

## SEMINAR 6 – THE PRESENT SIMPLE V. PRESENT PROGRESSIVE

*Introduction – two tenses: present and past*

In the study of the semantics of the verb phrase we have to differentiate between **tense** and **time**. As for time, the distinction can be made between past, present and future. However, **tense is a grammatical category that is realized by verb inflection**. Since English has no future inflected form of the verb we distinguish **only two tenses – present and past**. Morphologically English has no future form of the verb, but there are a few grammatical constructions that express the **semantic category of future time**.

**THE SIMPLE PRESENT CAN REFER NOT ONLY TO THE PRESENT TIME, BUT ALSO THE PAST AND FUTURE!**

### **I. Simple present for present time**

1) **general timeless statements – ‘eternal truths’**

e.g. Honesty *is* the best policy.

Water *consists* of hydrogen and oxygen.

Two and three *make* five.

Summer *follows* spring.

2) **‘the present period’** – we refer to events, actions or situations which are true in the present period of time and may continue – what we are saying is ‘this is the situation as it stands at present’

e.g. My father *works* in a bank.

My sister *wears* glasses.

Margaret *is* tall.

We *live* near Toronto.

3) **habitual actions** – with or without an adverb of time to describe habitual actions, things that happen repeatedly

e.g. I *get* up at 7.

Bill *drinks* heavily.

We *go* to Paris every year.

I sometimes *stay* up till midnight.

- 4) The so called **instantaneous present** – the verb refers to a single action begun and completed approximately at the moment of speech, with little or no duration; used only in certain situations

- a) commentaries:

Black *passes* the ball to Fernandez.... Fernandez *shoots*!

- b) demonstrations and other self-commentaries:

I *enclose* a form of application

- c) special exclamatory sentences (with initial adverbials):

Here *comes* the winter. Up you *go*.

- d) with performative verbs that refer to the speech acts performed by uttering the sentences, e.g. *promise, suggest, insist, apologize, agree, refuse*, etc.:

I *apologize* for my behaviour.

We *thank* you for your recent inquiry.

## II. Simple present referring to the past

- 1) the so-called *historic present* – characteristic of popular narrative style – describes the past as if happening now + conveys the dramatic immediacy of an event happening at the time of narration

e.g. Just as we arrived, up *comes* Ben and *slaps* me on the back as if we're life-long friends. 'Come on, old pal,' he *says*.

- 2) with *verbs of communication* (understand, hear, learn):

e.g. Jack *tells* me that the position is still vacant.

I *hear* that you need an assistant.

I *understand* that the game has been postponed.

These sentences would also be acceptable with the simple past or present perfect, but the *present tense suggests that the information is still valid!* Therefore, the present tense can be used in sentences referring to writers, composers, etc. and their works:

e.g. Dickens *draws* (drew) his characters from the London underworld of his time.

3) *newspaper headlines* - the simple present is generally used to refer to past events :

e.g. Snow *stops* traffic

Disarmament talks *begin* in Vienna

### III. Simple present referring to the future

1) in main clauses the simple present typically occurs with time-position adverbials to suggest that a future event is certain to take place, the event is fixed in advance:

e.g. The plane *leaves* for Ankara at eight o'clock tonight.

The exhibition *opens* on January 1<sup>st</sup> and *closes* on January 31<sup>st</sup>.

The concert *begins* at 7.30.

2) in dependent clauses - conditional and temporal

e.g. He'll do it if you *pay* him.

I'll let you know as soon as I *hear* from her.

### THE PRESENT PROGRESSIVE (CONTINUOUS)

1) *actions in progress at the moment of speaking*, they are seen as uncompleted, 'I am in the middle of doing s':

e.g. What *are* you *doing*? – I'm just *tying* up my shoe-laces.

He's *working* at the moment, so he can't come to the phone.

2) *temporary situations* – actions and situations which may not be happening long, or are thought of as being in progress for a limited period (today, this week, etc.):

e.g. What's your daughter *doing* these days? – She's *learning* English in London.

You're *working* hard today. – Yes, I have a lot to do.

Is Susan *working* this week? – No, she is on holiday.

Such situations may not be happening at the moment of speaking:

e.g. I'm *learning* to drive.

*Are* you *reading* any book now?

Carol wants to work in Italy, so she is learning Italian.

We can also describe current trends:

e.g. People *are becoming* less tolerant of smoking these days.

or changes happening around now:

e.g. *Is* your English *getting* better?

The population of the world *is rising* very fast.

### 3) *Planned actions: future reference*

- activities and events planned for the future, usually with an adverbial

e.g. *We're spending* next winter in Australia.

*He's arriving* tomorrow morning.

### 4) *Repeated actions*

- the adverbs *always* (in the sense of *frequently*), *constantly*, *continually*, *forever*, *perpetually* and *repeatedly* can be used with progressive forms to describe continually-repeated actions:

e.g. *She's always helping* people.

!Sometimes there can be implied complaint in the use of the progressive when it refers to something that happens *too often*:

e.g. *He's always losing* his keys.

*She's always leaving* the window open.

*Bill is always working* late at the office. (= disapproval)

John is never satisfied. *He's always complaining*.

### **Note:**

Generally, *verbs with stative senses* do not occur in the progressive. When such verbs that are ordinarily stative occur in the progressive, they adopt dynamic meanings – they may indicate a type of behaviour with limited duration, but only when we speak about behaviour:

e.g. compare: He *is* selfish.      v. He *is being* selfish.

*Verbs expressing emotion or attitude*, which are ordinarily stative, indicate tentativeness when they occur in the progressive:

e.g. I *'m hoping* to take my exam soon.

(usu. in the past – I *was wondering* whether you could help me).

### *Temporary v. permanent*

Compare: She's *writing* some short stories. v. She *writes* short stories.

*Verbs denoting states of bodily sensation* may be used more or less interchangeably in the progressive and nonprogressive when referring to a temporary state:

e.g. My foot *hurts / is hurting*. My back *aches / is aching*. I *feel / am feeling* cold.  
You *look / are looking* well. But! You usually look well.

### **Verb senses and the progressive**

#### **Stative**

- a) states of 'being' and 'having': *be, contain, depend, have, resemble*
- b) intellectual states: *believe, know, realize, think, understand*
- c) states of emotion or attitude: *disagree, dislike, like, want, wish*
- d) states of perception: *feel, hear, see, smell, taste*
- e) states of bodily sensation: *ache, feel sick, hurt, itch, tickle*

**Stance** – *lie, live, sit, stand* (= these verbs are intermediate between stative and dynamic v.)

#### **Dynamic durative** (taking place over a period of time)

- a) activities performed by inanimate forces: *blow, run (engine), rain*
- b) activities performed by animate agents: *dance, eat, play, sing, work*
- c) processes (denoting change of state): *change, grow, widen*
- d) accomplishments (activities having a goal or endpoint): *finish, read, write, knit*

#### **Dynamic punctual** (with little or no duration)

momentary events and acts: *bang, jump, knock, nod, tap*

- in the progressive they indicate the repetition of the event, e.g. He was knocking on the door.

*Compare the following sentences:*

- |                                  |    |  |
|----------------------------------|----|--|
| I'm weighing myself.             | v. | I weigh 65 kilos.                        |
| I'm tasting the soup.            | v. | It tastes salty.                         |
| I'm feeling the radiator.        | v. | It feels hot.                            |
| Why are you smelling the coffee? | v. | It smells strange.                       |
|                                  |    |  |
| I'm thinking of working abroad.  | v. | I think he is very clever.               |
| We're having a great time.       | v. | We have a big house.                     |
| I'm seeing the dentist tomorrow. | v. | Oh, I see. You're right. / I can see it. |