

The Structure, Formation, and Use of Gerundial Constructions in the English Language

¹ Aysu İsmaylova

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Abstract; In the contemporary world, English can no longer be regarded merely as a means of communication; it functions as a global language that underpins international interaction, scientific collaboration, and business relations. To understand the mechanisms through which English operates and evolves, linguistic research plays a crucial role. Linguistics examines language development, structure, functions, and cognitive processing, analyzing English at multiple levels—from phonetics and morphology to syntax, semantics, and pragmatic use in context.

Within this complex system, both simple and composite linguistic units contribute to the expressive richness of the language. One such unit is the gerundial construction, which adds semantic depth and syntactic flexibility to sentence structure. Although derived from a verb, the gerund functions as a noun within a sentence, allowing actions, events, and processes to be conceptualized as entities. As a result, gerundial constructions can perform various syntactic roles, including subject, complement, and predicate elements.

The primary objective of this article is to examine the structural characteristics, formation principles, and functional uses of gerundial constructions in modern English, highlighting their significance within the broader grammatical system of the language.

Keywords; *non-finite verbs, comprehensive grammar, subject complement, nominal identity*

1. Definition and Origin of the Gerund

In linguistics, the term gerund is used to describe a type of non-finite verb form that often appears in noun-like syntactic positions across languages. Etymologically, *gerund* originates from the Late Latin *gerundium*, commonly interpreted as referring to “something that is to be carried out.” In English, the gerund is especially notable because it represents a hybrid grammatical category: it preserves important verbal properties while functioning nominally in clause structure. For example, an English gerund can take a direct object (e.g., *reading a book*) and be modified by an adverb (e.g., *carefully reading*), both of which are typical characteristics of verbs (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002).

Many descriptions of English grammar use the broader label the *-ing* form to cover both gerunds and present participles. Traditional grammar often separates these two categories, treating gerunds as nominal verb forms and present participles as adjectival/adverbial verb forms. However, major

¹ Ismaylova, A. Master's Student, Nakhchivan State University, Azerbaijan. Email: ayssmylv1@gmail.com.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-2954-2396>

modern grammatical descriptions tend not to insist on a strict gerund–participle division within the *-ing* form, instead emphasizing shared structural properties and differences in syntactic distribution (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002). This more unified approach reflects the fact that the same morphological form (*verb* + *-ing*) can serve multiple functions depending on its position and role in a clause.

2. The *-ing* Form in Traditional Grammar

Within traditional English grammar, the term gerund typically refers to a central use of the verb form ending in *-ing*, especially when the *-ing* clause behaves verbally inside its own phrase but functions as a noun phrase in the larger sentence. Other *-ing* uses are commonly categorized as participles, particularly when they function like adjectives or adverbs (e.g., *a smiling child*, *Walking home, she called me*). In addition, some descriptions also recognize a pure verbal noun, which is a more fully nominal *-ing* form and may show noun-like behavior such as plural marking or determiners (e.g., *the makings of a leader*) (Baranova et al., 2009).

A useful traditional diagnostic is the following: an *-ing* form is treated as gerundial when it can be expanded as a verb phrase (taking objects and adverbial modification), while the whole unit occupies a nominal slot in the superordinate clause—such as subject, object, or complement positions (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002).

Example

“Eating this cupcake is easy.”

In this sentence, *eating* functions gerundially because it takes the direct object *this cupcake*, and the entire gerund phrase *Eating this cupcake* functions as the subject of the clause (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002).

This distributional flexibility is one reason gerundial structures are important in both descriptive and theoretical grammar: they allow English to encode actions and processes as “things” that can be discussed, evaluated, or used as grammatical arguments, which contributes to compactness and abstraction in academic and formal writing (Dixon, 2005; Rudanko, 2017).

3. Forms of the Gerund

Non-finite *-ing* forms (including structures traditionally labeled *gerunds* and *present participles*) can be described using several categories that are also applied to finite verb phrases. In particular, grammarians commonly distinguish perfect vs. non-perfect meaning and active vs. passive voice. In many descriptions, these oppositions are sufficient for describing the internal form of gerund-participial constructions, even though the *-ing* form itself does not show tense in the same way as finite verbs (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002).

From this perspective, gerundial structures are often presented as having four basic forms, resulting from the combination of (a) perfect / non-perfect and (b) active / passive. The non-perfect (sometimes loosely called “present”) form typically presents an action as simultaneous with, or

not explicitly prior to, the situation in the matrix clause, whereas the perfect form tends to encode an action viewed as anterior (i.e., prior) to the main clause situation. Similarly, the passive gerund highlights the experiencer/affected participant rather than the doer, which is useful when the agent is unknown, irrelevant, or intentionally omitted (Baranova et al., 2009; Huddleston & Pullum, 2002).

This four-way system is especially important in academic writing because it allows speakers and writers to express time relations and voice distinctions compactly, without expanding the sentence into longer finite subordinate clauses (Dixon, 2005; Rudanko, 2017).

Illustrative examples

- **Non-perfect active:** *Walking early in the morning* is relaxing.
- **Non-perfect passive:** *Being criticized unfairly* can damage confidence.
- **Perfect active:** *Having finished the task*, he felt relieved.
- **Perfect passive:** *Having been told the truth*, she changed her decision.

4. Syntactic Functions of the Gerund

4.1 Gerund as Subject

One of the most frequent gerundial uses is the subject position, where the *-ing* clause functions as the grammatical topic of the sentence and behaves like a noun phrase. This pattern is common in both spoken and written English, particularly when the speaker wishes to generalize an activity or describe it as an abstract concept (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002).

Examples:

- *Cooking* is a relaxing activity for me.
- *Running* is beneficial for a healthy body.
- *Writing* helps me forget my worries.
- *Baking* requires not only ingredients but also patience and care.

4.2 Gerund as Direct Object

Gerund phrases also commonly function as direct objects, especially after verbs that select a non-finite complement. Many high-frequency verbs in English prefer an *-ing* complement, including *enjoy*, *dislike*, *finish*, *stop*, *avoid*, *suggest*, and *hate*. In these contexts, the gerundial phrase fills a noun-like slot required by the verb and therefore acts as the verb's complement (Rudanko, 2017; Schachter, 1976).

Examples:

- I love *reading* detective and science books.
- He stopped *teaching* in secondary school.
- Jack finished *reading Pride and Prejudice*.
- She enjoys *baking* dishes from different national cuisines.
- Murad does not like *speaking* while eating.
- I remember *watering* the flowers.

4.3 Gerund as Object of a Preposition

After a preposition, English generally requires a non-finite complement in -ing form rather than an infinitive. As a result, gerundial phrases frequently appear as objects of prepositions, particularly in combinations such as *worried about*, *excited about*, and *stressed about* (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002).

Examples:

- They were worried about *forgetting* their electronic devices.
- She was disappointed about *missing* the trip.
- Jackson was excited about *finding* those books.
- Alice is stressed about *passing* the final exam.

4.4 Gerund as Subject Complement

Gerundial phrases may also occur as subject complements (predicative complements), especially after linking verbs such as *be*. In this structure, the gerundial phrase identifies or characterizes the subject by presenting an activity as its defining property or primary value (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002; Dixon, 2005).

Examples:

- My favorite activity is *watering* flowers in the garden.
- Her biggest weakness is *trusting* people too easily.
- The teacher's advice is *reading* more books and articles.
- Their greatest achievement was *passing* the most difficult exam.

5. The Subject of the Gerund and Gerundial Constructions

In many clauses, the gerundial phrase shares its subject with the matrix verb; however, English also allows gerunds to have an explicit subject of their own. Because the gerund is the most noun-like of the verbals, its subject is traditionally expressed through a possessive determiner or a noun in the possessive case, especially in more formal styles (Baranova et al., 2009).

Examples:

- Do you object to our smoking here?
- Do you object to Justin's smoking here? (Baranova et al., 2009, p. 24)

At the same time, not all nouns—particularly inanimate nouns—naturally occur in possessive form before a gerund. In such contexts, the subject of the gerund often appears in the common case, especially when the construction is formulaic or when the passive *-ing* form is used (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002).

Example:

- The success of these plans depends on the document being signed on time.

In informal and spoken English, even when the subject refers to a person, it is very common for speakers to use the objective case rather than the possessive. This choice is widely attested in contemporary usage and reflects a tendency toward simpler case marking in everyday communication (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002; Baranova et al., 2009).

Examples:

- Do you mind them listening too?
- I don't like the idea of Luca going home alone.

This pattern becomes particularly frequent when the gerundial subject is complex, coordinated, or otherwise heavy, because possessive marking can sound stylistically awkward in such cases:

- I insisted on George and Layla spending their vacation at home.

When a gerund has a subject that is different from the subject of the main clause, the resulting structure is commonly described as a gerundial construction. If the gerundial subject is expressed in the common case (for nouns) or the objective case (for pronouns), some descriptions refer to the pattern as a half-gerund construction (Baranova et al., 2009, p. 25).

6. Gerundial Constructions After Fixed Expressions

Gerundial constructions occur frequently after a number of fixed patterns in English. These expressions are particularly useful in academic and formal writing because they allow writers to evaluate actions and processes concisely, without expanding into longer finite clauses (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002).

Common patterns include:

- **It is no use + -ing:** It is no use **worrying** about it.
- **It is no good + -ing:** It is no good **drinking** very hot water.
- **It is worth + -ing:** It is worth **noting** this point.
- **It is not worth + -ing:** It is not worth **taking** a taxi.
- **Have difficulty/trouble + -ing:** Erica has difficulty **getting** a visa.
- **Be busy + -ing:** They are busy **baking** an apple pie.
- **Spend/Waste time + -ing:** She spent a lot of time **painting** the room.
- **Can't help + -ing:** I can't help **thinking** about it.
- **Can't stand + -ing:** I can't stand **waiting** for a long time. (Rudanko, 2017, p. 43)

7. Gerundial Constructions After Phrasal Verbs with *to*

Gerunds are also strongly preferred after phrasal verbs that end in the preposition **to**. Although learners sometimes confuse this *to* with the infinitive marker, it functions as a preposition in these expressions; therefore, it is typically followed by an *-ing* form (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002).

Examples:

- They don't take **to listening** to Spanish.
- Sama is used **to getting up** late.
- He is looking forward **to hearing** from me.
- We will get around **to watering** the flowers.

8. Gerund vs. Present Participle

One of the main sources of difficulty for learners is that the *-ing* form can serve multiple grammatical functions. As a result, the same surface form may be interpreted as a gerund or a participle depending on its syntactic role. Consider the sentence:

“Seeing is believing.”

Here, **seeing** functions as the subject, and **believing** functions as a subject complement. Despite appearing similar to participles, both *-ing* forms are gerundial because they occupy nominal positions in the clause (Schachter, 1976, p. 12).

A sentence may also contain two *-ing* constructions that behave noun-like:

- Reading comprehension is essential when learning foreign languages.

By contrast, in:

“Trying to get over the fence, he broke his arm.”

Trying functions as a present participle introducing a non-finite clause with adverbial meaning. Confusion is especially common when an *-ing* form follows a verb, because it may function as (a) a participial clause, (b) a predicative adjective, or (c) a gerund functioning as an object or complement (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002).

A useful comparison is the following:

Gerund (noun-like complement):

- Our children like eating chocolates.

Here, eating chocolates functions as the object of *like* (Rudanko, 2017).

Participle (descriptive clause after object):

- I saw the children **eating chocolates**.

Here, the *-ing* clause describes the children and behaves like a reduced relative clause (“children who were eating...”), which makes it participial rather than gerundial (Schachter, 1976, pp. 14–15).

Common verbs that often take an *-ing* complement include: **admit, avoid, begin, dislike, enjoy, finish, hate, like, start, suggest** (Rudanko, 2017).

9. Conclusion

Gerundial constructions constitute a significant grammatical resource for creating density, precision, and cohesion in English. In academic and formal registers, they support coherence by allowing actions and processes to be expressed economically, often avoiding lengthy subordinate clauses and reducing repetition. In this sense, the gerund functions as a grammatical bridge that enables a verb-based form to occupy noun positions while preserving action meaning (Dixon, 2005, p. 22).

More broadly, the English gerund demonstrates the flexibility of the *-ing* form and the language’s capacity for syntactic compression. Gerunds can fill structural slots typically reserved for noun phrases while still retaining verbal properties such as taking objects, allowing adverbial modification, and expressing voice or perfect meaning. For effective communication and advanced proficiency, it is essential to understand when gerunds are required—after specific verbs, after prepositions, as complements, and in some contexts with possessive subjects (Dixon, 2005, p. 23).

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