actions (e.g., Ryan winds up and . . . throws! Curve ball misses. Ball three.). In this case, the speed at which the event occurs forces the commentator to view the action as a whole, necessitating the use of the simple. If the progressive were used with such verbs, it would imply recurrence or repetition of a limited nature (e.g., He's throwing with a lot of confidence.).

- I'm forgetting my French. [Verbs of Mental Activity]³

When verbs of mental activity such as forget express a mental operation or process, the progressive is called for. When they express the fully formed result of a mental operation, the simple form is necessary. In this example, the forgetting is of a large body of knowledge and is a gradual process that takes place over time. This operation can be represented at mid-course, and being seen as a part or incomplete, takes the progressive. The moment the process of forgetting is complete, which generally occurs rapidly with single pieces of information (e.g., I forget his name.), the resulting completed mental process requires the simple form.

- I'm seeing stars. [Verbs of Sensory Perception]

This statement might well be made by a boxer who has taken a solid hit, and carries the implication that the speaker is hallucinating. Here, the mental image does not correspond to external reality. The lack of correspondence implies that the perceptual process has not been fully accomplished, that there is room for further development (i.e., up to the point where such correspondence is fully established), and so the progressive is called for. With the simple (e.g., I see stars.) the correspondence between the image and external reality is fully established, and the impression of a whole arises, evoking this more frequent everyday use of the form.

- He's liking his new job. [Verbs of Emotion]

The impression created by use of the progressive in this example is that the emotional quality (liking) is unstable, subject to possible change. The progressive indicates an attitude in the process of formation, rather than a wholly formed attitude which would be evoked by the simple form (e.g., He likes his new job.). With the simple, the emotion would be judged to be definitive and unchanging.

- She's being friendly. [Verbs of Having and Being]

The progressive form here presents an incomplete image of the subject's character, implying that friendliness is not characteristic of the person's real nature, and thus serving as a subtle rebuke.

The corresponding simple form (e.g., She is friendly.) is used to indicate a characteristic of the subject, her real nature. It is seen as a state and not subject to change. The latter is a compliment; the former is not.

- She's always reading at meals. [Pejorative Emotional Coloring]

The progressive in the above statement represents a series of recurrent actions continuing over time. This series is seen as incomplete, as having no end in sight. Perhaps the combination of this impression with temporal adverbs such as always emphasizes the endlessness of the series. The resulting impression of something exaggerated or excessive gives rise to emotional nuances such as irritation or annoyance (often described as pejorative emotional coloring). The simple form, on the other hand (e.g., She always reads at meals.), being represented as complete and unchanging, gives the impression of a statement of fact, a habit, that this is simply the way things are, and thus lacks the emotional impact of the progressive.

- I was hoping you'd look after the children for me. [Polite Requests]

From this example we can see that the progressive is a more tentative and hence more polite method of expressing a mental attitude. The progressive, presenting an incomplete image, creates an impression of a request or hope that is not completely formed, leaving the person addressed with a greater option for refusal. In this case, the past progressive is doubly self-deprecatory. With the simple form (e.g., I hope you'll look after the children for me), the notion represented by the verb is fully formed, leaving no room for change, and might be considered too demanding or coercive.

- Yes, my daughter Liz was telling me about it. [Recent Communicative Happenings]

This statement might be used in response to a question such as, "Did you hear about the accident down the street?" This response, framed with the progressive form as the verb, would not imply total knowledge, politely leaving the way open for continuation of the story. With the progressive here, the communication is seen as incomplete, only part of the information having been passed on, and suggesting that the speaker is prepared to continue the conversation. The corresponding simple form, however (e.g., Yes, my daughter Liz told me about it.), would carry the supposition that, "Yes, I know the whole story, so don't bother to tell me." With the simple form, the communicative act is represented as complete and leaves no room for further discussion.

Conclusion

Obviously, the above examples of progressive usage should be carefully selected for use at different levels of ESL instruction. Beginning students should certainly be exposed to action in progress, but the explanation provided should be modified to "an action in progress *and therefore* incomplete at the moment of speaking." At an intermediate level, explanations of some of the temporal functions of the progressive, such as unfinished actions, limited duration and recurrence, etc., would be much easier to grasp when based on the previously learn-

ed notion of incompleteness. This underlying meaning can also provide the basis for advanced students' understanding of some of the more subtle nuances associated with progressive use, as with pejorative emotional coloring, polite requests, recent communicative happenings, etc.

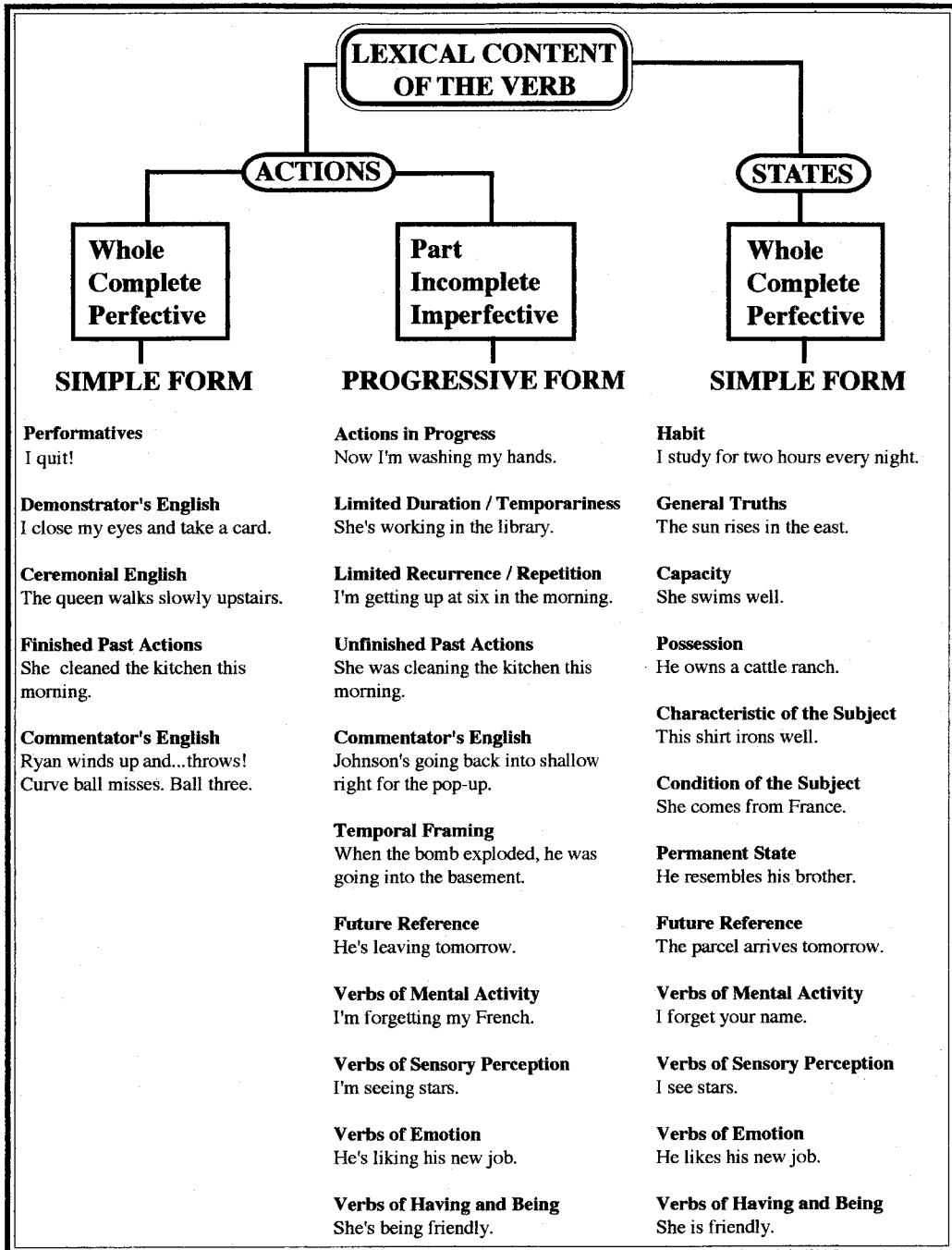
Because the explanations provided in many teaching manuals and grammars describe the progressive as a tense which is used for activities taking place now, many teachers, as well as advanced ESL students, have the erroneous impression that it is a grammatical form which is based on distinctions in time. As a result, beyond early levels of instruction, there is no ready explanation for the more complex and subtle examples of progressive use. Advanced level students generally have to discover the complexities and pitfalls of the progressive for themselves, and in so doing have to correct what was previously learned. More importantly, in spite of its extensive use today, the progressive remains an enigma to many teachers, who barely remember its existence after beginner levels of language instruction.

The progressive is a grammatical form based on distinctions the speaker makes between whole and part, complete and incomplete, perfective and imperfective. The progressive should always be taught in conjunction with the contrasting simple form, for the two form a permanent binary set in the mental system which gives rise to all linguistic forms. Finally, any understanding of the progressive/simple dichotomy is impossible without a detailed awareness of the differences between actions and states. These should be the distinctions that guide our organization of the teaching of the progressive, and teaching syllabuses and grammars, as well as classroom activities and exercises, should reflect this understanding.

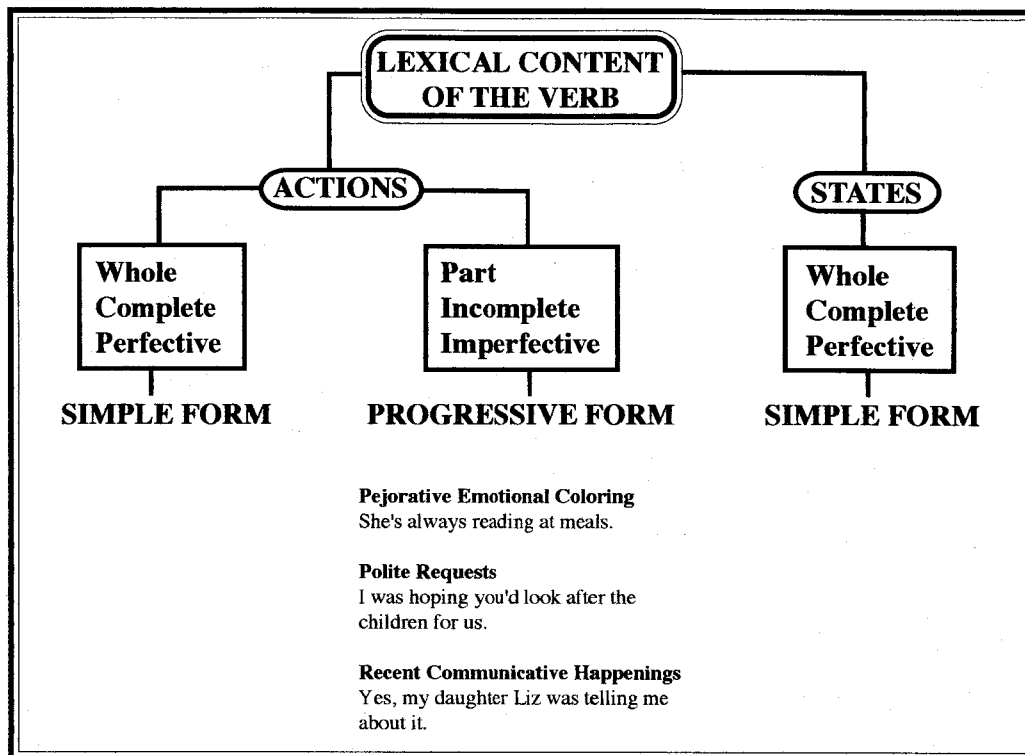
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APPENDIX⁴



APPENDIX (continued)



Footnotes

¹ Also described by Quirk et al (1972) as dynamic and stative verbs, and by Leech (1971) as event and state verbs. As Richards (1981, p. 393) notes, it would be more accurate to describe verbs as being used dynamically and statively.

² The author wishes to acknowledge the work done at Laval University by Professor Walter Hirtle as the source of this approach to teaching the progressive, and the work of Gustave Guillaume as the origin of the theory of language presented herein.

³ Most teaching and reference grammars list various classes of verbs which are said to deny progressive use. They generally fall into the categories of verbs of mental activity, verbs of sensory perception, verbs of emotion, and verbs of having and being. "Apparent exceptions," however, are widespread. For a complete listing see Davies (1992, pp. 89-92).

⁴ This chart has been adapted from Richards (1981, p. 394) and Hirtle (1967, p. 31) and widely modified. Listings for the progressive form correspond to the examples presented in this article. Although examples of the simple form have been included for reference, this listing should not be considered comprehensive.

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