

Performativity, Progressive Avoidance and Aspect

Unlike other reports of ongoing actions, English explicit performatives do not normally take progressive form. This suggests that “there is something over and above a mere concurrent report” in utterances like *I bet you I’ll win the race* that is absent in utterances like *I’m betting you I’ll win the race* (Levinson 1983: 259). For Krifka (2014), an explicit performative describes not the utterance act being produced, but the adoption of a new commitment, which has already happened at encoding time. If this is so, however, we might expect to find preterit- or present-perfect-form performative clauses and it appears that we do not. Using cross-linguistic data from genetically and geographically unrelated languages, we establish a strong typological tendency: explicit performative utterances use the same verbal construction that is used for reporting states holding at coding time. We attribute this tendency to an epistemic commonality between explicit performatives and state reports. In addition, we offer an explanation for exceptional uses of progressive aspect in apparently performative expressions, noted by, e.g., Searle (1989).

Building on Dahl (1985), we have developed a questionnaire that allows us to identify the aspectual distinctions made in individual languages and which of these categories are employed in the various performative contexts (as classified by Searle 1976). Imperfective aspect is used to encode performatives and present-time states in, e.g., Arabic, Turkish and Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian. In Bantu languages like Lingala and Kirundi, performative predications receive perfective encoding, and this same form is used to report states holding at present. Japanese and the Austronesian language Kilivila feature unmarked verb forms in both present state reports and performative expressions. Progressive aspect is systematically excluded in the languages of our sample. Thus, in light of these typological observations, the use of the English simple present in performative contexts is not unexpected.

The fact that present-time states and performative events receive the same aspectual construal across languages suggests a semantic commonality that cannot be conceived in terms of boundedness, one of the major parameters used to describe aspectual distinctions. We argue instead that aspectual categories encode epistemic distinctions, and that states and performative events are similar at this epistemic level: the situation type expressed by a performative or state predication is verifiable at the time of speaking. States have the subinterval property, according to which every segment of a state counts as an instance of that state, including that segment that overlaps the speech event. In the case of performatives, the reporting event and the performed event (promising, etc.) are one and the same; therefore, performative events are verifiable as such at speech time.

The few scholars who touch on performativity and aspect in English appear to assume that in the rare attestations of progressive performatives, the predication does not perform a speech act (like promising) but rather reports on one’s own performance, as in *I’m not just saying, I’m promising* (Langacker 1987; Verschueren 1995; Krifka 2014). However, this characterization is not evidently applicable to examples like *I’m warning you, Mrs. Hinkle: one more obscenity and I’ll charge you with contempt*, which does count as a warning. Analysis of COCA data reveals that one type of performative clause, the exercitive type (Austin 1962), involving verbs such as *warn* and *order*, accounts for the majority of progressive performative tokens. Following McGowan (2004), we assume that exercitive acts change the boundaries of permissible or appropriate conduct. We postulate that progressive-form exercitive acts do not change these boundaries but rather describe an effort to do so. More generally, progressive performatives are *action glosses* like *I’m trying to repair this*; they explain the purpose of ongoing actions, both linguistic and nonlinguistic. This account naturally extends to non-exercitive progressive performatives like *I’m withdrawing as a candidate*.

References

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