

Semantic Shifts Within Infinitive Constructions in English

Tatiana Sallier

St. Petersburg State University, Faculty of Philology, RUSSIAN FEDERATION

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Abstract

The purpose of the article is to trace the semantic evolution of predicates governing the infinitive. The article is aimed at proving that the lexical units governing the infinitive display a semantic shift from more concrete lexical meaning to more abstract modal meaning. The research is conducted on the basis of the theory of context. It is proved that the infinitive is an element of syntactic context reinforcing the modal seme in the meaning of the governing predicate. As the modal seme within the meaning of the predicate is reinforced regularly and the lexical seme only occasionally, the lexical seme is weakened and gradually disappears, the predicate acquiring purely modal meaning. Lexemes having no modal meaning outside the infinitive phrase acquire it when governing the infinitive, which imposes modality upon the governing predicate. The general semantic shift for this type of construction is from concrete lexical to abstract modal, and the modal seme being stronger in these contextual conditions.

Keywords: infinitive construction, grammaticalization, semantic evolution, contextual reinforcement, systemic trend.

1. Introduction

The study covers lexical units governing the infinitive as an object (he wants to do something).

The semantic processes occurring within infinitive phrases in English and some other European languages is a diachronic process well described in linguistic literature. The analytical tense forms in English where former modal verbs evolved into auxiliaries (Ilyish, 1972: 203); the construction “to be going +infinitive” acquired first the meaning of intention, and later of future; the fact that the verbs *can* and “to know” are of the same origin, deriving from the Old Germanic *cunnan* (Cf. German *kennen* (to know) and *können* (can)). The development of modal meanings of the verbs *can* and *may* was described by Traugott (1989, 2017).

It's also worth remembering that in modern English, such verbs as *to manage*, *to seek*, *to mean* change their semantics when governing the infinitive, acquiring quasi-modal meanings of result, attempt and intention respectively. The mechanics of this process, however, hasn't been fully explored, nor was the contextual aspect taken into account.

The semantic evolution of infinitive constructions is considered in the framework of the context theory formulated by N. Amosova (1968: 47-51). The scholar distinguishes lexical and syntactic context, the latter being a syntactic structure helping to realize the meaning of a word.

She introduced the concept of “indicative minimum”, that is of a lexeme or a syntactic structure helping to realize one of the meanings of a polysemantic word.

- Lexemes regularly governing the infinitive lose their lexical meaning and become modals.
- Predicates governing the infinitive lose their meaning because of their syntactic position.
- Lexemes having no modal meaning acquire it when governing the infinitive.
- The infinitive is the indicative minimum for the modal seme in the meaning of the predicate.

2. Methods

The methods to be applied in the research include contextual, semantic and syntactic analysis. Contextual analysis is especially important, showing which elements of meaning are reinforced or suppressed within the syntactic structures with the infinitive. The concept of syntactic context seems to be especially fruitful, as syntactic structure affects the lexical semantics. The infinitive structures were considered in the framework of a larger textual unit, to establish their communicative value. Pragmatic criteria were also taken into account to establish the comparative communicative importance of syntactic structures.

3. Results

It has been proved that lexical items regularly governing the infinitive lose their lexical meaning and become modal links. Lexemes having no modal meaning outside the infinitive constructions acquire it when governing the infinitive, which means that the infinitive imposes modality on any lexeme governing it.

4. Discussion

4.1 *The semantic and modal characteristics of lexical units governing the infinitive*

First of all, it is appropriate to consider the meaning of lexical items governing the infinitive. They include words meaning desire (want, wish, yearn, to be eager), attempt (try), possibility (to be able), positive and negative result (manage fail) verbs of speech (promise, refuse, agree) intention (mean, plan, propose) and of emotional attitude (to be happy, sorry, glad)

It can be seen that all the semantic groups have modal or quasi-modal meanings. The action expressed by the infinitive can be presented as real or unreal, depending on the meaning of the predicate.

Let's consider examples:

- (1) She was happy to be on the mainland. (S.K. 17)
- (2) I wanted to see John Harman. (N.Sh.L. 153)
- (3) The officer promised to make inquiries. (N.Sh.L. 65)

The first example allows the transformation “she was on the mainland” which means that the condition denoted by the infinitive is presented as real; meanwhile the phrase “she was happy” without the infinitive has no modal meaning. Consequently, the modal meaning is conferred upon the governing unit by the infinitive.

In examples (2) and (3) the action denoted by the infinitive is presented as unreal, because both a wish and a promise may remain unfulfilled. The examples show that the modal meaning itself is created by the infinitive, whereas the type of modality (real or unreal, and within

unreal modality meanings of desirability, capacity, obligation, intention, etc.) is conveyed by the meaning of the predicate.

As to the semantic structure of the predicate, it can be divided into two semes: the modal seme, connecting the subject and the action denoted by the infinitive and the lexical seme. In (1) the lexical seme is that of emotional condition; in (3) the verb has the lexical meaning of speech.

To see which element of meaning is stronger consider an example:

(4) If you get into any legal trouble we should be glad to act for you. (N.Sh.L. 20)

The transformation “if you get into any legal trouble we should be glad” is impossible because it contradicts the meaning of the statement. The adjective “glad” doesn’t mean emotional condition, but only readiness to perform an action, which shows that the modal element is semantically stronger than the descriptive element.

4.2 *Syntactic properties of infinitive constructions*

To understand the mechanics of semantic shift, it is interesting to compare the amount of information carried by the governing word or phrase and the infinitive group.

(5) I was interested to see a small, secluded part served by a middle-aged woman where the elderly could buy the clothes they were accustomed to, black skirts and flannel petticoats and coarse kitchen aprons. (N.Sh.L. 310)

The predicate *was interested* is complemented only by the infinitive group, whereas the latter consists of 24 meaningful words and consequently carries a far larger information load.

Let’s see the examples where the predicate has other subordinates besides the infinitive:

(6) He had long ago decided not to go into the garden shelter at night until an actual raid began. (R.Gr. 172)

(7) He is very anxious to speak to you before you go. (Ch.N. 149)

In (6) the predicate is modified with a two-word adverbial of time; in (7) by an intensifier.

The limited capacity of the predicate to accept subordinates and, consequently to convey information, is caused by its syntactic position: it is crammed between the subject and the infinitive group; the infinitive, however, having no obstacle to the right of the group, can realize all the verbal valences and accept a subordinate clause. The material studied shows that if the predicate is modified at all (which doesn’t happen often) the modifier is of one meaningful word. So the infinitive group, because of its syntactic position, carries a far larger amount of information than the predicate.

4.3 *The communicative value of parts of the infinitive phrase*

The relative importance of the information conveyed by the predicate and the infinitive group may be illustrated by the following example:

(8) If it should be possible for you to come to our office in London, our Mrs. Sandbourne will be very glad to give you all particulars and to answer all your questions. (A.C.N. 37)

The sentence allows a transformation:

(8a) Mrs. Sandbourne will be glad.

(8b) Mrs. Sandbourne will give you all particulars and to answer all your questions.

The comparison between (8a) and (8b) in terms of their communicative value shows the communicative prevalence of the infinitive group. The utterance is a promise to provide information, expressed in (8b); as to the first statement (8a), Mrs. Sandbourne didn't appear either in the preceding or in the following context and her emotions are of little interest to the story. If this phrase is omitted, the message will be the same, perhaps a little less courteously expressed. Examples (4)-(8) show that the main bulk of information is conveyed by the infinitive phrase.

Another factor contributing to the weakening and loss of lexical meaning by the predicates governing the infinitive seems to be functional sentence perspective, that is the distribution of information within a sentence. The examples quoted show that the main part of information is transmitted by the infinitival phrase with its great informational capacity, provided by the ability of the phrase to grow. The predicate, be it a verb or an adjective with the link verb has limited information potential and assumes the transitional function of linking the subject and the action. The fact that transitional elements gradually lose their lexical semantics and come to express temporal and characteristics of the sentence was established by Firbas (1974).

4.4 *The semantic evolution of the predicate*

To illustrate the process of a gradual loss of the lexical meaning, see the examples:

(9) They refused to take a penny from Scarlett, telling her she would do the same for them (M.G.W. 300)

(10) She got along better barefoot, but Eileen Howard refused to try it (Sh.L. 47)

(11) I had refused to be seen in the red pants and yellow parka I had found in the suitcase. (Sh.N.L. 126)

(12) Her cheerful flesh refused to be mortified (Bl.M.M. 28)

In (9) the speech *seme* in the meaning of the predicate is reinforced by the adverbial phrase (telling her, etc); in (10) the speech act exists (there are two characters), but no details are given. The unwillingness to perform an action may or may not have been expressed verbally, which is not important for the narration. (in 11) the speech act is absent because the character is alone; in (12) it is impossible because of the inanimate subject. It can be seen that if the lexical *seme* is not reinforced by the context, it is gradually weakened, while the modal *seme* (negation in 11-14) is systematically reinforced by the infinitive phrase.

A similar semantic evolution is demonstrated in the verb *to decline*

(13) He declined either to regain consciousness or to die. (Sr.Dr. 180)

As the semantics of the infinitive rules out verbal expression, the verb *declined* in (13) can be understood as expressing pure negation, without any additional components.

Some other verbs display the same tendency. The verb of mental activity *to expect* comes to mean intention:

(14) Johanna expected to treat her as a kind of upper servant. (S.Dr. 42)

This evolution is typical for the verb *to fail* which loses the meaning of unsuccessful attempt and becomes a negation marker, devoid of other meanings. See the examples:

(15) A dishonest barman could steal from his employer by failing to ring every sale into the cash register. (A.H.H. 305)

(16) These accounts fail to adequately explain why the genre was so heavily censored. (S.T.B. 179)

The phrase *failing to ring, etc.* in (15) denotes voluntary refusal to perform an action (we can' imagine the barman unsuccessfully trying to ring the sale into the register). In (16) the inanimate subject rules out the notion of unsuccessful attempt.

The phrases "to be ready" and "to be prepared" may lose the meaning of preliminary preparation and come to mean agreement and intention to perform an action. See the examples:

(17) I was ready to report the progress I had made. (N.Sh.L. 25)

(18) The city authorities were ready to remove 10,000 people from their homes and offices. (Google search)

(19) It appears that he [Umar Akmal] is not prepared to show remorse and seek apology. (Google search)

In (17) the predicate *was ready* implies preliminary activity described by the phrase *the progress I had made*. In (18) *were ready* means just an intention (perhaps an unwilling intention) to displace the residents. In (19) the phrase *not prepared* doesn't mean the absence of preliminary preparation, but just a refusal to apologize. It's absurd to think that the defendant will do some work on preparing to show remorse. The same is the case for Russian «готов» which sometimes means not the presence/absence of preparation but the agreement/disagreement to perform an action. The Russian translation site "Reverso" translated the phrase не готов as "unwilling":

(20) Том был не готов платить такие деньги за подержанный компьютер (Tom was unwilling to pay that much money for a secondhand computer). (Reverso site)

The translator didn't see the seme of "prior preparation", which testifies to its substantial weakening and disappearance.

For some lexemes, the loss of lexical meaning and the acquisition of modality is a diachronic fact, registered in the dictionaries. Such are the verb "to seek" meaning an attempt when accompanied by the infinitive; (cf. the French verb *chercher* displaying a similar semantic shift: it means *to look for* without the infinitive complement and *to try, to want* with it). The verb *to propose* means intention and is free of the speech seme it contains in other contexts; *to manage*, means realized action.

The examples quoted show that the weakening and loss of lexical meaning by the words governing the infinitive is a systemic unidirectional process (the unidirectionality of the grammaticalization process was established in Heine and Traugott, 1991). It can partly be explained by structural factors. The finite verb or an adjectival phrase are crammed between the subject and the infinitive and have limited opportunity to be modified by other subordinates besides the infinitive. Contextual reinforcement of the modal or quasi-modal seme is compulsory, whereas the lexical seme is seldom reinforced by the context. In the absence of contextual reinforcement, the lexical seme is weakened and gradually lost, the verb becoming a modal link devoid of lexical meaning.

Functional sentence perspective, as was noted above, also contributes to the loss of meaning. With the main amount of information carried by the infinitive phrase, the predicate finds itself out of informational focus, gradually losing all the semes except the one linking the subject and the infinitive, that is temporal, modal and phasal semes.

The lexeme governing the infinitive display another tendency as well: lexemes having no modal meaning in other contexts become modals when governing the infinitive. See the examples:

(21) She **chafed** to be gone and tell the story to her husband.

(22) Mr. Perry **is just itching** to know what it's all about. (B.M.M.)

(23) She **was in a fever** to look out of the window (A.S.Dr. 27)

(24) The Prince of Wales... **was frantic** to conserve the kingdom for his own son. (A.S.K. 295)

(25) He **burned** to distinguish himself in battle. (A.S.K. 74)

(26) I've **been dying** to get my hands on your manuscript.

In all the examples the predicate has the meaning of desire. It should be noticed, however, that these lexemes have no modal meaning unless accompanied by the infinitive. *Chafe* (21) and *itch* (22) mean skin irritation. *Fever* (23) means a medical condition; *frantic* (24) is extreme anxiety (cf. *anxious* in (7)); all these lexemes have quasi modal meaning of strong desire. The common element of their initial meaning is physical discomfort. It is interesting to note that the adjective *eager*, meaning “strong desire” has been derived from French *aigre* – sour, acrid, which means that a lexeme meaning “causing physical discomfort” came to mean desire.

Besides the lexemes quoted above, the meaning of desire within infinitive construction is usually acquired by other lexemes meaning discomfort: *to burst*, *to ache*, *on fire* or excitement: *mad*, *frantic*, *agog*.

In this connection, it is interesting to trace the distribution of meaning of the adjective *anxious*. The existence of the other meaning “restless, worried”, shows that originally the sense of anxiety was present in the constructions with the infinitive. (cf. *frantic* in 22). Gradually, in the absence of contextual reinforcement, this sense was neutralized and the adjective, within the infinitive construction, came to mean “desire, intention”.

To follow the semantic evolution of the lexemes governing the infinitive let's turn to the group of predicates denoting possibility. It was noted above that the verbs *can* and *know* are of the same Germanic root, so the meaning of ability developed from the more concrete idea of knowledge. Cf. French “Elle sait écrire” (she can write) and Old Russian “он знает читать» (he can read) For example:

(27) Но будутъ устроены экзамены , и если воспитанникъ не **знаеть читать**, то треть суммы будетъ удержана (Exams will be held and if the pupil can't read, a third of the amount will be withheld.) (Z.M.N.P. vol. 116, p.30)

It can be seen that the Old Germanic *cunnan* followed by the infinitive lost its lexical meaning and evolved into a pure marker of modality devoid of any other semantic element. It can even denote the epistemic modality of probability, as pointed out by E. Traugott (1989).

Another modal marker which has undergone a similar evolution is the adjective *able*. It is derived from Old French *hable* – “capable, agile, nimble”. In Modern English the word means “capable”. When followed by an infinitive phrase, however, the adjective is a modal marker. The absence of lexical meaning can be illustrated by the word's inability to accept an intensifier:

**He is very able to do something* being impossible.

On the other hand, new words and phrases, having no modal meaning without the infinitive are used to denote possibility.

(28) Having thus got rid of his two associates, Nigel was free to put certain questions which he didn't want either of them to hear. (N.B. M.M. 10)

(29) You are competent to run their culture center. (G.J.Sq. 157)

(30) I didn't have the heart to throw the case away. (I.Sh.N. 157)

In (28) *free* means possibility caused by the absence of obstacles; in (29), *competent* means possibility created by the personal qualities of the subject; in (30), the absence of possibility is caused by emotional factors. In all cases, the modal meaning is conferred upon the predicate by the infinitive.

The group of predicates with the meaning of attempt is also enlarged by lexemes having no modal meaning:

(31) Dan fought to control his temper. (G.J.Sq. 207)

(32) He struggled to add something to this. (Gr. M.B. 231)

Both verbs usually mean violent confrontation and imply the presence of a rival. In the examples, however, the second participant of the fight or struggle is absent and both verbs have the meaning of attempt and imply the difficulty of the action expressed by the infinitive. So the transformation of meaning from lexical to quasi-modal is obvious.

The process looks as follows: lexemes regularly taking the infinitive as an object lose their lexical and emotional meaning and become modal links; to achieve expressiveness, new words and phrases are used, which acquire modal meaning only when governing the infinitive.

5. Conclusions

The research conducted makes it possible to draw the following conclusions:

- The semantic evolution undergone by lexemes governing the infinitive is a systemic diachronic process.
- Lexical items regularly governing the infinitive tend to lose their lexical meaning and become modal and quasi modal links.
- The desemantization is caused by the syntactic position of the lexeme: the predicate is crammed between the subject and the infinitive having limited possibilities of extension.
- Due to this syntactic circumstance, the lexical part of the meaning is of minor communicative value, the main information load being carried by the infinitive phrase which can be extended freely.
- The lack of extension results in the lexical seme not being reinforced by the context, whereas the modal or quasi modal seme is regularly reinforced by the infinitive phrase,
- Alongside the loss of lexical meaning by the words governing the infinitive, the sphere of modal and quasi-modal meanings is constantly enlarged by new lexical items having no modal meaning outside the infinitive constructions.
- The infinitive therefore is an element of syntactic context reinforcing the modal seme where it already exists and invoking it in lexemes which take the infinitive as an object occasionally.
- Consequently, the infinitive and infinitive phrase serve as the indicative minimum for the seme of modality.

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