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## **Deconstructing Meaning : a semiotactic approach to gerundival constructions in English**

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## Chapter 5 – Concluding remarks

Over the course of the preceding chapters, a general account has been developed of the various uses of *-ing* forms in English, under the assumption that the semiotactic framework would be capable of expressing the nuanced distinction between each of these uses. Based on the work above, I would argue that this hypothesis is confirmed: the analyses that have been performed in each chapter consistently led to generalisations which the semiotactic framework could accurately express. Undoubtedly the most discussed of these is the situational gerund, which has been a point of discussion for decades now. With the present work, I hope to have provided a refreshing perspective on this problem which, on the one hand, will provide food for thought for analysts of all stripes, and, on the other, convince the reader of the clarity, preciseness, and expressive power of the semiotactic framework.

On the whole, this work is divided into two parts: one part, which spans from chapter 1 to chapter 3, describes the semiotactic framework and applies it to data which have been explained, at least to my knowledge, to a sufficient degree by other linguists. I have done so in an attempt to show the explanatory value of the semiotactic framework. This model was designed to indicate every semantic relationship that can be expressed by the grammar of any language. Significantly, it makes it possible to notate very precisely which meaning interacts with which directly and, as such, also where structural ambiguities may arise. In giving such a notation, a linguist presents the results of his own analysis of the data in the form of a clear and falsifiable statement. This is what makes the semiotactic framework an indispensable tool in the search for the meaning of grammar. I hope to have proven that the semiotactic framework is up to the task of expressing these statements in the first part of this work. Moreover, the description of these more clearly defined gerundival forms made it possible to isolate the topic of the second part: the situational gerund. Here, the (mostly structuralist) principles on which the semiotactic framework is based have been applied to a controversial topic to propose a novel explanation.

As is the case with any formal system, an analysis based on it will mean nothing to a reader that is unfamiliar with it. The first chapter of this dissertation is therefore dedicated to explaining the fundamentals of the semiotactic framework. It is dedicated to explaining the underlying assumptions about the nature of language, and what falls within and outside the realm of linguistics. The structuralist basis of the semiotactic framework is clearly reflected in a strong adherence to De Saussure's notion of *one form – one meaning*, and the study of language as a search for linguistic invariants: unambiguous connections between forms and meanings. Another fundamental

distinction that is markedly structuralist is the distinction between meaning and interpretation. This distinction has been expressed quite succinctly by Geoffrey Leech, who states that “meaning, for linguistics, is neutral between ‘speaker’s meaning’ and ‘hearer’s meaning’; and this is surely justifiable, since only through knowing the neutral potentialities of the medium of communication itself can we investigate differences between what a person intends to convey and what he actually conveys” (1971, p. 24). In other words, although there may be interpretive differences as to what a sign refers to given the context, what is important in linguistic analysis is what is always (invariably) conveyed, regardless of context.

It may be clear to any speaker of the English language that the most basic use of the *-ing* form is nominalisation of verbal forms. Most of these are instances of *abstraction*: they refer to the event as an entity within itself (e.g. *the cutting of the wedding cake*). However, many of these forms have lexicalised as well. Usually, when they lexicalise, these gerunds come to refer to the *result* of the action, rather than the action itself (e.g. *a building* is a structure that is the result of a building action). Apart from that, it may be clear that in many cases, the *-ing* suffix is used to place verbal meanings in adjectival positions. As has been argued in the second chapter, most of these forms actually retain their verbal properties, as they specify the entities they occur with by making them the agent of the event they refer to, and the (in)direct object positions of these forms can also be filled (e.g. *a man giving his wife a rose*). However, not every *-ing* form in an adjectival position does so. Rather, some forms seem to refer to a property or a propensity rather than an actual event. These forms can never distribute (in)direct object roles, and they can be quantified (e.g. *The movie was very inspiring (\*me)*). Apart from this distinction between adjectival gerundives and what I have here called lexicalised gerundival adjectives, there is also a distinction to be made on the basis of the position within the sentence that these forms can take. ‘Regular’ adjectival gerundives usually take the attributive position when they occur on their own (e.g. *a walking man*), although they will usually occur in postpositive position when they distribute roles other than the agent role (e.g. *a man writing a book*) or when it is itself specified (e.g. *a man walking on the moon*, in which the place of the walking is specified, versus *a walking man on the moon*, in which *man* is specified as the walker, and as being on the moon as well). However, it is also possible for adjectival gerundives to appear in the postpositive position without other meanings associated with it (as in *a man walking*). It has been argued in the second chapter that these forms specify the entity they occur with through *temporal limitation* rather than atemporal limitation. That is to say: rather than specifying the group of appropriate referents by indicating a subgroup carrying an extra property (i.e. the property the adjective refers to), they

indicate that the appropriate referents are only appropriate *when* they engage in that activity. For instance, the difference between *a walking man* and *a man walking* is that the first variant takes from all men those singular men that walk as appropriate referents, but the latter refers a man only *while* he is walking. In other words, it is not so much that he must be a carrier of a given property, but rather be in a specific state in order to be an appropriate referent. This may be a result of its being a reduced relative clause etymologically, but, as the perspective on language taken here only concerns itself with the present state of the language, this does not imply that this etymology must be reflected in the semiotactic notation of such forms.

A similar distinction was found in chapter 3, which dealt with participial gerundives, as well as prepositional and conjunctival forms. In positions taken by participles positions, forms that have not lexicalised (and hence do not allow for the suffix *-ly*, and can distribute roles other than that of a carrier) commonly specify either the subject or the main verb of the sentence temporally. In a sentence like *I work hard having drunk a cup of coffee*, the phrase *having drunk a cup of coffee* tells us something about when I work hard: when the first person has also been the agent of a drinking action, of which a cup of coffee was the object. However, when lexicalised forms are used, they usually refer to properties or propensities, just like lexicalised gerundival adjectives. For example, in *We are progressing frustratingly slowly*, the word *frustratingly* does not refer to a process, but to the fact that the progress is so slow it tends to frustrate. In the same way, *amazingly* does not refer to an action, as is shown in *The wind blew amazingly hard*, the wind is not literally said to amaze anyone (as in *It amazes me how hard the wind is blowing*), but rather that the hardness of the blowing of the wind was such that it tends to amaze. Apart from these forms, some gerundives have grammaticalised as well, leading to them taking on other functions than adjectives or adverbs. For instance, *notwithstanding* in *All their help notwithstanding, we were not able to raise enough money* clearly does not refer to a verbal meaning. There is nothing that the help is not withstanding. Rather, the word carries a meaning closer to *regardless*: it connects an entity to something that happened regardless of that entity. A form that has grammaticalised even further is *considering* in a sentence like *He handled the situation very well considering everybody was against him*. Here, the gerundival also does not perform any verbal function: he was not handling the situation while he was considering something. Rather, he did very well *although* everybody was against him: situation 1 might have been expected not to occur due to situation 2, but it did. This shows that the gerundival performs a conjunctival role rather than a verbal one.

As stated, the most controversial use of gerundival forms (and perhaps even the most controversial topic in all of English linguistics) is the connection between the form and the meaning of the situational gerund. Many people have commented on this form over the decades, and many have contrasted this form to the *to*-infinitive. This topic has been discussed in some detail in the fourth chapter. First, it has been established that from a semiotactic perspective both are, in fact, separate constructions. A new distinction between these two forms is here proposed. This new perspective distinguishes between the two nonfinite forms in two respects: the temporal/aspectual features on the one hand, and the features of the situation itself on the other. On the temporal/aspectual side of the equation, I argue that the situational gerund places the *narrated period*, (i.e. the period that the situation as a whole refers to), within the *event period* (i.e. the entire duration of the event referred to by the verb), so that every part of the verb refers to the verbal meaning as ongoing. Moreover, the situational gerund is also presented as sensitive to specification by the meaning that dominates it. By contrast, the *to*-infinitive is not specified at all. This means that it is not sensitive to the specification of any dominating element (which explains why the nonfinite in *I remembered looking at her* refers to a moment before the main verb event, whereas *I remembered to look at her* does not: both nonfinites are placed in the same moment in the past by the past tense of the sentence). These temporal and aspectual specifications naturally affect the entirety of any situation introduced by the situational gerund, so this temporal specification is notated on the sigma line of any situational gerund. Moreover, since it is not aspectually defined, both the beginning and the end are still part of the meaning (which explains why a form like *Try cooking the rice* does not imply that it is the cooking itself that may or may not be successful, whereas *Try to cook the rice* means that the nonfinite situation includes the beginning, which does allow for this reading). Apart from these features, the two nonfinite structures also differ in the way the situations they refer to are presented. More specifically, I argue that the situational gerund is not propositional, where the *to*-infinitive is. This opposition can accurately be notated through the use of the nexus functor. This allows the latter form to be used as the object to propositional verbs, whereas this is not the case with the situational gerund. Naturally, the role each of these aspects plays in the resulting projection is a matter of interpretation.

As stated in the introduction, the present work aimed toward three separate goals:

1. To give a full inventerisation of gerundival forms;
2. To present a new distinction between the situational gerund and the *to*-infinitive, based on semiotactic principles;

3. To prove that the semiotactic framework provides an adequate analytical method for distinguishing all the gerundival forms under discussion in this work, as well as a method of formalisation that is sufficient to express the differences between them.

I believe that the work presented above has succeeded in achieving all three of these goals. In the overview given above, nominal, adjectival, adverbial, prepositional, conjunctival, as well as participial and even clausal *-ing* forms have all been discussed in such a way that they can elegantly be distinguished from one another. I am using non-semiotactic terminology here, to indicate that, from a theory-neutral perspective, the above discussion is more or less complete – its scope covers all classes of words in which *-ing* forms can be found. The second goal of the present work, I believe, has also been achieved. In the application of the semiotactic principles, many theories were automatically discarded, whereas others did provide valuable insights into this elusive form and its companion, the *to*-infinitive. I believe the discussion in chapter 4 to have led to a distinction that holds true to the principle of *one form – one meaning*, as well as the distinction between *meaning* and *interpretation*. The notations proposed for both forms, moreover, also seem adequate in capturing every aspect of the distinction found in the application of this framework's principles. As such, the third goal also seems to have been reached: the semiotactic framework is adequate for analysing the gerundival forms of the English language.

More work still needs to be done, however. For instance, there is some variation caused by word order and prosody which is still underexplored. Although we have seen examples like “Shielding his eyes, the man looked at the guest” (Ebeling 1978, p. 354), for example, not every possible combination of position and prosody has been explored. The effect of such positioning may still be explored, although it appears to be a topic related to adverbials in their own right, rather than gerundives in particular. This also holds for the constructions discussed in chapter 2, in which no formal distinction is proposed to account for such incorrect sentences as *\*He is award-winning*. One may wonder whether there is something about this form and forms like it which bars it from the predicative position. This would be a lexicalised form, which is indicated by the fact that it is compounded to an element that interpretively would be the object of the event. A sentence like *His work is groundbreaking*, on the other hand, is totally acceptable, however. The reason for such restrictions may still be explored.

Another lacuna in the present work may be the fact that the bare infinitive, although briefly analysed, has not received the attention that may be due. The competition between this form and the situational gerund and the *to*-infinitive is rather marginal,

which is why it did not receive as much attention as these other forms. I believe a future study may well specify the meaning of this form given by Ebeling even further, or replace it completely. Also, in studying this, it is important to analyse whether the complement to *help* is equivalent to that of *see*. As noted in section 4.2.2.3, a sentence like *I helped find it* is acceptable, but the same sentence with *see* as its main verb is not: *\*I saw find it*. It has largely remained outside the scope of the present work, however, as it is not aimed at nonfinite clauses in general, but at the situational gerund in particular.

I hope that the preceding chapters have succeeded in convincing the reader that the principles on which the semiotactic framework are built are rigid enough to come to accurate, unambiguous descriptions of the meanings of sentences. It is also hoped that the present work, and the framework it was based on, will have a positive effect on the discussion that as yet still surrounds the situational gerund and the *to*-infinitive.