COLLEGE OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN CZĘSTOCHOWA

SYNTAX
IN COGNITIVE GRAMMAR

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PART III. SYNTAX OF SENTENCES

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A puzzle for the present: a Cognitive Grammar analysis of present tense simultaneity *as*-clauses

Introduction

As is well-known, apart from stative verbs (e.g. *I like chocolate*), the English present simple can be used to refer to present time only under "special" circumstances. For example, while (1a) is not possible if we are referring to an activity taking place at the time of speaking, special uses such as play-by-play descriptions like (1b), scripts like (1c) and performative uses of verbs as in (1d) are allowed, see e.g. Berk (1999: 102– 104) for a short, descriptive account.

(1)   a. **We speak right now.*
        b. *Nani skips past a wild challenge from Johnson to play in Park.* (http://www.guardian.co.uk/football/2010/mar/21/manchester-united-
-liverpool-premier-league-live)
        c. *First I take an egg. I crack it and empty it into a bowl.* (after Langacker 2009: 197)
        d. *I order you to destroy those files.* (after Langacker 2009: 192)

It may therefore come as a surprise to come across cases like (2):

(2) *That's, that's right, it's being updated now even **as we speak**.* (BNC: KRT 6614)[1]

The obvious question is why the present simple is used in the *as*-clause if (a) we are referring to an ongoing activity as the progressive form *is being updated* used in the main clause shows, and if (b) the present simple (*as we*) *speak* is impossible if used in a main clause under the same interpretation, see (1a) above. In other words, why don't we have *as we are speaking*? Interestingly, in the whole BNC there are 14 occurrences of *as we speak*, 13 of which occur embedded in main sentences where a progressive is used, as in (2), but there are no occurrences of *as we are speaking* at all. However, this may be an accident due

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[1] BNC stands for *British National Corpus*. The sequence of letters and numbers following BNC identifies the location of the example in the corpus.

to corpus design (e.g. corpus size), since scouring the web one can come across instances like (3):

(3) *As we are speaking right now, DEA agents and Chicago police officers are working in the Englewood community on the south side of Chicago where earlier this year we had two tragic deaths of young girls*
(http://www.justice.gov/dea/pubs/pressrel/pcline_interview.html)

In fact, such "minimal" pairs as (2) vs. (3) are not restricted to the verb *speak* alone but can also be found with verbs like *struggle* and *write*, see (4) vs. (5) and (6) vs. (7), respectively. (Notice also that in (4) and (5) the main clause, which has been underlined, is virtually identical.)

(4) <u>*The pre-Budget Report comes*</u> *as Britain **struggles** to emerge from recession and a General Election nears.*
(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/financetopics/budget/)

(5) ... <u>*the report comes*</u> *as Britain **is struggling** with an outbreak of highly contagious foot-and-mouth disease*
(http://archive.newsmax.com/archives/articles/2007/8/10/234806.shtml)

(6) *As I **write** this, the sun is shining through the golden leaves of the large Norway maple in front of my Carlos Hall office, a sign of optimism in...*
(arthistory.emory.edu/Newsletter/AH_Newsletter_F09.pdf - United States)

(7) *As I'm **writing** this I'm watching American Idol. I've been a regular Idol watcher for some time now, and am unembarrassed about it....*
(themetalpunkcontinuum.blogspot.com/.../as-im-writing-this-im-watching-american.html)

Other verbs which occur (at least) in present tense *as*-clauses are offered in (8)-(10).

(8) *My childhood dreams are shattering as I **approach** adulthood I used to believe in fantastic things of the imagination; now they all seem to be dead.*
(letters.mobile.salon.com/mwt/col/tenn/2008/03/.../index8.html)

(9) *Oil traders have been criticised for parking tankers off the coast of Britain as they **wait** for petrol prices to rise.*
(www.telegraph.co.uk/.../Oil-tankers-parked-off-British-coast-as-speculators-wait-for-prices-to-rise.html)

(10) *As I **watch**, I am quickening to the single thought that this man, for these few moments, is probably running faster than any other man one earth.*
(BNC: FBL 1299)

These data, which to the best of my knowledge have not been dealt with in any comprehensive treatment of the English present tense/progressive but are mentioned briefly by Broccias (2008), are very interesting from a descriptive

point of view since the language learner needs to be alerted to a pattern which does not seem to conform to the generalization that ongoing activities are referred to through the use of the progressive. These data, however, are also important from a theoretical point of view. Broccias (2008) only addresses this problem in passing by studying the differences between the use of the past, rather than the present, progressive and the simple past in *as* and *while*-clauses and concludes that the absence of the progressive in cases like (2) may simply be due to economy reasons since the progressive is already marked in the main clause. In the present paper, I will come back to this idea but I will primarily discuss whether such *as*-clause present simple verbs are compatible with Langacker's characterization of the English present tense. To be sure, such examples must be included in and made sense of in both descriptive and theoretical accounts of English syntax.

Langacker proposes that "[t]he English present tense specifies that an instance of the profiled process occurs and precisely coincides with the time of speaking" (Langacker 2009: 189; see also Langacker 2001). This means that the profiled process must be the same in length as the time needed to utter a clause describing it. Since this is obviously not the case in (1a), where speaking "overflows" the boundaries of instantaneousness, the only solution in English is to make use of the progressive (*We are speaking right now*), as Section 2 below will point out. However, the *as*-data with present simple verbs given above seem to be at odds with Langacker's deictic, temporal coincidence account of the present. In (2), for example, the time needed to utter the *as*-clause is obviously shorter than the speaking event; nevertheless, the present simple is acceptable.

In order to investigate whether Langacker's theory is compatible with the *as*-data exemplified above, I will first review (in Section 2) the assumptions underlying Langacker's characterization of the English present tense and how his analysis is able to tackle well-known "exceptions" such as (1b)–(1d). Next, in Section 3, I will try to argue that Langacker's analysis can capture the *as*-data provided that two assumptions are made: (a) *as* must be viewed as a scope-"restrictor" and (b) the verbs employed in the *as*-clause must be categorisable as activity verbs. Section 4 wraps up the paper by trying to go beyond a Langackerian analysis. In particular, it argues that a fuller treatment of *as*-clause present tense verbs can be achieved if economy and analogy considerations are factored in.

1. Langacker's temporal coincidence account of the English present tense

Pivotal to Langacker's analysis of the English present tense is his distinction between perfective and imperfective processes. A perfective process, e.g. *throw*, is said to have the following features (see Langacker 2009: 186):

a. It is conceived as being bounded in the immediate scope (IS) in its domain of instantiation, i.e. in the temporal domain (which corresponds to the maximal scope, MS).

b. It is not conceived as being internally homogenous, i.e. its component parts are not identical.

c. It is not contractible, i.e. an arbitrary part is not itself an instance of the process.

d. It is replicable, i.e. combining two instances results in multiple instances.

Diagrammatically, a perfective process is represented as a rectangle with square corners, see Figure 1. Note that the whole rectangle lies inside IS in Figure 1, which shows that the process is conceived of as being bounded.

Figure 1. A perfective process
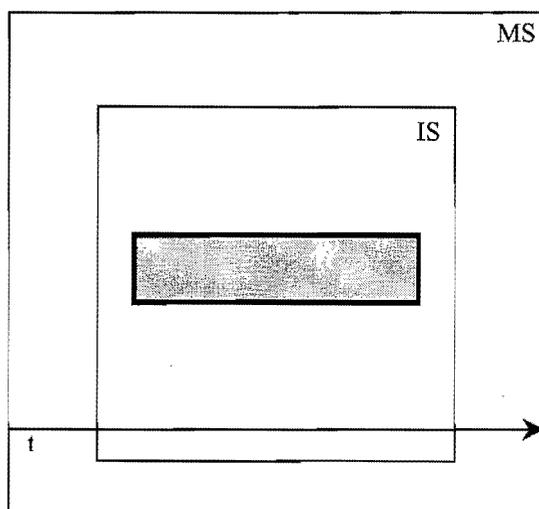
An imperfective process, e.g. *know*, is by contrast (see Langacker 2009: 186–7):

a. Not conceived as being bounded in the immediate scope in its domain of instantiation.

b. It is conceived as being internally homogenous.

c. It is contractible.

d. It is not replicable.

Diagrammatically, an imperfective process is represented as a rectangle with rounded corners, see Figure 2. Notice that the rectangle "overflows" the IS in Figure 2, which is intended to show that the process is conceived as being unbounded.

Figure 2. An imperfective process
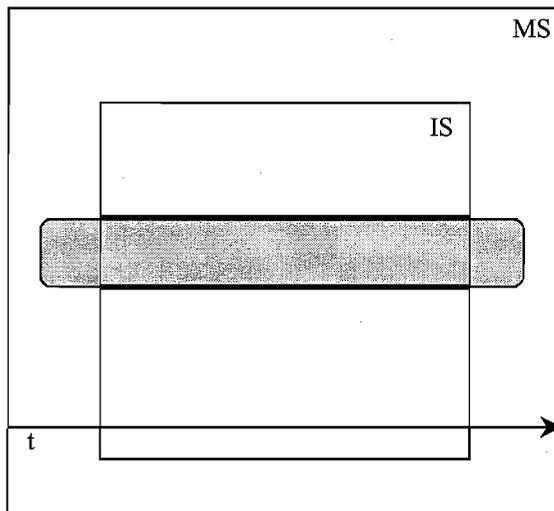
Langacker's analysis implies that perfectives include Vendler's (1967) achievements (e.g. *realize*), accomplishments (e.g. *grow up*) and activities (e.g. *walk*), while imperfectives correspond to Vendler's statives (e.g. *resemble*). It must be observed that Langacker is aware that activities bear some resemblance to imperfectives because activities designate processes that "are easily construed as being internally homogeneous" (Langacker 2009: 189) but Langacker claims that "they are nonetheless conceived as occurring in bounded episodes, and bounding is the critical property for the perfective/imperfective contrast" (Langacker 2009: 189–190).[2] From Langacker's analysis it follows that present tense imperfectives such as *I know her* are admissible thanks to contractibility. Since an arbitrary part of the process counts as an instance of the process, we can pick out a part which is coincident with the time of speaking.

Present tense perfectives such as *He mows the lawn right now* are not possible because of what Langacker calls a durational problem and an epistemic problem, see Langacker (2009: 191). The durational problem has to do with the fact that the perfective process is not the same in length as the time needed to utter a clause describing it. The epistemic problem has to do with the fact that "by the time we observe an event to find out what is happening, it is already too late to initiate a description that precisely coincides with it" (Langacker 2009: 191).[3]

The progressive is therefore recruited with perfectives since, among other things (see Langacker 2009: 190), it restricts the IS to a subpart of the profiled

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[2] This obviously amounts to saying that not all of the features listed for the two categories are on a par.

[3] It could be argued that the epistemic problem does not arise in cases such as (1a) since the speaker is not observing an internal event but merely expressing the type of activity she already knows she is engaged in.

process and renders it internally homogeneous. In other words, the progressive imperfectivizes the perfective process. By contrast, the progressive is redundant with imperfectives (since a subpart of an imperfective process can be picked out which coincides with the time of speaking) and, therefore, is not used.

The deictic analysis of the present simple is schematized in Figure 3. The diagram shows that the present is used when the time of speaking, represented as a squiggly line along the time (t) arrow, coincides either with the whole process, the uppermost rectangle, or part of it, see the rectangle underneath. The latter option obtains when the process is imperfective, as the rounded corners of the lower rectangle in Figure 3 show. I will come back to the former option later in this section. Before doing that, I would like to comment on Figure 4, which illustrates the contribution of the aspectual morpheme -*ing*.[4] The progressive, as was pointed out above, restricts the IS to a subpart of a perfective process, thus rendering it unbounded. This is shown by letting the rectangle in Figure 4 "overflow" the IS box. The effect of combining the deictic construction (the present simple) with the aspectual construction (the progressive) is shown in Figure 5 for the verb group *is speaking*. The progressive restricts the immediate scope to a subpart of the perfective process (IS_1) and renders, if necessary, the process internally homogenous (*speak*, being an activity verb, is already so). Since the process within IS_1 is now imperfective, a subpart can be chosen which coincides with the time of speaking. In other words, the present tense further restricts IS_1 to IS_2 in the diagram. However, for the sake of simplicity, the diagram in Figure 5 can be simplified as in Figure 6, where I have conflated IS_1 and IS_2 into a single IS.

Figure 3. The present tense

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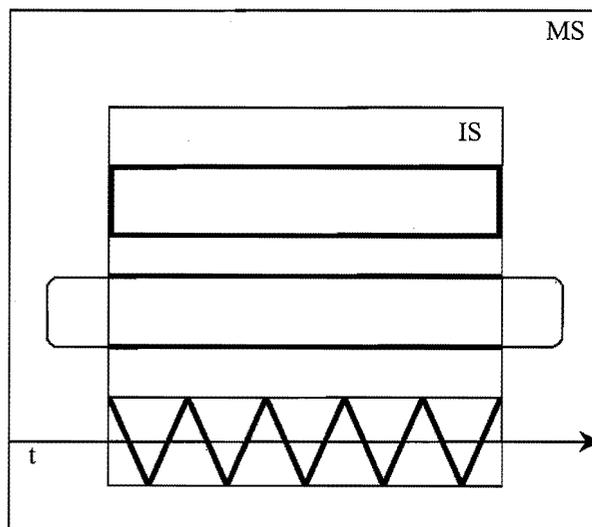
[4] For the sake of simplicity, I am ignoring the contribution of *be* in the progressive construction *be* V*ing*.
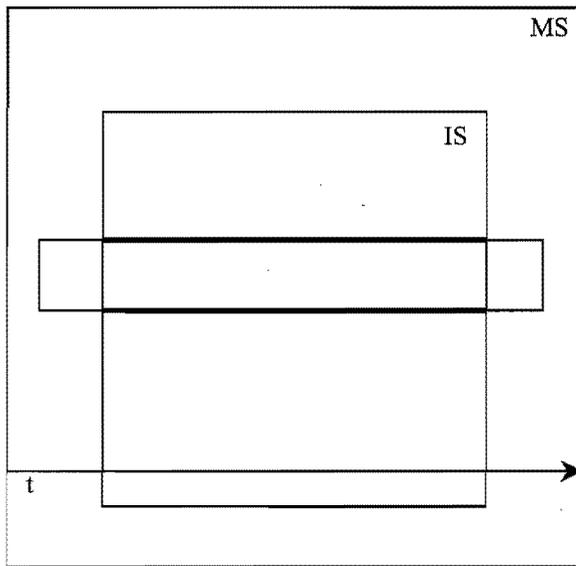
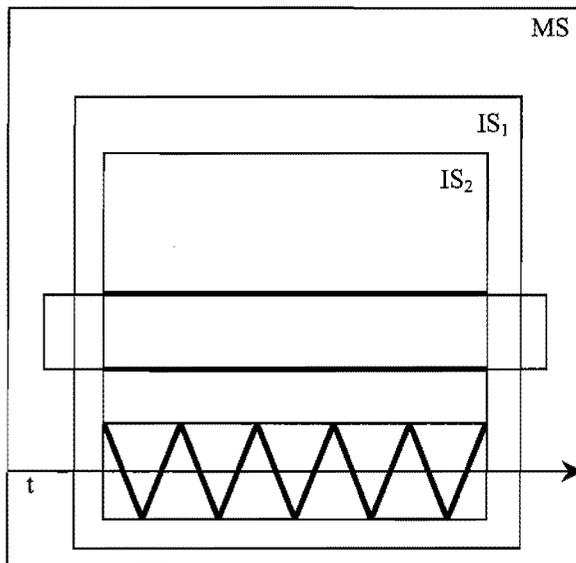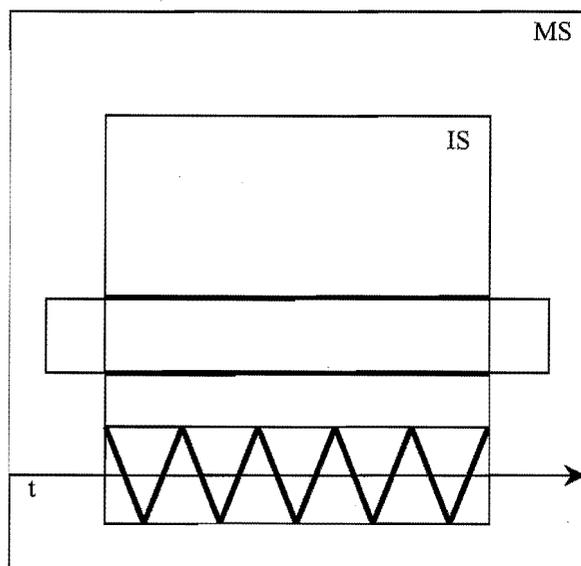*Figure 4. The progressive*

Figure 5. The present progressive

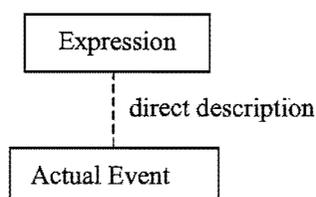*Figure 6. The present progressive (simplified)*

Langacker claims that some present time "exceptions" like the present tense use of performatives illustrated in (1d) above follow nicely from his deictic characterization of the present tense. Performatives correspond to the uppermost box in Figure 3, where the whole process (e.g. *order*) coincides with the time of speaking. A similar situation obtains with play-by-play descriptions of sporting events, as in (1b) above. In fact, Langacker himself acknowledges that since what we are describing in cases such as (1b) has (possibly) already happened, see the epistemic problem mentioned above, such examples are probably best regarded as instances of a non-present time use of the present tense. In other words, they are similar to cases of the historical use of the present. An example is (11), which can be used to describe what one sees while watching a tape (see Langacker 2009: 194):

(11)   *The suspect enters the store. Now he approaches the counter.* [...]

The crucial point is that cases such as (11) are instances of a special *viewing arrangement* in Langacker's analysis. In the default viewing arrangement, an expression is a direct description of an actual event. In the special viewing arrangement, the relation between expression and actual event is indirect. Langacker contends that the linguistic expression is a direct description of a virtual or representing event which is, in turn, a representation of a represented or actual event, as is summarised in Figure 7. It is worth mentioning that Langacker also extends this approach to scripts, see (1c) above, generics (e.g. *Water boils at 100°C*), and schedules (e.g. *The train leaves in five minutes*).

Figure 7. Viewing arrangements

Default Viewing Arrangement   Special Viewing Arrangement

| Expression |

¦ direct description

| Actual Event |

| Expression |

¦ direct description

| Representing Event (virtual) |

¦ representation

| Represented Event (actual) |
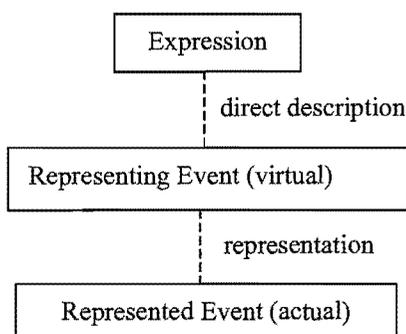
As a final note, it must be observed that although the temporal coincidence account of the present is able to cover a variety of different cases, Langacker (2007: 171) claims that "a full treatment of the English present has to be epistemic in nature". On this view, the present is taken to indicate epistemic immediacy (i.e. currency in the conceptualizer's conception of reality, to put it simply) of the profiled process. Reasons of space prevent me from offering a detailed summary of this alternative but I think it will suffice to say here that the epistemic account is used to justify the use of the present in certain adverbial (temporal and conditional) clauses such as (12). Notice that in such examples the subordinate clause does not refer to present time, but rather to a possibility. Langacker contends that in such cases the verb in the adverbial clause profiles a virtual event. I will return to this point briefly in the last section of the paper.

(12)   *{When/After/Before/If} she sells her house she will need a vacation.*

2. Present tense *as*-clauses

Since perfective verbs usually require the progressive in the present simple when they are used to refer to present time, it is important to discuss whether the occurrence of perfective verbs like *speak, struggle, write, approach, wait, watch* in present tense *as*-clauses used to refer to present time is compatible with Langacker's theory. In the light of the previous discussion, one could perhaps claim that the *as*-event depicts a virtual event, which is coincident with the time of speaking, along the lines of Figure 8. This seems indeed to be the case in examples like (13):

(13) *Now **as** I **watch** the progress of the plague, The friends surrounding me fall sick, grow thin, And drop away.* (BNC: HUB 531)

Figure 8. A virtual as-clause
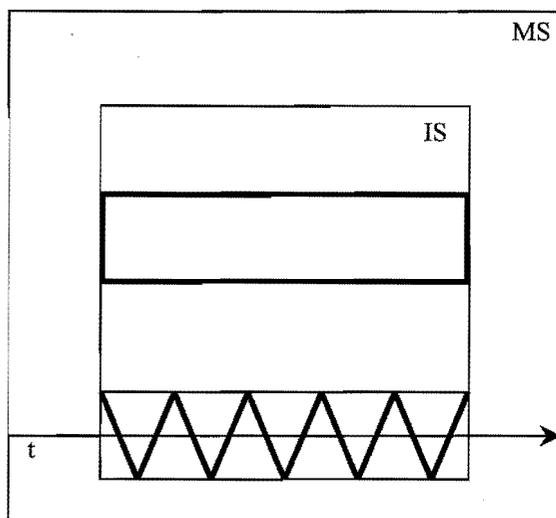
Notice that in (13) the present tense is used throughout the sentence. The effect intuitively seems to be that of viewing the various profiled processes in their entirety, in similar fashion to (11) above. However, if the *as*-event profiles a virtual event, why is virtuality typically found in the *as*-clause (i.e. the progressive is usually used in the main clause) and why, unlike cases like (12), is the progressive also possible, see e.g. (3) above?

The analysis has so far neglected any possible contribution due to the subordinator *as*. In the literature, three different uses of *as* are usually recognised, see Kortmann (1997), namely 'immediate anteriority' (which Kortmann paraphrases as 'as soon as'), 'overlap' (which Kortmann paraphrases as 'when'), and 'duration' (which Kortmann paraphrases as 'while'). The first two usages are illustrated in (14), taken from the ARCHER corpus (*A Representative Corpus of Historical English Registers*, see Biber et al. 1994), used by Broccias and Smith (2010) to explore the development of simultaneity clauses in Late Modern English fiction.

(14) a. *He bowed, however, to the ground **as** he recognised the ensign of the queen-mother.* (*ARCHER: 1837ains.f5b*)

      b. *... and **as** he met Rody, Dick was still standing within about a hundred yards of them ...* (*ARCHER: 1847carl.f5b*)

The *duration* usage is the one we are dealing with in this paper. A detailed description can be found in Broccias (2006). Simplifying somewhat, the function of an *as*-clause (or, metonymically speaking, *as*) can be described as that of locating the matrix event within the *as*-event. This means that the *as*-event, e.g. *As I walked down the road* in Figure 9, is construed as a path (see the arrow in Figure 9), the endpoints of which are not focussed on (notice that the endpoints of the path arrow are not included in the box representing the *as*-clause), and that some amount of scanning along the path is required in order to locate the matrix event, e.g. *I saw a cat crossing the street* in Figure 9.

Figure 9. As-events as path events

As I walked down the road, I saw a cat crossing the street
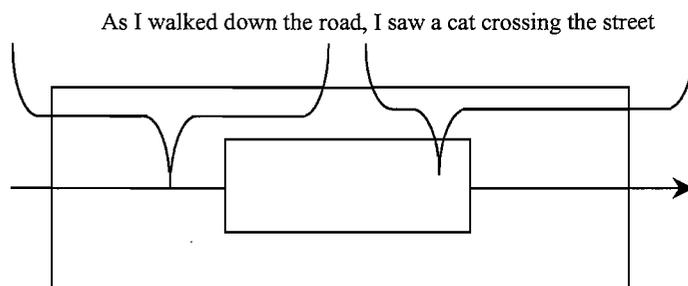
Having briefly detailed the semantic import of *as*-clauses when they have a durative meaning, the question is now whether it is possible to justify the use of the present simple without necessarily invoking virtual events simply because it is difficult to see what could be virtual in cases like (2). The speaking event just seems to take place at the time of utterance and not to be coincident with it. I have shown a possible non-virtual analysis in Figure 10b, which should be considered alongside Figure 10a, which depicts an *as*-clause used with a progressive construction. In Figure 10a I have ignored the contribution of the subordinator *as*, hence I put it in parentheses underneath the Figure. The coincidence between a subpart of the profiled process and the time of speaking is obtained through the use of the progressive, which renders the process internally homogenous and restricts the immediate scope to a subpart of it. The diagram is therefore analogous to that of a matrix clause like *we are speaking*. Figure 10b is identical to Figure 10a but it claims that identity is due to the use of *as*. How is this possible? This is possible because Figure 10b, like Figure 10a, is an abbreviated representation for the structure depicted in Figure 11.
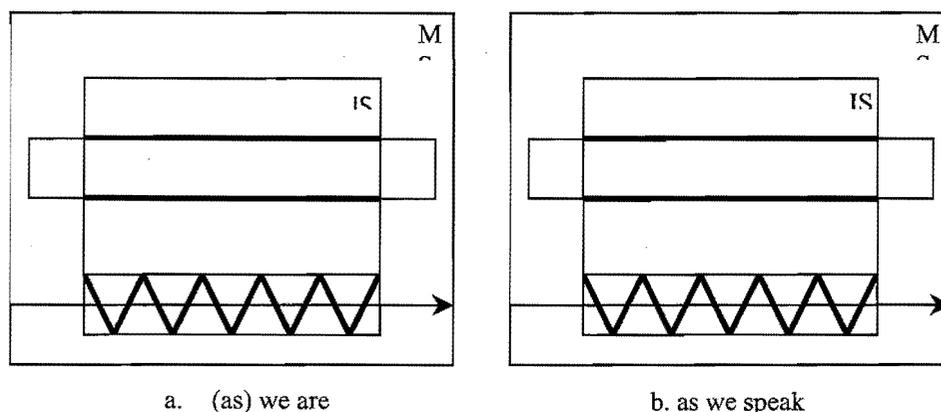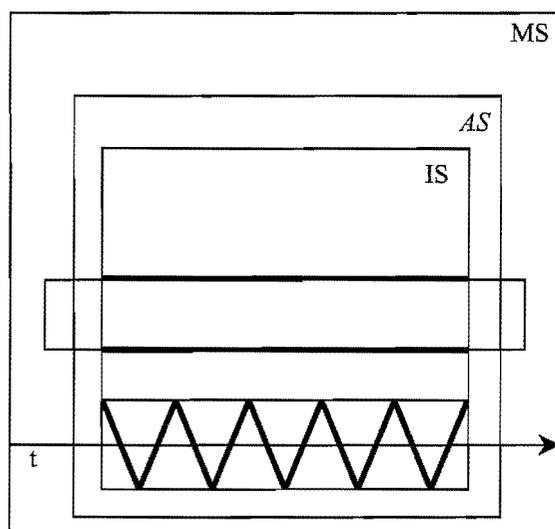
Figure 10. Progressive as-clauses and non-fictive as-clauses

a. (as) we are   b. as we speak

Figure 11. A non-fictive, present tense as-clause (expanded)

   Figure 11 should be analysed alongside Figure 5 above, which offers a de-
tailed representation of how the present and the progressive interact. My conten-
tion is that (a) *as* mimics the progressive by restricting IS to a subpart of the
process and (b) the profiled verb is construed as being internally homoge-
nous/contractible so that the ensuing representation is identical to that of Figure
5. *The former point is that as can be viewed as somewhat analogous to the pro-
gressive*; it does not (necessarily) include the endpoints of the profiled event bur
rather restricts scope to a portion of it, as was shown in Figure 9 above. The
other crucial observation is that the *as*-event seems to be construable as a path

event, i.e. an activity. In Section 2, I pointed out that Langacker himself recognises that activities are "easily construed as being internally homogenous" (Langacker 2009: 189); hence, the lack of the progressive is not problematic here because its imperfectivizing function would be redundant vis-à-vis the verb types occurring in the *as*-clause. The progressive construes the profiled process as internally homogenous/contractible. However, there is no need for the progressive to do that here because the profiled verb is of the activity type, that is the process is contractible by its very nature so that we can pick out a subpart which is coincident with the time of speaking, as required by the use of the English present tense.

Conclusions: Beyond Cognitive Grammar?

If correct, the proposal outlined above allows us to rescue Langacker's deictic temporal coincidence account in the case of present simple *as*-clauses. However, we still need to justify the optionality of the present simple in such clauses, see (2) vs. (3). Such data seem to point to two competing strategies. On the one hand, the use of the present simple in place of the present progressive could be viewed as an instance of (syntagmatic) economy (see also Cristofaro 2003, Haspelmath 2008a, b on this notion). In other words, since the progressive interpretation of the present simple in the *as*-clause follows from, on the one hand, the use of *as* and the use of an activity verb and, on the other, the progressive is already typically found in the main clause (see Section 1 and Broccias 2008), then there is no need to mark the *as*-verb for progressive aspect as well. By contrast, one could motivate the use of the progressive also in the *as*-clause as an instance of analogy, i.e. the unmarked option for referring to actions taking place at the time of speaking (the present progressive) is extended to all environments, including subordinate *as*-clauses.

I would like to observe in passing that the syntagmatic economy strategy may also be important for other adverbial clauses. As I pointed out above, Langacker uses the epistemic account to justify the use of the present in adverbial clauses in cases such as *After she sells the house, she will need a vacation*, but he doesn't explain the ban on the future in adverbial clauses, i.e. **After she will sell the house, she will need a vacation*. Even allowing for an epistemic account as the motivation behind the use of the present simple, one can also regard the absence of a future construction in the subordinate clause as an instance of economy. Since futurity is already marked in the main clause, a future 'exponent' in the subordinate clause as well is redundant and hence avoided. Future research needs to investigate this idea in more detail, of course. My main objective here has been to study whether present tense *as*-clauses are reconcilable with Langacker's present tense analysis when the *as*-clause simple present refers to an ongoing activity. Importantly, this can be done without necessarily invoking

fictivity. Rather, the proposal advanced here is that *as* mimics the progressive by restricting the IS to a subpart of the profiled process and the homogenous nature of the profiled process allows the conceptualiser to pick out an instance of it coincident with the time of speaking. The resulting conceptual configuration is therefore analogous to the one assumed to lie behind the use of the progressive. I also remarked, however, that the use of the simple present in *as*-clauses is a matter of construal since the alternative with the present continuous seems to be possible. My contention is that the availability of such two construals must ultimately invoke notions such as economy and analogy. Future research should take these two facets, economy and analogy, in greater consideration also in the case of other options, such as non-present time uses of the present tense.

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