BEGIN AND *START*: ASPECT AND COMPLEMENT CHOICE

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Abstract: The paper offers a semantic analysis of *begin* and *start* and their non-finite complementation: the *to*-infinitive and *–ing* constructions. The core idea of the paper is that the aspectual constructions 'begin + *to* infinitive', 'begin + *ing*', 'start + *to* infinitive', and 'start + *ing*' have both a schematic and a prototypical meaning, and that the subtle differences between them are motivated by several factors, like viewing (perfectivity vs. imperfectivity), temporality (future orientation vs. ongoing reading) dynamicity (graduality vs. abruptness), agentivity, etc.

Keywords: *begin*, *start*, *to* infinitive, *–ing* complements, prototypical meaning, schematic meaning

1. Introduction

The paper aims to analyse the possible complementation forms of the aspectual verbs, *begin* and *start*. These two verbs, also mentioned in literature under the name of 'phase verbs', 'aspectual complement verbs' (Dowty 1979)) or 'modality verbs' (Givón 1993) denoting the first part of a situation are very similar not only syntactically but also semantically. They take similar complement types (*to* V and V-*ing* sentential complements as well as simple nominal complements) and express similar meanings (express the beginning of an occurrence). Because they are so similar many authors do not even consider that there are any differences between *begin* and *start* and their complement forms (*begin+ to-infinitive, begin+ ing, start+ to-infinitive, start+ ing*). Hornby i.e. states that 'no general rule can be given for choosing between gerunds and infinitives as gerunds and infinitives as objects' or Strang that *…certain lexical items invariably or preferentially 'select' either the infinitive or the gerund to follow them- (...) though some common threads of meaning may be detected in each group, it is not on the basis of such common meanings that the groups are established, for near-synonymous verbs may pattern differently* (enjoy/like) (Wolf 1997).

Contrary to such interpretations, the paper assumes that there are some subtle semantic differences between *begin* and *start* and their complements. The difference between *begin and start* and their complementation is understood to be greatly motivated by the semantics of the verb on one hand, on the other hand by the interaction between the verb and its arguments (as well as the subject of the sentence). After presenting the semantic values of *begin* and *start* and the complement forms *to*-infinitive and *–ing* the paper presents a possible interpretation of the aspectual verbs and their complement forms.

2. The lexical meaning of *begin* and *start*

Begin and *start* have similar lexical meanings- they are both inchoative, denoting the very first phase of a situation (called 'onset' by Freed, 1979). Sentences (1)-(2) are examples of *begin* and *start* with *to*-infinitive and *-ing* complements, accomplishments and activities, both denoting that the event denoted by the complement has been initiated:

(1) It began to rain / raining. It started to snow. / It started snowing
(2) I began to write/ writing a letter. / I started to write/ writing a letter.

Yet, *begin* and *start* are also slightly different in nature, so that there are cases, when *start*, but not *begin* is allowed in a sentence, which gives the impression that *start* has a more

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specific use than *begin*. Sentences (3) and (4) are example of cases where only the use of *start* is allowed.

One of the most detailed analyses of aspectualizers is that of Freed (1979); she explains this discrepancy by the semantics of these verbs and their relation to the internal structure of an event, onset, nucleus and coda.[1]

According to Freed, *begin* and *start* relate to different phases of an event (*start* to the onset, and *begin* to the first phase of the nucleus) and this leads to different consequence relations of the two verbs: because *start* refers only to the onset, it may be possible that the event it refers to is not carried out after all, but cancelled in the meantime; this is not possible for *begin*, since *begin* denotes a part of a nucleus, as sentences (3) and (4) show. At the same time, when used with *–ing* complement, neither *begin* nor *start* allow for an interpretation that the action named in the complement is not carried out, since the *–ing*, viewed as an imperfectivizing operator denotes the ongoing character of the event in question (5) (Freed 1979).

(3) Henry started to sneeze but quickly regained his composure without actually sneezing. (Freed 1979: 72)
(4) *Henry began to sneeze but quickly regained his composure without actually sneezing. (Freed 1979: 72)
(5) *She began/ started sneezing / working, but then she didn't sneeze/ work.

Freed's idea that *start* refers to the very first moment of the event, *begin* to the first part has been confirmed by other authors, like Wierzbicka (1988) and Dixon (2005) as well. Duffley (2006), on the other hand contradicts Freed in this respect, saying that in fact *start* does not refer to any segment of an event, but 'evokes the notion of breaking out of a state of rest or inactivity or, in its transitive use, initiating an event by breaking out of a state or rest or inactivity'(Duffley 2006: 99). The fact, that *start* is associated with abruptness and sudden movement has been noticed by Wierzbicka as well, who contrasts *begin* with *start*, by saying that while *begin* tends to express graduality, *start* is rather associated with abrupt, sudden movement. The examples bellow from Oxford Learner's Dictionary and Websters Collegiate Dictionary show that *start* is indeed associated with abrupteness and sudden motion:

(6) The noise made her start (Oxford Learner's Dictionary)
(7) He started angrily to his feet (Websters Collegiate's Dictionary)

In these sentences the use of *begin* would not be appropriate, as *begin* is not usually associated with suddenness, but rather gradual initiation of a situation. Another feature of *start* which is closely related to the notion of movement is causality. While it can be said that both *begin* and *start* are causative in nature, since they inceptive, initiating a situation, *start* has an additional causative feature, which is missing from *begin*. The causality feature of *start* is shown in (8a) below, as well as in its paraphrase (8b). *Begin* does not allow for such structures:

[1] Freed (1979) defines onset as the temporal segment prior to the nucleus of an event-that is, before the event (or the action) is actually initiated (Freed 1979); the nucleus is the time segment during which the activity is in progress (without reference to its beginning or end); it can consist of sub-phases (initial, middle and final segments). Finally, a coda refers to the final segment of a situation.

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(8a) Joe started me thinking about the problem. / (8b) Joe caused me to start thinking about the problem. (Freed 1979: 80)
(9) * Joe began me thinking about the problem. (Freed 1979: 79)

Because *begin* does not have this additional causality, sentences with objects that do not express temporality need the specification of the complement verb, otherwise the sentence is ungrammatical; *start*, on the contrary can appear in contexts where it is not only to the temporality of the sentence that it is referred to but the initiating activity of the event as well. This allows for *start* to appear also in contexts where the verb is missing but the sentence is not temporal (12 -13):

(10) He began/ started the sermon.
(11) * He began a car. / He began driving a car.
(12) start a fight / ? begin a fight /he started the fire /* he began the fire (Freed 1979: 80)
(13) The flood started our trouble. /*The flood began our trouble. (Freed 1979: 78)

According to Hayakawa & Ehrlich (in Duffley 2006) *start* places more emphasis than *begin* on the fact of making a beginning, the mere act of setting out i.e. from a particular point (as on journey, race or a course) after an inaction or waiting.

Another difference which has been noted by Dixon (2005) between *begin* and *start* is that *start* tends to refer to a time, and *begin* to a place:

(14) The marathon race begins at Santa Monica. (Dixon 2005)
(15) The marathon race start at 3 o'clock. (Dixon 2005)

3. *To* infinitive vs. *-ing* complement forms

The question of aspectual complementation has been the concern of linguists for many years; starting from traditional grammarians to generative linguists, functionalists and cognitive linguists there have been many attempts to explain the phenomenon of complementation. Common to all approaches is that they analyze complementation as closely related to the issue of nominalization. Complementation forms are defined as nominalized forms or as representing the transition to nominalized forms.

Besides analyses that discuss complementation from purely syntactic considerations (in early generative-transformational accounts, i.e. Rosenbaum (1967) there are also several approaches that try to explain the phenomenon of complementation as (also) motivated by semantic factors. Semantic factors, with respect to which complementation is discussed are factivity (Kiparsky and Kiparsky 1970) implications (Dirven&Radden 1977), mood and modality (Vendler (1968), Bolinger (1968), Verspoor (1990), temporality (Wierzbicka 1988) (Freed 1979). In all these accounts complementation forms are treated as semantically meaningful elements, whose meaning is defined as attributable or closely connected to that of the matrix.

The interpretations differ with respect to whether they attribute temporal or non-temporal values to the complement constructions after *begin* and *start*. The authors that attribute a temporal and modal value to the *to*-infinitive and *–ing* constructions are numerous: Wierzbicka (1988) and also Dixon (1995) define *to* as containing the idea of wanting and future expectation, *-ing* a durative, ongoing occurance; Verspoor (1990) sees the difference between the *to*-infinitive and *–ing* constructions as between prior intention (*to*-infinitive and)

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and intention in action (-*ing*), Quirk et al. as between hypothetical meaning (*to*-infinitive) and actuality (-*ing*) etc.

There are also interpretations that define the meaning of these constructions in non-temporal terms. Langacker (1991) defines the *to*-infinitive and *–ing* constructions as representing the transition to nominalized forms, both constructions expressing summary scanning, characteristic of nominals; also Duffley (2006), following Langacker to a certain extent, defines the *to* infinitive and *–ing* constructions primarily in non-temporal terms (the *to*-infinitive is defined to contain the notion of movement leading up to a point, the *–ing* as having a direct object value).

Duffley (2006) even defines the value of *–ing* after *begin* and *start* as a totally nominalized form, having the value of a direct object; this, according to him, is shown by the possibility of passive constructions with *begin* and *start* (sentence 17), the possibility of pseudo-clefting (sentence 18) and the replacement of *–ing* by a nominal pronoun (sentence 19). Wierzbicka (1988) demonstrates that such structures are not always possible for *begin* and *start*, so that *–ing* cannot be considered to have simply a direct object value in these constructions. (sentences 20), 21)).Cornilescu (2003) also notes that these constructions after *begin* and *start* seem to be tenseless so that they cannot establish their own RT separate from the one expressed by the matrix (sentence 22):

(16) All of the countries should start/begin cleaning up water pollution as soon as possible (Duffley 2006: 102)
(17) Cleaning up water pollution should be started/begun as soon as possible. (Duffley 2006: 102)
(18) What they should start/begin is cleaning up water pollution. (Duffley 2006: 102)
(19) They should start/begin that as soon as possible. (Duffley 2006: 102)
(20) It started raining. * It was raining that it started. (Wierzbicka 1988)
(21) John started snoring. *It was snoring that he started. (Wierzbicka 1988)
(22) *Yesterday, John began to solve the problem tomorrow. (Cornilescu 2003: 239)

4. A possible approach to aspectual complementation

Following Kleinke (2002) to a certain extent the *to*-infinitive and *–ing* constructions are understood to have both a schematic and a prototypical meaning. The schematic meaning is based on notion of schema that of the prototypical meaning on the notion of prototype as understood by Langacker (1987). In Langacker's interpretation a prototype is defined as a typical instance of a category; a schema, by contrast, is an abstract categorization of a category and is fully compatible with all members of the category (Langacker 1987) (Taylor 2003: 69).

The two meanings differ from each other in several respects: while the schematic meaning of the complement constructions contains the more general meaning of the constructions, available in all instantiations, the prototypical meaning is construction specific and greatly depends on the semantic value of the matrix. Also, the schematic meaning can be understood to define the meaning of the constructions in aspectual terms (imperfective (-*ing*) vs. perfective reading (*to*-infinitive); the prototypical meaning of the constructions after *begin* and *start*, on the other hand is closely related to temporality and modality.

4.1 The schematic meaning of the *to*-infinitive and *–ing* constructions

The schematic meaning of the *to*-infinitive and *–ing* constructions can be defined with respect to viewing, by the relation between *to* and the bare infinitive on one hand, on the other

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hand, between -*ing* and the bare infinitive. The difference between the two constructions is aspectual and can be defined in opposition: within the '*begin+to infinitive*' and '*start+ ing*' construction the function of *to* is to express an exterior viewpoint of the beginning phase of one occurrence or a series of occurrences (sentences 23) and 24)). By contrast, -*ing* after *begin* and *start* expresses an interior viewpoint of the beginning phase of the occurrence; the event expressed by the complement verb can express one occurrence (as in sentence 25) or a series of occurrences as in 26).

(23) I started/ began to walk towards the door. (Freed 1979: 77)
(24) The emptiness and silence began to get on his nerves. (Rericha 1987: 130)
(25) The engine started (or began) smoking. (Duffley 2006: 98)
(26) I started making telephone calls. (Rericha 1987: 131)

The different schematic meaning of the two constructions can be explained to a certain extent by the different profile of the two constructions (source-path-goal schema of the *to*-infinitive and 'container' schema of the *–ing* (Lakoff 1987)). The *to*-infinitive construction has a relational profile: this function of the *to*-infinitive construction is greatly motivated by the origin of this construction. Before the preposition *to* turned into a tense/modal marker its original meaning was to express a 'direction'/'goal'/ or 'purpose' (Cornilescu 2003). [2]

-*ing*, on the other hand, has a regional profile; it suspends the 'temporally bound' reading of the bare infinitive, imposing on it a profile without endpoints. The profiled entity is seen as being stativized, so that no parts can be identified that would bring the event further on (beginning and closing phase). This is well illustrated by the difference between sentences 31) and 32). While in sentence 31) the rocket is only seen in flight, in sentence 32) the preparation before lunch as well as take off itself is also put in profile.

(31) Come on in! We are seeing Apollo 19 taking off (Kleinke 2002: 103)
(32) Come on in! We are seeing Apollo 19 take off (Kleinke 2002: 103)

4.2 The prototypical meaning of the *to*-infinitive and *–ing* constructions

Although the complement constructions after aspectual verbs will be defined primarily in non-temporal terms, it will be argued that there is a certain time relation between the main clause and the complement clause. The situation denoted by the complement clause can be considered to develop out of the situation denoted by the main clause (Cornilescu 2003: 243). The tenseless constructions, *to*-infinitive and *–ing* will be temporalized after they are embedded into the aspectual construction as a whole; the situation they express can be

[2] Kleinke brings up several reasons to show the more relational character of *to*-infinitives as compared to *–ing* constructions. One reason is the appearance of *–ing* constructions with possessives, which is not possible by *to*-infinitives, sentences 28-29)

(27) The children's singing amused us. (Kleinke 2002:115)
(28) * I taught John's to play the fute. (Kleinke 2002: 115)

Also, there is difference in the way the subject of complementation forms is expressed. While in the case of *to*-infinitives, the preposition 'for' is inserted, gerunds express their own subject by the possessive forms, which also points to the more relational character of the *to*-infinitive as compared to the *–ing* (Kleinke 2002: 116).

(29) For Susan to get married surprised mom. (Kleinke 2002: 57)
(30) Susan's getting married surprised mom. (Kleinke 2002: 57)

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considered a continuation of the temporality (RT- reference time) of the main clause. Decribed in more formal terms, it can be said that T1 (the time expressed by the main clause) begins T2 (the time expressed by the complement construction) (Dinsmore 1991).

Freed's (1979) defines the meaning of the *to*-infnitive and *–ing* after *begin* and *start* in opposition (the *to*-infinitive expressing a generic (or serial) reading, the *–ing* a single, durative occurrence) (in sentence 33 the use of the *to*-infinitive is more appropriate since it expresses a serial reading); although this opposition holds in many cases, there are also cases when the opposite is true (the *to*-infinitive expressing an ongoing event, *-ing* expressing a set of events. Thus, sentence 34) with the *to*-infinitive expresses a single event, sentence 35) with *–ing* a series of events (habitual reading):

(33) I had hardly slept for two nights, but the excitement of the move plus my nervous energy kept me going. By the third day I began to feel/? feeling drugged and every time I sat down I started to fall asleep/ ? falling asleep (Freed 1979: 75)
(34) All of a sudden she started to run towards the car. (Duffley 2006: 93)
(35) He started smoking when he was 13. (Duffley 2006: 93)

A difference between the *to*-infinitive and *–ing* construction in this respect is not between a series or a generic vs. one durative occurrence, but rather in terms of duration. While in the case of the *to*-infinitive there is no expectance to duration, in the case of *–ing* the event is expected to last. That *–ing* is related to duration has been noted by several linguists (i.e. Dixon (2005) defines *–ing* as expressing an activity taking place over a period of time).

The duration expressed by the *–ing* construction is not a property of *–ing* alone but it is a property of the entire aspectual construction and is activated after the complement construction is embedded into the aspectual construction as a whole. When followed by *–ing* the aspectual construction expresses an unbounded temporal progress. This means that the duration of the construction cannot be divided into segments (no beginning or ending phase can be separated within the progress of the construction).As a temporal property the duration can be defined as evolving simultaneously with an axis of orientation (the RT (reference time) expressed by the matrix verb).[3]

The *–ing* construction after *begin* and *start* often expresses the repetition of short term processes or habitual repetition over a limited period of time (Rericha 1987: 131) (sentence 36); in some cases the event governed by *–ing* may even be understood to be fully developed in its initial phase (Rericha 1987) (sentence 37):

(36) As soon as we sat down, three hoods leaned into our booth and began making vulgar cracks. (Rericha 1987: 131)
(37) I started reading a section called 'Tests and Sperm' and was astonished to discover that (..) (Rericha 1987: 131)

An important difference between the *to*-infinitive and *–ing* construction after *begin* and *start* can be defined with respect to modality. The *to*-infinitive in aspectual complementation refers to potential events (Cornilescu 2003: 471); it expresses dispositional properties of the subject, that is, what the subject can do, not what the subject is doing at some point in time.

[3] In his study on duration, Hollósy (1980) differentiates between two types of duration: in its first sense, duration can be defined as referring to unbounded temporal progress; in its other sense, duration expresses an extent of time that can be divided into segments (Hollósy 1980: 30). It is the first type of duration that is expressed by the progressive form *–ing*.

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This, according to Cornilescu (2003) is also shown by the frequent occurrence of the *to*-infinitives with statives, habitual predicates or psychological verbs (sentences 38), 39)). *Begin* and *start* are forward-looking constructions; after them the *to*-infinitive also implies a sense of futurity in itself:

(38) Edward began to miss his friends. (Cornilescu 2003: 471)
(39) Man is beginning to understand himself better. (Cornilescu 2003: 471)

Unlike the *to*-infinitive, the *–ing* construction after aspectual verbs makes reference to a specific event or series of events that are locatable in space and time (Cornilescu 2003: 471). The *–ing* construction does not express potentiality; rather, it expresses the actuality of the event that gets started by the time phase expressed by the matrix verb. The entity profiled by the *–ing* construction can be defined to be simultaneous with the time phrase expressed by the matrix verb; the moment referred to by the main verb can be presented as identical with the beginning of the stretch of time referred to by the complement (i.e. *I began/ started talking to her*) (Wierzbicka 1988).

A question that remains is the more frequent occurrence of *start* with *–ing,* that of *begin* with the *to*-infinitive construction.

The investigation of several corpora (Brown corpora, Flob, Frown, Lob corpora) reveals that although the two verbs allow for both complementation forms, *begin* appears much more often with *to*-infinitives than with *–ing* (*begin to* = 130 entries, *beginning to* =179 entries, *began to* = 627 entries, *begun to* = 111 entries/ *begin* + *ing* = 16 entries, *began* + *ing* =125 entries); on the contrary, *start* prefers *–ing* to *to*-infinitives (*start to* = 48 entries, *starting to* = 33 entries, *started to* = 152 entries/ *start*+ *ing* = 82 entries, *started* + ing = 126 entries). These findings are in accordance with Bailey (1993), who states a more frequent occurrence of *to*-infinitives with *begin* than *with start* (*begin to* = 254 entries/ *begin* + *ing* = 74 entries, and also a more frequent occurrence of the *–ing* with *start* than with *begin* (*start* + *ing* =154 entries, *start to* = 63 entries).

While the differences between *begin* and *start* are quite apparent in the present, with past forms the difference between *begin* and *start* regarding complementation forms is more reduced (i.e. *began* + *ing* has 125, *start* + *ing* 126 matches).

The fact that *begin* with *to*-infinitives is more frequently encountered can be accounted for in semantic terms. It can be related to the interrelation which exists between the semantics of the matrix, the complement construction and the subject of the sentence. The more frequent occurrence of *begin* with *to*-infinitives can be partially motivated by the semantic value of *begin* (its gradual character) and of the *to*-infinitive construction (which refers to the potential occurrence of an event). As compared to *begin,* s*tart* is more dynamic and abrupt in nature; its frequent appearance with *–ing* can be explained by the fact that both constructions focus on the on the actuality of the initial phase expressed by the complement verb; the coming into being of the activity or event is often seen as abrupt.

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