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# The relation between aspect and inversion in English[1]

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This article discusses the peculiar use of the simple present/past in full-verb inversion (i.e. locative inversion, directional inversion, quotative inversion, presentational *there*), and the corresponding scarcity of progressive aspect in these contexts. While it is normally ungrammatical in English to use the simplex tenses to report events that are ongoing at reference time, inversion seems to defy this restriction. Building on a combination of insights from analyses of aspect and of full-verb inversion in English, this study presents a cognitive-functional explanation for this exceptional characteristic of inversion that has gone largely unnoticed in previous accounts. I argue that there exists a *canonical* relationship between the preposed ground and the postposed figure in full-verb inversion and that this meaning of canonicity ties in perfectly with the perfective value that I deem constitutive of the English simple tenses. In addition, some cases of directional inversion involve a 'deictic effect' (Drubig 1988): in these instances, the conceptualizer's vantage point is anchored within the ground and the denoted (dis)appearance of the figure is construed as *inevitable*. On the basis of a large sample of corpus data and native-speaker elicitations, I demonstrate that the use of the progressive is disallowed in inverted contexts that involve a deictic effect, while its use is dispreferred but not excluded in other cases of inversion. This study thus brings together insights from the domains of information structure and aspect in English, and merges these into a comprehensive cognitive account.

## 1 Introduction

The present article investigates the peculiar use of the English simplex tenses, rather than their progressive counterparts, in sentences involving full-verb inversion (i.e. locative/directional inversion and presentational *(t)here*-sentences), as illustrated in examples (1) and (2):[2]

(1) Here **comes / *is coming** the rain again.
(2) On the shelf **lay / ?was lying** a book.

The occurrence of the simple present/past in these inverted contexts is decidedly noteworthy: unlike other Germanic languages, Present-day English generally does

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[2] While the use of the progressive in (1) is clearly anomalous, this is less obviously the case for (2), in which it is highly marked (i.e. contextually restricted) but not totally excluded, as I will demonstrate in sections 4 and 5 of this article.

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not allow the use of simplex tenses to report dynamic situations (i.e. events) that are concurrent with the time of speaking or with some past reference time; instead, speakers of English need to resort to the progressive. These uses of the simple present and past, and their concurrent (i.e. non-generic, non-habitual) interpretation, are tightly connected to the sentence-initial placement of a locative/directional adverbial or of *(t)here*, which typically triggers an inverted sentence structure (i.e. verb-second word order) with non-pronominal subjects.[3] If the locative/directional element or *(t)here* are not placed in this marked sentence-initial position, the sentence receives a habitual/generic interpretation, rather than an actually present one (as in (3b)), like simple-present utterances canonically do. On the other hand, habitual/generic readings are excluded in inverted contexts (as illustrated in (3c)). The following examples have been adopted from Lakoff (1987: 471):

(3) (a) Here **comes** Harry.
(b) Harry **comes** here from time to time.
(c) *Here **comes** Harry from time to time.

Besides full-verb inversion, there are a number of other contexts that defy the restriction on the use of the simple present, such as performative expressions, sports commentaries, and demonstrations.[4] Most of these uses – as well as the uses of the simple present in virtual present-time contexts (see footnote 4) – are extensively documented in reference grammars such as Quirk *et al.* (1985) and Huddleston & Pullum (2002) and in analyses of aspect in English by Hirtle (1967, 1995), Langacker (2001), Brisard (2002), Williams (2002a, 2002b), Leech (2004), Vanden Wyngaerd (2005) and De Wit (forthcoming). Yet in spite of its exceptional properties, the construction central to this study, viz. full-verb inversion, has either been ignored in these analyses (Quirk *et al.* 1985; Langacker 2001; Brisard 2002), or it is merely referred to without subjecting it to any (detailed) analysis (Hirtle 1995: 267–8; Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 128; Williams 2002b: 1245; Leech 2004: 7; Vanden Wyngaerd 2005: 195). Conversely, the role of aspect has also been ignored in most studies on full-verb inversion. Locative/directional inversion has been investigated from a variety of angles (see, e.g., Drubig 1988; Birner 1994; Bresnan 1994; Dorgeloh 1997; Birner & Ward 1998; Kim 2003; Chen 2003; Kreyer 2006; Prado-Alonso 2011; Webelhuth 2011). *There*-sentences have attracted a lot of attention as well (see, among many others, Milsark (1974) and Lakoff (1987)). Typically, so-called deictic/presentational *there*-constructions (Lakoff 1987; Lambrecht 1994: 462–585), characterized by the sentence-initial deictic adverb *here* or *there* followed by an intransitive verb (e.g. (3a)), are studied alongside and contrasted with existential *there*-constructions, which predicate the existence of some entity in some space (as in *There*

[3] As pointed out by Stockwell (1981: 581), fronted locative/directional constituents do not *necessarily* trigger inversion, even with non-pronominal subjects, if these subjects are in a way inferable from the previous context.

[4] This list does not include those contexts in which the simple present is used to refer to events that are construed *as if* they were part of the present, such as narratives, instructions, scheduled future events and non-counterfactual conditionals. These contexts involve *virtual*, rather than actual, coincidence with the time of speaking (Langacker 2001).

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*is a feeling of despair among those people*). Neither the studies on locative/directional inversion, nor those on *there*-constructions, have been concerned with the apparent bar on progressive aspect.[5] Two notable exceptions are Lakoff (1987: 496) and Chen (2003: 179–83); I will come back to their proposals in section 5.1.

The lack of attention paid to the relation between aspect and inversion is also reflected by the fact that, even if the restraint on the use of the progressive is sometimes observed, no one has noted that it does not seem to be entirely categorical, as illustrated in the following two examples retrieved from Google:[6]

(4) So I used large-grained bulgur from Turkey, and I rinsed it in a sieve and dumped it into a frying pan in which **was sizzling** a diced red onion. (6-12-2014)
(5) In her right hand was a pint glass, which she was holding under a swan necked spout that was below the white lever. Into the glass **was flowing** some form of beer, strange looking stuff. (6-12-2014)

Corpus data and/or native speaker elicitations would have to substantiate these preliminary observations, but if it is indeed the case that full-verb inversion *can* feature progressive aspect in certain contexts, then we would have to explain why this should be so. That is, a comprehensive account of progressive and non-progressive aspect in inversion would have to offer an explanation for both the general restriction on the use of the progressive, reflected in examples such as (1), and for the exceptions to this general restriction, and this is exactly what the present study aims to do. More specifically, I will account for the noteworthy use of the simple tense form and the corresponding dispreference for progressive aspect in full-verb inversion by showing that the perfective value of the English simple tenses ties in perfectly with the cognitive discourse principles underlying the majority of cases of inversion. This analysis thus solely concentrates on simple/progressive aspect, thereby excluding the perfect, which *does* occur naturally in full-verb inversion (Chen 2003: 179–81). I will briefly return to this acceptability of the perfect in section 5.1.

In a first step, I will delineate the types of full-verb inversion that I am focusing on in this analysis. Next, section 3 serves to introduce some important theoretical background on the perfective value of the English simplex tenses and on the function of full-verb inversion as proposed in previous analyses. In section 4, I verify to what extent and in which contexts full-verb inversion indeed disallows the use of the progressive, based on a large-scale corpus investigation (section 4.1) and native-speaker surveys (section 4.2). This study demonstrates that progressive aspect is hardly ever used in full-verb inversion, even if native speakers consider it acceptable with locative inversion and certain types of directional inversion. In section 5, then, I will introduce my analysis. Section 5.1 shows how a combination of observations on the semantics and

[5] Remark, for instance, that Webelhuth (2011) does not list it among those properties of locative inversion that, in combination, render the construction non-canonical.

[6] Note that this also holds for the exceptional (eventive) simple-present uses mentioned above: in each of these contexts, it is possible to use the progressive under certain circumstances (see, especially, Williams (2002a) and De Wit (forthcoming: chapter 4) for detailed discussions).

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discourse function of inversion as proposed by, mainly, Drubig (1988), Birner (1994, 1995), Dorgeloh (1997) and Chen (2003) naturally leads to the prediction that full-verb inversion only selects perfective-aspect constructions. I will claim, more specifically, that inversion is used to convey a sense of *canonicity*, and in addition, in some cases, *inevitability* – two meanings that do not normally license progressive construals. The exceptions to this general rule are discussed in section 5.2, in which I demonstrate that each of the occurrences of progressive aspect in full-verb inversion can be accounted for in the light of the semantic analysis I propose. This study thus brings together insights from the domains of information structure and aspect in English, and merges these into a comprehensive cognitive account.

## 2 Inverted constructions relevant for the current analysis

A study of the literature on full-verb inversion in English yields a jumble of constructions that are not always easy to distinguish from one another, although there have been numerous attempts in the literature to do so (see, for instance, Milsark (1974), Lakoff (1987) and Rochemont & Culicover (1990) on the difference between existential and deictic *there* and Birner & Ward (1993) and Dorgeloh (1997: 51–3) on the distinction between *there*-sentences and other types of inversion). In the present analysis I concentrate on those types of inversion that select events, thus excluding state reports, such as equative *be* (e.g. *Two problems are time and money*) or locative inversion with *be*, because these require the simple present/past by definition. The relevant constructions are the following:[7]

(6) Presentational *there* + dynamic verb: There/here **comes** my bus.
(7) Locative inversion + dynamic verb: On the shelf **lies** a book.
(8) Directional inversion with a specified endpoint: She was about to tell him when in again **rolled** the trolley, now with afternoon tea on it. (Birner, 1523)[8]
(9) Directional inversion with a specified source: From this trench **were recovered** sacrificial burials and offerings dating to the final days of the Aztec empire. (Birner, 127)
(10) Directional inversion along an unbounded trajectory: Across this arid desert **drifted** an occasional low cloud of red dust. (Birner, 1093)
(11) Sentence-initial location/direction without inversion (with pronominal subjects): Down we **go**!
(12) Predicate inversion + dynamic verb: Appearing out of nowhere **came** a bright red Lamborghini. (Birner & Ward 1992)
(13) Quotative inversion: 'Leave me alone!' **shouts** Harry.

Presentational or deictic *there*-sentences are to be distinguished from existential *there*-constructions. Traditionally, existential *there*-sentences are assumed to be exclusively

[7] Note that the labels used in this classification are semantic rather than syntactic. This entails, for instance, that I am not differentiating instances of locative inversion on the basis of the syntactic class of the preposed locative constituent, which can be a prepositional phrase, an adverbial phrase, etc.

[8] Examples that have been adopted from Betty Birner's corpus of locative inversion are referred to as 'Birner', followed by the number of the relevant corpus example. For more details on this corpus, see section 4.1.

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stative, whereas deictic *there*-sentences do allow dynamic verbs, such as verbs of inherently directed motion, manner of motion verbs, verbs of appearance or meander verbs (Levin 1993: 88–90). However, some existential sentences such as *There comes an end to all things* feature dynamic predicates as well (see also Lakoff (1987: 570–5) for similar examples). Superficially, these sentences are very similar to deictic *there*-sentences, yet syntactically they behave as existential *there*-sentences, since *there* functions as the grammatical subject of these sentences, which is not possible with deictic *there*. This is reflected in, e.g., the formation of tag questions:[9]

(14) There **comes** an end to all things, **doesn't there**?

This shows that existential *there*-sentences, unlike deictic ones, are not cases of full-verb inversion with a deictic, locative or directional element in pre-verbal position and a (non-pronominal) subject in post-verbal position, and so I do not take them into consideration in this analysis. For the present purposes I focus exclusively on deictic *there*-sentences that feature dynamic verbs; in line with Drubig (1988: 84), I will call these non-stative *there*-sentences 'presentational *there*-constructions'.

Predicate inversion, which is characterized by a sentence-initial participle, often takes the verb *be* as a main verb (in which case it is stative), yet it can also come with non-stative main verbs, as in (12) (Birner 1995). This article will primarily deal with predicate inversion in contrast with what I consider to be actual progressives (see section 5.2). Quotative inversion is semantically and syntactically divergent from other types of full-verb inversion; for instance, it takes an entire quote in preposed position rather than a single constituent and it is restricted to narrative contexts. However, since such quotative inversion equally excludes progressives, I will briefly address it in section 5.1. Note, further, that in my analysis I also take into consideration cases of metaphorical extension of directional/locative inversion. For instance, the TIME IS MOTION metaphor accounts for more abstract examples of directional inversion such as *Now comes the good part*, while SOUND IS MOTION could be the underlying metaphor in the nursery rhyme *Pop goes the weasel*.[10]

Recall that these constructions have been selected on the basis of their aspectual properties. This does not mean that full-verb inversion yields an essentially distinct meaning with stative verbs. However, in selecting simple verb forms to report states that hold at reference time, sentences featuring inversion behave just like sentences with canonical word order. Nor does it mean that all instances of full-verb inversion are the same at a more specific level of analysis – obviously, there are significant differences between, say, quotative and directional inversion. Yet the fact that all of these types of full-verb inversion share the exceptional property of selecting simple tense forms reflects, in my opinion, a shared semantic core that this article attempts

[9] Also with respect to other syntactic criteria, such as negation and embeddability (existential sentences can be negated and embedded, deictic ones cannot), *There comes an end to all things* patterns as an existential *there*-sentence.

[10] In that case, *pop* refers to the sound that accompanies the sudden appearance of the weasel out of his hole, but it could also refer to the appearance itself.

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to unveil. In treating *there*-sentences and other types of full-verb inversion in English as instantiations of the same construction, I subscribe to previous proposals along this line by Bolinger (1977: 93) and Penhallurick (1984).

## 3 The semantics of the simple tenses and the function of inversion in English: some theoretical background

### *3.1 The aspectual and modal meaning of the English simple tenses*

In this section, I summarize the basic tenets of the semantic analysis of the English simple tenses introduced more elaborately in De Wit (forthcoming: chapter 4). More specifically, I argue that we need to assume that we are dealing with a present *perfective* tense, in order to (a) account for the curious observation that the English simple present appears to be used for '*anything but* the present time' (Langacker 2001: 251; italics in the original) and (b) to offer an explanation for the noteworthy exceptions to this general restriction. This analysis in terms of perfectivity will be shown to have important epistemic implications, in the sense that a global perspective on a situation entails full identifiability of this situation. I will furthermore demonstrate that this analysis is also relevant for the English simple past.

An account that interprets the simple present as having a perfective meaning goes against the more standard view according to which present-tense constructions are imperfective by definition (see, e.g., Bybee *et al.* 1994; Michaelis 2004, 2006, 2011). However, there are a number of reasons why an analysis of the simple present in terms of pure imperfectivity is hard to maintain. For instance, if we apply Vlach's (1981) *when*-test, we see that the simple present can only yield perfective (sequential) readings, while an imperfective (incidental) interpretation is excluded:

(15) When I look up, she **walks** away.

Observations such as this have incited researchers like Brinton (1988), Smith (1997: 110–12, 185–6), Williams (2002a: 128–66) and Vanden Wyngaerd (2005) to assume that at least part of the aspectual semantics of the English simple present is perfective. In De Wit (forthcoming), I propose that the simple present in English is perfective in all of its uses. In order to appreciate this analysis, we first need to provide a definition of perfective aspect. The literature on grammatical aspect has put forward a variety of related concepts to analyze the basic distinction between perfective and imperfective aspect: totality versus lack of totality (Comrie 1976: 16; Dahl 1985: 78; Smith 1997: 3, 66), boundedness versus unboundedness (Chung & Timberlake 1985; Smith 1997: 301–2), external viewpoint versus internal viewpoint (Michaelis 1998), foregrounding versus backgrounding (Hopper 1979, 1982; Partee 1984), temporal definiteness versus temporal indefiniteness (Dickey 2000). In my view, these meanings can be regarded as more specific instantiations of a basic epistemic opposition. That is, I assume that a perfective viewpoint entails that a situation is fully verifiable by the conceptualizer: she can conceive of its beginning, its endpoint and all the intermediate phases of which

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the situation consists. Imperfective aspect, on the other hand, involves but a partial conceptualization of a situation: parts of the situation are out of focus and need not be known by the speaker. This epistemic approach to aspect is crucial to account for the use of perfective-aspect constructions with stative verbs, which refer to unbounded situations (thus failing to comply with the bounded viewpoint that is typically said to be imposed by perfective constructions). As noted by Bybee *et al.* (1994: 77) and De Wit (forthcoming), it is not uncommon cross-linguistically for stative verbs to combine with perfective aspect, and this is also the case in English, in which the simple present combines naturally with stative verbs to refer to present-time states. The critical property of states that distinguishes them from events is the so-called contractibility property (Langacker 1987: 258–62). According to this property, states, which do not change over time, are fully identifiable on the basis of one random sample, which is representative for the state in its entirety. In that sense, perfective aspect and states are perfectly compatible: the viewpoint imposed by a perfective construction samples a part of a state that, due to the contractibility property of states, allows verification of the state as a whole. A similar analysis can be proposed for the use of the simple present in habitual expressions. Just like states, habits are unbounded and they do not change over time, hence they are contractible. Thus, a present-perfective construction such as the English simple present can sample a representative part of a habit at the time of speaking.

An analysis in terms of perfectivity is generally considered more straightforward for non-stative uses of the English simple present.[11] In the case of performative expressions, the speech event in fact *constitutes* the reported event – e.g., by saying *I promise*, you are performing the act of promising (Austin 1962) – and this event is therefore by definition fully known at the time of speaking. Play-by-play sports commentaries often involve situations that are actually just past at (or at least not exactly coincident with) the time when the speaker is reporting them, yet for reasons of vividness they are often construed as occurring in the present (Langacker 2011: 60). Since the events in sports announcements also normally involve fairly stereotypical, scripted situations (Langacker 2001: 265), they follow from the structure of the world (of sports commentaries) (Brisard 2002: 286). Hence, play-by-play announcements typically involve events whose beginning, concise development and endpoint are fully conceptualized at the time of their report. A similar analysis can be proposed for running commentaries accompanying demonstrations, which are fully (epistemically) controlled by the speaker.

An analysis in terms of perfectivity is more widely accepted for the simple past than for its present counterpart. As illustrated in (16), the simple past cannot normally be used to report events that are ongoing at some past reference point:

(16) He told me she ?**had** / **was having** a bath, so she couldn't come to the phone.

[11] For reasons of brevity I am ignoring the perfective value of the simple present in virtually present-time contexts in this analysis (see also footnote 4), but see De Wit (forthcoming: chapter 4) for more details.

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Michaelis (2004: 53) shows that, in cases such as (17), the simple past does appear to be yielding both perfective (sequential; (a)) and imperfective (incidental; (b)) readings:

(17) (a) Thick smoke **filled** the corridor. [In a matter of minutes, we could no longer see the exit signs.]
(b) [I opened my door and looked out.] Thick smoke **filled** the corridor.

However, in examples such as (17b), the speaker has sufficient information at the time of reference to conceive of the filling event in its entirety. In fact, as pointed out by Michaelis (2004: 53), *fill* is given a stative construal here. Hence, a perfective viewpoint, including its requirement of full identifiability, is again felicitous.

The challenge is now to align this analysis of the English simple tenses as perfective constructions with the function of full-verb inversion, so as to identify the conceptual motivation underlying the anti-progressive constraint. Let us, therefore, first zoom in on some illuminating previous proposals addressing the function of full-verb inversion.

### *3.2 The function of English inversion: the cognitive organization of discourse and the 'deictic effect'*

My study does not intend to offer a genuine alternative for previous comprehensive accounts of inversion in English, as proposed in Drubig (1988), Birner (1994), Dorgeloh (1997) and Chen (2003). Rather, in section 5, I will align some of their observations, notably Drubig's 'deictic effect' and Chen's ground-before-figure proposal, with my own analysis of the English simple tenses in terms of perfectivity, and in addition introduce the notions of canonicity and inevitability to account for the anti-progressive constraint. The discussion presented in the current section is confined to those observations that are directly relevant for the present analysis; for more comprehensive reviews of the extant literature on English inversion, see Dorgeloh (1997: chapter 3), Chen (2003: 7–32), Kreyer (2006: chapter 3) and Prado-Alonso (2011: chapter 2). I will, more particularly, single out two main perspectives on inversion: its role in the cognitive organization of discourse, and the subjective viewpoint it entails. Birner (1994) and Birner & Ward (1998) argue that inversion in English is used to present discourse-old information (expressed by the preposed constituent) before discourse-new information (expressed by the postposed constituent), so as to connect this relatively new information with the previous context. Inversion is thus assumed to serve an information-packaging function. Chen (2003: 15–25) criticizes this discourse-oriented analysis by pointing to various examples in which the 'discourse-old before discourse-new' account runs into difficulties. As an alternative, he suggests a cognitive linguistic analysis of English inversion in terms of a 'ground-before-figure organization'.[12] In cognitive linguistics, it is assumed that spatial relations in language involve the location or motion of one entity (the figure) with respect to another entity,

[12] This 'ground-before-figure' analysis was in fact first suggested by Drubig (1988), yet Chen's account is more elaborate and comprehensive.

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which constitutes the ground for that figure (Croft & Cruse 2004: 56–8). Chen (2003: 46–55) further argues that the ground is first anchored by means of a landmark, which directs the hearer's attention to the ground. In example (18), for instance, the ground (*below the wings*) is first situated by means of an explicit reference to the wings, i.e. the landmark, in previous discourse; the postverbal constituent is then located with respect to preposed ground.

(18) The huge engines were built into the wings. Below the wings **was** a pair of stubby sea-wings, which served to stabilize the aircraft when it was in the water. (Chen 2003: 60)

Despite the differences between Birner's discourse-pragmatic and Chen's cognitive approaches, they have in common that they both analyze the entity referred to in the preposed constituent as *given* in some way. Their insights will prove to be important for my own analysis, yet in order to account for the apparent lack of progressives in full-verb inversion, I think their accounts need to be complemented with others that focus more on the viewpoint adopted in inverted constructions. Let me begin by pointing out the strong deictic character of presentational *there*-sentences (Lakoff 1987; Drubig 1988; Langacker 1993). By using these constructions, the speaker predicates the presence, absence or (dis)appearance of a figure within the deictic center (i.e. the speech event and its immediate circumstances). Both Bolinger (1977) and Drubig (1988) identify a similar presentative function for locative and directional inversion, which Bolinger (1977: 93–4) refers to as *there*less presentationals, which present 'something on our immediate stage'. As pointed out by, e.g., Drubig (1988: 86–8) and Kreyer (2006: 202–7), the use of inversion can trigger a 'displaced speech effect', whereby the addressee is invited to conceptualize a given situation from the viewpoint 'designated by the referent of the NP in the fronted constituent' (Dorgeloh 1997: 103). This 'displaced speech effect' can be – and often is – metaphorically conceived of in terms of a camera, which visualizes a situation from a certain vantage point, and which draws in viewers to conceive of that situation from this vantage point (Dorgeloh 1997: 103–5; Chen 2003: 65–6; Partee & Borschev 2007: 156). Consider the following example:

(19) One night there was a tap on the window. Mrs. Rabbit peeped through the window. Outside **stood** a little angel. (Birner, 1638)

As readers, we are invited to adopt Mrs. Rabbit's perspective on the angel, i.e. we are standing inside the house and looking at the angel standing outside. Drubig (1988: 88–90) goes on to argue that directional (as opposed to locative) inversion does not only trigger a 'displaced speech effect', but also a 'deictic effect' – a critical point which is largely ignored in subsequent analyses of inversion (though see also Dorgeloh (1997: 164–87) for similar arguments). The difference between the 'displaced speech effect' and the 'deictic effect' is that only in the latter case is the conceptualizer's vantage point placed within the location designated by the preposed constituent (e.g., in (19) we, as readers/listeners are not standing outside ourselves). Consider the following opposition, pointed out by Drubig (1988: 88):

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(20) He opened the bedroom door and the cat **walked in**.
(21) He opened the bedroom door and **in walked** the cat.

While (20) is ambiguous with regard to the subject's and the cat's positions – e.g. it is unclear whether the subject and the cat end up being in the same room or not – there is no ambiguity in the case of (21): the subject is standing inside the bedroom, he conceives of the cat's walking into that bedroom from that perspective and it is this conception that we, as readers/listeners, are invited to adopt.[13] Contrary to Drubig (1988), I assume that directional inversion does not *necessarily* entail a deictic effect: e.g., in the case of directional inversion along an unbounded trajectory, as in (10) (repeated here in (22)), the conceptualizer's vantage point does not have to lie within the location designated by the preposed constituent (the arid desert in (22)):

(22) Across this arid desert **drifted** an occasional low cloud of red dust. (Birner, 1093)

Although this modification will prove critical, Drubig's observations, just like Chen's, constitute essential building blocks for my own analysis presented in section 5. Bringing together Drubig's analysis with Chen's, we could claim that full-verb inversion in general involves a shift to a more privileged vantage point which is part of the landmark that serves to locate the ground. Whenever the deictic effect arises (i.e. with some cases of directional inversion), we are invited to conceptualize a situation from within the ground itself which functions as the (shifted) deictic center.[14]

## 4 Relative acceptability of progressive aspect: corpus data and native-speaker elicitations

To my knowledge, the aspectual properties of full-verb inversion have never been assessed on the basis of natural language data: either it is assumed that the use of

[13] One reviewer comes up with an interesting example that apparently counters Drubig's analysis. In the following sentence, the conceptualizer need not be standing in the room in which the President is entering: *I turned on C-SPAN yesterday for the President's press conference. After watching an empty stage for an hour, I ordered a pizza. After another 30 minutes, the camera cut to the podium and in **walked** the President*. What makes this type of example exceptional, though, is the presence of an actual camera, which functions as the conceptualizer's second, detached pair of eyes, so to speak: since the camera is in the room, the speaker need not be. However, it is again crucial that the camera is part of the preposed ground. That is, the construction forces us to interpret the above sentence as involving the President coming into the same room as the one in which the camera is standing. Admittedly, this is clearly also the preferred interpretation in the non-inverted equivalent of this construction: given the context, it is hard to imagine the President walking into another room than the one in which the camera is standing, simply because the conceptualizer, who only has the camera image to rely on, would not be able to know this.

[14] The deictic center, which is the position of the discourse participants at the time of speaking, constitutes the ultimate background against which everything else takes place, and thus also functions as a kind of ground. Yet since the notion 'ground' can refer to any element that serves to locate another one (the figure) in the conceptualization of a linguistic event, I use the more specific term 'deictic center' to refer to the most basic type of ground, i.e. 'the speech event, its participants, and its setting' (Langacker 1987: 126), and the term 'ground' with reference to any type of grounding that takes place on top of this basic grounding relation. Thus, while the arid desert in (22) functions as the ground for locating the cloud of red dust, it is not the deictic center: it is not the location from which the speaker conceives of the denoted event.

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the progressive (and other constructions involving auxiliaries; e.g. Dorgeloh 1997) is excluded, without further qualification, or aspect is simply ignored.[15] Chen (2003: 180–3) constitutes an exception: he observes that among his data (which he randomly gathered from various written and some spoken sources), there are no examples of full-verb inversion with progressive aspect, although he reports that, notably, the limited number of informants he consulted do not seem entirely averse to constructed progressive examples of locative inversion (see also Coopmans 1989: 729). In this section, I will examine to what extent full-verb inversion indeed disallows the use of the progressive, building on a large number of representative data, retrieved from corpora and provided by other linguists who have studied the phenomenon, as well as on a substantial sample of native-speaker elicitations.

### *4.1 Corpus data*

Given the presumed scarcity of progressives in full-verb inversion, it is important to study as many data as possible in order to make any claims about the contexts that allow the use of the progressive (if any) and about the commonalities of these contexts. Since this calls for large samples of corpus data, I have collected cases of inversion in three different corpora: 190 examples were drawn from the Collins corpora of modern written and spoken text, 314 examples come from the *Brown Corpus of Standard American English*, and 678 examples from the *OntoNotes Corpus*, release 5.0.[16] This boils down to a total number of 1,182 instances, only one of which features progressive aspect:

(23) Out of the mouths of revolutionaries **are coming** words of moderation. (OntoNotes)

In addition, I have been granted the opportunity to consult corpus data gathered by Betty Birner and Carlos Prado-Alonso for their own research on inversion (for book-length presentations of their studies, see, respectively, Birner & Ward (1998) and Prado-Alonso (2011)). Birner's collection of 1,778 present- and past-tense instances of full-verb inversion – collected on the fly, and excluding *there*-sentences – contains only two examples featuring progressive aspect.

(24) From the west **were rolling** pile after pile of fat, white, complicated clouds, and above the clouds was the clear and uncomplicated blue. (Birner, 1524)
(25) They have a great big tank in the kitchen, and in the tank **are sitting** all of these pots. (Birner, 1561)

[15] As I will explain in section 5.2, Birner & Ward's (1992) analysis of, what they call, progressive aspect in full-verb inversion, in fact involves predicate inversion, which is fundamentally different from the progressive-aspect examples under investigation in this study.

[16] Collins: selected subcorpora: US/UK English; Books/Reports/Spoken text forms; period 2000–2005. Brown: written data; 1960s; 1,014,312 words. OntoNotes: American English; written and spoken data; 1,745,000 words. Of these, only the Collins data exclusively contain event reports, and incorporate presentational *there*-sentences.

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Prado-Alonso's data collection is more systematic and corpus-based (all written and spoken examples of inversion were collected in a database of 1,804,000 words consisting of subcorpora from FLOB, FROWN, ICE-GB and CSPAE),[17] and he does take into account presentational *there*-sentences. On a total of 649 collected targets he counts only one progressive instance (Prado-Alonso pc):

(26) I'm sure you know that the Queen is standing beside the Duke of Edinburgh. In the middle and on her right **is standing** the Lord Mayor of London. She is wearing a lime green suit . . . (Prado-Alonso 2011: 133; pc)

Thus, to sum up, on a total of 3,609 tokens of full-verb inversion collected for the current investigation and for previous research, only four progressive tokens could be retrieved.

### *4.2 Native-speaker elicitations*

On the basis of the corpus data presented in section 4.1, it is safe to say that the use of the progressive in full-verb inversion is extremely rare. Yet it is not entirely barred, as is also reflected in the attestation of Google tokens. This not only raises the question why the progressive is generally avoided in inversion – which is the main topic of this study – but also in which contexts this general restriction is defied, and how these exceptions tie in with an explanation for the strong preference for simple tense forms. Since the naturally attested progressive tokens are obviously too few to base any generalizations on, I have launched two native-speaker surveys on Mechanical Turk.[18] For the first survey, I created 44 sentences involving the various types of full-verb inversion listed in (6) to (13), featuring both simple present and progressive aspect, as well as similar sentences without inversion, and seven control sentences (three grammatical ones, and four decidedly ungrammatical ones). In each case in which both a simple present and a present progressive version of the same sentence were given (i.e. all cases, except for predicate inversion), I had to ensure that none of the informants could see both aspectual variants so as to avoid syntactic priming (e.g., after having seen the simple present sentence, the same sentence in the progressive might have been considered more acceptable). Therefore, I split up these sentences into two batches of 22 sentences, such that every single informant could only see one aspectual variant. In total, 40 native speakers rated the acceptability of the sentences in one batch, using a four-point scale

[17] FLOB: *Freiburg–Lancaster–Oslo-Bergen Corpus of British English*; FROWN: *Freiburg–Brown Corpus of American English*; ICE-GB: *International Corpus of English: the British Component*; CSPAE: *Corpus of Spoken Professional American English* (Prado-Alonso 2011).

[18] One might of course question the validity of speakers' intuitions about the grammaticality of certain constructions, if they hardly ever use these constructions in their own language (see also Chen 2003: 180). While my main goal in this study is still to account for the general ban on progressive aspect, I believe that these detailed intuitions provide crucial insights into the semantic parameters that determine why the progressive can(not) be used.

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ranging from 'very bad' to 'perfectly fine'.[19] For every case, I investigated whether there was a significant difference in terms of acceptability between the simple present and the present progressive variant, so as to identify the types of inverted contexts that are more progressive prone. Despite the relatively coarse scale used in my study, significant differences were attested for directional inversion with a specified endpoint (27), presentational *there* (28) and quotative inversion (29).[20]

(27) I open the door and in **comes** the cat / *I open the door and in **is coming** the cat. ($p = 1.132–9$)
(28) There **goes** my bus / *There **is going** my bus. ($p = 4.251–40$)
(29) 'Why are you crying?' **asks** Jill / *'Why are you crying?' **is asking** Jill. ($p = 4.940–20$)

It is noteworthy that for pure locative inversion, for directional inversion along an unbounded trajectory and for directional inversion with a specified source, no significant differences could be attested. Thus, while (27) is clearly considered ungrammatical, (30) (31) and (32) were found to be much more acceptable:

(30) In the chair **is sitting** a beautiful man. ($p = 0.819$)
(31) Across the desert **are drifting** clouds of red dust. ($p = 0.100$)
(32) From below **is coming** a strange sound. ($p = 0.349$)

These first observations seem to indicate that types of motion of which the endpoint is envisaged are more progressive-resistant than other types of directional and locative inversion. This could suggest that there is a connection between a given endpoint (and thus, presumably, a full view on the development and ending of a state of affairs) and the obligatory use of the simple present. In order to verify this hypothesis, I conducted a second Mechanical Turk survey (using the same methodological precautions as with the first study), thereby specifically focusing on locative and different types of directional inversion. Again, simple-present sentences were contrasted with present-progressive ones, and a single informant only got to see one of the two. In total, 13 simple-present and 13 present-progressive sentences were judged by 28 informants. This second survey confirms the observation that the use of the progressive in locative inversion (examples (33) to (35)) and directional inversion along an unbounded trajectory, as in examples (36) to (38), are considered quite acceptable:

(33) In that house **are living** strange people. ($p = 0.501$)
(34) On top of the square block **is lying** another block. ($p = 0.376$)
(35) Upstairs **are hanging** my mother's clothes. ($p = 0.129$)
(36) Across that bridge **are going** hundreds of cars. ($p = 0.020$)
(37) Along the riverside path **are walking** several tourists. ($p = 0.389$)
(38) Down the beach **are running** cute puppies. ($p = 0.443$)

However, my study does not yield any uniform results for cases of directional inversion involving a specified source or endpoint: while sentences (39) to (41) are considered

[19] I set up the task such that only native speakers of US English could get access to it, no speaker could fill out the same questionnaire twice, and the sentences were presented in different random sequences.
[20] With $p < .001$.

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acceptable, sentences (42) to (44) are not:

(39) Up to the hilltop they **are running**. (p = 0.645)
(40) Onto the stage **is stepping** a beautiful woman. (p = 0.515)
(41) From our neighbor's house **is coming** the sound of piano music. (p = 0.100)
(42) *Out of the room **is stepping** an enormous man. (p = 0.0001)
(43) *She whistles and away he **is going**. (p = 0.0003)
(44) *In **is coming** the President. (p = 8.3468–5)

It seems, then, that explicit reference to an event's initial or final boundary does *not* preclude the acceptability of progressive aspect. Rather, this second Mechanical Turk study brings to the surface another parameter: as I will explain in section 5, it is the rise of the deictic effect that blocks the use of the progressive in cases such as (42) to (44).

## 5 The function of the simple tenses in full-verb inversion

### *5.1 Inevitability, canonicity and perfectivity*

Let me now align the analysis of the simplex tenses in English in terms of perfectivity with the function of full-verb inversion in English, as outlined in section 3.2 in terms of givenness, ground-before-figure organization and the deictic effect.

As already hinted at in the introduction to this article, previous proposals to account for the restriction on progressives in full-verb inversion have been formulated by Lakoff (1987: 496) for presentational *there*-constructions and by Chen (2003: 180–3) for locative inversion. Lakoff states the following:

> [T]he predication of location or motion is simultaneous with the speech act. Therefore, it must be present tense, which expresses simultaneity with the speech act. Since the pointing-out event (the speech act) is instantaneous, and since the present tense marks simultaneity with that speech act, there is no progressive or perfect aspect, and hence no auxiliary verbs . . . Consequently, [the verb] is in the simple present tense. (1987: 496)

It should be noted that it is not true that *there*-sentences exclusively feature the simple present: my corpus data show that past-tense presentational *there*-sentences are occasionally attested as well:

(45) 'Are you earning enough?' 'Of course I am.' And so there **went** the theatre again. All this had happened in the autumn of 1964 . . . (Collins)

However, more important for the present analysis is Lakoff's claim that presentational *there*-constructions refer to an act of pointing which is *instantaneous*. In other words, what is designated by the construction is not so much a process of motion or location, but rather the momentaneous attestation of that motion/location at reference time. With regard to locative/directional inversion, Chen (2003) argues that '[t]he progressive, which forces the hearer to pay much attention to the verbal process, could be a misfit for the GbF [ground-before-figure] model, for the GbF requires that attention be given to the ground and the figure' (181). Thus, when a certain ground is introduced, such as

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*Into the room*, the hearer will be concerned with *who* came into the room rather than with the way in which this person came into the room. Using the progressive forces the addressee to linger on the process referred to by means of the verb, thus delaying the identification of whoever is moving.[21] In other words, in line with Lakoff's analysis of presentational *there*, Chen believes that with locative/directional inversion it is the presence, absence or (dis)appearance of a figure in a ground that is profiled rather than the manner in which this figure is present or the movement that led to this presence.

While Lakoff's and Chen's proposals are seminal in many ways, they do not explain why the progressive is nevertheless used or considered acceptable in some cases, nor do they (explicitly) acknowledge the perfective value of the simple present.[22] I contend that, whenever the deictic effect arises, a perfective viewpoint is automatically entailed. Recall, first, that presentational *there*-sentences by definition convey a deictic effect and, secondly, that I assume that not all instances of directional inversion entail a deictic effect (*pace* Drubig 1988). Now, given a configuration in which the conceptualizer is placed within a deictic center/ground, with respect to which, at the same time, a certain figure is located, the conceptualizer has a limited view. She can note the presence, absence or (dis)appearance of a figure in this ground, but since her viewpoint is anchored within the same ground, she cannot step out of it, so to speak, and zoom in on the process that leads to this presence, absence or (dis)appearance. Thus, whenever the deictic effect arises, she can only adopt a global – i.e. *perfective* – perspective, and progressive construals are excluded. In view of this configuration, which involves full knowledge about a situation and its boundaries, it is not surprising that full-verb inversion in English conveys a sense of *inevitability* with motion verbs, as illustrated in (46) to (49) (see also (8)):[23]

(46) There **goes** the neighborhood.
(47) Then boom! Along **comes** the Internet. (Collins)
(48) Up we **go**!
(49) Now **comes** the good part.

If the conceptualizer 'waits' long enough in the location in question, the figure will inevitably (dis)appear in each of these cases.[24] As noted by Dorgeloh (1997: 76), the use of directional inversion is typically exploited to create a sense of tension. This sense of tension is naturally derived from the notion of inevitability: given a certain preposed ground, you can be certain that something is coming, but you do not necessarily know what yet. It is not surprising, then, that full-verb inversion should often be used in the context of play-by-play sports casting and demonstrations (Green 1982), in which perfective marking is the rule rather than the exception. Note, incidentally, that it is the

[21] On the highlighting function of the English progressive, see, among others, De Wit & Brisard (2014) and Petré (forthcoming).
[22] Chen (2003: 180) does point to the perfectivity of the English simple past.
[23] Observe that, in cases such as (48), the relation between the vantage point and the ground is not one of inclusion, but rather of *opposition* (*Up we go* entails that, right now, we are down). Yet in such cases, too, the speaker's vantage point is *fixed* with respect to the ground.
[24] I thank Laura Michaelis for suggesting this metaphorical formulation.

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fronting of the ground, rather than the postposition of a figure that yields the inevitability effect: as is illustrated in (48), the effect also arises in non-inverted sentences with pronominal subjects. This reflects my assumption that it is the anchoring/givenness of the conceptualizer's vantage point that creates this effect.

In each of the examples listed in (46) to (49), the movement is construed as irrevocable, and thus, crucially, the conceptualizer can fully identify the development and endpoint of these motions. I claim now that such full knowledge is characteristic of all types of full-verb inversion, including static locative inversion and directional inversion along a trajectory, which do not trigger a deictic effect. In (7), repeated here in (50), the only ways in which a book can normally be on a shelf (apart from general 'being') is by lying or standing.

(50) On the shelf **lies** a book.

The relation between the book and the shelf is inferable on the basis of general knowledge about shelves and books (Birner 1995); there is, in other words, a *canonical* relation between the figure and the ground. As extensively described by Birner (1995), locative inversion is restricted to verbs that are 'informationally light': they do not contribute any crucial information to the utterance, since the manner in which a figure is present in the ground could already be inferred from the nature of the ground and of the figure. Note that it is not the presence or absence of a figure within a ground as such that is canonical (cf. the frequently observed exploitation of full-verb inversion to create a sense of surprise). What *is* known, however, is the process (i.e. the situation designated by the verb) that relates the figure and the ground; one could claim that given a certain ground and a certain figure, the relation between them emerges naturally. Such canonical events typically trigger simple tense forms, whereas the use of the progressive is linked to more phenomenal, incongruous and possibly surprising situations, as is demonstrated in various analyses (Calver 1946; Dowty 1975; Goldsmith & Woisetschlaeger 1982; Langacker 2001; De Wit & Brisard 2014). Cases of directional inversion involving a deictic effect may be regarded as extensions of the prototypical full-verb inversion construction. The canonicity property characteristic of this basic construction is inherited by the deictic directional subtype, which in addition conveys a sense of inevitability.

In spite of the distinct features of quotative inversion compared to other types of full-verb inversion – analyses with reference to the givenness of the ground or to a deictic effect are clearly not applicable – the fact that it bars progressive aspect can equally well be explained in terms of the canonicity, and thus full identifiability, of the process referred to by the verb of speaking. The manner of speaking of the subject can typically be predicted on the basis of the preposed quote, and it does not contribute important information to the sentence. It would be anomalous to put focus on the verb of speaking, given the high prominence of the fronted quote.

Note, finally, that the acceptability of the present and past perfect in full-verb inversion follows naturally from the analysis presented in this section. Unlike the progressive, the perfect in English construes past events as completed, i.e. as a whole.

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In addition, these events typically still have some relevance at the time of speaking, in that the presence, absence or (dis)appearance of a figure within a given ground is construed as 'fresh'.

### *5.2 Acceptability of progressive aspect: exceptions that prove the rule*

I contend that in cases where full-verb inversion is used to convey a deictic effect, the use of the progressive is automatically barred for the conceptual reasons explained in the previous section. In cases where we do not get a deictic effect, the conceptualizer *can* zoom in on the denoted event, and the use of the progressive is not entirely excluded. This explains its relative acceptability with locative inversion (see (30) and examples (33) to (35) above). However, given the canonical information expressed by the locative (posture) verb, the use of the progressive remains highly rare. Lack of canonicity might account for the progressive occurrence in example (25), repeated here in (51):

(51) They have a great big tank in the kitchen, and in the tank **are sitting** all of these pots. (Birner, 1561)

Example (26), repeated here as (52), however, does involve a canonical relationship between the figure and the ground, yet it still features progressive marking:

(52) I'm sure you know that the Queen is standing beside the Duke of Edinburgh. In the middle and on her right **is standing** the Lord Mayor of London. She is wearing a lime green suit . . . (Prado-Alonso 2011: 133; pc)

My tentative explanation for this use of the progressive resides in syntactic priming: since the speaker has used the progressive *is standing* in the first sentence, she naturally repeats it, despite the inverted sentence structure. The progressive is also found acceptable in examples of directional inversion that do not involve a deictic effect, such as examples (36) to (40). Although in the latter two cases the endpoint of the motion is explicitly referred to in the preposed constituent, the conceptualizer's vantage point does not necessarily lie within that ground. Consider also example (24), repeated here in (53):

(53) From the west **were rolling** pile after pile of fat, white, complicated clouds, and above the clouds was the clear and uncomplicated blue. (Birner, 1524)

The use of the progressive here is, in my view, motivated by the gradual motion of the clouds; the more an event is stretched in time, the more natural it becomes to devote more attention to this process, which is consequently construed as less canonical.

There are two examples that appear to defy my analysis, one actually attested ((23), repeated in (54)), and one constructed yet considered acceptable ((41), repeated in (55)):

(54) Out of the mouths of revolutionaries **are coming** words of moderation. (OntoNotes)
(55) From our neighbor's house **is coming** the sound of piano music.

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In these examples, the denoted events 'end', so to speak, in the conceptualizer's deictic center. Yet this is not an effect of the construction, but rather of the verb *come*, which by definition subjectively refers to the deictic center. The crucial difference between these examples and the ungrammatical sentences cited in (42) to (44) is that, in the latter cases, the deictic center coincides with the ground that serves to locate the figure. By contrast, in (54) and (55), the figure is located with respect to a ground that is *not* the deictic center. Consequently, the conceptualizer's viewpoint is not anchored within or with respect to this ground and there is no constructionally induced deictic effect. Non-deictic cases such as these may allow the use of the progressive under specific circumstances. In (54) and (55), we are again dealing with events that are temporally extended – in (54), the words are being uttered repeatedly, and in (55), the sound of the piano music obviously does not 'arrive' instantaneously – and thus progressive construals are licensed.

In the overwhelming majority of the cases of full-verb inversion though, the use of the progressive is either dispreferred (i.e. rarely used compared to the simplex tenses), because there is no need to focus on the canonical process, or it is entirely barred, whenever the deictic effect arises. Apart from these functional constraints, there may also be more formal factors playing a role, namely the presence of other progressive-like constructions. This brings me to predicate inversion, in which the present participle is part of the preposed constituent. In line with, among others, Dorgeloh (1997: 86–8) and Chen (2003: 134–48), I believe that this fronted present participle has lost its verbal qualities, and that it is therefore misleading to speak of progressive aspect here, as Birner & Ward (1992) do. For instance, as pointed out by Birner & Ward (1992) themselves, the following example does not necessarily refer to an ongoing situation, since it could also be used to report the loss of the main opposition party (i.e. a completed event):

(56) A free election was held in Czechoslovakia for the first time since the war. **Losing** the election **was** the main opposition party. (Birner & Ward 1992: 1)

Ongoing readings are not excluded with predicate inversion, but, as amply demonstrated by Chen (2003: 138–46), the preposed participle is unambiguously adjectival in most cases, whereas unambiguously verbal instances are not attested (i.e. the participle can always be interpreted as giving more information about the referent of the subject NP and thus as an adjective). Predicate inversion may be exploited to construe the event of, in the case of (56), losing, as non-inferable, thus exempting the 'real' progressive from this function. Note that presentational *there*-constructions also have competing progressive-like constructions, as illustrated in (57):

(57) There'**s** someone **stepping/jumping** into the room.

Here, too, we are dealing with a present participle, modifying *someone*, yet again this construction could be exploited to construe the denoted motion as non-canonical, where full-verb inversion is a less likely candidate to fulfill this function. Compare, for instance, the following two examples:

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(58) Look, there**'s** someone **jumping** into the room!
(59) ?Look, into the room **is jumping** / **jumps** someone!

As illustrated in (59), it sounds at least contrived to use full-verb inversion to emphasize the exceptionality of the designated event (jump). Thus, for all types of full-verb inversion, there appears to be a related construction that could block the use of the actual progressive. Note that the presence of these progressive-like constructions does not preclude, but rather complements my conceptual account.

## 6 Conclusion

In this article, I have presented empirical data – in the form of corpus data and native-speaker elicitations – evidencing a constraint on the use of the progressive in full-verb inversion in English that is overruled in exceptional, specific contexts. Building on previous insights from analyses of both aspect and inversion in English, and combining these insights into an original analysis, I have suggested that inverted sentences involve processes that are fully identifiable at the time of reference: the relationship between a certain preposed ground and a certain postposed figure is canonical, and hence predictable. This sense of canonicity ties in perfectly with the aspectual meaning of the simple tenses in English, which I consider perfective. Therefore, the use of the progressive is only licensed in restricted contexts, for instance, when the speaker wants to confer special prominence on the process. In addition, cases in which the conceptualizer's vantage point is anchored within or in opposition to the ground, involve a deictic effect. In these cases, a sense of inevitability arises, and the progressive is barred. This article thus offers an explanation for the puzzling use of the simple tenses in full-verb inversion in English.

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## Supplementary material

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