

**ENDRE ABKAROVITS**

## **THE *-ING* FORM AFTER FINITE VERBS IN THE REFERENCE BOOKS OF THE NINETIES**

**Abstract:** The author compared the information offered by some of the most widely-used reference books on the use of non-finite constructions after transitive finites in a paper at the end of the eighties. The findings were rather embarrassing, but as the authors could rely only on their own intuition or on research carried out among a restricted number of native speakers of English at that time, the contradictions were inevitable. After a brief survey of the revolutionary changes that have taken place in the past few years the present paper attempts at comparing the information given by the new generation of corpus-based learner's dictionaries and some new grammar books to see if any improvements have been achieved in this field. Although one would expect a more unanimous picture when the compilers of the dictionaries all claim to have drawn their conclusions from some huge, and consequently reliable database, the present findings are not much less confusing than those a decade ago in spite of the general positive development in lexicography.

### **1 Recent developments in lexicography**

In the past ten years there have been revolutionary changes in the field of lexicography. Until 1987 the market of monolingual English learner's dictionaries was dominated by Oxford's Advanced Learner's Dictionary, first edited by A.S. Hornby in 1948. Then a rivalry started between Longman and Oxford. In 1987 the first edition of Collins COBUILD English Dictionary was published, the first dictionary with all the conclusions from the data of their own corpus, 20 million strong at that time. COBUILD broke with the traditional approach of lexicographers, who had invented their own examples, relying on their own intuition. COBUILD has always been

interested only in contemporary English. Different varieties of the written language, transcriptions of the spoken language were put into the database and the data were examined with the help of ever-developing retrieval methods. Nothing was accepted, unless it was supported by data of their own database. They introduced a so-called extra column, first mainly for information on grammar. Looking back from the point of view of today's wealth of data (which I still don't find sufficient), it seems that the first edition was based on a relatively small corpus. The second edition in 1995 saw a tenfold increase in the database. In this way far safer conclusions were made possible than had been in the case of the first edition. By this time other publishers also had to realise that unless they can claim that their dictionary is also based on authentic examples, which had been analysed carefully, they were not able to sell them. Their approach might be different, but by now all major learner's dictionaries claim to have some corpus of their own (or shared with another publisher), even if some of them seem only to use them to illustrate their preconceptions with authentic examples, while others – especially COBUILD – try to deduce all their conclusions from their data.

Besides having a database all publishers try to introduce novelties and the 1995 editions of four major learner's dictionaries competed in offering features not usual until then. (Frequency bands, culture pages, 'false friends', etc.) Along with the new editions of the dictionaries the same publishers also continued bringing out new grammar and usage books. Some of them (again especially in the case of COBUILD) were also the fruits of computer-assisted linguistic research, while others followed traditional methods.

With all these developments I thought it would be useful to return to a topic in which I became interested at the end of the eighties. At that time I examined the occurrence of various non-finite constructions after transitive verbs in the function of the object (complement), as described by 12 major reference books of the time. In that paper I also tried to find out the possibility of the choice between infinitive and *-ing* form. In the present paper I will concentrate only on the latter and the problem of the logical subject of the *-ing* form.

## **2 The treatment of the occurrence of the *-ing* form after finites with or without its own logical subject in between in earlier reference books**

The findings of my research at the end of the eighties were summarised in a table showing information offered by 12 widely-used reference books and they proved that there were a lot of contradictions between the authors. Grammar and usage books offered lists of various lengths, often selecting verbs at random. The richness of information, however, was not in close connection with the bulkiness of the book. Some quite thin dictionaries (like The BBI Combinatory Dictionary) or grammar books offered in certain issues more information than the most revered grammar books of Quirk et.al.

At that time it wasn't technically possible to select a top list of the – let's say – 30 or 50 most common verbs with the *-ing* form, so the usefulness of grammar and usage books depended on the intuition of the authors. It was no wonder that these lists did not coincide. It was less understandable why the dictionaries couldn't pay more attention to these constructions.

At that time I was interested in the issue of whether infinitive and gerund were equally acceptable after the verbs of my list and if a gerund was used, its logical subject could be expressed by both an accusative pronoun / noun in the common case and a possessive pronoun / noun in the genitive case or only by either of these. This latter issue was touched upon by very few books, most reference books described the choice as a matter of style (though some considered it to be rather a matter of individual preference, eg. BBI : xvii) and even sources which attributed some importance to this problem did not offer full information. Most dictionaries did not have a separate pattern for the different constructions, and even those which had, did not use them consistently.

As I still had the feeling that perhaps some reference books dismiss the treatment of the problem as if it were non-existent or at least the standard being the accusative and the possessive belonging to the formal (written) style, suggesting that the former is more common, I decided to check a few of these verbs in the COBUILD database. The following table shows that such generalisations are dangerous and it would be good to know why with some verbs the use of the two forms is fairly balanced, but with others one form is

clearly preferred. The table may prove that we should have some information and explanation whether there is a tendency to prefer one form or they are equally common.

	with accusative pronoun	with possessive pronoun
appreciate	28	34
enjoy	1	13
excuse	7	5
fancy	11	1
forget	6	2
forgive	3	7
imagine	205	10
mind	40	38
miss	9	4
pardon	0	4
remember	481	44

(The table shows figures from the 50 million corpus, which can be reached through subscription. I have chosen to examine only the pronoun form, because finding the 's genitive form of nouns in the corpus is fairly complicated and the occurrence of the genitive noun is even less likely than that of the possessive pronoun.)

### 3 The *-ing* form in the reference books of the past few years

What I was interested in was whether with the development of technology, when it has become possible to gain statistical data and frequency indicators from a computerised database and in this way to come to more objective conclusions, the information of the new generation of reference books has become more unanimous in this respect or not.

I have examined four major learner's dictionaries (Oxford, Cambridge, Longman, COBUILD), which were all published in 1995, along with some other reference books of the same publishers before and after 1995. Here are the results:

The symbols for the constructions:

- 1: verb + *-ing* form
- 2: verb + accusative + *-ing* form
- 3: verb + possessive + *-ing* form

	CGP	CCED	ALEX	LDOCE	OGEG	OALD	CIDE
acknowledge	1						1
admit	1		1	1	1	1	1
adore	1					1	1
advise	1				1	1	1
advocate	1					1,(2)	1
allow	1	(1)		1	1	(1)	1
anticipate	1,2		1,2,3	1	1	1,(2),(3)	1
appreciate	1,2		1,3		1	1,2	1
avoid	1,2	1	1,3	1	1,2	1	1
(can't) bear	1,2	1	1,2,3	2	1	1	1
begin	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
begrudge	1,2			1		(1),(2)	1
cease	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
chance	1,2					1	1
commence	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
confess		prep		prep	1	prep	prep
consider	1	1	1,3	1	1	1	1
contemplate	1,2	1	1,2,3	1		1,2	1
continue	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
defer	1	(1)	1,3			1	1
delay	1	1	1,3	1	1	(1)	1
deny	1	1	1,3	1	1	1	1
deserve	1				1		1
detest	1	1	1,2,3		1	1,2	1
discontinue	1	(1)	1				
dislike	1,2		1,2,3		1,2	1,2	1
dread	1,2	1,2	1	1,2	1,2	1,2	1
endure	1		1,2,3			1	1
enjoy	1	1	1,3	1	1,2	1	1
entail	1,2	1,2	1	1			1
envisage	1,2	1,2				1,2	1,2
escape	1		1,2,3		1	1	1
evade	1						1
excuse		prep	1,2,3	prep	1,2	(2),(3)	prep
face	1	1	1,2,3	1	1		1
fancy	1	1	1,2,3		1	1,2	1
favour	1,2	1				1	1
fear	1,2					(1)	1
finish	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
forbear	1	prep		prep			
forbid	1			prep		1	(1)
forget	1,2		1		1,2	1	1
forgive		(1)	1,2,3	prep		(2),(3)	prep
grudge				1		1,2	

hate	1,2	1,2	1,2,3	1,2	1,2	1,2	1,2
(can't) help		1	1,2,3	1	1,2	(1)	prep
hinder			1			(1)	
imagine	1,2	1,2	1,2,3	1,2	1,2	1,2,(3)	1,2
include						1	1
intend	1	1	1		1	1	1
involve	1,2	1	1,2,3	1	1,2	1,2,(3)	1,(2)
justify	1,2			1	1,2	1,(2),(3)	1
keep	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
like	1,2	1,2	1,2,3	1,2	1,2	1,2,(3)	1
loathe	1	1	1	1		1	1
love	1	1	1,2,3	1	1,2	1,2	1
mean	1,2	1	1	1	1,2	1,2	1
mention	1,2	(1)	1,2,3		1,2	(1)	1
mind	1,2	1,2	1,2,3	1,2	1,2	1,2,(3)	1,2
miss	1	1	1,2,3	1	1,2	1,2	1
necessitate	1,2	1	1,2,3	1		1,2	1,(3)
need	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
omit	1						
pardon		(3)	1,2,3	prep		(1),2,(3)	2
permit	1				1	1	1
plan						prep	1
postpone	1	(1)	1,3	1	1	1	1
practise	1	(1)	1	1	1	1	1
preclude	1,2	prep		prep		prep	prep
prefer	1	1	1	1	1,2	1	1
prevent	1,2	2	1,2,3	2	2	2,(3)	2
prohibit	1,2	prep		prep		prep	(prep)
propose	1	1		1	1	1	1
recall	1,2	(1)	1	1		1,2	1
recollect	1,2			1		1,2	1
recommend	1	1		1	1	1,(2),(3)	
regret	1	1	1	1	1	1,(2),(3)	1
relish	1	1				1,(2)	1
remember	1,2	1,2	1	1,2	1,2	1,2	1,2
repent				1			1
report	1,2	(2)	1			1,(2)	1
require	1		1		1	1	1
resent	1,2	1,2	1,2,3	1	1,2	(1),2,(3)	1
(can't) resist	1,2	1,2	1,2,3	1	1,2	1	1
resume	1				1	1	1
risk	1,2	1	1,3	1	1,2	1	1
save	1,2	prep		2	1,2	1,2	prep
shun	1						
(can't) stand	1,2	(1),2	1,2,3	1,2	1	1,2	1,2
start	1	1	1	1,2	1	1	1

stop	1,2	1,2	1	1,2	1,2	1,2,(3)	1,2
suggest	1	1	1,3	1	1	1	1
tolerate	1,2				1,2	1,2,(3)	
try	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
understand			1,2,3	2	2	1,(2),(3)	
urge	1						
visualize	1,2	2		2		1,2	
want	1,2	1	1	1	1	1,2	1

#### Abbreviations:

CGP: Collins COBUILD Grammar Patterns

CCED: Collins COBUILD English Dictionary

ALEX: Longman English Grammar

LDOCE: Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English

OGEG: Oxford Guide to English Grammar

OALD: Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary

CIDE: Cambridge International Dictionary of English

Figures in brackets stand for insufficient information in the case of dictionaries. These new dictionaries normally give the pattern illustrated by at least one example, but in some cases either the pattern or the example is missing.

'Prep' means that the use of the *-ing* form is indicated only in the presence of a preposition.

#### 4 Comments on the table

If we compare the individual books, we can find features that are quite common and others that may be different also in the case of the same publisher. The COBUILD dictionary drops the *-ing* construction in the case of quite a lot of verbs, although even its own database shows many examples for the missing pattern. Their more recent book on grammar patterns indicates the *-ing* form with many verbs the dictionary forgot to, but just like the dictionary it does not pay any attention to the possessive/genitive construction, it carefully selects all the examples with the accusative. It is not quite clear why the missing patterns in the second edition of the dictionary were not compensated. The Cambridge dictionary cares mainly for the basic construction and an example of a logical subject in between is quite accidental, even then with accusative forms. ('Necessitate' is the only exception.) Longman is also careful to select only accusative

examples while the traditional Longman English Grammar is the only one which offers relatively rich information on this issue, but as it is the earliest among the books examined, it is the most likely to follow traditional views. Still, it is not likely that the English language has changed such a lot recently that we should suppose that Alexander's lists are unreliable, as the COBUILD corpus figures of the previous table also testify to it.

The Oxford dictionary has no different patterns for the two ways of expressing the logical subject of the *-ing* form, but it does not refuse to give examples with the possessive. It offers however the examples in a fairly inconsistent way, so the absence of the other form does not necessarily mean its non-existence. Here are some examples to show this inconsistency:

**recall**

(V. *ing*) I recall seeing him there.

(V.n *ing*) I recall **her** giving me the key.

(A form chosen which can be either possessive or accusative.)

**recommend**

(V. *ing*, V.n *ing*) I recommended (**your**) meeting him at first.

(Giving two patterns with one sentence and only the possessive in brackets.)

**remember**

(V. *ing*) I remember posting the letters.

(V.n *ing*) I remember **him** objecting to the scheme.

(Only the accusative example indicated.)

**resent**

(V.n *ing*) Does she resent **me/my** being here? (also V. *ing*)

(Both forms of the logical subject indicated, basic pattern only in brackets.)

**tolerate**

(V.n *ing*) I will not tolerate **your** behaving in this way.

(Only possessive without brackets.)

Let's see what figures the 50 million corpus of COBUILD Direct gives for the above patterns. (Only examples where the *-ing* form is clearly a non-finite clause have been selected. The relative infrequency of some forms, when considering the millions of the



database, might make the false impression that these are unimportant patterns, but this need not necessarily be the case.)

	possessive	accusative
recall	22	66
recommend	2	0
remember	44	481
resent	27	25
tolerate	8	3

The figures seem to justify the choice of forms for the examples in the Oxford dictionary, but it can also be the result of how the compilers feel instinctively about the acceptability of a form, rather than that of the careful analysis of corpus data, as the indication of possible patterns and their illustration with examples do not show some systematic approach otherwise. It is not the absolute numbers, but the tendencies that matter in the case of the corpus data: a balanced occurrence of both forms or the predominance of one. Of course the relative frequency of certain words and patterns should also be observed when teaching a foreign language.

## 5 Conclusion

The main table of this paper shows a lot of discrepancies among the dictionaries, although all of them claim to have used a corpus. If these corpora were reliable and all compilers used reliable methods, there should not be so many differences. This either proves that the corpora are not big enough yet to draw safe conclusions, or the methods to analyse the corpus data are not sufficiently developed. Besides this, in our case it seems that dictionary compilers are not equally interested in certain grammatical constructions and without examining a grammatical phenomenon carefully, they may dismiss it with some generalization. (Eg. It is only a matter of style which form is preferred.) Overlooking data is not unknown either. Grammarians, who show more interest in these issues, often correct the information offered by the dictionary of the same publisher.

For all initial shortcomings there can be no doubt that the future is that of the ever-growing corpora and I think it is too early to say that they are already big enough.

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