A Reconsideration of How to Teach Tense and Aspect from the Viewpoint of Cognitive Grammar

Takao IMAI

Division of Human Sciences, Department of Human Sciences, Aichi Mizuho College

The current study tests the author's hypothesis that EFL students may profit from learning about the cognitive process which native speakers of English subconsciously possess. This may be particularly true of grammar, vocabulary, and idiomatic expressions. This study focuses on grammar; especially the concept of tense and aspect. When we consider how "educational grammar" is traditionally taught in Japanese junior or senior high schools, ideas from cognitive linguistics may shed light on the learning process. The present study is one research project based on this concept. It is also possible to speculate that not all, but most, grammatical features can be explained from the following two standpoints: (1) Words or structures share the same core meaning if they share the same form (*cf.* Bolinger:1977); or (2) Category membership is a gradient phenomenon (the prototype-based model of categorization). Helping learners become aware of the cognitive processes of native speakers may enhance their learning efficiency. An experiment to test this hypothesis was conducted to investigate the effects of cognitive awareness of the concept of tense and aspect in English. One-hundred-and-twenty-five Japanese-speaking learners of English from four different classes participated in the experiment as part of a class activity. The result of the experiment did not sufficiently prove that the author's new model of grammar is effective in improving learners' ability, but nevertheless, it led the author to conclude that teaching or learning about the cognitive awareness of grammar will provide motivation for language learning.

Keyword: cognitive linguistics; tense and aspect; teaching English as a foreign language

1. Background

For the past few years, the author has been presenting the sentence shown in (1) at the first class meeting of each semester and has asked the students whether the bus is moving or not.

(1) The bus **is stopping**.

As might be expected, many students cannot answer this question correctly. Of course, the students who gave the wrong answer differed according to their achievement level. The reason for their inability to answer correctly is most likely rooted in the fact that most English textbooks explain that "be + -ing" is called the continuous form and can be translated into "*shi-te-i-ru*" in Japanese. If students simply apply this translation rule to such an example as (1),

the translation should be "*Basu ga to-ma-tsu-te iru*". That is why, even if the students cannot answer the author's question given in the first class correctly, they are not to blame. The English teachers, textbooks, or reference books that have given such explanations based on translation are responsible for the students' error. The author does not necessarily think that the traditional way of explanation is the way to learn grammar. The progressive aspect is thought to be an expression of tense, like a facial expression, and the core image is that "something is on the way." That is why the meaning of example (1) is as follows: the bus is in the process of stopping, or, in other words, it has not yet stopped. However, the most important factor in language learning is understanding what the sentence really means, and grammatical explanations should serve that purpose. The traditional type of grammatical rules most students have been taught do not always help learners unless the objective of learning English is to be able to translate English into Japanese, or, in other words, grammar for *yaku-doku*. This sort of grammar may have been beneficial in the *Meiji Era*, when the main objective of learning English was to introduce Western ideas and culture into Japan. Since the objective of learning English gradually changed during the twentieth century from "translation from L2 to L1" to "being able to communicate in English," the teaching style of grammar should also now be modified accordingly.

In learning a foreign language, it is important to bear in mind that English cannot necessarily be translated into Japanese. In fact, direct translation can even prevent learners from understanding the real meaning expressed in English sentences. Related to this claim, it is a traditional Chinese practice to divide foreign language skills into five categories: reading, listening, writing, speaking, and translation. The author strongly believes that the fifth skill, translation, is the most difficult one and learners can acquire it only after they have acquired the other four skills. In addition, most learners of English do not need to master translation skills unless they want to be translators or interpreters.

In the context of English language teaching in Japan, however, most learners are forced to learn this translation skill from the apprentice level. This is a very undesirable situation, but very few have questioned it. Furthermore, the kind of translation which has been imposed on senior high school students is quite different from the translation that is done by translators and interpreters. The former type of translation is called *yakudoku*, while the latter form is called *honyaku*. The difference between those two manners of translation is finely discussed by Fujikake (1980: 3-13). Let us review the explanation by Fujikake. As shown in Figure 1, the main difference is that translation in *yakudoku* is a process to understand the meaning of English sentences, while translation in *honyaku* is the goal. The manner of translation used in *yakudoku* is what is used in the Grammar-Translation Method. In this method, the English-Japanese dictionary and the

yakudoku   *honnyaku*
Figure 1: The difference between *yakudoku* and *honyaku*.)
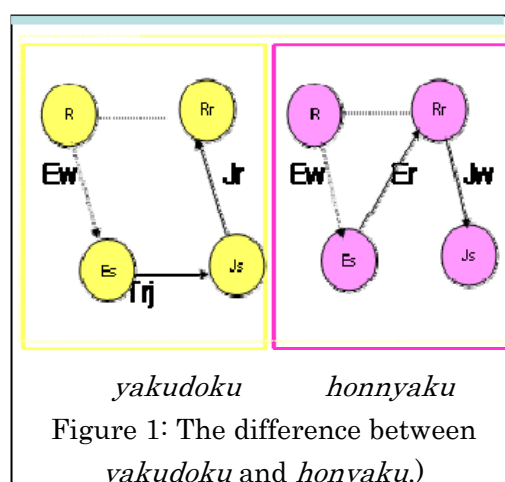
traditional grammar rules which have been taught at school are used as the tools for translation. This practice confirms that the English grammar which has been taught in Japanese junior or senior high schools is a grammar for translation. It is not a grammar for understanding the meaning of English sentences. Understanding what English sentences mean is one thing, but translating English into Japanese is quite another. This is a truism, considering the fact that native speakers of English cannot translate English into Japanese unless they are fluent in Japanese. Those who have acquired English as a foreign language also know that they can understand what English sentences mean before they can translate the English sentences into Japanese or give grammatical explanations for them. These facts demonstrate that the English grammar which is taught in Japanese junior or senior high schools, what is called "school grammar," might not be appropriate for Japanese learners of English. For this reason, the author thinks that it would be desirable for the present teaching of school grammar to be modified as soon as possible. It should be clearly understood that any grammar rule is just a working definition. The older ones should always be replaced by better ones. This is the destiny of grammar. A new kind of educational English grammar should be developed as soon as possible.

Imai (2002) presented a new model for understanding the concept of tense in relation to aspect and modality. This paper presents a revised version of my earlier model.

2. A New Model for Tense and Aspect

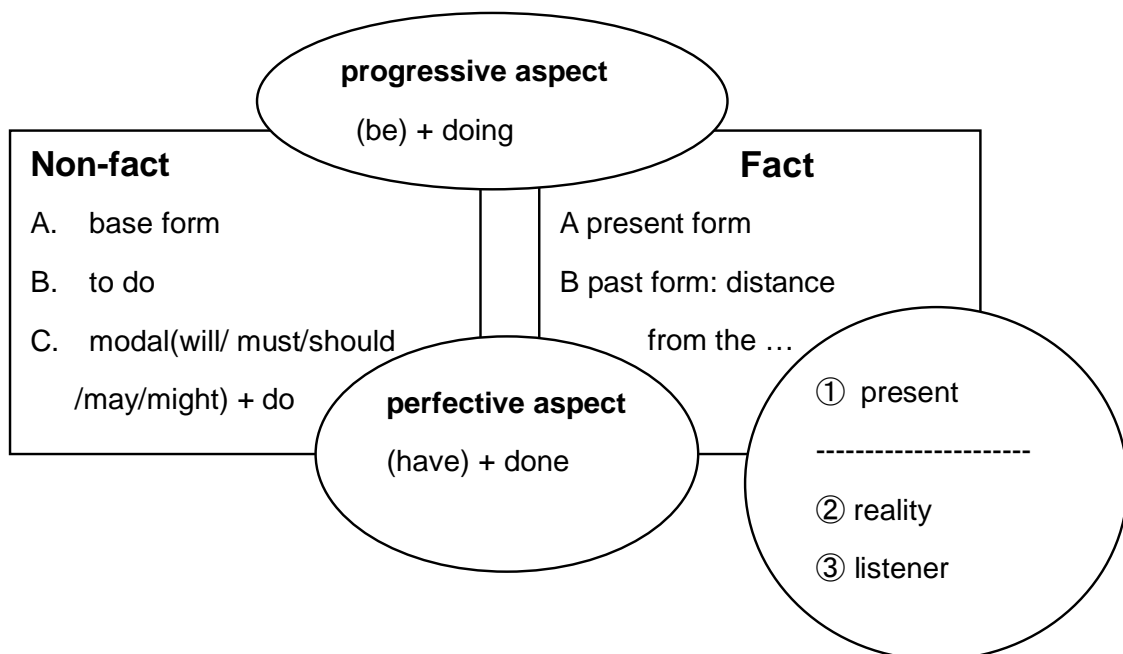Language ability reflects the way people construe things or situations. Cognitive linguistics

Figure 2: Tense in Relation to Aspect and Modality:

states that humans have several cognitive abilities and these abilities are embodied in fashion, cooking, sports, language, etc. Language is one vehicle for realizing those abilities. Some examples of cognitive abilities are figure-ground separation, figure-ground alternation, scanning, image schema formation, and metonymy ability. The author considers that grammatical ability is especially based on one of these cognitive abilities: figure-ground alternation. Proceeding from this idea, Imai (2002) presented a new model for learning tense in relation to aspect and modality. This paper presents an improved version of the model, which is shown in Figure 2.

This model considers that English has two tenses: present tense and past tense. These two tenses represent events or situation; The present tense indicates that a situation is construed as factual in the present as shown in the example sentences (1)-(3). Example (1) indicates that "waking up at seven" happens everyday. Example (2) refers to the moment in which the act of someone coming back is realized. Since example (3) is a schedule on a calendar, it cannot be changed. It is construed that "my birthday falling on Sunday" is a fact at the time of the utterance, even though "my birthday" hasn't come yet. All these events are construed as factual in the present.

(1) I usually **wake up** at seven.
(2) I'll tell him that you called as soon as he **comes** back.
(3) My birthday **falls on** Saturday this year.

By contrast. the past tense, in the author's view, should more appropriately be called "distance form." This name is more appropriate when considering the core image of the past form.

Depending on the context, the core image of "being distant from something" can be interpreted in roughly three different ways. One is distance from the present. (*c.f.* (4)) Another is psychological distance from the reality. (*c.f.* (5a), (5b)) The other is psychological distance from the person you are talking with. (*c.f.* (6)) The latter two cases are what is called subjunctive mood. Keeping a distance away from the present situation or the fact makes the expression less direct, or more polite.

(4) I **went to** Tokyo Disneyland last summer.
(5) a. If I **knew** more about computers, I **could fix** this trouble.
    b. "We'll be having a party this Saturday. Would you like to join us?" "I wish I **could**, but I have to study for the test next Monday.
(6) What **did** you have in mind, madam?

The next item to be considered by this paper is aspect. There are two aspects in English: progressive and perfective. Each is treated as if it were one expression of tense. Progressive aspect indicates that something is on the way, while perfective aspect means that some situation happened in the past. In addition, this model categorizes both present perfect and present continuous into the present tense, and also past continuous and past perfect into the past tense. As was discussed in the background of this paper, example (7) shows that the bus is still moving. Example (8) means that I injured my ankle and it is not cured yet. The act of injuring my ankle occurred in the past, but I still have the state of being injured. Next, compare example (9) to example (10). In (9), the dog was still alive when the vet arrived, while in (10) it was dead, since progressive aspect

indicates that something is on the way, while perfective aspect means that some situation happened in the past.

(7) The bus **is stopping**.

(8) I **have injured** my ankle.

(9) The dog **was dying** when the vet arrived.

(10) The dog **had died** when the vet arrived.

Next, consider items being categorized into "non-fact." All three items belonging to this category have a "base form." Base forms have no tense, or have zero tense, which basically means that the act indicated by the verb has not been completed yet. This is the core image of the "base form." In examples (11) and (12), the act shown by these sentences has not occurred yet. In other words, what is ordered or suggested is not done at the time of the utterance. That is why the base form is used in those examples. The same idea is true of the base form which follows the modals as shown in (13). This is also the case with "to + base form." (*c.f.* (14) - (15)) The act shown by the verb following "will" or "to" has not been completed yet.

(11) **Calm** down!

(12) I suggested to Jess that he **buy** a new car.

(13) "There's someone at the door. Can you answer it?" "I'**ll** get it."

(14) "Any plans for the weekend?" "I'*m going to* **study** for the test."

(15) The doctor advised my father *to* **quit** smoking.

Moreover, this idea can be applied to the difference in meaning between the "to do" form and the "doing" form. As Imai (2002) discussed, such expressions as those in examples (16)-(24) have usually been memorized as idiomatic expressions, but I do not approve of such practices. These expressions can also be explained from the viewpoint of the core image of tense and aspect which the author has discussed so far. They are also motivated by the way in which human conceptualizers construe a situation.

Consider examples (16) and (17). In (16), the speaker encourages something to happen, so that we can feel the force of something being pushed. The basic image of the preposition "to" is direction and goal. The act of studying abroad has not yet occurred, and so the base form is used. In (17), on the other hand, the speaker discourages something, and consequently, someone can feel the force of something being pulled back. Unless something is happening or going to happen, it cannot be discouraged. In this example, someone's girlfriend is thinking of studying abroad. This implies that "studying abroad" has already started in her mind or imagination. That is why "doing" (studying) is used here. The basic image of the preposition "from" is a starting point. From this position, the speaker tries to pull something back, and so the expression "from studying" is appropriate. The speaker wants his girlfriend to move back from the idea of studying abroad. The core image of "V + to do construction" and "V + from doing construction" is shown in Figure 3.

V + to do   V + from doing

Figure 3: The core image of "V + to do construction" and "V + from doing construction"
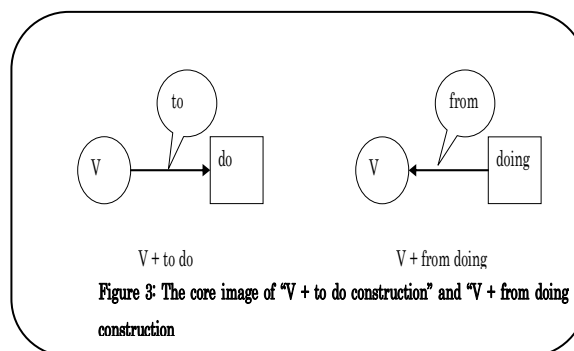
(16) I *encouraged* my girlfriend *to* **study** abroad.

(17) I *discouraged* my girlfriend *from* **studying** abroad.

Examples (18)-(20) can be understood in the same way. In examples (18) and (19), the act following "to" has not yet occurred, while in (20) the act which follows the verb (finish) has already been started and is on the way.

(18) I'll *tell* him *to* **attend** the meeting.

(19) Why did you *decide* not *to* **talk** to the press about the incident?

(20) Have you *finished* **writing** the term paper?

Next, let us consider some peripheral cases. When people "avoid" something, they are not going toward it mentally, but most people feel that an unwanted situation is coming towards them. That construal should be a reason why "doing" is chosen instead of "to do." (*c.f.* (21)) In the case of "manage," on the other hand, we are going toward the destination mentally. (*c.f.* (22)) In order to succeed in doing something difficult, someone is trying hard to reach the goal. The author thinks that the core meaning of "manage" might consist of two parts: process and goal. What is foregrounded in the manage-frame is the process, not the goal. While trying hard to complete something, the goal has not been reached, though. This aspect is backgrounding in the manage-frame. That is why "to do" is appropriate here.

(21) We want to *avoid* **disappointing** our customers.

(22) I finally *managed* **to carry** the heavy

copy machine into the house by myself.

Moving on to some more peripheral examples, the author thinks the figure-ground alternation ability explains why "doing" is chosen in these examples. Consider, for the sake of

Figure 4

illustration, the phenomenon of the "figure-ground segregation rule" as shown in Figure (4). This is one of the most significant cognitive abilities to bear in mind. In such expressions as "suggest" or "look forward to," two pictures can be construed. One is the aspect that "something is not done yet," while the other is that "we see something happening or existing in our mind or imagination." When we "suggest" or "look forward to" something, the latter image, that is, "something is happening" in the conceptualizer's mind, is construed as the figure. That might be the reason why "doing" is chosen in these two cases, as shown in examples (23) and (24), respectively.

(23) I'm *look*ing forward *to* **skiing** in Canada

(24) I *suggest* **talking** to a lawyer before you do anything.

Consider (23) more thoroughly. The meaning of "look" is "turn your eyes." The core image of "toward" is "moving, looking, or pointing in a particular direction." In this example, the speaker is thinking about the future. Here the speaker uses the verb "look," so something happening in the future has to be seen or pictured in the speaker's mind. If the base form is used, we cannot see the action. If "-ing" is used, we can see it happening in our mind. It is the reason why "doing," instead of the base

form, follows "to."

Next, consider (24) more thoroughly. In order to understand the meaning of "suggest," let us compare "suggest" with "advise," both of whose meanings are similar.

(25) Stephanie **suggested** that I *apply* to this university.
(26) Stephanie **suggested** my *applying* to this university.
(27) Stephanie **advised** me *to apply* to this university.

Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary (OALD) defines the meanings of these verbs as follow:

suggest: to put forward an idea or a plan for other people;
advise: to tell somebody what you think they should do in a particular situation.

According to the definitions given by OALD, the meaning of "advise" seems to be stronger than that of "suggest." These dictionary definitions are compatible with the form each verb takes in examples (25), (26), and (27).

In (25), the base form of verb is chosen inside a "that-clause." The core image of "that" is attracting someone's attention. The content the speaker suggests has not been realized yet. That is the reason why the base form of verb is chosen.

In (26), "doing" is chosen. The core image of "doing" is "something is happening" or "something is on the way." When "doing" is used with "suggest," the meaning of "doing" is interpreted as "something is happening" in the speaker's mind. When people put forward an idea or a plan for other people, the idea or the plan must exist in the

speaker's mind. If the base-form of verb is chosen, no image exists in the speaker's mind. That might be the reason why "doing" is chosen.

What, then, motivates the speaker to use one of the constructions which were given in examples (25) and (26)? The author thinks that, when we suggest an idea or a plan, two aspects seems to be connoted in the suggest-frame: (a) an idea or a plan is in the speaker's mind, and (b) an idea or a plan has not been realized yet. According to whichever aspect of the suggest-frame the speaker wants to foreground, the structure following "suggest" should be chosen. If the speaker wants to foreground (visualize) (a), the "suggest + doing" construction, as in example (26), is chosen. If the speaker wants to foreground (b), the "suggest + that" construction, as in example (25), is chosen. This observation is compatible with Bolinger's (1977) claim that even if two expressions seem to share the same meaning, there is some difference in meaning between these two expressions as in (25) and (26) unless they share the same form.

In (27), on the other hand, the "to + base form" follows "advise." In this form, as was discussed regarding example (16), we feel the force of something being pushed. The basic image of the preposition "to" is direction and goal. That is, the meaning of the "verb + person + to do" structure is that someone is being pushed in the direction of a certain act. Since the act has not occurred at the time of the utterance, the "base- form" follows "to." These observations led the author to conclude that the meaning of "advise" is stronger than that of "suggest," and the difference in meaning is embodied in the form of construction.

Whenever discussing cognitive motivation, however, particular attention should be given to Kawakami (1996: 50). He contends that cognitive

motivation is not what can be predicted–that is, the relationship between the prototype and the extensions generally cannot be foreseen. Instead, some effort should be made to understand the reasons why such extensions occur in native speech and why the expressions have come to be used habitually.

3. Survey

3. 1. Purpose

The present survey was designed based on the new model for learning tense and aspect in English introduced in section 2, for the purpose of investigating whether the author's model is helpful for learners to acquire the concept of tense and aspect in relation to modality.

3. 2. Participants and Procedure

A total of 125 university students participated in this survey. About half of the subjects were students at a public university, the other half were students at a private university. They were divided into two groups: Group A (G-A) and Group B (G-B); however, both public and private university students are included in both groups. All the subjects were asked to answer 10 questions about tense, aspect, and modals in the pre-test. Then the subjects in G-A were given an assignment to learn about tense, aspect, and modals by using the model presented in section 2. The subjects in G-B, on the other hand, were directed to learn tense, aspect, and modals in the same way as high school grammar books explain these matters. The post-test was given to both G-A and G-B one week after the pretest. The testing points of the post-test were the same as those of the pre-test, but different contexts were given. The author designated the former style as *D-Level Learning*[1] and the latter as *S-Level Learning*[1].

3. 3. Materials

The test questions used in the pre-test and the post-test were multiple choice, the same format as the grammar and vocabulary section of the *Daigaku Nyushi Center Test*. The testing points reflected the items which were given in the author's model presented in Figure 2. A total of twenty questions, ten for the pre-test and ten for the post-test, were given. In addition to the grammar questions, a questionnaire was also conducted in the post-test. The questionnaire asked the subjects about the following four items: a) how long the subjects studied for the post-test; b) how well the subjects thought they did the test; c) whether the subjects thought they are good at English or not; d) what the subjects thought about the learning material given as an assignment.

3. 4. Results

The deviation value of both the pre-test and the post-test was calculated, and the score was defined as "learning effect." The differences in scores between the subjects who were given the traditional grammar model (*S-Level Learning*) and those given the author's new model (*D-Level Learning*) were compared. "One-way" Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was employed where D/S-Level Learning was the subject factor. The results of the ANOVA indicated that the main effect of G-A was not significant ($F<1$).

As for whether the learning materials given were easy to understand, "One-way" Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was also employed where D/S-Level Learning was the subject factor. The main effect of G-A was significant ($F=7.43$, $df=1/124$, $P<.01$).

As for how well the subjects thought they had performed in the post-test, a "Two-way" Analysis of

Variance (ANOVA) was employed where *D/S-Level Learning* and pre/post tests were the subject factors. Only the main effect of *S-Level Learning* was significant (F=10.59, df=1/125, p<.01).

4. Discussion

While the present study did not prove statistically that *D-Level Learning* was more effective than *S-Level Learning*, the study proved that *D-Level Learning* was effective because it is easier for the subjects to understand the concept of tense and aspect.

Although the post-test happened to be more difficult than the pre-test, the subjects who learned the concept of tense and aspect through the author's new model did not lose confidence during the post test. The subjects who learned the concept of tense and aspect through the traditional method, on the other hand, lost confidence during the post-test.

The author tried to prove the impact of cognitive awareness on the concept of tense and aspect, but the main effect of learning about cognitive motivation was not significant. The learners stated, however, it was very helpful to know the cognitive motivation of grammar rules. One reason for this result is that almost all motivated learners at university level already have enough knowledge of vocabulary, syntactic rules, and more transparent idioms. Another reason is that current test methods are not necessarily suitable for measuring *D-Level Learning* ability. Regardless of whether they understand the concept of tense and aspect in *D-Level* or in *S-Level,* learners can answer the questions on such tests. That is why the effect of *D-Level Learning* cannot be reflected in raw scores. That is also why grammar, vocabulary, and more transparent idioms do not necessarily help to prove

the effectiveness of the author's approach. Instead, to prove the effect of cognitive awareness of the concept of tense and aspect, a new type of test method which could measure *D-Level Learning* ability should be developed.

Notes

1. *D-Level Learning* and *S-Level Learning* are terms invented by the author. D and S here indicate "deep" and "surface," respectively. In *D-Level Learning*, learners are more likely to understand the image of tense and aspect in relation to the cognitive process. In *S-Level Learning*, by contrast, learners simply remember the Japanese equivalents for tense and aspect.

References:

・ Bolinger, D. (1977). *Meaning and Form.* London and New York: Longman.

・ 藤掛庄市 (1980).『変革の英語教育』東京：学文社

・ Imai, Takao (2002). "A Suggestion on How to Teach English Grammar（Ⅰ）－ Tense in subordinate clauses of time or condition" －『中部地区英語教育学会紀要』第 31 号 pp.201-208

・ -------------- (2003). "A Suggestion on How to Teach English Grammar（Ⅱ）－ How to Teach Tense in Relation to Aspect and Modality" －『中部地区英語教育学会紀要』第 32 号 pp.79-86

・ 河上誓作 (1996).『認知言語学の基礎』東京：研究社出版

原著