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## The Infinitive and the *-ing* as Complements of Verbs of Positive and Negative Recall

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### 1. Previous Studies

There are only three studies in the literature which focus on complement constructions with verbs of positive and negative recall: Jorgensen (1990), Van Valin & Wilkins (1993) and Fanego (1996). Jorgensen's main point is the lack of parallelism between the verbs *remember* and *forget* with the *-ing* form; while the *-ing* is very frequently found after *remember* in affirmative sentences, as in (1a) below, it is practically non-existent in positive contexts following *forget*:

- (1) a. He remembered posting the letter.  
b. ?\* He forgot posting the letter.

*Forget* seems to require negation in this construction, often with the negative adverb *never*, which, as Jorgensen (1990:149) points out, makes it logically equivalent to 'always remember':

- (2) I'll never forget being in hospital.

(British National Corpus FU1 2214)

Jorgensen found only one case of positive *forget* + *-ing* in his survey of the data, from an American English source:

- (3) "You didn't teach me, Ben. Papa did." But her indignation sank away, unspoken, and Papa didn't protest. Maybe he had forgotten teaching her to drive.

(Jorgensen 1990:149)

The reason he adduces for the lack of parallelism between *remember* and *forget* is that there is very little use for positive *forget* with a retrospective function due to the fact that the mental process of forgetting is unconscious, so that "it is difficult or impossible later on for the person to point to a definite moment of forgetting, simply because he or she was not conscious of anything" (p. 150). While Jorgensen's observation of the data remains valid, we will show below that this is not the real explanation for the rareness of *forget* + *-ing*. To complete his observations moreover, it should be added that Jorgensen's corpus does not

seem to have contained any examples of a perfectly natural construction which combines positive *forget* and the *-ing*, of which eight instances were found in the 56-million-word Bank of English. Here are two representative examples:

- (4) director general John Birt should forget hiring an agency...
- (5) ... we cannot make someone a Christian. Forget imposing your faith...

These are obviously of a different type from the example found by Jorgensen and will be examined in closer detail below.

The goal of the study authored by Van Valin & Wilkins is to devise a formula for predicting the choice of complement form following the verb *remember* from the semantics of this verb. The latter is defined using a combination of Dowty- and Wierzbicka-style semantic transcription. Starting from the basic meaning 'become *think.again* (X) *about*. *something.be.in.mind.from.before* (y)', the authors derive the following three senses:

- (a) Psych-Action (=something X intends comes to/is in mind)
- (b) Perception (=something X perceives comes to/is in mind)
- (c) Cognition/Propositional Attitude (=something X knows/believes comes to/is in mind)

The Psych-Action sense selects the *to*-infinitive (*He remembered to close the door*), the Perception sense the *-ing* (*He remembers closing the door*) and the Cognition/Propositional Attitude sense a *that*-clause construction (*He remembered that she was there*). This approach raises several problems however. In general, the paraphrases proposed by Van Valin & Wilkins are more descriptive of the meaning of the complement than of the verb *remember* itself. Secondly, the notion of "perception" is not an appropriate description for all uses of the *-ing* construction. It is very frequent to find *remember* followed by the verb *think*, as in (6) below, and one example has been found in which it is followed by *know* (7):

- (6) "I remember thinking for a long time afterwards that it must have been Uncle Titch's," said William, and Preston stared at him in astonishment, shocked not so much by the thought of Uncle Titch and Mary Moxton in carnal embrace as by this sudden insight into William's dark imaginings.  
(British National Corpus F9C 3160)
- (7) Er, there used to be a place there, but, er, I can never remember knowing or else I should think I should've gone.  
(British National Corpus FXX 371)

These uses obviously do not correspond to the paraphrase 'something X perceives comes to mind'; furthermore, they show that there is overlap between the meanings of the *-ing* and *that*-clause constructions, an observation which brings Van Valin & Wilkins' whole enterprise to grief. Even had it worked as a predictive device, it would still not have constituted an explanation, as it involves no definition of the inherent semantic content of the complement itself, i.e. of the meanings of the *-ing* form, *to* or the infinitive. Thus, even though the Psych-Action paraphrase is a good fit for the *remember* + *to*-infinitive

construction taken as a whole, it provides no explanation of why the *to*-infinitive, and not some other complement form, should be used in this type of context.

Fanego (1996) is a diachronic study which traces the historical development of the retrospective and non-retrospective senses of *remember*. The author shows that while the latter sense has always been followed by the *to*-infinitive (p. 74), the retrospective sense, on the other hand, was originally found in two patterns: one in which it was followed by a subordinate clause, as in (8), and another followed by an accusative with infinitive, as in (9):

- (8) 1534 Tyndale *The New Testament* II, 20 Assone therefore as he was rysen from deeth agayne, his disciples remembred that he thus sayde. And they beleved the scripture, and the wordes which Iesus had sayde.
- (9) 1516 Fabyan *New Chronicles of England and France* 174V.C1 In this yere / and vpon the .xii. day of Octobre were thre flodes in Thamys / whiche thyng no man than lyuyng cowed remember y<sup>e</sup> lyke to be seen.

(Fanego 1996:74)

Two new constructions appear in Shakespeare's time with the retrospective sense: the perfect infinitive, as in (10), and a construction composed of the definite article + *-ing* + the preposition *of*, as in (11):

- (10) *King Lear* 3.2.48 Since I was man, Such sheets of fire, such bursts of horrid thunder, Such groans of roaring wind and rain, I never remember to have heard.
- (11) *As You Like It* 2.4.49-51 I broke my sword upon a stone, and bid him take that for coming a-night to Jane Smile; and I remember the kissing of her batler and the cow's dugs that her pretty chopp'd hands had milked;

Subsequent evolution sees the *-ing* become more and more verbal – although the semantic content of the whole construction remains stable – and eventually eliminating the perfect infinitive for the denotation of anterior time. The possible reason proposed for this development is that "the opposition *-ing* form vs. simple infinitive, as in *I remembered paying it/I remembered to pay it*, was felt to mark more efficiently the contrast between the retrospective and nonretrospective readings, and hence came to be eventually preferred" (p. 77).

Fanego makes a very pertinent observation as to why the gerundive construction is used to evoke anterior time with *remember*: the "inherent tense-neutrality" of the gerund "allowed it to derive its time reference from the surrounding environment" (p. 77). To back up this claim, a comparison is made with the construction with the verb *dread* + *-ing*, in which the *-ing* form evokes an event situated in the future with respect to the main verb. The point which Fanego makes is valid, as far as it goes, but it raises the question as to why the *to*-infinitive, which is also tense-neutral, should evoke as complement of *remember* something "nonretrospective" (p. 75), making reference to a "future action" (p. 71). This

shows that the semantic content of the complement itself must also be taken into account in explaining the resultant meaning of these constructions.

Before applying my hypothesis to usage, one fact can be mentioned which some authors observe, but for which no one offers an explanation. The fact in question is the curious lack of an aspectual distinction between the simple and perfective gerund constructions with these verbs, as can be seen in the examples below from Jorgensen (1990:148):

- (12) a. He remembered posting the letter.  
b. He remembered having posted the letter.

An explanation for this curiosity will be proposed below.

## 2. Explanation of Usage

### 2.1 Construction with the *-ing* Complement

The *-ing* is a verbal form which is inherently tense-neutral: in usage with verbs of recall, it evokes merely the interiority of an event taken as a whole entity (cf. Duffley 1995). The function of the *-ing* here is that of direct object: as such, the *-ing* denotes that which is 'remembered', 'forgotten', 'recalled', etc. This provides an immediate explanation for the fact that the complement's event is felt to be situated in anterior time with respect to the matrix: one can normally only remember or forget something which has already taken place. It also accounts for the lack of aspectual distinction observed above between the simple and perfect gerund constructions in (12): the perfect gerund is simply redundant in this case, as it reiterates the anteriority of the *-ing*'s event which is already entailed by the combination of the meaning of the main verb and the gerund's direct object function. Although the two constructions are generally considered synonymous, Jorgensen (1990:148) points out a potential distinction between them:

There may be cases, however, where a temporal distinction might to some people seem appropriate, as for instance in: 'We laughed a lot. I remember telling him how I had moved Parker's bed...' (Peter Curtis, *Death March in Three Keys*, Penguin, 1949, p. 119). The activity remembered ('... telling him how I had moved Parker's bed ...') is supposed to have been simultaneous with the act expressed in the first sentence ('We laughed...'); a perfect form might perhaps by some people be understood as placing the act of 'telling' at a point of time earlier than 'We laughed...'

The examination of the data also shows a very strong tendency for the perfect gerund construction to be used to denote the remembrance of the mere fact of something having

occurred rather than the details involved in the experience of its occurrence, the most frequent use of the perfect being with the verbs *see* and *hear* in utterances of the type:

- (13) I can't remember having seen them in church before.

(British National Corpus GVT 2307)

Only one case has been found where there is a possible evocation of the experiential content of the memory, (14) below, and even here the reference is probably purely factual, to one phase in a person's life-story:

- (14) The next few years saw her and Ross out with this band of fun boaters and future rodeo aficionados, though Lesley remembers having spent much of these early years bobbing about in the boils on the edge of the rough stuff, a result of lack of confidence in her own ability and perhaps not being pushed to perform by the guys in the group as much as they would each other.

(British National Corpus BMF 578)

Since the simple gerund construction is very frequently factual too, there is substantial overlap between the two structures. However, the simple gerund is also used in cases where the experiential content of a memory is remembered and not just its prior occurrence, as in:

- (15) She remembers going with me to fetch Greg and his trunk for the Easter vacation, and meeting Big Bob the porter who remembered her Daddy too.

(British National Corpus BIY 843)

In such contexts the perfect gerund feels somewhat inappropriate.

Something which is forgotten is also logically entailed to be prior to the forgetting of it, as is the case in Jorgensen's example given in (3) above, where Papa is depicted as being so absent-minded that he had perhaps forgotten something he had taught his daughter in the past. The real reason for the rarity of *forget + -ing* is not that proposed by Jorgensen however. In actual fact, it is simply because one is not aware at the present moment of what one has forgotten of one's past actions, whereas one is aware of what one remembers. It takes an outside observer to perceive that someone has forgotten performing some event which the observer knows them to have performed – this is the case in (3), where the daughter remembers the occurrence of an event which her father has forgotten.

There is nevertheless some use for the *forget + -ing* construction in the language, but the reference is not to past time. In the type illustrated in (4) and (5) above, the *-ing* evokes an event which has not yet been performed. Here the gerund refers to an event which exists only in someone's mind as a course of action which is being contemplated. The *forget + -ing* construction is used to tell the other person to delete this projected action from their active memory, as in the structure with the pronoun *it* (*Forget it, baby*). It is related to the expression *Don't even think about it*, and represents an even more radical approach which enjoins the addressee to nullify even the condition for thinking about a projected action, namely keeping it in one's active memory.

*Omit* and *neglect* are very rarely followed by the *-ing*: no examples were found in the Brown University, Lancaster-Oslo/Bergen, British National or on-line Cobuild corpora. Hunston & Francis (1999:98), however, report eight instances of *neglect* + *-ing* in the 300-million-word Bank of English corpus, and provide (16) as an illustrative example:

- (16) Many of us neglect drinking enough water.

*Drinking enough water* is quite obviously evoked as 'that which is neglected by many of us' in this use (cf. the possibility of substituting it by *that*). This implies that this action is a beneficial practice which should be followed but is not. There is no strong temporal implication produced in this use, although *drinking enough water* is situated in the realm of non-realized ideal actions, which might relate it to the future for some analysts.

One could also imagine a use such as (17):

- (17) In order to accelerate the procedure, she omitted sending the report to the vice-president for approval.

Here *sending the report to the vice-president for approval* corresponds to what was omitted. This implies non-performance of a possible action, the omission of a step from the normal procedure. Once again, the *-ing*'s event, if classified in temporal terms, would be called 'future'; it would seem more apposite however to describe it as a non-realized possibility.

## 2.2 Constructions with the *To*-Infinitive

The *to*-infinitive is not a direct object with the verbs of recall but rather what I have called elsewhere a "goal or result specifier" (Duffley 2000). This can be seen, among other things, from the impossibility of substituting an object pronoun for the infinitive in this construction:

- (18) a. He forgot to call her.  
b. \*He forgot it.  
c. He forgot to.

The preposition *to* makes a semantic contribution to the context and defines the relation between the main verb and the complement (cf. Duffley 1992), presenting the infinitive's event as the goal or result to which the main verb's event points or leads (or fails to lead, with negative recall). This means that in a sentence such as *I remembered to lock the door* remembering is represented as leading to the performance of locking the door, i.e. the infinitive denotes a result of the occurrence of remembering. This corresponds to the meaning of this construction quite adequately.

It is also possible to account for the absence of a *to*-infinitive construction with the verbs *recall* and *recollect*. *Webster's New Dictionary of Synonyms* (1968:680) describes the meaning of these two verbs as compared to *remember* in the following terms:

*Remember* usually implies a putting oneself in mind of something... it often implies no conscious effort or willing.

*Recollect* implies a gathering of what has been scattered... a bringing back, sometimes with effort, to one's own mind what has not been in it for an appreciable amount of time.

*Recall* often comes close to *recollect* in implying volition or an effort to bring back what has been forgotten, but it differs from *recollect* in suggesting a summons rather than a process of thought.

The explanation for the non-occurrence of these two verbs with the infinitive lies in the fact that they are not mere triggers leading to the performance of an action like *remember*, but rather involve a focus on bringing or calling back something to memory which requires some searching in order to find. This leads them to be construed exclusively with a direct object denoting the object of this searching, i.e. that which is recalled or recollected.

Verbs of negative recall do not show such restrictions on the infinitival construction, which occurs freely not only with *forget* but also with *neglect* and *omit*:

- (19) Bernard Dixon neglects to mention the beneficial side of geophagia.  
(British National Corpus B7C 2105)
- (20) It is also curious that, in describing the conference folder, Ms Helm omitted to mention the documented evidence it contained on failure rates, perinatal mortality, incidence of spina bifida and heart defects associated with invitro-fertilisation.  
(British National Corpus A2W 391)

Here the idea expressed is that of a main verb event which does not lead to the actualisation of the infinitive. The negation of the movement towards actualization can take the form of forgetting, omission or neglect: in any of these three cases, the result is the non-performance of the infinitive's event.

To round off the discussion of the verbs of recall, the question of the status of the construction *remember to have done* will be discussed. Fanego (1996:75) and Palmer (1987:198) claim that this construction is no longer in use today. Six cases have come to light however in the corpus data used for this study. All six involve verbs of perception, as in (21) below:

- (21) She remembered to have heard that the last Merefield ... had died in extreme old age.  
(Jorgensen 1990:147)

A parallel can be drawn between this construction and the use of the verb *think* with the perfect infinitive, as in (22):

(22) I thought to have perceived a certain odour.

(Jespersen 1940:202)

With both of these constructions a paraphrase is possible with a *that*-clause, the latter representing the more frequent structure in usage. Here the role of the preposition *to* can be analyzed as that of denoting the mental movement of connecting the subject of *think/remember* to the characteristic of having performed the action designated by the past participle, the impulse responsible for this connection being provided by memory or thought. It is interesting in this respect to note that there is also a parallel between *remember* and *think* with the simple *to*-infinitive. This can be observed in uses such as *If I had remembered/thought to check my mail, I would have noticed it*. This type of usage shows that both memory and thought can be triggers for action (simple infinitive construction) as well as for mental connecting (perfect infinitive construction). In any case, as far as the perfect infinitive construction is concerned, it should be pointed out that it is more common to simply conceive of the proposition 'that X has/had done y' as the content of the thought or memory by means of the much more frequent subordinate-clause construction.

### 3. Conclusion

Fanego (1996) stands out in her analysis of retrospective verbs as one of the few authors to resist the temptation to attribute an inherent temporal value to the *-ing* (although some form of this analysis does sneak in through the back door in footnote 10 (p. 78), where she piggybacks onto the view expressed by Bolinger (1968), Quirk et al (1985) and Dirven (1989) that the *-ing* expresses the notion of 'actual performance' with these verbs). The observation that the gerund is inherently tense-neutral and inherits any temporal implications from its context is essentially sound. The analysis remains incomplete, however, due to the lack of an analysis of the function of the *-ing* with respect to the main verb. Another even more important lack concerns the semantics of the *to* plus infinitive construction and its relation to the main verb. Without an analysis of these elements, one is left with no explanation as to why the *to*-infinitive, which is also tense-neutral, does not denote anterior time with retrospective verbs. Only a proper understanding of the meaning of *to* and the "result-specifier" function of the *to* plus infinitive phrase with respect to these verbs allows one to explain why the infinitive paradoxically evokes something posterior in time when used with a verb which denotes a retrospective notion such as *remember*. The capacity to explain such a paradox constitutes a strong argument in favour of the explanation expounded in this study.

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