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**DEFINING THE POTENTIAL MEANING OF  
THE ENGLISH -ING FORM IN A  
PSYCHOMECHANICAL APPROACH**

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La valeur de la forme en -ing a été définie jusqu'ici en psychomécanique comme comportant une image sécante de l'événement verbal, divisé en une partie révolue et une partie non révolue. Bien que cette définition rende compte adéquatement de l'effet de sens produit par l'emploi du -ing dans la forme progressive, elle semble en pleine contradiction avec des emplois de type gérondif tels After having supper, she went to bed. Cet article est une tentative de proposer un signifié puissancier pour la forme en -ing capable d'expliquer son utilisation pour exprimer des effets de sens aussi différents que ceux de la forme progressive et de l'emploi gérondif.

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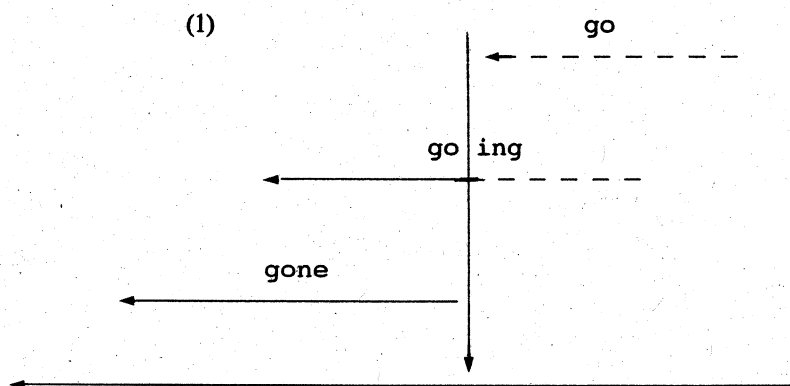
# DEFINING THE POTENTIAL MEANING OF THE ENGLISH -ING FORM IN A PSYCHOMECHANICAL APPROACH

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A few words of explanation regarding the term "potential meaning" used in the title are perhaps in order before getting down to the specific subject matter of this article as this terminology is probably somewhat obscure to most readers. One of the basic tenets of the approach taken here is that meaning exists in two different states in the mind. First of all, it exists as something potential, permanently stored in the speaker's unconscious outside of any particular use. This is what we will call "potential meaning": it resides in the permanent system of tongue (Saussure's *langue*) and consequently exists even when the speaker is not engaged in an act of speech, being rather what determines whether a given form is suitable for expressing a given experience or not. The second state in which meaning is found is called here "actual meaning" and corresponds to the sense produced by a form when the speaker uses the latter to refer to a particular experience which he wishes to express. Here the meaning potential provided by the initial state has been zoomed in on one particular object of representation. Thus the act of speech implies a mental operation of applying potential meanings to particular experiences to be expressed, which leads the psychomechanical approach followed here to take into account the operative aspect of language in an attempt to reconstruct both the potential meanings as they exist before being used and the operations by which they are applied to particular experiences to produce actual meanings (see Guillaume 1984: XI-XII). Indeed the only way to explain why a form is used in certain contexts to express certain experiences is to go back from the effect to the cause, i.e. to trace the actual meanings back to their source in the system of potential meanings. This is what we will be attempting to do in this study in the case of the *-ing* form.

As a form belonging to the quasi-nominal mood in the English verb system, the *-ing* has been defined by Psychomechanics with respect to the other forms of this mood (the infinitive and the past participle) as representing an event referred to some point in time coinciding with an instant between its beginning and its end (cf. Hirtle 1967: 17). The three

views of event time involved in the quasi-nominal mood can thus be diagrammed in the following way:



This definition of the *-ing*'s meaning has proved extremely valuable for explaining the vast array of uses of the so-called "progressive form" in English, all of which seem to involve some form of imperfectivity, as shown by Hirtle 1967, Hirtle and Novara-Curat 1986 and Hirtle and Begin 1990. It would also seem to apply to the other uses of the *-ing* where the latter has an adjectival function in the sentence. These are:

- (2) attributive:  
The woman carrying the blue shopping bag is my mother.
- (3) predicate complement to the subject:  
He kept moving so his feet would stay warm.
- (4) predicate complement to the direct object:  
I found her playing hopscotch with her friends.
- (5) appositive:  
Carrying a bulky box, he struggled up the stairs to the apartment.

In all of these uses the event expressed by the *-ing* is evoked as somehow incomplete, as caught at some point between its beginning and its end.

When applied to the so-called gerundive uses of the *-ing* form, however, the above definition raises a number of problems. In English grammar, the term "gerund" originally designated the phrase composed of the preposition *to* and the inflected form of the infinitive, as in:

- (6) Nu is tima us of slæpe to arisenne.  
'Now it is time for us to arise from (our) sleep'  
(Quirk and Wrenn 1955: 87)

In the eighteenth century, however, it came to be applied to the uses of the -ing form where the latter is used in a nominal function (cf. Visser 1966: 1097-1098), as opposed to the "present participle", a term applied to the -ing in its adjectival functions. The gerundive uses thus include functions such as the following:

- (7) subject:  
Marking exams can be boring.
- (8) direct object:  
They postponed signing the contract for two weeks.
- (9) indirect object:  
Why don't you give talking to her a try ?
- (10) object of a preposition:  
Without making any noise, she tiptoed up the stairs.

When one analyzes the semantic impressions associated with the -ing form in all of these uses, one observes that it seems to evoke its event not imperfectively, or as partly accomplished, but rather as a whole, so that one can say things such as:

(11) Climbing the mountain took us six hours,  
where the whole of the climbing is obviously referred to. This view of the event as a whole would also account for the possibility of using the -ing with the preposition after, something which is quite impossible with the "progressive form" in the following:

- (12a) \*After we were climbing the mountain, we ate a hearty lunch on the top.
- (12b) After climbing the mountain, we ate a hearty lunch on the top.

Moreover the gerundive -ing seems completely indifferent to any particular temporal relation to something else. Thus in the function of direct object it can express an event which is prior (13), contemporaneous (14), or subsequent (15) to the event of the main verb:

- (13) I remember working with her on it.
- (14) I am enjoying working with her on it.
- (15) I am considering working with her on it.

Here the -ing simply evokes its event as an entity which is 'remembered', 'enjoyed' or 'considered', and as above this seems to involve a holistic view of the latter as a 'thing-in-itself' in much the same way as a substantive noun.

Indeed the -ing does seem practically equivalent to a noun in such uses, except for its capacity of governing a direct object, which it shares with the verb. This was pointed out by Sweet (1891: 116) in the following terms:

In Seeing is believing the two gerunds are nearly equivalent to abstract nouns such as sight, inspection, belief or credence, although the two classes of words are kept apart by differences of grammatical construction: compare seeing a thing with the sight of a thing, believing a person with belief in a person.

The close similarity of the -ing to a substantive allows it to be incident to articles or to demonstratives while still being construed with a direct object:

- (16) At last, after a month's holiday with her brother in Coventry, she found she could never stand life with him and his ways; the getting him off to his office in the morning, the keeping him in clean shirts, and the avaricious whist parties in the evening.

(Kirsten and Schneider 1985: 16)

- (17) This pinning one's faith to a political party is very harmful to the country.

(Curme 1912: 361)

It has even been found as support of an attributive adjective in this type of construction:

- (18) This continual working up afresh the old materials into slightly different forms.

(Visser 1966: 1208)

In none of these uses does the notion of imperfectivity seem applicable. This implies that this notion cannot be taken to constitute the potential meaning of the -ing form in tongue, but must rather be regarded as one realization of the -ing's potential which occurs only in certain uses. The problem is thus raised of finding a meaning in tongue capable of producing both the effect of imperfectivity observed in adjectival uses and the holistic impression which is characteristic of gerundive usage, not an easy task at first sight since the two senses would appear to stand in direct contradiction to one another. I wish nevertheless to propose a possible solution to this problem in the remainder of this paper.

The solution which will be put forward here is based on a hypothesis concerning the internal make-up of the -ing as a verb form. Three components of the latter seem pertinent for the present analysis. The first two require little argumentation: (1) the presence of a lexeme constituting the word's lexical meaning and (2) the presence of a representation of event time, which is part of its grammatical meaning. The third component, the inclusion of a representation of person as a spatial support of the event, is less obvious. It is required nonetheless in order to

account for facts such as the use of predicate complements to the subject with the -ing form, as illustrated in:

(19) Being sick during the whole trip was a real drag.

As Dolbec and Le Flem (1980) argue for the French infinitive, this constructional possibility points to the presence of a representation of person even in the non-finite forms of the verb, since sick in (19) above is not felt to apply to the verbal event but to the entity involved in this event. The only difference with the finite verb is that the latter has a subject which identifies the ordinal rank and/or specific nature of the event's spatial support (I was sick during the whole trip/The children were sick during the whole trip), whereas this is left up to the context with non-finite forms. The inclusion of person as spatial support of the -ing's event also explains why the latter always implies a reference to some agent, an impression which is not necessarily produced by a deverbal substantive. In this respect compare:

(20a) Racing with Alain Prost was exciting.

(20b) The race with Alain Prost was exciting.

The latter could refer simply to a competition at which the speaker was a spectator, whereas the sentence with the -ing implies that the speaker actually realized the event of racing with Prost.

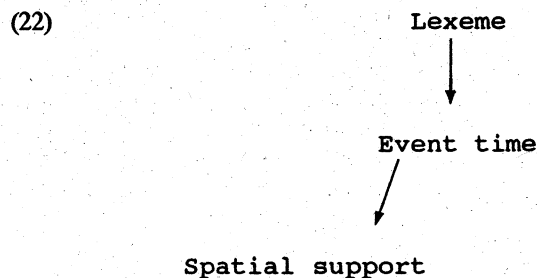
As I have argued elsewhere for the infinitive (Duffley 1992: 121-123), however, the spatial support of the -ing form is unlike that of the finite forms of the verb in being completely unspecified as to its ordinal rank. This can be seen from a sentence such as the following:

(21) Writing a book is not unlike building a house  
or planning a battle or painting a picture.

(Scheurweghs 1959: 205)

Here one feels that the events denoted by the -ing are potentially predicated of any spatial support capable of performing them. For this reason, the spatial support of the -ing form will be postulated to be a "generalized person" not yet defined ordinally as first, second or third, but rather representing an indeterminate 'something or someone' as actualizer of the -ing's event.

The relation between this person or spatial support and the other two components evoked above can be depicted as in (22):



The lexeme is a lexical representation of the specific nature of a particular event. Event time is a grammatical representation of the duration involved in anything perceived as an event. The spatial support is that spatial entity required to make any event conceivable. The lexeme is formed, categorized by the representation of event time and then made incident to its spatial support, i.e. "generalized person" not yet determined for ordinal rank. Thus one can see why the verb has been described by Guillaume (1971: 144-145) as involving external incidence, for the final incidence involved in this part of speech leads to the application of the verbal lexeme to something whose nature falls outside that determined by this lexeme. As for the relation of the lexeme to event time, this problem does not seem to have been discussed by Guillaume or other authors. I feel however that taking it into consideration can provide a way of unifying the participial and gerundive uses of the *-ing*, and of deriving them both from the same potential meaning.

Let us suppose that the incidence of the *-ing*'s event time to its spatial support is held in abeyance or not actualized. This would only seem conceivable with a highly virtual spatial support, which is what we have already postulated in the case of this verb form. If the relation of the event to its support is not actualized, then this leaves us solely with the relation between the lexeme and the event. What is this relation? It would seem to be one whereby the lexeme evokes the nature of that which it designates (the event), i.e. a relation to which the term "internal incidence" could be appropriately applied. This hypothesis would explain several facts. First of all, it would tell us why the *-ing* can sometimes give an impression of great similarity to a substantive noun. Secondly, it would account for the holistic impression produced by the gerundive *-ing*, since a noun contrasts with an adjective in evoking an entity as a whole in itself and not as a part of some other whole. This latter point can be seen from a sentence such as:

(23) It was blue,

where if *blue* is interpreted as an adjective, it would be felt to evoke a quality of something else, such as a house, that is to say a part of a greater whole. However, if *blue* is taken as a noun, then it would be felt to name the

it referred to by the subject, i.e. to express its nature, in which case the pronoun *it* would be interpreted as denoting something like 'the colour I was looking for'. Naming the nature of a thing obviously implies evoking it as an entity in and for itself, i.e. applying a characterization which designates the entity as a whole and not just some part of it.

This view provides in addition a way of understanding why the gerundive *-ing* can be used with the preposition *after* and why it is indifferent to any particular temporal relation with the matrix verb when used as verbal complement. As for the first fact, since the *-ing* in gerundive use evokes the event in itself, as a whole, it makes perfect sense that one should be able to evoke a position after, or even before it:

(24a) After leaving the office, please call me.

(24b) Before leaving the office, please call me.

As a verbal complement (cf. uses (13)–(15) above), the *-ing* produces an impression which shows that it stands in exactly the same relation to the main verb as a noun direct object. Just as the latter can evoke something which is prior, contemporaneous, or subsequent to the event of the main verb:

(25) I remember a conversation with Mary.

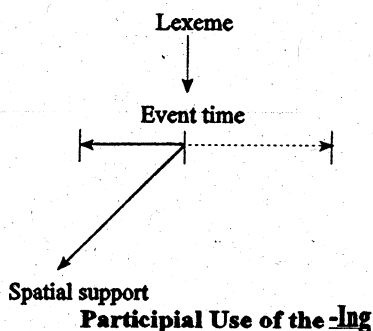
(26) I am enjoying a conversation with Mary.

(27) I am considering a conversation with Mary.

the *-ing* is capable of evoking the same possibilities. The relation between the *-ing* direct object and the main verb is thus purely "nominal", the former denoting, as a thing-in-itself, that which is '-ed' in the main verb's event.

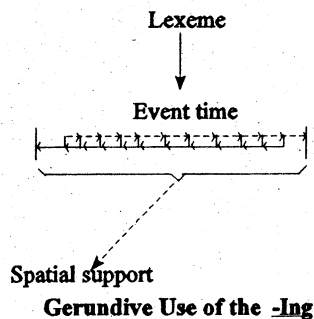
The potential meaning of the *-ing* in tongue would therefore simply provide for a representation of the interiority of its event. If the latter is referred to a support situated at a particular instant within the latter, this produces the impression of imperfectivity characteristic of the "progressive form" and of the adjectival uses of the *-ing*. This view of the event can be illustrated by the following diagram:

(28)



If however the relation of the event to the support is left virtual, there is no one point singled out within the event as being occupied by the support and therefore no interior division of the event into an accomplished part situated before this point and an unaccomplished part located after it: the latter's interiority is consequently evoked as a homogeneous whole made up of all the positions between the beginning and the end of the event. This could be diagrammed as:

(29)



Thus the so-called "present participle" and "gerund" do not appear to be two different forms of the verb in English but merely two different actualizations in discourse of the *-ing*, which evokes an interior view of an event which can be referred to a generalized spatial support.

It might be pointed out as a postscript to this conclusion that the -ing in gerundive use provides both a more homogeneous and a more immanent view of the event than do either the infinitive or the past participle, which also evoke event time as a whole, and that this accounts for the -ing being felt to be much closer to a noun. By evoking the event from the point of view of its beginning or its end, the infinitive and the past participle give special treatment to one instant, making it different from all the others and giving a directionality to the image of the event. With the -ing, on the other hand, all the instants between the beginning and the end of the event are felt to be the same. Moreover, if one wishes to evoke an event in itself, as an entity with an existence of its own, this would seem to require an image of it as that which exists between its beginning and its end, i.e. an interior view of its duration. Thus it is that the virtualizing of the -ing's relation to its spatial support produces an effect closer to that of a substantive noun than with any other verb form in English.

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