

Discourse-Pragmatic Aspects of Event Gerundives

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0. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to explore the nature and distribution of two types of event gerundives in English; the genitive (henceforth GEN) gerundive and the accusative (henceforth ACC) gerundive, which are exemplified below¹.

(1) a. I was surprised at *his driving the car*.

b. I was surprised at *him driving the car*.

Roughly speaking, the event gerundive has the interior structure of a sentence and the external behavior of an NP. Although no overall discussion of this construction has been presented so far, its categorial status has been one of the most challenging and controversial issues for syntacticians. Some scholars, e.g. Horn (1975) and Reuland (1983), claim that the GEN gerundive is an NP (nonsentential) and the ACC gerundive sentential. However this dichotomy falls short of explaining crucial facts about the nature and the distribution of these two constructions.

I shall subscribe to Abney (1987)s' view on the theoretical nature of event gerundives and maintain that they are cases of nominalization, formed by syntactic affixation of *-ing* to VP or IP node. The morpho-syntactic characteristics of GEN gerundives and ACC gerundives will be shown to reflect their specialized discourse-pragmatic functions and distributions. I will also account for wide variations in native speakers' acceptability and preference judgement. I will explain this phenomenon in functional and semantic terms, and briefly touch upon the impact of my explanation on a cross-linguistic analyses of similar constructions.

1. SYNTACTIC ASPECTS

Most of the literature on gerundives in the generative tradition is primarily concerned with the discussion of the syntactic status of each construction². Though, various syntactic analyses have been proposed for the GEN gerundive and for the ACC gerundive, many tend to concentrate on one of the two types and ignore the other. For instance, Baker (1989) attended only to the GEN type construction and Akmajian (1977) studied only the ACC type. Occasionally, it happened that a structure proposed for one type by some scholar(s) is identical to a structure proposed for the other type

by some other(s).

Look at the following phrase structure.

- (2) NP
S

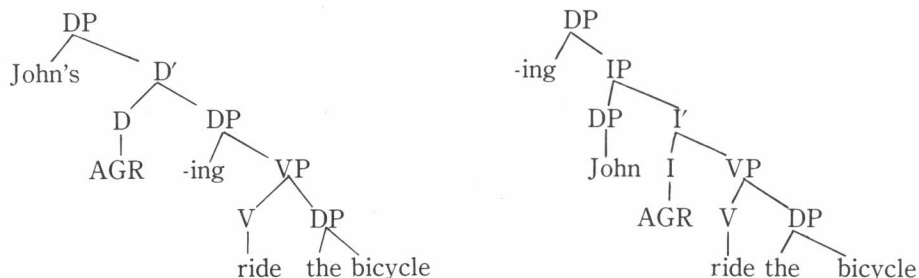
According to Williams (1975), among others, this is the internal structure of GEN gerundives. This same structure was proposed by Horn (1975) for ACC gerundives. Apparently, not enough attention has been paid to the syntactic difference between the two.

The first integral work on the issue was done by Abney (1987). He started by noting the mismatch between apparent syntactic structure and semantic scope in event gerundives. Take, for example, the following sentences.

- (3) a. John's *riding the bicycle* is odd.
b. John *riding the bicycle* is odd.

Syntactically, the suffix *-ing* forms a unit with the verb *ride* in both cases, but semantically the affix has scope over the combination *ride the bicycle* in (3a) and *John ride the bicycle* in (3b). On the basis of this observation, Abney developed DP analysis and argued for phrasal affixation of *-ing* to VP and IP, and proposed the following structures for the two types of event gerundives.

- (4) a. GEN type (Example 3a) b. ACC type (Example 3b)



Since affixation takes place on a phrasal level in both cases, event gerundives are conceived as embodiment of syntactic nominalization. We find several controversial points in this analysis, such as the assumption of the element AGR, and the dubious mechanism of subject case marking. But we will not go into details of their syntactic structure and derivational history and simply assume their morpho-syntactic nature and the phrasal affixation of *-ing*

2. TRADITIONAL VIEWS

To return back and concentrate on our theme of the discourse-function of the event gerundives with GEN/ACC subjects, we are, at times, met with opinions to the effect that they are not felicitous expressions and are not a part of good English. Long (1961.97), for example, notes as follows.

- (5) Gerundial clauses with both expressed subjects and expressed predicators seem somewhat stiff and uncomfortable much of the time. Competing constructions tend to replace them.

For example, in the following pairs of sentences, (b) is preferred to (a).

- (6) a. *John's staying away* complicates the problem.
b. It complicates the problem *for John to stay away*.
(7) a. It was she who actually suggested *our getting married*.
b. It was she who actually suggested *that we should get married*.

Long's discussion, however, is confined to sentence level analysis. As we have seen above, in the light of the contextual nature of the gerundives, we are certain to find environment where the (a) versions are natural and concise, while (b) sentences sound prolix and stiff.

The following comment by Jespersen (1933,324) shows a traditional (but not prescriptive) view on the two types of event gerundives.

- (8) a. With regard to the occurrence of genitives before a gerund it may be remarked that it is sometimes doubtful whether we have a genitive or a common (our *accusative*) case.
b. The genitive is to some extent falling into disuse before a gerund, at any rate in the spoken language.

His view is supported by the survey conducted by Fries (1940), who found that, in his data base, fifty-two percent of the cases in Standard English have the genitive form of the pronoun before the verbal and forty-eight percent have the accusative form.

When one is faced with such a comment as the one below, one may be inclined to think that there are only a few instances of this construction in the English language as a whole.

- (9) Gerundial clauses with both expressed subjects and expressed predicators seem somewhat stiff and uncomfortable much of the time. Competing constructions tend to replace them. (Long 1961.97)

However, such a comment does not apply to all styles of writing. According to our survey of different genres of writings, there are some texts that are rather rich in instances of this construction, while others have hardly any or none at all. Letters, journals, essays and narratives of retrospective or speculative style are excellent sources of event gerundives. By contrast, texts of expository writing style or stories that are full of actions provide few or no instances.

In what follows, we will argue against the view that GEN and ACC markings of the subject of gerundives reflect arbitrary grammatical differences. Our analysis is based on the assumption that there is a relationship between the form of a sentence and its function in discourse, and that grammatical form is in part determined by pragmatic circumstances and the speaker's intention under which the expression is used as a unit of information.

3. CONCRETIZATION & TEMPORAL DISPLACEMENT

As we have seen above, the gerundive construction is a type of nominalization, which is, in semantic terms, a concretization process. According to Hopper and Thompson(1985), the categories “noun” and “verb” are universal and distributed in such a way that “time-stable” concepts are represented by nouns, and non-time-stable concepts by verbs; ... their “nouniness” and “verbiness” is reflected in the characteristic morphological trappings — case and tense markings, etc.— with which they may occur³.

In the case of event gerundives, *-ing*, though not exactly a tense-marker, is a morphological trapping on the verb reflecting its special status. The genitive or accusative case given to the subject of gerundives reflects, above all, its demotion from sentential subject.

Gerundives' lack of tense mirrors their temporally displaced nature; they represent something as outside the speech situation. We can explain the exclusion of certain S-adverbs(which are variously called epistemic adverbs, attitudinal disjuncts, or speaker-oriented adverbs)from gerundive constructions, as the result of a temporal discrepancy between adverb and gerundive. For example, in the following sentences:

- (10) a. ?*Sam's predictably seeking Mary's favor* upset me.
 a'. ?*Sam predictably seeking Mary's favor* upset me.
 b. ?*John's probably giving the book to Mary* bothers me.
 b'. ?*John probably giving the book to Mary* bothers me.

S-adverbs represent the speaker's assessment of the event at the time of speech, which is incompatible with the temporal displacement associated with the gerundive construction.

Although GEN gerundives and ACC gerundives convey the same objective information, they differ in the speaker's conceptualization and representation of the events. Acceptability of only one form (and unacceptability of the other) in certain discourse situations is due to the speaker's communicative stance and the overall pragmatic environments. All the principles and tendencies that have thus far been noted in grammar books, as well as their syntactic differences are integrated and given a unified account under this functional perspective, which derives from their morphological and syntactic characteristics.

4. GENITIVE GERUNDIVES IN DISCOURSE

To concentrate on the nature and function of GEN gerundives, the morpho-syntactic form of this construction which invokes its action/process-oriented interpretation, can be factored out into two mutually dependent notions: demotion of subject and objectivity

When a speaker uses the GEN gerundive construction, s/he is permitting an

objective construal of the event from an external perspective. The subject is demoted to determiner status, which, in discourse-pragmatic terms, is one of the typical cases of backgrounding a piece of information from the narrated events. With its quasi-NP appearance, it also has the look of an objective presentation of information that comes from outside evidence. Observe the italicized gerundives in the following examples.

- (11) a. The fact of *my being always here* was remarked upon.
 a'. *The fact of *me being always here* was remarked upon.
 b. Of course there was little to keep me; but I became aware, as I rose to go, that there was more than I had supposed. On *my approaching her to take leave*, Mrs. Rimmle gave signs of consciousness. (D.M.)

The use of *my* in the subject of gerundives in (11) indicates that the speaker's SELF is objectivized and backgrounded: the emphasis is on the action/process of the event.

The more nouny look of GEN gerundives with their [NP's N] form accounts for their formality and objectivity. The facts about the inverted Wh-cleft provide evidence for this claim.

- (12) b. This is what I regret *your having done*.
 b'. *This is what I regret *you having done*.
 c. This is what I regret *Mary's having said to me last week*.
 c'. ??This is what I regret *Mary having said to me last week*.

The part that follows the *wh*-word (6) represents objective information, hence it is compatible with the GEN version but not with the ACC version

The GEN gerundive, but not the ACC gerundive, appears freely in cleft focus position.

- (13) a. *It was *John kissing Mary* that upset everyone.
 b. It was *Engypt's beating Israel* that was surprising.
 c. It was *John's knowing the location of the mailbox* that surprised her.
 d. Was it *May's having cashed the check* that Bill regretted?

In the case of these informative-presupposition *it*-cleft, the focus usually contains an anaphoric item—but marked as a known fact.

GEN gerunds, but not ACC gerunds, are movable by NP-movement and can be placed in marked focus positions other than the cleft focus position, as shown (14).

- (14) a. I was surprised by *Mary' leaving town*. (Passive)
 b. *Mary's leaving town*, it surprised me (Left-dislocation)

This is an indication of the objectivized status of the event referred to by GEN gerundives.

Consider the following examples.

- (15) a. ...But as for *his keeping Willard as a sort of hateful pet*, in order to jeer at him I simply don't believe it was like that at all. What is the mythical element in his story? Simply the very old tale of the man who is in search of his soul,... (W.W.)

- b. ...I have already made some observations (in Bolinger 1961), and *my reviving the question here is* by way of trying to see the whole problem of specifying infinitives in a broader perspective.(M.F.)

In (15a), the expression 'as for' indicates the objectivized status of the event, which sanctions the use of the GEN gerundive. In (15b), the GEN gerundive is used, since there is no need for the author to focus on himself as the agent of the action; he would rather stress the significance of his action and maintain the coherence of his discussion.

5. ACC GERUNDIVES IN DISCOURSE

The event reported by the ACC gerundive is intended to attract the focus of the viewer's attention on the agent/experiencer, rather than the action/process. Let us look at the following example.

- (16) Mrs. Bogart went thoroughly into the rumor...
 "...Won't you just have a cup of coffee, Carol dearie, I'm sure you won't mind *old Aunty Bogart calling you by your first name...*" (M.S.)

Here, the speaker is foregrounding herself to the eyes of the hearer for empathy. In the following example, *you* is highlighted, because it is the behavior of the addressee that is in the center of the attention here. Hence the use of ACC gerundives.

- (17) ..."There's the Phantom, at it again," Audrey used to say. It wasn't a very nice kind of observation. It had what I can only call a wolfish quality about it, as if you were devouring everything. Especially devouring Sir John. I don't suppose he made a move without *you following him with your eyes...* (M.M.)

It is because of this property that ACC gerundive constructions do not occur in the inverted cleft nor cleft focus position, which are reserved for objectivized pieces of information.

Negative polarity items are acceptable in the ACC version, but are not felicitous in the GEN version, indicating the lesser objectivity of the former and a high degree of objectivization expressed in the latter

- (18) a. *Him winning anything* is unlikely.
 b. ? *His winning anything* is unlikely.(Ross 1973:3-40)

6. CATEGORIAL OR GENERIC GERUNDIVES

The subject of categorial or generic gerundives is always ACC-marked. I have found all four types of these: the indefinite type, the definite type, the plural NP type and the bare NP type. An indefinite type occurs within the context of a specific referent which has been the topic of discourse. Observe the following examples.

- (19) ...As many as 1.5 million people in the country are also believed to be infected with the AIDS virus. The Gaffney case is believed to be the first in which the suit alleged medical malpractice that resulted in *a patient receiving contaminated blood.* (B.G.;Apr.27,1990)

- (20) Winterbourne had now begun to think simply of the craziness, from a sanitary point of view, of *a delicate young girl lounging away the evening in this nest of malaria*. What if she *were* a clever little reprobate? that was no reason for her dying of the *perniciosa*. "How long have you been here?" he asked, almost brutally... (D.M.)

The subject NP of the underlined gerundive is used to refer to an individual representing the class. The subject is indefinite but it has ties to the discourse via the presence of one specific member of its class.

The other three types do not require any specific member's presence in the preceding discourse. Observe the following examples.

- (21) ...many conjectures have been made about the *human infant springing from the womb with his noun phrases and relative clauses all ready to light up as soon as they are plugged into a particular language*. (M.F.4)
- (22) The condition for *genitives and partitives replacing accusative direct objects* are the same for *them replacing nominative objects* (Emonds, 1989)
- (23) a. The restriction on *not and any occurring side by side* is strong enough even to render doubtful certain sentences in which... (M.F.61)
- b. Oh, I know what it meant. In my time on the show I have already learned a great deal about *mankind lying with women*, because Charlie talked about little else when he sat on the train with Willard. (W.W.)

The texts in (21),(22) and (23) contain an example/examples of definite generic, bare plural generic and bare singular generic, respectively. They are productively used in scientific writings.

7. PERCEPTION VERB COMPLEMENT

Consider the following sentences.

- (24) a. We saw *John looking pretty sick*.
b. We watched *the prisoners dying*.

The sentences in (24) contain so-called perception verb complement (PVC). The *Ing* forms in (24) are traditionally labeled participial but they share certain similarities with ACC gerundives: their subjects are always accusative-marked, there have been debates over the categorial status of these constructions (NP or S), and they serve to provide vivid portrayals of the events or states of affairs.

Akmajian, who studied their syntactic behavior extensively, chose the term 'gerundive' PVC to refer to this construction. However, the PVC and the ACC gerundive, though alike in their forms and functions, are not identical in every respect. Consider the following sentences.

- (25) a. I saw *the moon rising over the mountain*.
b. I saw *the moon rise over the mountain*.
c. *The moon* was seen (by me) *rising over the mountain*.

d. *The moon rising over the mountain* was seen by many people last night. According to Declerck (1982), a PVC, such as the one in (25a), can be construed in three different ways: one, which corresponds to the unmarked interpretation, has a structure similar to (b) and is not movable by transformations; the other two are susceptible to movement operations to be realized as (c) and (d) respectively. The construction corresponding to the italicized part in (c) is a so-called head-modifier construction. The italicized part in (d) has a structure like the ACC gerundive.

We note two independent pieces of evidence against the identity of PVCs with ACC gerundives. First, the PVC, at least one type of it, can appear in cleft focus position, but the ACC gerundive cannot. Compare the following (26a) with (26b).

- (26) a. It was *John kissing Mary* that we saw.
 b. *It was *John kissing Mary* that upset everyone.

Secondly, the ACC can contain a stative predicate, but the PVC cannot. (Further examples of stative gerundive are found in (27) below.)

- (27) a. *We saw *John knowing about the experiment*.
 b. He insisted *on no one knowing about the experiment*.

8. PERFECTIVE GERUNDIVES

Perfective gerundives tend to be associated with the GEN subject. Observe the following contrast.

- (28) a. ?Of course she minds *her husband's acting like that*.
 b. Of course she minds *her husband's having acted like that*.
 (29) a. His mother kicked a little at first against the *money's having gone to him*.
 a' ?His mother kicked a little at first against *the money having gone to him*.
 b. *Sophia's having seen them* did not greatly surprise us.
 b'. ??*Sophia having seen them* did not greatly surprise us.
 c. This is what I hate *your having said to me some time ago*.
 c'. ??This is what I hate *you having said to me some time ago*.

What is remarkable here is (29a), which shows that it is easy to think of a situation where money (e.g. the legacy) is the topic of the whole discourse. Sentences like this one are centered around the whole topic of money and what has become of it, enough to override the restriction against the inanimate GEN subject, which is often pointed out in grammar books.

There is, however, no direct correlation between the use of the present perfect form and the choice of subject marking. It seems that the sense of prior time reference (which goes well with a GEN marking) is often overridden by the focusing on the action/process of the event (which prefers an ACC subject), as in the following examples.

- (30) a. ??The idea of *her mother's having had a husband* presented itself to her.
 b. The idea of *her mother having had a husband* presented itself to her.

- (31) a. I have some suspicion of *the police having never properly searched the room*.
 b. I have some suspicion of the *room having never been properly searched by the police*.

What this appears to show is the essentially communicative nature of gerundive constructions and the insignificance of the actual temporal sequence.

9. VARIATION AMONG SPEAKERS

There appears to be considerable variation among speakers of English in their judgements on gerundive constructions. Some have a strong preference for either GEN or ACC marking of the subject anywhere, while others prefer GEN marking in some positions and ACC in others⁵. Some vacillation and disagreement in informant judgement on the matter, however, is expected in the case of a rule of discourse pragmatics such as this one.

Not the least of the difficulties with gerundive constructions is the tenuousness of the judgements that most people seem capable of making. People have varying judgements to make, and the same person can sometimes give different judgements at different times.

The sociolinguistic and the cognitive-functional factors involved in the acceptability judgement support the view that in order to use a language appropriately, it is necessary to understand how the grammar interacts with other systems of knowledge and belief and communicative intent of the speaker. The following list contains some such factors, which are by no means exhaustive nor mutually independent.

- (32) a. the speaker's background attitudes and beliefs; his universe of discourse, his mental grammar
 b. influence of pedagogical (prescriptive) grammar
 c. socio-linguistic factors like the speaker's age, class, level of education
 d. his/her understanding of the context in which a sentence is uttered.
 e. the speaker's knowledge of the way in which language is used to communicate

10. GENTITIVE SUBJECTS IN OTHER LANGUAGES

The genitive marking of the subject NP of desententialized clauses is found in various other languages. The following are examples from Turkish and Latin reported in Lehmann (1988:195-6).

- (33) Turkish

Evvel-â çık-an güçlük-ler-in kendi-lig-in-den
 start-LOC emerge-ACCPTCP trouble-PL-GEN self- ϕ -POSS 3-ABL
 orta-dan kalk-tig-i gör-ül-ür
 middle-ABL disappear-NR-POSS see-PASS-HABIT

'It turns out that the problems occurring at first disappear completely by

themselves.'

(34) Latin

labor est functio quaedam vel animi vel corporis gravioris operis et muneris.

'Labor is the performance of a relatively hard compulsory work by the mind or the body.'

In Turkish, the possessive suffix on the subordinate verb agrees with the syntactic possessor (corresponding to the subject). In Latin, the genitive of the semantic subject (such as the italicized expression in (34)) is known as the *genitivus subjectivus* accompanying verbal nouns.

In Japanese, the genitive marking of a semantic subject is a common practice in nominalized expressions.

- (35) a. Taro *ga* koros-are-ta asa
 NOM kill-PASS-PAST morning
 b. Taro *no* koros-are-ta asa
 GEN kill-PASS-PAST morning
 'that morning when Taro was killed'

The similarity of the alternation of genitive *no* and the nominative *ga* to the genitive and accusative alternation of subject of English gerundives is evident. I will demonstrate that, as in the case of the English gerund, functional considerations are indispensable to account for the semantic differences and distributions of these two types of constructions.

Observe the following sentences.

- (36) a. Inaka *no* eki ni watasi *no* notta basu *ga* tomat-ta.
 rural GEN station LOC 1 SG GEN ride-PAST bus NOM stop-PAST
 b. ? Inaka *no* eki ni watasi *ga* notta basu *ga* tomat-ta.
 rural GEN station LOC 1 SG NOM ride-PAST bus NOM stop-PAST
 'the bus I was on stopped at a rural station'

The *no* version sounds better than the *ga* version, for the following discourse-pragmatic reasons. The speaker here is normally understood to be giving a narration of his trip and that he was on the bus is a backgrounded piece of information. The *ga* version, on the other hand, has the effect of foregrounding the information that the speaker was on the bus. Details of its different uses aside, *ga* is a particle that attracts the focus of the viewer's attention. For these reasons, it is not easy to think of an opposite situation where the *ga* version of (36) sounds better than the *no* version.

We have seen above that the *no/ga* marking of the subject of Japanese relative clauses has the discourse-pragmatic effect of backgrounding/foregrounding the subordinate proposition.

The striking similarity between English and Japanese with respect to the binary case marking of the subject of downgraded sentences is rather unexpected but undoubtedly real. When we take into consideration the existence of genitive-marked subjects

in Latin and Turkish, as we briefly touched upon in the beginning of this section, this phenomenon certainly has a cross-linguistic significance. Much more research is needed, both on a syntactic and semantic basis, to be able to say anything conclusive about its universality.

11. CONCLUSION

I have examined various aspects of the GEN gerundive construction and the ACC gerundive construction from a discourse-functional perspective. I have shown that the two constructions are not free variants of each other and that their noted difference in the degree of nouniness is correlated with the speaker/writer's conceptualization of the event. Thus the GEN version presents the agent/experiencer of the referred event as a discourse-displaced entity, while the ACC version maintains its discourse-manipulable status. Their uncomfortableness in isolation comes from their inherently context-dependent nature.

Some of the examples we have examined may not exhibit the distinction as forcefully as others, but the existence of very regular tendencies seems to be undeniable. It is hoped that what we have found here will serve to shed more light on the cross-linguistic analysis of genitive constructions in general, as well as on the research into the varying degrees of nominalization and its relationship with the speaker's conceptualization and stance toward the proposition.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 I am grateful to Susumu Kuno for valuable feedback on the ideas in this paper, and to Dianne Jonas and Carol Richmond for many useful comments on the earlier versions of the paper. Of course, they are not to be blamed for any of its shortcomings.
- 2 Wonder(1970) and Thompson (1973), however, make reference to semantic and contextual information.
- 3 The notion of 'time-stability' originates in Givon (1979;320-321).
- 4 The propositional gerundive construction with a pronoun subject as a whole appears much less frequently in vulgar English(Cf. Fries, 1940.87).

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