

A Contrastive Analysis of the English Aspect Marker, "Progressive"
and the Japanese Aspect Marker, "-*Teiru*,"
with a Perspective toward an Effective Way for Japanese Students
to Acquire the English Progressive

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0. Introduction

The English progressive and the Japanese *-Teiru* are roughly regarded as equivalent; however, they are not the same. Both of them are distinct aspect markers in their languages. Both have a major function to express that an action or activity is going on. Nevertheless, the two forms have many different functions, respectively. This difference results from the fundamental conceptual dissimilarity in both forms: "Dynamic" vs. "Static." In consequence, the Japanese *-Teiru* splits more than two of its English equivalents, while the English progressive has more than two of its Japanese equivalents. Native Japanese students of English, who tend to think the two forms are equal because of their surface similarity in their major function, often fail to acquire the full function of the English progressive. This negative tendency is exacerbated by the word-by-word translation-oriented teaching/learning method. The solutions for this problem are: 1) teaching/learning not the translation but the concept underlying each aspect marker; and 2) teaching/learning a target language in context.

The data and the examples presented in this paper are collected mainly from the transcript of *Back to the Future* and its Japanese translation (1994, *Screen Play*). The choice of the text is based upon Quirk et al.'s claim: progressive forms, which cover less than 5 percent of all verb phrases, are used most frequently in conversational American English (1985 : 198).

1. The English progressive

The general features of progressivity in linguistics are "continuous meaning and nonstativity" (Comrie, 1976 : 38). Leech (1987 : 18) claims that the major function of the English progressive is, like the features of progressive in general linguistics, to express "temporary situations, activities, or goings-on," though the English progressive has more functions than this definition and covers a wider area

than other languages do. The frequency of this major function is proved high in my data: out of 67 progressive sentences observed in *Back to the Future*, the majority of 64 percent is on-goings, followed by 22 in future expressions, and 14 in emotional comments on habits or polite expressions. A similar ratio is presented by Ferguson & O'Reilly: 68 in continuous present simultaneous or on-goings, 20 in future and 12 in habitual (1976). Many of the English progressive sentences in on-goings are translated into the Japanese *-Teiru* form:

- (1) Yeah, well, I still don't understand what Dad was doing in the middle of the street.
=Ee, demo papa ga michi no mannaka de nani wo shiteita noka ga doushitemo wakaranai wane. (*Back to the Future*, p. 20)

Leech (1987 : 19) categorizes this use into three groups: 1) "duration" ; 2) "limited duration"; and 3) "happening need not be complete." From the viewpoint of "time-span," Leech states that progressives stretch the time-span of an event verb and compress the time-span of a state verb. The inherent meaning of a verb plays an important role in the distinction of the three types. The meaning of a given progressive sentence is decided through interplays between syntactic feature of the progressive and the semantic feature of a verb (Brinton, 1988; Leech, 1987; Quirk et al., 1985).

Quirk et al. (1985) divide verbs into two groups: "dynamic" and "stative." Both groups have subgroups. The stative-verb group consists of three groups: "quality," "state" and "stance," while the dynamic-verb group varies into 8 subgroups: "goings-on," "activities," "processes," "accomplishment," "momentary event," "momentary act," "transitional event" and "transitional act." Stative verbs are usually incompatible with the progressive because of their inherent meanings of "state." However, the stative verbs in the "state or stance-group," such as "think" and "live," can be used in the progressive form:

- (2) I am living in Wimbledon. (Leech, 1987 : 20)

The time-span of "live" is compressed in Sentence (2), thus this sentence conveys the meaning of temporal residents. Brinton (1988 : 40) states that "the effect of the progressive with otherwise stative verbs is to impart to them a dynamic reading."

All dynamic verbs have the progressive forms, though the meanings are different among each group of verbs. Verbs of "goings-on" and "activities," such as "rain," "drink" or "sing," express "temporal situations, activities and on-goings,"

which play the major role of the progressive use. Accomplishment verbs, such as transitive "write," express "incompletion," while momentary verbs, such as "nod," express "repetition" in this form. Transitional verbs, like "die," express "process" and the time-span is stretched:

- (3) For three years, Victor had been terribly sick. . . Victor was dying.
(*Reader's Digest*, 1994, March, p.13)

The progressive form also expresses the "anticipated happenings in the future" or "arrangements" (Leech, 1987). The ratio of this use in my data is the second highest, 22 percent. English has several future forms which express the future differently and have preferences for their contexts. The most frequent form is "will or shall," followed by "be going to" and the simple present. The progressive is the fourth frequent. Along with "be going to," the progressive serves an important function in conversational English though the use of the progressive is limited to actions. Examples in *Back to the Future* are:

- (4) Next Saturday night, we're sending you back to the Future.
=*kondono doyobi no yoru kimi wo mirai ni modoshite yaru.* (p.39)
(5) I'm comin', Doc. = *Doku, ikukara na.* (p.73)

Stative verbs in progressive do not have this reading of future:

- (6) * Tomorrow she is knowing the truth. (Smith, 1981 : 371)

The future expression of the present progressive often has the time adverbials, such as "Next Saturday night" in (4). The time adverbials make it clear that a given progressive sentence has a future reading. The progressive sentences without time adverbials can express the immediate future, and in this case "the context" compensates for the ambiguity caused by the lack of the time adverbials (Leech & Svartvic, 1975).

A reading of "arranged future" also applies to the future progressive. Leech & Svartvic (1975 : 78) explain the difference between these two sentences:

- (7) Will he come by car ?
(8) Will he be coming by car ?

Compared with Sentence (7), (8) excludes "the intention" and describes the event as scheduled. The choice of this future progressive sometimes shows the personality of a speaker as well as the situation. A sentence in *Back to the future II* presents

this example:

- (9) Marty: Hey, Doc, success. Everything's cool.
Doc: Great! I'll be landing on the school roof in about one minute.
Marty: I'll be there. (p.75)

Doctor Emmett Brown with a scientific mind chooses the future progressive, not the simple future, because for him an event is, in most cases, a well-calculated result.

Speakers who want to express their irritation at or disapproval of someone's habitual action often use the progressive. This use usually accompanies adverbials, such as "always," "forever" and "continuously" (Leech, 1987; Quirk et al., 1985; Suzuki & Yasui, 1994).

- (10) Don't you know if you let people walk over you now, they'll be walking over you for the rest of your life.
=*Ima hitoni funzuke rareteitara, issho yatsura ni funzuke rareru koto ni kizuite inaina.* (Back to the Future, p.30)

The phrase, "for the rest of your life," behaves the same way as "forever." The progressive can also express "habit in existence over a limited period" as in:

- (11) In those days, we were getting up at 7 o'clock . (Leech, 1987 : 32)

Here, a speaker is emotionally neutral.

The positive emotional coloring as well as the negative is observed in some progressive sentences. Murata (1982 : 170) states that speakers prefer the progressive to the simple form in a polite request because the progressive form has a temporary reading, which connotes that the request can be canceled in a given moment and thus, less forcible. Accordingly, Sentence (13) is more polite than Sentence (12):

- (12) I hope you'll give us some advice.
(13) I'm hoping you'll give us some advice.

This function of the progressive is important because it contributes to establish and keep good relationships with others.

2.The Japanese *-Teiru*

-Teiru is one of the most distinct aspect markers in Japanese. The Japanese

version of *Back to the Future* has 121 *-Teiru* sentences, whose English counterparts vary a lot. The most frequent English counterpart is, not the present progressive, but the simple present with state verbs. The second most frequent counterpart is the present progressive, followed by copula, "be," the simple present with dynamic verbs and the present perfect. Examples in *Back to the Future*, in order are:

- (14) *Nanika shitteru(shitteiru) daro!* = You must know them! (p.59)
 (15) Marty: *Nani shiteru(shiteiru) nda ?*= Whatta, whatta you doin'?
 George: *Sore wo kaiteiru n dayo.* = I'm writing this down. (p.66)
 (16) *Toshi totteru(totteiru) na .*= I'm an old man. (p.51)
 (17) *Doyobi wa neteru(neteiru) kara na.* = I sleep on Saturdays. (p.17)
 (18) *30 nen mae tokeidai ni kaminari ga ochite irai ano tokei wa ugoite imasen*
 = Thirty years ago, lightning struck that clock tower and the clock hasn't run since. (p.14)

The inherent meaning of a verb is an important factor to determine the use of the *-Teiru* form, as the same holds in the English progressive. Kindaichi (1950) classifies the Japanese verbs into 4 groups based on their relationships with *-Teiru* :1) stative verbs, which are incompatible with the *-Teiru* form; Kindaichi uses the term "stative verb" to refer to a limited number of verbs such as "*iru* (be)" and "*aru* (be)"; 2) durative verbs of natural phenomena or actions/activities by animate subjects, such as "*fururu* (rain)," "*yomu* (read)" and "*aruku* (walk)" ; 3) momentary (punctual) verbs, such as "*shinu* (die)" and "*kekconsuru* (marry)" ; and 4) verbs which are irrelevant to "time" and behave like adjectives, such as "*sugureteiru* (excellent)." The fourth group always has the *-Teiru* suffix, so some scholars exclude the fourth group out of the aspectual forms.

The basic concept or feature of the *-Teiru* form, together with the semantic feature of each verb, also functions as a determiner of an actual meaning. Kindaichi (1950) defines the basic feature of *-Teiru* as "expressing that a thing is in a certain *State*." Teramura (1984) states that the major feature of *-Teiru* is to express "the existence of the result of some action or event." Accordingly, two main uses of *-Teiru* are Continuative state and Resultative state (Teramura, 1984). Verbs with duration, the group 2 verbs in Kindaichi's classification, express Continuative state in the *-Teiru* form , while verbs with little or no duration, the group 3 verbs, express Resultative state:

- (19) *Akanbo ga naiteiru.* (A baby is crying.) [Continuative state]
 (20) *kingyo ga shindeiru.* (A goldfish is dead.) [Resultative state]

The problem is that a verb is not always categorized into one specific group. One and the same verb sometimes belongs to two or more groups.

(21) *Kare wa sono hon wo yondeiru.*

For instance, Sentence (21) is equivocal because *yomu* (read) has both a continuative reading and a resultative reading as in (21') and (21''):

(21') He is reading the book.

(21'') He has read the book. (Kindaichi, 1950)

However, this ambiguity is compensated by the context or the additional information given by adverbs:

(21-1) *Ima, kare wa sono hon wo shosai de yondeiru.*

(Now he is reading the book in his study.) [Continuative state]

(21-2) *Kare wa mou sono hon wo yondeiru.* [Resultative state]

(He has already read the book.)

Teramura (1984 : 128-32) presents three other uses of the *-Teiru* form: Habits, Repetitions and Recollections. Examples in order are:

(22) *Nichiyobi niwa ie ni ite, aburae wo kaiteiru.* [Habits]

(On Sundays I stay home and paint in oils.)

(23) *Afurika dewa mainichi suumannin no hito ga shokuryo busoku de shindeiru.* [Repetitions]

(In Africa, tens of thousands of people are dying from food-shortage.)

(24) *Souseki wa takusan no shosetsu wo kaiteiru.* [Recollections]

(Souseki wrote a lot of novels.)

These three uses can be regarded as sub-categories of the two main uses: Continuative state and Resultative state. Habits and Repetitions are sub-categories of Continuative state, and Recollections is a sub-category of Resultative state.

3. The comparison between the English progressive and the Japanese *-Teiru*

3.1. The fundamental featural opposition between two forms - "Dynamic vs. Static"

So far, we have observed various uses of the progressive and *-Teiru*. Next, the fundamental feature of each form is revealed through their comparison. I claim that the fundamental featural opposition between the English progressive and the

Japanese *-Teiru* is that of Dynamic vs. Static.

The progressive form gives a dynamic reading to a verb as is seen in Sentence (2), "I'm living in Wimbledon." A dynamic character of the progressive is also claimed by Bertinetto (1994), Goossens (1994) and Smith (1983). Bertinetto (1994) argues against Vlach's claim in 1981 that stative and the progressive are analogous. Vlach (1981) maintains, as one of the grounds to support his claim, that statives and progressives are analogous because progressives are built by means of the stative verb "be," which Bertinetto disputes, claiming that the basic meaning of progressives is not carried by "be." Bertinetto (1994 : 399) concludes that, though "statives and progressives share some properties, they are on the whole quite distinct entities." His claim is more convincing when we pay attention to the featural difference between the English progressive and the Japanese *-Teiru*.

The dynamic reading of the progressive, as well as a verb's inherent meaning, encourages expanding the use of this form toward the future reference (Goossens, 1994). The future expression in the progressive had its start in the verb phrases, "be going" and "be coming" (Jespersen, 1924). These two verbs have an inherent meaning of movement or process, which implies a goal in the future. It is a dynamic reading of the progressive that adds more energy for change to these verbs and eventually, makes them expand their uses from the simultaneous present to the future. This phenomenon had an influence on the use of the other verbs of movement such as "arrive" or "leave." Now not only this group of verbs but also other verbs can express arranged or near future in the present progressive form.

The fundamental tendency of the *-Teiru* forms is toward expressing "state," which is revealed itself by the comparison between the *-Teiru* form and its English counterparts. Nearly 50 percent of the *-Teiru* forms have stative verbs or copula, "be," as the English counterparts. A remarkable result is that the *-Teiru* suffix functions to give a "stative reading" to a verb. For instance, a verb like "*wakaru* (learn)" can get a stative reading only by adding the *-Teiru* suffix, "*wakat-teiru* (know)."

The static feature of *-Teiru* persists even in the case of the less static motion verbs such as "*aruku* (walk)." A surface observation finds *aru-teiru* (be walking) dynamic; however, the basic concept underlying this expression is static. *The National Institute of the Japanese Language* (1985 : 88) argues that the *-Teiru* form should not be confused with the progressive. The examples presented in the report

are: (25) *aruiteiru*; (26) *aruiteiku*; (27) *aruitekuru*. Compared with (26) or (27), (25) has no direction and does not connote the progress. The report (1985) maintains that one should use (26) or (27), instead of (25), to express the progress in the act of walking. The suffixes "*iku*" and "*kuru*," whose original meanings are "go" and "come" respectively, give a dynamic reading to a verb. However, "*iru*," whose original meaning is "be," does not connote the progress, but the "state."

Finally, I conclude this part, presenting an interesting example which shows a striking contrast of Dynamic vs. Static in the progressive and *-Teiru*. Transitional verbs, "die (*shinu*)," express two aspects in a very limited moment: Process and Result. It can be illustrated as follows:

(28) die = [Process + Result] = *shinu* = [Process + Result]

When we add "be -ing" and "*-Teiru*" to "die" and "*shinu*," respectively, we have two distinct expressions:

(29) die + Dynamic (the progress) = is dying [PROCESS + (result)]

(30) *shinu* + Static (*-Teiru*) = *shindeiru* [(process) + RESULT]

Phrase (29), "is dying," expresses a dynamic process toward "death," while Phrase (30), "*shin-deiru* (is dead)," expresses a static/unchanged resultative state after "death."

3.2. The difference in frequency of use

The *-Teiru* forms are used more frequently than the progressive. In *Back to the Future*, out of 200 verb phrases chosen at random, 26 *-Teiru* forms (13 percent) and 14 progressives (7 percent) are observed. This dissimilarity results from the different relationships between each form and the simple forms in each language.

The English simple present covers a wider range than the Japanese simple form does; eventually the progressive is used less than *-Teiru* is. Three main uses which the English simple present form covers are: 1) the state present; 2) the habitual present; and 3) the instantaneous present (Quirk et al., 1985). Stative verbs, the verbs of perception and the verbs of judgment express the present state in the simple form, not in the progressive. Dynamic verbs express actual present in the progressive form; however, it is in the simple form that they express the present

habit. In English, the simple form is an unmarked form to express habits.

The relative high frequency of the *-Teiru* form attributes itself to the uses of *-Teiru* which correspond to the English simple form. There are two obvious types in which the *-Teiru* form is used as the translation of the English simple present form. First is the expression in reference to the present state. *-Teiru*, which expresses a present state, is usually translated into the English simple form. Examples are:

(31) *Wakatteru yo, wakatteru!* = Yeah, I know, I know! (p.13)

(32) *Miterunda* = Watch this. (p.25)

Second is the habitual use of *-Teiru* whose counterparts in English is the simple form. The English progressive also has the habitual use; however, it covers a smaller range than *-Teiru* does. An example in *Back to the Future* shows this contrast:

(33) *50 nendai no wakamono no shūteita(shūteita) koto wa wakara naiyo.*
= I don't know, what did kids do in the "fifties"? (p.59)

The use of *-Teiru* is determined through the interplay with the simple present form, the *-Ru* form, which is incapable of expressing actual present in most cases other than the verbs of one's judgment such as "*omou* (think)" or the verbs of perception excluding "*miru, kiku* (see and hear)" (Teramura, 1984). The simple present form in Japanese, generally represents the predetermined "future." Japanese simple present is capable of expressing present habits; however, people prefer the *-Teiru* form in expressing habits to the simple form because of the future reading of the simple form. As a result, the Japanese people use *-Teiru* to express actual presents and present states in many cases, and habits relatively frequently.

4. A Suggestion for an effective way to teach the English progressive

It is obvious that these differences in both forms, *-Teiru* and the progressive, cause problems to the learners of English when a classroom is operated by using a word-by-word translation-oriented method. The contrast of Dynamic vs. Static and the difference in frequency in both forms cannot go with this method. Potential errors that Japanese students will make are: 1) less awareness or misunderstanding of some progressive meanings; and 2) overuse of the progressive forms.

The examples of the first potential errors are: 1) the low awareness of the future referent of the progressive form; 2) the misinterpretation of a progressive sentence, such as, "The bus is stopping." Both have the Japanese translations other than *-Teiru*: the future reference of the progressive is usually translated into Japanese "*-Ru*" form, while "is stopping," Japanese "*tomari-kakeru/kaketeiru*."

In regard with misinterpretation, Kodera (1992) reports that the majority of Japanese students in a junior-high school class take the sentence, "The bus is stopping," for the equivalent of "The bus is at a stop." It is obvious that the word-by-word translation, based on the wrong idea of "be -ing = *-Teiru*," causes this misunderstanding: the *-Teiru* form in "*Basu ga tomatteiru*" represents the resultative "state," not the process or "dynamic" shift toward the goal. When I asked 40 Japanese students their interpretation of the sentence, "The bus is stopping," more than 70 percent of them took it for, "The bus is at a stop." However, it should be noted that, after providing the students with the preceding context of it, most of them came to understand the correct meaning.

The second potential error, the overuse or inappropriate use of the progressive form, is reported in *Acquisition of English Tense and Aspect - In the Case of Japanese Learners of English; Tokyo Gakugei University Interlanguage Development Research Project (ILDRP) Report 1* (1987). According to the report, the order of the acquisition is: 1) present progressive; 2) future, will; 3) past progressive; 4) simple past; 5) present perfect; and 6) simple present. As far as the acquisition order is concerned, the progressive form seems less problematic for Japanese learners. Error analysis, however, reveals that students tend to overuse/inappropriately use the progressive form. Two most frequent errors observed in the research are : 1) to mistake the simple form for the progressive; 2) to mistake the simple past for the present perfect. The research team blames Japanese interference of "*-Teiru*" and "*-Ta*," for the errors. In a multiple-type question, many students chose the answer, "I am writing a letter to my mother every month," instead of the correct answer, "I write a letter to my mother every month." Here, we see a Japanese interference of "*kaiteiru*." Likewise, the preference of Japanese learners for the English progressive form results mainly from the automatic translation of *-Teiru* into the progressive.

The implication here is that applying the Japanese standpoint to learning the English progressive, which is what translation-oriented method does, causes students to fail to acquire the progressive. One cannot acquire the aspectual system

of a given language without acquiring the standpoint which speakers of its language have when they perceive the objects. Learning a foreign language, as Slobin put it (1991), means learning a new standpoint.

Similarities observed in both forms also give clues for the teaching method. Firstly, Part 1 to 3 in this paper show that a context is indispensable to both addressees and speakers to determine the meaning of a given sentence. Vet & Veters (1994 : Introduction) state that "tense and aspect distinctions generally constitute the most difficult part of the language system for non-native language learners," and that "a considerable part of the meaning of tense and aspect forms strongly depends on contextual factors." Therefore, a progressive sentence should be taught, not in isolation, but in context.

Secondly, Leech (1987) states that it is sometimes difficult to give a clear-cut definition for the use of the progressive since the choice between the progressive and the other forms sometimes depends on a speaker's viewpoint. A similar opinion is presented by Okuda (1977/1978); one cannot understand the *-Teiru* form without including the *-Ru* form in the scope. Even native speakers, unconsciously, compare potential forms in their language system when they choose one particular aspectual form to express what they have in mind. This shows how important it is for learners of a foreign language to learn an aspectual form in relation to other tense/aspect forms in the language.

5. Conclusion

The meanings of the English progressive and the Japanese *-Teiru* form are equally determined through the interplay between a verb's inherent meaning and the basic feature of each form. Nevertheless, the difference in each basic aspectual feature makes both forms unequivalent, rather contrary. The two forms show a striking contrast in their fundamental features. Dynamic feature of the progressive motivates all of its uses, which have a basic reading of "change"; by contrast, Static feature of *-Teiru* portrays an action or activity as a State.

An effective way to teach the English progressive is to present the basic concept of its form, not the translation. Furthermore, it is necessary to teach its form in comparison with the other English tense/aspect forms. Lastly, of crucial importance is to present students with as many progressive sentences in contexts as possible.

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