

**THE THESES OF THE PhD DISSERTATION**

# **The Semantics of Aspectualizers in English**

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## I. Objectives of the dissertation

The dissertation offers a semantic analysis of aspectualizers and their non-finite complement constructions (*to-infinitive* and *-ing*) in English. The aspectualizers and their complements are characterized by a great complexity which is assumed to be contributable to their semantics to a great extent. In many cases, the aspectualizers are very similar with little difference between them. A good example of this are examples (1-3) where there is almost no difference between the various aspectualizers. In spite of this it is assumed that there are some subtle differences between the aspectualizers and the constructions they are part of, and that these differences are motivated not only semantic factors, but by pragmatic and sociolinguistic elements as well.

- (1) *It began to rain / raining. It started to snow / snowing.*  
(2) *Someone kept/continued slamming the door all night.* (Freed 1979: 98)  
(3) *John stopped/ quit liking rock music.* (Brinton 1991: 86)

One of the most detailed analyses of aspectualizers belongs to Freed (1979). In her study, she analyzes twelve aspectualizers – that of expressing the beginning of an event – *begin* and *start*, the continuity or the cessation (*continue*, *keep*, *resume*, *repeat*, *cease*, *stop*, *quit*) and also the end of an event (*finish*, *end* and *complete*) within the presupposition and consequences approach. This analysis also analyzes these aspectualizers, also adding the aspectual verb – *go on-* to the analysis. Other analyses besides Freed are that of Dowty (1979), Brinton (1988), Dinsmore (1991), Duffley (2006), Dixon (2005) etc. These studies shed light on various aspects of the semantics of aspectualizers. Dowty, for example, working within the generative semantics and using the elements of Montague logic offers a decompositional analysis of the aspectual verbs. He defines the aspectualizers by using the atomic predicates DO, CAUSE and BECOME (COME ABOUT). While Dowty is mainly interested in the truth conditions of aspectualizers, other analyses (like Brinton (1988), Schmid (1993), Binnick (1991) define the semantics of aspectualizers with respect to other criteria, like causativity (some aspectualizers, like *stop*, *keep* and *stop* express causativity, while others do not (consider sentences 4-6). Another criterion is that of intentionality, which is characteristic of several aspectualizers, like *finish*, *resume*, *quit* and *cease*. The lack of intentionality can also explain the ungrammaticality of sentence (7), including a the verb *finish* which cannot appear with an inanimate, unagentive subjects:

- (4) *The flood started our trouble. /\*The flood began our trouble.* (Freed : 78)  
(5) *They kept the audience waiting.* (Freed : 97)  
(6) *The water stopped dripping. – The dripping of the water stopped.* (Freed: 116)  
(7) *\*Her teeth finished decaying.* (Freed : 130)

Although all the approaches presented so far give useful accounts of the phenomena subsumed under complementation, they also have their drawbacks. Several of the approaches interpret the meaning of complement forms as mainly coming from the semantics of the matrix. The matrix verb is taken to define the meaning of the complement form, so that the meaning of the complement form will depend on the type and meaning of the matrix verb. Consequently, there are often such cases discussed and elaborated where the matrix can only appear with one complement form (either the *to- infinitive* or the *-ing*). The problem with this is that in many

cases no clear-cut distinction or ordering can be made of a certain matrix verb and the complement form it takes. Apart from a few analyses (Duffley 2006, Dixon 2005, Mair 2002, 2003, Schmid 1993, 1996) the analysis of the semantics of the complement constructions is neglected. The analysis of the eventuality type of the complement verb and that of the subject are neither given considerable attention. The number of analyses that give a detailed analysis of aspectual verbs and their complement constructions is quite low. In order to remediate this situation I try to give a semantic analysis of aspectual constructions with a special focus not only on the semantics of the aspectual verb, but also that of the complement construction and the subject of the sentence.

Some of the most important questions the research focuses on are the following:

- The semantic analysis of the aspectualizers, their complement constructions and the subject of the sentence.
- The analysis of the eventuality type of the complement verb. I am interested to see what eventuality types (statives, activities, accomplishments or achievements) appear with the greatest frequency in a certain construction.
- The semantic analysis of the subject also receives a great importance. I assume that the thematic role of the subject (agent, patient, experiencer) contributes to the meaning of an aspectual construction.
- The analysis of the possible differences between the constructions having the same aspectualizers but different complement constructions (e.g. between *begin + to infinitive* and *begin + ing*) and also constructions containing different aspectualizers but the same complement construction (e.g. *begin + to infinitive* and *start + to infinitive*).
- The analysis of the possible factors that influence the semantic value of a certain aspectual construction. An important question is whether the aspectualizers and their complement constructions can be analyzed with respect to one semantic criterion, or several criteria are necessary for their analysis, and if so, what factors play an importance in the semantics of these constructions?

## II. Applied methods

The dissertation follows the line of a constructionist framework (following mainly Goldberg 1995, 1997) also adopting elements of cognitive grammar (Langacker 1990, 1991, 1999, 2009). The approach can be considered constructionist in the sense that the aspectualizers and their complement forms are seen as constructions, they themselves being also part of a larger macro-construction. This macro-construction, containing the meaning of the matrix, that of the complement construction and the subject is assumed to have a meaning of its own which, although motivated to a great extent by the matrix and the other constituents of the sentence, is imagined to be more than the sum of the meanings of each construction.

The analysis of the *to- infinitive* and *- ing* constructions receives a great importance in this study. Following Kleinke (2002) to a certain extent it will be assumed that complement constructions have both a schematic and a prototypical meaning. The two meanings are equally important and present in the meaning of a construction. The difference between them is as follows: while the schematic meaning is based on the notion of schema, representing the more general meaning of the construction, the prototypical meaning depends on the meaning of the construction it is part of. The schematic meaning greatly depends on the profile of the construction in question.

Concerning the *to-infinitive* and *-ing* constructions their schematic meaning is based on the path-goal schema of the *to-infinitive* and the container schema of the *-ing*. The schematic meaning of these constructions represents the different ways of viewing a situation. Motivated by their profiles, the two constructions express two different ways of viewing: while the *to-infinitive* expresses a viewing from the exterior, the *-ing* construction expresses a viewing from within. Using the terms of Langacker (1991, 1999) we can say that the *to-infinitive* expresses sequential scanning, where the event is seen as happening in sequence, and *-ing* holistic scanning, where all parts of an event are seen as being simultaneously present.

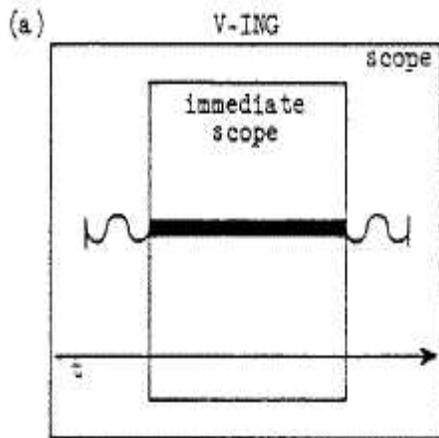


Table 1.: The profile of the *to-infinitive* as understood by Langacker (1991, 1999)

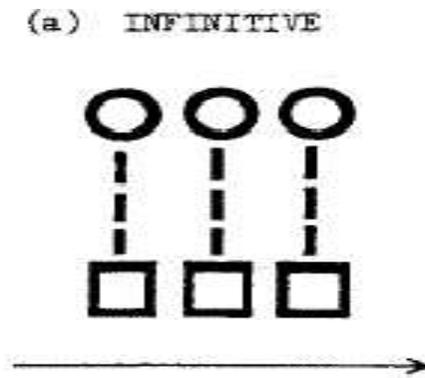


Table 2.: The profile of *-ing* as understood by Langacker (1991, 1999)

While schematic meaning is present in all contexts the construction appears in, the prototypical meaning depends on the construction it is part of. The prototypical meaning of the *to-infinitive* and *-ing* constructions vary depending on the meaning of the matrix verbs. When following the aspectualizers, the two constructions, *to-infinitive* and *-ing* can be considered to express a variety of prototypical meanings, like futurity (in the case of the *to-infinitive*), actuality (in the case of *-ing*), durativity, graduality.

During the research I concentrated mainly on those aspectualizers that appear with both the *to + infinitive* and *-ing* constructions. These aspectualizers are the following: *begin*, *start*, *continue*, *go on* and *cease*. I was interested to see what possible differences can be detected between the various constructions (*cease + to infinitive*, *cease + ing*, or *begin + to infinitive*, *start + to infinitive* etc.) and how frequent these differences are. Besides these verbs, I also analyse those aspectual verb that allow only for *-ing* complements, like *keep*, *resume*, *quit* and *finish*. Those aspectualizers that do not normally appear with either the *to-infinitive* or *-ing* constructions will not be analyzed in detail in the dissertation.

The semantics of aspectualizers and their complement constructions are analyzed with the methods of corpus linguistics. I have used several corpora for this reason (like *Brown*, *Frown*, *Flob*, *Lob* corpora, *BNC* (the British National Corpus) and also the Internet as corpus. Although there are

various analyses that use corpora for the study of aspectualizers (Mair 2002, 2003, Schmid 1993) these studies concentrate mainly on the analysis of *begin* and *start*. There are no analyses as yet that would offer a corpus-based approach of the aspectualizers and their complement constructions. In this sense this analysis can be considered to shed some new light on the semantic of aspectualizers and their non-finite complements.

The corpus-based analysis of aspectualizers seems to be very plausible as it offers several advantages as compared to the traditional approach. An important advantage is that it allows for both a qualitative and a quantitative analysis. A qualitative analysis helps to identify the phenomena that are taking place in aspectual complementation. By a qualitative analysis an overall picture can be obtained on the context aspectual verbs appear in, that is the complement forms they are followed by (*to-infinitive* or *-ing* construction), the situation type of the complement verb (if it is a state verb, an activity, accomplishment or achievement) and also the semantic role of the subject. The quantitative research gives information on the frequency of the data observed and shows the relevance of the observed phenomenon.

It must be noted that the present analysis only discusses the semantics of the aspectualizers and the complement constructions. Pragmatic and sociolinguistic factors are not discussed in detail in the dissertation. Also, the dissertation is limited to a synchronic analysis and only partly discusses the diachronic development of the aspectualizers in question and their complementation.

### III. Results

The data from corpora point to some interesting characteristics of the aspectualizers and their arguments. Although these data are of a great actuality, the conclusions drawn cannot be considered as final or complete. This is even more so since we are dealing with continuously changing phenomena.

Some of the relevant observations include the following:

1. The *to-infinitive* constructions, including *begin + to infinitive*, *start + to infinitive*, *continue + to infinitive*, *go on + to infinitive* and also *cease + to infinitive* often contain stative constructions. Depending on the eventuality type of the complement constructions these constructions also show some subtle differences. That is, the two constructions *begin + to infinitive* and *start + to infinitive*, although very similar semantically are also slightly different. While the former constructions contains a great number of cognitive and emotive verbs, in the latter construction the number of activity verbs is higher.
2. Contrary to *to-infinitive*, the *-ing* constructions appear more rarely with stative verbs. On the contrary, they tend to appear with activity verbs that require an acting agent. Those process verbs that do not require an acting agent are not frequent within this construction. It seems that very often this construction attributes a certain dynamicity to the entire construction; the *to-infinitive* construction, by contrast, tends to express graduality and stativity.
3. Among the *-ing* constructions the number of dynamic constructions are quite high (within the *start + ing* construction, for example we find a great number of verbs that require an acting agent, like *work*, *play*, *go*, *move*, *shoot*, *push*, *make*, etc.). The number of dynamic

verbs are high in other constructions as well. In the *cease + ing* construction for example, the frequency of dynamic verbs is also considerably high.

4. The analysis of the subject also receives a great importance in the dissertation. The semantic value of the subject seems to vary according to the constructions it is part of. The data point to a great frequency of patient and experiencer subjects within the *to-infinitive* constructions (sentences 8-10). The thematic role of the subject depends on the semantic value of the matrix verb to a great extent. Taking *start + to infinitive* and *begin + to infinitive* as example, the number of agentive subject is higher in the construction with *start* (which can be explained by the more dynamic nature of *start*). The subject of the *start + to infinitive* construction can acquire an agentive value even if it appears with a stative verb. An example of this is sentence (11), where the subject of the sentence can be interpreted as agentive, so that the structure *-to be interested* can be also understood as *to show interest* (He started to show interest...). As compared to the *to-infinitive*, the subject of the *-ing* construction is often agentive. In this construction, the subject can acquire an agentive value even if it is inanimate (as for example in sentence (12) where the object of the room are almost seen as acting agents:

(8) *You want to see him again - just one more time, you tell yourself - and you begin to feel the overwhelming need to confess.* (FROWN)

(9) *So we know that so far about fifty percent of our anthropogenic CO two has been locked away in this system in the ocean. And at the moment there is considerable research effort being directed to try and work out just how much more carbon dioxide the ocean will continue to absorb.* (BNC)

(10) *If we unplug a TV set from the mains electricity, it ceases to function. But I can not then say that the real source of electricity is the socket upon the wall.* (BNC)

(11) *She started to be interested in music late in his life.* (Cornilescu 2003: 471)

(12) *When the clock has been destroyed, the rest of the objects in the room cease attacking at once. When the adventurers have finished with the clock, this chamber will probably be a complete shambles.* (BNC)

5. The *to-infinitive* and *-ing* constructions acquire a temporal value after the aspectual verbs. A common characteristic of the *to-infinitive* constructions is that they express futurity, a movement towards the beginning of an action (*begin + to infinitive* and *start + to infinitive*) to its continuity (*continue + to infinitive* and *go on + to infinitive*) or to its cessation (*cease + to infinitive*). Concerning this feature of the *to-infinitive* construction, *cease + to infinitive* is more specific in this respect, since *cease* refers to the cessation of the event. In spite of this, I believe the sense of futurity is also present in the case of *cease*. That is, the *cease + to infinitive* construction is understood to express not only that the event in question comes to an end, but also, that a new state comes into being. Sentence (13) expresses not only that that the busses have ceased running any more but creates the state when the busses are not running any longer.

(13) *The buses have ceased to run.*

(Dirven 1989:131)

Concerning the *-ing* construction, the assumption that the time interval expressed by *-ing* is simultaneous with the time interval expressed by the aspectualizer in question (Freed 1979, Wierzbicka 1988) seems to be confirmed. This time interval can be the beginning phase, middle or end phase of a situation (*onset*, *nucleus* and *coda* in Freed's terms). This is also true in cases when *-ing* expresses an instantaneous action-in such cases, the event is recategorized as series, as is also the case in sentence (14). This is because in the case of the *-ing* construction the event needs to have a certain duration.

(14) *Well I always feed the birds. Yeah. Give them a bit of chicken. Not cooked or anything. That won't matter. I'll only cut it up smaller that's how they like it. Anything with fat they eat. Oh! I'll be glad to sit down again! You've got the to do it and th I'll have to be ever so careful I'm we wearing a. And so kept on finding bits of the Angora wool.*

(BNC)

6. The frequency of a certain construction is also an important point to consider. Although in this case, sociolinguistic factors may have the greatest impact (Mair 2002, 2003, Fanego 2004, and also Brinton 1988 link the frequency of a certain complement construction to sociolinguistic factors) semantic elements also seem to play an important role in this respect. The difference in frequency is well illustrated by higher frequency of *begin + to infinitive* as compared to *start + to infinitive*, or the more frequent occurrence of *cease + to infinitive* as compared to *cease + ing*. While this may be explained by the continuous spread of *-ing* as it is pointed out by Mair (2002, 2003) and also Fanego (2004) the more frequent occurrence of an aspectual verb with a certain complement construction is also semantically motivated. The more frequent occurrence of *begin + to infinitive* as compared to *start + to infinitive* is also influenced by the semantic value of the matrix verb (*begin* is more stative in nature than *start* and can also express graduality, features which are more compatible with the semantic value of the *to-infinitive* than with *-ing*).

Another category of aspectualizers contain those verbs that only appear with *-ing* complements, like *keep*, *quit* and *finish*. The non-appearance of these verbs with *to-infinitives* can be explained by the semantic value of the matrix, that of the subject and the complement construction. The *to-infinitive* construction expresses futurity after aspectual verbs. The fact that neither of these verbs express futurity can partly explain the exclusive occurrence of these verbs with *-ing* complements.

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