

ON THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF ENGLISH RETROSPECTIVE VERBS*

SUMMARY. – This paper examines the earlier history of so-called retrospective verbs, that is verbs like *remember*, *forget* and *regret*, which allow either an infinitive or an *-ing* clause as complementation, the distinction between both constructions being primarily one of tense (future vs. past), as in *I remembered to do it/I remember doing it*. It is shown that the origins of this contrast are to be explained by reference to the inherent time-neutrality of the English abstract verbal noun or ‘gerund’, from which the *-ing* forms occurring after retrospective verbs have evolved.

1. Retrospective verbs in Present-day English

The label ‘retrospective’ is usually applied in Present-day English (PE) grammars to a small set of catenative verbs allowing either an infinitive or an *-ing* form as complementation. The former is selected to indicate “that the action or event takes place after (and as a result of) the mental process denoted by the verb” (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 1193), while the reverse is true for the gerundive construction, which is used retrospectively to refer “to a preceding event or occasion coming to mind at the time indicated by the main verb” (*ibid.*). This difference in time reference, which is also mentioned by Palmer (1987: 190, 198), Jorgensen (1990) and various others, is clearly illustrated in the following examples:

- (1a) I remembered to do it.
 (1b) I remembered doing it.
- (2a) I forgot to go to the bank.
 (2b) I shall never forget having come to see you!.

Commenting on these pairs, Palmer (1987: 190) points out that “there is no obvious general statement that can be made about the *to*-infinitive and the *-ing* form carrying such a distinction in meaning (unlike, for instance, the distinctions with SEE) [i.e. *I saw the boy crossing the road/I saw the boy cross the road*]”, in which the contrast is, of course, not one of tense, but rather aspect (progressive vs. nonprogressive).²

Verbs in the retrospective class include *remember*, *forget*, and *regret*. To these could be added *recollect* and *recall*, which differ from the other three in that they can only be employed retrospectively, and not with reference to a future action (*he recollected seeing her* is grammatical, as opposed to **he recollected to see her*). With all five verbs, either a simple or a perfect gerund can be used with retrospective function in Present-day English, as in the following examples:

- (3) She remembered leaving early/having left early.
- (4) She never forgot coming to see you/having come to see you.

Yet, as Palmer (1987: 178), Quirk *et al.* (1985: 239) and Jorgensen (1990: 148, footnote 9) all note, these simple and periphrastic *-ing* forms behave somewhat idiosyncratically in that there is between them “no apparent difference of meaning” (Palmer 1987: F78), that is,

they both refer to past time and do not seem to carry any implication of a perfective vs. nonperfective contrast. In other words, the pairs in (3)–(4) above are “virtually synonymous with each other” (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 239).

From the preceding discussion, it can be seen that retrospective verbs seem to be quite unique as a class in PE. First, because of the apparent lack of any aspectual difference between the *-ing* forms available with them. Second, because the systematic contrast in time reference (future vs. past) between the infinitival and *-ing* complements of *remember*, *forget* and *regret* is not found with other catenatives also allowing both constructions, as is clear from (5)–(7) below and similar structures in English:

- (5a) I like learning languages.
 (5b) I would like to learn languages.
- (6a) I intend to finish it.
 (6b) I intend finishing it.
- (7a) I heard John close the door.
 (7b) I heard John closing the door.

In the remainder of this paper, I will try to achieve some insights into the PE behaviour of retrospective verbs from a consideration of their history since late Middle English (ME) times. Specifically, it will be shown that the syntactic and semantic peculiarities noted above are intimately related to the properties of the English abstract verbal noun or ‘gerund’, and its development from ME onwards. Therefore, a brief excursus on this seems in order before proceeding to the next section.

As is well known, in ME the gerund³ was still only a pure noun formed through the addition of the suffix *-ing* (earlier also *-ung*) to a verb stem. Being a noun, the gerund could occur with a wide range of verbs, and also in a wide range of functions (subject, object, predicative, complement of a preposition). It could also take determiners (articles, possessives, etc.) and, because of its nominal character, it was naturally indifferent to time distinctions; accordingly, depending on the context, it could be employed to express any time, or no time in particular. Thus in (8) the reference is to the future; in (9) to the past:

(8) a1387 Trevisa *Higden's Polychronicon* 5.153 [*MED* s.v. *Dreden* v. 2. (a)] He hadde i-trespased, and dredde the chastisyng of his maister... ‘he... dreaded being punished by his master’

(9) c1378 *Piers the Plowman* (B-text) XV 285 [Tajima 1985: 111] Poule, after his prechyng panyers he made...

For reasons not yet well understood,⁴ the gerund acquired, from ME onwards, a number of verbal properties, namely, a) it became capable of governing an object or a predicative complement (e.g. “I hate *drinking beer*”, “I don’t like *being ill*”); b) it could be modified by adverbial adjuncts restricted to co-occurring only with verbs; c) it showed tense and voice

distinctions (e.g. “after *having preached*”, “the necessity of loving and *being loved*”); and d) it could take a subject in a case other than the genitive (e.g. “I didn’t know about *the weather* being so awful in this area”).⁵

This process of increasing verbalization of the gerund has been explored by, among others, Mustanoja (1960), Visser (1963–1973: §§1035–1124), Tajima (1985), Donner (1986), Jack (1988), Houston (1989), Bourcier (1992), and, more recently, by Fanego (1996). Though further research on the topic is still needed, on the whole it can be asserted that, as both Donner (1986) and Tajima (1985: 137) have shown, the regular and systematic use of the gerund with fully verbal characteristics was not an established feature of Middle English syntax, even though the preliminary stages of its development from purely nominal to purely verbal can be detected as early as in the second half of the twelfth century (see Tajima 1985: 137).

In object position, the verbal gerund was particularly slow to develop. Thus, I have recently shown elsewhere (Fanego 1996) that sequences like “I intend *seeing Mary*”, “I like *reading poetry*” and so on were practically non-existent in English until the early eighteenth century. In addition, there were also significant differences as regards the acquisition by the gerund of the several verbal properties mentioned earlier in this section. The last to become general was precisely the one that is relevant for the purposes of the present study, namely the ability to show time distinctions by means of periphrastic forms like “after *having preached*”. The first sporadic instances of this perfective type do not seem to occur until 1580–1581 (cf. Tajima 1985: 112 ff), but they remained a rarity for a long time afterwards.

2. Retrospective verbs in late Middle and Modern English

In order to trace the development through time of the infinitival and *-ing* constructions after retrospective verbs, I checked all the occurrences of *forget*, *remember*, *regret*, *recollect* and *recall* in the following sources:

1) the relevant sections in Visser (1963–1973: 1185, 1773, 1777); 2) the *Middle English Dictionary* (Kurath, Kuhn *et al.* 1952–) and the *Oxford English Dictionary*; 3) the *Helsinki Corpus of English Texts*, subperiods ME4 (1420–1500, 213.850 words) and EModE (1500–1710, 551.000 words); 4) data for Marlowe’s complete works, as found in Ando (1976); 5) the *Harvard Concordance* (Spevack 1973) to the complete works of William Shakespeare; 6) data for Dryden’s prose, as found in Söderlind (1958); 7) Louis T. Milic’s (1986) *Augustan Prose Sample 1675–1725* (= 79.000 words); 8) *The Spectator*, nos. 474–514 (= about 45.000/50.000 words; see Smith 1966); 9) pp. 1–65 (= about 25.000 words) of Daniel Defoe’s *Roxana* (1724); 10) Volume I of Joseph Spence’s *Observations, Anecdotes, and Characters of Books and Men* (Osborne 1966); these cover a long period, comprising from about 1727, when Spence first started recording actual conversation (cf. Osborne, p. xviii), till a few years before his death in 1768; 11) a body of letters written to and by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu between March 1721 and December 1749 (pp. 1–448 in Vol. II of Halsband [1966]; about 125.000/130.000 words in all).

Though this list can justifiably be described as quite extensive, it must be acknowledged that the evidence for the various retrospective verbs is limited. Thus *recall* is first recorded in 1929 (see Visser 1963–1973: §1777), and is therefore of little interest for the purposes of the present study. The earliest occurrences of *regret* and *recollect* (in the relevant patterns) are also comparatively late, dating back to 1849 and 1776 respectively (cf. Visser 1963–1973: §§1773, 1777). *Forget*, in its turn, could be employed either with a *to*-infinitive and future time reference, in the sense ‘omit or neglect through inadvertence’ (*OED* s.v. *Forget* v. 2; first quotation: a1300), or with a noun phrase or finite clause, to yield the retrospective reading ‘lose remembrance of, cease to retain in one’s memory’ (*OED* s.v. *Forget* v. 1; first quotation: c888). Its first use followed by a retrospective gerund is (10) below; I have not been able to trace any earlier examples:⁶

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

Remember is in fact the only retrospective predicate that occurs in both the *-ing* and infinitival constructions prior to the second half of the eighteenth century, and this suggests that it must be seen as the central member of the class, and as the one that eventually came to set the pattern for all the others. It is with *remember*, therefore, that the following discussion is chiefly concerned.

Remember (from Old French *remembrer*; *OED* s.v. *Remember* v.) is first recorded in English in the fourteenth century. Both in late Middle English and in the sixteenth century it is frequently employed with reference to a future action, in its still current sense of ‘not to forget to do something’, as in (11):

(11) 1534 Fitzherbert *The Book of Husbandry* 101 [HC] One thinge I wyl aduise the to remembre, and specially in wynter-tyme, ... to consyder in thy mynde, whether...

The retrospective reading ‘have the memory of, recollect’ was also available from the start (*MED* s.v. *Remembren* v. 1a.[c]). When so used, *remember* occurs in the early part of the Modern English period in a variety of syntactic patterns; thus, both finite clauses, as in (12), and the so-called accusative-with-infinitive construction, as in (13), are recorded in subsection EMode I (1500–1570) of the *Helsinki Corpus*:

(12) 1534 Tyndale *The New Testament* II, 20 Assone therfore 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.

(13) 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 luyng cowde remembre y^e lyke to be seen.

There are no instances, however, of the retrospective *-ing* form (e.g. *I remember seeing John*) which is the concern of the present study.⁷ In fact, in my material, the pattern of variation between infinitives and gerunds after *remember* that is characteristic of PE usage can be discerned for the first time in Shakespeare's works. As today, Shakespeare selects a *to*-infinitive for the nonretrospective reading of *remember* (4 ex.), as in (14):

(14) *1 Henry VI* 1.4.94 When I am dead and gone, /Remember to avenge me on the French./

In its retrospective use, *remember* is followed by a *that*-clause, as in earlier and later stages. But, in addition, two other types of complement (1 ex. each) are used by Shakespeare for the same purpose:

(15) *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. Man's nature cannot
carry /Th' affliction nor the fear.

(16) *As You Like It* 2.4.49–51 **Touchstone:** I remember when I was in love, 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 milk'd; and I remember the wooing of a peascod instead of her,

In (15) *remember* takes a perfect infinitive that explicitly signals that the reference is to past time. This type of construction is no longer acceptable today, but was in common use in Modern English (cf. example (17) below), and can even be found in texts dating back to the middle of the twentieth century.⁸ In (16), by contrast, the retrospective sense of *remember* is conveyed through the selection of two nominal gerunds. Because of its status as a noun, the gerund, as already noted, was inherently time-neutral; depending on the context, it could thus be employed to refer to an action prior to the moment of speaking, as in (16), or to one coming later, as in (8) quoted above. Given the paucity of the evidence found so far, it is of course difficult to evaluate the extent to which this retrospective use of the gerund after *remember* was or was not established in Elizabethan English. Tentatively, however, I would suggest that by Shakespeare's time, if not before, there existed (apart from finite clauses) two different alternatives to denote past-time after *remember*: the perfect infinitive and the nominal gerund. Further, I would also suggest that the distinction between both forms may have been chiefly one of style, the gerund being the less formal alternative;⁹ this assumption is based not only on Shakespeare's usage – note in this connection the colloquial character of the passage quoted as (16) –, but also on the data provided by later sources. These are the concern of the paragraphs that follow.

By the end of the seventeenth century, the contrasting patterns observed in Shakespeare can again be found in Dryden's prose usage. Nonretrospective *remember* + simple infinitive occurs in three cases (see Söderlind 1958: 21–22); when in retrospective function, a perfect infinitive follows (1 ex.):

(17) 1697 Dryden *Notes to the Aeneis* 62 I remember not to have read it in any English author.

The gerund is not used by Dryden for exactly the same purpose, but the following passage from his play *Don Sebastian* is reminiscent of the *As You Like It* example quoted above. In fact, the chief difference between (18) and Touchstone's use of the gerundive construction after *remember* is that in (18) the gerund, strictly speaking, is not a dependent of this verb, but rather an apposition to its object (i.e. "the glorious Rapines..."); also worthy of note is the progression in the verbalization of the gerund, as shown by the fact that in the lines quoted below the last of the five coordinated *-ing* forms selects a direct object rather than an *of*-phrase:

(18) 1689 Dryden *Don Sebastian* 424 [Söderlind 1958: 193] Do you remember the glorious Rapines and Robberies you have committed? Your breaking open and gutting of Houses, your Rummaging of Cellars, your demolishing of Christian Temples, and bearing off in triumph the superstitious Plate and Pictures ...?

In the early eighteenth century, the alternation between a simple infinitive or a perfect one according to the nonretrospective or retrospective function of *remember* continues to be very regular. The former is frequent and thus requires no exemplification; the latter occurs in *The Spectator* nos. 68, 493, 497, 506, etc. It is also found once in the correspondence of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, in a letter from August 18th 1739 ("such [people] as I do not remember to have seen"; see Halsband 1966: 143). But elsewhere, she uses a gerund (4 ex.; see below), which seems to confirm my suggestion above that this was the form preferred after retrospective *remember* in informal levels of style. Interestingly enough, in the two quotations from 1740 the gerunds still exhibit clear nominal traits, namely, they take determiners (*my, the*) and, in (20), the object of *paying* surfaces as an *of*-phrase. This reveals how slow was the development and acceptance of the verbal gerund after *remember*.

(19) 1740 Lady Mary W.M. to Lady Pomfret, p. 182 Won't you admire the force of destiny? I remember my contracting an intimacy with a girl in a village, as the most distant thing on earth from power and politics.

(20) 1740 Lady Mary W.M. to Wortley, p. 190 As to the Bill, I perfectly remember the paying of it, which you may easily believe when you enquire that all auction bills are paid at the farthest within 8 days after the sale.

(21) 1745 Lady Mary W.M. to Wortley, p. 354 I perfectly remember carrying back the Manuscript you mention and delivering it to Lord Oxford. I never fail'd returning to himself all the Books he lent me.

(22) 1748 Lady Mary W.M. to Lady Bute, p. 392 I remember (when I return'd from Turkey) meeting with the same affectation of youth amongst my acquaint<an>ce that you now mention amongst yours,

According to Visser (1963–1973: §1777), “in the first half of the nineteenth century the form in *-ing* [after *remember*] was frowned upon as an improper innovation by the grammarians”. Yet, in the light of the evidence adduced in this section, its use as an alternative to the perfect infinitive after retrospective *remember* can be traced back to considerably earlier. The only innovation one could speak of in connection with nineteenth century usage concerns the introduction of the perfect gerund. Once this had become firmly established in the language, examples occur in which it is employed as still another form to denote anterior time after *remember*; the following is the first instance known to date:

(23) 1823 Ch. Lamb *Essays of Elia* (Nelson) 108 [Visser 1963–1973: §1777] I can just remember having been there.

In essence, the various passages quoted so far illustrate a clear line of development of the gerund after *remember*, from more nominal to less nominal to, eventually, purely verbal; but all through, the semantic content has remained remarkably stable: from the start, the function of the gerund was denoting anterior time. This was made possible, as already stated, by its inherent tense-neutrality, which thus allowed it to derive its time reference from the surrounding environment.¹⁰

Earlier in this paper mention was made of other retrospective predicates, namely *forget*, *regret*, *recollect* and *recall*. With all these, as already mentioned, the use of the *-ing* pattern can be discerned only from the late eighteenth century onwards (cf. Visser 1963–1973: §§ 1773, 1777). It can be hypothesised, therefore, that, once the gerund was available as a real option to denote past time after *remember*, it diffused to other semantically related verbs, to become finally consolidated in the course of the nineteenth century.

Finally, the fact that in PE the perfect infinitive (*I remember to have paid it*) is no longer acceptable as a retrospective form after *remember* and after the other predicates in the class suggests that the *-ing* form has been advancing at the expense of the infinitive. This might indicate 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. However, as I have demonstrated elsewhere (cf. Fanego 1996), from the late seventeenth century onwards there is a sharp rise in the frequency of gerunds after a good number of English verbs (*like*, *fear*, *intend*, *forbear*, *omit*, *neglect*, etc.) that formerly were followed by an infinitive, either preferentially or exclusively. Bearing this in mind, the disappearance of the perfect infinitive after retrospective *remember*, and its complete replacement by an *-ing* form, could thus be interpreted as yet another manifestation of this widespread linguistic trend.

NOTES

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¹ Both Palmer (1987: 198) and Jorgensen (1990: 149 ff) note that *forget*, when used in retrospective function, seems to require negation; it is then exactly synonymous with *remember* (i.e. *never forget* = *always remember*), and this accounts for its ability to take an *-ing* form indicating, as in the case of *remember*, anterior time.

² For a recent account of the grammar of verbs of perception see Van der Meer (1994).

³ The label 'gerund' will be used henceforth as a convenient cover term for nominal, verbal and mixed gerundive constructions, as illustrated respectively in a) *I remember the paying of it*; b) *I remember paying it*; and c) *I remember the paying it*.

⁴ For a discussion of the factors behind the development of the English verbal gerund, see in particular Jack (1988).

⁵ This and the following paragraph will also appear, in a slightly modified form, in Fanego (1996), where I discuss the development of gerunds after certain verbs of subject-control between 1400 and 1760. Retrospective verbs, however, are not examined in this paper.

⁶ In Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1630) [HC subperiod EModE II, Middleton, p. 1], *forget* is followed by a noun phrase headed by an *-ing* nominal:

"drowsie browd, dull eyed, drossie sprited, I hold my life you haue forgot your Dauncing: When was the Dauncer with you?"

This, however, represents a different use of this verb, namely *OED Forget* v. 3.c.obs. 'drop the practice of (a duty, virtue etc.)'.

⁷ It should be noted, however, that Visser (1963-1973: §1777) adduces the following early instance of *remember* + *gerund*:

c1535 Bp. Fisher *Works* 74, 25 "He spake before of the inwarde partes of mysery, now he remembereth nombrynge the outwarde partes of it."

Here the form *nombrynge* seems to refer to an action coming later in time than the action of the higher verb; in such case, it could be considered quite exceptional, in that it would be the only example known so far where *remember* 'not to forget to do sth.' is followed by an *-ing* form. If, as seems more likely, *remember* is used above in its retrospective sense of 'have the memory of, recollect', this would be the earliest instance of a pattern that is now firmly established.

⁸ Jorgensen (1990: 147), who adduces examples from 1954 and 1960, assumes that the perfect infinitive is still a valid option today, but this form is explicitly ruled out by Palmer (1987: 198) and is judged ungrammatical by native speakers of English.

⁹ On this issue see also Fanego (1996), where I show that, in earlier stages of English, at least certain uses of the gerund were associated with the less literate styles.

¹⁰ In many recent approaches, the *-ing* form after *remember* and related verbs is seen as chiefly indicating performance, as opposed to the infinitive pattern, which denotes future-time reference and hence potentiality (contrast, for instance, *I will remember to pay it* = something projected, with *I remember paying it* = something actually done); see in this connection Bolinger (1968: 124), Quirk *et al.* (1985: 1193), Dirven (1989: 128). In my view, however, this semantic distinction between potentiality and performance has probably evolved from the original, primary, distinction discussed in this paper, whereby the function of the gerund, as opposed to the infinitive, was denoting anterior time. But, by definition, events that have taken place in the past involve actual performance, so, as a corollary, this semantic feature has also come to be associated with the *-ing* forms occurring in retrospective clauses.

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