

Dear John,

Thank you very much for the opportunity to sending you language questions. I've worked on a problem for quite a while, but I'm not able to solve it on my own.

Why is it:

"I'm having a drink"

but NOT

"I'm having a glass in my hand"

I learned, that if something is happening at the moment, I have to use the "-ing" form. I cannot explain why it should be "I have a glass in my hand" if I can see that there is a glass in my hand at the moment.

Please, can you answer the question?

Thanks in advance.

Best wishes,
Sabrina

Dear Sabrina,

Thanks for the question – even if it is a difficult one to answer.

The issue you have addressed (the difference between the present simple and present continuous) is fundamental to the English language and, unfortunately, rather complicated. I fear that it will not be possible to give you a simple, clear cut answer that will make it possible for you to always know exactly when to use either the simple (“I have a car”) or the continuous form (“I am having a drink”). Indeed, the expectation that one could reach such a state rests on – at least in my view – a false understanding of what the role of grammar in language production, and I would like to briefly address this issue first.

In my view, grammar is ultimately not generative, but rather descriptive. Certainly, grammar can become normative in school settings and when learning a second language, and in these cases plays a constructive role in generating linguistic texts. But this is a derivative function that is limited in its scope. Moreover, the “rules” of grammar that we become so familiar with in schools are not really rules, but rather descriptions of behavior patterns that you can use as guidelines. Native speakers don't usually know “why” they use certain verb forms at certain times and are almost always at a loss to provide rules and reasons for their language use when asked. This is informative in as much as it give us a hint to how we learn our native language: We mimic behavior; we do not – at least consciously – follow rules. This is relevant for us now in so far as it is important to notice that grammar does not describe essential structures dictating language production – for language production is based on habits, not rules. Rather, grammar describes general patterns of behavior and what these patterns usually mean.

Follows from this that grammarians' job is to try to provide the most general pattern descriptions possible; the goal of these descriptions is to help those learning a language to mimic the behavior of native speakers. Having said this, I don't think that the description of the difference between the present simple and continuous that you have been working with is very helpful. The

distinction between present simple and continuous is not solely one of “now” or “not now.” While it is true that we often use the continuous form when the action is going on now, this is not always the case. (“I am taking an English class this semester.” “I usually grow a garden, but I am not growing one this year.”) Likewise, we often use the simple form to describe an action that is going on now: “The moon circles the earth.”

Try this conceptual distinction and see if it helps you: use the present continuous when you want to emphasize that the action is ongoing and temporal, the present simple when you view the action as being more permanent. If you say something like “I work in Cologne” or “My husband comes from Ireland,” you are describing circumstances that you perceive as being permanent – even if you may be surprised and lose your job next week. On the other hand, if you say something like “I am staying at my sister’s apartment until I find a place of my own,” what you want to tell us is that the situation is temporary, that you will be moving out of your sister’s flat as soon as you can. One thing to emphasize here is that the usage of the simple and continuous forms reflects how the speaker views reality, not necessary reality itself. (A child, for instance, will say “I go to Como’s Kindergarten,” not “I am going,” even though from a grown-up’s perspective this would be a temporary situation.)

Another interesting characteristic of our behavior patterns with reference to the usage of present simple and continuous forms is that we tend to express things like ownership, sensory perception, emotions, and opinions/beliefs with the present simple, even if the situation is clearly temporary. Although in my dialect we often so say things like: “I am feeling down today,” “I feel down today” is more common, as is “I see the dog” (not: “I am seeing the dog,”), etc.

How can this new description help you out in your specific case? Let’s return to the question you asked: “having a drink” vs. “have a glass in my hand.” First off, let’s ignore the “now”/ “not now distinction,” since both are happening “now” this cannot serve to explain the difference in behavior. Because the verb is “to have,” we are dealing with possession in this case, and usually one would expect to see the simple used in both cases. But with the drink, this is not the case. What could be going on in this case? Think about the permanent issue. Would you want to finish the drink in a few days if you do not finish in the next few hours? Probably not. “Having a drink” means that you are drinking something, i.e., this is a temporary situation. There are few drinks that are not perishable, and, when you say “I am having a drink” you want to tell me that this is a situation with a limited time frame, i.e., it is temporary. The other example – even though it is dealing with a situation that is temporary (“I have a glass in my hand”) – is a case where the ownership issue influences usage, i.e., we use the simple form here because we generally view ownership as a permanent situation – even though in this case one presumably will not be holding the glass in his/her hand indefinitely. However, in the sentence “I have a glass,” it agrees with our intuitions to use the simple continuous because the ownership of the glass is a more permanent situation, and most likely this issue of ownership is affecting the case with the glass in my hand, although the situation here is not permanent.

Allow me to make a last suggestion. Try out my description (temporary vs. permanent) and see if it helps you to improve both your usage and your understanding of how the present continuous vs. simple forms are used. To check this out, watch native speakers (on television, etc.) and sensitize yourself to their behavior patterns. Try to imitate what they do and develop a sense for when they use the present simple as opposed to present continuous. If my suggestion helps you, then hopefully you develop speaking patterns that harmonize with the patterns of native speakers and, ultimately, you will be able to forget about any guidelines that I or anyone else have suggested. If my suggestion doesn’t seem to help you out – write me back with examples that are giving you trouble, and we will try again!

Take care,

John Stanley