A Contrastive Study on the Semantic Essences of “Be + V-ing” and “Be + Prep. + V-ness” in English

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Abstract. Both “be + v-ing” and “be + prep. + v-ness” can mean the ongoingness of the “action,” many Chinese learners just take them as the same in their acquisition of English. But the semantic essences of them are different. This paper is a contrastive study on the semantic essences of two forms from a cognitive perspective. The former is progressive aspect with an aspectual meaning: a dynamic process which contains both beginning and end, but excludes them and it highlights the situational changes at a certain point or period of time within the process. However, the latter is a kind of state description of the verb event, and it underlines the real-time existence of the event, without including the situational changes of it.

Introduction

“Be + v-ing” is taken as progressive from, which is one of the subcategories of aspect. Aspect studies the internal temporal construction of an action or state expressed by the verb. One aspectual meaning expressed by the verb in the “be + v-ing” is ongoingness. Some prepositions, when used together with nouns (mostly refers to an event), also owns the meaning of ongoingness of a certain activity, such as: the roses are in full bloom. It means that right now the roses are fully flowering. From this aspect, both the “be + v-ing” and “be + prep. + v-ness” can express the ongoingness of a certain action, so the two are taken as the same in expressing an ongoingness action. However, as the two are quite different ways of language combination, they are in no way the results from the same cognitive activity. According to cognitive linguistics, language is the external form of our mind and cognition, different cognitive processes result in different forms of language expression. This paper is a cognitive-contrastive study on the two forms. The former is in fact a dynamic process, shortened as process, which implies both the initial and final endpoints, but excludes them, while the latter is a static description of the event.

The Imperfective Aspect: “be + v-ing”

The verbal form “be + v-ing” is marked for imperfective, a verb form of aspect, contrasting with the perfective. The imperfective makes special reference to the internal structure of situations by focusing on their ongoing development, but do not make reference to their terminative phrase. The semantic essence of “be + v-ing” is neither sheer dynamic nor static. Instead, it is a dynamic process, shorted as process, which implies both the initial and final endpoints, but excludes them.

The Imperfective Aspect: “be + v-ing” and Static

Langacker (1987, 254) took process that involves a change through time as perfective; and other processes for imperfective. He then matched the perfective and imperfective with active and static. He explained why perfective or active verbs occur in the progressive construction marked by “be + v-ing,” while imperfective not. The second difference has a ready functional explanation. “Be” is itself an imperfective verb, and the progressive construction overall has the effect of imperfection what would otherwise be a perfective expression. Adding “be + v-ing” to the imperfective would therefore be superfluous, and it is understandable that the evolving conventions of English have not pursued this redundant path.
1. The middle linebacker is kicking his dog.
2. * J.P. is resembling his father.

The verb “kick” can be used in the form of “be + v-ing,” while “resemble” cannot, for it has the same semantic properties as a static verb. Both the predicates of progressive aspect and static predicate can play the role of providing the temporal frame for another event. But that is not enough to prove they are the same.

3. a. We left before he was angry.  
   b. * We left before he was singing.

The syntactic structures of the above sentences are the same, but “before” and “after” clauses are acceptable with the static ones, while they are unacceptable in the case of the progressives. So the examples above can well illustrate that the progressiveness is different from state. In fact, “state is a kind of homogeneous and stable situation, lacking the internal structure, and has no beginning or end” (Chen Youliang, 2004). That may be why 3(a) and 4(a) are right: we can take any moment of it as the initial or end point for there isn’t any change within a static event. The imperfective makes special reference to the internal structure of situations by focusing on their ongoing development, but does not make reference of their terminative phrase, which is just like what Smith (Langacker, 1987) said, “In the progressive viewpoint, an event is presented from a stage that is neither initial nor final.” The grammatical meaning of “be + v-ing” or progressiveness can sometimes demonstrate the dual character of both static state and dynamic state. “At the same time” and “at the time” tests are used by some linguists to test the characteristics of progressiveness. The following is the analysis of the test:

5. Amy climbed Ben Nevis. Fiona was climbing Snowdon at the same time.
6. Amy climbed Ben Nevis. Fiona was climbing Snowdon at the time.

*7. Amy climbed Ben Nevis. Fiona was a girl at the same time.
8. Amy climbed Ben Nevis. Fiona was a girl at the time.

The difference between “at the same time” and “at the time” is that the latter is used in a temporal event, which provides a temporal frame for other event and plays the role of back-grounding, while the former can have its own independent time. That is why (7) is not acceptable. However, the “be + v-ing” in (5) and (6) are acceptable, which means it is not the same as the static state. The predicate in progressive aspect is different from that of a static one, which appears in the event-state sequence. In fact, the state plays a back-grounding function, which means it cannot have its own independent time role. In an event state sequence, there is only one time role. Thus “be + v-ing” is not the same as the static ones.

The Imperfective Aspect: “be + v-ing” and Dynamic

A “dynamic” event includes the initial and terminal points of situational state or action. The initial and terminal points are called as its endpoints, which are related to the following three aspects: the achievement (such as get the ball), accomplishment (such as finish homework) and activity (for example, clean the room). Contrary to “dynamic” event, a “static” (for example, like the flower) one has no endpoint. However, the progressive aspect is like both the static and dynamic events but is neither the static nor the dynamic. That is because it implies the end-points which is just like the dynamic state, but at the same time it excludes them, which is just like static state. Again the “ATST” and “ATT” test is used to prove that:

9. Amy climbed Ben Nevis. Fiona climbed Snowdon at the same time.
10. * Amy climbed Ben Nevis. Fiona climbed Snowdon at the time.

*10 is unacceptable, but when “climb” is used in the progressive form: “be + v-ing,” it becomes all right. As it is absolutely sure that “climb” in *10 is in a dynamic state, which means that the progressive form is different from the dynamic state.

Thus it is not hard to figure out that the grammatical meaning of progressiveness is not the same as static state or dynamic state. It is like both the static and dynamic events but is not sheer dynamic or static. Instead, it is a dynamic process, shortened as process, which implies both the initial and final points, but excludes them.
The Form: be + prep. + v-ness

V-ness here refers to the corresponding noun form of the verb. The verb and its noun form may be just in the same form like: play (verb, such as: the kid is playing) and play (noun, such as: the kid is at play.). When a verb has the corresponding noun form, generally, the noun form, together with a certain preposition, can be used in the form: “be + prep. + v-ness”. Like the progressive form of the verb, the “be + prep. + v-ness” also has the meaning of “ongoingness.” However, unlike the progressive form, which is somewhat ambiguous, it turns to be a description of the real-time happening event, so it is obviously static, not dynamic. It underlines the real-time existence of the event, without focusing on the situational changes of it.

“Be + prep. + v-ness” Expressing the State

“V-ing” is just the progressive form of the verb, which means that it still keeps the main verbal characteristics. As we have analyzed above, only when a verb refers to a “dynamic” event or action, where changes are contained, can it be used in the progressiveness, while in the form of “be + prep. + v-ness”, the character of being of noun overweighs that of a verb. The “v-ness” means that the property of the word has been changed into a noun. The main function of the noun is referring and naming, so it is more static. For example:

1. The new machine is on sale in that country.
2. The new machine is being sold in that country.

In (1), “be + on sale” means there is such a real situation that in that country you can find that kind of new machine in the shop. While in (2), as we have analyzed above, “be + being + sold” tends to stress the action that the people in that country are dealing with the new machine right now.

Again, the “ATST” and “ATT” test can also be used here to prove that.

*3. Amy worked on a new invention. Fiona was at work on his old business at the same time.
4. Amy worked on a new invention. Fiona was at work on his old business at the time.
*5. Amy worked on a new invention. Fiona was a girl at the same time.
6. Amy worked on a new invention. Fiona was a girl at the time.

What we can see is that both (3) and (5) are unacceptable in the common situation (if not to say they are wrong). “Be” is used in (5) to mean the state of the subject. That is (FIONA, GIRL). Here, (3) is also a state description. As we have analyzed before, on one hand, the difference between “at the same time” and “at the time” is that the latter is used in a temporal event, which provides a temporal frame for other event and plays the role of back-grounding, while the former can have its own independent time, while, on the other, “be” is a static predicate, which appears in the event-state sequence. The state plays a back-grounding function and it cannot have its own independent time role. In an event state sequence, there is just only one single time role. “Be” in the form: “be + prep. + v-ness” has no difference from that in (6).

The Cognitive Contrast of “be+ v-ing” and “be +prep. + v-ness”

“Be+ v-ing” and the “be + prep. + v-ness” are taken as the same, like: the car was in motion: the car was moving. In fact, they showed the “ongoingness” of a certain situation, but their semantic essences are not the same, so it is wrong to say that the two are the same. As we have stated before, progressive aspect “be + v-ing” has the aspectual meaning: a dynamic process which contains both beginning and end, but excludes them and it highlights the situational changes at a certain point or period of time within the process. However, it is a state description of the verb event, and it underlines the real-time existence of the event, without including the situational changes of it. In a word, the “be + prep. + v-ness” is static, while the progressive form “be + v-ing” tends to be dynamic (though, it does not wholly equal “dynamic”). Here, we can use “more and more” to test the difference between the two.

7. * The new machine is on sale in that country more and more.
8. The new machine is being sold in that country more and more.

“More and more” means the amount of something is increasing or the degree of a certain state is changing, so it can be used to test whether there is any change in the sentence is or not. When there
are some changes, it must be dynamic, vice versa. In (7), it is unacceptable (if not to say it is wrong), when the phrase “more and more” is added into the “be + prep. + v-ness” form, while in (8), it is quite right to use “more and more” in the progressive form: “be + v-ing.” The progressive aspect presents the subjective intention of the speaker. And it implies that the speaker shows some interest in the temporal construction of the situational content, which is presented by the contextualized predicate. He may consciously or unconsciously stress the contents in the sentence which contains the temporal information, thus to develop or feature the changes in the situation. According to corporal statistics of derivate forms of verbs (Quirk, 1985:198), the rate of applying the progressive form of the verb only accounts for less than 5%, which means, more than 95% of the verbs are employed in a non-progressive form. That may explain why the progressive aspect is more common to be seen in conversational texts than scientific articles, and in present tense than past tense, the premise of which is that the user subjectively holds that the situation presented by the verb is not static, but dynamic and changeable, and it is also continuous and not perfective.

Conclusion

According to cognitive linguistics, language form can represent how we conceptualize the world around us. “Be + v-ing” and “be + prep. + v-ness” are two different ways of expressing the “ongoingness” of a certain event. In this article, we have studied respectively the semantic essences of the two. We have analyzed, “be + v-ing” is a dynamic process which contains both beginning and end, but excludes them and it highlights the situational changes at a certain point or period of time within the process. However, “be + prep. + v-ness” is a kind of state description of the verb event, and it underlines the real-time existence of the event, without including the situational changes of it. Here, the main difference of the two “ongoingness” expressions lies in their states. The “be + v-ing” highlights the dynamicness of the situation represented by the verb, while the “be + prep. + v-ness” stresses the state of the situation represented by a corresponding noun form of the verb. So for the Chinese learners, when choosing the expression of an on-going action or situation in their English learning, they should take the semantic essence into consideration, instead of just taking the two as the same.

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