

ON PATTERNS OF COMPLEMENTATION WITH VERBS OF EFFORT¹

1. Duffley & Tremblay (1994) on English verbs of effort

In a recent paper, Duffley & Tremblay (1994) examine the use of the infinitival and *-ing* patterns after verbs of effort, and conclude that in PE most verbs in the class (e.g. *endeavour, strive, struggle*, etc.) 'take only the infinitive and refuse the *-ing*' (p. 567). Variation between the two forms is in fact restricted to the verb *try*, and, marginally, to *attempt*. With the former, both the *to*-infinitive and the gerund are in common use today, though, as is well known, there is an important difference in the meaning of the two constructions. Whereas *try V-ing* necessarily involves performance of the action, whether successful or not, with *try to*-infinitive the implication is that the complement event was attempted but never performed:

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

Usage with *attempt* is remarkably different. Thus, Duffley & Tremblay point out that this verb is construed almost exclusively with an infinitive, examples of *attempt V-ing* being very rare in their corpus (only seven cases noted). In addition, the selection of *-ing* after *attempt* does 'not appear to necessarily evoke performance of the event expressed by the *-ing*' (p. 567), so that with this verb 'the distinction in meaning between the two constructions is practically nil' (p. 573).

In view of these observable differences in behaviour, Duffley & Tremblay set out to explore, first, whether 'there is 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*' (p. 567); secondly, why it is that verbs of effort, with the already mentioned exception of *try*, generally subcategorize only for an infinitive.

Following Duffley (1992), they argue that *to* is not a mere infinitive marker, but, rather, a meaningful element which, because of its prepositional origin, denotes 'a movement from a before-position to an after-position in time' (p. 571). Given this semantic potentiality, the *to*-infinitive is the natural form after verbs involving the notion of effort: by definition, an effort towards the achieving of a certain goal comes prior to the actual realization of that goal; that is, there is a before/after relation which is marked morphologically by the selection of a *to*-infinitive complement, as in

- (3) Looking back at me, he struggled desperately to understand why I should know his name ...

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Duffley & Tremblay further suggest that, contrary to what is usually assumed, the notion of effort is not part of the lexical meaning of *try*. Rather, in a sentence like

(4) I tried to switch on the light.

the idea of effort is 'a product of the combination of *try*'s meaning with that of the preposition *to*' (p. 575). In support of this view, they adduce a sentence like

(5) She was looking for her slippers.

in which the idea of searching is not inherent in the verb *look* itself, 'but is produced by the combination of the meanings of *look* and the preposition *for*' (p. 575).

By contrast, when *try* is followed by a gerund, the before/after relation implied by the infinitive marker *to* is absent, and hence the verb is simply apprehended as 'put to the test, try out'.

As regards *attempt*, Duffley & Tremblay point out that with this verb the notion of effort is effectively inherent in its lexical meaning. As a consequence, *attempt to*-infinitive and *attempt V-ing* are 'quasi-synonymous' (p. 574), since, irrespective of the construction chosen, the verb itself evokes an effort aimed at attaining a goal. In other words, the distinction between both patterns of complementation is, as it were, neutralised. Finally, the marked preponderance of *to*-infinitives after *attempt* is accounted for on the basis of the natural association between *to* and genuine verbs of effort that was pointed out earlier in this section.

2. An alternative analysis of verbs of effort

Though the paper by Duffley & Tremblay summarised above contains a number of interesting suggestions, certain aspects of their analysis seem open to question. In what follows, I would like to examine in particular: a) their contention that the reading of *try* as 'make an effort' is solely a product of its combination with a following *to*-infinitive; b) the status of *to:ing* as a meaningful opposition in English, both historically and synchronically; and c) the factors triggering the selection of the *-ing* form after *attempt*.

As regards *a*, it is argued by Duffley & Tremblay that it is the combination of *try* with a following *to*-infinitive that brings about the idea of effort, just as the idea of searching conveyed by a verb like *look for* is not implicit in *look* itself, but results from 'the combination of the meanings of *look* and the preposition *for*' (p. 575). This may sound attractive as a hypothesis, but the analogy between *try to* and *look for* should not, I think, be pushed too far. The grammar of catenatives like *try to*, *expect to* or *intend to* bears little relation to the grammar of idiomatic combinations like *look for*, *look after*, *look on* 'consider', and so forth. Between these verbs and their corresponding prepositions there exist close syntactic and semantic ties that justify the label 'prepositional' with which they are conventionally known in English. Suggesting that the infinitive marker *to* plays a role comparable to *for*, *after* or *on* in the above mentioned syntagms seems, to say the least, far-fetched. This not to mention the fact that

one could easily adduce instances of prepositional verbs whose meanings can hardly be described as a product of the combined meanings of the verb and the preposition in question; cf. in this respect *come across* 'find' or *call on* 'visit'.

In view of this, a more adequate approach would be to check whether there is any evidence to suggest that the lexeme *try* can in fact convey the meaning 'make an effort' even when followed by a noun phrase, rather than by a *to*-infinitive. In PE, this is clearly not the case, as Duffley & Tremblay rightly point out. However, if we turn to earlier stages of the language it appears that *try* + *NP* could in fact be used in that way. Thus, under *Try* v. 15 'attempt to do, perform, or accomplish (an action)', the *OED* adduces the following quotation:

- (6) 1638 Junius, *Paint. Ancients*, p. 12: All kind of worke seemeth to be hard before we doe try it.

An earlier example illustrating the same use is (7):

- (7) 1554 *The Trial of Sir Nicholas Throckmorton I*, 75.C1 (Helsinki Corpus): *Hare*: I knowe no Meane so apparent to try Procurement [i.e. 'to attempt to induce others (to treason)'; s.v. *OED Procurement 1*] as by Words, and that Meane is probable ynoughe agaynst you, as well by youre owne Confession, as by other Mennes Depositions.

Throckmorton: To talke of the Queenes Maryage with the Prince of Spayne, and also the commyng hyther of the Spanyardes is not to procure Treason to be done ...

Significantly, the first attested instance of *try to*-infinitive dates back to the late sixteenth century (1593 Queen Elizabeth I, tr. *Boethius' De Consolatione Philosophiae*, p. 96 [Helsinki Corpus]),² and this suggests, I think, that this construction developed from the use of *try* + *NP* illustrated in (6) and (7) above. By the end of the seventeenth century *try* was in common use as a catenative verb taking infinitival complementation (cf. Söderlind 1958:22), and has remained so to this day.

The evidence just adduced shows that the assumption of Duffley & Tremblay that *try* derives its meaning of 'attempt, make an effort' from its combination with a *to*-infinitive is incorrect. Rather, it seems clear that by the beginning of the Modern English period *try* + *NP* could be employed either as 'put to the test' (s.v. *OED Try* v. 11; first quotation: 1545) or as 'attempt to do, make an effort' (s.v. *OED Try* v. 15). By the late sixteenth century *try to*-infinitive had also become available in this latter sense.

Having clarified this point, I would now like to turn to the second aspect mentioned at the beginning of this section, namely, the status of the opposition *to:ing* after English catenative verbs. It is not my intention to discuss PE usage in detail; rather, what I propose is to ascertain whether historical evidence can again throw light on clauses like *I tried to work/working harder* and on other contrasting pairs. For this purpose, in the following paragraphs I will be adducing data derived from a large corpus of texts covering the years 1400-1760, and comprising well over two million words. As the overall conclusions of my investigation have been expounded elsewhere (cf. Fanego 1996a, 1996b), I will

² The first quotation adduced by the *OED* is from 1697; s.v. *Try* v. 16.

restrict myself to summarizing the findings which are relevant to the present study.

Basically, my sources reveal that, from the seventeenth century onwards, *-ing* forms came to be increasingly used in object position as an alternative to infinitival complements. The process starts with verbs denoting avoiding and forbearing (*avoid, escape, forbear, refrain, etc.*), and is then extended to other classes of predicates, including: a) verbs of declining and refusing (*decline, fail, miss, neglect, omit, refuse, etc.*); b) emotive verbs (*abhor, dread, fear, hate, like, love, etc.*); c) verbs of intention (*intend*); d) verbs of suffering and bearing (*abide, bear, endure, etc.*); and e) the retrospective verb *remember*. Verbs of effort (*attempt, endeavour, labour, strive, try, etc.*) were also examined, but, with the exceptions noted later in this paper, they are not affected by the above mentioned trend and continue to collocate exclusively with an infinitive.

By the middle of the eighteenth century *-ing* forms had ousted the *to*-infinitive after verbs of avoiding and forbearing, while after the verbs in classes *a* to *d* above there was much variation in usage. The selection of complement was controlled by a number of factors, among others the synsemantic environment (for instance, whether this was iterative or durative, or included auxiliaries such as *can/could* and perfective *have*), the type of text (speech-based texts favouring the gerund), and stylistic constraints such as the desire to avoid two consecutive infinitives or *-ing* forms, which results in sequences such as *to refuse making /refusing to make*, rather than *to refuse to make /refusing making*. In addition, there are cases in which the choice of form after a given verb cannot be accounted for on the basis of any of the variables just mentioned, and appears to be completely arbitrary, as in (8) and (9) below:

- (8) 1739 Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, *Complete Letters*, p. 149 (Halsband 1966): I have been oblig'd to excuse my going to Court on having no Court dress, and saying *I intended to leave the Town* in a few days.
- (9) 1739 *ibid.*, p. 150: He told me that he had not had that advantage, but he was informed that *you intended leaving Sienna ...*

During the period examined (i.e. 1400-1760), *remember* is the only verb with which the contrast between the *to*-infinitive and the *-ing* form can be described as systematic. As in PE, this latter form occurs when *remember* is used in its retrospective sense of 'recollect, have the memory of' (e.g. *I remember doing it*), while for the reading 'not to forget to do something' a *to*-infinitive is selected instead (e.g. *I will remember to do it*).³ As I have shown elsewhere, this regular pattern of variation after *remember* can be observed since about the late sixteenth century, and is firmly established in eighteenth century usage. This means, therefore, that with at least one English verb, namely *remember*, the opposition *to:ing* was meaningful and served the specific purpose of distinguishing

³ On the grammar of retrospective verbs in PE, see in particular Palmer (1987: 190, 198) and Jørgensen (1990). During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a perfect infinitive (e.g. *I remember to have done it*) was also in use after retrospective *remember* as an alternative to the gerund; for a discussion of the distinction between both forms, see Fanego 1996b.

between two substantially different readings of the same lexeme. So different, indeed, that in a language like Spanish they are rendered by means of two separate lexical items: thus *recordar* 'recollect, remember (doing something)' contrasts in Spanish with *acordarse de* 'not to forget (to do something)'.

In the course of the nineteenth century the two patterns available with *remember* became extended to the semantically related verb *forget*.⁴ Prior to that time, *forget* could be employed either with a *to*-infinitive, in the sense 'omit or neglect through inadvertence' (s.v. *OED Forget* 2; first quot.: a1300), or with a noun phrase, to yield the retrospective reading 'lose remembrance of, cease to retain in one's memory' (s.v. *OED Forget* 1; first quot.: c888). However, early in the nineteenth century an *-ing* clause became also available after *forget* in this latter sense, as in

- (10) 1823 Ch. Lamb, *Essays of Elia*, p. 108 (Visser 1963-1973: §1777): ... we had never forgotten being there together.

In its turn, *try V-ing* seems to have come into use roughly at about the same time, to judge at least from the evidence adduced by Visser (§1780) and from his remark that 'the construction with a form in *-ing*' seems to be found since 'the beginning of the nineteenth century' (*ibid.*). Clearly, *try* does not belong in the class of retrospective verbs, but it exhibits features that allow one to hypothesize that the systematic contrast between infinitival and *-ing* forms found with those verbs was likely to diffuse to it, too, sooner or later. One such feature is that *try*, like *remember*, is polysemous,⁵ so the alternation *to:ing* must have been felt as marking the readings 'make an effort' and 'put to the test' explicitly. Another feature that *try* shares with *remember* and related verbs can be best illustrated by considering the following pair:

- (11) 1749 Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, *Complete Letters*, p. 441: I hope you will remember to send me the 3rd Vol. of Architecture with any other amuseing Books.
 (12) 1745 *ibid.*, p. 354: I perfectly remember carrying back the Manuscript you mention and delivering it to Lord Oxford.

Though the opposition *to:ing* with *remember* is primarily one of tense (future vs. past), it is clear that clauses involving retrospective *remember*, as in (12), will often refer to 'real' events that have actually taken place in the past; hence, the *-ing* form may easily come to be interpreted as also signalling performance of the action, specially by contrast with the infinitive construction, since this, because of its future-time reference, necessarily implies potentiality or non performance. If we now consider the two readings of *try* that are the concern of this paper ('put to the test' vs. 'make an effort'), it is clear that the contrast between performance vs. non performance is also relevant to them, as was noted in section 1 above and as Duffley & Tremblay acknowledge. In this respect, therefore, there is some

⁴ *Regret* is another retrospective verb affected by the same development; in this case, the first attested instance with an *-ing* form is from 1849 (cf. Visser §1773, and Fanego 1996b)

⁵ In passing, it can be mentioned that, in Spanish, *try*, like *remember*, corresponds to two separate lexemes: *tratar de* 'try to' and *probar a* 'try V-ing'.

semantic overlap between *remember* and *try*, and this, as I see it, may have facilitated the diffusion of the opposition *to:ing* from one verb to another.

To conclude this brief discussion of patterns of complementation with English verbs of effort, I propose to examine in the last place the factors triggering the choice of *-ing* forms after *attempt*. As Duffley & Tremblay note, examples of this pattern are very rare today, and appear to be 'quasi-synonymous' (p. 574) with the infinitival construction. This, they suggest, is due to the fact that the notion of effort is inherent in the lexical meaning of *attempt*; therefore, the distinction between *to:ing* is largely neutralised with this particular verb.

The evidence derived from the historical sources mentioned earlier in this section indeed confirms that the preference of *attempt* for the infinitive pattern applies also to earlier stages of the language. In fact, during the early Modern English period *attempt*, *endeavour*, *labour*, *strive* and other related verbs are the only ones to escape the tendency, referred to in the previous pages, for the gerund to alternate with the infinitive in object position. Surely, there must be some explanation for this exceptional behaviour, but I will not try to provide one at present. Rather, let me just point out that, though the infinitive is clearly favoured by all verbs of effort over the period 1400-1760, a few isolated occurrences of *attempt V-ing* are also attested. In all, I have come across six examples of this construction. One of them is (13) below; this, as I have suggested elsewhere (cf. Fanego 1996a), might be accounted for on the basis of the type of text (Fielding's *Grub-Street Opera*), as speech-based texts clearly promoted the use of the gerund during the period in question. The other five cases all belong to the pattern illustrated in (14):

- (13) 1731 Fielding, *Grub-Street Opera* 1.5.16 (Regents): Pshaw! I should not think him worth being jealous of. He runs after every woman he sees ... Oh Margery, when I was in London with Madam, I have seen several such sparks as these; some of them *would attempt making love* too.
- (14) 1724 Defoe, *Roxana*, p. 88 (Abbey Classics): ... it was not safe for me to attempt doing him any good.

It is clear that in (14) the *-ing* form is selected primarily so as to avoid the occurrence of two consecutive infinitives. This stylistic constraint, which has already been referred to earlier in this paper, can be seen at work since about the late sixteenth century. A few decades later it has become a near knockout factor, that is, it applies to most of the verbs I have examined (*attempt*, *love*, *refrain*, *decline*, *neglect*, *omit*, *refuse*, etc.), whenever they occur in the relevant context.⁶ The only exception are verbs of effort other than *attempt*; in other words, sequences like those in (15)-(16) do in fact occur several times with *endeavour*, *labour* and *strive*, by far the three most common items in the effort class during the period under discussion:

- (15) 1708 Ockley, *Human Reason Exhibited in the Life of Hai En Yodkhan* (Milic 1079-EO): He saw also that it was his duty to endeavour to make himself master of the properties of that being ... [5 other examples noted.]

⁶ In a recent paper, Rohdenburg (1995: 381) notes, too, that this avoidance strategy accounts for the *-ing* forms associated with *attempt* in Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766).

- (16) 1629 *Barrington Family Letters*, p. 76 (Helsinki Corpus): ... yow shall (God willing) ever finde mee willing to strive to desearve your love to my uttermost power and indeavour. [I more example noted.]

These verbs, therefore, differ from *attempt* in their inability to take an *-ing* form even in such circumstances. The explanation for this might lie in syntactic and semantic factors of various sorts; but, alternatively, it could have to do with something so unsophisticated as phonotactics: a sequence like *to attempt to do* produces not just two successive *to*-infinitives, but also a consonant cluster that may have been felt as undesirable. At any rate, the conclusion seems clear that, in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the opposition *to:ing* could indeed be meaningful, for instance, with the verb *remember* (cf. examples [11]-[12] above), but it was not invariably so. In cases like (14) above the infinitive and the *-ing* should rather be seen as mere contextual variants that were automatically triggered by the syntactic environment.

In the light of this data, it is worth considering in detail the PE instances of *attempt V-ing* recorded by Duffley & Tremblay. Though they have come across seven examples of this construction, only the following three are actually quoted in their paper:

- (17) Over their lifetime, many people attempt, or at least strongly consider, setting up their own. (*Longman/Lancaster English Language Corpus* 40055 04 US 87).
 (18) ... 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).
 (19) 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).

As regards (17), I do not think that this can be counted as an instance of *attempt V-ing*; *setting up* is immediately dependent on *consider*, and after this verb the gerundive construction is the only possible choice in English. Examples (18)-(19), in their turn, are parallel to (14) quoted above; that is, they reveal that the stylistic constraint on the use of two consecutive infinitives is still at work in PE, at least with the verb *attempt*. It follows, therefore, that the *-ing* forms in those two examples must be regarded as exactly synonymous with the infinitival construction, rather than as 'quasi synonymous', as Duffley & Tremblay suggest. Concerning the other four instances of *attempt V-ing* occurring in their corpus, if they prove to be of a different kind, it would be worthwhile to examine them in relation to variables such as the type of text or the synsemantic environment; these were relevant for complement selection in earlier stages of English, and might well throw light on contemporary usage.

Department of English and German
 Facultad de Filología
 University of Santiago de Compostela
 E-15704 Santiago de Compostela
 Spain
 e-mail: iafanego@usc.es

TERESA FANEGO

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