

Know / Knowing

A question from Wojciech in Poland

I have heard that there are some verbs which very rarely are used in the continuous form. Could you give me an example in which a verb such as 'know' is used in the continuous form (possibly other than an idiom that requires '-ing' form)?

Gareth Rees answers

Wojciech, thank you for your question. First of all, in a sense, there are two types of verbs, action verbs and state verbs. Action verbs include ones like kick, take, do. State verbs include ones like have, be, know, believe. Interestingly, state verbs often describe things connected to our minds and thoughts, as well as possession and existence. To be or not to be for example.

It is indeed unusual for a verb with a state meaning to be used in the continuous form. This is because the continuous form suggests something is temporary and of limited duration, usually happening at a specific time, for example; "At the moment, I am working on a computer."

However, a state is something which has a feeling of permanence or unlimited duration. For example: "The sun is the source of energy."

So, we say 'I know my Father', not 'I am knowing my father', because the relationship feels permanent, and it is a state of knowledge not an activity. You either know your father or you don't. To know or not to know, that is the example.

However, there some verbs which usually have a state meaning, but can sometimes have an action meaning. 'Think' is a good example of this. Here are two examples:

"What do you think of the weather in your country?"

"Hey David, you seem worried. What are you thinking about?"

In the first example, think has a state meaning - what is your opinion? In the second example think has an action meaning. David is actively thinking hard about something. His friend can see this in his face, we can imagine the engine in his brain working. So, we can therefore use the continuous form because it is now an action verb. And, we want to give a meaning of temporary action happening now 'What are you thinking about? Tell me!'

Finally, a few more examples of the verbs which are rarely used in the continuous but could be. First of all: "I have a brother" , "I can't talk now. I'm having dinner."

In the first one, to have a brother, is a permanent state of existence. You either have a brother or you don't. In the second one have describes the action to eat dinner, to have dinner. This is an action so we can say "I'm having dinner."

And lastly the verb 'to love'. This is a state of emotion and is normally used in the simple form, not in the continuous form. "I love ice-cream", "I love my wife".

However there is one popular example at the moment which is used by an American restaurant company in their advertising. They simply say for the experience of eating in their restaurant, "I'm loving it".

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