

Simple & Progressive Aspects of Grammar and their Usage in Literature

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Abstract

As English teachers, we are constantly worried about the poor performance of our students in the subject. We also notice that most of them are more interested in reading novels than their grammar texts because such texts are 'very dry, and abstract'. A number of students also argue that they cannot see the relevance of what we teach to their chosen careers. How do we encourage them to learn more about the grammar of English and to use it for their communicative needs? How do we make our students enjoy reading texts on tenses so as to understand the differences between the simple and the progressive? An attempt is made in this study to integrate language into literature using excerpts from literature texts (precisely Things Fall Apart) as materials for the teaching of the simple and the progressive aspect. This is based on our conviction that if the essence of teaching grammar is to apply the knowledge to actual life situations, then Literature, which is said to be from life, could be a viable option in making our students to realize the usefulness of English Studies & National Development.

Keywords: Communication, Lexis and structure, simple aspect, progressive aspect.

Introduction

Most of us are familiar with the traditional method of teaching Grammar because almost every one of us passed through that system - a system that was essentially text-based. The method was prescriptive with little or no concern about the context in which the materials may be used, Grammar classes were therefore dreaded and the teachers sometimes felt frustrated that despite the effort¹; they had put in, nothing good seemed to be forthcoming. One area that our students find problematic is distinguishing between the simple and the progressive aspect - see Shaughnessey (1977), Boadi, Nwankwo and Grieve (1981) Judgill and Hannah (1985), Odumuh (1987), Ofuokwu (1984, 1986, 1996, 2007), Adedimeji (2007), etc. Things Fall Apart (TFA), Achebe's most popular work, known and studied internationally as one of Africa's greatest novels focuses on the conflict between tradition and the invading Christianity. Our choice of the novel for this study is precisely because most students and teachers are familiar with the text and will therefore be at home with the illustrations from it. Adopting an integrative approach, this study uses materials from TFA to teach grammar, precisely to highlight the differences between the simple and the progressive aspect. It is our hope that this approach will complement our endeavours in distinguishing between simple & progressive aspect, traditional grammar classes and improve the knowledge of our students in the use of the features.

The problem this study focuses on the simple and progressive aspect. Its main objective is to make our students see the relationship between concepts in grammar, how they are employed in literature and their application in real life. It sets out precisely to answer the following questions:

- Can we use materials from TFA to distinguish between the simple and the progressive aspect?
- How do we encourage our students to learn more about the simple and the progressive aspect through Literature?
- Can the materials on simple and progressive aspects from TFA be adapted to suit communicative needs of our students in their various disciplines?

Methodology

This study is essentially instructional. A number of excerpts from TFA were selected for the analysis. Care was taken to ensure that these present illustrative contexts of some of the functions of both the simple present and the progressive with a view to highlighting areas of difficulties and contrast between them. As much as possible, passages that contributed to the development of the

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Stories that would naturally be exciting to the students were used. Part of the discussion is to assign students to practice exercises on the issues raised in the study.

Tenses in English

Tense is generally taken to mean the relationship between an event and the time the event took place. There are quite a number of ways of looking at tense: from the traditional present, past and future tenses, present and past to past and non-past tenses. There will be no need to go into the merits and demerits of each of these approaches. For us, it is sufficient to state that whichever approach that is adopted, TFA provides instructional materials.

Our illustration is however based on the distinction made by Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartvik (1972) - A Grammar of Contemporary English - which recognizes present and past tenses, each with the simple, progressive and the perfective forms. Quirk et al. list a number of the uses of the simple present. These include making universal time statements/eternal truths, habitual time statements and presenting rapid and instantaneous actions. The simple present is also used to refer to the future and sometimes reference can be made to the past especially with hypothetical statements.

The basic difference between the simple present and the past is that the latter denotes definite past time i.e. 'What took place at a given time or in a give place before the present moment' Quirk et a/., (p. 86).

In contrast to the simple present and past, the progressive aspect depicts events that lasted sometime or are taking place now. Usually denoted with v+ing, it is traditionally referred to as 'continuous' to distinguish it from habitual or instantaneous actions. It is the inability of our students to differentiate between these two distinct functions that this paper addresses. How are these functions presented in TFA?

Present tense forms of verbs

In the following excerpt, we see the use of the simple present to depict habitual or an annual activity. Unoka speaks of his activities before the farming season to the priestess, Agbala about his poor harvest.

*Every year, before I **put** any crop in the earth, I **sacrifice** a cock to Ani, the owner of all the land. It **is** the law of our fathers. I also **kill** a cock at the shrine of Ifejioku, the god of yams. I **clear** the bush and set fire to it when it is dry. **sow** the yams when the first rain has fallen, and **stake** them when the young tendrils **appear** (P. 12).*

The priestess screams at him:

*Hold your peace! ... You, Unoka are known in all the clan for the weakness of your machet and your hoe. When your neighbours **go out** with their axe to cut down virgin forests, you **sow** your yams on exhausted farms that take no labour to clear. They **cross** seven rivers to make their farms; you **stay** at home and **offer** sacrifices to a reluctant soil. Go home and work like a man (p. 13).*

It is important to state that even though the statements are in the present, the actual context is the past. Here, we see the present referring to the past.

When Ezeani, the priest of the earth goddess, Ani addresses Okonkwo after he had beaten his wife within the Week of Peace, we are presented with a mixture of traditionally accepted timeless truths and habitual events:

You **know** as well as I do that our forefathers ordained that before we **plant** any crops in the earth we **observe** a week in which a man **does** not say a harsh word to his neighbour. We **live** in peace with our fellows to honour our great goddess of the earth (P. 22),

A number of verbs can be identified from the above excerpts. The students may be asked to point out these verbs and their functions in the sentences. They may work in groups. A list similar to the one below is expected:

put, sacrifice, is, kill, clear, sow, stake, stay, clear, sow, stake, stay, offer, know, plant, observe, does, live, etc.

They may also be asked to justify the use of **does** instead of **do**, since all the other verbs are in the v+o form i.e. the non-third person singular form. The discussions that follow should show how these verbs depict habitual events or eternal truths. For instance, the use of the time frequency adverbial, **every year**, shows that before Unoka puts his yam into the soil, he **sacrifices..., kills..., and clears..., stakes**. These things are done regularly, ('Every year', Unoka himself says). Even when the priestess screams at him, it is because he did the opposite (every year), of all the commendable things his neighbours did regularly. The important point is the fact that it is carried out from time to time.

It should be mentioned that Achebe makes extensive use of proverbs which are seen as part of Igbo rhetorics. Of importance to this study is the fact that these proverbs 'which **are** the palm-oil with which words are eaten' are usually (though not as a rule) presented in the simple present and are seen as communally accepted eternal truths as one can always trace their authorship to unknown elders - 'Our elders **say**/ As the saying **goes...**'. He who **brings** kola **brings** life (p. 5).

A man who **pays** respect to the great **paves** the way for his own greatness (p. 14).

An old woman is always uneasy when dry bones **are mentioned** in a proverb (p.15).

A baby on its mother's back **does not know** that the way **is** long (p.71).

The Simple Past

TFA is essentially a novel set in the past and Achebe's opening with Okonkwo at the peak of his fame is both dramatic and captivating:

Okonkwo **was** well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame **rested** on solid personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen he had brought honour to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat. Amalinze **was** the great wrestler who for seven years was

unbeaten, from Umuohia to Mbaino. He **was** called the Cat because his back would never touch the earth. It **was** this man that Okonkwo threw in a fight which the old man **agreed was** one of the fiercest since the founder of their town **engaged** a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights.

The drums **beat** and the flutes **sang** and the spectators **held** their breath. Amalinze **was** a wily craftsman, but Okonkwo **was** as slippery as a fish in water. Every nerve and every muscle **stood out** on their arms, on their thighs, and one almost **heard** them stretching to breaking point. In The drums **beat** and the flutes **sang** the end, Okonkwo **threw** the Cat.

These illustrate the use of the simple past to denote events that have taken place. Achebe ends that story as he usually does with 'That **was** years ago, twenty years or more!'

A careful study of the extract shows that there are different verb types even though they are all in the simple past. This situation provides an opportunity for the language teacher to discuss verb patterns - regular and irregular verbs. Other issues that should attract the attention of the language teacher are the verb to be, with the singular past form, was used more frequently than any other verb (see Ofuokwu, 1994); the dummy do used in the next paragraph in a unique way: 'And he **did** pounce on people' - unique because quite a number of students have problems with that pattern of usage: did+v (pres) - and would have expected did pounced*.

But how can a language teacher incorporate these forms in his grammar classes? As has already been suggested, he can at this point discuss the differences between the regular and the irregular verbs, based on the addition of the predictable -ed to the base of the main verb to give the v-ed1. Students should then be asked to read the excerpt and identify the verb types. The students are likely to come up with a list similar to this:

Regular Verb and Irregular Verbs

Regular Verbs	Irregular Verbs
agreed	threw, beat, sang, held, stood,
rested	brought, threw

If the students encounter any problems with identifying the members of each group, they should be advised to use the present simple forms of the verbs. There will be additional verbs to illustrate with if the items discussed under the simple present are included. They may be asked to change them to the past:

sacrificed, staked, stayed	put
cleared, killed, sowed	was
knew, offered, lived	

The Progressive Aspect

In contrast to the simple present and past, the progressive aspect depicts events that lasts/lasted sometime or are taking place now. Usually denoted with v+ing, it is traditionally referred to as 'continuous' to distinguish it from habitual or instantaneous actions. It is the inability of our students to differentiate between these two distinct functions that this paper addresses. How is the progressive presented in TFA ?

In preparing for the New Yam Festival, a lot had to be done and Achebe devotes quite some time to it. Okonkwo's wives had scrubbed the wall and drawn patterns in white, yellow and dark green.

They then set about **painting** themselves with cam wood and **drawing** beautiful black patterns on their stomach and on their backs (p.27)'.
But while they were all excited, Okonkwo was calm:

He was always uncomfortable **sitting** around for days **waiting** for a feast or **getting** over it. He would be much happier **working** on his farm (p.27).

Cooking was an essential part of the preparation for the festival and new yams were indispensable. While Nwoye's mother **was peeling** the new yams, Ezinma offered to make the fire. This is how Achebe records it:

She broke them (firewood) into little pieces across the sole of her foot and began to build a fire **blowing** it with her breath. 'You will blow your eyes out/ said Nwoye's mother, **looking** from the yams she **was peeling**. 'Use the fan.' She stood up and pulled out a fan which was fastened into one of the rafters. As soon as she got up, the trouble-some nanny-goat, which had been dutifully **eating** the peelings, dug her teeth into the real thing... Ezinma's fire **was** now **sending** up thick cloud of smoke. She **was fanning** it until it burst into flames... they **are beating** the drums... Nwoye's mother **is** already **cooking**..., Okonkwo **was sitting** on a goatskin already **eating** his first wife's meal (pp. 30-31).

Most readers can also recall the story of All of you by Tortoise but we pity this cunning animal as we see his own wife prepare a landing strip for his plunge to death:

Tortoise looked down from the sky and saw his wife **bringing** things out, but it was too far to see what they were (p. 70).

In all the events highlighted by the verbs, we see activities which lasted sometime or in progress. The contrast between the simple and the progressive can be seen from the following examples:

When a father **beats** his child, it seeks sympathy in its mother's hut (p. 94).

They **are beating** the drums (p. 30).

The flutes **sang** (p. 3).

The singers went round **singing** each man's praise as they came before him (p. 82).

She (Ozoemena) **died** in her eleventh month (p. 54).

Ezinwa **was dying** (p. 53).

Okoye was a great talker and he **spoke** for a long time... (p. 5)

As he **was speaking** the boy returned, followed by Akueke, his half-sister (p. 49).

Care must be taken to let the students know that not all verbs take the v+ing pattern for the progressive. Most activity verbs are dynamic and can easily take the progressive form while the opposite is the case for the stative verbs.

Stative and Dynamic Verbs

Stative Verbs	Dynamic/Activity Verbs
is	sacrifice
live	put
stay	clear
know	sow
kill -	stake, offer

Unoka: You see, I **owe** that man a thousand cowries. But he has not come to wake me up in the morning for it (p. 6).

*You see, I **am owing** that man a thousand cowries. But he has not come to wake me up in the morning for it.

We **live** in peace with our fellows to honour our-great goddess of the earth ((p.22).

*We **are living** in peace with our fellows to honour our great goddess of the earth.

I **think** it is good that our clan holds the ozo title in high esteem (p. 48).

I sometimes **think** he is too sharp (p.49),

*I **am thinking** it is good that our clan holds the ozo title in high esteem.

*I **am** sometimes **thinking** he is too sharp.

We note, however, that when **to think** becomes a serious and conscious mental activity we can have: 'How a woman could carry a child of that size so easily and for so long was a miracle. But Ekwefi **was not thinking** about that' (p. 75). At this point, a teacher can introduce other types of stative verbs: see, have, resemble, own, hear, understand, know, love, note, etc., as discussed by Quirk, et al. (1972:96) and explain the students how to contrast them with the dynamic verbs. They should be advised to be careful in using the stative verbs, as it could be absurd to use a number of them especially in the progressive form. Consider this supposedly 'romantic' conversation between a husband and the wife:

Wife: Thank you for the gift, it's very thoughtful of you.

Husband: Yes, it is because I **am loving** you now! Wife: Before, nko? (What about before?)

A more familiar case is noted in the use of **having** among our students:

Who **is having** my novel? We **are having** a lecture in the theatre now. We **are having** only .fifteen naira, can we join you?

In these examples, **has/have** are preferred alternatives.

Between the Simple and Progressive Aspect

Inability to distinguish between the simple and the progressive aspect has been noted as one of the problems confronting learners of English as a second language. This has been attributed to mother tongue interference. But how does the language teacher provide a guide to correct usage? How does the learner apply the grammatical details provided here to actual linguistic situations he finds himself?

The basic thing is to understand the functional difference between the two: the simple present is used to indicate timeless and universal truths, habitual events, instantaneous actions and sometimes to make reference to the future. In its past form, it can be used for actions that have taken place. It can also be used in hypothetical statements to refer to the past. Okonkwo makes a valedictory statement and pays tribute to Ezeudu, one of the most respected men who had taken three of the four titles in the town;

If your death **was** the death of nature, go in peace. But if a man **caused** it, do not allow him a

moment of rest (p. 86).

The progressive, on the other hand, is used to indicate activities that last for some time. It is 'an action in progress', and signals 'temporariness' whether in the presenter in the past.

Of the various functions of the simple present, it is its use to indicate habitual events that presents a conflict with the progressive. This is principally because some users fail to distinguish between habitual events (which take place from time to time) and activities which may not necessarily occur regularly but are continuous. Based on this distinction, students should be guided and tested to see the differences between the following:

Ojo **teaches** in the university - simple present (he may not be teaching at the moment but that is what he does for a living). Ojo **is teaching** in the university - progressive present (he is teaching at the moment; he may not be doing it as a career).

Maduka **dances** very well - (he may not be dancing at the moment but anytime he does, he does it very well).

Maduka **is dancing** very well - (he is dancing at the moment and is doing it very; it may not be so always).

Conclusion

Literature and Language have always been seen as two different courses and our students are expected to acquire different skills from them. An integrative approach, such as we have adopted here, allows the teacher to incorporate elements of grammar into literature classes. Since the students naturally enjoy reading literature texts, explaining the syntactic functions of the simple present and the progressive will no doubt create an understanding of the grammatical input and consequently, a greater appreciation of not only the story but the nature and sequence of events. This will make them appreciate the difference between what is habitual and what is merely instantaneous. They will therefore be in better positions to apply them in their daily activities in various aspects of life. It is our suggestion that language teachers should try some of the methods suggested here and see whether there will be an improvement on the part of the students, afterwards as our elders say 'the taste of the pudding **is** in the eating'.

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