The gerund/infinitive contrast in English verb complementation

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Abstract

Teaching the gerund/infinitive distinction in complement constructions is a problematic area in EFL/ESL instruction. English language learners normally have difficulty choosing the appropriate complement in cases where only one is possible as in ‘he enjoys studying English’ and ‘she intends to study English’ as well as in those where either may occur: ‘they love studying/to study English’. Lists do not adequately address the problem since they fail to take into account the semantic relationships between head verbs and complement constructions as well as speaker motivation for complement choice. I will, therefore, offer an alternative approach to teaching gerund/infinitive complementation based on the assumption that the distribution of both constructions is a function of the core meanings of to and -ing and that native English speakers select complements in accordance with their communicative needs. It is hoped that the insights provided here will prove helpful to EFL/ESL teachers.

One of the many problems which confront EFL/ESL students is knowing when to use the infinitive and when to use the gerund in verb complementation. More specifically, learners are often uncertain as to which complement to choose both in those cases where only one is possible as in ‘she refuses to go’ and ‘she enjoys going’ and in those where either, at least from a structural perspective, may be possible: ‘she prefers to go/going’. Since a corresponding gerund/infinitive contrast does not exist in most languages, including the Scandinavian, non-native speakers, who do not appreciate the subtle semantics that distinguish the two constructions, frequently fail to select the appropriate complement. Here are three examples taken from student writings.

She has not finished to do her homework.

The horse practiced to leap over the fence.

I’m not allowed having lunch in the library.

These types of errors suggest that the language learner is often in the dark as to what informs the choices made by native speakers.

Lists

Traditionally, ESL treatments of gerund/infinitive complementation have not attempted to account for native speaker (hereafter NS) usage, i.e., they have not been concerned with what might motivate the NS’s choice of a particular complement in a given communicative situation. In effect, the traditional method for teaching gerund/infinitive
complementation has usually involved little more than having students memorize long lists of head verbs and their respective complements. The problem here is, however, that if they forget the verb-complement match, students are left with nothing more than a 50-50 chance of making the right selection, the same chance someone who had never studied the lists at all would have! Another problem is that lists can never be complete since, as W. Petrovitz (2001: 173) observes, it is doubtful whether the head verbs in, for example, ‘the coach criticized drinking before the game’ and ‘the law encourages conserving natural resources’ would be found on them.

A final problem – and here the limitations of listing as a pedagogical tool are most evident – is that lists do not account for those verbs that can occur with either construction. Since these verbs are clearly not amenable to listing, most ESL texts appeal to ad hoc, often quasi-semantic explanations for such verbs as forget, regret, and try, where there is a perceptible difference in meaning depending on complement choice. On the other hand, in the case of verbs like begin, like, and cease, where a semantic difference is not so obvious, complementation is frequently regarded as essentially a matter of free variation, i.e., either the gerund or infinitive may be chosen ‘with little or no change in meaning’ (Azar 1989: 162).

In the final analysis, lists reflect frequency of co-occurrence: if a verb occurs frequently enough with one or the other complement construction, it ‘makes’ the appropriate list. If, on the other hand, a verb occurs with relatively high frequency with both complements, it is set apart as a separate class and, for all intents and purposes, not dealt with.

Lists, by their very nature, do not provide the learner with an opportunity to actively participate in the learning process. Because they are no more than ‘catalogues’ of native speaker usage, they do not, as Rodriguez-Bachiller (1986: 8-9) observes, ‘offer specific assistance to the learner in forming new L2 concepts’. From a pedagogical perspective, they do not encourage students to test and develop hypotheses as to the conceptual boundaries of the linguistic items in question. The learning task is, in effect, to memorize, not to hypothesize.

Given the failure of lists to offer a coherent account of verb complementation as well as their inadequacy as a pedagogical tool, the question is: Can an underlying rationale for complement choice be discovered which is operative both for those verbs which appear on the lists and those which do not? If so, can such a rationale serve as a basis for upgrading EFL/ ESL pedagogy in this difficult area?

An Alternative Approach

The approach to gerund/infinitive complementation which I will take here has been inspired by the Columbia School of Linguistics (CSL) which is currently based in New York City. Accordingly, complement choice can be seen as a function of semantic and pragmatic factors rather than simply as unmotivated co-occurrence. The assumption that underlies this approach is that linguistic items have basic meanings and that these items are chosen by speakers depending on the messages they wish to communicate.
A basic meaning is a meaning which is associated with a particular linguistic form (e.g., to, -ing). As such, it is synchronically invariant and operative in all linguistic contexts. The message, on the other hand, refers to what is communicated, i.e., what motivates a speaker’s selection of particular linguistic items to the exclusion of others. Messages are not encoded in linguistic forms; rather, they are inferences made by the hearer as to the communicative intentions of the speaker. Basic meanings, the semantic components of linguistic forms, function as hints or clues which, while not encoding the message, function to guide the hearer in the intended direction. Bridging the inferential gap between meaning and message is a creative interpretive act on the part of the hearer which depends on contextual factors and is conditioned by his/her ‘unique linguistic, cognitive, and life experience’ (Reid 2004: 2). Thus the message evoked by an utterance amounts to considerably more than the sum of its semantic components.

Applying the CLS analysis to infinitive and gerund complementation, I have assigned a basic meaning to to and -ing, the linguistic forms which respectively mark each construction:

- Basic meaning of to: ORIENTATION TOWARD A POINT
- Basic meaning of -ing: PROCESS.2

ORIENTATION TOWARDS A POINT: The basic meaning of to is transparent when it is used prepositionally to indicate relationships in the spatial domain where it normally suggests some distance between entities:

(1) a. It is close to the door.
   b. I took the rocky road to Dublin.

It is also operative on a more abstract level when to appears in the infinitive construction:

(2) a. She hopes to finish before the bell.
   b. I promise to come tomorrow.

Here, the ‘point’ specified in the basic meaning can be understood as a goal towards which the activity of the head verbs (hope, promise) is directed. Note that there is a before/after relationship between the head and complement verbs. This relationship has its cognitive source in the distance relationship signalled by to when used prepositionally.

PROCESS: Process can be conceived of either as an actual entity involved in an on-going activity

(3) a. the boiling water
   b. the decaying leaf

or as an implicit or imaginary entity experiencing an activity:

(4) Jogging is a healthy form of exercise.

1 Although basic meanings are also relationally defined with respect to other meanings in a given semantic domain, a discussion of this will not be necessary for our purposes here.
2 For data supporting these hypothesized meanings see Wherrity (2001).
Here it is to be observed that the presence of an ‘entity’ and ‘on-going activity’ are necessary components of the cognitive structure of ‘process’ since the one cannot be imagined in the absence of the other. In any case, the meaning of -ing remains constant, even when the entity is implicit, as in the gerund construction.

When choosing a to or an -ing complement, speakers opt for the meaning which is suitable to the message they wish to communicate. Since basic meanings are maximally general and therefore quite imprecise, it is really a matter of choosing the meaning which is less inappropriate to the message; there is no perfect fit. In effect, speakers ‘exploit’ or ‘press into service’ the meaning which is best suited to expressing what they wish to say, as in the following example:

(5) I hope to win the lottery.

In this example, the basic meaning of to is appropriate for conveying messages of ‘futurity’ and ‘contingency’ owing to its future orientation from a ‘before’ point in time in the direction of a goal which represents an ‘after’ point in time (Duffley 1992:16) This before/after component is clearly not present PROCESS, which is more appropriate for suggesting messages of simultaneity of activity between head and complement verbs. With the infinitive complement, however, the temporally distancing function of to, suggesting a before/after relationship between complement and head verbs, is semantically compatible with the future thrust of hope. This can be contrasted with the following:

(6) She enjoyed hearing the performance.

In this example, the basic meaning of -ing is suited to conveying a message of an experience occurring simultaneously with the activity of the head verb. One cannot ‘enjoy’ something without experiencing it. This holds even in general statements such as ‘she enjoys swimming’ which can be paraphrased as ‘whenever she goes swimming, she enjoys it’. By contrast, the to complement would not work here owing to its temporally distancing function.

Note that in (5) and (6) a semantic conflict would result if the other complement were chosen:

(7) *hope winning
(8) *enjoyed to hear

In (7) the -ing complement suggests a message of non-futurity which is inconsistent with the futurity encoded in hope while in (8), on the other hand, the future orientation of to clashes with the idea of simultaneity of activity encoded in enjoy. These considerations help to explain why hope appears on the list of verbs that take a to complement and enjoy on the list of those followed by the gerund.

There are a variety of ways in which the hearer might interpret the activity of the complement verb in gerund and infinitive constructions. These ‘messages’ can be roughly classified as follows: to-type messages and ing-type messages. Some examples are presented in the Table below. Note the contrasts.
Table 1. Activity of the complement verb: Message types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To-Type</th>
<th>Ing-Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Not yet experienced:</td>
<td>Experienced:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘I hope to work here’</td>
<td>‘I like working here’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Future:</td>
<td>Non-Future:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘He promised to come’</td>
<td>‘He enjoys singing ballads’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Conceptually distant:</td>
<td>Conceptually present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘She plans to live there some day’</td>
<td>‘Imagine taking a winter stroll…’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Iterated</td>
<td>Continuous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘He continued to show up late’</td>
<td>‘He continued speaking’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Conceived as a whole</td>
<td>Conceived as on-going</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘We like to dance’</td>
<td>‘We like dancing’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Abstract</td>
<td>Concrete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘I prefer to live in peace’</td>
<td>‘I prefer living here’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other to-type messages: conditionality, hypotheticalness, inception, contingency, possibility
Other ing-type messages: existence, vividness, simultaneity, immediacy

Here it is important to observe that messages are not to be considered as discrete categories, since they frequently overlap in communication. For example, in ‘he enjoys singing ballads’, messages of ‘simultaneity’ and ‘vividness’ are also present in addition to that of ‘non-futurity’. It is also to be remembered that messages are not meanings; rather, they are what is suggested or evoked by the basic meanings. As such, they are not encoded in the language, but are interpretations constructed by the hearer.

Analysis

In this section, I will present a few examples of sentences containing verbs that can take either complement and provide a short analysis in the light of the analytical guidelines I have proposed. The following verbs will be discussed: like, prefer, cease, continue, and start.

Like

(9) In a year she’ll like living abroad too much to want to come back.

(10) She would like to live abroad for a year.

In (9), the message is one of an activity, i.e., ‘living abroad’, having been experienced by the participant prior to the temporal reference point ‘in a year’. Note that here a to-complement would seriously impede the construction of a coherent message by suggesting that the experience in focus will not have been realized prior to the point of reference. In (10) on the other hand, the participant has not yet experienced living abroad. In this case, there are messages of ‘futurity’ and ‘possibility’, messages clearly consistent with ORIENTATION TOWARDS A POINT.

Prefer

(11) I prefer to see the results first. After that, I will make my decision.

(12) We bought this house three years ago and have been living here happily ever since. I much prefer having my own home and property. I hate living in apartments.
In (11), to signals a before/after relationship between the head and complement verb suggesting an option not yet realized. In (12) on the other hand, an option, that of living in one’s own house as opposed to living in an apartment has been experienced, a message compatible with PROCESS, the basic meaning of -ing. Note that ‘vividness’ is also conveyed by the gerund since the experience is regarded close up. By contrast the infinitive, owing to its distancing component, would not be appropriate for such messages.

It is interesting to observe that out of the first 100 tokens of both like and prefer plus complement which appear in The Guardian/Observer 2002, over half contain the modal auxiliaries would, might, or may. This is not to be wondered at since the conditionality expressed by these modals is compatible with the basic meaning of to, namely, ORIENTATION TOWARDS A POINT. This fact might be exploited as a heuristic device by EFL/ESL instructors for teaching these as well as the related verbs love and hate.

Cease

(13) The wounded marine had been groaning in pain. However, when he looked up and saw his buddy, he ceased groaning and smiled.

(14) Those social civilizations factors not rooted in the human spirit of the group will, in the long run, cease to exist.

Cease might be regarded as a Janus-faced verb. In (13) it is backward looking with the focus on a prior activity which has come to an end at a previous point in time. Such messages of prior activity and non-futurity are clearly the province of the -ing-complement. In (14), on the other hand, the verb is forward looking, as suggested by will and in the long run, and the focus is on an activity projected from the present into the future, a to-complement context.

The final two verbs to be discussed are aspectuals. In the case of aspectuals, the semantic distinctions signalled by to and -ing are often quite subtle. Nevertheless, they are present and cannot by written off as insignificant or, even worse, non-existent.

Continue

(15) Despite criticism from many quarters and obvious theoretical difficulties with his position, Chomsky continues to insist on the autonomy of syntax.

(16) I remember when I was working in high school. I was working in an office right after I got out of school. I continued working there on a full-time basis for probably one more year.

In (15) the message is one of iterated rather than continuous activity. Criticism comes from different quarters at discrete points in time. The message is one of temporally punctuated performances of an act (cf ‘he continued to cough all through the lecture’ vs. ‘he continued coughing all through the lecture’ where iterated and on-going activity clearly contrast, the gerund complement suggesting that the coughing was non-stop). In example (16) the message is one of on-goingness which is made clear by the context: the hearer understands
that there are no breaks or interruptions, i.e., that the ‘working’ was not off and on. This interpretation is in line with the imperfectivity signalled by the preceding progressives.

Start

(17) Jim sat there quietly through most of the conversation. At one point he started to say something, but was interrupted.

(18) When it began to grow dark, he put Clives and Lewis on the guns and told them to start shooting as soon as they saw an enemy silhouette.

In example (17), the to-complement is used to convey the notion of interruption of an act at some unspecified point. As a matter of fact, it is possible that Jim never got to the point of vocalizing. Here an -ing complement would suggest that the speaker had, minimally, entered into the vocalizing stage: ‘…he started saying something but…’ In (18), by contrast, there is no suggestion of a process interrupted. Moreover, there are messages of ‘vividness’ and ‘immediacy’. Clives and Lewis are to ‘jump into’ the process of shooting, as it were, without a second thought. The gerund construction is appropriate for such imperatives, especially when the situation is urgent. In the same context, an infinitive complement would, owing to its distancing function, suggest futurity rather than immediacy and thereby leave open the possibility that there might be some hesitation in the initiation of the act or that the act might be interrupted at a subsequent point. In another context, that of a shooting range, for example, where the performance of a number of discrete shooting acts might be expected and there is less urgency, an infinitive complement could very well be appropriate: ‘Start to shoot when I give the signal’.

Implications for EFL/ESL Teaching

The short analysis I have presented represents an attempt to provide a coherent explanation of the distribution of gerund and infinitive constructions in the complement position. From an EFL/ESL perspective, it offers guidelines for designing and developing materials specifically targeted to teaching the gerund/infinitive distinction in English verb complementation.

As we have seen, context plays an essential role in the interpretation of utterances. Accordingly, exercises and drills in which information necessary to message construction is absent are of little pedagogical value. Such exercises as presented in many EFL/ESL texts frequently reflect a confounding of semantic and structural criteria for correctness. Thus, a piece of discourse may be structurally unobjectionable while being semantically incoherent. Because, for example, ‘she likes to jog’ is structurally acceptable and semantically interpretable does not guarantee that it will be interpretable when the tense is changed and more information is provided: ‘*she liked to jog with us last night’. Consequently, it is important for texts and instructors to provide as much information as is needed in order for the learner to be able to discern the semantic relations among linguistic items in utterances and to construct coherent messages accordingly. Moreover, exposing learners to gerund/infinitive complementation in a variety of contexts will enable them to both test the validity of the basic meanings hypothesized here as well as to form their own hypotheses as to the relationship between meanings and messages.
It is important that the contextual frameworks used in drills and exercises be based on real rather than made-up data (though the latter may be used to illustrate particular points) which reflect actual usage. To this end, it is recommended that instructors avail themselves of the numerous and various English language corpora which are currently available in the form of electronic data bases.

One possible way in which a lesson on gerund-infinitive complementation might be presented is as follows: Begin by teaching the basic meanings of to and -ing. At this stage the instructor can draw the students’ attention to the fact that to in verb complementation usually indicates a before/after relationship between the activity of the head and complement verbs while -ing is unmarked for time and signals that the activity of the complement verb is on-going. By way of illustration, some examples should be provided. Students can then be given a short exercise consisting of brief passages containing selected head verbs such as promise, imagine, want, consider, love, begin, etc. (see Appendix 2). As already mentioned, both the examples and the exercises should be based on real data, which may be modified in conformity with the particular needs of the lesson. The idea is to get students thinking along the lines of which basic meaning is more appropriate with a given verb in a given context and why. At the end, longer text selections can be presented for analysis. It is here that the various message types can be examined in detail and discussed as they are encountered in different contextual frameworks. Students can be asked to explain why speakers or writers choose one complement construction over the other, i.e., what message motivates their choice. Discourse function can also be examined. It is particularly interesting to look at cases where a speaker or writer uses the same verb twice with different complements in a given piece of discourse.

Approaching complementation from the perspective advocated here has the added advantage of offering the English learner an opportunity to become familiar with the lexical meanings of those verbs which function as head verbs. This opportunity is not provided by lists, which simply reflect the frequency of co-occurrence and consequently do not take into account the crucial semantic interaction between head verbs and complement constructions.

One final suggestion: When teaching the gerund/infinitive contrast (as well as when teaching other areas of grammar) EFL/ESL instructors should make it clear to their students that in the case of grammatical items – here to and -ing – there is always a cognitive connection, an inferential chain as it were, which links the message to the basic meaning. In other words, the message is always answerable to the basic meaning. Moreover, instructors should stress the active role played by the hearer in the construction of messages. English learners should be alerted to the fact that the construction of gerund/infinitive messages depends not only on the linguistic forms and their associated meanings used in communication, but also on context and the hearer’s world knowledge. In effect, message construction is a creative act of interpretation. By the same token speakers, in order to communicate effectively, must be aware of what constrains a hearer’s interpretation in any given communicative situation.
References

Corpora
The Brown Corpus (1964/79). Francis, N & Kucera, H. (Compilers)
Switchboard (1992). Texas Instruments (Compiler)

Appendix 1

Results Of Quantitative Tests
The analysis is supported by a series of quantitative tests which were performed for the following verbs: like, love, hate, prefer, continue, begin, start, can't stand, try. These verbs are usually classified in ESL texts as able to take either complement with little or no change in meaning. The tests, in the form of 24 items on a questionnaire, were administered to 72 native English speakers at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey. As evidenced by the choices they made, the subjects discerned a semantic difference between the to and -ing complements for every item. The results were subjected to a chi-square test and found to be statistically significant.

Sample Items

Hate
(5) Can’t you stay a little longer? After all, it’s been a long time. Besides, I’d hate _______(see) you leave before dessert is served.
(14) I’ve always hated _______(stay) at home on Saturday nights with nothing to do but watch television. Nevertheless, I’m getting used to it.

90% of the respondents chose the infinitive for (5) and 89% chose the gerund for (14) as predicted.
Love

(8) Rousseau admits that though he couldn’t agree to a public performance, he would indeed, just for his own satisfaction, dearly love______(know) how his work would sound when done by professional musicians and trained voices.

(13) During the war, both families loved _______(live) in the same house, despite religious differences. After the war ended, they kept in touch.

74% of the respondents selected the infinitive for (8) and 90% chose the gerund for (13) as predicted.

Note that there are no structural clues in these examples and that either complement is, from a purely syntactic perspective, acceptable in each slot.

Appendix 2

Sample Exercise

a) Imagine _____(walk) along the beach in Mayo in late autumn, the sunlight glistening on the sea...

b) For a start, who is going to teach those children, given that numbers are declining rapidly across the nation and given the reluctance of graduates to consider______(work) as teaching assistants.

c) Amerida is the only supplier of gas from a green source. It does not promise _____(supply) renewable gas, but runs a scheme with an environmental charity...

d) Successful singers are uniquely blest people. The thing they love ______(do) more than anything else wins them vast riches and adoration.

e) We marry later, we have our children later, we aren’t expected to even begin _____(mature) emotionally until we are 35.

f) ‘She would love _____(be) in newspapers ‘ he said: But then, he wouldn’t allow her to be because he believes in protecting his children’s privacy.

g) At the end of each run, you get an overall score, and one for points scored under the glare of the media. As you begin______(meet) your targets, you will be awarded skill points.
Note that in cases where a coherent message can be constructed using either complement, the instructor should focus on drawing the students’ attention to how the to and -ing type messages differ and which is the more appropriate given the larger context.