

The Case Against Stative
(The Stative The Art)

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In A Linguistic Study of the English Verb, Palmer (1965) observes that "there are some verbs that are commonly not used in the progressive form at all, even where they seem to indicate duration". Whilst claiming that for these verbs the non-progressive form is "the norm", he recognises that in certain circumstances the progressive forms can be used. Palmer subdivides this class of verbs into "private" verbs and verbs "of state". In claiming that "The reason why these do not normally occur with the progressive is different for each sub-class", Palmer is saying that the reasons are semantic ones. The classes that he is setting up are, in fact, semantic classes.

In Stative Verbs and Adjectives, however, Lakoff (1966) took a very different approach. In his analysis there is a syntactic feature [±stative] which verbs and adjectives have in common, verbs being mostly [-stative], and adjectives being mostly [+stative]. While considering stativity a syntactic phenomenon, Lakoff recognises that "The grammatical distinction...partially reflects a semantic distinction".

In this paper, I shall argue that it is wrong to have a stative/non-stative distinction in the syntax, that such a distinction should be confined to the semantics, and that at least part of its syntactic function can be adequately handled in terms of case grammar.

It seems to me wrong to label a verb as [±stative] and then say that because it is labelled in a certain way it cannot occur in certain constructions. (Incidentally, it seems somewhat circular to argue that a verb has a certain feature because it cannot occur in certain constructions, and then to explain such non-occurrences by the presence of this feature.) Firstly, we are left in a quandary when a verb that is marked [+stative] does appear in the progressive, imperative, etc.: how do we explain such an occurrence in a theory that claims that the verb is inherently syntactically stative? Secondly, we fail to explain why a verb may occur in certain constructions when it has one meaning, but not when it has a different, but related meaning. Thirdly, Lakoff himself admitted that there are exceptions to the semantically active/syntactically non-stative correspondence: he points out that all of the exceptions are semantically non-active and syntactically non-stative. There are two classes of exceptions: (a) remain, stay, keep, (b) sit, stand, huddle, squat.

Lakoff's first test for a stative verb is that it should reject the command imperative. It is obvious that a verb that cannot have an Agentive in its case frame cannot take the command imperative construction. Let us consider the verb smell--in Lakoff's analysis [+stative]. I would claim that smell has (at least) two case frames: +[__E O] and +[__A O]. These different case frames account for the difference between (1) and (2):

- (1) I smelled onions, but I couldn't think where the smell was coming from.
- (2) I smelled the rose and nearly pricked my nose in the process.

Only in (2) has an action been performed. It is only when smell has the case frame +[__A O] that it can take a command imperative. Thus:

- (3) *Smell onions!
- (4) Smell the rose!

In Lakoff's theory, smell would be marked as [+stative] and (4) would have to be marked as some kind of exceptional usage. In the case grammar analysis suggested above, however, no such problems arise, and we have explained why it is that when smell means one thing it can take the command imperative but in its other meaning it cannot.

Just as the command imperative requires the presence of an Agentive, so do Lakoff's constructions with persuade/remind, for someone's sake and manner adverbials like carefully, reluctantly, masterfully and enthusiastically. We may note in passing that the Agentive NP need only be Animate and need not be Human.

- (5) I persuaded the frightened dog to come out of its hiding place.
- (6) The monkey enthusiastically ate the expensive orchid.

Other tests that Lakoff uses are What I did was..., ...do so..., and ...instead of.... The first of these tests whether a verb is semantically active, do so is now accepted as generally problematic, and I fail to find any regularity using instead of as a test. That the tests do not do what Lakoff claims that they do is shown by (7)-(9):

- (7) What Spiro did was imply that students are trouble-makers.
- (8) I doubt John's word, and Peter does so too.
- (9) The article presupposed his guilt, instead of reserving judgment until all the evidence had come to light.

Perhaps the most problematic test of all is the progressive. There is, apart from any other difficulties, great dialectal differentiation as to which verbs can take the progressive. My Border Scots dialect, for instance, permits (10) and (11):

(10) I'm needing a new pair of shoes.

(11) I'm thinking that I'll go tomorrow.

both of which are impossible for a speaker of Southern English. Given the difficulties, is there anything we can meaningfully say about the occurrence and non-occurrence of the present progressive form in English preferably obviating the need for a syntactic feature stative?

Of those verbs which Lakoff classes as stative, the following can never in my dialect occur in the progressive form: know, desire, doubt, understand, perceive, believe, comprehend, preclude and seem. Of these verbs, the first seven take a subject NP in the Experiencer case, preclude takes an Instrumental as subject, and seem takes as subject either a pronominal copy of a sentence dominated by an Objective node or else an NP which has been raised out of the lower sentence. It seems to me significant that in none of these cases can the verb take an Agentive.

There are some cases where, as with the command imperative, we can explain the occurrence or non-occurrence of the progressive with the same verb by its case frame. The verb smell, to use it once again as an example, can occur in the progressive when there is an Agentive NP present, but not when there is an Experiencer NP present (we may note in passing that it is not possible to have both an Agentive and an Experiencer in the same sentence with smell.) Thus:

(12) *I am smelling something delicious.

(13) I am smelling my uncle's prize tea rose.

The verb taste occurs with the same cases as smell. We may note that the pairs hear/listen to, see/look at and (more problematically) feel/touch may be considered as, in a sense, the same verb, the two different forms of each directly paralleling the two different usages of taste and smell. In each case the first of the pair has the frame +[E O] and the second +[A O]. Boyd and Thorne (1969) suggest that with verbs like see and hear, can acts as the marker of progressive aspect. Thus:

(14) I can see the blackboard.

Quirk (1970) found a tendency on the part of people repeating sentences containing these verbs to insert can where it had not in fact appeared originally. Quirk's explanation is that "the modality in I can smell it seems to be a way of enabling the speaker to disclaim that he is choosing to smell it". Yet it seems to me

doubtful that it is modality that is here involved. Why it is the form can that is thus used I do not know, but it does seem as if we feel some need to express the idea of the progressive without confusion with sentences like (13). Perhaps this need is felt because we tend to use see and hear in the simple present with frequentative meaning:

(15) I see the castle every day on my way to the bus stop.

(16) I often hear the National Anthem before turning off the T.V. set.

I would claim that in both of the above the subject NP is still in Experiencer.

The verb imply also has the possibility of occurring with or without an Agentive. Once again, it is when imply does not have an Agentive present that it rejects the progressive form, and when there is an Agentive that it can take the progressive. Thus:

(17) This evidence implies that he is guilty.

(18) *This evidence is implying that he is guilty.

(19) The prosecutor is implying that he is guilty.

Appear has many problems which I cannot go into here, but it too gives some support to a theory connecting the occurrence of the progressive with the Agentive case. It can take an Objective case dominating a sentence (which would ultimately give (20)) or an Agentive, with a Locative etc. (as in (21)).

(20) John appears rich.

(21) John is appearing in the play tonight.

Again, note the ungrammaticality of (22) where there is no Agentive present.

(22) *John is appearing rich.

We find that exactly the same thing happens with sound. In (23) there is an Agentive and an Objective, and in (24) there is an Objective dominating a sentence:

(23) The doctor is sounding Fred's chest.

(24) Paris sounds a lovely city.

(25) *Paris is sounding a lovely city.

Commenting on a paper given at the LSA summer meeting 1970, Greg Lee suggested that while it might be the case that absence of the

of the progressive construction implied absence of an Agentive, it was not the case that absence of an Agentive implied absence of the progressive. He then cited weather expressions like:

(26) It is raining.

(27) It is snowing.

and has since in conversation mentioned (28) as another example in support of his claim:

(28) He is sleeping.

At first glance, the evidence of the weather expressions appears strong: one would not expect there to be an Agentive present. On the other hand, let us consider (29) and (30):

(29) The petunias were destroyed by rain.

(30) The petunias were destroyed with rain.

In a lecture to his syntax seminar at Ohio State University on June 30, 1970, Fillmore suggested that (29) has the Objective and Instrumental cases present, and that (30) has an Agentive, Objective and Instrumental. This analysis is suggested by the prepositions: by marking an NP which has been downgraded by the passive transformation, and with marking an Instrumental NP which has not been so downgraded. There is obvious difficulty in finding an active sentence corresponding to (30). See, for example, the ungrammaticality of (31):

(31) *John destroyed the petunias with rain.

The only possibility would seem to be something like (32):

(32) God destroyed the petunias with rain.

There is other evidence that suggests that there is an Agentive somewhere in sentences with weather verbs. Firstly, we have sentences like (33):

(33) It's getting ready to rain.

Secondly, we find the pragmatic modal will with weather verbs:

(34) It just will not stop raining.

Thirdly, it is possible to find imperatives:

(35) Stop raining, won't you!

Weather verbs are undeniably a problem, and I do not feel competent to give a fuller analysis of them, but it does seem as if there is

an Agentive somewhere in their structure.

It seems that frequently, instead of considering a sentence as ungrammatical, we assign an extraordinary reading or analysis to some part of it. Let us take (36) as an example:

(36) Last night I began to know the answer to that problem.

We would not normally expect a semantically non-active verb to follow begin. In (36), however, it is not as a semantically non-active verb that we interpret know: rather we reanalyse it as a 'developmental' verb, more or less equivalent, I think, to learn. Thus in (36) know takes an Agentive subject. I would suggest in passing that when we do want to express the onset of a state, we do it as in (37):

(37) Last night I first knew the answer to that problem.

Of those verbs that Lakoff classes as stative, I can use the following with developmental meaning as in (38): like, appreciate, think, doubt, want, hate, love, hope and suspect.

(38) I'm liking it here more and more.

I do not think that it is necessarily the case that for these verbs to be used with this developmental meaning there must be an Agentive present.

That we cannot say that a progressive always requires the presence of an Agentive is shown too by the other example that Greg Lee gave: the verb sleep. We may note the difference between the verbs sleep and wake, as in the following:

(39) John is asleep.

(40) John is sleeping.

(41) John is awake.

(42) John is waking.

I assume that the subject NPs in (39)-(41) are Experiencers: I am not sure about (42)--possibly it is Agentive. We may note that while wake indicates a change of state, sleep does not.

In none of sentences (43)-(45) is the subject NP Agentive:

(43) The lorry is standing by the parking lot.

(44) John is sitting on the chaise-longue.

(45) The saw is lying on the woodpile.

All of them, however, have a verb which is semantically non-active, i.e. expresses a state, and express that this state is temporary. This is in contrast to (46)-(48):

(46) Nelson's statue stands in Trafalgar Square.

(47) The Queen sits on the throne.

(48) Shetland lies to the north of Orkney.

where the state is considered as either continuous and permanent (as in (46) and (48)) or permanently habitual (as in (47)).

Perhaps this use of the progressive form is tied up with the fact that in English the simple present form (other than performatives) denotes frequentative action if the verb is semantically active (this meaning often, but not necessarily, being reinforced by an adverbial). Since the simple form has come to have this function, it is not surprising that the progressive is used to denote one single action in the present. It appears that we cannot, in English, express the repetition of a state.

(49) John hits his son every day.

(50) *Peter resembles his father every day.

Thus for semantically non-active verbs, the simple form expresses one occurrence of the state, which may have considerable duration, and the progressive indicates that the state is temporary.

In this paper I have tried to show that it is wrong to consider verbs as syntactically [+stative] since this commits us to marking many usages as exceptions, and fails to account for why verbs take different constructions in different meanings. Lakoff's tests for stative were examined and it was seen that those which were at all regular could be accounted for by equating [-stative] with the presence of an Agentive subject NP, with the exception of the test of whether or not a verb could occur in the progressive form. It was found that those verbs which sometimes take an Agentive can occur in the progressive when an Agentive is present, but may not occur when it is not. I have also suggested that when a semantically non-active verb is understood 'developmentally' it may be used in the progressive form. It also seems that when we wish to express the temporariness of a state expressed by a semantically non-active verb we use the progressive form.

This paper is, of course, far from being a full study of the occurrence and non-occurrence of the progressive in English. It says nothing, for instance, about the use of the progressive with habitual meaning, nor does it consider the problem of how we are in fact to generate the be + ing form, whether as a higher verb, as in Ross (1967), or as a locative, as in Anderson (1968), or by some other means. We may rest assured, I feel sure, however, that in a fuller explanation of the progressive a syntactic feature stative will play no part.

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