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– A semantic interaction approach –

Teaching verb + *ing* form, infinitive, or base form

Yoshiaki Sato

PEN language Education Services

Shunsuke Nakamura

Mizuho Nougei High School

Abstract

Verb complementation in English is among the highest hurdles for learners to clear. The selection between infinitive and *ing* complements in context is a daunting task even for advanced learners. Semantic instruction is crucial here since rote learning will never encourage learners to process information in the target language. However, this problem cannot be solved by simply applying a binarism such as “potential (*to* infinitive) vs. factual (*ing* form),” which is partially true but may at times mislead and confuse learners. A semantic interaction approach, which views *to* infinitive, bare infinitive (base form) and *ing* form complements as explainable through the semantic interaction between verbs and their complement clauses, may help to teach what is often said to defy instructional intervention.

Key words: *to infinitive, bare infinitive, base form, ing form, networking*

Framing the Issue

The English language has a complementation system in which verbs can take clause objects such as *ing* forms, infinitives, that-clauses, etc. It is easy to predict that mastering selection of the appropriate form of complement in context is a formidable challenge for EFL learners. Indeed, even advanced learners make persistent errors in the choice between the *ing* form and the *to* infinitive after a given verb.

Some verbs take *ing* forms only (e.g. *She enjoys playing golf* / **She enjoys to play golf*), while others accept infinitives exclusively (e.g. *He refused to accept the invitation* / **He refused accepting the invitation*). Still other verbs can occur with both these complements with or without a clear semantic effect, as shown in the contrasts below:

Case A [+ clear semantic difference]

I remember seeing you somewhere vs. *Remember to lock the door*

Case B [- clear semantic difference]

She started talking vs. *She started to talk*

The issue at hand for teachers can be expressed by the following questions: (1) Do learners have to memorize such restrictions on complementation patterns mechanically, or are there any ways to explain the principles governing such restrictions (i.e. why one form is acceptable while the other is not)? (2) Given those cases that take both forms with seemingly little semantic difference, is it pedagogically sound to teach them as simply interchangeable, or is it possible and therefore necessary to explain the subtle semantic difference between these two complements (i.e. the *to* infinitive and the *ing* form)?

There are two opposing ways to address these questions. One is a sheer dependence on rote learning or exposure to language use. The other is seeking ways to answer these questions from the viewpoint of semantic motivation. Since it is hard to expect to maximize the value of educational intervention with the first approach, it is vital to examine the pedagogical potential of a semantically motivated way.

There are two points to be considered here: 1) the semantic properties of the *to* infinitive (related to those of the base form) and the *ing* form (at times behaving like the present participle), and 2) the interaction between these nonfinite clauses and the preceding verbs which contain them as their complements. Much academic discourse has been produced and trials and errors made in classrooms relating to these points. There is a non-negligible tendency, however, to overgeneralize a contrast between *to* infinitives and *ing* forms (as gerund), which may at times mislead and confuse learners. In addressing this situation, a semantic interaction approach will be of help. It holds as an assumption a lexico-grammatical stance that the schematic meanings of lexical items help explain the range of constructions in which they can occur.

Making the Case

A binary way of grasping the semantic properties of nonfinite clauses was presented by Bolinger (1968) when he stated that the *to* infinitive represents some *hypothesis* or *potentiality* (*unrealized possibilities*) whereas the gerund stands for *reification* (*actualities*). In parallel to this, Kiparsky and Kiparsky (1970) pointed out that *factive* predicates take gerunds while *non-factive* ones occur with *to* infinitives. Reflecting these contrasts, a number of alternative interpretations have been put forth to date. This binary approach, nevertheless, can be summarized as a contrast as follows: *factual/actual* (*ing* form) vs. *potential/futuristic* (*to* infinitive). Indeed, a large number of *to* infinitive complements seem to represent actions which seem to be potential, or likely to be carried out in the time to come (e.g. *She decided to break up with him*). Also a number of *ing* complements may be aptly interpreted with reference to something actual (e.g. *He admitted stealing the money*).

However, intractable exceptions remain to this binary approach. For example, *to finish the job* in *She managed to finish the job in a day* does not just mean something potential; it refers to an actual situation. Nor does *going out with you* in *I can't imagine going out with you* mean anything actual; it is nothing more than an imaginary scenario. In a word, this type of binary approach is effective only with a limited range of usages. Therefore, learners are advised to pay due attention not only to the schematic understanding of the *to* infinitive and the *ing* form, but also to the semantic interaction between these nonfinite clauses with their preceding verbs.

Now in the reconsideration of the true nature of infinitives, Duffley (2003) correctly stated that the *to* infinitive is “a composite made up of the bare infinitive + the preposition ‘to’” (p.324). This analysis sounds promising in that it goes in the direction of a lexical grammar which assumes grammatical information embedded in lexical items. It suggests that the two distinct forms of infinitives—*to* infinitive and bare infinitive—are to be systematically comprehended with the presence or absence of a single variable, i.e. the metaphorically extended preposition *to*.

The preposition *to* has a schematic image where some entity spatially faces another as in phrases like *face to face* (Tanaka *et al.* 2003, p.1759).



Figure 1. The schema of the preposition *to*

As a metaphorical extension from this spatial relation of “facing some entity,” the *to* infinitive (i.e.

to + base form) obtains a schematic image of temporally facing some action (Sato and Tanaka 2009). A shift from prepositional *to* to infinitive *to* entails a semantic shift from “facing some entity (spatial sense)” to “facing some action (temporal sense).” Hence, the *to* infinitive naturally implies “facing some action to be carried out.”

Here is a brief analysis of how some verbs, as lexical sets categorized based on their semantic commonality, interact with the *to* infinitive. As the most typical case, “volition / desire verbs” (e.g. *want, hope, wish, desire, decide, intend*) occur with *to* infinitives and refer to future actions to be carried out. “Commitment verbs” (e.g. *attempt, learn, manage, struggle, bother, fail*) occur with *to* infinitives since they require as their object some action to be carried out through a certain amount of commitment. Whether the action in question is actually carried out hardly matters; this temporal or psychological situation of *facing* some action is represented by the *to* infinitive. “Social communication verbs” (e.g. *agree, ask, offer, promise, refuse, decline*) occur with *to* infinitives since they presuppose a situation where some action is offered or requested to do in a social interaction. The scheme of “facing some action to be carried out” applies here, whether you “agree” to do something or “refuse” to do it.

The schematic analysis of the *to* infinitive mentioned above also leads to a clearer understanding of the base form of a verb. Since the base form, i.e. the bare infinitive, is the subtraction of *to* from the *to* infinitive, it has no *facing* scheme in it. It rather directly stands for what is represented by the verb itself. Hence, the base form’s scheme: “an event which is actually realized” (Duffley 1992: 28), with no time gap felt between the base form and its preceding verb. Therefore, in *I saw him cross the street* or *I’ll have him call you back*, due to the absence of *to* preceding it, each base form stands for actual realization of the action in sync with the time represented by their preceding verb. In like manner, the constructions of *help* + *to* infinitive / *help* + bare infinitive will be better comprehended. In *I helped (him) carry the baggage*, the action of carrying the baggage is felt to be realized at the same time in point as designated by the preceding verb (so it is possible to sense a direct involvement of the helper in achieving the event represented by the infinitive). With a *to* infinitive, the same action would be felt to be as yet to be realized due to the *facing* scheme (so it is natural to see it as an indirect contribution to that action).

Now turning to the discussion of the *ing* form as verb complement, its semantic value varies depending on the type of verb that precedes it. This polysemous nature of the *ing* form derives partly from its association of the usages of the present participle. The common denominator scheme of the *ing* form is the event of *doing something* or *something taking place*. But it can manifest either as its process with an ongoing image, like in the progressive form, or as its nominalized concept, which is time-neutral by nature. These two prototypical images of the *ing* form are not mutually exclusive, though; they rather constitute two end points on a single cline.

The following is an analysis of how some verbs, as lexical sets categorized based on their semantic properties, interact with the *ing* form as their complement, compared when necessary with the way they occur with the *to* infinitive (the first three categories take both the complements).

“Remembrance verbs” (e.g. *remember, forget, regret*) occur with the *ing* form when referring to a situation in the past, while the *to* infinitive will be used in futuristic contexts. An *ing* complement here can refer to a past situation even without using the perfect form “having + past perfect”; it becomes time-neutral as a nominalized concept (memory in this case).

“Aspectual verbs” (e.g. *start, begin, continue, keep, stop, finish*) represent some actual ongoing process, when occurring with the *ing* form, while with the *to* infinitive they suggest some gradual change that is to come. *Stop* and *finish* take *ing* forms exclusively since one can only stop or finish some ongoing action. *Keep* also takes *ing* forms only because it means maintaining an ongoing action, awaiting no future change.

“Emotive verbs” (e.g. *like, love, hate*), followed by *ing* forms, can represent one’s own habitual or “general” emotional status deriving from some ongoing activity (e.g. *I love singing*). They occur with the *to* infinitive to represent a “particular” situation where one personally faces some action to be carried out (e.g. *I’d love to sing*).

“Performance verbs” (e.g. *enjoy, practice*), occurring with *ing* forms, refer to some action actually performed, which has an ongoing image. This explains why *enjoy* and *practice* can occur only with the *ing* form. No new situation is expected to take place, so the *to* infinitive would not fit.

“Avoidance/missing verbs” (e.g. *avoid, dislike, mind, miss, put off, postpone*) focus on the possibility of not doing some action for a while or for good. This negative reference to an event is more naturally represented by *ing* than infinitive complements. This is because the event is not regarded as any action to be carried out, but it is now referred to as a time-neutral, nominalized concept.

“Imagination verbs” (e.g. *imagine, dread*) refer to some imaginary situation, but an ongoing image of action is captured as a mental picture. This ongoing image, though not physically observable, prevents these verbs from occurring with *to* infinitives.

“Prospective verbs” (e.g. *consider, suggest*), followed by *ing* complements, can represent an anticipated idea of an event. *Consider* and *suggest* occur only with *ing* forms (e.g. *Would you consider working for me?*) though they refer to future situations. This is because the *ing* form here is so nominalized as to become indifferent to whether the event in question is executed or not. This *ing* form is more of an idea or a concept than some action to be carried out, which is represented by the *to* infinitive (paraphrasing the example into *Would you consider the idea of working for me?* might make the point clearer).

Here is another category of verbs that when occurring with the *ing* emphasize its nominalized nature (e.g. *want, need, bear, deserve*). With these verbs, the *ing* form (in the active voice) means the action or event understood in the passive voice (e.g. *This printer needs repairing / cf. This printer needs to be repaired*). This voice-neutral usage becomes possible with the *ing* form because as a nominalized concept it hardly matters whether the event in question is viewed in the passive or active voice.

Pedagogical Implications

Learners above all need to comprehend and produce language in context-rich exercises. Consider an example given by Freed (1976). Without contextual information, the *ing* form and the *to* infinitive would look interchangeable after *continue* as in *When the bell rings, ignore it and continue reading / to read*. Now suppose a student is reading a report toward the end of a class, but the teacher wants the student to continue after the bell. If the teacher gives the instructions before the bell rings, it would be natural to use the *ing* form. For it would mean an ongoing situation, without interruption. In contrast, without such instructions, the student would probably have stopped reading. In that case, the teacher would more likely use the *to* infinitive construction (Freed 1976). As this example shows, in the case of aspectual verbs, when some gradual change is expected to come degree by degree, *to* infinitives will be more natural (in most cases some intermittent image arises there). In contrast, when a durative, ongoing process is to be described, the *ing* form will be selected. This case shows the importance of context-rich exercises in teaching verbal complements said to be interchangeable, which in fact are not.

Another idea worth introducing in class will be lexical networking. It would be meaningful to try out networks of semantically related lexical items, putting aside terminological distinction (e.g. gerund or participle) when necessary. Network ideas like the following may help learners become more sensitive to the commonality as well as uniqueness among lexical items that can occur in each network respectively.

Network (1): *She started / kept / was / stopped / continued / finished eating*

Network (2): *He likes / enjoys / is / goes / imagines swimming in the pool*

Network (1) focuses on “aspectual verbs” + *ing* forms. These verbs followed by *eating*, standing for different aspects of an ongoing process, all entail or presuppose the situation in which *She was eating*. Network (2) connects verbs that can take the *ing* form with an ongoing image. *Go* + *ing* constructions as in Network (2) give an impression of pleasure-seeking activities; so it is possible to see this *ing* as consistent with the ongoing image of the *ing* form following “emotive verbs” (*likes*), “performance verbs” (*enjoys*) and “imagination verbs” (*imagines*), all of which are connected to the ongoing image of *be* + *ing*.

Lexical networking is also possible with the *ing* form as a nominalized concept as follows:

Network (3): *I remember / denied / missed / avoid / suggest talking to her*

In Network (3), each of the verbs preceding *talking to her* refers to this event (action) as a nominalized concept (such as fact, idea, possibility and the like), whether from the past, about the present, or toward the future. “Prospective verbs” like *suggest* and *consider*, which refer to some future scenario, are expected to be among the toughest ones for learners to deal with, since it is easy to erroneously infer that future events are always represented by *to* infinitives.

Lexical networking ideas can be applied to *to* infinitive constructions as well. For instance, there are a number of semi-modal phrases containing the infinitival *to*. It would be interesting to compare such semi-modal phrases with other verb expressions like the following.

Network (4): *I have to / am going to / am supposed to / am about to / want to / managed to / failed to / refused to have a word with him*

It is easy to see some consistency running through all the semi-modal phrases (*have to, am going to, am supposed to, am about to*) in Network (4). The common thread is the infinitival *to* and some nuance of modality or futuristic image. Modality by definition concerns the speaker’s mental attitude as to or judgment about the state of affairs expressed in a sentence, such as prediction, obligation, possibility, volition, and the like. Such attributes are all linked to the schematic image of the *to* infinitive: facing some action to be carried out.

Engaging in networking exercise as shown above, combined with realistic context-setting, will help learners internalize the principles underlying the complement selection between infinitive and *ing* form. It will help them grow out of mechanical rote learning, terminology-oriented distinction, and blind application of binarism. Based on the schematic understanding of the infinitive and *ing* form as explained in Making the Case, learners will be able to see why similar verbs—such as *refuse* and *avoid*, both of which are futuristic and negative—can behave differently in terms of the selection of complement clause.

SEE ALSO: Teaching Infinitives and Gerunds; Teaching Modals: the Potential of Can; the Possibility of May; the Necessity of Must; the Likelihood of Will; the Requirement of Should

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