

A Consideration of How to Teach Peripheral Examples of be + V-ing from the Viewpoint of Cognitive Grammar

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The objective of this article is to investigate ways to deal with peripheral examples of the “be + V-ing construction” in teaching English to speakers of Japanese. The article starts by examining the misunderstanding which frequently occurs in English classes due to students translating the construction into Japanese. The article also refers to a sign, “Now stopping at Shibuya,” which is displayed on *JR-Yamanote Line*. This sign seems to be wrong at first, but it can be a peripheral example of the “be + V-ing construction.” In order to test the author’s hypothesis, a survey was conducted to measure the attitudes of native speakers of English towards the expressions in question. The results of the survey led the author to theorize that in addition to learning about the core image of the be + V-ing construction, the “Two Standards for Evaluating New Language Expression” which will be proposed in this article is beneficial for Japanese learners of English.

Keyword: teaching grammar, be + V-ing, cognitive grammar, prototype/peripheral

1. Introduction

On *JR-Yamanote Line*, three different sequential notifications are displayed to signal passengers to the location of the train. Imagine, for example, the situation in which your train has just left *Ebisu*, and is heading for *Shibuya*. (a) Soon after the train left *Ebisu*, the sign reads *Tsugi wa Shibuya desu* in Japanese and “Next Shibuya” in English. (b) When the train is about to arrive in *Shibuya*, the sign reads *Manonaku Shibuya desu* in Japanese and “Arriving at Shibuya” in English. (c) While the train is in *Shibuya* station, and passengers are getting on and off, the sign reads *Tadaima Shibuya desu* in Japanese and followed that expression with “Now stopping at Shibuya.” I think (a) and (b) leave nothing to be desired, but (c) is a little bit controversial because a strict grammatical

meaning of “Now stopping at Shibuya” would be that the train is about to arrive in Shibuya.

Related to this “be + V-ing” construction which was mentioned in the last paragraph, a frequent misunderstanding that occurs in English classes in Japan comes to mind. When someone says, for instance, “My battery is dying,” while talking on a cell phone, the meaning of the sentence is that the battery of the cell phone is going to die soon. If Japanese learners of English, however, remember the meaning of the “be + V-ing” construction as the equivalent of *-shite iru* in Japanese, they are less likely to understand the meaning of the sentence. This phenomenon has been frequently observed in the author’s classes regardless of the learners’ English achievement level. They will probably translate the sentence as

“*Jyuden ga kirete iru.*” It is clear that this translation is not correct because the meaning of the Japanese sentence is the battery is dead. “*Jyuden ga kireso*” might be preferable. This kind of problem frequently happens in English classes in Japan. (*cf.* Imai: 2007)

According to the schematic/core image of the “be + V-ing” construction, the way in which *JR-Yamanote Line* uses the expression, “Now stopping at Shibuya,” seems to be a little bit problematic because it is confusing. The author guesses, however, that the *JR-Yamanote Line*’s expression (c) might be a peripheral example of the “be + V-ing” construction. Based on the two incompatible examples which have been discussed so far, the present study focuses on what matters when we come across such peripheral examples as “Now stopping at Shibuya” in reference to the viewpoint of cognitive grammar.

2. Theoretical Backgrounds

2.1 Fundamental Cognitive Abilities Underlying Grammatical Competence

From the viewpoint that cognitive linguistics regards language ability as one of the embodiments of human cognitive abilities, the author has speculated that there are four fundamental cognitive abilities which underlie grammatical competence. Those four fundamental abilities are prototype-based model of categorization, figure/ground segregation and alternation, reference point ability, and granularity (schematicity/specificity). It should also be noted that each of these abilities are not mutually exclusive.

The first of these abilities is prototype-based model of categorization. In this prototype-based

model of categorization, category membership is a gradient phenomenon, that is, some members of a category are more central members than others. The former members are called prototype examples, while the latter ones are called peripherals or extensions.

The second of these abilities is figure/ground segregation and alternation. This ability explains the fact that humans can visualize several different meanings in a word or a sentence within context. In short, humans foreground some aspect of a situation, while they background the other aspects.

The third ability is reference point ability. The process of this ability is identical to that of metonymy, a type of figurative language in which one entity or thing is used to indicate, or provides mental access to, another entity. In language communication, the author thinks that all language expressions serve as reference points. That is, language expressions are one of the cues for the hearer to understand what the speaker intends to convey. The listener’s job is to infer the speaker’s meaning by using these languages expressions (reference points) as one of the cues, along with grammatical knowledge, background knowledge, context information, theory of mind (*cf.* Yanase: 2007), and so on.

The last ability is granularity. This ability enables humans to construe things or situations schematically or specifically. Depending on the schematicity level at which things or situations are conceptualized, things or situations could be construed in different ways. It is sometimes said that people are the same, while it is also mentioned that each person is different. The reason for which those two statements are not contradictory could be explained by humans’ ability to be able to construe things or situations both roughly and precisely.

2.2 Two Standards for Evaluating New Language Expressions.

As was discussed in section 2.1, when communicating with people by using language, reference point ability plays an essential role in understanding a speaker's meaning. This ability is inevitable especially when listeners come across spontaneous metaphors or language expressions that they have never heard before. A language expression as a reference point is regarded as appropriate if the speaker's meaning is successfully conveyed to the listener. Related to the appropriateness of a language expression, people often say that some language expressions are grammatical, while others are ungrammatical, based on a standard of judgment that is supported by rule-based model of grammar. In reference to the viewpoint of cognitive grammar and a dynamic usage-based model of grammar (*cf.* Langacker, 2000), however, such dichotomy as grammatical or ungrammatical does not necessarily work. Instead, the next two standards should be considered to evaluate language expressions that listeners do not feel comfortable with.

Standards for Evaluating a New Language Expression

- (1) Whether a language expression in question is conventional or nonconventional (not grammatical, or ungrammatical), that is, what percentage of native speakers of the language would feel comfortable or are familiar with the expression.
- (2) Whether the expression in question could be assimilated into a category as a peripheral

example or an extension, that is, whether the expression could be explained from the viewpoint of cognitive motivation.

As for the standard (2), which was presented above, a related supportive statement is also given by Langacker.

... the categorization constitutes the expression's interpretation with respect to established linguistic convention, as embodied in the schema. An elaborative relationship represents a judgment of conventionality (often referred to as "grammaticality"). While an expression that conflicts with a schema is to that extent nonconventional ("ungrammatical"), this need not be grounds for stigma. The pleasures of innovation and the pressures of actual language use are such that we are always pushing the envelop of established convention. Thus a certain measure of nonconventionality is usually and readily accepted. (Langacker 2008: 170)

It makes perfect sense to the author that Langacker uses the term conventional/nonconventional, rather than grammatical/ungrammatical, considering the reality that language is dynamic and has always been changing. It is just a problem of extent of conventionality whether some expression is acceptable or not. If an expression is explained based on the cognitive motivation, however, it could be regarded as a peripheral member of a category.

Consider, for example, "I'm loving it!" which is known as a catch-phrase of McDonald's commercial. Some Japanese teachers of English pointed out that this expression is ungrammatical,

by evaluating the expression based on the rules of traditional school grammar. That attitude of evaluation is not necessarily appropriate, when we consider the actual language use and its dynamism. Evaluating “I’m loving it” according to the two standards given above led the author to conclude as follow: (a) This expression is accepted by many young people, while elder people are generally less likely to feel comfortable with the expression. One native speaker of English, who is in her early twenties, commented that “I’m loving it.” is used in McDonald’s commercial, but it seems awkward. However, “I’m loving it” has its place in the English language. If a person is intrigued or likes a certain situation (something works in his/her favor), he/she might use “I’m loving it!” (b) Taking into account that the schematic/core image of the “be + V-ing” construction as seen in section 2.3 below, the interpretation of “I’m loving it!” should be that I’m loving it temporarily, or for the time being. That is because using an imperfective verb as a component of the “be + V-ing” construction, implicit boundaries are imposed. (cf. Radden & Dirven: 2007: 177) In this construal, the aspect that “I’m enjoying it now!” is foregrounded. This usage is assimilated to a peripheral member of verbs which could be used in that construction.

Related to the meaning of “I’m loving it!” the author once asked how native speakers of English feel about the difference between “I love you.” and “I’m loving you.” The comment by one of the participants, which is shown in Table 1 below, also supports the author’s conclusion.

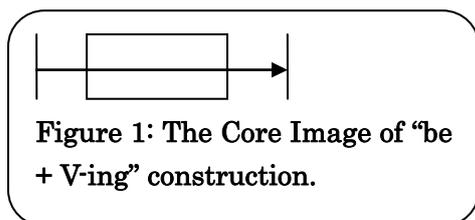


Table 1
(A Comment by a Native Speaker of English)

“I love you” is a more powerful phrase (although unfortunately, in our culture we have managed to demean its emotional impact by using it too much and insincerely). This phrase, if used with genuineness, connotes true feeling for something or someone, a strong sentiment. “I love my family/God/country”, for example. It is, in many instances, constant.

Whereas, “I’m loving you” is more removed from the object of the emotional word “love”. It is like saying I enjoy/appreciate you right now for a reason, whether it is because you gave a good performance or you did a favor for me. It is less constant and more conditional. (The comment of Daria Deeva)

2.3 The Schematic/Core Image of be + V-ing

As is shown below, different kinds of verbs have been considered to behave in different ways when they are used as a component of the “be + V-ing” construction. What should be observed here is, however, that if visualized in the schematic lever, they share the same core image as is shown in Figure 1. The core meaning should be described as follow: the subject of the verb is construed to be in the middle of doing something which has a boundary. (cf. Radden & Dirven: 2007: 179-182, 190-193)

(1) a. Jack ate an apple. [durational / telic]



b. Jack is eating an apple.



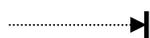
(2) a. Maria slept an hour [durational/atelic]



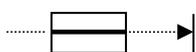
b. Maria is sleeping.



(3) a. The bus stopped. [punctual/telic]



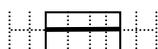
b. The bus is stopping.



(4) a. Rob hiccuped. [punctual/atelic]



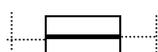
b. Rob is hiccuping.



(5) a. I live in an apartment. [lasting state]



b. I'm living in an apartment.



3. Survey

3.1 Objective

The objective of this survey is to investigate whether the sign, “Now stopping at Shibuya,” in *JR-Yamanote Line*, is a peripheral example of the “be + V-ing” construction. According to the schematic meaning of the “be + V-ing” construction, “Now stopping at Shibuya,” should be paraphrased as “Now the train is about to arrive in Shibuya.”

JR-Yamanote Line, however, uses the expression to mean “The train is at Shibuya.” Based on the two standards given in section 2.2, the author explored the *JR-Yamanote Line’s* expression.

3.2 Participants

Seven native speakers of English participated in this survey, all of whom are living in Japan and teaching English in a university. Four participants are from the U.S, two are from U.K, and one is from New Zealand. These participants were chosen on the basis of availability for interviews by the author.

3.3 Materials and Procedures

Regarding sentence 1 through 8 shown below, the participants were asked to choose their interpretation of each sentence from the options ① through ④ in the box below. These sentences for the interviews were designed by the author, by adding either “now” or “Shibuya,” or both to the sentence, “The train is stopping.” The reason was to investigate whether adverbials of time or place are determinants of sentence meaning.

1. The train is stopping.
2. The train is stopping at Shibuya.
3. Now the train is stopping.
4. Now the train is stopping at Shibuya.
5. Stopping.
6. Stopping at Shibuya.
7. Now stopping.
8. Now stopping at Shibuya.

In each of the sentences 1 through 8, do you feel the train is moving or not? Choose your interpretation from ① to ④.

- ① The train is moving.
- ② The train is not moving.
- ③ The train could be moving or not moving.
- ④ This sentence doesn't make sense.

After the participants completed the survey, the author talked with each participant about the content of the survey in English. During the interview, some participants gave their comments in addition to their answer to each question.

3.4 Results

The results of the survey are presented in Table 2. The letters: U.S., U.K., and NZ show the country where each participant is from. The numbers given in the column under the country of each participant show the interpretation which the participant chose from ① to ④. Two numbers are given in the slot when the participant thought two interpretations could be possible. If two numbers are given, but one of them is in the parenthesis, the interpretation in the parenthesis is possible, but less likely. The numbers given in the column under ①, ②, ③, or ④, in Total, indicate the total number of the participants who chose the interpretation for each sentence.

Along with answers to the questions, some participants gave comments. Some of them are summarized by the author and presented in Table 3:

Table 3 (Comments by Survey Participants)

(a) Since “be + V-ing” construction always means that the subject of the sentence is in the middle of doing something, the meaning of “Now stopping at Shibuya” should be that the train is about to arrive in Shibuya. If the train is at Shibuya, “Now stopped at Shibuya” should be appropriate. Just saying “Shibuya” is more appropriate and natural.
(b) In the context of the train being at Shibuya station, you should say, “Now standing at Shibuya.” ※ Regarding this, another participant commented that “Now standing at Shibuya” is appropriate when you are trying to catch the train, but if you are riding on the train, this expression is awkward.
(c) The meaning of “stopping” is usually “moving,” but if you are talking about a train schedule, such as “The train will be stopping at Shibuya,” “stopping” could mean “not moving.”
(d) One participant from California commented that in the <i>JR-Yamanote Line</i> ’s context, “Now stopping at Shibuya” means that the train is not moving. I know this is contradictory against the core meaning of be + V-ing, but it is natural anyway.

Table 2 (Results of the Survey)

	Subjects							Total			
	NZ	U.S.	U.S.	U.S.	U.S.	U.K.	U.K.	①	②	③	④
1. The train is stopping.	1	1	1	3	1	1	1	6			1
2. The train is stopping at Shibuya.	1	1	1	3	3	1	3	4			3
3. Now the train is stopping.	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	7			
4. Now the train is stopping at Shibuya.	1	1	2	1	3	1	3	4	1		2
5. Stopping.	1(4)	4	4	4	1,4	1	1	4			5
6. Stopping at Shibuya.	1(4)	4	4	1	1,4	1	3,4	4			5
7. Now stopping.	1	4	4	1	1,4	1	3	4		1	3
8. Now stopping at Shibuya.	1	1	2	1	3	1	1,3	5	1	2	

4. Discussion

According to the results of the survey in Tables 2 and 3, it is observed that native speakers of English usually interpret the meaning of “Now stopping at Shibuya.” as the train is about to arrive in Shibuya, that is, most of them did not accept the usage of *JR-Yamanote Line*. Only one out of the seven participants, on the other hand, stated that “Now stopping at Shibuya” means that the train has already stopped, that is, it is not moving now. Thus the participant mentioned that the usage of *JR-Yamanote Line* is acceptable. As for the existence of adverbials of time (now) or place (Shibuya), no influence of their existence on the interpretation of the whole sentence was observed.

Related to the topic of this study, in one scene of a novel titled *the curious incident of the dog in the night-time* (Haddon: 2003), a boy is in the station, describing what is going on, and says in his mind “Train coming, Train stopped, Train going. Silence.” In this context, the boy foregrounds the moment in which the train has just stopped, and says, “stopped.”

As was discussed in section 2, in the process of understanding the speaker’s meaning, the most important factor is the listener’s inference ability. In order to infer a speaker’s meaning, the listener constructs the meaning based on grammatical and vocabulary knowledge, background knowledge, context information, and the theory of mind.

Consider the results of the survey according to the standards (1) and (2) which were proposed in section 2.2. As for standard (1), it could be said that most native speakers of English do not accept the interpretation of “Now stopping at Shibuya” as the train is not moving, while a few seems to accept the interpretation. Related to this point, since the survey shows that one participant answered in the

affirmative, the author asked for some comments of another native speaker of English who lives in California. His comments are shown in Table 4.

Table 4

(A Comment by a Native Speaker of English)

Most people would assume that the train was about to arrive at the Shibuya station with respect to its location in the universe, and not really consider its state with respect to its entire route. On the other hand, I can see sentence 8 as being valid when considering its current state or behavior within the context of its entire route.

In summary, context (c) does have validity if you ask the question:

“What is the state of the train NOW in its activity of moving from the start of its scheduled route to the end of its scheduled route?”

“Well, it’s NOW stopping at Shibuya.”

(The comment of Michael Conaway)

As for the standard (2), the cognitive motivation of “Now stopping at Shibuya” in the context of *JR-Yamanote Line* could be explained, based on granularity, which is one of the cognitive abilities described in section 2.1. If humans as conceptualizers visualize the situation as the location where the train is, the meaning of “Now stopping at Shibuya” should be interpreted as the train is about to arrive in Shibuya, which is the core/schematic meaning of the “be + V-ing” construction. In this case, conceptualizers conceptualize the situation specifically. If conceptualizers, on the other hand, construe the situation with respect to its entire route, the meaning of “Now stopping at Shibuya” could be interpreted as the train is at Shibuya, which could be a peripheral meaning of the “be + V-ing”

construction. (This explanation is also supported by the native speaker's comment which was given in Table 4.) In this case, conceptualizers conceptualize the situation more schematically. That possibility of understanding may be because a meaning of "stop" which is shown below is foregrounded.

to interrupt one's course or journey for a brief visit or cease.

(The American Heritage College Dictionary)

This meaning is also foregrounded in the example sentence below. This example is a more prototypical usage of this meaning, though.

(e.g.) This train will be stopping at *Shin-Yokohama* and *Shinagawa* before arriving at Tokyo terminal.

This example sentence announces the train schedule. Note that also in this context, humans as conceptualizers visualize the situation with respect to the entire route.

5. Conclusion and Implication

In conclusion, *JR-Yamanote Line's* usage of "Now stopping at Shibuya" could be a peripheral example of the "be + stopping" construction. That is, the meaning of "Now stopping at Shibuya" could be construed in different ways according to the ways humans visualize the situation. In one case, humans as conceptualizers construe the situation as the location where the train is. In the second case, humans visualize the situation with respect to the entire route. The former meaning is a prototypical meaning, while the latter could be a peripheral meaning. This peripheral meaning, however, does not seem to have reached the condition of common

usage yet in the English language.

Taking into account the fact that English is a living language and it has always been changing, the author thinks that it is desirable for teachers and learners of EFL to be aware of this fact. In addition, EFL teachers and learners need to take a more flexible attitude toward accepting language expressions which they have never heard or read before. This flexible attitude, the author thinks, is one of the most important factors in acquiring a grammar of English from the viewpoint of a dynamic usage-based model of language acquisition. The "Two Standards for Evaluating New Language Expressions" which were proposed in this paper should shed light on this matter.

6. Implications for English Teaching

It may be useful to illustrate how to present the "be + V-ing" construction in the classroom, based on the theory described in this paper. In the apprentice stage of English language teaching or learning, the prototypical examples of "be + V-ing" construction should be given priority of course, along with the core image of the construction which was presented in section 2.3. That is, some prototypical examples should be given as elaborations of the core/schematic image of the "be + V-ing" construction. After the prototypical examples, some peripheral examples should follow. The next stages (a) through (f) are examples of how to introduce "be + V-ing" construction in the classroom. (a) The core image of "be + V-ing" construction is something is in the middle of something. (b) If you are in the middle of eating an apple, you can say, "I'm eating an apple." (c) If your dog fell asleep a few hours ago, and it is in the middle of sleeping, you can describe this situation as "My dog is sleeping." (d) If John started sneezing,

and he is now in the middle of it, you can describe the situation as “John is sneezing.” (e) If a bus driver notices that the traffic light is red, and he slams on the brakes, you can describe the situation, “The bus is stopping.” (f) What is the differences in meaning between the following two examples?; 1) I live in an apartment; 2) I’m living in an apartment. Basically, 1) is a permanent situation, while 2) is a temporary situation. Imagine another situation. Someone lives in a house, but since their house is being remodeled now, they are in an apartment for the time being. In this case, the situation can be described as “They are living in an apartment for now” because it is temporary. This article argues that it is desirable for these five cases to be taught in order, from prototypical examples to peripheral examples, along with the core image of the “be + V-ing” construction. What is important in the whole process of learning this construction is that teachers and learners should keep the core image in mind. Then consider what will happen if learners come across such a more peripheral example as “Now stopping at Shibuya,” which is used by the *JR-Yamanote Line*. Based on what learners have learned so far, this example seems like an exception at first. In such situations, it should be helpful to make learners aware of “Two Standards for Evaluating New Language Expressions.” These two standards should help learners develop flexible attitudes towards learning a foreign language. Such flexibility, which is inevitable when learning a foreign language, will surely help learners understand peripheral examples while they use the target language as a means of communication.

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