THE ASPECTUAL CHARACTERISTICS OF FULL-VERB INVERSION IN ENGLISH

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I. INTRODUCTION: THE ENGLISH SIMPLE TENSES IN ONGOING EVENT REPORTS

- Well-known restriction on simple tenses in English: they cannot be used for concurrent event reports:

(1) Be quiet, I *try / am trying to read.

(2) She *had / was having a bath when he called, so she couldn’t come to the phone.
1. Introduction: The English simple tenses in ongoing event reports

- But there are exceptions!
  - Performatives:
    (3) I promise it won’t happen again.
  - Sports broadcasting:
    (4) De Bruyne passes to Mertens, Mertens to Lukaku… Lukako shoots!
  - Demonstrations:
    (5) Look, I first place the card underneath the table cloth, and then wait for ten seconds.
I. Introduction: The English simple tenses in ongoing event reports

- And also:

- Full-verb inversion: adverbial in sentence-initial position and (non-pronominal) subject in postverbal position

(6) *On the shelf lies a book* → locative inversion
(7) *Along came a spider* → directional inversion
(8) *There / here comes my bus* → presentational *there*
I. INTRODUCTION: THE ENGLISH SIMPLE TENSES IN ONGOING EVENT REPORTS

- And also:

- No progressive aspect with full-verb inversion:

  (6’) ??On the shelf is **lying** a book
  (7’) *Along **was coming** a stranger
  (8’) *There / here **is coming** my bus
I. Introduction: The English simple tenses in ongoing event reports

- But progressive aspect is not entirely prohibited in contexts of full-verb inversion:

  (9) So I used large-grained bulgur from Turkey, and I rinsed it in a sieve and dumped it into a frying pan in which was sizzling a diced red onion. (internet, 3-6-2016)

  (10) “Eight o’clock the next morning, my phone was ringing off the hook – ‘You’ve got the job. We’re announcing it today.’ Suddenly I was on a bullet train, doors were shut, and off I was going.” (From an interview with Sam Taylor-Johnson, director of Fifty Shades of Grey, Time magazine, February 16, 2015.)
I. INTRODUCTION: THE ENGLISH SIMPLE TENSES IN ONGOING EVENT REPORTS

- Two research questions:

  i. why does full-verb inversion favor the use of the simple tenses in English (in spite of the general restriction on the use of these tenses with ongoing events)?

  ii. why do some inverted contexts still allow the use of the progressive?
OVERVIEW OF THE TALK

1. Introduction
2. Corpus data and native-speaker elicitations
3. The aspectual semantics of the English simple tenses
4. The function of full-verb inversion in English
5. The function of the English simple tenses in full-verb inversion: canonicity and inevitability
6. Conclusion
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2. **Corpus data and native-speaker elicitations**

Corpus data:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Corpus</th>
<th>Full-verb inversion token frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Collins corpora of modern written and spoken text</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brown Corpus of Standard American English</td>
<td>314</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OntoNotes Corpus</td>
<td>678</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betty Birner corpus</td>
<td>1778</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carlos Prado-Alonso corpus</td>
<td>649</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>3609</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. Corpus data and native-speaker elicitations

- Only four progressive tokens:

(11) Out of the mouths of revolutionaries are coming words of moderation.

(12) From the west were rolling pile after pile of fat, white, complicated clouds, and above the clouds was the clear and uncomplicated blue.

(13) They have a great big tank in the kitchen, and in the tank are sitting all of these pots.

(14) I’m sure you know that the Queen is standing beside the Duke of Edinburgh. In the middle and on her right is standing the Lord Mayor of London.
2. Corpus data and native-speaker elicitations

- Conclusions drawn from corpus research:

  1) The simple tenses are used in an overwhelming majority of full-verb inversion instances

  2) Progressive aspect is exceedingly rare, but not excluded → too few tokens to make any generalizations as to when it can be used

Native-speaker elicitation
2. CORPUS DATA AND NATIVE-SPEAKER ELICITATIONS

- Native-speaker elicitations
  - Goal: evaluate the relative acceptability of progressive aspect in contexts featuring full-verb inversion
  - Two acceptability judgement tests (in total 68 participants, 70 simple versus progressive sentences), four-point scale

Examples:
(15) Across the desert drift clouds of red dust.
    and
(16) Across the desert are drifting clouds of red dust.

(17) He claps his hands and away they go.
    and
(18) He claps his hands and away they are going.
2. **Corpus data and native-speaker elicitations**

- Significant differences between simple and progressive examples found for:

- **Presentational inversion and directional inversion with specified source or endpoint**

(19) *There goes / *is going my bus* (p = 4.251e-40)

(20) *I open the door and in comes / *is coming the cat* (p = 1.132e-9)

(21) *Out of the room steps / *is stepping a huge man* (p = 0.0001)
2. Corpus data and native-speaker elicitations

- Simple present and present progressive considered equally acceptable in:

  - **Locative inversion:**
    (22) *In that house live / are living strange people.* (p = 0.501)
    (23) *On top of the square block lies / is lying another block.* (p = 0.376)
    (24) *Upstairs hang / are hanging my mother’s clothes.* (p = 0.129)

  - **Directional inversion across some trajectory:**
    (25) *Across that bridge go / are going hundreds of cars.* (p = 0.020)
    (26) *Along the riverside path walk / are walking several tourists.* (p = 0.389)
    (27) *Down the beach run / are running cute puppies.* (p = 0.443)

  - **Directional inversion with a specified source or endpoint:**
    (28) *Up to the hilltop they run / are running.* (p = 0.645)
    (29) *From our neighbor’s house comes / is coming the sound of piano music.* (p = 0.100)
2. **Corpus data and native-speaker elicitation**

Conclusions on the basis of native-speaker elicitations:

- Locative inversion and directional inversion along some trajectory are more favorable to progressive aspect
- Directional inversion with a specified source or endpoint is more versatile
- Presentational inversion does not allow progressive aspect

→ An analysis of aspect in full-verb inversion needs to be able to account for these differences
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3. The aspectual semantics of the English simple tenses

- The English simple present: perfective or imperfective?

  - *when*-test:

    (30) *Paul always smiles when Mandy comes in.*
    \[\rightarrow\] Sequential, i.e. perfective, reading

- The English simple present as a perfective construction
  \[\rightarrow\] indicates that a situation can be conceived of in its entirety at the time of speaking (De Wit forthcoming)
  \[\rightarrow\] same analysis for simple present in full-verb inversion
3. The Aspectual Semantics of the English Simple Tenses

- The English simple past: perfective or imperfective?
  - The *when*-test

  (31) *She took a shower when he called.*
  → Sequential reading

- The English simple past as a perfective construction
  → indicates that a past situation can be conceived of in its entirety
  → same analysis for simple past in full-verb inversion
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4. The function of full-verb inversion in English

- Two important aspects

1) Full-verb inversion can trigger a ‘deictic effect’ (Drubig 1988)

(32) a. Fred opened the bedroom door and the cat **walked in**.

   b. Fred opened the bedroom door and **in walked** the cat.

→ conceptualizer’s vantage point **anchored** within the location designated by the preposed constituent (the deictic center)
4. THE FUNCTION OF FULL-VERB INVERSION IN ENGLISH

- Two important aspects

  1) Full-verb inversion can trigger a ‘deictic effect’ (Drubig 1988)

- Deictic effect arises with presentational *there* by definition

- Deictic effect arises with some cases of directional inversion with a specified source or endpoint, but not with locative inversion, e.g.:

  (33) *One night there was a tap on the window. Mrs. Rabbit peeped through the window. Outside stood a little angel.* (Birner, 1638)
4. The function of full-verb inversion in English

- Two important aspects

2) The verb in full-verb inversion is ‘informationally light’ (Birner 1995)

(34)  a. In that bedroom slept two people.
       b. ?? In that bedroom jumped two people.

→ The verb expresses a canonical relationship between the entities designated by the preposed and the postposed constituents.
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Central claims:

1) In most cases of full-verb inversion, a perfective viewpoint is felicitous and progressive aspect is not needed in view of canonicity

2) In those cases in which there is a deictic effect, progressive aspect is prohibited
5. The function of the English simple tenses in full-verb inversion: canonicity and inevitability

1) In most cases of full-verb inversion, a perfective viewpoint is felicitous and progressive aspect is not needed in view of canonicity

E.g. Into the room walked a cat.

Process is highly predictable, and thus fully identifiable from the conceptualizer’s vantage point → perfective construal
5. **The function of the English simple tenses in full-verb inversion: canonicity and inevitability**

1) In most cases of full-verb inversion, a perfective viewpoint is felicitous and progressive aspect is not needed

- Conceptualizer conceives of presence, absence or (dis)appearance of a figure (from) within her deictic center
- Process that led to this presence, absence or (dis)appearance is conceived of as fully identifiable and complete (i.e. perfective)

→ Frequent use of full-verb inversion to express a sense of **inevitability**:

(35) *There goes the neighborhood.*

(36) *Then boom! Along comes the Internet.* (Collins)

(37) *Up we go!*
5. The function of the English simple tenses in full-verb inversion: canonicity and inevitability

1) In most cases of full-verb inversion, a perfective viewpoint is felicitous and progressive aspect is not needed

… but in some cases we do want to give more emphasis to the process and use progressive aspect:

- When the denoted event is stretched out, as in:
  (12) From the west were rolling pile after pile of fat, white, complicated clouds, and above the clouds was the clear and uncomplicated blue.

  … and other examples of directional inversion along an unbounded trajectory

- When the denoted event is not entirely predictable, as in:
  (13) They have a great big tank in the kitchen, and in the tank are sitting all of these pots.
5. The function of the English simple tenses in full-verb inversion: canonicity and inevitability

Zooming in on the ongoing process:

From the west were rolling pile after pile of fat, white, complicated clouds…
5. The function of the English simple tenses in full-verb inversion: canonicity and inevitability

2) In those cases in which there is a deictic effect, progressive aspect is prohibited

*Example:* *Into the room walked a cat*
5. THE FUNCTION OF THE ENGLISH SIMPLE TENSES IN FULL-VERB INVERSION: CANONICITY AND INEVITABILITY

2) In those cases in which there is a deictic effect, progressive aspect is prohibited

e.g. *Into the room was walking a cat
5. THE FUNCTION OF THE ENGLISH SIMPLE TENSES IN FULL-VERB INVERSION: CANONICITY AND INEVITABILITY

2) In those cases in which there is a deictic effect, progressive aspect is prohibited

Conceptualizer cannot step out of deictic center, since her vantage point is anchored within this center
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i. why does full-verb inversion favor the use of the simple tenses in English (in spite of the general restriction on the use of these tenses with ongoing events)?

- Because it involves **canonical** processes that can be viewed in their entirety at reference time \(\rightarrow\) **perfective** viewpoint associated with frequent interpretations of **inevitability**

ii. why do some inverted contexts still allow the use of the progressive?

- If there is **no deictic effect**, the conceptualizer can use progressive aspect to zoom in on a process
REFERENCES


Want to know more?

3. The aspectual semantics of the English simple tenses

- The English simple present as a perfective construction with different types of situation:
  
  * **English simple present + present-time states:**
    States are contractible (i.e. they have the subinterval property) → can be identified on the basis of the sample that overlaps with the time of speaking
  
  * **English simple present + present-time events:**
    Performative contexts, sports broadcasts, demonstrations etc.: typically short events that the speaker can identify in their entirety at the time of speaking because of their predictability

  → Same analysis in terms of perfectivity for the English simple present in full-verb inversion