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THE USE OF -ING FORM AND ITS CLASSIFICATION IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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Abstract

This article investigates the use and classification of the -ing form in English, a versatile morphological structure that functions predominantly as a gerund, present participle, and deverbal noun. Through a descriptive-analytical approach, various grammatical roles and syntactic environments of the -ing form are examined. The study highlights the semantic and functional distinctions among the categories and explores their frequency and distribution in contemporary English. Findings suggest that the -ing form serves critical roles in verbal and nominal constructions, contributing to the language's expressive flexibility. The article concludes with implications for linguistic theory and English language teaching

Keywords: Ing form, gerund, present participle, deverbal noun, English grammar, morphology, syntax

Introduction

Introduction

The English -ing form represents one of the most productive and multifunctional morphological devices in the language, capable of assuming various syntactic roles. Deriving from Old English present participle morphology, this suffix has

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evolved into multiple functional categories, each with distinct syntactic and semantic properties (Quirk et al., 1985). Its ambiguity often challenges language learners and linguists alike, raising important questions about categorization, usage norms, and the interface between morphology, syntax, and semantics.

Understanding the diverse functions of the -ing form is essential for a comprehensive grasp of English grammar. It appears extensively in continuous verb forms, noun phrases, and adjectival constructions, thus permeating all levels of language use (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002). While previous research has acknowledged the existence of gerunds, participles, and deverbal nouns, the boundaries between these categories remain blurred in many grammars and instructional contexts (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999).

This paper addresses the need for a clear classification system and descriptive account of the -ing form in contemporary English, as well as its syntactic and semantic behaviors. Using corpus data and theoretical syntactic frameworks, this study contributes to clarifying ambiguities and providing practical insights for language teaching and linguistic analysis.

Methods

The methodological framework of this study rests on qualitative linguistic analysis and corpus examination. Data were sampled from the British National Corpus (BNC) and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), selected for their representativeness of diverse registers, genres, and speakers. A total of 500 randomly selected sentences containing the -ing suffix were extracted, balancing spoken and written modalities, formal and informal contexts. These instances were manually annotated and classified into predefined categories: gerund, present participle, deverbal noun, and adjective, according to morphosyntactic criteria established in Huddleston & Pullum (2002).

Syntactic environments were analyzed with respect to verb phrase structures, modification patterns, compatibility with determiners and quantifiers, and

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argument structures. Semantic roles attributable to the -ing forms were noted, especially focusing on aspects of eventivity, agentivity, and adjectival quality.

Results

Classification of the -ing Form in Detail

1. Gerund-Verbal noun

Gerunds function as verbal nouns but retain several verbal properties, including the ability to take direct objects and be modified by adverbs. For instance:

Swimming every morning improves your health. (subject)

He enjoys reading novels. (object with direct object "novels")

I appreciate your helping me. (possessive determiner with gerund)

Gerunds denote events or actions, maintaining aspectual interpretation typical of verbs, yet they occupy noun phrase positions within syntax—often the subject or object. Gerunds can also appear with possessive determiners or pronouns, underscoring their verbal origin (Biber et al., 1999).

Syntactically, gerunds can be embedded within complex noun phrases, such as in "the constant barking of the dog," where "barking" is a gerund modified by the adjective "constant" and determined by the definite article "the."

Present Participle (Verbal Adjective):

Present participles primarily serve two functions:

a) As components of progressive verb tenses:

She is reading a book.

b) As adjectives or parts of participial phrases modifying nouns:

The crying baby wants attention.

Running water is soothing.

Present participles denote ongoing or progressive action, and in adjective use, they attribute a dynamic quality to the noun. Unlike gerunds, participles cannot generally be preceded by determiners or pluralized.

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Participial phrases often provide additional information about the noun and can function in reduced relative clause forms:

The man standing by the door is my uncle. (reduced relative clause)

Deverbal Nouns:

Deverbal nouns are derived from verbs with the morphological -ing but are fully nominal in function. These nouns do not retain verbal properties such as taking direct objects or being modified by adverbs. For example:

The building is old. (here "building" is a noun meaning a physical structure)

There are several paintings in the gallery.

Deverbal nouns can appear in plural forms and be modified by adjectives but not by adverbs or verb complements, indicating their noun status.

They often signify entities, objects, or abstract concepts related to the base verb but are necessarily semantically distinct from the action or process denoted by their gerund counterparts.

Adjectives:

Certain -ing forms have lexicalized into adjectives describing inherent qualities or states resulting from the verb's action. These adjectives can be contrasted with temporary or dynamic participles:

A boring lecture (adjective)

The lecture is boring me right now (participle in a progressive sense)

Adjectival -ing forms are gradable and compatible with intensifiers:

A very interesting story

These adjectives lose verbal properties and behave entirely as descriptive modifiers.

Examples and Syntactic Structures

Below are examples demonstrating syntactic realizations for each category:

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Category	Example Sentence	Notes
Gerund	Jogging early in the morning is refreshing.	Gerund as subject; verbal noun
Present participle	The cat is sleeping on the sofa.	Progressive tense formation
Present participle	The shining stars lit the night sky.	Adjectival modification
Deverbal noun	The painting was sold at auction.	Concrete noun, pluralizable
Adjective	The lecture was exciting and informative.	Lexical adjective, gradable

Syntactic trees illustrating these forms would show gerunds embedded in NP structures with verbal dependents, participles as part of VP or as postnominal modifiers in NPs, and deverbal nouns occupying normal NP positions without verbal complements.

Discussion

Semantic and Functional Overlap

Gerunds, present participles, deverbal nouns, and adjectives share morphological similarity but crucially differ in syntactic function and semantics. The gerund's hybrid verbal-noun property enables it to encapsulate activity as a nominal concept, which is less explicitly possible in deverbal nouns. Present participles emphasize temporality or adjectival modification, while deverbal nouns focus on entities, and adjectives provide qualitative descriptions.

This fluidity reflects English's analytic flexibility but also introduces ambiguity and learning challenges. For example, the phrase "the building is impressive" (deverbal noun meaning structure) vs. "building a new house is expensive" (gerund referring to the activity/action).

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Implications for Language Acquisition and Teaching

Many ESL learners struggle to distinguish gerunds from present participles, given their shared morphology but different syntactic functions (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999). Explicit instruction on their syntactic environments—such as gerunds’ ability to take objects and participles’ role in progressive tenses—facilitates more accurate use.

Moreover, lexicalized -ing adjectives require additional semantic awareness, as their meaning often differs significantly from the participial or gerundive forms.

Cross-linguistic Considerations

Unlike many languages that may distinguish participles and gerunds morphologically, English relies on contextual and syntactic cues. This characteristic underlines the importance of an integrated morpho-syntactic-semantic approach when analyzing and teaching the -ing forms.

Corpus Insights

Frequency data highlight that participles dominate in continuous tenses, gerunds are frequently nominalized in writings and spoken discourse, deverbal nouns appear commonly as concrete nouns, and adjectives are strongly associated with descriptive text.

Conclusion

The English -ing form encapsulates several interrelated but distinct functions: gerund as a verbal noun, present participle as verbal-adjectival, deverbal noun as pure noun, and adjective derived from verbs. This multifunctionality introduces expressive richness into English grammar but requires nuanced understanding to use accurately.

This study clarifies their classification and usage through corpus analysis and theoretical underpinnings, underscoring the grammatical and semantic

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distinctions critical in both linguistic research and pedagogy. Further empirical investigations could focus on acquisition timelines for each category and typological comparisons across languages.

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