

Uses of the Simple Present Tense
Referring to a Specific Point of Time

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0. Introduction

The Simple Present Tense is usually used with a stative verb (cf. Close 1987:241). Of course, the Simple Present is also used with an action verb (cf. Close 1987:244). When we talk about our habits or customs, for instance, we regularly use action verbs, as in "I *wake* up at six every morning, and then *listen* to the English conversation program on the radio." In our daily life, however, it seems that stative verbs are used in the Simple Present more frequently than action verbs (cf. Kaplan 1989:182), and if an action verb is used in the Simple Present, the time reference is rarely to the exact present moment (the 'instantaneous present'; see section 1.3.), but to an unrestricted period of the present time (the 'habitual present'; cf. Crystal 1988:78; Kilby 1984:22).

Though Kasher and Ruth Manor (1980) write about the Simple Present Tense, their attention is limited to sentences describing regularities extending over some period of time and no other uses of it are mentioned in their paper. Therefore, I will examine the latter types of use of the Simple Present, such as the ones referring not to an unrestricted period of time, but to a specific point of time.

1. Review of the Literature and Reconsideration

1.0. The Exact Moment of the Present Time

First, let us consider the present time. What does it mean? Some people may answer, "It means 'the present moment'"; others, "It is 'now'." Then, what on earth does 'now' indicate? Michael Lewis (1986:49) says, "'Now' is essentially a point in time, an

instant with no duration," though he adds, "If events are to happen in time, we must think of periods, not points" (ibid.). Otto Jespersen (1954:16-17) and F.R. Palmer (1985:43) regard the present time as a certain length of time including the theoretical point of the present moment.

Consequently, when we consider 'now', namely the present time in practical conversations, we cannot help thinking that 'now' has a certain period of time, and that we could interpret it either as short or as long depending on situations. This may be why "the Simple Present Tense is used in the main clause of a sentence when the time reference is general or non-specific" (Mckenzie 1977:133). In other words, even though "there is a grammatical form we call present tense it does not always mean the present instant of time" (Cattel 1972:119); "the use of the so-called present tense does not generally imply contemporaneity with the act of utterance" (Lyons 1977:678).

1.1. Performative Expressions

A performative sentence is "one which carries out the effect identified by the verb by virtue of being said" (Kaplan 1989:182). For example, 'I promise' is a performative sentence: the speaker actually performs the act of promising (i.e. makes the promise) by means of uttering this sentence (cf. Allan 1986:165).

Needless to say, the time reference of the performative expressions is to the very moment of the utterance, that is, the exact present moment. Hence, the tense of a performative verb must be present (nonpast, nonfuture, nonperfect), and its aspect is normally simple (cf. Allan 1986:165).

1.2. The Simple Present Used for Statement

- (1) I *call* it an outrage. (Palmer 1985:61; the italics are mine.)

Ando (1983:74) gives this sentence as an example of the perform-

atives, while F.R. Palmer (1985:61) says that the speaker merely makes his/her statement by uttering this sentence, and that this is not a performative sentence, but rather a similar case of verb of statement.

- (2) I *say* he should go. (Palmer 1985:61; the italics are mine.)

This sentence is also provided by Palmer as an example of verb of statement. What point of time does the Simple Present used in (2) refer to? Strictly speaking, it is a little after the verb 'say' is uttered that the content which the speaker really wants to say is uttered. Thus, we might possibly use the auxiliary *will* in place of the Simple Present.

1.3. The 'Instantaneous Present'

"The Simple Present is normal in on-the-spot reporting of football matches, baseball games" (Allan 1986:174), the pattern or commentary of conjurors and demonstrators, etc. (cf. Leech 1985:2). The following are often given as typical examples of the 'instantaneous present':

- (3) Moore *passes* the ball to Carlton. (Quirk et al. 1974:85; the italics are mine.)

- (4) To the flour I *add* milk. (cf. Keenzie et al 1969:41; the italics are mine.)

The former is uttered by a sports commentator, while the latter is used in a cooking class. Is it possible to say that the time reference of the Simple Present used here is to the exact moment of the utterance?

Strictly speaking, in the former case, a little moment after the commentator gets what happens in the field, he/she can say the sentence. On the other hand, in the latter, a little moment after the cooking teacher explains what he/she is going to do, the action explained by the teacher is actually done. Therefore, the Simple Present used in sentences (3) and (4) refers respectively to a past point of time a little before the exact moment of the utterance and a future point of time a little after the exact moment of the utterance. Thus, the sentences can

be rewritten in the following way:

(3) a. Moore *passed* the ball to Carlton (a moment ago).

b. Moore *has passed* the ball to Carlton.

(4) a. To the flour I *will* add milk (a moment later).

However, it is also not impossible to think of the 'moment' in (3a) and (4a) as an unlimitedly short moment. Hence, if the 'moment' is thought of as an unlimitedly short one, it is also conceivable that the point of time when the act denoted by the verb is accomplished is almost the same time as the exact point of the utterance in both sentences (3) and (4).

1.4. The Simple Present Referring to the Past Time

In our everyday life, the Simple Present with the past time reference is used "with verbs of communication, where more strictly the present perfect would be appropriate" (Leech et al 1987:69):

(5) John *tells* me that you are going to Europe soon. (Quirk et al. 1974:86; the italics are mine.)

A similar kind of use of the Simple Present is also common when we are "quoting from books, notices or very recently received letters" (Thomson et al 1982:146):

(6) A notice at the end of the road *warns* people not to go any farther. (ibid.; the italics are mine.)

Regarding sentence (5), it is clear that after the act denoted by the verb is done, the speaker utters the sentence. On the other hand, 'a notice' in sentence (6) was written in the past. Therefore, we might be able to rewrite these sentences in the following way:

(5) a. John *told* me (a while ago) that you are going to Europe soon.

b. John *has told* me that you are going to Europe soon.

(6) a. A notice at the end of the road *warned* people not to go any farther.

b. A notice at the end of the road *has warned* people not to go any farther.

In both cases, unlike the case of the 'instantaneous pres-

ent', it seems slightly difficult to think that the point of time when the act described by the verb is accomplished is almost the same point as the exact present moment.

As to sentence (6), moreover, if the Simple Past or the Present Perfect is used in place of the Simple Present as in (6a) and (6b), we feel as if we saw 'a notice at the end of the road' only once. Consequently, it seems better to interpret sentence (6) in the following way:

(6) c. *Whenever we see it*, a notice at the end of the road warns people not to go any farther.

If we interpret sentence (6) in this way, we might also interpret this kind of use of the Simple Present as the 'habitual present' — its time reference is to an unrestricted period of time.

A similar interpretation might be possible for sentence (5); i.e. it might be possible to interpret that John is informed not only once, but more than once, of what is said in the *that*-clause and rewrite it also in the following way:

(5) c. John tells me *many times* that you are going to Europe soon.

1.5. The Simple Present Referring to the Future Time

In some dependent clauses, particularly in temporal and conditional clauses introduced by conjunctions *if*, *when*, *as*, *until*, etc., we usually use the Simple Present to refer to the future time. According to Geoffrey N. Leech, "the happening referred to is not a prediction, but a fact that is taken as given" (Leech 1985:60). In the same way, if the Simple Present is used in independent clauses, "we may say that the speaker treats the event as a fact" (*ibid.*).

Consequently, the Simple Present is generally used in independent clauses to express arrangements, decided plans and so on:

(7) I *read* my paper tomorrow. (Palmer 1973:89; the italics are mine.)

As the adverbial phrase 'tomorrow' shows, the time reference of the Simple Present used here is clearly to the future time. Then

what about the following sentences with no adverbial phrases?

- (8) You *take* the first turning on the left past the roundabout, then you *cross* a bridge and *bear* right until you *reach* the Public Library. (Leech 1985:13; the italics are mine.)

According to F.R. Palmer (1985:67), there is futurity in this kind of sentences.

1.6. Classification of the Simple Present

Depending upon its Time Reference

From what we have seen so far, it is possible to classify the use of the Simple Present referring to a specific point of time into the following five groups depending upon the exact time reference:

- i) a case where the act denoted by the verb was accomplished *some time ago*
- ii) a case where the act denoted by the verb was accomplished *a moment ago*
- iii) a case where the act denoted by the verb is accomplished *at the exact moment of the utterance*
- iv) a case where the act denoted by the verb will be accomplished *a moment later*
- v) a case where the act denoted by the verb will be accomplished *some time later*

The difference between this new classification and the traditional one is that the group of the 'instantaneous present' in the latter is further divided into three groups, that is, ii), iii), and iv).

When we direct someone to do something, however, the Simple Present used can join in group iv) or v) depending upon the verb used and the situation:

- (9) You stand up!

- (10) You turn to the right at the next corner.

Sentence (9) seems to be in group iv), while sentence (10) seems to be in group v).

2. Method of This Study and Hypothesis

2.0. Hypothesis

If the new classification is correct, the Simple Present in groups i) and ii) might be replaced by the Simple Past or the Present Perfect, and the Simple Present in groups iv) and v) might be rewritten with the auxiliary *will*. As to the use of the Simple Present classified as group i), another interpretation, where the time reference is to an unrestricted period of time, may be possible as mentioned in section 1.3. Thus, there will be some cases where the Simple Present cannot be replaced by the Simple Past or the Present Perfect in group i).

2.1. Material

The Simple Present may probably appear in real conversations more often than in novels and stories. Although it is hard to get a lot of real English conversations here in Japan, we can get play and film scripts more easily, and they must contain a lot of conversations. Therefore, play and film scripts seem to be the best materials for this study. Needless to say, only the Simple Present which is used in the conversations will be examined, and all of the stage directions are excluded.

All the scripts used in this study are:

Anne of the Green Gables (Video Transcript), Back to the Future (1989), Back to the Future II (1990), Back to the Future III (1990), Melody (1979), The Secret of My Success (1988), The Third Man (1968), Tucker — The Man and His Dream (1989), Working Girl (1989), Wuthering Heights (1967),

and parts of the scripts in *Jiji Eigo* from January 1988 to July 1990 and *Screen English* February and April 1978, and January 1979.

2.2. Methodological Remarks

First, we pick up from all the materials mentioned above, the sentences where the Simple Present is used, excluding all the examples with the stative verbs. Then we further exclude, judging from the context, the examples where the Simple Present with action verbs seems to be used to refer to an unrestricted period of time. Since we examine the Simple Present in independent clauses only, we further exclude the Simple Present referring to the future in temporal or conditional clauses.

Next, we classify all the relevant examples into the five groups shown in section 1.6. When the verb in the Simple Present actually refers to a past or a future event, one question arises: is it possible to use, in place of the Simple Present, the Simple Past, the Present Perfect or the auxiliary *will*? In order to find out the possibility, we need to ask some native speakers of English.

Since several paraphrases are prepared in advance for each example, what our informants are asked to do is, first, to select sentences they feel are used most normally, and then, to put all the paraphrases in order of acceptability using their own intuition. Needless to say, the context around the sentence in question is also given so that it may be easier for the informants to do the task assigned.

Reading all the scripts and looking for the examples corresponding to each group mentioned above, we have got fifty examples in the following way:

- i) cases where the act denoted by the verb was accomplished
some time ago ... 6
- ii) cases where the act denoted by the verb was accomplished
a moment ago ... 7
- iii) cases where the act denoted by the verb is accomplished
at the exact moment of the utterance ... 10
- iv) cases where the act denoted by the verb will be accomplished
a moment later ... 10
- v) cases where the act denoted by the verb will be accomplished
where *some time later* ... 17

2.3. Informants

The following five informants have helped the research.

| Informant | Sex | Nationality | Age | Mother Tongue |
|-----------|--------|-------------|----------|---------------|
| A | male | Canada | about 60 | French* |
| B | female | U. S. A. | about 40 | English |
| C | male | U. K. | about 40 | English |
| D | female | Canada | about 30 | English |
| E | male | Australia | about 20 | English |

* English is his second language.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1. The Simple Present Classified in Group i)

While some informants say that only the Simple Present is good (one informant in one example, two in two, and three in one), some admit that the Simple Past or the Present Perfect can be used for the Simple Present (two informants in one example, three in two, and four in one). Thus, this use of the Simple Present might be interpreted as referring to the past time.

However, the four informants interpret some of these examples as cases of the "habitual present", whose time reference is to an unrestricted present time. They say that if the Simple Past or the Present Perfect is used in place of the Simple Present, the action denoted by the verb seems to be done only once, while if the Simple Present is used, it seems to be done many times. Broadly speaking, therefore, we can say that the Simple Present used in these examples tends to be interpreted as the 'habitual present'.

3.2. The Simple Present Classified in Group ii)

With these examples, most of the informants say that the Simple Present is the most normal. However, since they also ac-

knowledge the use of the Simple Past or the Present Perfect, it seems that the Simple Present here refers to the past time. In other words, the Simple Present is regularly used in these examples even if the event described by the verb actually belongs to the past time.

There is one example where the Simple Present is interpreted as the 'habitual present' by the two informants.

- (11) Why *does* it *do* that? ("Working Girl":31; the italics are mine.)

3.3. The Simple Present Classified in Group iii)

Most of the informants answer that the Simple Present is the most common in all the examples here.

There are also some examples where some informants acknowledge that the auxiliary *will* can be used (one informant in two examples, two in three, three in two, and four in one). According to these informants, however, if the auxiliary *will* is used, the sentence sounds as if it were a prediction, or the act denoted by the verb would be accomplished not now but in the distant future; i. e. the sentence is no longer the performatives.

3.4. The Simple Present Classified in Group iv)

This use of the Simple Present seems to be classified into two subgroups: a) normal sentences, b) sentences which have function to direct someone to do something.

First, in the case of normal sentences, most of the informants answer that the auxiliary *will* may be used in place of the Simple Present. Moreover, they remark that both the case where the Simple Present is used and the case where the auxiliary *will* is used are almost the same in meaning. Thus, the use of the Simple Present here seems to be idiomatic. However, even in this case, there is one example where the Simple Present is interpreted as the 'habitual present' by one informant:

- (12) People's impression of me *starts* with you. ("Working

Girl":17; the italics are mine.)

On the other hand, it sounds strange to most of the informants to use the auxiliary *will* in sentences of directions. According to one informant, using the auxiliary *will* here makes the sentence more polite.

3.5. The Simple Present Classified in Group v)

This use of the Simple Present is also classified into two subgroups in the same way as in the case of group iv).

With all the examples of normal sentences, most of the informants admit that the auxiliary *will* can be used in place of the Simple Present. However, another interpretation seems to be possible here. That is, there are some examples which some of the informants say are general statements. According to one informant, if the auxiliary *will* is used, the event described by the verb seems to refer to a specific one, not a general one.

Regarding the case of sentences of directions, however, most of the informants do not approve of the use of the auxiliary *will*. There is only one example where all the informants think it impossible for the auxiliary *will* to be used even if there is a time adverbial *tomorrow*.

(12) You fellows *come* and *see* me tomorrow. ("The Third Man": 116; the italics are mine.)

4. Conclusion

With an action verb, the Simple Present basically refers to the exact moment of the present time. Therefore, strictly speaking, we can use the Simple Present only in the case of the performative expression. However, we normally use the Simple Present when we describe an event which happened a moment ago, or will happen a moment later.

The Simple Present referring to a specific point of time tends to be used in the case where the event denoted by the verb is unlimitedly close to the exact moment of speech. Hence, if

the Simple Present is used in the case where the event described by the verb happened or will happen at a point of time far away from the exact moment of the present time, the Simple present often tends to be interpreted as the 'habitual present'.

In our everyday life, we rarely use the performative expressions, where the time reference is to the exact moment of the present time. Therefore, the Simple Present is seldom used to refer to the exact present moment. However, "it is quite common for us to perceive things as if they happened instantaneously" (Lewis 1986:49). This is the so-called 'instantaneous present'.

On the other hand, when we direct someone to do something, it is very conventional to use the Simple Present Tense. In this case, however, the reason why the Simple Present is used is, not because the act denoted by the verb is perceived at almost the same point as the exact present moment, but because it is thought necessary by the speaker to be done by the hearer as if at the exact moment of the present time. In other words, what is important here is whether or not the act described by the verb is done by the hearer rather than at what point of time it is accomplished. Hence, we might say that the Simple Present used here is neutral in the tense-meaning. In this sense, it seems to be similar to the Simple Present used in the stage directions, the instructions for operating an audio system, etc.

In addition, it is also ordinary that if we believe something to be a real fact at the exact moment of the utterance, we describe it in the Simple Present. In this case, however, the Simple Present cannot necessarily refer to the exact moment of the present time, but to an unrestricted present time including the exact present moment. This is the so-called 'habitual present'.

In conclusion, because the Simple Present with action verbs can be interpreted both as the 'instantaneous present' and the 'habitual present', its use is very difficult for us to interpret exactly.

5. Problems

In this paper, we have examined only the cases where the Simple Present refers to a specific point of time. One important aim of ours was to find out what is the basic meaning of the Simple Present. Unfortunately, however, we were not able to do so satisfactorily. This may be partly because we were not able to get enough materials for this study, due to the rarity of the Simple Present referring to a specific point of time, and partially because it is very difficult to judge which point of time the Simple Present actually refers to.

There also seem to have been some problems in the method of interviewing the informants. When one is asked some questions directly, for example, one cannot help being conscious of how to answer them. Generally speaking, the answer which is worked out deliberately is sometimes far from the exact fact. For this reason, what we have found out in this study is at best an overall tendency. Thus, when we interview informants, we must be as careful as we can so that they may not notice the purpose of our questionnaires.

Notes

¹ According to Eirlys Davies (1986:7), "imperatives lack in tense inflection." That is, he does not seem to admit that the imperative sentences are used in the Simple Present Tense.

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