

6. Video and grammar

Jean Louis R. Habert

Video-taped documents have been used for a variety of purposes in language teaching, and I may surprise the reader if I say that the most efficient use I have been able to make of them has been in the field of grammar teaching. Indeed, coupled with the latest linguistic research conducted in France in the last thirty-odd years¹, I have found it an indispensable tool far superior to any other medium when it came to helping the student understand how the English language functions. It has led me, over the years, to the writing of a thesis² on the subject, of which the present article will be but a short sneak preview.

The use of short video extracts has helped me make the student understand that a language is not a subject matter like the rest. The language teacher has to teach a content (the language) by using it, a feat that teachers of other matters do not have to perform since they teach whatever it is they teach by using the common language of both students and teacher. Video-taped scenes thus permit the student to realize that no language is produced (uttered or written) unless there is, here and now, a situation in which a speaker, for some reason or other, has to communicate with a co-speaker with a precise purpose in mind. They also show that communication is not made up of words only, but that intonation, mimicry and gestures are part of the communication process, and, I am tempted to say, part of grammar in a broad sense, that of the principles that govern communication between humans.

The study of language as used in authentic³ video-taped scenes shows the student that most traditional grammar "rules" simply do not function, but these scenes also help the teacher show that these rules can be replaced by other principles, which have been brought to light by the research mentioned above.

Here are two very common points in English grammar that I currently use in lectures and classes to make my point clear: the use of *this/that* and that of the so-called "progressive form".

This/that

Most grammar books published for foreign learners offer a rather simplistic approach to the use of these two "demonstratives"⁴. They basically assert that "this" expresses proximity and a rather laudatory comment on the speaker's part whereas "that" expresses distance and a rather derogatory comment. The film corpus I have

gathered along the years shows that most of the time the concept of distance is at best irrelevant, and that of comment depends on the way the statement is delivered.

Let us consider a typical example as illustrated in the first two scenes of the film *Cocoon II*.⁵

Situation: In a Florida rest home, a woman is teaching a group of elderly people how to hook a rug.

Woman: Now remember: if your loop is large, your rug is loose. Now let's all repeat **that**, shall we?

The elderly: If your loop is large, your rug is loose.

Woman: Good. Now, let's give it a try. Make a loop, pull it through, cross over and pull it out.

She walks toward an old man, and put her finger onto his work

Woman: Tighten **those** loops, Mr. Lefkowitz!

The woman is obviously angry, which may justify the use of *those*, according to the old rule, but how are we to account for the fact that the speaker did touch the object she was referring to, if *that/those* are to be used when the said object is far from the speaker? And how far, may I ask, has the object to be from the speaker for the latter to choose between *this* and *that*?

The above example shows beyond doubt that the use of *that/those* is a little more complex than described in standard grammar books.

Some time later, Mr. Lefkowitz is shown in the cemetery, complaining to his wife's tombstone:

Mr. Lefkowitz: **This** rest home! You wouldn't believe the place! Lights on, lights out! Rules, rules, rules, They won't even let you keep a hot-plate!

The interesting thing is that what is shown on screen as these words are being uttered is an angry speaker throwing his arms about in a gesture of rejection and a long range shot which shows nothing but tombstones as far as the eye can reach. The rest home referred to is obviously not near the speaker (for reasons that are easy to understand...)

How is the teacher to account for the fact that the object referred to by *this* is

miles from the speaker? And what about the gestures and tone of voice, both of which indicate anger, rejection, and derogatory comment?

A speaker-centered, and communicative approach of the teaching of grammar has taught us how *this/that* function in fact. What is important here is that the video enables the teacher to actually show the student the principles along which these words are used.

This video example clearly illustrates that if the speaker refers to something that he deems unknown to his co-speaker it is *this/these* that will be used, whereas, if he thinks that what he is referring to is already known to the co-speaker, then, *that/those* will be used, as if to tell the co-speaker: "you know what I'm talking about, we've been through this before". Of course, the speaker can always choose to speak as if the co-speaker knew what he is talking about to create a number of effects:

Hey, what about those \$10,000 that you owe me?

What? What 10,000 dollars? You never lent me any money!

What are you talking about?

I was just kidding!

Thanks to the use of the video, the teacher will be able to help the student understand how things function by asking the following questions, whose answers are easy to find since all the student has to do is to watch the scene attentively:

1. Those loops :

Who is the speaker?

Who is the speaker speaking to?

In what tone?

What is the aim of the message? (paying a compliment, reproaching, etc...)

How far is the speaker from the object referred to?

Is it the first time the speaker has been referring to loops?

Does the word loop normally have a negative connotation to it?

Can you explain the woman's anger? (Think of your own teachers in a similar situation!...)

2. This rest home!

Who is speaking?

To whom?

How is the speaker feeling?

What has the speaker come for?

Is the co-speaker supposed to know what the speaker is going to say?

Is the speaker happy in his rest home? Look at his gestures. Are they gestures of acceptance or of rejection?

Does the word rest home normally have a derogatory connotation to it?

Can you see the rest home in the picture? Is it close to the cemetery?

Is this rest home followed by information known to the co-speaker or unknown to her?

3. Lets' all repeat **that**, shall we?

Who is talking?

To whom?

What for?

Is that used to show or point at anything?

What is that referring to?

How much time has elapsed between its uttering and the mention of what it is referring to?

Is that referring to information to come or information already given?

The pictures obviously show that *that* is not used here to show anything, and that the demonstrative is neither laudatory nor derogatory. It is my experience that the teacher has a difficult time making his students understand these things with the mere help of a text.

The so-called "progressive form"

The term itself has had students confused the world over for decades. Indeed, the *be+ing* form is always presented as expressing first and foremost an action "in progress". A close study of an adequate corpus easily shows that this use accounts for about 10% of all the uses of the said form.

What I try to make the student understand is that a speaker who uses the *be+ing* form, as linguists have chosen to call it, says more than a speaker who chooses the simple form: if two words are needed instead of just one, then, quite obviously, the message conveyed must be more complex. With the use of video-taped documents, I aim at helping the student discover what it is that the speaker is adding. Recent linguistic research and theories conducted in France⁶ have shown that the *be+ing*

form is used by the speaker to refer, among other things, to:

- an action that has started before its very mentioning, and which may still be in progress:

She is not coming yet, Toto, but she hurt you, didn't she?... (Dorothy in the opening scene of the Wizard of Oz, showing her running away from something or somebody).

- but also to something that may not be in progress at the moment of speech: (Two friends talking on a street)

*By the way, what **are** you reading at the moment?*

*At the moment, I 'm **not reading** anything, stupid, I 'm walking with you, can't you see?*

*No, you're **not**, you just stopped to answer my question!*

- or to something that has been planned, said, or envisaged before the moment of speech:

*Don't forget that I'm **leaving** tomorrow.*

(Person reminding a friend that he or she can't do something because...)

*When you vote **YES**, you' **re voting** for... (political slogan).*

And the effect of all these various uses, of which I shall not give an exhaustive list here, is often one of comment on the speaker's part:

*Watch out! She's **always borrowing** money!*

*Andy! You have **been drinking** again!*

On top of this the use of the *be+ing* form tends to turn the sentence towards the subject and the state he/she is in, rather than toward what he/she is actually doing:

Aunty Em, Aunty Em, guess what Miss Gulch did to Toto...

*Don't bother us, honey, we're **trying** to count! This old incubator has gone bad and...⁷*

Here, as in many examples, the speaker is solely interested in the subject's situation: = *don't bother us honey, we're busy (counting)*. It is also to be noted here that when the speaker speaks, he is no longer counting, neither trying to, but simply speaking!

I propose to help the student understand these various meanings with the help of video-taped scenes. Let us first consider the conversation taking place between several teachers on the day before their school re-opens⁸.

There are old and new teachers meeting in the school gym. A teacher is shown

practicing on a punch ball. He has taken his jacket off.

1st teacher: Anyway, he says to me: "Exaggeration, pure exaggeration. There is absolutely no discipline problem here."

Murdoch: There is no discipline problem at Alcatraz either.

He hits the punch ball violently one last time and turns to his colleagues.

2nd teacher: You can't teach a disorderly mob.

Murdoch: That's right. You've got to have discipline and that means obedience.

2nd teacher: Hmm, how are you going to get that?

1st teacher: With a ruler.

Murdoch: Take a ruler to one of those delinquents and he'll beat you to death with it. Oh, my name's Murdoch. You a new teacher?

Dadier: Yes. English. Richard Dadier.

1st teacher: Wilson Orly, carpentry.

2nd teacher: George Cash, social science.

Murdoch: I'm taking money under the false pretense of teaching history.

The younger teacher takes the joke and smiles in return, then adds:

Dadier: But you develop their muscles.

Murdoch: No, I'm developing my own... Getting in shape to defend myself for the fall term.

Dadier: Makes it sound like a reform school.

Murdoch: Oh, first teaching job, hey?

Dadier: That's right.

Cash: Don't listen to him, Dadier, he's a cynic.

Murdoch: Why not? This is the garbage can of the educational system. You take most of these schools and put them together and what have you got? One big, fat, overflowing garbage can.

Dadier: How long have you been teaching here?

Murdoch: Oh, twelve years. Two Purple Hearts and no salary increase. They hire fools like us with college degrees to sit on that garbage can, to keep 'em in school so women for a few hours a day can walk around the city without getting attacked.

Let's first concentrate on the following sentence, uttered by Murdoch.

"I'm taking money under the false pretense of teaching history".

My main aim is to help the student realize that a *be+ing* form does not necessarily convey the idea that the action is not completed, and we propose the following tasks, all of which are conducted in context and with constant reference to the pictures.

First series of tasks:

Look at the scene again. Concentrate on Murdoch. Say what you can see him doing. The aim is of course to start with what the students think they know about *be + ing*, and we obtain sentences such as:

- *We can see him hitting a punch ball.*
- *talking to other teachers.*
- *putting his jacket on again.*
- *introducing himself to the new arrivals.*

Second task:

Now say what he is doing when the scene starts. And say when this started.

We get sentences such as:

- *He's hitting a punch ball... with a vengeance.* and:
- *He started hitting the ball before the scene began.*

This is one of the key concepts I want the students to become aware of:

Whether the action is completed or not, what matters when *be + ing* is used is that the predicate somehow started BEFORE it was mentioned.

We then add a few more questions:

- *What else is he doing? (venting his frustrations out of his system, perhaps?)*
- *How does he look? Happy, serious, worried, complacent?*

What is being aimed at is to attract the attention of the students onto the speaker's mood and the real message that he is actually delivering. The smile on Dadier's face is a big help, for it is a sign for the students to understand that what Murdoch is saying is not to be, and is not, taken seriously by those who are listening to him. Everyone can *see* that Murdoch is not in the process of taking money, but that, in fact, he is *talking about himself*, passing a judgment on himself, we could even go as far as saying that he is talking about his habits since what he is saying about himself is not new! And that it started a long time ago... and lasted... some twelve-

odd years. So much for the *simple present* as a way to convey habits!

So as to help the students conquer all these concepts we propose the following tasks:

Find in the scene (or in the script) a sentence meaning:

- *I'm a thief. I do not really earn or deserve the money they pay me. Or:*
- *I'm a dishonest person. I do not work in earnest. I'm just pretending.*

After aligning the three following statements

- *I'm taking money under the false pretense of...*
- *I'm a thief.*
- *I'm a dishonest person.*

The teacher can help the students understand that *be* enables the speaker to give the predicate *taking money under the false pretense of teaching history* a status that is close to that of an adjective, and that he is not talking about the action of *taking money* but rather about himself.

I use the following kind of questions to help the students discover all this:

- a. *Is Murdoch actually TAKING anything when he says that?*
- b. *Can you actually see money in his hand?*
- c. *Why doesn't he say I TAKE instead of I'M TAKING? After all, this has become a habit with him, after twelve years!*
- d. *Is he speaking (!) seriously or just joking?*
- e. *Is his statement taken seriously or as a joke? Look at Dadier's face.*

These last questions illustrate the great store I set in the role played by the person to whom any message is delivered, and this is very difficult to do without a visual document showing an authentic example of communication.

We shall now look at the other occurrence of *be + ing* in the present tense that this scene offers:

"No, I'm developing my own. (I'm) getting in shape to defend myself for the fall term."

I start with the following task:

Now try to explain why Murdoch said: "I'm developing, I'm getting in shape..."

If the students get stuck, I help them with questions or tasks as the following:

- a. Find a sentence uttered by Murdoch, and which sounds like a wild exaggeration of the situation.
- b. Show that it's taken as a joke again by Dadier and as cynicism by his other colleagues.

It is clear that here I am referring the students to what they can easily see on screen: i.e. the smiles of Murdoch's colleagues.

- c. Is Murdoch actually **in the process of exercising** when he says that?
- d. Is he referring to the past or the present?
- e. Who introduced the idea of developing muscles **first**?
- f. Look at Murdoch's reaction and movement when he answers Dadier's question. In what direction does he look?

These questions have all been thought out to help the students understand that an action does not have to be in process for the speaker to use a *be + ing* form. In this case the humorous intention of the speaker and the fact that he was answering the co-speaker's mention of "*develop one's muscles*" have been enough to trigger the use of *be + ing*.

Question *f* shows that the speaker is clearly referring to the past, to what already been mentioned, experienced, lived. That's my way of showing the students the value of *-ing*, which refers to something that happened prior to the moment of speech.

Our last example is taken from an almost unknown movie⁹ dating back to the late fifties. Let's look at the short scene and compare the use made by the same speaker of the *simple present* and *present continuous* as it is called in grammar books.

The scene takes place in a penitentiary death row after a mutiny.

Mears: Warden, what about that car?

Stone: I can't give it to you, Mears.

Mears goes to a cell where a few guards are held hostage, and threatens one of them with his machine gun.

Mears: All right, Harris, get outa here!

Harris: What for, Mears? ... The warden did what you said, he quit shooting and

he took the gas-guns away.

Mears: He didn't do what I told him! C'mon, get outa here, fatso, we' re gonna convince him.

Harris: I'm not getting out of here. I'm staying right here. I'm not getting outa here, Mears... You take... you take O'Flaherty. He's... he's an old man. I'm a young man, Mears, Mears. I got a wife and kids, Mears. ...You take O'Flaherty, he's an old man.

What I wish to do here is help the students understand why Harris, in almost the same breath, uses *be + ing* and then the *simple present*. In fact we have here a situation that is almost the same as the one we saw before, in which a speaker answers, or reacts to something the co-speaker has said. So as to help the students grasp this, I give them the following tasks:

Find in Harris's response:

- a. *first: the part of his speech that refers to Mear's order.*
- b. *and secondly: the part of his speech in which he brings new information, or a new idea.*
- c. *Can Harris refuse to obey Mears order even at the risk of his own life?*
- d. *Can he force Mears to do what he suggests (take O'Flaherty)?*

Tasks c and d obviously aim at making the students aware that, in this situation, one of the speakers dominates the other, as it is almost the case in real life situations.

Another way of making the students understand or discover the real meaning conveyed by Harris's *be + ing* forms is the following:

Which of the following statements is/are closest to Harris's message in "I'm not getting outa here", "I'm staying right here"?

- a. *I won't leave this cell.*
- b. *I refuse to leave this cell.*
- c. *I'm not gonna budge from here.*
- d. *If you think I'm going to do what you want, you've got it all wrong.*
- e. *I heard you all right, but I won't do as you told me.*

It is obviously sentences d. and e. that show what kind of operations took place in Harris's mind.

Such a document can also be used as a testing aid to check whether what may

have been explained in a different but similar situation has indeed been grasped by the students. If such is my choice, I show the extract without the soundtrack but with the foreign subtitles and the script of the extract with the verbs in the infinitive form, and ask the students to imagine what Harris is saying in English: we are far from a traditional translating exercise, since the students, prior to producing language, have identified the situation in which it is produced. As a further check of understanding we may propose to the students to imagine what Mear's reaction to Harris's suggestion might be, a sentence in which Mears would obviously have to remind Harris that *he* is the one in charge:

"I'm not taking O'Flaherty. I'm taking you, fatso. I'm calling the shots, here, get it?"

This article may have surprised the reader as video-taped documents are generally used by teachers for a variety of reasons and purposes but rarely as an aid to understanding how the language functions in depth, or what kind of abstract mental operations take place in the speaker's mind. I particularly cherish this medium because it helps me *show* these operations and the lexical, grammatical or syntactical traces they leave in the use of the language. I hope I have made the reader eager to read more on the subject!

Notes

1. See bibliography.
2. See bibliography.
3. By authentic, we mean pieces not made up to teach language as in most textbooks, but documents made to entertain or inform.
4. See for example *Pratique de l'anglais de A - Z*, Hatier, France 1994
5. *Cocoon II*. Richard Zanuck. 20th Century Fox 1988
6. See bibliography
7. *Wizard of Oz* 1939.
8. *The Blackboard Jungle*, Richard Brooks, 1954.
9. *The Last Mile*, Howard Koch, 1959.

Jean Louis Habert is a French *agrégé d'anglais* and a doctor in linguistics. He teaches and lectures at the high school and college levels. He also lectures in various French universities on teaching grammar and the use of video-taped materials in EFL classes. He has published several books on these subjects and has been a teacher trainer for twenty years.