

A Semantic Study on *To*-infinitive as Complement Clause

He Cang

Department of Basic Education, Luxun Academy of Fine Arts, Dalian, China

Keywords: semantic meaning, *to*-infinitive, complement clause

Abstract: This study focuses on answering the question: What is the semantic meaning of *to*-infinitive in complement clauses? Accordingly, this thesis concludes six parts, the first chapter is the introduction, the second is the definition, the third for the part of speech and meaning of the *to*, and the fourth for the semantic analysis of *to*-infinitive as complement clause, and the fifth comes to the conclusion.

1. Introduction

To-infinitives is a very important component of the nonfinite verb forms in English. What's more, the semantic meaning of it when it functions as a complement clause is a key issue of non-finite constructions. Therefore, this thesis will do a semantic study on *to*-infinitival in complement clauses.

2. The Definition of *To*-infinitive

Since the *to*-infinitive is one of the types of the non-finite clauses, it is necessary for us to have a discussion about the concept of finite and non-finite.

Coming from Latin *finitus*, finite means finished and finite clauses are always have relationship with tense. Aarts (2011: 27) stated that "Traditionally, 'finiteness' is concerned with variation for person and number, and is applied to verbs, in that they take on different inflectional forms depending on the person and number of their subjects". Nevertheless, Aarts argues that the 'in present-day English it makes much more sense to speak of finite and non-finite clauses (or constructions), since the verbal paradigms contain almost no forms with distinct endings' (Aarts 2011: 27).

Unlike finite clauses, 'non-finite clauses are clauses that do not contain a tensed verb' (Aarts 2011: 27). What's more, 'non-finite clauses are distinguished from finites largely but not wholly by the inflectional form of the verb' (Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 1173). Accordingly, there are three types of non-finite clauses based on the inflectional form of the verb, which are infinitival, -ing participle and past-participle.

We now turn to the definition of infinitive. The infinitive is easy to be recognized for it always contains a marker *to*. In Oxford English Dictionary(1978: 263), infinitive is defined as 'the name of that form of a verb which expresses simply the notion of the verb without predicating it of any subject, usually classed as a 'mood', though strictly a substantive with certain verbal functions, esp. those of governing an object and being qualified by an adverb'. Briefly, the infinitive is a label for the inflectional form of the verb. Furthermore, Huddleston & Pullum offer some properties that can help distinguish from the two finite constructions:

- i Most infinitival , apart from the complements of modal auxiliaries and supportive *do*, contain the VP subordinator *to*: this is a clear marker of the infinitival.
- ii Unlike imperatives, they do not take auxiliary *do* in negatives, etc...
- iii Unlike imperatives, they are almost invariably subordinate.
- iv Unlike subjunctives, they usually have no subject, and where there is a subject it appears in accusative (or plain) form, not nominative...

v Whereas the most common type of subjunctive construction, the mandative, takes the finite-clause subordinator *that*, the infinitival subordinator (used only when a subject is present) is *for*.’ (2002: 1173)

Besides, the infinitives can be divided into two subsections: the infinitive with the marker *to* and the infinitive without the marker *to*, which is also called bare infinitive. Examples are as follows:

- (1) They made me to call the police. (*to*-infinitive)
- (2) They helped me call the police. (bare infinitive)

Considering that ‘The *to*-infinitival occurs in a very wide range of constructions, whereas the bare infinitival is very restricted’ (Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 1174), this chapter will only focus on *to*-infinitive.

3. Part of Speech and Meaning of the *To*

It has been a debatable question which part of speech the infinitive marker *to* belongs to. Nevertheless, it seems that the *to* doesn’t fit in the definition of any part of speech, though, normally, we consider it as a preposition or an adverb. Also, this is a question which puzzles most of the English learners.

Despite of its semantic meaning, many scholars regard *to* as infinitive marker only with grammatical function. Chomsky believes that *to* ‘can hardly be said to have a meaning in any independent sense’ (1957: 100). However, it seems that many grammarians agree that *to* infinitive *to* derives from the prepositions *to*. Fischer states that ‘It is generally acknowledged in the literature that the allative preposition *to* (or its equivalent in other Germanic languages) developed into an infinitival marker when it became combined with an infinitive’ (2003: 451). At the same time, Jespersen not only argues that ‘*To* had at first its ordinary prepositional meaning of direction, the meaning of the preposition has been weakened and in some cases totally extinguished (1927: 10), but also, he points out that *to* ‘has now come to be a mere empty grammatical appendix to the infinitive’ (1940: 154). Besides, Quirk *et al* states that ‘the infinitive marker *to* may be viewed as related to spatial preposition *to* through metaphorical connection’ (1985: 687). To make it clearer, Quirk exemplifies the *to* in the sentence ‘*John went to swim*’ is a ‘metaphorical connection’ of infinitive marker, distinct from the *to* in the sentence ‘*John went to the pool*’ which shows the direction.

Simply speaking, both Jespersen and Quirk believe that if the *to* can be regarded as a preposition *to*, it conveys its own lexical meaning in the context. However, the meaning carried by the infinitive *to* is far more abstract than the preposition one. As Duffley puts it: ‘the potential meaning of *to* before the infinitive is more abstract than that found in the spatial use of the preposition, and can be stated as follows: the possibility of a movement from a point in time conceived as a before-position to another point in time which marks the end-point of the movement and which represents an after-position with respect to the first’ (1992: 16). Respectively, the preposition *to* expresses the direction in the notion of space while the infinitive *to* expresses one action starts to happen from one status to another in the notion of time. A comparative example goes to sentence (3) and (4):

- (3) Jim went to school.
- (4) Jim went to study.

In sentence (3), the *to* is treated as a preposition for it explains that Jim is moving from a place in the direction to school. While the *to* in sentence (4) is a infinitive *to*, expressing that Jim finished his breakfast and began to study, focusing on the changes of status.

Now let’s refer to some explanations from several significant dictionaries.

Firstly, the *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English (OALD)* explains the infinitive marker *to* as ‘a particle, making the infinitive, used immediately before the verb’ (Hornby *et al* 1980: 908).

Secondly, in *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (LDCE)*, the infinitive marker *to* is illustrated as ‘used before a verb to show it is the infinitive, but not before *can, could, may, might,*

will, would, should, ought to, shall, must. Sometimes it is left out when the verb is understood' (Procter *et al* 1978: 1163-64).

Besides, the *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* illustrates that *to* is 'used as a functional word to indicate that the following verb is an infinitive...and often used by itself at the end of a clause in place of an infinitive suggested by the preceding context' (Mish *et al* 1983: 1238-39), which means that the infinitive *to* doesn't possess any notions on its own, but only has grammatical functions. Accordingly, the information given by the two dictionaries above show that the infinitive marker *to* can be regarded as particle, for it enjoys some features of functional words.

Furthermore, an important function of the infinitive *to* is illustrated in the *Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary* (CCELD), which is 'the verb part of the infinitive can be omitted in some cases when the context makes it clear what you are referring to' (Sinclair *et al* 1991: 1539). For example, the sentence *He ate more than he used to* is short for *He ate more than he used to eat*, because the context makes it unnecessary to speak out the full sentence. In this circumstance, we can treat the infinitive *to* as an auxiliary verb regarding that replacing a full verb is one of the auxiliary's functions.

In summary, the infinitive marker *to* is a multiple and powerful word which enjoys features of both particles and auxiliaries. Being no more a preposition in the infinitive constructions, the meaning of infinitive marker *to* can still be connected to a spatial *to* in some contexts.

4. Semantic Analysis of To-infinitive as Complement Clause

Aarts (2011: 102) assigns the function label of complement clause as the 'clauses that are licensed by a verb, but cannot be assigned one of the other Complement functions Direct Object, Indirect Object, Predicative Complement, or PP as Complement'. Thus the licensing verb is the main issue to do the semantic analysis of *to*-infinitive in complement constructions. Egan (2008: 93) illustrates that 'The *to*-infinitive form of complement occurs with all nine types of matrix verb', which have the notion of *mental process, attitude, communication, perception, effort, enablement, causation, aspect* and *applied attitude*. Accordingly, I would like to discuss the semantic meaning of *to*-infinitive in complement clause according to four groups of licensing verbs.

4.1. The To-infinitive Complement Licensed by Verbs Carrying Notion of Judgment

The *to*-infinitive complement licensed by verbs carrying notion of judgment is exemplified by the following three sentences.

- (5) a. She discovered Lucy to be very clever.
- (6) a. He had assumed Tom to be a doctor.
- (7) a. I know Jack to have divorced in America.

In these three examples, the complement clauses are licensed by verbs carrying the meaning of judgment, and all the subjects of the main clauses (She, He, I) venture a judgment or opinion about the subjects of the complement clauses (Lucy, Tom, Jack) on their properties (clever) or status (being a doctor, divorced). Egan explains that "the sense of the judgment construction will often be understood in an utterance, to mean 'the subject *thinks* this is the most likely complement situation'" (2008: 98). However, if we change the *to*-infinitive clause in the examples to a *that*-clause as the sentences below and do comparisons, it is not hard to find that there is a contrast between the two constructions.

- (5) b. She discovered that Lucy was very clever.
- (6) b. He assumed that Tom was a doctor.
- (7) b. I know that Jack has divorced.

(5) b. implies that she knew Lucy very well and may have seen Lucy's IQ score, so she knew for sure that Lucy was a clever girl. On the contrast, in (5) a, *she* may know Lucy for one month, and *she* guessed Lucy was a clever girl during the time they studied together. Moreover, (5) b. is more about the fact and emphasizes the result while (5) a. is more about the process of discovering. The same contrasts apply to (6) a. and (6) b, and (7) a. and (7) b. as well. Furthermore, the conjecture encoded to the complement situation may have several alternatives from a firm one, as in the case

of ‘know Jack to’ in (7) a, to a weak guess, as in the case of ‘assume Tom to’ in (6) a. However, irrespective of ‘the subject’s degree of conviction’ (Egan 2008: 98) and the alternatives, the complement situation ‘is the alternative which the subject considers most likely to be true’ (Egan 2008: 98). Thus, Egan defines the judgment *to*-infinitive complements as ‘a situation, viewed as a whole, is profiled as likely to be true’ (2008: 98).

4.2. The *To*-infinitive Complement Licensed by Verbs Carrying Notion of Wanting

The four sentences below can be examples for the *to*-infinitive complement licensed by verbs carrying notion of wanting.

- (8) Mum wants me to come to the wedding.
- (9) Teacher expects me to get a distinction degree.
- (10) It began to rain suddenly.
- (11) To go or not to go- that is the question

Firstly, the *to*-infinitive complement encodes potential future occurrences which are profiled as expected but not for sure. With the licensing verb *want* and *expect*, the construction (want somebody to do something) in sentence (8) and (9) is quite typical for *to*-infinitive complement with wanting verbs. However, as what we found in the examples, the licensing verb doesn’t have to be exactly ‘want’ or encode the meaning of hoping. In fact, recalling Quirk’s theory that the potentiality is an important characteristic of *to*-infinitive, the *to*-infinitive in this construction focuses more on the potential future occurrences and the licensing verb can be without any relationship with *want*. Therefore, though the famous sentence (11) from Hamlet doesn’t contain any licensing verb, I would regard the *to*-infinitive in this sentence licensed by a certain wanting verb, for the reason that no matter whether Hamlet goes or not in the end, the complement indicates a potential action that Hamlet may do, active to do, and not for sure.

Secondly, the *to*-infinitive indicates an optimistic and positive potential situation in some contexts. Interestingly, though the future can be both positive and negative, it is found that the *to*-infinitive is more likely to implicate the positive aspect. To be more exact, ‘the subject of the main verb is active to do the things that *to* complement clause indicates’ (Sun 2008: 26) and positive verbs are often followed by *to*-infinitives complement. Ilana Graff has done a famous and interesting experiment. She mixed the optimistic and pessimistic verbs together and asked students to make sentences. It turns out that students prefer *to*-infinitive after optimistic verbs. A proper example goes to sentence (9), getting a distinction degree is a positive potentiality and a happy result, which the subject in the complement would like to see. Other positive verbs that may license *to*-infinitive are *like* (like to do), *hope* (hope to do) and *look forward* (look forward to something), while the opposite examples go to the *dislike* (dislike doing) and *avoid* (avoid doing).

Nonetheless, this explanation doesn’t apply to every situation, for example we can say *I don’t want to go* or *I’m afraid to speak in the public*. Therefore the semantic meaning of *to*-infinitive in this construction needs to be considered with the specific context together.

Thirdly, the *to*-infinitive expresses the non-intention of the subject in the complement. For example, in sentence (10), when will it rain can’t be planned with intention. Hence, the *to*-infinitive has relationship with the domain of verbs.

4.3. The *To*-infinitive Complement Licensed by Verbs Carrying Notion of Emotion

I would regard the verbs which can show the subject’s attitude towards an event or a situation as emotion verbs, example verbs are as *nice*, *pleased*, *glad*, *blush*, *regret*, *eager*, *delighted*, *surprise* and so on.

In the first place, the *to*-infinitive complements with emotion verbs ‘express an attitude towards an event, not a reaction to it’ (Bolinger 1984:52). Imagine the situation, when people meet each other for the first time, people always begin with ‘(It’s) nice to meet you’ and sometimes end with ‘(It’s) nice meeting you’, but one is unlikely to say ‘It’s nice that I meet you’ or ‘It’s nice because I meet you’. All of the four sentences express the positive attitude towards the event of seeing each other, the difference is: only the attitude showed by sentence with *to*-infinitive aims at the event, while the other three sentences focus more on the reason which caused the attitude. Therefore, the

to-infinitive complement is about ‘emotions projected’ (Bolinger 1984: 52), but not ‘emotions caused’ (Bolinger 1984:52).

Furthermore, another semantic meaning of *to*-infinitive complements with emotion verbs raised by Bolinger is that it ‘taking stock of the situation’ (1984: 48). To be more specific, the situation is ‘in keeping with the idea of ‘knowing’, or ‘coming to know’ (Sun 2008: 36). Thus, frequently, the *to*-infinitives licensed by projective emotions occur with verbs of perception, such as *hear, see, find out* and so on. Examples are as follows:

(12) Mum was happy to hear that I got a distinction degree.

(13) It is good to know that you are married.

(14) The children were sad to find out that their Halloween candies were gone.

From sentence (12)-(14), we can also interpret the projective emotions in another way: the subject actually is able to predict the attitude towards the event before it happens. Respectively, for sentence (12), any mum with normal psychology will feel happy for the child’s achievement; for sentence (13), the sentence will only be spoken in the case that the addresser hopes for the addressee to marry; in sentence (14), most children love candies and they knew they would be sad if their candies were missing even before the event really happened.

4.4. The *to*-infinitive Complement Licensed by Verbs Carrying Notion of Violation

Typical violation verbs that may license *to*-infinitive clause as complements are *plan, mean, intend, propose, choose, and decide* and so on. Example sentences are as follows:

(15) He plans to go to America.

(16) He intends to go to America.

(17) He decides to go to America.

Firstly, the basic meaning of all of the three sentences is *He wants to go and he will go*. Therefore, I would propose that most *to*-infinitive complement with violation verb can be transferred to the pattern of ‘subject + wants to do+ and+ subject + will do’. Take sentence (9) as an example, it is unlikely to say * *Teacher wants to expect me to get a distinction degree and will expect me to get a distinction degree*.

Secondly, it can be seen that the *to*-infinitive complement licensed by violation verbs implies the absolute initiative and willingness of the subject in the complement. Dixon puts the *to*-complement in this construction as ‘can only be used if the subject wants the activity to take place. If it is something that is not (or not yet) wanted, then only an *ING* clause will be permitted’ (1991: 592).

5. Conclusion

Generally, this thesis studies *to*-infinitive in complement clauses theoretically and makes a detailed analysis of semantic meanings of them with quite a few example sentences. Accordingly, the following conclusions have been reached. Firstly, with the preposition originality, the infinitive *to* can be used with the verbs carrying the notion of *judgment, wanting, emotion* and *violation* in complement clauses. Though these notions are only four groups of verbs which can license *to*-infinitives as complement clauses, these groups are typical enough to represent the features. After detailed analysis, generally, this thesis has drawn the conclusion that 1) The *to*-infinitives in complement clauses encode the changing from one status to another. 2) *To*-infinitives indicate the situation that may happen in the future. 3) *To*-infinitives emphasis the activity of the subject to make the situation to come true.

References

- [1] Aarts, Bas. 2011. *Oxford Modern English Grammar*. Oxford University Press Inc., New York.
- Chomsky, Noam. 1957. *Syntactic Structure*. The Hague: Mouton.
- [2] Bolinger, D. L. 1984. Intonational signals of subordination. *Proceedings of the tenth annual meeting of Berkeley Linguistics Society*, 401-13.

- [3] Egan, Thomas. 2008. *Non-finite Complementation: A Usage-based Study of Infinitive and –Ing Clauses in English*. Amsterdam-New York.
- [4] Fischer, Olga C.M. 2003. Principles of grammaticalization and linguistics reality. In Günter Rohdenburg & Britta Mondorf (eds.), *Determinants of Grammatical Variation in English*, 445-78. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- [5] Hornby, A.S. et al. 1980. *Oxford Advanced Learner's dictionary of current English*. London Group Limited.
- [6] Huddleston, Rodney & Geoffrey K. Pullum et al. 2002. *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [7] Klein, Eberhard. 1982. *Semantic and Pragmatic Indeterminacy in English Non-finite Verb Complementation*. Gunter Narr Verlag Tübingen.
- [8] Langacker, R. W. 2004. *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar: Descriptive Applications*. Beijing: Peking University Press.
- [9] Mish, F. C. et al. 1983. *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*. Springfield: Merriam-Webster Inc.
- [10] Palmer, F. R. 1974. *The English Verb*. London: Longman.
- [11] Procter, P. et al. 1978. *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*. China Commerce and Trade Press.
- [12] Quirk, Randolph. Greenbaum, Sidney. Leech, Geoffrey & Svartvik, Jan. 1985. *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. Longman Group Limited.
- [13] Shuai, Yanqiu. 2012. *Between Infinitives and –Ing Participles When They are Used as Object and Object Complement*. M.A. dissertation, Hunan Normal University.
- [14] Sinclair, John. et al. 1991. *Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary*. Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- [15] Sun, Guangping. 2008. *The Semantic Research of Infinitives as Complement Clauses in the English Language*. M.A. dissertation, University of Zhejiang.
- [16] Ungerer, Friedrich. 2001. *An Introduction to Cognitive Linguistics*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.