Time Concept of Habitual Progressive Forms

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Introduction

Progressive forms can be used to indicate repeated actions for a limited period of time or temporary habits, although non-progressive forms are normally used for repeated actions for an indefinite period; habits or generic states (Comrie 1976:37, 49–50; Eastwood 1994:84; Leech 1989:389; Palmer 1988:62; Swan 1991:502). Hereafter progressive forms of this kind will be called “habitual progressives.”

Compare the following sentences:

(1) a. Harry plays football well. —— Hornby 1975:82.
   b. Harry’s playing football now. —— Ibid.
   c. Harry’s playing in the first eleven this season. —— Ibid.

The sentence (1a) is “a general statement”; (1c) refers to “a temporary habit.” We should also distinguish the use of a progressive form in (1c) from that in (1b). We notice the difference in time: “now” in (1b) refers to “at the moment of speaking,” and “this season” in (1c) “for a certain extended period of time.” The progressive form in (1c) is used to express that the action is repeated during the time which the adverb implies.

Progressive forms to indicate temporary habits do not necessarily occur with time adverbials:

(2) He’s teaching in a comprehensive school. —— Greenbaum et al.
It may be said that the time concept provided by verbs or predications\(^{3}\) (expressed by certain verbs and their complements) acts on the interpretation of habitual progressives. What kind of time concept allows progressive forms to express temporary habits? As mentioned above, habitual progressive forms connote a limited period. Time adverbials can also make it clear that situations or activities will not last for long. In this sense they can be contextual factors. Can any other elements be contextual factors? If so, what are they?

Chapter 1

In this chapter we will discuss the characteristics of habits.

In order to express habits, verbs with dynamic meanings\(^{2}\) are usually used in the simple present form\(^{2}\), but the habit predications have stative properties in terms of time — activities are repeated over an unlimited period or forever: they have no definite end-points. We should notice the difference between the following two sentences:

(3) a. His father *owns* a local pub. — *COBUILD*\(^{4}\)


When we own something, we own it every moment of time. On the other hand, when we are in the habit of drinking heavily, we do not continue drinking at every moment: we repeat the activity at some intervals. The former situation can be shown by a line; the latter by a sequence of dots:

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  [a state (continuous)]
  . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
  [a habit (successive)]
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fig. 1.
Habits, indeed, have some stative properties. Both (3a) and (3b) can also be expressed as follows:

(4)  

a. His father is the owner of a local pub.

b. Bill is a heavy drinker.

Drinking is an activity but the repetition of the activity can be viewed as stative on the whole.

Chapter II

Compared with simple present forms, habitual progressives imply temporariness. In this sense they can be looked upon as dynamic. They should connote certain limited periods to be distinguished from those which ongoing activities at the present moment indicate. The elements which denote such certain periods may be the keys to habitual progressives. We will examine the aspects of verbs and other elements like time adverbials.

2.1 < smoke >

What is the difference in the interpretation between simple present forms and progressive forms in the case where there are no time adverbials?

Compare the following examples:

(5)  


b. Jack is smoking (a pipe).—— Ibid.

Kreidler says that (5a) “implies no time boundaries at all; it is habitual or generic”, while (5b) is “about the present moment ... [and] calls attention to the fact that the activity is in process now and implies that the activity will end” (222–3).

Declerck’s view is similar to Kreidler’s. According to Declerck (183), the simple present forms of smoke mean “in the habit of smoking”; their progressive forms with no time designation by adverbials mention an activity
Is it possible for the progressive forms of smoke to have a temporary-habit interpretation? I asked six American and British informants whether the temporary-habit interpretation is acceptable as to the progressive form in the dialogue below:

(6) A: Does your father smoke?
   B: Yes, he is smoking. But he’s going to give up smoking for his health.

All of them answered, “No.” K. L. Stamper in the Editorial Department of Merriam-Webster, Inc. comments that “in this case, the correct sentence would read ‘Yes, he smokes. But he’s going to give up smoking for his health.’ When you say, ‘Yes, he is smoking,’ the impression given is that your father is smoking as we speak. The progressive form (which implies an action or event occurring at a particular time) in this circumstance refers to the event of father’s smoking as it takes place.”

When time adverbials define the time, interpretations are more obvious (i.e. temporary habits or activities in progress at the moment of speaking):

(7) a. Normally I smoke twenty cigarettes a day. But now I’m smoking only five a day, because I’m saving up for a new motorcycle. —— Leech 1989:389.
   b. She is smoking less these days. —— Aarts and Meyer 1995:138.

According to Leech, Aarts and Meyer, both (7a) and (7b) express temporary habits. Note that “now” in (7a) and “these days” in (7b) connote certain limited periods and make the temporary-habit interpretations possible. Battistella (1990) supports our position. He states that “the progressive indicates a temporary habit spread over an interval determined by the adverbial” (101).
Judging from these grammarians' and informants' views, it can be said that the progressive forms of *smoke* without any time designation cannot express a temporary habit.

We would also say that the comparative "less" in (7b) can indicate a limited period. The mutual interaction of the grammatical meanings of progressive forms, verbs, and other elements gives the interpretation as a whole.

2.2 *work*

Many grammarians agree that the progressive forms of *work* ("do a job") indicate that the action is temporary and holds only for a limited period (Comrie 1976:37; Eastwood 1994:84; Freed 1979:12; Jacobs 1995:209, etc.)

(8)  a. She *is working* in Texas. —— Freed 1979:12.
    b. He *is working* for a steel company. —— Jacobs 1995:209.

We notice that both sentences do not have time adverbials.

J. H. Marshall, an associate editor of Oxford English Dictionaries, comments in his answer to my questions that "(8b) may not necessarily indicate that he may probably quit the job in the near future, but it would be a more likely form to use if he were working on-contract to a steel company, rather than being a full-time employee, or if he were a member of some wider profession for which employment by a steel company was not generally expected to be a life-long career." Judging from his comment, the progressives of *work* imply "a limited period." Progressive forms in themselves restrict the period during which the subject is engaged in the job.

We will add the following example of a habitual progressive:

(9) Bob's *working* in Avonmouth at the moment. But they may be moving him to head office in Birmingham. —— Eastwood 1994:84.
2.3 〈study〉

(10)  
   b. Bruno is a law-student. — Ibid.
   c. I'm studying geology at the University of Colorado.— Celce-Murcia 1983:63.

Schlesinger says that (10a) has two interpretations. One is that (10a) may have more or less the same meaning of that of (10b); the other is that "Bruno may be doing some studying without being enrolled as a student." Whichever interpretation is adopted, both interpretations can refer to a temporary habit (in this case "a temporary situation" might be better). Celce-Murcia regards (10c) as "a temporary activity": the "action will end and therefore lacks the permanence of the simple present tense."

I asked the six informants earlier mentioned which of the two sentences below is usually used to mean "He is a student at Oxford University":

(11)  
   a. He studies at Oxford University.
   b. He is studying at Oxford University.

All the informants replied either "(11b)" or "(11b) is more natural than (11a)." Stamper states that "(11b) employs a recurrent progressive construction, and (11a) might lead a native English speaker to think that he takes his books to the Oxford campus library and studies the books." Marshall says that the progressive form of study is "a more likely construction" when we refer to a temporary situation, "because the status of a student is almost invariably temporary in nature."

2.4 From the observation above, we would like to say that the properties of verbs (i.e. aspects of verbs) have something to do with the interpretation of habitual progressives.

We have examined the progressive forms of smoke, work, and study.
Considering time semantics of verbs, we can distinguish smoke from the others. The activity of smoking a cigarette or pipe probably takes only several minutes. "He works for the company" and "she studies at the university" refer to "occupation" or "status." From the time-oriented point of view, work and study have stative properties. The same may hold true for teach in (2). When (5b) [Jack is smoking (a pipe)] is given no time designation, it may be impossible to judge that it refers to a temporary habit. In the case of (10a) [Bruno is studying Law], a temporary-habit reading is possible as mentioned above. The more stative characteristics verbs have and the more temporary situations are, the higher is the possibility that progressive forms express temporary habits. The aspects of verbs play an important role in the habitual reading with progressive forms.

2.5 Temporary habits are habits over a limited period. Progressive forms in themselves can restrict duration. It may also be said that with some elements the whole predication implies this limited period. So far we have examined that the properties of verbs and some other elements function in distinguishing habitual progressives from other types of progressives which express ongoing activities at the moment. Now, let us observe one more element: objects.

Compare the examples below:

(12) a. Charles is writing a letter now. (at this moment) —— Hornby 1975:82.
   b. Charles is writing another novel. —— Ibid.
   d. She's writing some short stories. —— Greenbaum et al. 1990:54.

(12b)-(12d), unlike (12a), connote that the subjects need not be doing the
activities: they continue the activities intermittently over a limited period. It can be said that this temporary-habit interpretation is possible because of the duration which these objects show. "Writing [reading] a novel" or "writing some short stories" usually takes us a longer period than "writing a letter." Our informants all support this view.\(^6\)

Conclusion

The time concept of habitual progressive forms is "temporariness." Progressive forms in themselves indicate that. Verbs and other elements such as time adverbials and objects can imply "certain periods." It may be said that the time concept provided by the grammatical meanings of progressive forms, verbs, and other elements determines interpretations. We should add that the elements (time adverbials and objects) which can be called "contextual factors" are not necessarily given in sentences. It is obvious that discourse contexts or pragmatic factors would contribute greatly to the temporary-habit interpretation of progressive forms.

Notes

1) This term is used by Allen (1966).
2) Verbs can usually be divided into two groups according to their lexical meanings: dynamic and stative verbs. But a clear borderline cannot be drawn between the two. Some verbs can have both dynamic and stative meanings or have both dynamic and stative properties according to contexts.
3) As Quirk \textit{et al.} (1985:180) say, verbs with stative meanings may have a habitual sense when accompanied by a frequency adverbial: \textit{She is seldom alone}.
5) Additionally the following may be said: \textit{smoke} is a unit and single activity. When we smoke (habit), we repeat the same activity of smoking. On the other
hand, work and study do not respectively imply a single activity: these activities consist of such acts as attending meetings and filling in documents as to work, and attending lectures and reading books as to study.

6) (12b) and (12d) could be more acceptable than (12c) because “writing a novel or some short stories” usually takes more time than “reading a novel.”

Bibliography


