Good Writing Practice

Grammatical misagreement in tense

II – Present Participle, Progressive Verb

Introduction

In this regular feature, the misagreement in tense is extended from present and present perfect tense (discussed in the previous edition of MEW) to an analysis of the frequently used present participle (of the participial phrase) and the infrequently used progressive verb (of the progressive phrase), each of which contains an ing syntactic unit.

The present participle component of the participial phrase functions primarily adjectivally but as a verbal retains verb-like qualities such as tense. The present progressive verb phrase is infrequently (if at all) used in research writing, possibly because of its informal narrative pattern (characterised by agent- and action-focused sentence constituents).

The following examples are analysed according to (1) the context of a conceptual component in a journal article section, (2) the type of syntactic unit (participle, progressive verb), and (3) the type of disagreement (time, certainty).

Experimental section

Part 1 – Results section: results statement and preliminary interpretation

Example: Present tense – misagreement in certainty

The band shifts and the new bands were consistent with the predicted bands, indicating that the plasmid pIV4Sm integrated into the chromosome at ure C.

Revision 1

The band shifts and the new bands were consistent with the predicted bands, a consistency which indicated that the plasmid pIV4Sm integrated into the chromosome at ure C.

Revision 2

The band shifts and the new bands were consistent with the predicted bands, which indicated that the plasmid pIV4Sm integrated into the chromosome at ure C.

Notes

In the Example, the tense of the present participle indicating denotes a timeless truth rather than a circumspect preliminary interpretation.

A preliminary interpretation denotes information one conceptual level above a result statement. To a traditionalist, the preliminary interpretation may seem to belong in the Discussion section; however, an even higher level of conceptualisation, such as inference (including the Conclusion and Consequence) do belong in the Discussion section. Therefore, the more depth of the Discussion section, the more appropriate placement of a preliminary interpretation in the Results section.

In Revision 1, the usage of the past tense (as a past participle) is circumspect, befitting the care with which research was performed and interpreted. To write the past participle indicated, a which is required, inexplicitly modifying more than one of the constituents or even the whole sentence. This which (often termed the ‘vague’ which) ostensibly justifies usage of the antecedent marker consistsence that identifies the inexplicit antecedent (Revision 1) being modified.

Usage of the antecedent marker consistsence may seem as a hypercorrection and redundant, so despite its vagueness an adjective clause with the inexplicit marker which may be the preferred option (Revision 2).

Contextual sections

Part 1 – Introduction section: research problem pertinent background and research problem

Example: Active progressive verb – misagreement in time

Although many researchers are looking for cementum-specific markers (that differentiate cementum from bone), their existence is still uncertain.

Revision

Despite wide-spread interest, existence is still uncertain of cementum-specific markers that differentiate cementum from bone.

Notes

The present time of the present participle focusing is inconsistent with the past focus of the other sentence constituents (sentence orientation previous study and the sentence verb were tested). In the Revision, transformation into the past participle focused avoids the tense misagreement. Both the present and past participle adjectivally modify the noun study.

Another distraction of study focusing on is personification of an inanimate subject, which is less so in the past tense as study focused on.

Part 2 – Introduction section: research problem pertinent background and research problem

Example: Active progressive verb – misagreement in time

Unlike the previous study focusing on plasma alone, in the present study the function of the erythrocyte as well as plasma was tested.

Revision

Unlike the previous study focused on plasma alone, in the present study the function of the erythrocyte as well as plasma was tested.
Part 3 – Discussion
section: research consequence

Example: Passive progressive verb – misagreement in time

The present study may also be contributing
to understanding magma transport mechanisms at mid-ocean ridges.

Revision
The present study may also contribute to understanding magma transport mechanisms at mid-ocean ridges.

Notes
The progressive verb, even in the passive voice be

contributing, indicating a present on-going action, is in misagreement to a consequence of past research. In the revision, the present tense may also convey a time-independent consequence in the present and even future time.

Summary
Rhetorical consequence: The frequent usage of a present participle to denote a preliminary interpretation in the Results section connotes a timeless truth – a certainty characteristic of a non-professional tone, as is the highly informal narrative progressive tense.

Revision options: Transformation of the present to past participle minimises the certainty in a preliminary interpretation. For replacement of the narrativism of the progressive tense, there are tenseless syntactic alternatives or the present tense.

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Schematised misagreement in tense – distractions and preferred revisions

Present Participle Misagreement

Introduction: research objective
Transformation: present → past participle
Unlike the previous study focusing on plasma alone, in the present study the function of the erythrocyte as well as plasma was tested.

Results: results statement and preliminary interpretation
Replacement: present participle → past tense adjective clause
The band shifts and the new bands were consistent with the predicted bands, indicating that the plasmid pIV4Sm integrated into the chromosome at ure C.

Progressive Verb Misagreement

Introduction: research problem pertinent background and research problem
Replacement: adverb clause → tenseless prepositional phrase
Although many researchers are looking for cementum-specific markers (that differentiate cementum from bone), their existence is still uncertain.

Discussion: research consequence
Transformation: progressive verb phrase → present tense finite verb
The present study may also be contributing to understanding magma transport mechanisms at mid-ocean ridges.

The present study may also contribute to understanding magma transport mechanisms at mid-ocean ridges.