

# Deriving the readings of French *être en train de*

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# French simple present

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* (*êtd*), 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, *êtd* 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 *êtd* in this respect : Catalan, Dutch, Italian . . . others?

- Some instances of *êetd* 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

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 (*êetd*, 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  
what.is-it that your are in midst of us do.INF for the  
diner? -# On va se régaler!  
dinner we go REFL enjoy  
'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).'

expressive

- (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).'

expressive

However, there are also many cases where there is no additional expressive meaning. In these, *êtd* 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  
each child is in midst of decorate.INF his tree of  
Noël.  
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

Initial hypothesis:

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

- (14) a.  $\hat{e}etd_{neutral}$ : AIM: p is ongoing  
b.  $\hat{e}etd_{expressive}$  AIM: p is ongoing, CI: p is bad

This hypothesis correctly treats the AIM of expressive *êtd* 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 *êtd* 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 *êtd*

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)  $\llbracket \hat{e}td \rrbracket^c = \lambda p \lambda s . \forall w \in \text{BEST}(f_c, g_c) :$   
 $\exists s' \subset w$  and  $s$  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:

$$\llbracket \hat{e}etd \rrbracket^c = \lambda q \lambda s . \forall w \in \text{BEST}(f_c, b_c) : \\ \exists s' \subset w \text{ and } s \text{ is a non-final part of } s' : [q(s')]$$

(23) stereotypical ordering source CI:

$$\llbracket \hat{e}etd \rrbracket^c = \lambda q \lambda s . \forall w \in \text{BEST}(f_c, g_c) : \\ \exists s' \subset w \text{ and } s \text{ is a non-final part of } s' : [q(s')]$$

# Taxonomy of *êetd* readings

*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

→ the expressive readings we have seen so far

- **stereotypical** ordering source in the CI:

- $p = q$  : disambiguating reading
- $p \neq q$  : interpretive reading

→ the neutral cases we have seen so far

# Bouletic ordering source CI

Discordant reading: bouletic,  $p \neq q$

- (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,  $p \neq q$

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  $\neg p$ , 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 brosse 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,  $p \neq q$

$p \subset q$ :

- (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.'

disambiguating: [stereotypical](#),  $p = q$

- (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.'

disambiguating: [stereotypical](#),  $p = q$

- (31) Quand je rêve de moi, je cours. Je veux dire, je suis en  
when I dream of me, I run I want say I am in  
train de courir.  
midst of run.INF  
'When I dream of myself, I {run/am running}. I mean, I am  
running.'

disambiguating: [stereotypical](#), p = q



Interpretive reading: [stereotypical](#),  $p \neq q$

In this case the CI is not exactly the same as the AIM, because  $p \neq q$ .  
Constraint: it can't be that  $p \cap q = 0$ . So,  $p \cap q \neq 0$ .

Interpretive reading of *êtd* (Kearns 2003, Martin 2006):

- (32) Pierre quitte la réunion. Il est en train de faire une  
Pierre leave the meeting he is in midst of make.INF a  
erreur.  
mistake  
'Pierre is leaving the meeting. He is making a mistake.'

interpretive: [stereotypical](#),  $p \neq q$

# 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!