

THE INFINITIVE AND THE *-ING* AS COMPLEMENTS OF VERBS OF EFFORT

Recently one of us received a letter from a Japanese teacher of English desperately seeking advice on the difference between *try to* and *try + -ing*. This reinforced our conviction of the need to carry out a thorough investigation into the use of the infinitive and the *-ing* after verbs expressing the notion of effort, since it shows that the problem is not only of theoretical interest but also has practical value for ESL teachers. The present paper represents the fruit of that investigation.

There are a number of fairly good descriptions of the overall meanings of the two constructions referred to above. F.R. Palmer¹ explains the difference between:

- (1) I tried switching on the light.
- (2) I tried to switch on the light.

by saying that in (1) the action was performed, while in (2) 'there was an attempt to perform the action, which attempt may or may not have been successful'. Regarding:

- (3) John tried balancing the ball on his head.
- (4) John tried to balance the ball on his head.

R.M.W. Dixon² comments that in the first case the balancing was actualized by John 'perhaps to see whether he liked the experience', but in the second sentence the event expressed by the infinitive was not realized. More recently, T. Givon³ has compared:

- (5) (After everything else failed), he tried reciting the pledge of allegiance; but the child kept crying.
- (6) He tried to recite the pledge of allegiance, but no sound came out.

He observes that with the *-ing* 'the complement event was successfully performed, although it didn't achieve the desired effect', while with the infinitive

¹ *A Linguistic Study of the English Verb* (London, 1965), p. 163.

² 'The Semantic Basis of Syntactic Properties', in *Proceedings of the Berkeley Linguistic Society*, X (1984), 590.

³ *Syntax: A Functional-Typological Introduction*, II (Amsterdam, 1990), p. 534.

'the complement event was attempted but never performed'. Givon's observation about (6) must be rectified slightly in the light of uses such as (7) below where the complement event was actually performed:

- (7) ... the Swede was a resident correspondent to a syndicate of Scandinavian papers... All the journalists tried to make friends with him; all succeeded; but they found him disappointing as a news source. (E. Waugh, *Scoop*, Penguin, 1943, p. 81).

Nevertheless it is true to say that without further contextualization *try* + *to* by itself does leave open the question of whether the infinitive's event is actualized or not. Thus on the whole the above descriptions reflect important aspects of the meanings conveyed with the verb *try* in the two constructions we are examining.

The problems start when one tries to relate these impressions to the other verbs of effort and to the other uses of the *to*-infinitive and the *-ing* as complement of the verb. Thus why is it that *attempt*, which seems very close in meaning to *try*, is construed almost exclusively with the *to*-infinitive? Why also is it that the few examples of *attempt* + *-ing* which have come to our attention do not appear to necessarily evoke performance of the event expressed by the *-ing*? In (8) and (9) below, for instance, there would seem to be little difference if the *to*-infinitive were used instead of the *-ing*, both leaving open the question of whether the complement verb's event was realized or not:

- (8) ... be a fluid, and that conception led a number of men to attempt bottling the fluid by holding a water-filled glass... (*Longman/Lancaster English Language Corpus* 20199 07 US 62).
- (9) Over their lifetime, many people attempt, or at least strongly consider, setting up their own. (*Longman/Lancaster English Language Corpus* 40055 04 US 87).

Can this be explained by the difference between *attempt* and *try*? If so, what is this difference? Moreover, is there any general principle deducible from the other uses of the *-ing* and the infinitive which would explain why they produce two quite different meanings when used with the verb *try* but almost no difference with *attempt*? And, lastly, why do all the other verbs of effort (*strive*, *struggle*, etc) take only the infinitive and refuse the *-ing*?

The approach of some authors, such as Givon (1990) mentioned above, to the infinitive/*-ing* complement question, is simply to classify complement usage according to a system of logico-semantic categories. Givon thus distinguishes three classes of verbs taking verbal complements, which he calls 'modality verbs', 'manipulative verbs' and 'cognition-utterance verbs'. However these classes provide no explanation at all of complement usage, as the same verb (e.g. *want*) is found in different classes and verbs taking diverse forms of complementation are placed within the same category: the 'modality verb' class, for instance, includes *want* (construed only with the infinitive), *finish* (construed only with the *-ing*) and *begin* (construed with both). Indeed Givon has drawn up his categories based on a broad array of languages without analyzing any

one of them in depth, and so it is perhaps no surprise that they should gloss over the specifics of complementation in English and be of little or no use in explaining how the English language really works in this aspect of its grammar.

Other authors do propose principles based on usage in English. P.S. Tregidgo⁴ suggests that the difference between *try* with the *-ing* and with the infinitive can be explained by the general principle that the *-ing* is used for events whose existence coincides with or precedes that of the main verb, while the infinitive is used as complement of verbs expressing 'forward-looking' events. He interprets the meaning of (10) below therefore, as 'be nice to her and test the result', 'with "being nice" in a sense coming first', whereas in (11) 'the being nice is the goal towards which the trying is directed, and so in a sense it comes later':

(10) Try being nice to her.

(11) Try to be nice to her.

While Tregidgo's characterization of the *to*-infinitive fits in with the other uses of this construction (cf P.J. Duffley 1992),⁵ the explanation of the gerund does not stand up to cases like (12), where the event expressed by the *-ing* can only be conceived as subsequent to that of the main verb:

(12) She is considering buying a new car.

A. Wierzbicka's explanation⁶ is subject to a similar criticism, for she is even more restrictive as to the meaning of the *-ing* than Tregidgo, holding that 'whenever time is relevant they [gerunds] imply sameness of time'. Consequently in:

(13) He tried frying the mushrooms.

'the choice of a gerundive complement forces an interpretation based on the "sameness of time" requirement (the trying and the frying had to occur at the same time)', whereas the *to*-infinitive suggests 'a sequence of times: first the trying and then, if ever, the frying'. No criteria are proposed however for determining when time is 'relevant'. Indeed, it would seem to be highly relevant in a sentence such as *He postponed calling a meeting as long as he could*, and yet the *-ing* does not imply sameness of time. Consequently the explanation proposed does not stand up to the test of usage, nor is it clear exactly how it should be applied to the latter.

The question of why *try* + *-ing* implies simultaneity (i.e. performance of the trying and the complement verb's event at the same time), whereas *try* + *to* does

⁴ 'Some Observations on Verb + ... ing and Verb + Infinitive', in *English Language Teaching Journal* XXV, 2 (1980), 45.

⁵ *The English Infinitive* (London).

⁶ *The Semantics of Grammar* (Amsterdam, 1988), pp. 64 & 69.

not is therefore still unanswered. The plot thickens when one recalls that when *attempt*, generally followed by *to* + infinitive, is construed with the *-ing*, sameness of time does not seem to be expressed as it is with *try* (cf (8) and (9) above). Also to be elucidated is the manner in which other verbs expressing the notion of effort fit into the pattern: *strive*, *endeavour*, *struggle*, etc. This is obviously a field of usage calling for further exploration.

The Syntactic Aspect of the Problem

J.E. Emonds⁷ has argued that there is a syntactic difference between *to*-infinitive complements and *-ing* complements: the latter behave like noun phrases in that they can occur after prepositions (*He got his way by being nice to her*), allow clefting (*It was being nice to her that he should have tried*) and can be used in the subject position of embedded clauses (*They considered being nice to her to be the best policy*); *to*-infinitive complements cannot be used in these ways. As concerns the verb *try*, this implies that the *-ing* following this verb is used in the syntactic function of direct object whereas the *to*-infinitive is not. Confirmation of this is provided by the following facts. Firstly, the *-ing* can be 'promoted' to the subject position in a passive sentence, whereas the *to*-infinitive cannot:

(14a) They had already tried being nice to her.

(14b) Being nice to her had already been tried.

(15a) They had already tried to get to sleep.

(15b) *To get to sleep had already been tried.

Secondly, the *-ing* can be replaced by the nominal pronouns *it* or *that* whereas the infinitive cannot:

(16a) Calvin studied the door. 'There isn't any handle or knob or latch or anything. Maybe there's another way to get in'.

'Let's try knocking anyhow,' Charles said. (M. L'Engle, *A Wrinkle in Time*, Farrar Strauss Giroux, New York, 1973, p. 115).

(16b) Yes, let's try it anyhow.

(17a) But he couldn't sleep. The more he tried to sleep, the more he couldn't. (A.A. Milne, *Winnie-The-Pooh*, McClelland and Stewart, 1926, p. 62).

(17b) *The more he tried it, the more he couldn't.

A third difference concerns the fact that the *to*-infinitive construction admits an adverb of manner between it and *try*, while the *-ing* is similar to a noun direct object in showing resistance to this structure:

(18a) *He grabbed desperately the rope.

(18b) ... taking part in their after-school games and trying desperately to translate Grimm's Fairy Tales... (*Brown University Corpus* G47 1310 11).

(18c) *He tried desperately translating Grimm's Fairy Tales.

⁷ *A Transformational Approach to English Syntax* (New York, 1976), pp. 124 seq.

Indeed our corpus contains 43 cases where an adverb occurs between *try* + infinitive as against only 2 with the *-ing*; moreover, neither of these two are adverbs of manner, both being rather adverbials which could also be inserted before a noun direct object:

- (19a) He tried, once, riding without using his hands, but the road was bumpy, and he almost fell. (T. Findley, *The Last of the Crazy People*, Penguin, 1967, p. 125).
- (19b) He tried, once, a new method of doing it, but the results were not encouraging.
- (20a) She tried for a time helping in a youth club, but found it was not a success. (in G. Scheurweghs, *Present-Day English Syntax*, Longman, 1959, p. 209).
- (20b) She tried for a time this new way of doing things, but found it was not a success.

The *-ing* behaves therefore exactly like a noun direct object. What about the *to*-infinitive?

The best way to describe the syntactic rôle of the *to*-infinitive seems to be to analyze it as a prepositional phrase having an adverbial function with respect to the main verb. This correlates first of all with the third fact pointed out above, as there is no resistance to an adverb occurring between a verb and an adverbial prepositional phrase:

- (21) He looked desperately through the porthole.

just as there is no resistance to this structure with the infinitive as seen in (18b) above.

A second fact which speaks in favour of this analysis is the pro-form used to recall the infinitive. Just as in certain cases one can recall a prepositional phrase by means of the preposition introducing it:

- (22a) He crawled through the tunnel.
- (22b) Then his brother crawled through too.

so one can also recall an infinitive by means of the *to* introducing it:

- (23a) He tried to open the door.
- (23b) Then I tried to as well.

Analyzing *to* + infinitive as a prepositional phrase and not as a direct object allows one to account in addition for the absence of a need for a preposition to introduce the infinitive after verbs which require one, such as *to long*:

- (24a) She longed for peace and quiet.
- (24b) *She longed peace and quiet.
- (24c) She longed to be alone.

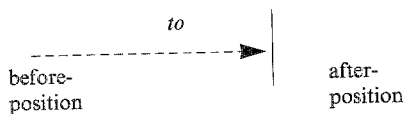
This implies that the distinction between *try* + *-ing* and *try* + *to* is exactly parallel to that between:

- (25a) He grabbed her purse. (direct object)
 (25b) He grabbed at her purse. (adverbial)

The *-ing* denotes that which was tried, just as the noun phrase *her purse* in (25a) evokes that which was grabbed. On the other hand, the *to*-infinitive is an adverbial of finality just as the prepositional phrase *at her purse* is an adverbial expressing the goal of the grabbing. This syntactic distinction between the *to*-infinitive and the *-ing* has never been taken into account however in explaining the difference between *try to* and *try -ing*. We shall see below that it throws considerable light on the problem.

The Meaning of *to*, the Meaning of *try* and the Relation Between the Latter and the Infinitive

This brings us to the question of the status of *to* in the constructions under study here. *To* is frequently treated as a mere 'infinitive marker'⁸ or a meaningless grammatical appendix to the infinitive.⁹ The parallel between (22) and (23) above shows however that *to* functions as a preposition after *try*, just as *at* is a preposition after *grab* in (25b). This receives further confirmation from the semantic parallel between *try to* and *grab at* evoked above. As argued in Duffley (1992),¹⁰ *to* denotes the goal of the trying here because of its basic or potential meaning, which is the same as in all its other uses, and when applied to temporal entities involves the notion of a movement from a before-position to an after-position in time:



The after-position is represented by the infinitive's event: the before-position by the event of trying. The lexical notion evoked by *try* in this use is therefore that of 'make an effort'. The infinitive evokes the goal of the effort, and *to* the before/after relationship which holds between the effort and its goal.

As for the *-ing*, it has already been proposed that its relation to *try* is the same as that of a noun direct object. This means that its rôle is simply to identify that which is 'verbed' in the main verb's event. In contrast to the *to*-infinitive, which is an adverbial of goal expressing the temporal subsequence of its event with respect to that of the main verb, the *-ing* direct object therefore does not stand in a temporal relation with respect to the main verb at all. Conse-

⁸ R. Quirk, S. Greenbaum, G.N. Leech, and J. Svartvik, *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (London, 1985), p. 150; E. Andersson, *On Verb Complementation in English* (Lund, 1985), p. 57.
⁹ O. Jespersen, *A Modern English Grammar*, V (London, 1940), 154; N. Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures* (The Hague, 1957), p. 100; A. Lehrer, 'Why *to* is not a verb', in *Aspects of Language*, II (Amsterdam, 1987), p. 256.
¹⁰ *The English Infinitive*, p. 17.

quently, according to the meaning of its governing verb, it can imply notions of subsequence, simultaneity or anteriority just like a noun direct object:

(26a) I am considering moving to New York.

(26b) I am considering a move.

(27a) I am enjoying talking with you.

(27b) I am enjoying this conversation.

(28a) He remembered talking to her.

(28b) He remembered his conversation with her.

All that the direct object does in these sentences, be it a noun or an *-ing*, is to designate that which is considered, enjoyed or remembered.

This puts us in a position finally to understand why the *-ing* implies simultaneity with *try*. Like a noun direct object used with this verb, it evokes that which is tried. Since, however, *try* shifts senses from 'make an effort' to 'test, try out' when used with a nominal direct object (cf Webster's), this is also the sense expressed by *try* when used with the *-ing*. And since in order to test the effect of some action one must necessarily carry this action out, the *try + -ing* construction implies realization of the *-ing*'s event at the same time as the trying. The trying is in effect the performing of the event tested to see what effect it will produce.

This sheds light on yet another impression associated with *try + -ing*: the implication that the realization of the *-ing*'s event is merely a means to a further end (as compared with the *to*-infinitive construction where the latter evokes the final end or goal of the trying). Thus in (1) above one would feel that the light being switched on was a means used to attain some further unexpressed end, such as scaring away a thief. This is a product of the idea of testing or trying out denoted by *try*, as one tests switching on a light only in order to see what effects the switching will produce. In (2) however getting the light switched on is already presented as the goal and so the idea of an ulterior end does not come into the picture explicitly.

The Other Verbs of Effort

One can now understand as well why the other verbs of effort are only construed with the *to*-infinitive: *struggle, strive, labour, endeavour*. All of them involve the notion of making an effort, and *to + infinitive* expresses the goal of the effort. This can be seen from:

(29) Looking back at me, he struggled desperately to understand why I should know his name and why he should think I seemed to be someone he knew. (T. Findley, *Stones*, Penguin, 1988, p. 165).

(30) Here again is a pointer to the kind of comedy he had in mind. Not only do the men and women of the play strive wholeheartedly to fulfil this duty, but Wilde himself seems to have constructed his plot out of improbable action... (G.C. Rosser, Foreword in O. Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, University of London Press, 1958, p. 9).

- (31) 'It's Marx Brothers comedy. And if you've never seen it on the big screen, you're really missing something. Too bad you're working tonight.'
'Actually my clients chickened out. I'm free.' She labored mightily not to sound too eager.
(M. Gilden, *Beverly Hills 90210: No Secrets*, Harper, New York, 1992, p. 8).
- (32) There should be no reason to misinterpret or ignore the intent of this letter. Pozzati and I endeavoured earnestly to record our impressions without the prejudice that the anxiety of our time so easily provokes. (*Brown University Corpus* J62 0180 3).

Confirmation of this is to be found in the fact that a similar notion to that expressed by the infinitive can also be evoked by a prepositional phrase with *for* or *after*, both of which also express the idea of a goal:

- (33) They struggled for power.
- (34) ... strove not only for the advancement of learning but also for the conversion of the heathen. (Webster's)
- (35) The priesthood had striven after kingly power and rank. (OED)
- (36) ... labours for the restoration of normal conditions. (Webster's)
- (37) If we are endeavouring after more riches. (OED)

Significantly, none of the four verbs discussed above can be used with a noun direct object, conclusive evidence that the infinitive is not a direct object in these constructions.

The Verb *Attempt*

Attempt is unique among the verbs of effort in that it can be construed with both the infinitive and the *-ing*, yet the distinction in meaning between the two constructions is practically nil. With *try*, as we have seen above, there is a clearly perceivable shift in sense from that of 'make an effort' found with the infinitive to that of 'test, try out' with the *-ing*, the latter sense being that found also with *try* + noun direct object. Dictionaries record only one sense for *attempt*, however, regardless of the syntactic construction in which it occurs. This sense is 'to make an effort to do, accomplish, solve or effect' (Webster's), 'to make an effort, to use one's endeavour to do or accomplish some action' (OED). These paraphrases apply equally well both to the common use of *attempt* with the infinitive:

- (38) Arthur attempted to explain to Fenchurch, but was too often interrupted by Marvin's dolorous cybernetic ravings. (D. Adams, *So Long, and Thanks for all the Fish*, Pan Books, 1984, p. 187).

as well as to the far rarer use of *attempt* with the *-ing*, of which we have only found seven instances:

(39) He looked pensive, and then shook his head.

'I have never eaten toads', he said. 'Frogs, yes. But toads, never. Doubtless there is an English recipe. No?'

I decided not to attempt describing the English delicacy called toad-in-the-hole. (P. Mayle, *Toujours Provence*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1991, p. 51).

Two facts must be explained in the case of *attempt* therefore: (1) the quasi-synonymy of the constructions with the infinitive and the gerund and (2) the quasi-exclusive preference for using the infinitive, particularly puzzling since the two constructions seem to mean almost the same thing.

The explanation for both facts lies, we believe, in the lexical meaning of *attempt*. The quasi-synonymy of *attempt to* and *attempt + -ing* is due to the fact that the notion of effort aimed at attaining a goal is inherent in the meaning of *attempt*, whereas this is not the case with the verb *try*. One can observe this by comparing the two with a noun direct object:

(40) I tried the exercise that the doctor suggested.

(41) I attempted the exercise that the doctor suggested.

While (40) means that I did the exercise to see whether it would speed my recovery (i.e. the idea of testing, not that of effort), (41) makes the exercise sound like something very difficult to perform and evokes an effort aimed at seeing whether the speaker could perform this task or not. Indeed *attempt + noun* leaves the question of the realization of the action denoted by the noun unanswered, often suggesting an effort which did not lead to the performance of the desired event:

(42) Kenneth Albright was a paranoid schizophrenic. Four times now he had attempted suicide. (T. Findley, *Stones*, Penguin, 1988, p. 113).

(43) He attempted a daring stunt.

The fact that the notion of effort is inherent in *attempt*, even in usage with a direct object, explains the slightness of the distinction between *attempt to* and *attempt + -ing*.

As for the almost total preponderance of the infinitive with *attempt*, this is also due to the inherence of the notion of effort in the lexical meaning of this verb. When two temporal entities or events are put into relation with one another and the governing verb evokes the notion of an effort towards the achieving of the complement verb event's realization, then English speakers are led spontaneously to feel a before/after relation between the two events and so the *to*-infinitive is used in the complement. In contrast, with *try* meaning 'put to the test, try out', the complement verb's event is felt simply to be that which is tried, and so the *-ing* is used in the function of direct object. This suggests the further consideration that the notion of 'effort' is probably not inherent in the meaning

of *try*, but is rather a product of the combination of *try*'s meaning with that of the preposition *to*, just as the idea of searching is not part of the meaning of *look in*:

(44) She was looking for her slippers.

but is produced by the combination of the meanings of *look* and the preposition *for*. We close somewhat ironically therefore with the conclusion that what would seem to be the 'prototypical' verb of effort, *try*, does not denote effort inherently but merely implies it when used in combination with certain other lexemes, among these that of the *to* introducing the infinitive.¹¹

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¹¹ A similar effect is produced by the use of *try* with the preposition *for*, as in: 'It would be much better for everyone if he could fix it up with Elizabeth; better for the children. He felt dismal about this but it was in a good cause. He would try for a clean break. He hoped she wouldn't scream at him.' (M. Atwood, *Life Before Man*, Seal, Toronto, pp. 212-213).