

The English present

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1. Introduction¹

English² presents a peculiar case, particularly in comparison with some of its closer siblings in the Germanic family, when it comes to the formation of present-time expressions at the verb level, or rather to the way in which these expressions divide the labor of referring to states of affairs that are simultaneous with the time of speaking. It makes use of two distinct morphological paradigms, either of which is common enough, typologically speaking, in its own right and serves semantic functions that can be found throughout the world's languages. The so-called simple present (henceforth indicated as “present tense”) constitutes one of the two (inflectional) tenses that characterize the verb paradigm in English and that roughly contrast with each other in terms of “coincidence with” vs. “anteriority to” the time of speaking. The progressive variant is a periphrastic form that may occur in all three of the time frames — past, present, and (the *shall/will*) future — and generally denotes the ongoingness or continued duration of a state of affairs. However, it is the distribution of these two constructions within the context of referring to the present that generates a number of more idiosyncratic properties. Crucially, these properties cannot be studied in isolation for each of both constructions but need to be seen in relation to one another, with one construction clearly marking the semantic boundaries of the other.

In languages like Dutch and German, the present progressive, which is relatively isomorphic in structure to its counterpart in English, comes across as a rather marked way of locating states of affairs in the present, because it almost always implies a very strong sense of duration. In contrast, this aspectual component need not always be present in English, notably in instances where a certain class of verbs takes the present progressive by default, i.e., because using these

verbs in the present tense would, barring a restricted number of special contexts, make them hard or even impossible to interpret. This extremely sharp fissure is thus not a matter of free variation or stylistic preference but defines the very grammaticality of sentences that incorporate a reference to the present moment. It seems, then, that *perfective* verbs like *learn/write/study/recite/copy* obligatorily take the present progressive as a default form and that, when they do, no intimation of any type of temporal progression is necessarily being conveyed. This is not the case for *imperfective* verbs like *know/like/understand/see/have*, which are typically set in the present tense and have the possibility of using the progressive construction if a durational, repetitive, etc. meaning needs to be explicitly indicated.

Langacker (1991: 262–269) proposes a “naïve” and minimal picture of the meaning of the present tense, in which the notion of (full) coincidence with the time of speaking constitutes the sole defining feature. More specifically, according to this purely temporal characterization the present tense in English is seen as consistently indicating *the occurrence of a full instantiation of the profiled process that precisely coincides with the time of speaking*. At first blush, this definition appears to stay within the boundaries of more traditional conceptions of the present tense (and of tense in general), which treat tense predications as grammatical markers of temporal locations and posit one-to-one correspondences between the tenses’ basic meanings and the temporal frames that their nomenclatures betray — “present” for the present tense, “past” for the past tense, etc. (for a classic example of this “localist” approach to tense, see Comrie 1985). However, the emphasis in Cognitive Grammar on a strict correlation between the beginning and end of a profiled process and the boundaries of the speech event in which this process is expressed, substantially transforms the temporal basis of such an approach. In fact, it suggests a view of tense meaning that can readily be integrated into an “elaborated epistemic model” of tense and modality (Langacker 1991: 240–249). Langacker uses the definition of the present tense to explain why an imperfective verb can always occur in the present tense whereas a perfective one, at least if it is to express the mere “presentness” of a process, cannot. To motivate this distributional fact, the

property of (im)perfectivity is directly related to the objective scene or *immediate scope* of a predication, which, in the case of the present tense, is restricted to that portion of reality whose temporal profile coincides with the speech event (the ground). In contexts where a speaker wishes to say something about a current state of affairs, an imperfective verb like *know* can always take the present tense because any instance of ‘knowing’ represents a full instantiation of the process type designated by that verb. Consequently, the requirement that a full instantiation coincide exactly with the boundaries of the speech event is clearly met in the case of imperfectives. With a perfective verb like *learn*, on the other hand, the bounded process that constitutes its semantic pole should be taken in its entirety and be made to coincide exactly with the speech event, such that the resulting configuration yields the “one instance right now” interpretation said to typify the present tense. Mostly for pragmatic reasons, this interpretation generally does not come about (Langacker 1991: 251). More recently, Langacker (1999c, 1999d, 2001, 2002) has radicalized his earlier ideas on the temporal basis for a unified characterization of the semantics of the present tense. In these publications, Langacker is examining the consequences of maintaining his view against the backdrop of the blatant observation that time (i.e., the “present”) cannot uniquely and exhaustively be called in to cover the whole meaning range of that tense in English. The problem of perfectivity in relation to the present tense is more explicitly cut up into a “durational” (temporal) and an “epistemic” component. In Langacker (2001), the situation for perfective verbs that are to be located in the present is described in terms of a “pragmatic unlikelihood”: on the temporal side, there exists no intrinsic connection between the length of the profiled process and that of the speech event, while an epistemic perspective reveals that a speaker cannot generally both observe and identify/describe an event at the very same time.

Although the epistemic problem of naming an unfolding event *in situ* is obviously associated with certain temporal restrictions, no explicit attempt is made to conceive of these two aspects as manifestations of a common underlying principle, which, if formulated in a more abstract way, might succeed in reading the temporal constraint

as one (and only one) of its realizations. Instead, the stringent temporal criterion of exact coincidence is exploited further to account for uses of the present tense where a designated process, whether perfectly or imperfectly construed, is not located in the present at all. Cases of “furate” uses of the present tense (referring to scheduled activities in the future), as well as stage directions, photo captions, and generic utterances are all treated as invoking the conception of a *virtual plane* onto which representations of events that are not (yet) actualized in reality (more specifically, in the present itself) are projected. It is these (fictive/mental) representations that are said to coincide exactly with the time of speaking, allowing the straightforward application of the temporal constraint that holds for clear-cut present-time uses of the present tense. Now, while this analysis manages to capture all of the possible usage contexts in which the present tense occurs, I suggest that its heavy emphasis on temporal constructs slightly obscures the fundamental contribution of modal values to that tense’s meaning. The epistemic hallmark of the present tense, for one, which almost invariably reveals a high degree of *certainty*, is neither motivated nor acknowledged as one of its structural semantic qualities (but see the final note in Langacker 2001).

In what follows, I will momentarily suspend the function of “temporal coincidence” as a notion that is needed to arrive at a satisfactory account of the use of the present tense in English, in order to concentrate more on its modal foundations. This move necessitates a “resistance” to make use of certain constructs advanced in the Cognitive Grammar analysis of the present tense, even if it does not imply an outright rejection of that analysis. I agree with Langacker’s proposals insofar as they illustrate the various detailed mental operations that need to be assumed for a sense of “epistemic certainty” to arise in the first place. Nevertheless, I do not want to start from the strictly temporal premises that are proposed for prototypical, present-time uses of the present tense, because I would like to show that an epistemic approach yields more schematic and ultimately more basic analytical constructs while still managing to cover the whole range of usage types for the present tense. So the analysis will have to start from scratch, as it were, and not assume the type of “one instance

right now” meaning that Cognitive Grammar adopts, if only to attempt to close the circle and exclusively work with nontemporal concepts. This also means that, at least for the sake of argumentation, I cannot accept certain implications that would follow from Langacker’s own discussion of noncanonical usage types (e.g., that the epistemic judgment that is identified for those uses, including the context of virtual occurrences, is necessarily coincident with the time of speaking). Within the general category of tense predication, epistemic meanings will thus be identified as the basic schematic frames to which all (temporal, modal, and other) usages must conform. For the present tense, this entails that the idea of *immediate apprehension* provides the analytical starting point for a truly epistemic approach that is both comprehensive and unified and that ultimately respects Cognitive Grammar’s commitment to the epistemic nature of grounding. In the end, both Langacker’s and my own approach offer some attempts, if formulated from diverging angles, to explicate the various ways in which nonpresent occurrences can nonetheless be available for immediate apprehension, and in that sense they are clearly complementary.

2. A temporal perspective

2.1. (Im)perfectivity

Consider the following examples:³

- (1) *Fran is getting up right now.*
- (2) **Fran gets up right now.*
- (3) *Fran gets up at 8 o’clock.*
- (4) *Fran is never getting up on time (lately).*

The process designated by *get up* can be characterized, in the terminology of Cognitive Grammar, as perfective, which means that it profiles a bounded process that can be punctual or of limited duration.⁴ A perfective verb usually features a dynamic, as opposed

to static, state of affairs whose beginning and end are by necessity included within the profile determining the verb's semantics. (Typically, these two extremities limiting the temporal contour of a perfective verb also remain fairly contiguous in "real" time.) If the bold section of the timeline in Figure 1 represents the time of speaking, a perfective verb may only select the present tense if its own profile (the bold wavy line) coincides *exactly* with the profiled interval of the timeline. In real-life situations involving *actual* occurrences of states of affairs, this rarely happens, since we must generally first observe what is happening before we can describe it. Thus, I must first see and interpret a singular, nonrepetitive instance of Fran's getting up — including the beginning and end of that action — before I can utter (1) (but not 2). The difference, then, between the simple and the progressive variant of the present tense is not only aspectual, with the first situation being viewed as incomplete and the second as complete. It is also directly related to the meaning of this tense. While it may not discriminate by itself between verbs with differing *Aktionsart* (perfective vs. imperfective), the complete coincidence of a verb's profile and that of the speech situation is generally reserved for imperfective processes, due to largely pragmatic effects of how the world is conceptually organized and how this organization can be brought to bear on its linguistic expression.

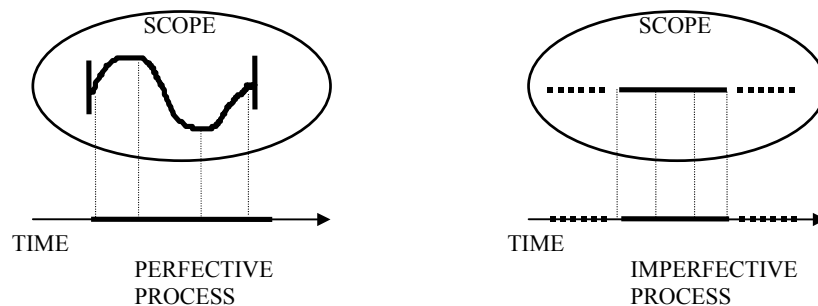


Figure 1. Perfective and imperfective construal (Langacker 1987: 261)

In English, perfective processes take the progressive form when the speaker wants to express that the activity in question is to be interpreted as more or less coinciding with the time of speaking (hence, the adverb *now* in example 1). For imperfective verbs, the opposite generally holds. They take the present tense when a state of affairs (prototypically, a state) is expressed that coincides with the time of speaking. Moreover, again with respect to perfective processes, *habitual* construals of a state of affairs may license the use of the present tense, as exemplified in sentence (3). Yet this is not a matter that can reliably be attributed to the effects of a type of sentence “operator”, as a similar habitual context, with or without a temporal adverb limiting the relevant time stretch in which the process is to hold (cf. sentence 4), may sanction the progressive form as well. In this case, the additional qualification is one of temporary validity, if the temporal profile of the process in question is the focus of attention, or, in contexts where a strong emotional investment is indicated, of irritation or some other negative emotion. (The same connotations are also relevant, by the way, for imperfective verbs that may occur in the progressive form.)

This explanation of the correlation between predication type (perfective/imperfective) and aspectual form (progressive vs. simple) is colored by the theoretical orientation adopted in Cognitive Grammar with respect to tense. The semantics of the present-tense morpheme is characterized as follows: “PRES indicates the occurrence of a full instantiation of the profiled process that precisely coincides with the time of speaking” (Langacker 1991: 250). From the argumentation put forward here, we should then conclude that it is the requirement that a “full instantiation”, as opposed to any partial one, is to coincide with the present which is the crucial element in this definition. This is precisely the reason why perfective processes, which are of limited duration but whose occurrence can almost never be taken to coincide exactly with the time of speaking, do not sanction the present tense under normal circumstances, whereas imperfective processes, for which the same requirement holds, can bypass this condition, so to speak, by relying upon the property of contractibility (cf. Langacker 1991: 251–252). In other words, the

motivation for sanctioning a simple or progressive form in the present is *deictic* in origin, in the sense of taking the ground or time of speaking (the deictic *origo*) as the absolute basis for deciding which form to select. Nevertheless, based on the behavior of habituais in the present (more specifically, of those marked by the present tense, as in 3), it might be argued that more is at issue than the purely deictic concern with exact coincidence. The distinction between tense and aspect cannot exclusively relate to the superimposition of a processual profile onto the time of speaking. For habituais, the function of the present tense is clearly not just a deictic one. Instead, when the present tense is used to denote a habit, matters of temporal location (situating a state of affairs as simultaneous with the present) seem to be combined with aspectual concerns of iteration. When both functions of a tense are taken into account, as I will attempt here, the result does not have to be a hybrid explanatory model in which, depending on context, deictic and aspectual meanings are more or less arbitrarily distributed over the progressive and the simple form. In fact, such an account might well yield a picture in which both the present-tense morpheme and that of the progressive contribute their own specific, altogether rather fixed, schematic meanings to the constructions in which they figure as a whole.

2.2. “One instance right now”

Let us accept Langacker’s characterization of why perfective verbs cannot occur in the present tense without engendering some “special” reading, while imperfective verbs can, and use it as an analytical starting point. Generalizing the “one instance right now” explanation (Langacker 1991: 252), we can examine why it is that only imperfective verbs, at least under normal conditions, seem to satisfy this stringent criterion. In Figure 2, “OS” indicates the *objective scene* or immediate scope of a verb predication. It includes the (temporal) region that constitutes the focus of a predication’s meaning as its unique profile.

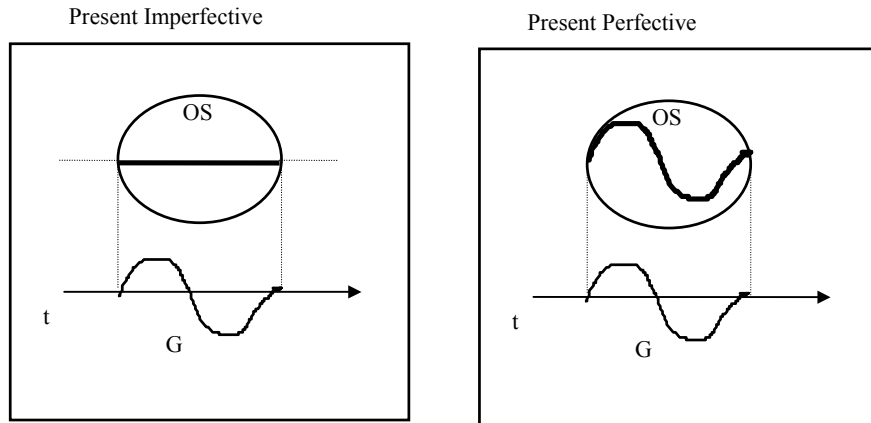


Figure 2. The present tense (Langacker 1991: 251)

A profile is that part of a predication's configuration that is actually designated. For perfective verbs like *get up*, the OS is constituted by all of the phases which, taken together, form the process of 'getting up', i.e., including the very start of the act up to what is considered its terminal point, the point beyond which one can no longer speak of 'getting up'. It is also the totality of these phases, viewed as taking place in immediate reality ("now"), that needs to coincide exactly with the speech event if a present tense is to be used. The ground ("G") stands for the speech event and occupies a limited interval in time, which is precisely why it generally precludes present-tense instances of perfective verbs: "The duration of an event is seldom equal to that of an utterance describing it, and perfectives lack the property of contractibility (hence the entire event — including its endpoints — must be profiled for it to count as a full instantiation of the process type)." (Langacker 1991: 251–252) For imperfectives, the precise coincidence of a verb's profile and the time of speaking is not a problem, since any component state that happens to coincide with the ground will do as a full instantiation of the process in its entirety. For instance, as each interval of knowing counts as a full-fledged instance of the process (type) 'know', the present tense selects one

that matches the interval of the time of speaking exactly, thus satisfying its conditions of use.

If a perfective verb is to be located in the present, it generally adopts a progressive form in English. The progressive, then, *imperfectivizes* the process designated by the original perfective verb, and it can achieve this in two ways (cf. Langacker 1982).⁵ The first possibility is for the progressive construction to zoom in on a single, arbitrarily selected point that is internal to the process, thereby disregarding the boundedness of the process and having this one focused point coincide with the time of speaking, as in (5):

(5) *Joe is eating his lunch.*

(6) *Sally's blinking.*

In this case, the imperfectivization involved simply narrows the focus of attention (or takes an internal perspective on a homogeneously construed process), up to the point where the boundaries of the originally perfective process become locally irrelevant, i.e., they are no longer in focus. Alternatively, for an expression like (6), the punctual character of the described process practically precludes this first option. The imperfectivizing construal involved in (6) is different, insofar as the progressive form now indicates quick repetitions of the same event. This replication, in turn, allows an internal perspective like the one adopted for nonpunctual perfectives and thus also has the process coincide exactly with the time of speaking. It is understood that the replication of perfective processes in the course of imperfectivization generates a *higher-order temporal relationship* (i.e., for the purpose of expressing the “present” location of a perfective, the indefinite replication of that bounded process constitutes a unit in its own right). In both cases, Cognitive Grammar posits the *derivation* of an imperfective process from a perfective one, as signaled by the progressive form.

Finally, this account of the differential effect which the progressive form has on imperfective and perfective processes needs to be complemented with one that centers on the notion of *structured-world knowledge* (Langacker 1991: 263–266), as an

analytical tool for dealing with the interpretation of perfective verbs in the present tense. If perfective verbs do not take the present tense because the full coincidence of a designated process and the time of speaking is a matter of fairly exceptional circumstances, then an additional mechanism must be assumed which would warrant the use of the present tense for such verbs in *general-validity* contexts. This mechanism, then, is motivated by Goldsmith & Woisetschlaeger's (1982) discussion of *structural* and *phenomenal* knowledge types, an epistemological distinction which differentiates between structural (substantial) and incidental (accidental) properties of the world and of events happening in it. Two rather different types of knowledge about the world are distinguished according to which level of a description is focused upon: "One may describe the world in either of two ways: by describing what things happen in the world, or by describing how the world is made that such things may happen in it." (Goldsmith & Woisetschlaeger 1982: 80) In this light, Cognitive Grammar claims that habitual constructions such as illustrated in example (3), though formally marked by the present tense, actually express another higher-order, imperfective process, any instantiation of which is regarded as representing the process as a whole — a derivation which makes a seemingly perfective verb eligible for a present-tense construal.⁶ This would then sanction the occurrence of such a perfective verb in the present tense without abandoning a definition of the present tense that hinges on the crucially temporal notion of "full coincidence". In general, the interpretation of this "derived" verb, designating an imperfective process, focuses on "the continuation through time of the stable situation in which the process type in question is part of the world's structure" (Langacker 1991: 265). It is to be read concretely as rendering someone's habit, a generic property of the physical world (as in scientific, law-like statements), or even more abstract postulates regarding the type of universe we claim to inhabit (e.g., in mathematical or logical expressions using the so-called timeless present). We will see in section 3.2 that this analysis underwent a few changes that have slightly shifted the focus from these original derivational mechanisms to the postulation of multiple planes of representation.

3. An epistemic stance

While the gist of the argumentation presented above is certainly one I would agree with, certain qualifications can still be made. For one, Cognitive Grammar's postulation of an imperfective process (whether obtained through zero derivation or through projection onto a virtual plane) for general-validity expressions in fact equates the structural force of such statements with the notion of "imperfectivity". But the same work could be done by having a truly perfective process adopt a present-tense meaning that readily accommodates interpretations of general validity directly, i.e., by locating the habitual or generic meaning in the interaction between an original verb form and a (nontemporal) tense meaning. In reserving the term "structural" for the meaning of the tense proper, instead of using it only for the kinds of generalization involved in generics and habituais in particular, I am in effect broadening its range of application. I suggest, in this respect, that the concern with "structuration", as a manifestation of the category of structural knowledge, is qualitatively distinct from (yet obviously compatible with) the type of "generalization" that is relevant to general-validity statements, and that it is only the first phenomenon that can arguably be assumed to function as the basic meaning of a tense predication.

For a simple illustration, consider the following examples, taken from Langacker (2002):

- (7) *The triathletes ran along the coast for several miles.*
- (7') *The triathletes run along the coast for several miles.*
- (8) *These mountains run along the coast for several miles.*

In (7), involving a past context, an individual dynamic process is being presented that is objectively construed in the sense of being wholly onstage. Interestingly, the same sentence cannot take the present tense if the state of affairs is construed as coinciding with the time of speaking. Instead, the progressive is called for then, as in *The triathletes are running along the coast (for several miles)*. A present-tense variant on this same example (7') would have to be interpreted

as conveying something like the planned route that the triathletes are supposed to take, which is not conceivable as involving one specific (physical) event in time. It is, rather, a more or less stable situation that somehow indicates what is perceived as a piece of structural knowledge (at a very local level, of course), just like in example (8), where the position of the mountain range vis-à-vis the coastline is pretty much treated as a (noncontingent) given, too. Therefore, if we attribute a semantics to the tense predication per se that might account for the emergence of aspects of stability and structure in the meanings of these constructions, then the *interpretation* of “general validity” comes from the interaction between the construal of a perfective process and the structural quality of the present tense itself. This approach should unify the analysis of present-tense perfectives and imperfectives as it proposes that the present tense *directly* conveys a structuring quality, but at the same time it leaves room for subtle differences in how this interpretation comes about for both predication types. In the case of a present-tense perfective, there is little else than general validity that the structural construal of a perfective process can evoke, whereas present-tense imperfectives, by virtue of their intrinsically stable profile, may lead to any level of structural interpretation (from extremely local to general), depending on their contextually defined scope (see section 3.2). And so *run*, a perfective verb in the context of (7), acquires a more stable, less “objective” meaning in (7’) because of what the present tense does. I am not denying the imperfective character of that same verb in (8), but there the imperfectivity is lexically, rather than grammatically, motivated and is not called in just to deal with the effects of one grammatical predication (tense) on the construction of the scene as a whole.

Instead of emphasizing the purely temporal functions of the present tense, I will rather propose that it is primarily concerned with a degree of *immediate* (“present”) *givenness* that warrants the attribution of epistemic certainty to a state of affairs. As a phenomenological category, such immediate certainty, it might be argued, can only be observed in two cases. When an event is expressed that is to be seen as present, either the speaker reports on

what is directly perceived by her and thus automatically assumed to be wholly given, or she relies upon her knowledge of the structure of the world and divides statements into those which are in full accordance with it and those which are not (i.e., only partially so, or only inferentially so, etc.). Clearly, the first category (of direct perception) is of little use by itself for any concrete analysis of the English present tense, for both perfective and imperfective processes can be directly perceived while still receiving a differentiated treatment in terms of their tense assignment. Therefore, what is needed for those cases where something is directly reported is an additional condition which states that the process in question must also, at least if the present tense is selected, meet the demands imposed by one's knowledge of the world's structure (what is given, presumably — or ideally — for both speaker and hearer). These terms, “givenness” and “immediacy/presence”, will thus provide the basis for an epistemic account of tense meaning in English, and in particular of the meaning of the present tense. It should be capable of explaining those prototypical (present-time) uses of the present tense that traditional temporal analyses of this category are able to explain. In addition, however, it should account for the (many) uses that fall outside such a temporal scope, either because they are typically described as secondary “connotations” (Comrie 1985) that do not instantiate the “true” meaning of the present tense and thus need to be derived in some way or other, or because they are simply discarded as relevant objects of study, as in the case of (many varieties of) tense logic and a host of other, semi-logical treatments (e.g., Allen 1966).

3.1. Immediate certainty

I want to arrive at a characterization of the English present tense which combines the epistemic status of knowledge coming from perception (the only possible source for the acquisition of experience and, for that matter, one that is to be exclusively located in the present) and the type of generic knowledge which is generally formulated in terms of timeless, gnomic statements. I will suggest

that the present tense typically calls upon these two modes of experience (perception and generality) and that, accordingly, it accommodates two basic types of meaning. Immediate certainty is attained in cases where a state of affairs is either directly present (in time) or just always present (out of time, as a structural part of our model of reality).

The link with the present tense's primary function, as the most *unmediated* way of referring to the ground, is straightforward in this respect. The ground (and thus any reference to it) constitutes, in a phenomenological sense (Husserl 1970; see also Habermas 1998), the background of our thematic knowledge and is therefore always, if implicitly, present at a pre-reflective stage. This implies that the ground does not merely consist of the spatio-temporal (empirically verified) relations holding at the time of speaking, but that it must also include those elements of our rational conception of reality which are held to be generally valid, or given. In this sense, the present tense's dual function reflects the privileged status of the ground as both the locus of direct experience and the container of general knowledge, which will evolve with us through time as a continually updated and always negotiable repertoire of known or anticipated information. Experientially, the ground keeps the contingency in check of new input coming in (through perception) at any moment in time, and it does so through proximity to experience.⁷ Using certainties that we obtain from personal experience or through the cultural transmission of knowledge, the ground erects a firewall against *surprises* (Peirce 1934), critical experiences that could render the background character of the ground problematic. This is why surprises (i.e., experiences that cannot directly be anticipated on the basis of what we know about reality) are not expressed by using the present tense, which focuses on those statements whose epistemic status is essentially compatible with the background character of the ground. Instead, such surprises, which we constantly encounter in our dealings with reality and which are thus not so rare as the dramatic epithet bestowed upon them would suggest, will be indicated, in English, by the progressive form of the present. The present progressive is concerned with contingent states of affairs that may

not fundamentally alter our model of the world but do not exactly follow from it in a predictable way either. Compared with the background status of present-tense meanings, then, the present progressive typically presents a state of affairs that is the object of direct perception (i.e., located in the present and therefore potentially perceivable by an observer — not necessarily the speaker, though — at the time of speaking) as relatively *foregrounded* precisely by virtue of its incidental status with respect to the ground as an epistemic background. What belongs to the ground, in other words, is unmarked (the *simple* present), and what does not belong there is marked, also morphologically (the progressive). The latter category comprises events that just happen to occur at some present time but could not actually have been foreseen, which represents an overwhelming majority of events that are actualized in reality. At any given moment, surprises are thus momentarily included in the ground but do not constitute it.

Let us approach the problem of temporality from another angle, i.e., in terms of the conceptualization work needed to arrive at a phenomenology of temporal categories or frames. If the meaning of the present itself, as an experiential category, had to be put in terms of the notions of “givenness” and “immediacy”, the question would need to focus on what the combination of these two factors yields that the past, which is to be considered as comprising some type of givenness as well, does not. A preliminary answer could be formulated as follows. Knowledge is construed as immediately given either through direct perception or through some less direct mode of knowledge acquisition (e.g., cultural transmission, logical deduction, etc.) that is nonetheless construed as generating equally strong and warrantable epistemic judgments. When we produce or interpret a predication expressing an immediately given process, as the present tense seems to do in English, this mode of knowledge effectively attributes to the expression in question the status of a structural statement, i.e., one which is not essentially contingent or dependent on contextual factors. Thus, the present tense, expressing the immediately given by virtue of its association with the experiential present as a temporal category, imposes an additional constraint (i.e.,

on top of mere temporal location) upon its conditions of use, specifying that a designated event needs to be construed as *justifiably* belonging to the present. Here, the present is not just another temporal moment, but it is construed as that critical point in time, concurrent with the perspective of the ground, up to which all previous events (the past) are expected to lead on the basis of some (mostly unspecified or vague) general model of the world. Expressions that take the present tense must be constituted by this, and only this, particular conception of the present. It is, in other words, not enough that the states of affairs they refer to simply coincide with the time of speaking.

In order to schematize the relation between grammatical form (i.e., tense) and the conceptual category that the form is referring to (i.e., time), we might take recourse to the following formulations:

PRESENT TIME: “present” (or “immediate”), “given”

PRESENT TENSE: “given”, “necessary” (i.e., “necessarily now” or noncontingent)

The present tense, then, borrows from its notional counterpart, the temporal frame of the present, the fundamental idea of “immediate givenness”. Based on the facts of present-tense usage in English, this notion is interpreted in a fairly specific way, viz., as selecting only that type of information which can reasonably be construed as conforming to the speaker’s (or rather, a speech community’s) view of the essential properties of the world. Thus, states of affairs that are objectively situated in the present (as a very short interval in which a clause or utterance can be produced) correspond to such a characterization, provided that they also exhibit the quality of being constitutive of the world at that time. Conversely, expressions of states of affairs that are not part of the present may yet take the present tense, but only if their conceptual representation co-constitutes the ground, even if, referentially speaking, they belong to the past or even the future. (It is not so hard to see how, in cognitive terms, the future can be *constitutive* of a present state of mind, or of a conception of the present world’s structure. The case of scheduled

future activities, whose scheduling has necessarily taken place before the moment of their actualization, illustrates convincingly how real such representations can be in the mind of a present speaker and how they could, accordingly, influence the structure of a world that exists before they do, thus conforming to the constraint given here for the use of the present tense. See also section 3.3, as well as Kočańska, this volume.)

What is traditionally regarded as the prototypical use of the present tense (its designation of states of affairs occurring in the present) can now be revealed for what it really is, i.e., one manifestation, among many others, of the schematic characterization provided above. At the same time, we manage to include a notion of necessity into the description of tense usage, resuscitating the old idea that tense semantics might have something to do with modality after all. In line with this modal orientation in the analysis of tense meaning, the notion of immediacy can be slightly reinterpreted as well. While it retains the idea of proximity that is certainly at work in cutting up the conceptual space reserved for tense (with the past tense indicating a departure from the ground, or “distance”), the analysis does not essentially hinge on the spatial metaphor that is lying behind the use of these terms. Rather, “immediacy” refers primarily to the unmediated character of the knowledge that is expressed when using the present tense. Again, temporal proximity is one obvious correlate of this category, but not the only one.

3.2. *Scope building*

The first problem we have to tackle in advancing an epistemic account of tense meaning in Cognitive Grammar can be illustrated in a straightforward way. Let us look at example (9):

(9) *Your keys are on the table.*

Given this example, we should ask what is *structural* about it. Apparently, it makes no claims of “structural knowledge” that go

beyond the very local context in which such an utterance might be produced. The answer to this problem is much less straightforward.

First of all, we are of course dealing with an imperfective process here. This implies that we need not worry about imperfectivizing procedures at this point. An intrinsically imperfective process, such as indicated by the verb *be*, is stable in its own right. And it is therefore directly compatible with at least one aspect of the meaning of the present tense, specifying that a designated process is seen as more or less constant through time. But the use of the present tense also requires that the process be seen as part of the ground, i.e., as representing a structural aspect of reality. This is much harder to imagine for an expression like (9). What we need in addition to the specified tense meaning, then, is a pool of devices that allows the language user to indicate or reconstruct the particular *scope* in which a (tensed) statement is taken to hold. Scope is a technical term in Cognitive Grammar and refers to the “stage” or general locus of attention in a predication. As a matter of definition, a (lexical) predication’s profile is onstage and objectively construed as the primary focus of attention within that expression’s immediate scope (see also Langacker 1999a). By contrast, the ground and the grounding relation are offstage and construed subjectively. The grounding relation represents a certain way of “viewing” the focused entity onstage (i.e., within the immediate scope). The specific nature of that viewing constitutes the grounding relation, which is what distinguishes one grounding predication from another (Langacker 1999c).

Let us now assume that the immediate scope for the present tense is defined in an epistemic, not a temporal, domain, and that this scope can be “built” in a variety of ways, involving both its reduction and its extension, possibly into infinity. The viewing relation involved specifies an epistemic assessment of the content verb’s profile, viz., one of immediate certainty, as well as its range of application, as indicated by the tense’s scope. As to the concrete interpretation of this mechanism, we might state that the tense predication consistently profiles the process designated by the content verb but offers varying ways of construing the (maximal or minimal) ground to which this

profile is related. What seems to happen in example (9) is that the tense predication's immediate scope gets restricted to the actual profile of the grounded process and thus coincides with it. The absolute validity of the present state of affairs in (9), in terms of its immediate givenness, is indeed asserted but does not transcend the local speech situation in which that sentence is uttered. This is what one might expect from a present-tense construal of at least some imperfective processes, which come in many varieties, including instances that designate very local or temporary processes. Imperfectivity is therefore not simply synonymous with something like "timeless stability" but is rather a matter of construing a process, whether point-like or eternal, in a certain way. Besides, the idea that imperfectivity involves more, or other, factors than the mere homogeneity and temporal stability of a process can also be inferred from observing the semantics of truly imperfective processes that are "imperfectivized" by means of the progressive construction. In those cases, the local character of the scope imposed by the present tense is retained for the auxiliary, but the *-ing* form adds a connotation of nontypicality (always in relation to the ground). To be sure, this is difficult to realize for sentences like (9), because there it would be hard to grasp how a typical state of 'being on the table' might differ from a nontypical one, as far as keys are concerned.⁸ But consider sentence (10), involving the attribution of a property to an animate (human) subject:

(10) *You're being silly.*

Here, the imperfectivization effected by the *-ing* form is not simply redundant, which it would be if that process were exclusively defined in terms of temporal unboundedness.⁹ It suggests, for one, that the behavior predicated of the subject is not what one would expect, given what is known about the subject, but that it constitutes something of a surprise. We will see, furthermore, that this line of reasoning can be made analogous to what happens with a perfective verb in the progressive. Note that expressions of a specific subclass of the type "*be+adjective*", despite their implication of a certain

measure of volitional control (typical of perfectives), are still treated as real imperfectives in the present description, because the intended interpretation actually generalizes over any kind of processual predication that might figure in the construction, not just these “pseudo-imperfectives”.¹⁰ In short, if perfective verbs that take the progressive form convey a meaning of contingency, i.e., the direct opposite of the stable, structuring relations reserved for the present tense, so do imperfective ones in the present progressive.

For a sentence like (11) below, which might be uttered in the context of a paranormal experiment, Langacker (2001) argues that the originally perfective verb *move* is imperfectivized by means of the participial *-ing* form attached to it. That is how perfective verbs designating an actual state of affairs in the present are generally treated, and their derived imperfective status then allows a portion of the resulting process to coincide exactly with the time of speaking, as required in Cognitive Grammar. Yet the actual construal involved in the “present” participle, one might argue, is, again, not so much of a temporal but of an epistemic nature. Thus, for all tense purposes, the imperfective auxiliary *be* behaves just like in example (9) and it has the same restriction of scope that is typical of such momentary events as ‘being on the table’ or ‘(being) moving’. It is the participial verb form, in contrast with its bare infinitive and finite counterparts, that takes care of the epistemic modulation characterizing the English progressive construction as a whole. Because it seems that in English “progressive” is once more something of a misnomer for a marker that, in many of its uses, refers rather to notions like contingency and incompleteness, which are decidedly more epistemic in nature than the mere absence of temporal bounding, or than the temporal quality of “ongoingness” traditionally ascribed to this form (Goossens 1994). Thus, only insofar as the idea of imperfectivity is compatible with such epistemic qualifications can the perfective stem of a progressive form be said to really imperfectivize. Imperfectivization then implies that the process at issue is construed as *nonconstitutive* of the ground, a description which would at least fit prototypical progressive forms of perfective verbs, where often (observations of) very transitory

events are described that are unpredictable from the “timeless” perspective of the ground — surprises, as in (11):

(11) *Your keys are moving on the table.*

(12) *Sally is tall.*

(13) *The Earth is round.*

Thus, while the expression of perfective processes located in the present seems to favor the progressive construction (as an indication of their generally ephemeral nature), English treats imperfective processes that might be as momentarily or contingently belonging to the present differently, with the present tense attributing a structural quality to them that holds within a limited scope (as in 9). The reason for this distinct treatment probably lies in the realization that imperfectives, as a verb class, tend to profile more stable qualities, which is a matter of construal, and some aspect of this property is bound to be retained in their tense-related behavior. Notice now that, if the present tense were used in example (11), the sentence would have to be interpreted in a subtly different way. We can imagine a situation where the speaker is supremely confident in the reality of paranormal phenomena and is merely waiting for a confirmation of her beliefs, which constitute the local ground for her. In that sense, a present-tense use would not function as a description of whatever happens to “impress” the speaker at the time of speaking, but rather as an affirmation of what she already knows to be the case, even if what is the case has not yet been actualized: *See? Your keys move on the table. I told you they would...* This use of the present tense would thus call for an analysis that pays more attention to how the speaker presents a situation (i.e., as a surprise or a given). We will see in section 3.4 that the speaker’s *attitude* towards (the epistemic status of) a description determines many of the nontemporal uses of the present tense.

The situations in (9–11) represent a limiting case of present-tense construal. (At this point, I’m including 10 and 11 only with respect to the tensed auxiliary figuring in these statements.) Many other imperfective verbs, however, may lead to statements whose validity

does transcend the situation of speech, as in (12). The relevant cues triggering a widening of the tense's scope will be mainly lexical and contextual (taking into account the information that is contained in the whole of the clause, and not just in the verb form), and of course they are hard to formalize. Now, to obtain a clearer view of how scope building may work, let us examine a sentence like *During an interview she is quite relaxed*, describing a structural property of the subject that may not hold in every conceivable situation ('she' can be quite nervous on other occasions). Here, the scope builder is explicitly mentioned, such that the validity of this statement is lexically indicated as being limited to those portions of reality that may count as 'an interview'. Notice, in this respect, that such slices of reality need not be temporally continuous or contiguous at all. Similarly, if I say that *She keeps calm under pressure*, the prepositional phrase that functions as a scope builder indicates some more or less clearly defined region in semantic space, consisting of situation types which share a fairly abstract property that can be described as "causing stress in a person". If seen from a temporal perspective only, however, the actual situations instantiating this type would be randomly and unevenly distributed over time and, in analytical terms, they would not make up much of a scope to work with. Scope is therefore not an essentially temporal notion as far as tense meaning is concerned.

Next, a limiting case at the other extremity of the scale of epistemic validity is illustrated in (13). Here, the immediate scope is widened to include all of reality/time, and thus by definition also the ground. This present-tense use, then, is motivated by the same epistemic characteristics of the profiled process (i.e., immediate givenness), not because that process is (locally) construed to coincide with the ground, but because it is always coincident with it. The utterer of (13) does not need to perceive the situation she describes, because she naturally assumes that it holds at the time of speaking as a matter of culturally transmitted knowledge. Thus, in examples (9–13), an imperfective process, including the auxiliary *be*, directly sanctions the use of the present tense because it conforms with that tense's two conditions of use: givenness (i.e., its construal in terms of

“reality”) and immediacy, or the unmediated access to its epistemic status.

As noted previously, general-validity statements, including habituais and generic¹¹ sentences, make use of the same principles of construal and respect the semantic character of the present tense that is being presented here. But of course they come in two varieties: with imperfective verbs, as in (13), or with perfective ones, as in (14).¹²

(14) *John drinks heavily.*

Perfective generics and habituais receive a special treatment in Langacker’s (2001) account of the present tense. There are some difficulties involved in this, though. First of all, it is unclear to me whether such present-tense perfectives are imperfectivized (through zero derivation), as was still claimed in Langacker (1991: 264). It seems that imperfectivization is no longer essential in current Cognitive Grammar accounts of general-validity statements in the present tense, but at least such a process would not go against the spirit of the new explanation in terms of “virtual entities”, as diagrammed in Figure 3. When projected onto a virtual plane, ‘John’s drinking’ may in fact be represented as a type that belongs to the structure of the world, in which case it might as well retain its perfective construal, or as a series of ‘drinking’ events whose very persistence through time may indicate their structural nature.¹³ In the latter scenario, there is room for imperfectivization in the standard Cognitive Grammar sense. Next, regardless of whether or not the perfective process in (14) undergoes imperfectivization, the process in question is projected onto a plane representing structural aspects of the world, where it becomes a virtual (i.e., nonactual) entity. This should reflect the intuition that general-validity statements are not about individuated events but rather about generalizations pertaining to a number of similar events. This virtual entity thus effectively transforms the perfective process ‘drink’, which in other contexts refers to singular instances, into a specification “capturing what is

common to an open-ended set of instantiations in actuality” (Langacker 1999d: 96).¹⁴

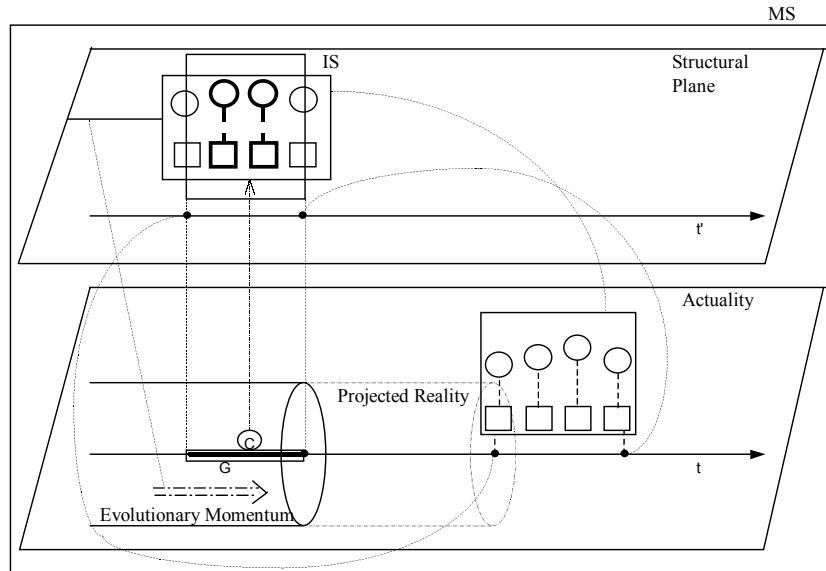


Figure 3. Virtual projection (C=conceptualizer; G=ground; t=conceived time in actuality; t'=conceived time in virtuality; IS=immediate scope; MS=maximal scope; adapted from Kochańska, this volume)

So, at least this type of virtual plane, a notion that Cognitive Grammar proposes to deal with other uses of the present tense (cf. section 3.2), may actually be said to comprise entities at a *type* level, which would represent one case where a grounding predication (i.e., the present tense) is interpreted as designating types instead of instances: if the immediate scope for a statement like (14) is seen as extending indefinitely (which would be another way of representing structural knowledge), then the process profiled in the statement will be *interpreted* as designating a type, because a type is what all instances of a given kind have in common within a set scope. Elsewhere, Langacker (2002) appears to redress this implication by suggesting that the fictive entities concerned are “arbitrary” instances of such (structural) types, and that the designation involved in the general-validity use of the present tense therefore still pertains to

instances rather than types. (This line of reasoning follows some of the argumentation laid out for the analysis of the indefinite article and certain quantifiers in Cognitive Grammar, where the line between arbitrary reference and type conceptions can become very thin indeed.)¹⁵

I want to suggest, at this point, that the idea of structural knowledge is certainly the most essential component of the use of the present tense illustrated in (14). This structural aspect represents the most abstract level at which to define the meaning of the present tense, and all concrete usage types are supposed to derive from it in one way or another, through the interaction with features of the context. The postulation of separate planes of representation, as done in Cognitive Grammar to accommodate present-tense uses as in (14), may be considered a necessary elucidation of which mental constructions are needed to bring about situations of epistemic certainty for nonpresent events. But regardless of the specific mental constructions that will turn out to be necessary here, the tense meaning as discussed in the present analysis should always be applicable if it is to have any value at all. In addition, whether we characterize the representation involved in (14) as an arbitrary instance or as a true type, in the end both versions of the analysis will need to find a way of having that representation satisfy the epistemic criteria for using the present tense, since the generalization it expresses is always “now in force” or immediately given. Consequently, we might talk of this and similar uses of the present tense as not being referential at all. If a present-tense statement does not refer to any *actual* instance, the tense marker might still be said instead to project its usual epistemic qualification onto the process in question, only without triggering the search for a corresponding entity in (present) reality. It is in this sense that I would propose that these usage types (e.g., general-validity statements) are *extremely subjectified* (Langacker 2002), in any case more so than their straightforwardly referential present-time counterparts.

Extreme subjectification, in my eyes, does consist in the loss of an objectively construed entity (in time), i.e., it eliminates any direct concern with the occurrence of actual events. It could be said to happen as soon as the local scope of the speech event is even slightly

transcended, including statements like (12). Yet it need not be assumed for each and every context that this loss of objectivity should be analytically recovered by multiplying (levels of) representations “outside time” or “within the conceptualizer”, as it were. What seems to be common about most “nonprototypical”, non-present-time uses of the present tense is that the semantic entity they conjure up inheres solely in the conceptualizing activity itself and thus no longer depends on any objective (let alone temporally coincident) “input” from the outside world. This *conceptual occurrence* of a state of affairs at the time of speaking does suffice to motivate the use of the present tense, and of course any piece of structural knowledge can be evoked at any given time by definition. However, once we establish the analytical relevance of such a conceptual occurrence, it is not the temporal unfolding of the “occurring” event that seems to matter, as a kind of mirror image of what may be happening (or the case), but the very fact that it can be evoked, i.e., its occurrence as a sign of its given epistemic status. The latter is an act of interpretation or categorization, not necessarily tied to any referential concerns and in particular not easily amenable to a kind of “internal perception/observation” of the mental event that would be “going on” at the time of speaking.

The usefulness of positing such internal perception is obvious in a model which stresses the strictly temporal conditions for using the present tense but disappears when we view the tense’s meaning as essentially epistemic in nature. Concretely, in a generic utterance like *The Earth is round* (example 13), I find it intuitively strange to hold that the judgment of this utterance should occur “in the present”. Rather, the judgment involved is a culturally transferred one that does not need to be replicated, as it were, every time a speaker decides to use that phrase (it is “given” in this sense). The judgment in this type of generic, and in other usage types like in (14), can be one that has been made in the past by some authority, possibly the speaker herself, and that is simply adopted without necessarily being “performed” over and over again. For other usage types (the more temporally oriented ones), it is undoubtedly true that some kind of epistemic judgment is necessarily linked to the time of speaking, but this does not automatically hold for every use of the present tense. And if the whole

range of usage types is to be covered (if only schematically), something else is needed by way of analysis than the mere assumption of a temporal coincidence between the speech event and a profiled (objective or subjective) process. Even terms like “present” or “immediate”, as defined in the present account, are not so much temporal notions as they point to the direct accessibility of the given status of a state of affairs within the ground, as opposed to a kind of mediated accessibility of its givenness (e.g., in the case of the past tense). Crucially, I do not discuss terms like givenness or immediacy in processing terms, and this may be the main difference with the standard account of the present tense in Cognitive Grammar.

Given the focus in this section on matters of scope (reduction or extension) to explain various uses of the present tense, I feel that the type/instance distinction informing grounding theory in Cognitive Grammar can be construed as epiphenomenal for a number of such predications, including certain uses of the present tense. What is perceived by the analyst as a type or instance specification of a state of affairs is ultimately a function of scope. In one limiting case (examples 9 through 11), the scope of the present tense marker actually coincides with the profile of the grounded process, which is then interpreted as indicating a state of affairs whose epistemic validity does not transcend the situation of speech. This represents what we might call an “instance”. At the other extremity (examples 13–14), the scope coincides with reality and there is thus no one actual event that is focused upon. The representation involved in this kind of construal might be called a “type”. This is not to say that the type quality is part of the meaning of the present tense, but that in certain general-validity contexts, for instance, it follows quite naturally from that meaning in combination with a perfective construal of the verb process. In instances where general-validity statements take the past tense or the (*shall/will*) future, the meaning is exactly one of “generality” without implying the kind of ground-constituting (or simply “grounding”) force that typifies present-tense uses. The latter types of statement express a notion of general validity that is not, however, essentially tied to the speaker’s conception of the ground; general validity in itself expresses more of an aspectual

concern that has something to do with construing different instances over time and is thus by itself not conducive to any kind of structural interpretation (in the sense employed here). The conception of a type, I would say, emerges from the interaction between generalization (aspect) and structuration (tense) that is typical of some perfective present-tense uses, since in those cases they are not really “about” specific (actual or even virtual) instances of some process. This does not appear to pose much of a threat to the overall idea that grounding is about instantiating type conceptions, since the type interpretation that is at stake here emerges from an interaction and is therefore pragmatic, not part of the meaning of the present tense.

3.3. Space building

In discussing virtual planes, Langacker often refers to Fauconnier’s (1994, 1997) “Mental Spaces” account of such phenomena as nonspecific reference in indefinite nominals, as in *I want to marry a princess who speaks five languages* (where ‘the princess’ at issue might not even exist). Here, *a princess* indicates a referent that is conjured up in a local context only, more specifically one that is constructed by the mental predication *want*. The main verb in that sentence can thus be considered a *space builder*, because it establishes a new space (not necessarily in reality), with new elements within them and relations holding between these elements. Insofar as this space is perceived as somehow removed from “reality”, the process of space building differs from that of scope building. However, the principles involved, specifically in regard to tense meaning, remain the same.

If a statement is made that is not taken to hold in what the speech participants at one point interpret as reality, the process of scope reduction/extension will not suffice as a tool of analysis. Such statements can also take the present tense, and if we want to pursue a truly integrated analysis of this tense, it is mandatory that similar semantic and pragmatic mechanisms can be shown to be at work in these nonreal spaces, too, which may present their own grounds. Let

us therefore look at some of the possible usage types that might call for an analysis in terms of space building:¹⁶

- (15) *If the blood test is positive, he won't get a life insurance.*
- (16) *(In this picture) Nixon says farewell from the steps of his helicopter.*
- (17) *Tomorrow I take you to the zoo.*

The most clear-cut case is, of course, the conditional use of the present tense (15). When the present tense is used in a conditional subclause (the protasis), givenness is presented as a concept that can be interpreted relative to the internal structure of the hypothetical space that is created by the conditional context. The conditional construction as a whole should hence be seen as building this hypothetical space, in which a differentiation is made between protasis (setting up the premises for a type of inferential reasoning) and apodosis (presenting the conclusions drawn from these — and other, implicit — premises). In the protasis, then, the present tense indicates the conditional premises, which are given in a hypothetical context, i.e., the information in the subclause belongs to a hypothetical reality with respect to which information presented in the main clause is inferred and thus nongiven (hence, the “future” *will* form; cf. Brisard 1997). The epistemic status of the information expressed in the conditional is crucial for the characterization of the present tense appearing in it. A tense's referential value, as an indicator of temporal positioning, is of secondary or no importance for conditionals. But what matters most in our present discussion is the observation that the hypothetical space created by the conditional accommodates the epistemic status of the information presented therein, which will be construed as supplying a given background. In a way, the protasis creates the ground for the hypothetical space while it describes it, and any processual predication that figures in that ground (and thus constitutes it) will consequently take the present tense. (With past-tense or past-perfect protases, we might still describe the subclause as presenting a “ground” for the subsequent reasoning, but there additional qualifications need to be made — concerning the clause's epistemic

status — which are linguistically expressed through the relevant morphological markings.)

Sentence (16) might have been a photo caption in a seventies newspaper. If the adverbial, *in this picture*, is explicitly added to it, it is this phrase which will function as a space builder, indicating the “world” in which an event is described as if it is taking place. So, although the event lies in the past with respect to the picture’s time of publication, it sanctions the use of a present marker. Not just any marker, though, because in contrast with the expression of (perfective) events taking place now, the use of the present progressive would sound a bit odd in the context of a photo caption. The combinability of a perfective verb and the present tense thus suggests that the world described is not the actual one (though there is no doubt about its objectivity in the real past, of course), but one that subtly differs from it. A photo is an icon of past reality, a sort of lagged mirror, which thus inhabits its own space. In such contexts, the explicit marking of the space as separate from reality is not necessary, because the photo frame offers its own context and is thus in itself a kind of “builder”, at a nonlinguistic yet decidedly semiotic level. With or without the prepositional phrase, sentence (16) therefore functions in the same way with respect to its use of the present tense. What this function ultimately comes down to, remains an issue to be discussed in the context of “current report” uses of the present tense (cf. section 3.4). Let me simply note at this point that it is precisely the framed character of the photographic world that is being negated through this tense use. We will therefore first need the presupposition of a separate space that is built for purposes of describing a photograph, in order to establish how the present tense comes to negate this very frame.

Finally, the futurate use of the present tense, as in (17), can, but need not, be explicitly signaled by a temporal adverb. This adverb builds the space of a “reality” that is, from an objective point of view, potential or projected,¹⁷ but certainly not given as yet. Nevertheless, the use of the present tense suggests its givenness in a way that resembles what happens in the context of a paranormal “believer” (cf. the discussion of example 12) construing the givenness of a situation with respect to her own local (and perhaps idiosyncratic) expectations. The mere fact that

the speaker selects the present tense in (17) indicates her absolute confidence or certainty. Symbolically, the event is treated as given and wholly constitutive of the ground, even though it has not taken, or will indeed never take, place. The notion of a fixed plan or schedule expresses this very attitude, whereby the future is not construed as uncertain and, instead of a prediction, a matter of fact is being stated. Other present forms, notably the progressive and *be going to* (Brisard 2001), may be used to refer to the future as well, though not quite in the futurate sense that is reserved for the present tense. In the case of the progressive, for instance, the *-ing* form indicates a degree of contingency in the projected state of affairs, and the prediction should thus be that the use of the progressive in future contexts will signal a lower degree of epistemic certainty (and, conversely, that the construction behaves more liberally with respect to temporally unqualified or less specific predictions; cf. note 17). I believe this prediction is confirmed by English usage conventions. Remark that, due to the strictly nonactualized character of a future state of affairs, we might still talk of a separate space being built (as the future, *qua* temporal category, is not seen as part of the ground), but the distinctions between “reality” and what is expected to become real in the (near) future are progressively blurred in these futurate contexts. At some point in the analysis, we will probably have to concede that scope and space building are an analyst’s way of making sense of the attitudes that can be displayed in the process of “world making”, and that the specific metaphysics involved in these analytical choices are not necessarily those of the language users exploiting this process.

3.4. Footing in “special” uses

The one unambiguous case where a present-tense perfective might actually be said to refer *directly* to an actual state of affairs that literally coincides with the time of speaking, is the performative use of certain (institutionally sanctioned) verbs. Interestingly, this very same case also represents the most clearly definable “horizon” (as a limiting notion) against which other usage types can be marked out.

In that sense, performative uses of the present tense should actually be considered central in the analysis, instead of being marginalized, as the tradition goes, because of their weak link with more canonical “descriptions” of reality. Let us then examine what happens in the following example:

(18) *I hereby pronounce you husband and wife.*

I would like to discuss this and other examples, including some that were introduced above, in terms of Goffman’s (1974, 1979) notion of “frame analysis”, focusing on the exploitation of participation statuses, or the social relation of a “member” vis-à-vis her utterance, and in particular on the alignment of *footing*. Indeed, the problem of performativity seems to call for such a reflexive turn in the analysis. Footing, in this context, is understood to be a procedure through which a speaker chooses to put herself onstage, so to speak, and presents that “figure” — a figure in a statement — as performing a certain role in the world that is spoken about. Such a description may be taken as building upon Langacker’s (2001) observations regarding the “special” viewing arrangement that is involved here. Indeed, there is something distinctive about performative uses in the way of relating subjective and objective levels of conceptualization, which might be seen as a manifestation of the process of extreme subjectification that is posited for uses of the present tense that go beyond the mere location of a state of affairs in the present. I would also like to suggest at this point that something in the nature of managing “production formats”, omnipresent and unavoidable, is probably going on in many, if not all, of the usage types that can be distinguished for the present tense.

In (18), the speaker might be seen to function objectively as a “principal”, in a legalistic sense, i.e., “someone whose position is established by the words that are spoken, ... someone who has committed himself to what the words say” (Goffman 1979: 17). In the case of (18), it is obvious that by uttering the sentence the speaker is simultaneously claiming a particular social identity which sanctions the use of these particular words in a specific institutional

setting. This is an essentially reflexive mechanism that has little to do with matters of temporal alignment at the level of semantic representation. That is to say that the reflexivity implied in this type of performative use “solves” the *epistemic* problems noted in Cognitive Grammar with respect to the use of the present tense for perfectives. Thus, the speaker of (18) is effectively transforming the world while uttering the sentence, and she can do so by adopting a certain stance in which the givenness of the situation described is actually created on the spot. A performative use of the present tense constitutes the ground as a matter of definition, and the resulting identity of the speech event and the profiled process gets rid of the canonical differentiation between the observation and identification of a state of affairs. In analytical terms, a performative use blurs any distinctions in the objective/subjective status of linguistic representations, because it is the subject of conceptualization (i.e., the speaker as a principal) that effects or produces the objective categories being described. In this case, a (local) ground is linguistically shaped that was not there before, a process which seems to transcend previously discussed levels of transformation affecting the ground. But, of course, once again the contrast between extending/reducing scope, building nonreal spaces, and creating a new (“real”) ground is far from absolute. If anything, that contrast would serve more as an analytical shortcut for distinguishing between tense uses that really form a continuum, as they are all about construing and manipulating (aspects of) the ground.

As a result of a performative’s radical independence from what is perceived as objectively real, the speaker can also be described as *controlling* the content and construal of her statement in an absolute fashion. That is, she knows that her statement is epistemically valid (that it constitutes the ground), exactly because she presents it as such. Another way of describing this would be to say that the speaker is aware of existing presuppositions regarding the use of the present tense. These presuppositions¹⁸ can then be exploited as readily as in other realms of lexicon and grammar, where processes of “accommodation” (Lewis 1979) abound. So if a present tense is used in a context where it is clear, from the audience’s point of view, that

the state of affairs in question could not in any objective sense already constitute the ground (“reflection”), then the next interpretive move, i.e., to read the utterance in a subjectified frame (“creation”), presents itself naturally. And this principle is exactly what performative usage types share with many other noncanonical uses of the present tense. In this and similar cases, the mode that the speaker finds herself in is not a descriptive but a creative one, and such acts of creation, which are presumably correlated with the construction of virtual entities in Cognitive Grammar, can be found all over the place in language use. For instance, if we consider the futurate use of the present tense, as in example (17), we might reinterpret the space building that was shown to go on there as a case of extreme accommodation, whereby the speaker presents a future state of affairs as given even though (she knows that) her addressees contextually assume that it is not. The only way to interpret such “violations” is by attributing to the speaker a high degree of certainty with respect to the predicated state of affairs, i.e., by considering the knowledge state that the speaker must be in at the time of speaking, which is what the present tense seems to convey anyway, and concluding that the speaker creates the givenness of that future state as a matter of fact. In this case, as in all others, the present tense means exactly what it should mean, viz., that some state of affairs necessarily belongs to the ground. It is reality itself that sometimes lags behind.

Performative, or futurate, uses of the present tense represent a kind of *instruction* to the hearer to just assume (perhaps contrary to objective evidence) that the predicated state of affairs is really given in the ways specified above. Here are some other examples of the same mechanism:

- (19) *Hamlet moves to center stage.*
- (20) *You head north on highway 107.*
- (21) *“The rest of the carcass goes into sausages and rolls.”* [a butcher teaching tricks of the trade to an apprentice]

One way of explaining these uses is by pointing out the space-building characteristics of each of them. The sentences all *describe*

situations that are not real at the time of speaking/writing, but that are portrayed as such in the world that seems to be at issue then (respectively, the “world” of an actual theatrical performance, an actual drive, and the actual production of “meat”).¹⁹ For one, this descriptive illusion allows the speaker to issue directions in a less face-threatening way, for these present tenses are modal statements disguised as reports.²⁰ Moreover, they offer descriptions of what “should” happen (within the world at issue) that do not essentially rely on the speaker’s individual claim to authority, which is another way of reducing possible threats to the hearer’s face. In fact, the reason why the present tense can be used in this way at all is precisely because of its intimation of necessity within the ground, which is not a matter of any individual’s authority but rather of the structure of the world as such. Here, too, the speaker has control over what happens just by saying that it is “the case”, yet it is a type of control that is highly subjectified and is therefore several steps removed from more objective formulations, where the mood or modal “force” involved would be presented onstage.

None of these “descriptions” is essentially about temporal duration or location. They are concerned with presenting a state of affairs *as if* it necessarily held in reality (or, as holding in some version of reality), regardless of how it relates to a specific temporal interval. What is part of their present-tense meaning, then, is that they should hold at any time *t* — that is what makes them structural. Thus, in any actual stage performance of *Hamlet*, the directive in (19) is taken to hold as a description of what should happen at a given moment in that performance, even if it is not in reality acted upon. In this light, and as a final point of contention, I would like to present some examples brought up by Langacker (2001) to defend the position that the idea of a speaker “controlling” events set in the present is necessarily linked up with the intrinsic *duration* of these events:

(22) *Now I raise my hand. And now I lower it...*

(23) *Now I lay back. Now I close my eyes. Now I think of England.*

- (24) *The pitcher glances over, winds up, and it's bunted, bunted down the third base line.*
- (25) *Well, anyway, so Spike comes up and sees these people abusing me, and he shoves the twin on the shoulder and tells him to beat it, and before I knew it, the two of them had jumped on him.*

With respect to (22), Langacker observes that the bodily actions involved have approximately the “right length” (i.e., that of the speech event) for them to figure in a present-tense description. While this might be true for (22), I do not think it is a necessary condition for all such uses. Consider (23), where the two bodily actions do conform to this condition, but where the mental state described at the end hardly qualifies as the kind of instantaneous event that could be completed within the span of a single speech event (‘thinking of England’ for about one second is indeed conceivable — *Oh, I remember, I have to call London* —, but not in the present context).

What remains an important *temporal* facet in these examples, as in (24) and (25), is a general feeling of tempo created by this tense usage and linked to the explicitly serialized presentation of the events described. The vividness attributed to live reports and historical accounts such as (25) is undoubtedly attributable to the tense marking, but not necessarily because of a condition of temporal coincidence (with the speech event). Casparis (1975) hints at this conclusion as well. What he calls the “current report” meaning of the present tense reflects “the quality of perception reproduced with a minimum of cognitive analysis, or simply, perception before cognition” (Casparis 1975: 10). In other words, the characterization of a narrative strategy (“current report”), whereby a sequence of sense impressions is articulated almost simultaneously (as in first-person or eyewitness narration, but also in the narration of dreams, visions, and drug experiences), can naturally be undertaken in terms of their immediate, i.e., unmediated, epistemic status, or their direct availability for description (“telling without thinking”). The events in (24) are fairly stereotypical, if not wholly predictable, in the given context, and they can thus be presented as instantiating some of the

normal things that may be expected to happen in a ballgame. Pragmatically, this routine-like quality of reporting standard event types that may occur in a given setting is the reason why the speaker can opt for a mode of narration that practically ignores the (first-person) vantage point grounding any act of description and that switches to a kind of god's-eye perspective. That, too, may be part of the use of the present tense, and the resulting descriptions have a "sourceless" feel to them, much like certain generic statements and the examples (19–21).

What is distinctive about examples (24) and especially (25), which involves some instances of the "historical present", is that they are set in a clearly narrative mode and accordingly exploit different aspects of the semantics of the present tense. In particular, the perfective verbs figuring in them typically profile very short actions that have none of the more structural implications we might still find in performative contexts, for example. In fact, these verbs illustrate some of the most ethereal states of affairs that one could imagine, and it is hard to see them contribute to any act of constituting the ground (or any new ground), in contrast with most of our previous examples. Therefore, it might be better to analyze these particular present-tense usages as exploiting the "immediacy", rather than the "givenness", of the presented states of affairs. In the examples, the speaker functions as an *animator* (Goffman 1979: 16–17), i.e., a "talking machine" that does not (even implicitly) engage in any interpretation or mediation of the reported events but "presentifies" them, in a Kantian sense, for immediate apprehension (cf. the discussion of example 11). In this sense, the opposite is happening of the kind of extreme subjectification that we have witnessed in previous examples. One could speak of a complete removal of subjectivity in these latter cases, creating an effect that highlights the mere presence of the events and producing (processual) objects that are not of a virtual but of a *hyper-real* nature. This hyper-reality is what prompts the vividness of such descriptions, and their occurrence in typically narrative contexts is not accidental. Narration differs from ordinary description in that it establishes a frame (that of a live broadcast, a fictive world, or a photographic reality, as in 16). It is this very frame that is in turn being negated in

hyper-real uses of the present tense, as a temporary relief from the relevant modalities of the narrative medium, presenting objects — making them present — as if they happened right before our eyes. However, no strict grounding can be inferred from this, because the direct apprehension of hyper-real objects is a conceptual activity that is not mediated through a set of structuring beliefs (in reality or in the narrative space) and does therefore not require a qualification of these objects in modal terms, e.g., of necessity (givenness).

It is important, though, to realize that this type of exploitation does go back to the same semantic substrate. Indeed, the availability of two divergent paths of exploitation would suggest that the double present-tense meaning offered in section 3.1 has some analytical validity to it. I attribute the relatively marginal status of the hyper-real use of the present tense to its restricted attestation in explicitly narrative contexts. In simple description or reporting, it would make little sense to present an event as if it happened before our eyes, if it in fact does.

4. Conclusion

The present tense in English indicates that the designated process should be seen as constituting the ground. In this particular context, the ground is a modal conception, picturing what the/a world should be like or is necessarily like. In Table 1, I present the most palpable meaning types that can be distinguished for the simple and progressive present in light of the previous discussion.

Various types of scope and space building, as well as other forms of footing alignment within the epistemic domain defined by the ground, are responsible for the temporal (present and nonpresent) and nontemporal usage types that can be distinguished. Consequently, the temporal concerns that are taken to mark the use of the present tense do not instantiate what this construction is actually about. Such temporal meanings are, of course, empirically real but accidental, and they should emerge quite naturally from an account referring to the speaker's state of knowledge, which has analytic priority.

Table 1. Usage types for the present tense and progressive *-ing*

	Imperfectives	Perfectives
Present tense	<i>Constituting the ground:</i> from local to generic scope, and including the auxiliary form in progressives	<i>Constituting the ground</i> in general-validity statements <i>Performative</i> and other types of footing alignment <hr/> <i>Presenting hyper-real objects</i> in narrative settings
Progressive <i>-ing</i>	<i>Contingency</i> (e.g., in temporally bounded contexts)	<i>Contingency</i> in “present-time” and other bounded contexts

I have thus outlined a schematic analysis of the English present tense that is, in a number of respects, meant to complement Langacker’s previous accounts. In general, I have stressed the importance of an epistemic approach to tense, which I believe constitutes the essence of Cognitive Grammar’s discussion of grounding. The elaborated epistemic model and notions of construal, such as immediate scope, mental-space construction, and subjectification, have therefore contributed significantly to the substance of the present analysis.

Instead of emphasizing the purely temporal function of the present tense, I have proposed a rather programmatic account of tense meaning that starts from an essentially epistemic (modal) approach. For the present tense in particular, this means that I have tried to explicate some of the ways in which nonpresent occurrences can nonetheless be available for immediate apprehension. This involves figuring out how the mental world we talk about (when using the present tense) can comprise far more than the direct observation of reality or actuality, much like previous analyses in Cognitive Grammar have proposed the postulation of virtual documents, including associated operations like projection (e.g., for futurates), mental replay (e.g., for the historical present), and fictive (temporal) vantage points (e.g., for a number of subclauses). The discussion, within the present paper, of “types”, hypothetical spaces, photo

captions where the world described is not the real one, and hyper-real uses fits directly into this concern with fictive or virtual constructs. I have posited mechanisms like accommodation, footing, and exploitation, which allow the analyst to locate effects of “special viewing arrangements” in strategies which the speaker has at her disposal to present, modulate, or even create an epistemic status for any given state of affairs on the spot. In other words, it is in the speaker’s online attitude or orientation to knowledge about predicated events that I have looked for the source of many “extensions” of present-tense meaning. Technically, it seems as if the varied mental operations proffered by Langacker’s accounts of the present tense are really to be situated at some processing level, whereas the ones discussed here are more about pragmatic interactions with context (given the highly schematic semantic content that is attributed to tense predications). I believe, though, that this analytical move does not go against the spirit of grounding theory in Cognitive Grammar, especially since it concerns clausal grounding, which is fundamentally thought to be dealing with the (non)reality of designated processes (and where I think actuality and even time are not per se significant factors).

Notes

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I wish to thank Louis Goossens and Ron Langacker for going over some of the less obvious points in this analysis with me in the past. I also thank René Dirven for his valuable comments on an earlier version of this paper.
2. The term *English*, here and in the title, refers to a language, not a culture. Throughout this text I will be dealing with Standard English only. With respect to nonstandard varieties, Labov (1972: 51) provides a nice illustration of how a language like Black English Vernacular seems to be more precise (or “logical”) in its treatment of *perfective* verbs and the various forms that are compatible with them. The sentence *He be working*, with invariant *be*, generally indicates so-called habitual (or iterative) behavior, so that we can conclude that the subject in question usually works or has a steady job. In contrast, the “elliptical” construction *He working* only indicates that the subject is

working at the time of speaking. Thus, Black English Vernacular presents more paradigmatic options for the marking of perfective verbs than Standard English does, and these options correspond to semantic functions (basically, those expressing general validity and coincidence with the time of speaking) that appear to be conflated in the single progressive form of Standard English.

3. Example (1) is adapted from Kress (1977). It figures in a discussion of the differentiation between various deictic and nondeictic concerns within the verb paradigm.
4. (Im)perfectivity is, strictly speaking, a matter of *Aktionsart*. In the present discussion, this aspectual notion is essentially treated as a semantic one in English, though grammatical operations may have effects that are describable in the same terms. Since perfective and imperfective processes are designated by different lexical “predication types”, they should be conceptually distinguished from grammatical aspect marking, as in the contrast between progressive and simple forms of the past and present tense.
5. Nakamura (1991) rightly points out that Langacker’s analysis of the English progressive bears many conceptual similarities with Jespersen’s (1932: 180) “frame-theoretic” perspective on this construction.
6. An alternative way of putting this without resorting to morphological terminology would be to state that the higher-order process in question is obtained through a process of semantic extension.
7. “Experience” is the result of categorized perception and is therefore not to be equated with the latter. It is, in other words, perception that has passed through the “filter” of (grounded) knowledge.
8. In fact, the same meaning of nontypicality might even be difficult to realize in the context of example (4), which was supposed to indicate a habit and thus a typical trait of the person indicated by the subject. Notice, however, that the example involves a *temporary* habit, i.e., one that is in fact not part of the ground and that therefore constitutes something of a surprise against the backdrop of that person’s more global patterns of behavior. The ground, I would like to maintain, is ultimately an atemporal notion, and any intimation of temporal boundaries, as in (4) or (10), will thus result in some degree of separation from it.
9. The (temporal) characterization of the present progressive with perfective verbs in Cognitive Grammar is somewhat involved but actually quite cogent as a first argumentative step. While the progressive marker imperfectivizes the perfective process, “zooming in” on that process and thus excluding the conception of its starting and endpoints, the present tense imposes a second scope (“IS₂”) which selects part of the derived imperfective process and has that coincide with the speech event. See Langacker (1999b) for a related discussion of imperfectivized imperfectives (in generic contexts).

10. One might in principle wish to argue that expressions such as *be silly*, *be careful*, etc. have more of a perfective quality to them because of what they mean ('behave in a silly way, act carefully'), such that they can also appear in other, nonprogressive contexts where no apparent imperfectivization can be seen at work: *Try to be careful*, *Don't be so silly*, *He was repeatedly silly*, ... However, the principle does not seem to be limited to "be+adjective" constructions (*You're being an ass*), nor is it capable of precisely delimiting the class of predications that would be involved. Given the appropriate context, virtually any imperfective process may take the progressive form, regardless of the degree of control and volition it usually expresses: *I'm having difficulties with this*, *I'm seeing things lately*. The possibility of having imperfectives behave "perfectively" seems to be so widespread and productive that it would be preferable to see this as a grammatical phenomenon (with certain constructions, including the present tense, favoring more of an "active" construal of the process in question) rather than a lexical one.
11. I will not discuss plural generics here, which appear to have a number of special properties with respect to the present tense and progressive aspect. See Langacker (1997, 1999b).
12. Actually, it might seem as if so-called general-validity statements come in *three* varieties, because every generic or habitual expression may be imperfectivized regardless of the perfective or imperfective nature of the verb appearing in it, resulting in temporarily valid statements like *John is drinking heavily these days*, or *You're being very silly lately*. These are, first of all, obvious cases of scope building. And because of the explicitly temporal nature of the concrete scope builders involved, they may arguably be discussed in terms of the imperfectivizing procedure imposing a (higher-order) sense of temporal *boundedness* upon the predication (an effect of "zooming in"). This does not imply, however, that the epistemic properties that should come with such progressive constructions are lost. They remain in place and apply within the scope that is being predicated through the tense marker. The conclusion should thus be that, at the level of the content verb (as opposed to that of the auxiliary), general-validity statements lose their *absolute* validity in such contexts, even within the restricted temporal scope, and behave just like other progressive forms in general.
13. Habituals feature the same individual involved in the same type of event over time, while generics present the same type of subject with multiple distinct instantiations over time. It is a matter of analytical preference to assume, or not, that a generic or habitual reading necessarily construes multiple instances *over time* in the background (or maximal scope).
14. Naturally, this specification is not about the act of drinking in general but about the kind of heavy drinking that John engages in, i.e., it generalizes over a proposition instead of an isolated predication.

15. Consider the generic sentence *A cat plays with a mouse it has caught*, where the virtual event that is profiled captures what is common to an open-ended set of instantiations in actuality. Still, in Cognitive Grammar it is maintained that a fictive *instance* of the event type is profiled. The contrast crucially hinges on the fundamental definition of grounding as an act of singling out instances of a thing or process type. Accordingly, whenever there is talk of “arbitrary instances”, what is invariably meant, it seems, is that the instance in question is to be situated at a fictive or virtual level of conceptualization.
16. The difference between a scope builder and a space builder is a relative one and basically depends upon the definition of “reality” that one assumes speakers are working with. Thus, the temporal subclauses (featuring *when*, *until*, etc.) adduced in Langacker (2001) to illustrate the temporal quality of mental-space building simply instantiate cases of scope building, insofar as the time stretches they indicate are set in “reality”. I have already stressed that the scope (or space) built need not evoke the temporal domain.
17. I agree with Langacker (2001) that the type of reality involved is more likely to be projected than merely potential, because of the typically planned or scheduled nature of the events that are being “predicted” in this usage type. Thus, both *??Their plane arrives* (referring to an upcoming event that is anticipated but not precisely localizable in the future) and *??An earthquake strikes next week* are highly infelicitous, mainly due to the pragmatics involved.
18. I am not using the term “presupposition” in the sense of a representation that is part of a predication’s “conceptual substrate”, as in Langacker (2001), because that would imply that the presupposed content reside in the predication’s maximal scope. It should be clear from the present discussion that the presupposition referred to here is very much part of the present tense’s immediate scope (in fact, it defines that scope) and thus simply constitutes its semantic meaning. It acts as a presupposition with respect to potential pragmatic exploitations of that meaning.
19. Sentence (21) should be interpreted in a context where the speaker tells her apprentice what she *should* do in an actual instance of carcass processing. Notice that a progressive variant of (21), “(What?) *The rest of this carcass is going into sausages!*”, does not sound as “normal” and matter-of-fact as its simple counterpart. It could be said to express an element of surprise. Compare also *This bolt goes in there* vs. *The bolt is going in... (Hurray!)*.
20. Consider the possibility of turning these sentences into real directives, employing deontic modal verbs such as *should* or *must* or even the imperative mood.

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