The Underlying Structures of

“It is [noun/adjective] [a gerund phrase]"

Naomi AIBA

ABSTRACT

In English it is possible to say “It is hard to deceive me” and “It is hard deceiving me.” The former expression using an infinitive is far more widely used than the latter using a gerund. However, the expression “It is no use crying over spilt milk” is far more widely used than the expression “It is no use to cry over spilt milk.” These constructions are generally called extraposition, and thus are treated in the same category. In this thesis, it will be revealed that the introductory IT in the construction with an infinitive is different in nature from that of a gerund. It will be also clarified that sentences with a noun phrase and a gerund are structurally different from those with an adjective and a gerund.

1. The Aim

The aim of this paper is to clarify the underlying structures of what is generally called gerund extraposition, that is to say, the constructions with the introductory IT and a gerund.

In the sentences “It is hard deceiving me” and “It is no use crying over spilt milk,” it is widely considered that both the introductory ITs refer to the gerunds “deceiving” and “crying”; however, the analyses here will reveal that neither of the introductory ITs refers to the gerunds. In one of those sentences, “it” is an existential IT and in the other “it” is what may be called a circumstantial IT.

2. “It is no use crying over spilt milk.”

It is generally interpreted that in the sentence “It is no use crying over spilt milk,” “no use” is adjectival, or it is sometimes called accusative adjective; “no use” is probably reduced from “of no use.” However, the following (2) seems to be far less common than (3):

(1) It is no use crying over spilt milk.
(2) It is no use crying over spilt milk.
(3) It is of no use to cry over spilt milk.

In the above three sentences, (1) is an idiomatically established expression and, needless to say, the commonest. As for the word “fun,” it seems that (5) is a doubtful expression.

(4) It is fun playing outside in this nice weather.
(5) It is of fun playing outside in this nice weather.
(6) It is of fun to play outside in this nice weather.

In surface, it may appear as if “it” in (1) refers to the gerund “crying,” but let’s look at the following sentences:

(7) It is a book on the desk.
(8) It is some books on the desk.

The above (7) and (8) are generally called non-standard or dialectal. Grammarians should insist that (8) is particularly awful, though it is still used in some dialects and in slang. In (7) and (8), “it” is existential and is replaced with “there” in ordinary widely “accepted” Present-day English just as in the following (9) and (10):

(9) There is a book on the desk.
(10) There are some books on the desk.

The above (1) and (4) may be replaced with the following (11) and (12) respectively:

(11) There is no use crying over spilt milk.
(12) There is fun playing outside in this nice weather.

Furthermore, the above two sentences may be changed into (13) and (14) though they may sound awkward:

(13) There is no use in crying over spilt milk.
(14) There is no use in playing outside in this nice weather.

The preposition “in” is very often omitted if it is used immediately before a gerund: in that case, it appears to a lot of people as if the gerund worked as a present participle. The following example sentences will be enough to explain that there is no grammatical change in the –ING form:

(15) I always have a lot of trouble in speaking to a large audience.
(16) I always have a lot of trouble speaking to a large audience.

As mentioned above, the preposition “in” placed immediately before a gerund is very often omitted, but we still should take (13) and (14) as the basic underlying structures.

It is obvious that (9), (10), and (10) are exactly the same in structure: “There is [a noun phrase] [a prepositional phrase].” Since (7) and (9) are the same meaning, it is clear that (1) and (9) are the same meaning.

Of (11), (12), and (10), the first is by far most commonly used, because it has the longest history and has long been idiomatically established. The same reason can be given to the fact that (4) is far commoner than either of (13) and (14).

From the above analyses, the following conclusions can be drawn:

(17) In the construction “it is [a noun phrase] [a gerundial phrase]” as in

milk.
The Underlying Structures of
“It is [noun/adjective] [a gerund phrase]”

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ABSTRACT

In English it is possible to say “It is hard to deceive me” and “It is hard deceiving me.” The former expression using an infinitive is far more widely used than the latter using a gerund. However, the expression “It is no use crying over spilt milk” is far more widely used than the expression “It is no use to cry over spilt milk.” These constructions are generally called extraposition, and thus are treated in the same category. In this thesis, it will be revealed that the introductory IT in the construction with an infinitive is different in nature from that of a gerund. It will be also clarified that sentences with a noun phrase and a gerund are structurally different from those with an adjective and a gerund.

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The aim of this paper is to clarify the underlying structures of what is generally called gerund extraposition, that is to say, the constructions with the introductory IT and a gerund.

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It is generally interpreted that in the sentence “It is no use crying over spilt milk,” “no use” is adjectival, or it is sometimes called accusative adjective; “no use” is probably reduced from “of no use.” However, the following (2) seems to be far less common than (3):

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In the above three sentences, (1) is an idiomatically established expression and, needless to say, the commonest. As for the word “fun,” it seems that (5) is a doubtful expression.

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(6) It is of fun to play outside in this nice weather.

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Of (1), (11), and (13), the first is by far the most commonly used, because it has the longest history and has long been idiomatically established. The same reason can be given to the fact that (4) is far commoner than either of (13) and (14).

From the above analyses, the following conclusions can be drawn:

(17) In the construction “it is [a noun phrase] [a gerundial phrase]” as in...
“It is no use crying over spilt milk,”
“it” does not refer to the gerund but
it is existential, and its original con-
struction should have the preposition
“in” before the gerund. The ordinary
expression in Present-day English is
“There is a [noun phrase] [a prepo-
tional phrase].” The difference
between “It is no use crying over
spilt milk” and “It is a book on the
desk” is that the former is idiomati-
cally established in history while the
latter is regarded as non-standard,
dialectal, or slangy.

The above 07 will explain why 08 which
is the same as 09 is doubtful though 09 is
possible (Postal 1974).

08 Who is it fun kissing?
08 Who is there fun in kissing?
08 Who is it fun to kiss?

The following example sentences are
interpreted in the same way:

It was an adventure going down the
river on a raft.
It’s a bore reading answers which
are almost all the same: it’s more of
a challenge writing individual and
original answers!
It’s a tedious business attending so
many meetings.
It’s no good discussing what
happened.
It was quite a job finding him.

08 It’s a nightmare worrying where the
children might be.
08 It’s a waste of time trying to learn
hundreds of dates by heart.
08 It’s a worry to me having to leave
the children alone in the house.

Needless to say, however, not all sen-
tences of this construction can be inter-
preted this way. Let’s look at the following 08:

08 It isn’t bacterium making people
sick.

The original construction for this sen-
tence is considered to be 07; then, the subject
relative clause was reduced to a present
participle clause, 07, as analyzed in Aiha

08 It isn’t bacterium that makes people
sick.
08 It isn’t bacterium making people
sick.

It is obvious that though 08 and 09 are
exactly the same in surface, the word IT and
the “ING form in the former are different in
nature from those of 09.

3. “It is hard deceiving me.”

In English sentences, the subject must be
used; however, it is often difficult to
find the proper subject with the meaning,
and in that case the word IT is used.

08 It is raining now.
08 It is hot today.
08 It is dark in this room.
08 It is just ten o’clock by my watch.

In these sentences, the word IT is said to
mean weather, temperature, time, and so on.
It is possible to say it means the circum-
stances in a broad sense and may be called
the circumstantial IT.

Now, let’s look at the following sen-
tences.

08 It is hard to deceive me.
08 It is hard deceiving me.

The meaning of both sentences seems to
be the same, though 08 sounds more collo-
quial than 09. Since both of them can be
changed into 09 and 08 respectively, the word
IT in 08 and 09 appears to be the introductory
IT, but actually they are quite different in
structure. 09 cannot be structurally changed
into 08.

08 To deceive me is hard.
08 Deceiving me is hard.

In 08, there is an omission of the prepo-
tion “in,” just as mentioned in 03 and 04.

05 It is hard in studying there.
06 It is in studying there.

It is clear that 05 and 06 are in tune with
each other as the question and the answer,
although in actual usage 05, the form with the
preposition “in” deleted, is usually used.

The introduction of “in” into the under-
lying structure explains why the object of the
gerund cannot be fronted.

07 It is hard to deceive me.
06 I am hard to deceive.
06 It is hard deceiving me.
06 It is hard in deceiving me.
06 I am hard in deceiving.

Now, it is time to look at the conclusion
of this structure.
"It is no use crying over spilt milk," "it" does not refer to the gerund but it is existential, and its original construction should have the preposition "in" before the gerund. The ordinary expression in Present-day English is "There is a [noun phrase] [a prepositional phrase]." The difference between "It is no use crying over spilt milk" and "It is a book on the desk" is that the former is idiomatically established in history while the latter is regarded as non-standard, dialectal, or slangy.

The above 07 will explain why 08 which is the same as 09 is doubtful though 08 is possible (Postal 1974).

08 ?Who is it fun kissing?
09 ?Who is there fun in kissing?
08 Who is it fun to kiss?

The following example sentences are interpreted in the same way:

08 It was an adventure going down the river on a raft.
09 It’s a bore reading answers which are almost all the same: it’s more of a challenge writing individual and original answers!
09 It’s a tedious business attending so many meetings.
08 It’s no good discussing what happened.
09 It was quite a job finding him.

The original construction for this sentence is considered to be 07; then, the subject relative clause was reduced to a present participle clause, 09, as analyzed in Aiha (1992).

08 It isn’t bacterium that makes people sick.
09 It isn’t bacterium making people sick.

It is obvious that though 11 and 08 are exactly the same in surface, the word IT and the "ING form in the former are different in nature from those of 09.

3. "It is hard deceiving me."

In English sentences, the subject must be used; however, it is often difficult to find the proper subject with the meaning, and in that case the word IT is used.

08 It is raining now.
09 It is hot today.
08 It is dark in this room.
09 It is just ten o’clock by my watch.

In these sentences, the word IT is said to mean weather, temperature, time, and so on. It is possible to say it means the circumstances in a broad sense and may be called the circumstantial IT.

Now, let’s look at the following sentences.

08 It is hard to deceive me.
09 It is hard deceiving me.

The meaning of both sentences seems to be the same, though 08 sounds more colloquial than 09. Since both of them can be changed into 09 and 08 respectively, the word IT in 08 and 09 appears to be the introductory IT, but actually they are quite different in structure. 08 cannot be structurally changed into 09.

08 To deceive me is hard.
09 Deceiving me is hard.

In 09, there is an omission of the preposition "in," just as mentioned in 03 and 04. Since both of them can be changed into 09 and 08 respectively, the word IT in 09 and 08 appears to be the introductory IT, but actually they are quite different in structure. 09 cannot be structurally changed into 08.

It is clear that 02 and 08 are in tune with each other as the question and the answer, although in actual usage 09, the form with the preposition "in" deleted, is usually used.

The introduction of "in" into the underlying structure explains why the object of the gerund cannot be fronted.

08 It is hard in studying there.
09 It is hard in studying there.

08 It is hard to deceive me.
09 I am hard to deceive.
08 It is hard deceiving me.
09 It is hard deceiving me.
08 It is hard in deceiving me.
09 I am hard in deceiving.

Now, it is time to look at the conclusion of this structure.
In the structure “it is [adjective] [a gerundial phrase]” as in “It is hard deceiving me,” it appears as if “it” referred to the gerund, but actually the pronoun “it” indicates the circumstances in a broad sense and may be called the circumstantial IT. Furthermore, there should be a preposition “in” immediately before the gerund in the underlying structure. It is obviously impossible to take a noun phrase out of the adverbial phrase, that is to say, the IN-gerund phrase.

There are numerous example sentences of this kind as follows:

- It is always awkward doing business with an alias.
- It was just too bad being poor.
- It was boring listening to lectures on grammar.
- It is dangerous marrying a widow because she has cast her rider.
- It is disturbing being here again.
- We find it rather dull living out here.
- It was easy getting the equipment loaded.
- It’s enjoyable working here.
- It’s funny looking back at childhood days.
- It is good striving to be the best.
- It is ill stealing from a thief.
- It is instructive reading good books.
- It’s nice seeing him again.

There are far more adjectives which can be used in this pattern.

It is said that this structure does not allow the subject of the gerund to appear. (Postal 1974)

- Jim’s doing that was wrong.
- It was wrong Jim’s doing that.
- It was wrong doing that.
- It was wrong for Jim to do that.

However, there are some actual usages with the subject found as follows:

- I think it rather dangerous your venturing out there.
- It is deplorable their being so frivolous.
- It would be a bit difficult their doing the work in such a short time.
- It’s strange him behaving like that.
- We thought it wrong your punishing him.

We have to wait for further researches to find out what restrictions exist around here.

4. Conclusions

In this paper, we have discussed the so-called gerund extraposition and found that the pronoun “it” is existential in case a noun phrase comes before the gerund, while it is circumstantial if an adjective is used in front of the gerund. We have also found that the preposition “in” should be found immediately before the gerund in the original structure.

This interpretation explains why it is impossible to take a noun phrase out of the gerund phrase. We have to continue working to find out why the subject of the gerund may appear in some sentences, but not in others.

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