The Present Is Not the Present: How Processing the Present Progressive Brings Future Events and Promotional Deadlines Closer

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Advertisement uses both, present progressive and simple ("Mc Donald’s-I am loving it", “I love NY”). Based on linguistic relativity theory we show that using the progressive affects time evaluations. It reduces the duration of non-joyful tasks, increases liking for task-supporting-products, moves future events closer and increases willingness-to-pay for event-related products.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1019690/volumes/v43/NA-43

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

When expressing present actions in the English language, several options are possible of which the present progressive and the simple present are the two most common. While linguistically most verbs are classed to either embrace (so called perfectives) or refuse (so called imperfectives) the present progressive, advertisements messages in line with recent developments in linguistics often use both forms “interchangeably”. An example is McDonald’s famous marketing slogan “I am loving it”, which uses the present progressive versus the more common simple present for the verb (to) love (e.g. the city of New York’s slogan “I love New York”). However when looking at how the famous slogan is translated into other languages, we see that McDonalds uses the simple present even in languages, for which a progressive tense exists (German slogan: “Ich liebe es” instead of “Ich bin es am Lieben”). This suggests that companies may have the assumption that tense doesn’t have an impact on consumers. However, verb tenses as linguistic inducers have been shown to prime a particular mode of processing that continues to be engaged even after language is no longer in use (Wolf and Holmes 2011). Based on the tense-specific characteristics of the progressive expressing an (1) incomplete action or state in progress 2) that is realistically accomplishable (with no exact duration of the temporal frame) 3) at a specific time around the now, and 4) that implies a subjective sense of immediacy to the speaker (Jespersen 1932, Langacker 2001) and previous work in cognitive linguistics (e.g., Athanasopoulos et al. 2015), we hypothesize that more attentional resources are allocated to an action described in present progressive (compared to one in simple present). The action stated in present progressive is on-going and vividly imagined which captures attentive resources (Madden and Zwaan 2003). The heightened attentional focus in turn speeds up time passage (Block, Hancock, and Zakay 2010). When time goes by faster, the future starts sooner and future events move temporally closer (Maglio and Hershfield 2014). We thus derive the hypothesis that:

Hypothesis: Processing statements in present progressive (versus simple present) moves future events temporally closer.

Across six studies, we show the described effect as well as the related process. More precisely, we show that the present progressive moves promoted events (e.g., a marathon event, studies 1-5) and promotional deadlines (e.g., coupon deadlines, study 6) that lie in the future temporally closer. We provide evidence for the process being related to more attention being paid to a statement made in present progressive and show that when cognitive load is introduced, the effect can be attenuated (study 1). We rule out two relevant alternative explanations: differences in frequency of using the present progressive (studies 2-5) and differences in construal level activated by different verb tenses (study 3 and 4). We use English-Dutch and English-Spanish samples (as in Dutch and Spanish expressing actions in progress in simple present is more common than in English) to replicate that the present progressive condition moves a future event closer, even when accounting for differences in fluency. In study 3 and 4 we also rule out the alternative explanation that using or processing the present progressive activates a lower-level of construal and show that our manipulation does not affect time-dependent preference that have been shown to react to differences in construal such as job-preferences with differently interesting training and job periods. It even produces reverse effects on event probability compared to what would be predicted by construal level theory. The reason is that when processing the present progressive, attentional resources are allocated to the ongoing, described activity stated in present progressive. If for example one reads “John is reading a book”, he/she will vividly imagine the action of someone reading a book. While this speeds up time and makes the future start closer (and with it brings future events closer), the focus of attention remains on the action of “reading a book”. When evaluating the probability of any action/event but “reading the book”, attentional resources are occupied which makes any other action/event to be perceived as less probable. We further support our reasoning that time passes when participants process present progressive and use a classical measure to show a faster perceived time passage, namely video duration estimates. Those in the present progressive condition perceive the video duration as significantly shorter than those in the simple present condition and as significantly shorter than the objectively correct video length in seconds (study 4). In the last two studies, we show that the bias created by the present progressive has important effects on marketing and can be used strategically. We show that if an event is perceived to happen sooner, people will feel a greater need to “get ready” for the event which positively affects purchase intentions for event-related products. Those in the present progressive condition show a greater willingness-to-pay for event-related products (e.g., running gear for a marathon event in study 5) than those in the simple present condition. We also collect field data and show that the present progressive can be used to move coupon redemption deadlines perceptually closer and therewith increase redemption numbers (study 6). A coupon deadline that is perceived as closer increases coupon redemption numbers as people redeem the coupon before forgetting about it or losing it.

To sum up, we introduce a new cognitive linguistic effect by examine how present progressive versus simple present affect time-based consumer decisions. We show that processing the present progressive makes time go by faster and thereby makes the future start sooner. With the future starting sooner, events that lie in the future move temporally closer (e.g., a sponsored marathon or promotional deadlines). This has important marketing-relevant effects as it increases willingness-to-pay for event-related products (e.g., sport goods) and increases coupon redemption rates. We contribute to the consumer behavior literature by being first to examine the effects of changes in verb tense.

REFERENCES
