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Deconstructing Meaning : a semiotactic approach to gerundival constructions in English

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Chapter 3 – Gerundives in gradation relations

3.1 – Introduction

Apart from the forms discussed in chapter 2, gerundive constructions can also specify meanings through gradation in a variety of ways. There are some parallels to be found between the distinctions made in chapter 2 and in this chapter. The aim of this case is to connect positions within the sentence to specific semantic relations. In particular, it will be shown that formal properties distinguish those adverbials that link to the rest of the sentence on the basis of regular gradation from the ones that do so by temporal gradation. Section 3.2 will discuss gerundival adverbials in an atemporal relation to the rest of the sentence. After that, some forms which have *grammaticalised* will be discussed in 3.3. That is to say, some forms have developed in such a way as to perform prepositional (e.g. *discussions concerning religion*) or even conjunctival functions (e.g. *I have serious doubts about the truth of that statement, considering there is no evidence to back it up*). All of these forms relate to the rest of the sentence through atemporal gradation, which is why they are discussed here. The sentential positions which allow for *temporal* gradation will be further explored in 3.4. These positions can usually be taken by other participial forms as well, which will also be discussed. Moreover, the discussion in section 3.4 will concern itself with the progressive and perfect aspect in combination with participle forms, as well as the distinction between active and passive forms (e.g. *I work hard having drunk a cup of coffee* or *I slept, being tormented by dreams*).

3.2 – Atemporal gradation and gerundives

Meanings connected to other meanings through gradation specify the abstraction of the form they are connected to rather than the meaning of the form itself (see section 1.3.3.2). For instance, when someone says *I ran quickly*, the property ‘quick’ is not added to the *x*-role in that event. In other words, it does not mean that the agent was quick directly: someone who ran quickly once does not always carry the property that he is quick. Rather, it is ascribed to the event itself: I ran, and the running I engaged in was quick. Often, adverbial forms take the deadjectival affix *-ly*.

These forms can take the positions usually attributed to regular adjuncts as well, as the two sentences below show:

(68) That guy was *amazingly* funny.

Σ / PA

guy = funny > amazing’

(69) *Amazingly*, the sprinter broke the record.

‘amazing < Σ / PR
 sprinter = [break₁]
 [break₂]; record’

In sentence (68), it is clear that *amazing* is not something that is ascribed to the subject of the sentence as a whole, but rather to one of the properties that he possesses. In this regard, the function of this gerundival is similar to that of *very* in (4) above. It appears to specify the meaning it accompanies by specifying the degree to which it is present. Sentence (69), on the other hand, is of a rather different nature: here, the word *amazingly*, attributes a feature to the situation as a whole. A reasonable paraphrase of (69) would be *It is amazing that the sprinter broke the record*, showing that the meaning of *amazingly* is attributed to the situation as a whole, rather than to any single meaning within that situation.

It seems there are only a limited number of gerundives that take positions of atemporal gradation. Sentences (70 – 72) provide some examples:

(70) *A stunningly* red dress
 ‘dress – red > stunning’

(71) “... I wear that, that *dazzlingly* confounds”
 (Melville 1980, p. 23, italics added).

‘ Σ / PR
 me = [wear₁]
 [wear₂]; that ↓
 – Σ / PR
 X =confound₁> dazzling’

(72) We are progressing *frustratingly* slowly.
 ‘ Σ / PROG / PR
 we = progress₁ > slow > frustrating’

These sentences contain gerundives performing the basic functions of the adverb. In (70), for instance, *stunningly* contributes the meaning that *redness* that is ascribed to

the dress is of such a nature that it tends to dazzle the beholder. A verbal meaning is specified in (71): “that, that dazzlingly confounds” is something that confounds in a way that is dazzling. Finally, in sentence (72), the slowness of the progress is such that it is frustrating. Note that although gerundival forms themselves naturally encode events, these forms do not do so. Rather, they encode a specific sort of property: in (70) and (72) this is a propensity (i.e. to stun or to frustrate), whereas in (71) it seems to encode a degree through the feeling it invokes. None of these can therefore rightly be said to place anyone or anything in a specific role in the verbal action they might have been expected to contribute. That is to say: the verbal meaning expressed by the gerund in isolation is not itself introduced in any of these examples. The fact that this is not the case indicates that these forms have lexicalised like the lexicalised adjectival forms described in chapter 2. The idea that these forms are lexicalised is further bolstered by a number of other factors:

- a. The fact that these forms take *-ly* is an indication that their content is not merely that of an action anymore – this suffix is normally used to indicate that a property meaning is applied through gradation (e.g. *beautiful* – *beautifully*);
- b. Like gerundival adjectives, these forms may take objects in highly restricted contexts, and when they do, they are prefixed to the verbal meaning, indicating that they have lexicalised together (e.g. *painstakingly*, *heartbreakingly* cannot occur without their interpreted objects: **takingly*, **breakingly*);
- c. Properties can be quantified, but participation in an event cannot. The fact that the forms affixed with *-ly* do allow for grading, then, indicates that they contribute property meanings (e.g. *an absolutely stunningly red dress*).
- d. The fact that the meanings without *-ly* essentially exhibit the same behaviours in adjectival contexts (e.g. *It is frustrating* is lexicalised (non-progressive), but *It is frustrating me* is not), leads one to conclude that the forms are lexicalised.
- e. Example (72) contains *frustrating*, which, when referring to an action, is transitive. In (72), however, the verb has lost this function.

Following this analysis, it is here assumed that the *-ing* form is part of the word that resulted from this lexicalisation. It must be explicitly included in the notation of these forms for this reason. This is why the semiotactic notations of (70–2) are still suffixed by *-ing*: each represents a word on its own, rather than a meaning in a specific position.

The above analysis leads to the conclusion that gerundival forms ending in *-ly* are generally lexicalised forms. Naturally, there are certain contexts in which such meanings are used as to specify through limitation instead. For instance, sentence (70) above could be adapted to *a stunning red dress*. In this sentence, it is not that the redness of the dress is stunning, but rather that the dress as a whole is both stunning and red. In other words, when the gerund takes the position before the noun it specifies without *-ly*, it clearly does specify it via limitation. It may appear that adjectives close together interact with one another, but in practice many instances do not show any formal difference that would indicate a different kind of relation:

(73) “The blinding red rays from the ruins snapped instantaneously out...” (Lovecraft 1926/2013, p. 151).

‘Σ / PA

ray – red – blinding – [from₁] =snap₁> out > instantaneous
[from₂]; ruin’

For the form analysed above, it may be accurate to say that, since it is possible either to include or omit the deadjectival *-ly* affix, the gerundive is lexicalised, and interacts differently with or without the *-ly* suffix (e.g. in *the blindingly red rays*, the gerundive does directly specify the redness of the rays in question). However, there are also some gerundives which have lexicalised into adverbs exclusively, without the affix *-ly*. As Brinton & Traugott state: “many present participial degree Adv_s were figurative like *piping* (‘emitting a hissing/piping sound because of the heat’)... Most were replaced by the end of the nineteenth century, while *piping hot* has become a fixed expression” (2005, p. 121). Brinton & Traugott rightly consider this an instance of grammaticalisation. Consider the following example:

(74) Piping hot soup
‘soup – hot > piping’

Another form that may be perceived to have a similar status is *scorching*. This form is taken as adverb in some contexts (WordNet 2008), as in the context of sentences like (75) below:

(75) It was scorching hot.

‘Σ / PA
it = hot > scorching’

In such cases, the *-ing* suffix is again notated, because the word as a whole has a meaning that is different from the verbal meaning *scorch*.

3.3 – Prepositionally and conjunctively used gerundives

As Brinton & Traugott point out, there are some gerundives which have acquired prepositional and even conjunctival functions. In these roles, they can therefore connect two elements via a meaning that does not entail participation in a dynamic event. Some example sentences containing constructions of this nature will here be discussed. Take, for example, sentence (76) below:

(76) All preventative measures notwithstanding, the dam
broke under the weight.

[notwithstanding] < ‘Σ / PA
dam = break₁ > [under₁]
[under₂]; weight
[notwithstanding₂]; measure . . .’

Note that *notwithstanding* is a preposition: it coordinates the existence of one thing with that of another. In this position, this form takes sentential scope (see section 1.4.3.2). In (76), there is no entity is withstanding or not withstanding anything. Rather, the contribution of the word *notwithstanding* seems to be closer to that of *regardless*: preventative measures have been taken, but regardless of that, the dam broke. For this reason, it seems that it is not any entity in particular that is specified, but the occurrence of the event as a whole. For this reason, the notation looks as is shown above. It is also possible for prepositionally used gerundives to connect to the rest of the situation via limitation, as the notation of (77) shows:

(77) The outrage following the scandal was justified.

‘Σ / PA
outrage – [following₁] = justify₂
[following₂]; scandal’

In this context, the distinction between the grammaticalised preposition and the verbal form is only found in the semantic contribution. The projection that results from this is not one in which the outrage is pursuing a scandal, but that the outrage came chronologically after it occurred. Although it cannot be denied that this construction

3.4 – Temporal gradation and participles

Moving on, it is notable that there are various positions in a sentence which lead to a relation of temporal gradation rather than an atemporal one. These positions seem to be open to participles, but not to adverbs as such. Since temporal gradation relates two meanings by making them occur at the same time, this actually makes sense: both meanings refer to the same carrier, rather than to each other. In other words, when one says *I work hard having drunk a cup of coffee* (see 1.4), I am saying that both my working hard and my having drunk a cup of coffee occur together – not that my hard working is of the type that I have drunk a cup of coffee. For this reason, *-ly* suffixed words do not usually fill temporal gradation positions. For this reason a sentence like **I work hard stunningly* does not sound correct.

Temporal gradation usually does not exist between adverbs and other elements. The fact that temporal gradation itself implies simultaneity precludes this: both meanings apply to the same entity, not to one another. As such, it seems likely that in a relation of temporal gradation, a participle contributes its full meaning. Sentences (80–82) contain examples of this:

(80) I still cry *thinking* about it.

‘Σ / PR

me	=	cry ₁	>	still	⊃	think ₁	>	[about ₁] [about ₂]; it’
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(81) I make my money *driving* cars.

‘Σ / PR

me	=	[make ₁] [make ₂]; money ↓	⊃	[drive ₁]	
		– me			[drive ₂]; car’

(82) “I framed my resolution and in heart *trembling* undertook to move it”
(Ghandi 1929/1982, p. 436).

‘Σ / PA

me	=	[frame ₁]	> and <	[in ₁]	<	tremble ₁	⊂	undertake ₁ . . .
		[frame ₂]; resolution ↓						
		– me						[in ₂]; heart’

Sentence (80) means that the crying happens while the subject is thinking about it. A similar example is found in (81). The sentence gives the impression of being similar in meaning to *I make my money by driving cars*, and interpretively this may well be the case, but it must be noted that *driving cars* is placed in the same relation with *make* as *cry* with *thinking about it* in (80). The making of the money is therefore contingent upon his driving the cars. Lastly, in (82), *trembling* indicates the event that is concomitant with the speaker's undertaking. Therefore, temporal gradation is used to indicate this relation. What is more, the trembling is also specified in such a way that it only pertains to the heart.

One of the most obvious differences between these examples and those in (68–72) is that the gerundives do not take *-ly*. In (80–82), moreover, the gerundive forms have retained more features typically associated with verbs: they can take objects (*driving cars*) and they can be modified by prepositions (*thinking about it*), but not by degree modifiers: **I make my money very driving cars*. The most important difference between these gerundival forms and those described in (68–72), however, is the fact that, rather than specifying the meanings they accompany directly, they rather seem to indicate a condition on those meanings being part of the projection. In other words: in the case of (80), the crying is contingent upon the act of thinking about whatever *it* represents. Similarly, the money in (81) is only being made when the subject drives cars. Lastly, (82) provides an example of reversed temporal gradation on the main verb. This still leads to the projection that the undertaking took place as the subject was trembling.

3.5 – *The gerundival participle: aspect and voice*

Quirk et al. (1985) note that in many positions similar to those discussed above, aspectual meanings as well as voice distinctions can also be made. There is no reason to move away from the notation of the participle normally used on the level of the sigma: any event, whether represented as the main verb of a sentence, or only to specify an entity, has an event period inherent in its meaning. As shown in chapter 1, in the semiotactic framework, aspectual meaning is analysed using the distinction between the *narrated period* and the *event period*. This does not, in itself, require a sigma. As Ebeling has stated: “The relation is completely symbolised by “=”, the line above it with ‘Σ’ represents the portion of the world that is also unambiguously expressed by “=”” (Ebeling 2006, p. 152).¹⁸ In other words, the sigma merely repeats the situation as a whole, so that the situation as a whole can be specified for tense and aspect. This does

¹⁸ “De relatie is volledig gesymboliseerd door “=”, de regel erboven met ‘Σ’ staat voor het stukje wereld dat ook al ondubbelzinnig door “=” is aangeduid” (Ebeling 2006, p. 152).

not mean, however, that within that situation there cannot be a temporal relation. In fact, it means quite the opposite: the sigma does not add temporality; it merely copies whatever information (temporal or otherwise) is expressed in $x = y$ or simply x . Within this nexus relationship, however, it is also possible that one thing is temporally contingent on another, as was shown in 3.4. Going back to an earlier example, *I work hard having drunk a cup of coffee* means that it is presently the case that my working hard occurs whenever I have drunk a cup of coffee. The sentence clearly does not express that I work hard while I am drinking it, or before I drink it. This situation as a whole is placed in the present. Aspectual meanings therefore do not merely occur on the sigma line, but also on verbal meanings *within* clauses. When an aspectual meaning is used in combination with a verb rather than a full clause, it is only the NP of the event that is relevant. For instance, *I work hard having drunk a cup of coffee* contains a perfect aspect. This means that I do not work hard while I drink coffee, but rather after the EP of the coffee-drinking event: this is where the perfect places the NP. This NP is what is presented as concomitant with the working event, meaning that the speaker works hard when the coffee drinking event has just occurred. In other words the combination of the verbal meaning and the aspectual meaning is the same as with a sigma (see section 1.7.2), and the resulting NP of this specification is what is happening while the main verb event is occurring. Moreover, the subject of the first verb and the second verb are the same. For example, in *I work hard having drunk a cup of coffee*, *I* is the subject of *work* and of *drink* (or, more precisely, *have drunk*). Both are unambiguously ascribed to the subject of the entire sentence. For this reason, both verbal meanings must appear on the same line in the notation: they both describe the same entity's actions, and the relations between them. For this reason, it would lead to an inaccurate notation to present one of these verbal meanings using a separate sigma, as this would make this convergence impossible. This is not mere interpretation, as this holds systematically.

In their grammar, Quirk et al. (1985) provide a list of temporally grading elements that are used in both the active and the passive voice, as well as in combination with either the progressive or the perfect aspect, or with both of them together. The table they present is shown below:

	Infinitives	Participles
Simple	<i>to examine</i>	<i>examining</i>
B	<i>to have examined</i>	<i>having examined</i>
C	<i>to be examining</i>	<i>[being] examining</i>
D	<i>to be examined</i>	<i>[being] examined</i>
Complex		
BC	<i>to have been examining</i>	<i>having been examining</i>
BD	<i>to have been examined</i>	<i>having been examined</i>
CD	<i>to be being examined</i>	<i>[being] being examined</i>
BCD	<i>to have been being examined</i>	<i>having been being examined</i>
	<rare>	<rare>

Fig. 3 – Representation of table presented in Quirk et al. (1985, p. 153)

In the table above, B represents the perfective meaning, C represents progressivity, and D symbolises the passive voice. The table above shows that a wide variety of combinations can occur. Concerning the bracketed items on the right-hand side of the table, they state the following: “Whenever a phrase should theoretically begin with the auxiliary *being*, this participle is omitted. In this way, the *-ed* participle phrase *examined* is regarded as a special variant of the *-ing* participle phrase, *viz* the representative of the passive construction D” (p. 153). This type of reasoning seems to imply a deviation from the principle of *one form-one meaning*. However, the result of the analysis by Quirk et al. seems to hold. Consider the example sentences presented below:

(83) I left the hospital *examined*.

‘ Σ / PA
me = leave₁ \supset examine₂’

(84) I believed the surgery would help, *having examined* many studies.

‘ Σ / PA
me = [believe₁] \supset [examine₁] / PF
[believe₂]; Σ / WILL / PA
surgery = help₁
[examine₂]; study / many’

The various ways in which a participle can be introduced in the sentence all differ in the semantic contribution they make. For instance, a perfect form is introduced by

adding *-ing* to *have*, and presenting the verb in question in the perfect form, like in (84). However, a perfect form can also occur on its own, as shown in (83). This cannot be the perfect aspect, as (84) already contains this form. Rather, the perfect in isolation presents the verbal action in the passive (expressed through the subscript ‘2’): in (83), *I* am not the one doing the examining. Naturally, the projection of this sentence will most likely be one in which the person has already undergone both, but the structure of the sentence only reveals what is shown above. Quirk et al. also note that a sentence like *The person writing reports is my colleague* can be interpreted in a host of ways: as the person who *will write*, *will be writing*, *writes*, *is writing*, *wrote* or *was writing* (p. 1263). These options are all interpretive, however: the only information the “reduced” sentence gives you is *writing*, which is not aspectually specific in this context. Similarly, there are many ways in which *examined* could be interpreted, but only the passive construction is explicitly given by the form of the sentence. It is common for passive sentences to be interpreted as more or less perfective, due to their form: the passive always includes the perfect form of the verb. For example, a sentence like *I am surprised* may easily be interpreted as referring to the result of an event, but formally there is no reason for this interpretation. It is, moreover, impossible for this form to actually have this meaning, because this would make the sentence *I have been surprised* pleonastic: the perfect aspect would then be added to something which is already completed. The sentence *I left the hospital having been examined* would have been illogical for the same reason. Contrastively, in a construction like *I am badly hurt*, the pain will in most cases be projected as ongoing: something hurts the person in question. In the same way, a sentence like *I entered the hospital badly hurt* does not lead to the interpretation that the pain occurred before the entering. The fact that the interpretation may lead to a different temporal configuration is therefore common, but still just that: interpretation. In (84), by contrast, the belief that the surgery would help only occurs at the moment the studies have been examined. This is due to the perfect being involved: it places the EP of the verbal event before the NP, and the NP is presented as occurring at the same time as the believing event. In other words, before the studies had been read, the belief did not occur (at least, the structure of the sentence does not tell us that it did). Rather, only when the studies had been read, the belief occurs in the present situation.

A passive also occurs in the following sentence, which contains the progressive meaning as well:

(85) I was very anxious *being examined for malaria*.

‘ Σ / PA
 me = anxious > very \supset examine₂ / PROG . . .’

In this example, the perfective interpretation that the passive evoked in (84) is blocked. This is because the meaning of the progressive is involved here. It places the NP inside the verbal action, forcing it to be read as ongoing. In this case, then, the anxiety occurred while the examination was in progress. The NP of the participle is in a temporal gradation relation with *anxious* in this instance. The progressive aspect can also combine with the perfect aspect on a verb. This follows essentially the same pattern as described in section 1.7.2. Consider, the following example:

(86) I went home *having been partying* by myself all night.

‘Σ / PA

me = [go₁] > home ⊃ [party₁] > [by₁] / PROG / PF
[by₂]; myself’

In (86), the going event is related to the fact that the first person had been partying all night. The sentence presents these notions in such a way that it appears that the first person only leaves after the partying alone has been going on for a while. The progressive meaning is applied first, after which the perfect aspect is applied. Formally, this is clear from the fact that it appears that *be partying* (the progressive form) has taken the verbal position in the perfect aspect structure *have + V-ed*. It is therefore applied *after* the progressive. This structure, in turn, receives the gerundive suffix *-ing* on *have* on account of its being used to temporally specify *go home*. If this structure were reversed, *have + V-ed* would be placed in the *be + V-ing* construction, yielding **being having partied*. This analysis also makes semantic sense: being engaged in the partying has occurred up until the present, and now the person who has done so is going home. However, the perfect aspect used in this sentence does not necessitate that the action itself is necessarily completely over. Rather, what is placed in the past is the narrated period singled out by the progressive, which was itself placed within the event period, but this itself does not necessarily mean that the entire event period was singled out. In this instance, however, the interpretation of this sentence would usually imply as much.

As discussed above, the passive form can also be used in combination with the perfect:

(87) I was relieved, *having been examined* for malaria.

‘Σ / PA

me = relieved ⊃ [examine₂] > [for₁] / PF
[for₂]; malaria’

Like other lexicalised forms, “relieved” in this context cannot be said to be derived from *relieve* proper. Rather, the word refers to a sensation, not an action, and this meaning is only *derived* from the earlier form. For this reason, ‘relieved’ appears as a single lexical item in the above notation. Moving on, the first person only felt relieved after he or she was the object of a malaria examination. The perfect aspect expresses this: since this meaning places the actual event (the examination) before the moment actually described, it is clear that the relief only occurred within the situation when the examination was complete.

Lastly, the combination of the progressive, the perfect aspect *and* the passive voice will be discussed. Sentence (88) shows all these meanings combined into one:

(88) I was bored, *having been being examined* for hours.
 Σ / PA
 me = bored \supset [examine₂] > [for₁] / PROG / PF
 [for₂]; hour’

As the above indicates, the person undergoing the examination only felt bored after having undergone it for hours. The structure is similar to that of (88), with the distinction that here the gerundive verb is also passive. For this reason, two forms of *be* occur. The passive form is usually *be* + V-*ed*, and the progressive takes *be* + V-*ing*. When they occur together, then, two *bes* are used. Also, the perfect (*have* + VPF) adds *have* and requires a perfect form. The combination thus yields the structure *having been being examined*. The boredom only sets in, therefore, after the examination has been going on for a long time. In this context, however, the interpretation that the event stretches on beyond the narrated period singled out by the progressive: the examination will most likely go on during the period in which the person is bored.

3.7 Conclusion

In the above, it has been shown that only lexicalised gerundival adjectives can take positions which are traditionally associated with the adverbial position. That is to say, the meanings which display essentially the same features as the lexicalised forms in chapter 2 (i.e. reference to a propensity rather than an activity in its own right, gradability, and an inability to distribute roles) can take the adverbial suffix *-ly* (e.g. *We are progressing frustratingly slowly*). When the lexicalisation process has taken a different turn, gerundives can occasionally also fulfil prepositional functions (e.g. *The outrage following the scandal was justified*) or even conjunctival functions (e.g. “Considering none of those guys knew how to use cameras, it was pretty amazing when it started to come together” (Helmore, 6 August 2011)). Contrastively, gerundives

which are not lexicalised seem to take positions in which they create a temporal gradation connection. This means that the meaning they specify (usually the main verb) only occurs in the projection of the situation if the event in the gerundive is also projected (e.g. *I sat talking*). In this position, since they convey their full verbal meaning, they can also be specified for aspect and voice (e.g. *I work hard having drunk a cup of coffee*, which refers to the event of my working hard occurring only when the event of drinking a cup of coffee is completed, or *I left the hospital examined*, which contains a passive participle).