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Nice to Meet You or Nice Meeting You: **Complementation Patterns of Emotive Adjectives**

Abstract

The current paper investigates the plausibility of the claim that the complementation patterns of an adjective can resemble that of a verb as well as its compliance with the rules of Present-Day English. The results of the research suggest that, as long noted in the case with verbs, the gerund complement is diffusing over the *to*-infinitive in regressive contexts. The study also reveals additional factors which might influence a speaker's choice of the respective complement type.

1. Introduction

Complementation system is defined as “the function of a part of a phrase or clause which follows a word and completes the specification of a meaning relationship which that word implies” (Quirk 1985, 65). The English verbal complementation system has been researched quite thoroughly since the iconic work of Callaway (1913); yet, the adjectival patterns still lack a detailed explanation. The present paper focuses on the complementation of emotive adjectives. Seemingly, they have the potential of taking either gerund or *to*-infinitive as their complement, yet, the preferred choice is the latter. This goes against the Present-Day English rule, noticeable in the example of matrix verb:

- (1a) I forgot to lock the door.
- (1b) I forgot locking the door.

The matrix verb has the power of suggesting either futurity or resultativity and it takes either the *to*-infinitive or the gerund, respectively. The question posed in the present study is whether a potential matrix adjective can have a similar choice of complement, i.e. if native users distinguish between futurity and resultativity in the case of adjectives, as in:

- (2a) (It is) Nice to meet you.
 (2b) (It was) Nice meeting you.

The research investigates the patterns of *nice to meet you* and *nice meeting you* – two of the most common expressions in the language employed when making an acquaintance – in order to trace back the subsequent stages of these forms. A diachronic study has been carried out to this end to ultimately discern a rule governing the usage of either complement.

2. Origins of the gerund and the *to*-infinitive

The gerund

The gerund complement has a fairly recent history. Although the form has been in use since the Old English times, the derivational mechanism attaching *-ende* or *-ung* to a verb created a form with purely nominal functions (Visser 1963–1973, 1165). As a complement it started to become popular only in Middle English. The period brought new developments, with the gerund having a marginal verbal potential (Tajima 1985; Fanego 1996). As surveyed by de Smet (2013, 147), Late Modern English saw the gerund become a vital element of the complementation system. Based on the data collected in the *Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Early Modern English* and the *Corpus of Late Modern English Texts*, de Smet's research reveals 28 verbs taking gerund complement in the period 1640–1710 and 52 verbs between 1850 and 1920.

To illustrate, from the set of verbs containing *avoid*, *like* and *try*, it was *avoid* that first adopted the gerund complement with *like* and *try* appearing with it later (Visser 1963). The gradualness of the change is best accounted for by the notion of diffusion, i.e. “the incoming form does not spread in all contexts at once but some acquire it earlier than others” (Nevalainen 2006, 91). Consequently, a diffusional change is a process of “gradual unidirectional expansion of a linguistic item over a new range of lexicogrammatical environments” (de Smet 2013, 45).

In Present-Day English, gerund often accompanies adjectives in integrated participle clauses, as in (3), denoting an emotive relation, occupation or duration:

- (3a) I am happy making the films I make. (Google, December 11, 2011)
 (3b) I also take her to doggie daycare when I am busy working. (*OED*, 2006)
 (3c) She was done not being fully herself. (Google, January 6, 2016)

However, for a large number of adjectives the primary complement is the *to*-infinitive:

- (4a) Any message to Miss Smith I shall be happy to deliver. (*OED*, 1816)
 (4b) He was busy to establish and extend his power. (*OED*, 1998)
 (4c) It wasn't done to show that you were striving. (Google, October 13, 2016)
 (4d) We are pleased to announce that an exciting opportunity at the Group Leader level has recently arisen. (*OED*, 2000)

It is obvious that the two patterns have different meanings. Example (3a), for instance, denotes the simultaneity of the feeling (happiness) and the activity (film-making), whereas (4a) introduces a delay between the two events. The difference is even more prominent in the case of (3b) and (4b).

The *to*-infinitive

In Present-Day English, the main competitor of the gerund is the *to*-infinitive, which, incidentally, once also diffused over another complement type, the bare infinitive, now confined to very few instances. The frequency of the *to*-infinitive rocketed in Middle English, when it gained a strong foothold in the system.

The beginnings, though, were rather modest, the *to*-infinitive being a mere prepositional phrase (Los 2015, 3). The earliest function of the *to*-infinitive included first and foremost that of a purpose adjunct, which in Present-Day English can be replaced by *in order to* and *so as to*, as well as a finite clause (Quirk 1985, 564). Interestingly, in its initial phase the *to*-infinitive also had a nominal function (Lightfoot 1979; Kageyama 1992), thus not indicating tense (van Gelderen 1993, 92), a function indispensable in today's English.

As early as Old English, the infinitive began diffusing into the complementation system, gradually supplanting the supine, i.e. the inflected infinitive of purpose, which, from that point on, was losing ground in verbs of desiring, intending, attempting, etc. (Callaway 1913, 70). Similarly, the bare infinitive was also replaced by the *to*-infinitive and in Present-Day English its use is restricted to modals as well as perception and causation verbs (Los 2015, 11).

The contemporary scholars are fairly unanimous claiming that the matching problem, i.e. the choice of a complement, is solved by temporal reference, with *to*-infinitives covering consecutive events (in regard to the matrix verb), and gerunds – simultaneous or regressive ones (Bolinger 1984; Wierzbicka 1988). Conversely, this rule may also apply to adjectives, which have the potential of taking either complement.

3. Corpus data

The data for the present study come from five electronic corpora. They were selected in order to cover three periods in the history of English starting with Middle English before which the gerund was not common enough to yield any results (see section 2 above). The texts selected for the analysis should reflect the spoken character of the expression in question. This criterion is attainable only partly, since the corpora comprise mostly written data. Thus, to provide a sense of balance, the *Corpus of English Dialogues* has been included.

Table 1. The corpora used in the study

Corpus	Period	Size
<i>Innsbruck Corpus of Middle English Prose</i>	Middle English 1150–1500	7.8m words 129 texts
<i>The Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpora of Historical English</i>	Middle & Early Modern English 1150–1710	3m words 284 texts/samples
<i>Corpus of English Dialogues</i>	Early Modern English 1560–1760	1.2m words 168 texts
<i>Corpus of Historical American English</i>	Late Modern English – Present-Day English 1810–2009	400m words
<i>Google Books American</i>	Early Modern English – Present-Day English 1500–2000	155bn words

Since the linguistic data selected for this study from Middle English and Early Modern English are rather scarce, the research was divided into two parts. In the corpora covering the period 1150–1810 all instances of the three following patterns were sought:

- a) copula + adjective + *to meet*
- b) copula + adjective + *to have met*
- c) copula + adjective + *meeting*

where ‘copula’ is “a verb having a merely linking function” Quirk (1985, 737). For the *Corpus of Historical American English (COHA)* and *Google Books American (GBA)*, first, the most popular collocates of *meet* were selected, whose number was further narrowed down to emotive adjectives. The results can be found in Table 5 below. The choice of American corpora instead of British ones is dictated by two main reasons: firstly, American corpora provide a larger database indispensable in a study of such a small feature; secondly, language variety may also play a role in the complement choice, thus it remains to be researched further.

4. Corpus analysis

This section presents the results of corpus searches. The competing forms in question are in each case the *to*-infinitive, the perfect infinitive marking the past tense, and the gerund.

Table 2. *Meet* as complement in the *Innsbruck Corpus of Middle English Prose*

Pattern	No. of instances	Example
copula + adjective + <i>to meet</i>	5	y turnyd to the thevis-ward, thay se but too, and thane thay were bold to mete with theme; (<i>The Life of St. Hieronymus</i> 1484. In: <i>Prosalegenden</i> [St.Jerome] a1500)
copula + adjective + <i>to have met</i>	0	–
copula + adjective + <i>meeting</i>	0	–

Table 3. *Meet* as complement in the *Penn-Helsinki Corpora of Historical English*

Pattern	No. of instances	Example
copula + adjective + <i>to meet</i>	15	he will be glad to meet you in any plase, that it please you to apoynt; <i>To his right worshipfull father</i> (Sir Robart Plompton; 1502–1505)
copula + adjective + <i>to have met</i>	0	–
copula + adjective + <i>meeting</i>	0	–

Table 4. *Meet* as complement in the *Corpus of English Dialogues*

Pattern	No. of instances	Example
copula + adjective + <i>to meet</i>	2	and that he being fearefull to meete her, he hath turned back; (<i>Witches in the Covtie of Lancaster</i> ; 1612)
copula + adjective + <i>to have met</i>	0	–
copula + adjective + <i>meeting</i>	0	–

As evidenced above, the corpora contain no instances of Middle English forms allowing the gerund form *meeting* to complement the adjective. It was not until Late Modern English when such a structure emerged and began to slowly spread. The first known example is the sentence from a 1904 novel, *Cape Cod Folks*, by Sarah Pratt McLean Greene. At the same time, it is the only known occurrence of the form with *fortunate* to date:

(5) I think I'm awfully fortunate **meeting** you here in the lane. (COHA)

Next in line to accept the gerund complement is *nice*, which, after the first occurrence in 1940, yields 75 more cases of the pattern. Due to the productivity of *nice*, this paper focuses on its complementation patterns.

(6) He said: "Nice **meeting** you, Mr. Thompson. I'll see you around." (COHA)

In 1962, *great* joins the ranks of adjectives following the new pattern, the first instance recorded in *Simple Honorable Man*, a novel by Conrad Richter. Two more instances are evidenced in the corpus.

(7) "Great **meeting** you, Silenski," he said. [...] "I've been hearing tremendous things about you." (COHA)

Connections: Understanding Social Relationships by Harry Cohen, published in 1981, offers the first instance of *difficult* followed by the gerund. Interestingly, not only does the phrase go beyond the context of making an acquaintance, but also it is a piece of academic writing, a sign that by that time the form must have spread from colloquial speech and been accepted in wider circles.

(8) So is it difficult not **meeting** needs. (COHA)

Another adjective that accepts the gerund is *better*, as shown by the quotation from Jonathan Penner's short story *The Sensational Madeline Lee* (1983). So far, it is the only recorded instance of the pairing between *better* and the gerund *meeting*.

(9) I realized that it would be better just **meeting** her at the Captain's cocktail party. (COHA)

Somewhat surprisingly, *better* adopted the gerund before *good*, which took it as late as 1999, as shown by the passage from a science fiction novel *Will Be* by Robert Reed:

- (10) But she told me, “It’s good to meet you. It’s always a pleasure to know my son’s friends.” “And... it’s good **meeting** you...”, I managed.

Table 5 offers an overview of all instances of the researched adjectives (in the case of gerund the date of its first occurrence is given in parentheses):

Table 5. *Meet* as complement in the *Corpus of Historical American English*

Emotive adjective	Frequency	Frequency with <i>to</i> -inf	Frequency with perfect inf	Frequency with gerund
<i>glad</i>	444	444	29	0
<i>pleased</i>	287	287	17	0
<i>nice</i>	178	178	16	76 (1940)
<i>good</i>	133	42	0	1 (1999)
<i>happy</i>	124	123	8	0
<i>willing</i>	104	104	1	0
<i>afraid</i>	94	83	0	0
<i>anxious</i>	91	91	0	0
<i>delighted</i>	91	91	6	0
<i>great</i>	74	7	0	3 (1962)
<i>eager</i>	69	69	0	0
<i>difficult</i>	53	45	0	1 (1981)
<i>best</i>	49	3	0	0
<i>fortunate</i>	39	13	3	1 (1904)
<i>pleasant</i>	38	31	0	0
<i>better</i>	31	12	1	1 (1983)
<i>easy</i>	30	22	0	0
<i>surprised</i>	26	28	0	0

The next step in the analysis was to determine in which context, i.e. future or present/regressive, the gerund occurs.

Table 6. Futurity vs. resultativity of *meet* as complement in *The Corpus of Historical American English*

Adjective	Frequency with gerund	Future context	Present/regressive context
<i>nice</i>	76	1	75
<i>good</i>	1	0	1
<i>great</i>	3	2	1
<i>difficult</i>	1	0	1
<i>fortunate</i>	1	0	1
<i>better</i>	2	1	1

Whereas the *to*-infinitive appears freely in future as well as present/regressive contexts, the use of gerund is confined to the regressive reference, which suggests it adjusts to the rule formed by Wierzbicka (1988) (see section 2 above).

In the *COHA*, the first instance of *nice meeting you* is found in Frank Gruber's crime novel *The Laughing Fox* from 1944. The form is encountered in a purely end-of-conversation context:

(11) “Nice **meeting** you, Mr. Thompson. I’ll see you around.” (*COHA*, 1944)

In fact, 75 out of 76 instances contain *it was* or *goodbye* right before the phrase and only one gerund appears in the present context at the beginning of the conversation. The instance comes from a 2002 book *P is for Peril* by Sue Grafton. The usage might indicate that the gerund is diffusing over yet another field, so far reserved for the *to*-infinitives:

(12) “Ms. Millhone? Fiona Purcell. Sorry to make you wait. I was at the back of the house. Please come in.” “Thanks. You can call me Kinsey if you like. Nice **meeting** you,” I said. (*COHA*, 2002)

The results of the analysis of the remaining adjectives are not as reliable considering the scarcity of instances. The quotation in (7) above, for instance, is the only example of *great meeting*. Although it occurs at the beginning of a conversation, one cannot form any kind of a rule on the basis of a sole token. Interestingly, the adjective *good* does not seem to follow that pattern at all:

(13) But she told me, “It’s good **to meet** you. It’s always a pleasure to know my son’s friends.” “And... it’s good **meeting** you...” (*COHA*, 1999)

Two factors may be at play here. Either, as suggested above, the gerund is pushing back its frontier or its use could be accounted for by the principle of *horror æqui*. Basically, as evidenced by Rudanko (2000, 111–112), users tend to steer clear of repeating the same structure, favouring “in avoiding to be” over “in avoiding being”. Hence, in the above example, the narrator might have been careful not to copy the phrase already used by their interlocutor.

5. Discussion

In the group of surveyed adjectives, some seem more apt to accept the new pattern than others. Naturally, a question arises why a number of adjectives still remain immune to the diffusion. In the case of the two top ones which resist the change, i.e. *glad* and *pleased*, the answer is quite obvious: these adjectives follow a personal pronoun, as in (14):

(14) **They** were all so **pleased** to see me. (*BNC*)

Thus, it seems that only the adjectives introduced by dummy *it* (overt or not) are now able to take either complement. Since the *to*-infinitive still has features of a purpose adjunct (see section 2 above), it renders the dummy *it* impossible to be assigned a thematic role (Los 2015, 127). This might be the reason why dummy *it* allows for the new pattern to appear and spread.

Seemingly, *pleasant* does not follow the pattern at all; however, the search in a contemporary corpus reveals an example from 1992 where the adjective is followed by a gerund:

(15) **It** sure was pleasant **meeting** you for the first time. (*COCA*)

Note, however, that the hypothesis about a gerund accompanying the adjectives introduced by dummy *it* does not hold for *fortunate*, which in (5) above follows the personal pronoun. Again, either the gerund is diffusing over yet another field so far reserved for the *to*-infinitive, or the change is brought about by the loss of preposition *in*, typically taken by *fortunate*:

(16) **I** have been fortunate **in meeting** with a kindlier and less formidable response than he; (*BNC* 1975–1984)

Since *fortunate* still favours prepositional phrases and nouns, the peculiarity may be explained by blocking, i.e. “certain predicate-complement constructions may be sufficiently frequent as a whole to be stored independently and resist change when a new complement type emerges” (de Smet 2013, 62).

Consequently, one might conclude that the groups of adjectives most prone to accepting the new pattern are those introduced by dummy *it* and those once followed by a preposition. Among those most resistant to this type of complementation there are adjectives requiring an AGENT-subject on the opposite extreme.

6. Limitations and further research

Clearly, the present paper has its limitations, as is the case with any research. First of all, it surveys a phrase which at its core is used mainly in spoken language. Secondly, the pattern of copula followed by an adjective and an infinitive is but a fraction of all possible complements in the English language, whose subset *nice to meet you* and *nice meeting you* is even smaller. It surely requires further research to test whether the pattern checks out with other verbs too. The next step will be to follow the emotive adjectives listed above in order to confirm their double complement-taking tendency. The outlooks are promising considering the following example from the *COHA*:

(17) I need to run. **Nice chatting** with you. (*COHA*, 1989)

Thirdly, the data included have been limited strictly to the verbal use of the gerund, i.e. all occurrences akin to *me meeting*, *my meeting of*, etc. have been excluded due to their ambiguous status. Further, expressions not pertaining to the pattern *copula verb + adjective + verb* have also been ignored, even though some of these occurrences were contextually viable, e.g.

(18) I had the good **fortune to meet** with one fine woman. (*COHA*, 1823)

This certainly yields less material, but at the same time allows for the clarity of the research question.

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