

On-Going or Resultative?: Energy-Input Theory for the Aspectual Form *Te-iru*

**Yuki Johnson
University of Toronto**

This article reexamines the functions of the aspectual form *ている* and presents a systematic theory of verb categories termed “Energy-input theory” in order to better understand what type of verb occurring with *ている* expresses either an on-going or a resultative meaning and what type of verb occurring with *ている* expresses only a resultative meaning.

ている has been an object of study in the field of aspect for decades, with countless research efforts evolving from the work of Kindaichi (1950). His classification of verbs into four distinct categories is still often used; however, it is often criticized as a merely intuitive system, relying too much on the idea of “how long for an event to realize.” Refinement was eventually given by Okuda (1986), yet the study of English aspect applied to the characteristics of Japanese verbs later revealed problems inherent to the theories of Kindaichi and Okuda. In particular, the notions of “homogeneity” and “non-homogeneity” presented by Dowty (1986) better clarified the functions of *ている* and bestowed a clear picture of the difference between *私は(今)食べている* and *私は(もう)食べている*. (Without “now” or “already,” the meaning is ambiguous.)

Theories like these arising from linguistic research are, however, difficult to incorporate into teaching of Japanese in academic settings, and misunderstanding of the interpretation of *ている* sentences is still seen almost always among learners of Japanese. For example, *リスが死んでいる* and *友達は大学に行っている* are without fail translated as “A squirrel is dying” and “My friend is going to school” even after covering *ている* in detail. The gap between theoretical linguistic studies and daily teaching can be large, as with *ている*, and the fundamental research needs to be reformulated in a manner addressed to educators of Japanese.

Inspired by the teaching of Japanese grammar and research in Japanese linguistics, this article reexamines the fundamental nature of *ている* by employing the notions of “energy input” presented by Comrie (1986) and “homogeneity,” by Dowty (1986). By combining these two notions, the study presents a clear picture as to what type of verbs expresses either an on-going or a resultative meaning and what type of verbs expresses only a resultative meaning. Specifically, when a verb is considered to require energy input (either human volition or natural force) in order to maintain the situation, it can express either an on-going or a resultative meaning, both of which relate to a “homogeneous” state. On the other hand, when a verb is considered not to require energy input and relates rather to a one-time event, then the *ている* sentence expresses only a resultative meaning. For example: *鹿島建設は古い建物を壊している* “Kajima construction company is destroying an old building (on-going)” or “Kajima construction company has destroyed an old building (resultative)”; *車が壊れている* “A car is broken down (resultative meaning only).”

The theory of energy input can easily be explained to learners of Japanese. With an appreciation for the fundamental linguistic theory, learners can better understand the inherent nature of *ている* as quite different from the English progressive (“~ing”) and thereby create and interpret *ている* sentences accurately.

	Volitional control	Repetition	Energy input
泳ぐ	✓	✓	✓
泣く	✓	?	✓
買う	✓	??	✓
降る	X	✓	✓

	Volitional control	One-time event	Energy input
知る	✓	✓	X
住む	✓	✓	??
持つ	✓	✓	??
死ぬ	??	✓	X

泳いでいる { On-going “is swimming”
Resultative “has swum”

死んでいる { On-going “is dying”
Resultative “is dead”

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Technical Terms

On-going: Refers to an event that is maintained by the energy-input of a living, volitional entity or a natural force.

Resultative: Refers to a situation after cessation of energy-input, where such cessation is realized by a living, volitional entity or a natural force. Therefore, static or stative situations described by an adjective, for example, are not considered “resultative.”

Energy-input theory: When a situation requires energy-input in order to persist, verbs with ている can express either an on-going or resultative meaning. On the contrary, when a situation does not require energy-input to persist, verbs with ている receive only a resultative meaning.

Homogeneity: a concept that refers to a situation for which the interval described by the predicate is also true for any subinterval therein – no matter how small. For example, states and activities reflect the concept of homogeneity, since the predicate holds any subinterval.