Cristina ONU
Universitatea din Piteşti

THE ADVERB vs. THE SPLITTING of THE INFINITIVE

Abstract: *The issue put forward by the admissibility or non-admissibility of the split infinitive is one of usage, not of principle, and one thing that is clear is that in speech the split infinitive is common even among speakers who on principle reject it with horror. As a rule a split infinitive occurs in English when an adverb or adverbial phrase is inserted between the infinitival particle to and a verb in its infinitive form. Claims that split infinitives are wrong are intermingled with appropriate counterarguments by leading writers and grammarians. The adverbial "misplacements" to be considered will be taken under the heads: fear of split infinitive, imaginary split infinitive passive and splitting of the compound verb.*

Key-words:*adverb, adverbial phrase, infinitive, split infinitives*

Fussing about split infinitives is one of the most tiresome pastimes invented by 19th century prescriptive grammarians. The question is, in any case, one of usage, not of principle, and one thing that is clear is that in speech the split infinitive is common even among speakers who on principle reject it with horror.[1] In formal writing, where grammatical conservativeness is the norm, there is more of a case for not splitting infinitives than in everyday writing and speech.

As a rule a *split infinitive* occurs in English when an adverb or adverbial phrase is inserted between the infinitival particle **to** and a verb in its infinitive form. One very famous example is from the science fiction series *Star Trek*: "*To boldly go where no one has gone before*." Here the infinitive verb form of *go* is *to go*, and the adverb *boldly* has been inserted, creating a split infinitive.

It should be noted that the term 'split infinitive' is a misnomer: nothing is being split. In Latin there is an infinitive form of the verb, which is traditionally translated into English by means of *to* + plain form. Latin *amare* is translated as *to love*. But while *amare* is a single word, *to love* is not: it is a sequence of two words. Thus the fact that no adverb can be positioned within *amare* provides no basis for expecting that it should be contrary to grammatical principles to position one between *to* and *love*.[2] The modern English infinitive is derived from the Middle English infinitive, which was marked by the endings **–e** and **–en**. The use of **to** with the infinitive in Middle English almost exactly matched its use in modern English; i.e. sometimes it was used, and sometimes not.

Claims that split infinitives are wrong

The admissibility of split infinitives has been controversial since the 18th century. People have been splitting infinitives since the 14th century (but no split infinitives are to be found in the works of Shakespeare, Spenser, Pope, or Dryden, or in the King James Version of the Bible), and some of the most noteworthy splitters include John Donne, Samuel Pepys, Daniel Defoe, Benjamin Franklin, Samuel Johnson, William Wordsworth,

[1] Strang, B., *Modern English Structure*, London, Edward Arnold LTD, 1962, p.52.
[2] Huddleston, R., Pullum, G.K., *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p.581.

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Abraham Lincoln, George Eliot, Henry James, and Willa Cather. The earliest prohibition of the usage was in 1762, when Robert Lowth argued that because a split infinitive was not permissible in Latin, it should not be permissible in English. However, the split infinitive was not used much in the eighteenth century, so Lowth's prohibition didn't attract much attention. E.g.

Lady Russell loved them all, but it was only in Anne that she could fancy the mother to revive again. (Jane Austen, *Persuasion*)

Split infinitives became more common in the nineteenth century, and general awareness seems to have started with Henry Alford's condemnation of them in *Plea for the Queen's English*, published in 1866. By the end of the century, the prohibition was firmly established in the press and popular belief. E.g.

*A gentleman who thinks he is good enough for Lucy must expect to be sharply criticised. (*George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss)*

I was surprised at this talk, and began to consider very seriously what the meaning of it must be. (*Moll Flanders*, Daniel Defoe – 18th)

Her imperial majesty was pleased to smile very graciously upon me whether a man would choose to be always in the prime of youth. (Gulliver's Travels, Jonathan Swift – 18th)

Already to be looking sadly and vaguely back (Vanity Fair, William Makepeace Thackeray - 19th**)**

Although the influential *New Oxford Dictionary of English* (1998) recently admitted that "in standard English the principle of allowing split infinitives is broadly accepted as both normal and useful", there are nevertheless plenty of people who consider it unacceptable.

Prescriptive rules and recommendations to use the 'split infinitive' are often motivated by the wish to achieve clarity of expression, in particular to avoid ambiguity. A curious feature of the 'split infinitive' rule, however, is that following it has the potential to reduce clarity, to create ambiguity.

However, fear of the split infinitive can lead to ambiguous expressions such as:

*It will, when better understood, **tend firmly to establish** relations between Capital and Labour/ He failed **entirely to comprehend it.***

In some contexts however splitting the infinitive avoids ambiguity, for example, if in a written form as *Certainly all the members of the panel here tonight are too young to really remember The Second World War* (*Any Questions?*, BBC Radio 4, 9 Nov., 1990), *really* was placed before *to* it could be misunderstood as focusing on *too young*, though in speech the intended focus could be conveyed intonationally. [1]

There are also a number of expressions in English that are weakened considerably by avoiding the split infinitive. The phrase *I plan to really enjoy the party* is more natural and rhythmic than alternatives such as *I plan really to enjoy the party* and *I plan to enjoy really the party*. The final possible alternative *I plan to enjoy the party, really* actually possesses a slightly different meaning.

Counterarguments

However, just as the prohibition against the split infinitive was becoming part of popular culture, there was a reaction against it among leading writers and grammarians. For example, in the 1907 edition of The King's English, the Fowler brothers wrote: "The 'split' infinitive has taken such hold upon the consciences of journalists that, instead of warning the novice against splitting his infinitives, we must warn him against the curious

[1] Greenbaum, S., *The Oxford English Grammar,* Oxford University Press, 1996, p.584.

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superstition that the splitting or not splitting makes the difference between a good and a bad writer."[1]

It is exceedingly difficult to find any authority who condemns the split infinitive – Sidney Greenbaum, Knud Schibsbye, H. W. Fowler, Silvia Chalker, Geoffrey Leech, and others agree that there is no logical reason not to split an infinitive. Thus, contemporary grammars differ considerably in their degree of accepting the split infinitive as grammatically correct.

After stating that although rejected by some grammarians today, the 'split infinitive' has gained currency[2], Levițchi quotes Evans (470) who warmly advocates the use of split infinitives, adding that "any number of words may stand between ***to*** and the verb form", but who warns against exaggeration. At the same time he analyses the position of the adverb within a compound infinitive: "In a composite infinitive involving the auxiliary *be* or *have* and a participle, the normal position for the adverb is after the auxiliary and not before it. That is, *to have always thought* is the normal word order and *to always have thought* is a variation that adds special emphasis."

Infinitive phrases in which the adverb precedes a participle, such as *to be rapidly rising* and *to have been ruefully mistaken,* are not split and should be acceptable to everybody.

Whitten and Whitaker recommend (*Good and Bad English*, 1946: 55-57) a number of split infinitives, of which[3]:

to clearly understand	*to wholly agree*
to fully realize	*to gladly consent*
to flatly refuse	*to again meet*
to thankfully receive	*to cautiously require*
to quietly await	*to cordially greet*

But there are some idiomatic expressions that cannot be split: *to think fit, to see fit*, [4] e.g.

They thought fit to blame everything on Tom.

Thomson and Martinet state that it used to be considered bad style to split an infinitive, but there is now a more relad attitude to this. Some adverbs of degree such as *completely, entirely* can be interfered between ***to*** and the rest of the verb, e.g.:

to completely cover the floor instead of *to cover the floor completely* (but it is safer to keep the conventional order, as in the second example.)

Silvia Chalker[5] considers that the splitting of the infinitive is sometimes acceptable, e.g.

The United Nations is expected to strongly condemn action in sending armed fighter planes over the territory of another independent sovereign state. (*is expected strongly* would hopelessly alter the meaning; to condemn strongly is possible but breaks another 'rule' about not separating a verb from its object)

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[1] Fowler, H.W.&F.G., *The King's English*, Wordsworth Reference, 1993, p.329.
[2] Levițchi, L., *Limba engleză contemporană - Morfologie*, Editura Didactică şi Pedagogică, Bucureşti, 1970, p.210.
[3] *Ibidem*, p.211.
[4] Zdrenghea, M., Greere, L., *A Practical English Grammar with Exercises*, Editura Clusium, 1997, p.406.
[5] Chalker, S., *Current English Grammar*, Macmillan, 1992, p.146.

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Infinitival ***to*** is a separate word, and therefore adverbials (especially single adverbs) sometimes intervene between it and the infinitive states Greenbaum[1], e.g.

But it's the sense of freedom of being able to <u>just</u> lie down if you want to roll over.

(Instructor and dance student, Middlesex Polytechnic, apr. 1991)

The split infinitive is however commonly found in certain connections, e.g.

I don't expect to <u>ever</u> see him again / I wish to <u>utterly</u> forget my past / It's a sad experience to <u>always</u> live from hand to mouth.

Certain adverbs however can never be placed between the particle *to* and the infinitive: *only, merely, not.*[2]

Erin Billy clearly told Lucy <u>to not go</u> to the Cambridge test centre without identification.

Although many native speakers of English would make such an utterance, the construction is frowned upon by most grammarians, perhaps only because the sentence could be corrected so easily:

Erin Billy clearly told Lucy <u>not to go</u> to the Cambridge test centre without identification.

Problems caused by trying to avoid splitting infinitives

The meaning of other expressions can be changed completely by avoidance of the split infinitive. The sentence *He failed to <u>completely</u> understand the book* suggests that the understanding is not complete, whereas *He failed <u>completely</u> to understand the book* implies that no understanding was achieved at all. Another alternative *He failed to understand the book <u>completely</u>* is ambiguous, as it is not certain whether the adverb is attached to *failed* or to *understand*. Finally, the adverb is sometimes placed after the infinitive, as in *He failed to understand <u>completely</u> the book*, a construction that can be, according to Fowler, "unnatural".[3]

Split infinitives are also often employed to provide a necessary emphasis in conversation:

Student A: *I'm going <u>to do</u> better next year.*

Student B: *I'm going <u>to really do</u> better next year.*

The following example, *The government has promised seriously to consider the proposals,* draws attention to its own structure; *The government has promised to consider the proposals seriously* is structurally unobtrusive, and allows us to concentrate on its meaning. The rhythm and balance of the sentence have to be also taken into account when deciding whether to split the infinitive.

Non-adverbial insertions

There are rare examples of non-adverbial insertions into infinitives, as in *It was their nature to <u>all</u> hurt each other.* (adjective)

Splitting infinitives using negations, such as the phrase "I want to *not* see you any more" are generally considered awkward or ungrammatical, the phrasing "I don't want to see you any more" being preferred. The construction is by no means rare, but is regarded with disapproval by many. It may be suggested though that one should try to avoid both extremes – that of using it unnecessarily, and that of avoiding it at any price. (www.campusprogram.com)

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[1] Greenbaum, S., *The Oxford English Grammar,* Oxford University Press, 1996, p.583.

[2] Schibsbye; K., *A Modern English Grammar,* London, Oxford, University Press, 1973, p.26.

[3] Fowler, H.W., *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage,* Second edition, Oxford University Press, 1996, p.461.

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Further on, the misplacements to be considered will be taken under the heads:

- fear of split infinitive
- imaginary split infinitive passive
- splitting of the compound verb

Fear of split infinitive

The order of words in the following examples is bizarre enough to offend the least cultivated ear. It will be seen that the natural (not necessarily the best) place of the adverb in each is where it would split an infinitive, e.g.

Such gentlemen are powerless to analyse correctly agricultural conditions.[1]

Imaginary split infinitive passive

In the following example it is again clear that the natural place for the adverb is not where it now stands, but invariably after *to be.* To insert an adverb between the infinitival particle **to** and *be* would be splitting an infinitive; to insert one between *to be* and *concerned*, is a particular case of separation of copulative verb and complement. The confusion created is illustrated in the following extract, e.g.

*Every citizen worth the name sought **vitally** to be concerned into today's election.*

Splitting of the compound verb

By compound verb is meant a verb made up of an auxiliary (or more than one) and an infinitive form (without *to*) or participle. When an adverb is to be used with such a verb, its normal place is between the auxiliary (or sometimes the first auxiliary if there are two or more) and the rest. Not only is there no objection to thus splitting a compound verb, but any other position for the adverb requires special justification, e.g.

I have never seen her, not *I never have seen her*, is the ordinary idiom, though the rejected order becomes the right one if emphasis is to be put on *have (I may have had chances of seeing her but I never have).* However, a prejudice has grown up against dividing compound verbs. It is probably a supposed corollary of the accepted split-infinitive prohibition; at any rate, it is entirely unfounded. In each of the four extracts there is one auxiliary; the other four have two auxiliaries each[2]:

Single auxiliary, e.g.

If his counsel still is followed, the conflict is indeed inevitable.

Politicians of all sorts in the United States already are girding up their loins for the next election.

Double auxiliary, e.g.

Oxford must heartily be congratulated on their victory.

Observation: In order to avoid ambiguity one should write: *must be heartily congratulated.*

e.g. *Write must be heartily congratulated/ it may be earnestly hoped/ it has quite rightly been given.*

This minor point of whether the adverb is to follow the first auxiliary or the whole auxiliary depends on the answer to a not very simple riddle – Do the adverb and verb naturally suggest an adjective and noun? If so, let them stand next each other, and if not, not, e.g.

Heartily congratulated, earnestly hoped, suggest hearty congratulations and earnest hope; but *rightly given* does not suggest right gift or right giving. That means that the notion of giving is qualified by *right*ly not absolutely, but under the particular

[1] *Ibidem*, p.463.
[2] *Ibidem*, p.464.

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limitations of the auxiliary, and that the adverb is better placed between that auxiliaries than next to g*iven.* However, the main object is to stress the certain fact that there is no objection whatever to dividing a compound verb by adverbs.[1]

The separation of copulative verb and complement is one of the same footing as the splitting of the compound verb discussed previously; that is, it is a delusion to suppose that the insertion of an adverb between the two parts is a solecism, or even, like the splitting of the infinitive, a practice to be regarded as abnormal. On the contrary, it is natural arrangement, and in the following example *fundamentally* has been mistakenly shifted from its right place owing to a superstition, e.g.

It would be a different thing if the scheme had been found fundamentally to be faulty, but that is not the case. (instead of *It would be a different thing if the scheme had been found to be fundamentally faulty, but that is not the case*.)

A modifier placed between *to* and a following verb will always be interpreted as modifying that verb, but one located before the *to* can in principle be interpreted as modifying either the following verb or a preceding verb in a matrix clause.[2]

Placement of a modifier after infinitival *to* is not uncommon, in either speech or writing. Among the adverbs that particularly lend themselves to placement in this position are those marking degree (*really, actually*), [3]e.g.

I want you to ***really*** *understand my decision.*

Some writers, holding that there is the same objection to split compound verbs as to split infinitives, prefer to place any adverb or qualifying phrase not between the auxiliary and the other component, but before both. Provided that the adverb is then separated from the auxiliary, no harm is done: 'Evidently he was mistaken' is often as good as 'He was evidently mistaken', and suits all requirements of accentuation[4]. But the placing of the adverb immediately before or after the auxiliary depends, according to established usage, upon the relative importance of the two components. When the main accent is to fall upon the second component, the normal place of the adverb is between the two; it is only when the same verb is repeated with a change in the tense or mood of the auxiliary, that the adverb should come first. '*He evidently was deceived'* implies, or should imply, that the verb *deceived* has been used before, and that the point of the sentence depends upon the emphatic auxiliary; accordingly we should write 'The possibility of his being deceived had never occurred to me; but he evidently was deceived', but 'I relied implicitly on his knowledge of the facts; but he was evidently deceived'.[5]

In the example below the adverb is rightly placed first to secure the emphasis on the auxiliary, e.g.

I recognize this truth, and always have recognized it.

In the following examples the above principle of accentuation is violated:

Religious art at once complete and sincere never yet has existed. – Ruskin

Not mere empty ideas, but what were once realities, and that I long have thought decayed. – C. Brontë

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[1] *Ibidem*

[2] Huddleston, R., Pullum, G.K., *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p.581

[3] *Ibidem*, p.582.

[4] H.W.&F.G. Fowler, *The King's English*, Wordsworth Reference, 1993, p.352.

[5] *Ibidem*, p.353

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Traditional grammar rules and the most formal grammar rules require that we not split infinitives; however, more modern and less formal American English grammar permits split infinitives when they sound better.

Concluding, H. W. Fowler in his *Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, notes that "the English-speaking world may be divided into (1) those who neither know nor care what a split infinitive is; (2) those who do not know, but care very much; (3) those who know and condemn; (4) those who know and approve; (5) those who know and distinguish....Those who neither know nor care are the vast majority, and are a happy folk, to be envied by most of the minority classes." [1]

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[1] *Ibidem*, p.579

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