
The Pragmatics of Infinitives and Gerunds in English

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Abstract

Grammarians attribute the choice between the infinitive and the gerund in English to syntactic and semantic criteria. The aim of this paper is to argue that the choice between these two forms is best attributed to pragmatic criteria. Results from the analyses of contexts allowing the infinitive only, contexts allowing the gerund only, and contexts allowing both the infinitive and the gerund show that the selection between the infinitive and the gerund in English depends on pragmatic criteria such as felicity conditions of speech acts, context, reference, and presupposition. Furthermore, the selection between the infinitive and the gerund after certain verbs determines the illocutionary force of the utterance in which one of the two forms is used.

1. Introduction

Grammarians attribute the choice between the infinitive and the gerund in English to syntactic and semantic criteria. Thus, syntactically, verbs like, "promise" can only be followed by the infinitive, as in:

- a. I promise to be there tomorrow.
- b. *I promise being there tomorrow.

Likewise, verbs like "enjoy" can be followed by the gerund but not the infinitive as the following examples show:

- a. I enjoy visiting the museum.
- b. *I enjoy to visit the museum.

The semantic criteria apply to cases where the infinitive and the gerund are interchangeable, such as verbs that can take both the infinitive and the gerund as their complements, e.g.

- a. I like to learn languages.
- b. I like learning languages.

However, sentence (1. b.) above, for instance, is syntactically as grammatical as Chomsky's famous example "Colorless green ideas sleep furiously". But, pragmatically speaking, (1. b.) is not acceptable because the speech act of promising requires that "the content of the promise must have to do with a future possible action of the speaker" (Mey, 1993: 119) as one of its felicity conditions. Since the gerund, as we shall see later, always refers to an action that has already happened, its use with verbs like "promise" pragmatically violates this condition. Hence (1. b.) is not acceptable in actual language use. The infinitive, on the other hand, always refers to a forward action, i.e. a future action; therefore, its use with verbs like "promise" satisfies the above-mentioned condition. Hence, (1. a.) is acceptable in actual language use.

The use of the gerund but not the infinitive after the verb "enjoy", as examples (2. a. and b.) show, can be justified by the same argument. One cannot enjoy an action unless one has done, or at least has already started doing that action. That is, one of the felicity conditions of the speech act of "enjoying" is that the content of the action must refer to an already done action of the speaker. Again, since the gerund always refers backward, i.e. to a completed action, and the infinitive always refers forward, i.e. to a future action, only the gerund satisfies the condition of "enjoying" speech act. Hence, the gerund is pragmatically acceptable after "enjoy" whereas the infinitive is not.

Similarly, when both forms, i.e. the infinitive and the gerund, are possible, it is the speaker's communicative intention, i.e. the speaker's meaning (which is the cornerstone of the pragmatic concern) which determines the choice. For example, with the verb "like", if the speaker intends to express her/his desire to do something s/he chooses the infinitive, but if the speaker intends to express her/his enjoyment in

doing something s/he chooses the gerund, as examples (3. a. and b.) show.

Following such argumentation in the analysis of further English data, the researcher will demonstrate that the choice between the infinitive and the gerund is best ascribed to pragmatic rather than syntactic or semantic criteria. The procedure to be followed in this paper is as follows:

there will be a pragmatic analysis of contexts that allow the use of the infinitive only.

this will be followed by a pragmatic analysis of contexts that allow the gerund only.

finally, there will be a pragmatic analysis of contexts that allow both the infinitive and the gerund.

2. Verbs followed by the infinitive only.

Verbs in this category include the following:

hope, deign, ask, offer, promise, swear, affect, undertake, fail, manage, agree, arrange, consent, long, determine, hesitate, prepare, presume, pretend, seek, tend, volunteer, vow, condescend, desire, beg, expect, request, wish, etc.

(Palmer, 1968: 160; Graver, 1971: 157- 158;

Frank, 1972: 334; Close, 1978: 198; Quirk et al. 1985: 1187, 1188)

Examples of the use of the infinitive with these verbs are the following:

I promise to tell the truth.

I long to return home.

I wish to see you.

I hope to pass the exam.

I swear to keep the secret.

I undertake to help you.

I agree to meet you soon.

I expect to win the prize.

I tend to be honest.

I desire to travel abroad.

The choice of the infinitive only after these verbs has pragmatic justification. As we see from the examples above, these verbs require complements which refer to future acts. The time of the complement is always subsequent to the time of the main verb of the sentence. This is also the case with certain speech acts, like the speech act of promising. One of the felicity conditions of such speech act is that the content of the predication should denote a future act. This is called by Searle (1969: 57) the propositional content condition. Thus, if a content referring to a past act is chosen as a predication of such speech acts they will be infelicitous.

One of the differences set between the infinitive and the gerund is that the infinitive is forward-looking and pointing ahead to some later time in contrast with the gerund which denotes an activity or a state currently in existence or perhaps entirely over at the time of the principal verb (Tregidgo, 1980: 46-47).

Given this difference between the infinitive and the gerund, one can argue that only the infinitive satisfies the propositional content condition of these speech acts. Hence, it is the only predication allowed after such verbs.

The verb “fail” needs another distinction between the infinitive and the gerund. The content of the predication of this verb should denote unfulfilled action in order for the speech act to be felicitous. Since the infinitive denotes unfulfilled action compared to the gerund which denotes fulfilled action (Bladon, 1980: 210), only the infinitive is used after the verb “fail”. The use of the gerund after the verb “fail” renders the the speech act pragmatically infelicitous.

The infinitive is used with verb “be” to express the following speech acts which cannot be expressed by the gerund:

1. direct command, e.g.

You are to wait for him.

Indirect command, e.g.

He said that I am not to leave the house.

Plan, e.g.

She is to return tomorrow.

Prohibition, e.g.

You are not to stand in the way.

Mutual agreement, e.g.

They are to be married soon.

**(Christophersen & Sanford, 1970: 228;
Quirk et al., 1972: 89-90; Thomson &
Martinet, 1986: 117-118)**

3. Verbs followed by the gerund only.

**This category includes verbs like,
mind, miss, relish, resent, quit, admit, justify, abhor, enjoy,
keep, celebrate, finish, support, tolerate, recall, recognize,
etc.**

**(Graver, 1971: 153; Frank, 1972:
323; Stone, 1974: 113; Close, 1978: 199-200; Swan, 1984: 333)
Examples of the use of the gerund with these verbs are the following:**

I enjoy teaching philosophy.

I admit taking the money.

I miss walking on the seashore.

I abhor staying alone.

I keep visiting my friends.

I celebrate graduating from college.

By an argumentation similar to that followed in the analysis of contexts allowing the infinitive only, one can demonstrate that the choice of the gerund only after these verbs is pragmatic. The above examples show that these verbs require complements which refer to acts either currently in existence or entirely over at the time of the principal verb. That is, one cannot enjoy/ abhor/ quit/ admit/ miss/ or keep doing something unless one has done that something or at least has started doing it. Pragmatically speaking, the propositional content condition of these speech acts is a content referring to a past act. Recalling the difference between the infinitive and the gerund set by Grammarians, one can argue that only the gerund satisfies the propositional content condition of such speech acts. And this justifies the use of the gerund but not the infinitive in these speech acts.

4. Verbs followed by both the infinitive and the gerund.

These verbs include:

begin, cease, commence, continue, start, forget, remember, regret, choose, need, plan, propose, disdain, scorn, venture, demand, refuse, claim, profess, afford, attempt, neglect, try, decide, deserve, stop, dread, like, hate, love, loathe, prefer, intend, want, mean, etc.

When both the infinitive and the gerund are allowable in a sentence, it is the context which determines the choice between them. Bosco et al. (2004) identify six categories of context which they believe fundamental in understanding communicative intentions. Three of these categories pertain to the physical world, which are:

Access: having access to the physical object to which the communicative act refers (e.g. an object on which to carry out an action).

Space: the spatial distance between agents and objects of the physical world to which the communicative act refers (e.g. the distance between the hearer and the object).

Time: the temporal sequence of the events to which the communicative act refers (e.g. the order of the actions performed by the agents).

The other three categories pertain to the social world, which are:

Discourse: the information conveyed through discourse before the communicative act was performed (e.g. what has previously said by the speaker).

Move: the moves performed by the agents while playing a behavior game (e.g. the move actually performed by the actor).

Status: the social status of the agents (e.g. the status of the speaker is higher than the status of the hearer).

(pp. 472-473)

Out of these categories only time and discourse are relevant to this pragmatic study of infinitives and gerunds. The infinitive is chosen, for instance, in contexts where the time of the predication is subsequent to the time of the main verb whereas the gerund is chosen in contexts

where the time reference of the predication is antecedent to the time reference of the main verb. Consider the following examples:

- a. I remembered to lock the door. (subsequent)
- b. I remembered locking the door. (Antecedent)

- a. I forgot to post the letter. (I haven't posted the letter yet)
- b. I forgot posting the letter. (I did post the letter but I forgot that I had done so)

- a. I gave the porter a shilling to carry my luggage.
- b. I gave the porter a shilling for carrying my luggage.

(Graver, 1971: 166; Swan, 1984: 339; Close, 1978: 138, 205-206; Wood, 1956: 14)

The contextual category of discourse contributes to the choice between the infinitive and the gerund. The context created by the discourse which precedes the sentence in which to use either the infinitive or the gerund is decisive to determine which form to use. Thus, the contexts of (28. a. and 29. a.) require the infinitive as complements of the verbs "try" and "can't help", respectively, whereas the contexts of (28. a. and 29. b.) necessitate the gerund as complements of the verbs "try" and "can't help", respectively.

- 28. a. I was tired. I tried to keep my eyes open but I couldn't.
- b. I've got a terrible headache. I tried taking an aspirin but it didn't help.

- 29. a. The problem is so complicated. I can't help to solve it.
- b. When I see a beautiful scene I can't help looking at it.

Searle (1969: 123) states that the illocutionary force of the utterance determines the mode in which the content of the predication is presented. We have seen in the examples of (2 and 3) how the illocutionary force of the utterance determines whether the content of the predication is presented in the infinitive mode or the gerund mode.

However, sometimes, the mode in which the content of the predication is presented determines the illocutionary force of the

30. a. I propose to start at once. (I intend ...)
b. I propose starting at once. (I suggest...)
(Archer & Nolan-Woods, 1979: 100)

31. a. I mean to work harder next year. (= intend)
b. This illness means going to hospital. (= entails, requires, involves)
(ibid.)

32. a. I can't help to solve this problem. (I can't afford assistance)
b. I can't help laughing. (I can't avoid)

33. a. They need to eat. (the boys, for instance)
b. They need eating. (the apples, for instance)
(Palmer, 1974: 188)

35. a. She went on to sew.

b. She went on sewing.

Sentence (35. a.) presupposes that she has completed some act, and then she turned to sewing, whereas sentence (35. b.) presupposes that she continued with the act of sewing which she had previously started.

36. a. I forgot to brush my teeth.

b. I forgot brushing my teeth.

Similarly, sentence (36. a.) presupposes that I did not brush my teeth, whereas sentence (36. b.) presupposes that I did brush my teeth.

5. Conclusion

It can be concluded that the selection between the infinitive and the gerund is best attributed to pragmatic rather than syntactic or semantic criteria. Felicity conditions of speech acts, context, reference, and presupposition are the main pragmatic criteria which determine the choice between the infinitive and the gerund. Furthermore, the choice between the infinitive and the gerund after certain verbs determines the illocutionary force of the locution in which one of the two forms is selected.

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