

A Semantic Look Into English Verbs and Its Implications for Grammar Teaching

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Among the different parts of speech in each language, verbs are usually the most complicated and difficult to understand and master. This paper attempts to classify and analyze English verbs from a semantic perspective, esp. to have a semantic analysis of the grammatical concept of the progressive aspect of English verbs, so as to raise students' awareness of the relationship between semantics and grammar, and thus to help students have a deeper understanding and mastery of the grammatical rules in future English teaching.

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Introduction

Every language has a distinction of different parts of speech, although the classification may not be exactly the same. Most languages have the distinction of nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, etc. Very often, grammar books use parts of speech terms when explaining grammatical knowledge. Therefore, speaking of parts of speech, we tend to think that it is closely related to grammar. However, the concept of parts of speech is not exclusive to grammar. A semantic analysis of parts of speech is also very important and highly helpful for language learning and teaching, which can help us understand the relationship between semantics and grammar and then better engage in grammar teaching. There are about 10 parts of speech in the English language, among which verbs are relatively the most important but most complicated and difficult to master. Therefore, in this paper, the author will mainly analyze and discuss English verbs from the perspective of semantics, so that we are able to understand better the relationship between grammar and semantics.

Classification of English Verbs and the Semantic Meaning of Their Progressive Aspect

First, let's look at the definition of verbs as a whole. What is a verb anyway? How do verbs differ from nouns, adjectives, etc.? To quote a relatively technical definition of the word "verb" from Dictionary.com: "A verb is any member of a class of words that function as the main elements of predicates, typically express action or state, may be inflected for tense, aspect, voice and mood, and show agreement with subject or object". This definition explains a verb from different perspectives such as morphology, syntax, and semantics. This paper will mainly analyze the English verbs from the semantic perspective, that is to say, a verb is the expression of an action or a state.

English verbs can be divided into different classes according to different criteria. For example, verbs can be divided into notional verbs, link verbs, auxiliary verbs, and modal verbs according to their roles in a sentence.

Verbs can also be divided into transitive and intransitive verbs, depending on whether they need an object afterwards or not. There are various other classification criteria, which are not detailed here. After all, the purpose of this article is not to classify verbs. What the author is interested in is to make a semantic classification of the verbs, and then explore the relationship between the semantic idea and the grammatical function of the progressive aspect of a verb, to see whether, through such classification and analysis, we can have a deeper understanding of the progressive aspect of English verbs. In relation to the progressive aspect of verbs, we are often troubled by such questions: Why can't verbs, such as "like", "own", "belong", and "be" be used in the progressive form? Why do verbs that use the progressive form sometimes stretch the time span while sometimes shorten it? If we analyze these verbs from a semantic perspective, perhaps we can clarify these doubts and confusion.

From the definition of verbs above, verbs can be explained and classified from the semantic perspective. This is a perspective from which the concept of the progressive aspect of verbs is most applicable: (1) Verbs that express a state (i.e., a static situation) are here called "state verbs"; and (2) Verbs that express events, processes, and actions (i.e., dynamic situations) are called "action verbs". A static situation refers to an "existence" rather than an "occurrence" and refers to a situation that is constant throughout the process. The dynamic situation refers to an occurrence, which may occur instantaneously or continuously, and the situation may not be constant all the time. Let's classify and analyze these two classes of verbs, starting with action verbs.

Action Verbs

Momentary verbs. There is a class of action verbs that are instantaneous and have little or no time continuity. For example, verbs "kick", "knock", "jump", "wink", "nod", and so on belong to this class. As a result, such verbs, when used in the progressive aspect, can express a relatively extended concept of time. However, it is important to note that this extension of time is not the continuation of a single action, but the repetition of an action over and over again. Compare the following two sets of sentences:

1. a. He winked at me.
b. He was winking at me.
2. a. Someone fired a gun at him.
b. Someone was firing a gun at him.

In both sets of sentences, when the verb appears in the simple aspect, it expresses an instantaneous or momentary action. "He winked at me" means "He gave me a wink". "Someone fired a gun at him" means "Someone took a shot at him". However, in Sentence b of each set, the verb is in the progressive aspect. In this way, the continuity of the action is extended. The sentences express the continuity of the action rather than the occurrence of the moment. But it's not the continuation of a single action; it's the repetition of an action. "He was winking at me", that is, he winked at me again and again. "Someone was firing a gun at him", that is, he fired one shot after another.

Transitional event verbs. Verbs such as "arrive", "die", "leave", "stop" are in this class. They are called "transitional action verbs", because they transition to a different state once the action has taken place. For example, the action of "stop" in the sentence "The bus stopped" means that the bus changes from a moving state to a still state. So, what the verb expressed is actually a transitional action, indicating the end of a process. Like the above class of momentary verbs, this class of verbs also refers to momentary events. But when used in the progressive aspect, these verbs have different implications. Let's look at the verb "die" in "He was dying". The progressive

aspect of the verb represents a process in which “die” is the final state. Because it’s a process, it has continuity. Therefore, it can be concluded that the progressive aspect of verbs of this class represents the process of transition to the final state, which is continuous, while the simple aspect represents the transition itself, which is instantaneous.

To sum up, when the above two types of action verbs are used in the progressive aspect, the time span expressed by the action can be extended. This is why, when commenting on some sports, commentators use the simple aspect for fast-action sports such as football and the progressive aspect for leisurely sports, such as golf.

Process verbs. Now, let’s take a look at the last type of action verbs which show processes, such as “change”, “grow”, “widen”, and so on; we call them “process verbs”. Since these verbs express processes, they are often used in the progressive aspect which usually indicate continuation of time. “The bus is slowing down”. “He is changing for the better”. However, because the progressive aspect usually indicates that a certain action is happening at a particular moment, the time span expressed by a process verb when used in the progressive aspect is instead shortened. Try to feel the different time span indicated by the verb “widen” in the following two sentences: “They widened the road” and “They were widening the road”. Obviously, the time span expressed by the verb in the progressive aspect is shorter than that expressed in the simple aspect.

State Verbs

After an analysis of the action verbs, now the author tries to make a brief analysis of state verbs, which are not normally used in the progressive aspect.

State verbs of having and being. These verbs include “be”, “matter”, “resemble”, “have”, “own”, “contain”, “belong to”, etc. Verbs “be” and “have” are representatives of verbs of this class. Therefore, such verbs can be used to explain the meaning of “be” or “have”. For example, “matter = be important”, “resemble = be like”, “own = have ... in one’s possession”, “contain = have ... inside”, and so on. All of these verbs refer to a state, a static situation, an existence rather than an occurrence. The semantic function of the progressive aspect not only expresses the existence, but also the occurrence and progress. Therefore, this class of verbs which express property or possession is usually not used in the progressive aspect. We often say “Whether he comes or not doesn’t matter”, but we do not usually say “Whether he comes or not isn’t mattering”.

Verbs of inert perception and cognition. We use the adjective “inert” to modify “perception” and “cognition”, which actually indicates that these verbs of perception and cognition often have a connotation of being passive. The state verbs which express perception, such as “feel”, “hear”, “see”, “smell”, “taste” and the state verbs indicating cognition like “believe”, “know”, “understand”, etc., all have the connotation of passive acceptance. For example, we can differentiate well between state verb “see” and action verb “look”. Both verbs are related to vision and the eyes, but the former refers to a passive state of perception while the latter refers to an active action. Usually, the time spans of the states expressed by these verbs are extended indefinitely. Therefore, verbs of this class are not usually used in the progressive aspect.

Conclusion

Of course, there is no definite boundary between the different classes of verbs above. Some verbs may be state verbs in a given context, but action verbs in another context. Also, there are exceptions to any rule, so it’s not uncommon to use state verbs in the continuous tense, such as “He is being a fool” and “She is being friendly”. However, at least, through such a classification and analysis, we can at least realize that semantics and grammar

are not two completely independent branches of linguistics. On the contrary, they are complementary and closely related. Therefore, when it comes to grammar learning and teaching, we should not only teach students grammatical rules by deductive means for students to practice and memorize mechanically. Rules learnt by rote without real understanding will soon be forgotten. And students are more likely to make mistakes while applying the rules. Therefore, in grammar teaching, we can make use of the induction method more often, providing students with a variety of meaningful contexts related to a certain grammatical point, such as subjunctive mood, so that students can summarize the grammatical rules of this grammar point from both the structural and semantic perspective. With semantics as the basis, grammatical rules can be understood and mastered more easily and thoroughly.

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