

The Progressive Aspect in English and how to avoid errors in German

ENGLISH LANGUAGE STRATEGIES

Among the various verb structures in English, there exists a form called the 'progressive aspect'. The term 'progressive' means 'in progress, currently underway, going on at the moment'. This verb construction is also referred to as 'continuous'.

The progressive aspect is a compound verb structure, meaning that multiple verbs are needed to construct the form. To build the progressive aspect in English, the speaker conjugates the verb 'be' (as a helping verb) and then uses the '-ing' form of the lexical verb (the 'real' verb) to indicate the activity in the sentence.

Examples of the progressive verb aspect in English: (be + vb-ing)

The woman is working today. / I am watching TV. / The children are playing on the lawn.

The verb structures in the above sentences indicate that the action is currently in progress. Compare the above sentences to the following examples below where only the simplex conjugation of the verb (a single verb) expresses the activity.

Examples of simplex conjugation of the verb in English: (only one verb)

The woman works at the post office. (She may not actually be working at the moment.)

I watch TV on the weekends. (This means, perhaps, last weekend, or next weekend, or no specific time.)

The children always play on the lawn. (There is no definite time, rather the activity is generally true.)

GERMAN LANGUAGE STRATEGIES

There is no progressive aspect in German. Instead, German simply conjugates a single verb. What this means is that the simplex conjugation of the verb in German can mean that the activity is generally true or that the activity is currently in progress. Only through context is it possible to distinguish the aspect of the verb.

Examples of simplex German verb conjugations:

Die Frau arbeitet.		The woman is working.		The woman works.
Ich sehe fern.	<i>can mean</i>	I am watching TV.	<i>or</i>	I watch TV.
Die Kinder spielen.		The children are playing.		The children play.

Conversely, if an English sentence with the progressive verb aspect is rendered into German, the German verb form loses the English progressive aspect of the verb.

Examples of English verbs that lose their progressive aspect when rendered into German.

I am working.	Ich arbeite.	In these instances, German simply conjugates a single verb, nothing more. There is no verb 'be' in the German sentences, only the lexical verb.
He is playing .	Er spielt.	
We are watching TV.	Wir sehen fern.	
It is raining.	Es regnet.	

(The Progressive Aspect of English Verbs, Continued)

The German verb 'sein' (be).

When the only verb in the sentence is a form of 'be', then German conjugates the verb 'sein', and there is no other verb in the sentence.

I am happy. Ich bin froh.
It is cold. Es ist kalt.
We are here. Wir sind da.
She is pretty. Sie ist schön.

In each of these sentences, the only verb is a form of the verb 'be'. This means that the lexical verb (the verb with the actual meaning, not a helping verb) is the verb 'be', ('sein' in German).

A tool to express the progressive aspect in German.

If a German sentence needs to express that something is currently in progress, then often the adverb 'gerade' appears in the sentence. The word 'gerade' means roughly 'at the moment, currently'.

She is working. Sie arbeitet gerade.
I am playing cards. Ich spiele gerade Karten.
The children are watching TV. Die Kinder sehen gerade fern.
It is raining (at the moment). Es regnet gerade.

Transference errors from English to German.

English speakers learning German often attempt to force the English strategy of the progressive aspect of the verb onto German sentences. This fails in German and renders the sentences ungrammatical. A native speaker of German hearing (or reading) these sentences would be instantly confused and possibly would not comprehend what the native English speaker wished to express.

Examples of errors produced by English speakers forcing the progressive aspect onto German.

UNGRAMMATICAL	CORRECT	English Translation
⊗ Sie ist arbeiten. ⊗	Sie arbeitet.	She is working.
⊗ Es ist regnet. ⊗	Es regnet.	It is raining.
⊗ Die Kinder sind spielen. ⊗	Die Kinder spielen.	The children are playing.
⊗ Ich bin sehe fern. ⊗	Ich sehe fern.	I am watching TV.

Examples for practice.

Translate the following sentences into German. Be sure to avoid the trap of applying the English progressive aspect of the verb onto the German. Look to the right to check your work.

I am working.	Ich arbeite.
He is playing.	Er spielt.
The weather is nice.	Das Wetter ist schön.
We are learning German.	Wir lernen Deutsch.
I am happy.	Ich bin froh.
It is raining.	Es regnet.
They are attractive.	Sie sind schön.