A Functional Analysis of Gerundive Constructions in English

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0. INTRODUCTION

The object of this paper is to explore the essential functional properties of two types of gerundive constructions in English; viz. the genitive gerund and the accusative gerund. The category gerund, as termed by Jespersen (1933:320), is a hybrid between noun and verb;[1] it defies unambiguous classification into a single lexical category. The same basically applies to gerundive constructions in general, which are regarded as a true 'mermaid' type of form between a noun phrase and an embedded sentence. They have elements of both—occupy noun phrase positions in sentences, have propositional contents, etc.; but do not have the prototypical form of neither. The syntactic nature of gerundive construction has always been in controversy among linguists.[2] However, any attempt to solve the problem of this categorial ambivalence purely on syntactic ground will lead us nowhere. To provide a satisfactory account of the full range of phenomena, it is essential to focus on the alternation of genitive and accusative marking for the subject of gerundive construction, which is thus far one of the least discussed facets of the construction. I will claim that this opposition is conditioned by a number of complex factors deriving from the overall discourse functions of the two types of gerundive constructions. I will present morpho-syntactic evidence for this claim, explain this phenomenon in functional and semantic terms, and briefly touch upon the impact of the explanation on cross-linguistic analysis.

1. GERUND AS OPPOSED TO OTHER TYPES OF NOMINAL EXPRESSIONS

There are at least three distinct nominal expressions in English with a genitive marked subject: the gerund, the action nominal and the derived nominal:

(1) John's refusing the offer   (gerund)
(2) John's refusing of the offer   (action nominal)
(3) John's refusal of the offer[3]   (derived nominal)

Each of these nominal expressions has the propositional content that corresponds to the following sentence.

(4) John has refused the offer.

However, action nominals and derived nominals have many more of the properties of noun and fewer of the properties of sentence than gerunds. For instance, as can be seen from (1)–(3), the 'object' of the action nominal and the derived nominal always occurs with the preposition *of*, while the 'object' of the gerund occurs in the same form as it would in the corresponding sentence. Like nouns, action nominals and derived nominals are modified by adjectives, while gerunds are modified by adverbs:

(5) a. John's bluntly refusing the offer
    b. *John's blunt refusing the offer
(b) a. John's blunt refusing of the offer
    b. *John's bluntly refusing of the offer
(7) a. John's blunt refusal of the offer
    b. *John's bluntly refusal of the offer

Action nominals and derived nominals, but not gerunds, occur with articles:

(8) a. The refusing of the offer
    b. The refusal of the offer
    c. *The refusing the offer

As the final difference, note that gerunds may show aspect and/or tense, while action nominals and derived nominals do not occur in such contexts.

(9) a. John's having refused the offer
    b. *John's having refused of the offer
    c. *John's having refusal of the offer

There are therefore numerous differences between gerunds on the one hand and the action nominals and derived nominals on the other.[4] Here, we will not be further concerned with this latter type, the more 'nouny' ones in the sense of Ross (1973)—the ones that are generally regarded as possessing the internal structure of a noun phrase.[5] Hereafter, we will concentrate on the properties of gerundive constructions whose categorial status is of more controversial nature—a true 'mermaid' type of form which retains the force of a verb, as demonstrated above.

Also excluded from our consideration is the 'activity gerund' of the following type, whose status is extensibly discussed by Wasow and Roeper (1972) and Thompson (1973).

(10) a. I abhor singing.
     b. Going there was fun.

2. TWO TYPES OF GERUNDIVE CONSTRUCTIONS

Besides the type with genitive subject cited in the previous section, there is another type of gerundive construction in English examplified by the following:

(11) a. John refusing the offer
     b. Him refusing the offer

(The case of *John* in (11a) is not overtly marked. Grammar books like Jespersen (op. cit.) and Quirk *et al.* (1985) call it 'common case', while calling that of *Him* in (11b) 'objective case'. Kilby (1984) refers to the type like those in (11) either as non-possessive pronoun version or accusative gerund, and as for the special type with pronouns like (11b) he talks of 'oblique case'. However, there does not seem to be any point in making this distinction between pronouns and all other forms in this position. Hence, we follow Ross in giving them a uniform treatment and recognize the case in question as accusative.) As we shall see below the genitive gerund and the accusative gerund are not free variants of each other. We recognize a division of labor between them in a number of discourse situations. By contrasting the meaning and the distribution of the genitive gerund with those of the accusative gerund, it is expected, we can best illustrate the properties of both types, as well as the general nature of gerundive constructions.

According to the 'nouniness squish' of Ross, the accusative gerund (*Acc Ing* in his term) is less 'nouny' than its genitive counterpart (his *Poss Ing*). Also, Quirk *et al.* (op. cit.: 1290-1) recognizes a complex gradience of various *-ing* expressions, from the pure count nouns as *some paintings of Brown's,* to the purely participial form in a finite verb phrase as in *'Brown is painting his daughter'.* In between these two extremes, they list twelve different stages, where the genitive gerund and the accusative gerund are located side by side somewhere in the middle, with the former closer to the verbal end and the latter to noun end.

In what follows, we will try to identify the nature of opposition reflected in the relative nouniness of these two types of gerunds, by analyzing a variety of behavioral aspects of gerundive constructions. However, we will not go into the details of their syntactic structure or their derivational history.

3. FACTIVITY HYPOTHESIS, COUNTER-EXAMPLES AND REVISING POSSIBILITIES

It is generally supposed that genitive gerunds may refer to a fact or an action (Quirk *et al.*: 1064), while accusative gerunds are reserved for nominal description of performance (op.cit.: 1195), or situation (Kilby: 131). Indeed, in some typically 'factive' environments, as pointed out by Kilby, the accusative gerund is odd or unacceptable:

(12) a. I thoroughly regret *my* (**me*) *being involved in that.*
     b. The fact of *my* (**me*) *being here* was remarked upon.

In the following examples, the predicate *was a dreadful sight* could hardly be used appropriately of a fact, hence the oddity of the genitive version:

(13) a. *?His driving the car* was a dreadful sight.
  b. *Him driving the car* was a dreadful sight.

Kilby (op.cit.: 141) thus hypothesize the following:

(14) The accusative-gerund construction represents the 'bare proposition', while the possessive (our *genitive*) represents that same proposition as a fact.

The contention to the same effect is found in Ross (op.cit.: fn.92). This hypothesis accounts for a number of behavioral differences between the two types of gerundive constructions. Consider the following sentences:

(15) The mere thought of *me* (**my*) *marrying him is preposterous.*
(16) I saw *him* (**his*) *working.*

In neither of the above two sentences, which disfavor the genitive version, the gerundive proposition is treated as a fact. Furthermore, an obvious contrast is observed in the following pair.

(17) a. I don't mind if you come, but I object to *Mary coming.*
  b. ?I don't mind if you come, but I object to *Mary's coming.*

Thus it would appear that the hypothesis (14) is quite correct. However, Further considerations of the overall phenomena render untenable the claim that the genitive gerund expresses a factive meaning, which is normally lacking in the accusative version.

Ross notes that there are actually contexts where genitive gerunds appear as subject of non-factive predicates. Consider the following sentences:

(18) *His returning the money to us* is unlikely.
(19) *His sewing us up* shouldn't take a minute.
(20) *John's bargaining with Archie* dragged on.

Ross himself reserves comments, but in these sentences it is clear that the speaker is not referring to the action specified in the gerundive construction as a fact.

The opposite situation obtains in the following (21)–(24). They show that some factive predicates do take accusative gerunds as their subjects. Thus, alongside (21a) and (22a), we have sentences like (21b) and (22b):[6]

(21) a. *John's mending the bicycle* is odd.
  b. *John mending the bicycle* is odd.
(22) a. I was surprised at *his driving the car.*
  b. I was surprised at *him driving the car.*

As discussed in Hooper (1975), *be odd* and *be surprised* are examples of factive predicate, which presupposes the factivity of its subject/complement proposition.[7] The hypothesis

(14) therefore falls short of explanation in some crucial cases—it may not be an entirely correct generalization.

What we need now is a reconciliation of the hypothesis (14) with the facts like above. To attain this goal, it is important to analyze a number of syntactic, semantic and pragmatic aspects of the phenomena so far noted in the literature. Jespersen, for instance, makes the following comments:

> (23) With regard to the occurrence of genitives before a gerund it may be re-marked that it is sometimes doubtful whether we have a genitive or a com-mon (our *accusative*) case. (op.cit.: 324)

> (24) The tendency to use this common-case construction is stronger when the idea is vague than when it is definite or concrete. (op.cit.: 326)

The list Quirk *et al.* (op.cit.: 1064-5) gives as characteristic environments of the two types of gerunds may be regarded as the best example of descriptive findings. Some of them appear to support (14) to a certain extent. First, by contrasting (25) and (26), they maintain (27):

> (25) I intend to voice my objections to *their receiving an invitation to our meet-ing.*

> (26) I didn't know about *the weather being so awful in this area.*

> (27) The genitive is generally preferred if the item is a pronoun, the noun phrase has personal reference, and the style is formal, while the accusative is pre-ferred when the item is a non-personal noun phrase and not a pronoun.

Second, they note the facts like (28) and conclude (29):

> (28) Do you remember *the students and teachers protesting against the new rule?*

> (29) The genitive is avoided when the noun phrase is lengthy and requires a group genitive.

Their third point is (31), which is exemplified by (30):

> (30) *My forgetting her name* was embarrassing.

> (31) The genitive case is preferred when the item is initial in the sentence.

The following sections will be devoted to discussions of the distinctive meanings of the two types of gerundive constructions, to attain the goal of a unified account which integrates all the contrast expressed in (14), (27), (29) and (31), from a discourse-functional perspective.

4.   TOWARD A DISCOURSE BASED EXPLANATION

What I would like to propose is the following general hypothesis:

> (32) The genitive gerund construction presents a proposition as a discourse estab-

lished topic, in the sense that it is in the center of consciousness of the ad-
dressee, while the accusative gerund construction introduces the same pro-
position as a discourse referential but non-topical piece of information.

Since a topic proposition may or may not be factive, all the phenomena explained by the
factivity hypothesis are explainable by (32) just as well. At the same time, with the
factivity notion eliminated, there remains no reason whatsoever to prevent a non-topic
proposition from occurring in factive environments. Further justification for (32) may be
obtained from the following couple of contrasts provided by Ross.

(33) a. ? I found *Ron lying to us like that* disgraceful.
b.   I found *Ron's lying to us like that* disgraceful.

The presence of anaphoric *that* determines the discourse-established status of the gerund,
to the exclusion of the accusative gerund. A similar situation obtains in the following
pair.

(34) a. *Him winning anything* is unlikely.
b. ?*His winning anything* is unlikely.

The affect-loaded item *anything* can appear in a focal position but not in a discourse
established topic—hence the oddity of (34b).

How about the observations made by Jespersen and Quirk *et al.*? Let us start by
rephrasing (29) in our framework. We may well say that if a noun phrase is lengthy, it
is discourse functionally more informative. Hence, it is less likely to be a discourse-
established topic. If on the other hand, the noun phrase is a pronoun or personal noun
for that matter, it is likely to be part of a discourse-established topic, which eventually
explains part of the observation made in (27) as well. The general avoidance of genitive
noun phrase with non-personal reference is thought to be the result of the humanness/
animacy hierarchy, which is noted in such works as Givón (1984: 371); that is, a human/
animate noun phrase is more likely to be the topic of a sentence than a non-human/
inanimate noun phrase. As to the formal or literal (or 'house style') flavor of the genitive
construction, we can contend that it also derives from the discourse meaning of the con-
struction; it presents a proposition as established regardless of its true discourse-functional
status. If the proposition in question is really a discourse topic, presumably it is more
natural to take the form of a pronoun such as *it* or *that*, as is usually the case in normal
spontaneous conversation. The genitive gerundive construction, therefore, gives the im-
pression that the discourse is more introspective or else more deliberate. Thus, to use it is
to repeat a discourse-established proposition in a form of nominalization—rhetoric
typically employed in formal or literary writings. In actual situation, it is true that
genitive gerunds are extraordinarily rare in colloquial style writing or discourse, although
much more frequent in journals and more formal styles (Kilby, op.cit.).

As to the observation expressed in (31), we may safely say that the sentence-initial

position is the typical position of a discourse topic. Although the prototypical topic is a definite noun phrase, proper noun or pronoun, the mere presence of the genitive (which is formally a determiner in noun phrase) itself provides the *-ing* form with a nominal characteristic. A proposition can be a discourse-topic without being a fact, as we have seen above; it may well be in the consciousness of the discourse participant(s).

5. SEMANTIC PROPERTIES AND THE COGNITIVE ASPECTS

We have discussed both the syntactic and discourse-pragmatic characteristics of the two types of gerundive constructions in the previous sections. The syntactic difference of their relative nouniness and the discourse-functional difference in topicality are inalienably interconnected with each other. Since topicality is typically a property of a noun phrase (Givón, op.cit.), only nouny constructions are so qualified. Closely associated with them are the following semantic aspects. The genitive version presents the proposition as a topic with the primary meaning of 'state of affairs.' The accusative version, on the other hand, emphasizes the performance aspect of the subject's action or the situation associated with the subject. For example, in (30) above, it is the state of affairs resulting from the speaker's action and not his actual performance that was embarrassing —hence the use of the genitive marker for the subject noun phrase. In (26), where the subject is marked in the accusative, what is at issue is the meteorological situation in this area and not the state of affairs resulting from any specific action/process concerning the weather. In (22a), what the speaker was surprised at is the state of affairs (or the fact in this case since the nominal complement occurs with the factive predicate), while in (22b) it is the subject's performance that is emphasized in the gerundive, hence the accusative-marking.

Look at the following minimal pair:

(35) a. I dislike *him driving my car.*
      b. I dislike *his driving my car.*

The genitive form of the subject is an option in formal English, but is often felt to be awkward or stilted. This is because it is more likely for a person to dislike somebody's performance of an action, than a state of affairs.

The examples of the following type best illustrate the semantic characteristic which is shared by all accusative gerunds:

(36) a. They moved it without *him (*his) being notified.*
      b. I am against *him (*his) being moved.*
      c. Instead of *him (*his) coming here,* we went there.
      d. With *him (*his) supporting us,* we can't go wrong.[8]

In all of the cases here, contrary to the general tendency (cf. (27)), the subjects of the gerunds are pronouns. They are necessarily referential. The accusative marking is the

reflection of their semantic and communicative function; viz. the complement proposition represents the situation/performance of the referent of the subject, which is treated as a non-topic.

Further contrast is shown in the following:

(37) a. ?I consider *him leaving* likely.

b. I consider *his leaving* likely.   (Ross, op.cit.)

The epistemic judgement expressed by the predicate *be likely* may be made of the probability of a state of affairs, but not of someone's performance.

It is necessary to note in this connection that neither the genitive gerund nor the accusative gerund can function as a manner phrase, which is left to the task of action nominals.

(38) a. *John's mending of the bicycle* was inept/*is odd.

b. *John's mending the bicycle* is odd/*was inept.

c. *John mending the bicycle* is odd/*was inept.

The genitive gerund, being a topic, is generally excluded from sentence-final position, since the latter is usually reserved for a focus element. The following pair of examples illustrate this point.

(39) a. We saw *him* (**his*) *working.*

b. We saw *his* (**him*) *working* as a threat to union solidarity.[9]

Furthermore, (36) shows that the accusative gerund is not restricted in this way, but is generally excluded from the sentence initial position.

As to the general colloquial flavor of the accusative version, it is possible that it depends on a rather greater variety of factors. Consider the following sentence:

(40) John coming is a good idea.

There appear to be discrepancies between the form here and the normal rule of gerundive formation; an animate noun phrase is marked in accusative and is in the sentence-initial position, which is the prototypical position of a topic. It gives the impression of being a sloppy way of saying two things at a time: viz. the information that John is coming and it's positive evaluation on the part of the speaker.

6. ASSOCIATION WITH SIMILAR CONSTRUCTIONS

This section will be devoted to the discussion of perceptual sentence construal strategies and the issue of syntactic iconicity. We have seen above that, of the genitive gerund and the accusative gerund, it is the former that is more nouny. The parallelism of the genitive gerund to the action nominal and the derived nominal, and ultimately to a normal noun phrase of the form [NP's N] is evident, as noted in the previous discussion. We can recognize a case of syntactic iconicity at this point.

In some cases one may hesitate about the analysis of a combination, which may be taken to contain either a participial or a gerundive construction (Jespersen, 327; Kilby, 137). Typical cases are illustrated in the following:

(41) I was surprised at *the man eating candy floss.*

(42) I hate *the children quarrelling all the time.*

In sentences of the form like the following, the accusative noun phrase has an ambivalent syntactic status; it may be the object of the main verb or the subject of the following -*ing* form:

(43) a. I saw *him (*his) swimming.*

    b. I noticed *him (*his) writing a letter.*

Semantically, though, it is more likely to be understood as the subject of the -*ing* expression—be it a gerund or a participle (as is assumed by Quirk *et al.*) I maintain that in any case the addressee is most likely to process the string [I saw him] first and on hearing the -*ing* hurriedly relate it to the object noun phrase of the main sentence.

The accusative gerund is associated with the sort of constructions which Declerck (1981) calls pseudo-modifiers:[10]

(44) A: What is that noise ?

    B: It's *the boys teasing a dog.*

The NP V-*ing* construction functions as a typical predicate; it provides the information needed by the conversational opponent. We recognize similar informative uses of the accusative gerund in cases like (16) and (39a).

The accusative gerund may ultimately be considered to be parallel to the infinitive construction:

(45) a. I want *him to swim.*

    b. I told *him to come.*

In other words, there is felt to be some kind of discontinuity between the accusative noun phrase and the gerund, just like between subject and predicate.

A further factor which needs to be taken into account in this connection is that the accusative noun phrase but not genitive noun phrase may carry emphasis. Thus, the former can be used to constitute the head of a constituent, while the latter can only occupy the determiner position to the head noun.

The next case has to do with the general idea of contrastive emphasis. Consider the following contrast noted in Ross (op.cit.):

(46) a. *Him not preparing dinner* is good for her health.

    b. ?*His not preparing dinner* is good for her health.

The activity of the subject referred to by the third person masculine pronoun is contrasted with somebody else's action of preparing dinner. Hence, the necessity of the

accusative, which is the only pronominal form that can receive emphasis.

Many of the points made by Ross in his discussion of relative nouniness of the genitive gerund and the accusative gerund are thus integrated in our basically discourse functional analysis. Nouniness of a proposition is considered to be the other side of the coin of its topical status. In other words, nouniness is a function of relative topicality of the proposition, and vice versa.

7. GENITIVE-MARKING OF SUBJECTS IN JAPANESE

The genitive marking of subject is observed in some types of Japanese constructions as well. Though there seems to be no exact equivalent of gerundive constructions, there are two constructions that might worth considering in this connection. First, there are expressions like the following , which are better considered to be the equivalent of the action nominal or the gerundive nominal, rather than the gerund.

(47) a. asika no tobi-komi
         sea lion GEN jumping
         'jumping of sea lions'
     b. kaze no sasayaki
         wind GEN whisper
         'whispering of wind'
     c. tomodati no tasuke
         friend GEN help
         'friend's help'

These refer either to the mode of an action or an abstract idea/entity. The following version with *ga* are construed as normal subject + preverbal (*renyo*) ending of predicate.

(48) a. asika ga tobi-komi
     b. kaze ga sasayaki
     c. tomodati ga tasuke

Better contrast obtains in the *ga/ni* alternation phenomenon in the prenominal 'relative clause' which functions as a restrictive modifier of the head noun.

(49) a. titi ga kat-te kure-ta rekoodo
         father NOM buy INF give PAST record
         'the record my father bought me'
     b. titi no kat-te kure-ta rekoodo
(50) a. Amerika ga kagayai-te mie-ta zidai
         America NOM shine INF look PAST times
         'the times when America looked glorious'
     b. Amerika no kagayai-te mie-ta zidai

(51) a. John ga enzuru Hamlet
        NOM play
        'Hamlet played by John'
     b. John no enzuru Hamlet
(52) a. Kane ga naru ki
        money NOM grow tree
        'tree on which money grows'
     b. Kane no naru ki
(53) a. Kimi ga yuku miti
        you NOM go path
        'the path you take'
     b. kimi no yuku miti

Apart from some transformational accounts of the restrictions on *no* version, no systematic research has been conducted to this day concerning the difference that exists between these two types of relative expressions, except Tomoda (1982), where the nouniness of *no*-version as opposed to less nouny characteristics of *ga*-version is discussed. I argue that, as in the case of English gerund, functional consideration is indispensable to account for the semantic and syntactic differences between these two types of constructions.

It is extremely difficult to discern any meaning difference between these alternatives out of context. However, the difference between the functions of these two constructions becomes clear in the following situations:

(54) a. Sore wa titi ga kat-te kure-ta recoodo desu.
        that TOP father NOM buy ING give PAST record be
        'it is the record which my father bought me'
     b. ?Sore wa titi no kat-te kure-ta recoodo desu.

Only *ga*-version can properly function as a predicate nominal. The oddity of (54b) seems to issue from the fact that complex nouns with relative clauses of *no*-marked subject are generally excluded from predicate nominal position.

Both *ga*-version and *no*-version are possible in the sentence-initial position:

(55) a. Titi ga kat-te kure-ta recoodo wa boku no takara da.
        father NOM buy INF give PAST record TOP I GEN treasure be
        'the record that my father bought me is my treasure'
     b. Titi no kat-te kure-ta recoodo wa boku no takara da.

However, (54b) will become acceptable whenever a contrastive interpretation is possible —as "it is the *record* (not the book) that my father bought me."

Obviously, much more research is needed, both on a syntactic and a semantic basis, to be able to say anything conclusive here. But we might give the following three-part hypothesis, as a first approximation.

(56) a. *No*-marked subject is backgrounded in the discourse, while *ga*-marked subject is foregrounded

  b. The focus of *no*-version lies in the head noun, while that of *ga*-version lies in the subject noun phrase

  c. The head noun of *no*-version is the focus of the relative clause, while that of *ga*-version is the topic.[11]

We might capture the parallelism with the English gerundive constructions in terms of the genitive versus non-genitive marking of the embedded subject as follows:

(57) a. Japanese genitive marker, just like the English equivalent ('*s*) provides a nominal characteristic to the complex noun phrase—increases nouniness. At the same time, both expressions background the information provided in the genitive construction.

  b. Both the genitive subject in English and the *no*-marked subject in Japanese represents a backgrounded element in the discourse, as opposed to the foregrounded accusative and *ga*-marked subject, respectively.

The principal reason for (57b) seems to derive from the fact that the genitive position is structurally the determiner position and is doomed to be non-focal. Although length limitations do not permit me to go into this here, it is interesting to further pursue the issue of universal nature of genitive marking along these lines.

7. CONCLUSION

I have discussed various aspects of the alternation of two types of gerundive constructions from a discourse-functional point of view. The basic pragmatic common denominator in all the cases described is noted as relative topicality of the proposition. Some of the examples we have examined may not exhibit the distinction as forcefully as others, but the existence of a very regular tendencies seems to be undeniably there. 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 the research into the nature of English *-ing* forms.

FOOTNOTES

1) Jespersen uses the term *substantive* in place of *noun*. But the terminology does not concern us here.

2) There are some works, like Quirk *et al.* (1985), which do not recognize the catagory gerund itself, claiming that it is a type of participial expression. Others, like Ross (1973), carefully avoid this categorial issue and choose to talk of Acc *Ing* and Poss *Ing*.

3) These examples are due to Chomsky (1970).

4) All the differences noted here are cited from Kilby (1984).

5) Excluded from this argumentation is the earlier work by Lees (1960).

6) These are examples by Kilby himself.

7) According to Kiparskys (1971), one of the criteria of the factive vs non-factive distinction is the predicate's ability/inability to take gerundial (our *gerundive*) subject.

8) These examples are due to Kilby.

9) These also are examples by Kilby.

10) Declerck regards the *ing* form here as participle. But I consider this type of construction as a mixed form—hybrid of so-called 'participle' and 'gerund'.

11. Kuno (1973) claims that the head noun phrase of a relative construction is the theme (our *topic*) of the relative clause, while Makino (1980) claims that it is the focus. My analysis proves that both of their claims are only partially true.

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誤	→	正
p. 57　l. 25　　to noun		to the noun