Deriving the readings of French être en train de

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Tenth International Tbilisi Symposium on Language, Logic and Computation: Workshop on Aspect
September 24, 2013
The French simple present has both a generic/habitual construal and an ongoing reading:

(1) Il mange du pain.
  he eats PART bread
  a. ‘He eats bread.’ [habitual]
  b. ‘He is eating bread.’ [ongoing]
Être en train de

Être en train de (êetd), lit. ‘to be in the midst of,’ is traditionally referred to as the French progressive and expresses ongoing meaning.

(2) Elle est en train de lire un livre.
    she is in midst of read.INF a book
    ‘She is reading a book.’
However, êetd cannot express ongoing meaning in certain contexts where other progressives are fine.

(3) It’s raining.

(4) Está lloviendo.
   estar.pres.3S raining
   ‘It’s raining.’

(5) a. ??Il est en train de pleuvoir.
     it is in midst of rain.INF
     b. Il pleut. √
     il rains
     ‘It’s raining.’

Other languages have progressives that behave like êetd in this respect: Catalan, Dutch, Italian . . . others?
Some instances of ëetd seem to be associated with an additional expressive meaning, compared to the simple present:

(6) Qu’est-ce que tu fais?
what.is-it that you do
‘What are you doing?’/‘What do you (habitually) do?’

(7) Qu’est-ce que tu es en train de faire?
what.is-it that you are in midst of do.INF
‘What (the hell) are you doing?’
Expressive meaning is contributed by conventional implicatures (CIs): see Grice 1975; Potts, 2005, on *the hell, damn, bastard* .... CIs are:

- part of the conventional meanings of words (*âetd*, in this case; *the hell*)
- independent of the at-issue meaning (e.g. the pejorative part is not what’s being questioned)
- and are non-cancellable speaker commitments:

(8) Qu’est-ce que tu es en train de nous faire pour le diner? - # On va se régaler!
‘What are you cooking for dinner? - # We are going to love it!’
(9) a. Nous savons tous ce qui se passe en Syrie.  
   We know all that which REFL goes.on in Syria  
   ‘We all know what’s going on in Syria/California.’  

b. Nous savons tous ce qui est en train de se  
   we know all that which is in midst of REFL  
   passer en Syrie.  
   go.on.INF in Syria  
   ‘We all know what’s going on in Syria/California (and I  
   disapprove).’
(10) a. Il prend un bonbon.
    'he takes a candy'
    'He is taking a piece of candy.'

b. Il est en train de prendre un bonbon.
    he is in midst of take.sc Inf a candy
    'He is taking a piece of candy (and he shouldn’t be).' expressive
(11) Il est en train de pleuvoir sur notre pique-nique.
it is in midst of rain-INF on our picnic
‘It is raining on our picnic (and the picnic is ruined).’
However, there are also many cases where there is no additional expressive meaning. In these, "êetd" just seems to express ongoing meaning. The speaker wants to disambiguate:

(12) Je suis en train de guérir grâce à cette méthode.
    I am in midst of heal.INF thank to this method
    ‘I’m getting better thanks to this method.’
    neutral

(13) Chaque enfant est en train de décorer son sapin de Noël.
    each child is in midst of decorate.INF his tree of Christmas
    ‘Each child is decorating their own Christmas tree.’
    neutral
Desiderata:

1. explain the content of the expressive meaning
2. explain why the expressive meaning does not always arise
3. explain why neutral êetd cannot be used to express ongoing meanings in all contexts
Analysis

Initial hypothesis:

- âetd is simply ambiguous between the expressive and neutral readings.
- The content of the expressive meaning is that the propositional complement of âetd is bad according to the speaker.

(14)  
(a) âetd_{neutral}: AIM: p is ongoing
(b) âetd_{expressive} AIM: p is ongoing, CI: p is bad
This hypothesis correctly treats the AIM of expressive êetd the same as the simple present:

(15) Qu’est-ce que tu es en train de faire ?
    what.is-it that you are in midst of do.INF
    ‘What (the hell) are you doing?’

(16) Bah, je joue. / #Bah, je suis en train de jouer.
    uh I play / uh I am in midst of play.INF
    ‘Uh, I’m playing.’
Problems for initial hypothesis:

- The reason for the proposed ambiguity is left unexplained.
- The reason the neutral reading of êetd is not always possible is not explained.
- The proposed content of the CI of expressive êetd is not correct.
The expressive meaning in êetd cannot be accounted for with the “p is bad” semantics.

(17) Le général était en train de s’habiller
     the general was in midst of Refl.dress.inf
     ‘The general was getting dressed.’

= the general wasn’t ”visible”

(18) Je suis en train de me brosser les dents.
     I am in midst of Refl brush.inf the teeth
     ‘I am brushing my teeth.’

(context: the phone rings) = I cannot pick up the phone

⇒ It’s not that p is bad, it’s that some other q is desired (the speaker seeing the general, the speaker picking up the phone)
At-issue meaning of \( \hat{\text{êetd}} \)

same as the ongoing reading of the simple present (cf. Portner, 1998)

(19) \[ c = \{ x_c, s_c, f_c, g_c, b_c \} \]
\( x_c \): speaker
\( s_c \): situation of utterance
\( f_c \): speaker’s circumstantial conversational background in \( s_c \)
\( g_c \): speaker’s stereotypical conversational background in \( s_c \)
\( b_c \): speaker’s bouletic conversational background in \( s_c \)

(20) \[ \llbracket \hat{\text{êetd}} \rrbracket^c = \lambda p \lambda s . \forall w \in \text{BEST}(f_c, g_c) : \\
\exists s' \subset w \text{ and } s \text{ is a non-final part of } s' : [p(s')] \]
We know that modals with circumstantial modal bases can often have both bouletic and stereotypical ordering sources.

(21) Copley, 2002

a. Will you marry me?
b. Yes, I will!
c. Why yes, that’s just the sort of thing I would probably do.

We’re not suggesting that the at-issue meaning of êetd has another reading with a bouletic ordering source. However, we would like to suggest that it has a modal CI that has both possibilities for its ordering source.
Conventional implicature of êetd

identical to the at-issue meaning except that it can have either a bouletic ordering source or a stereotypical ordering source. Note that it has its own proposition q.

(22) bouletic ordering source CI:
\[
\left[ \text{êetd} \right]^c = \lambda q \ \lambda s . \ \forall w \in \text{BEST}(f_c, b_c) : \exists s' \subset w \text{ and } s \text{ is a non-final part of } s' : [q(s')]
\]

(23) stereotypical ordering source CI:
\[
\left[ \text{êetd} \right]^c = \lambda q \ \lambda s . \ \forall w \in \text{BEST}(f_c, g_c) : \exists s' \subset w \text{ and } s \text{ is a non-final part of } s' : [q(s')]
\]
êetd is ALWAYS expressive (i.e., it always has a CI). Different “readings” arise depending on (i) the ordering source in the CI and (ii) whether p (the proposition expressed by the complement of êetd and involved in the AIM meaning) equals q (the proposition introduced by the CI).

- **bouletic** ordering source in the CI:
  - $p \neq q$ : discordant reading
  - $p = q$ : accordant reading

- **stereotypical** ordering source in the CI:
  - $p = q$ : disambiguating reading
  - $p \neq q$ : interpretive reading

→ the expressive readings we have seen so far

→ the neutral cases we have seen so far
Discordant reading: **bouletic, p ≠ q**

(24)  *Il est en train de prendre un bonbon.*

he is in midst of take.INF a candy.

‘He is taking a piece of candy (and he shouldn’t be).’

discordant: bouletic, p ≠ q

AIM: the current situation s is such that there is a supersituation s’ of s, s a non-final interval of s’, such that on all circumstantially accessible worlds compatible with the speaker’s stereotypical knowledge, *he take a bonbon* is true of s’.

CI: ‘the current situation s is such that there is a supersituation s’ of s, s a non-final interval of s’, such that on all circumstantially accessible worlds compatible with the speaker’s desires, a proposition q is true of s’

⇒ the speaker judges that p is in the midst of happening, and wants it to be that q is in the midst of happening. Here, q could be ¬p, e.g.
However, q doesn’t have to be $\neg p$. All that matters is that $p \neq q$:

$$p \cap q = 0:$$

(25)  Je suis en train de me brosser les dents.
      I am in midst of REFL brush.INF the.PL teeth
      ‘I’m brushing my teeth (so I can’t answer the phone).’
      discordant: bouletic, $p \neq q$

$$p \subseteq q:$$

(26)  Les enfants sont en train de traverser la rue.
      the.PL children are in midst of cross.INF the street
      ‘The children are crossing the street (there is imminent danger).’
      discordant: bouletic, $p \neq q$
Accordant reading: **bouletic, p = q**

(27)  

a. Je parle.
   I talk
   ‘I’m talking.’

b. Je suis en train de parler.
   I am in midst of talk.INF
   ‘I’m talking (and I’m asking you not to interrupt me).’

accordant: **bouletic, p = q**

(28)  

a. Ta soeur dort.
   your sister sleeps
   ‘Your sister is sleeping’.

b. Ta soeur est en train de dormir.
   your sister is in midst of sleep.INF
   ‘Your sister is sleeping (and I want her to keep sleeping, be quiet).

accordant: **bouletic, p = q**
Stereotypical ordering source CI

Disambiguating reading: **stereotypical**, \( p = q \)

A CI that is exactly the same as the AIM?!?! Yes. When \( p = q \), they are exactly the same. But since the simple present has the ongoing meaning without the extra CI, it would normally be used unless disambiguation is needed from the habitual reading.

(29)    Je suis en train de guérir grâce à cette méthode.
        I am in midst of heal.INF thank to this method
        ‘I’m getting better thanks to this method.’

(30)    Chaque enfant est en train de décorer son sapin.
        each child is in midst of decorate.INF his tree
        ‘Each child is decorating their own Christmas tree.’
Quand je rêve de moi, je cours. Je veux dire, je suis en train de courir. ‘When I dream of myself, I \{run/am running\}. I mean, I am running.’

disambiguating: stereotypical, $p = q$
Interpretive reading: **stereotypical, p ≠ q**

In this case the Cl is not exactly the same as the AIM, because p ≠ q.

Constraint: it can’t be that p ∩ q = 0. So, p ∩ q ≠ 0.

Interpretive reading of ëetd (Kearns 2003, Martin 2006):

(32) Pierre quitte la réunion. Il est en train de faire une erreur.

‘Pierre is leaving the meeting. He is making a mistake.’

interpretive: **stereotypical, p ≠ q**
Conclusion

- The AIM of êetd is just an ongoing meaning, same as the simple present.
- Taxonomy of readings of êetd: bouletic ordering source in the CI (discordant, accordant) and stereotypical ordering source in the CI (disambiguating, interpretive).

Desiderata:

1. Content of the expressive meaning: modal CI with either a bouletic or a stereotypical ordering source
2. Why the expressive meaning does not always arise: actually, the CI is always there, but when it has a stereotypical ordering source, it is not “expressive” in Potts’ sense (good/bad)
3. Why êetd cannot be used to express ongoing meanings in all contexts: when the CI has a stereotypical ordering source and p = q, that makes the CI identical to the AIM, only useful for disambiguating.
Thank you!

Merci!

Madlobt!