

# 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.

### 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 of 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 fun 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), (13), and (14) 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 (13) are the same meaning.

Of (1), (11), and (13), 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 (12) 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 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 (17) will explain why (18) which is the same as (19) is doubtful though (20) is possible (Postal 1974).

- (18) ?Who is it fun kissing?
- (19) ?Who is there fun in kissing?
- (20) Who is it fun to kiss?

The following example sentences are interpreted in the same way :

- (21) It was an adventure going down the river on a raft.
- (22) It's a bore reading answers which are almost all the same ; it's more of a challenge writing individual and original answers!
- (23) It's a tedious business attending so many meetings.
- (24) It's no good discussing what happened.
- (25) It was quite a job finding him.

- (26) It's a nightmare worrying where the children might be.
- (27) It's a waste of time trying to learn hundreds of history dates by heart.
- (28) It's a worry to me having to leave the children alone in the house.

Needless to say, however, not all sentences of this construction can be interpreted this way. Let's look at the following (29) :

- (29) It isn't bacterium making people sick.

The original construction for this sentence is considered to be (30) ; then, the subject relative clause was reduced to a present participle clause, (31), as analyzed in Aiba (1992).

- (30) It isn't bacterium that makes people sick.
- (31) It isn't bacterium \_\_\_\_ making people sick.

It is obvious that though (1) and (29) are exactly the same in surface, the word IT and the -ING form in the former are different in nature from those of (29).

### 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.

- (32) It is fine today.

- (33) It is raining now.
- (34) It is hot today.
- (35) It is dark in this room.
- (36) 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.

- (37) It is hard to deceive me.
- (38) It is hard deceiving me.

The meaning of both sentences seems to be the same, though (38) sounds more colloquial than (37). Since both of them can be changed into (39) and (40) respectively, the word IT in (37) and (38) appears to be the introductory IT, but actually they are quite different in structure. (38) cannot be structurally changed into (40).

- (39) To deceive me is hard.
- (40) Deceiving me is hard.

In (38), there is an omission of the preposition "in," just as mentioned in (13) and (14).

- (41) It is hard in deceiving me.

Here, the subject IT has no obvious meaning, but it means the circumstances in a broad sense, as discussed in (32) through (36).

Now, let's look at the following (43) and

(44), both of which are the answers to the question (42) :

- (42) How is it in your room?
- (43) It's hard studying there.
- (44) \*Studying there is hard.

It is said that (44) is ungrammatical because the focus should be placed at the end of the sentence ; this is called the end-focus principle. (Quirk &c 1972) However, (42) asks about the circumstances in a broad sense ; yet the answer (44) refers to something very specific. The question and the answer are not really in tune with each other and that is why (44) sounds ungrammatical. In the underlying structure of (43), there is an omission of the preposition "in," as mentioned before.

- (45) It is hard in studying there.

It is clear that (42) and (45) are in tune with each other as the question and the answer, although in actual usage (43), 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.

- (37) It is hard to deceive me.
- (46) I am hard to deceive.
- (38) It is hard deceiving me.
- (41) It is hard in deceiving me.
- (46) \*I am hard in deceiving.

Now, it is time to look at the conclusion of this structure.

- (47) 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 :

- (48) It is always awkward doing business with an alias.
- (49) It was just too bad being poor!
- (50) It was boring listening to lectures on grammar.
- (51) It is dangerous marrying a widow because she has cast her rider.
- (52) It is disturbing being here again.
- (53) We find it rather dull living out here.
- (54) It was easy getting the equipment loaded.
- (55) It is enjoyable working here.
- (56) It's funny looking back at childhood days.
- (57) It is good striving to be the best.
- (58) It is ill stealing from a thief.
- (59) It is instructive reading good books.
- (60) 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)

- (61) Jim's doing that was wrong.
- (62) \* It was wrong Jim's doing that.
- (63) It was wrong doing that.
- (64) It was wrong for Jim to do that.

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

- (65) I think it rather dangerous your venturing out there.
- (66) It is deplorable their being so frivolous.
- (67) It would be a bit difficult their doing the work in such a short time.
- (68) It's strange him behaving like that.
- (69) 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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