

Re: "To run is good exercise"?!

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- *From:* Nathan Sanders <nsanders.DIE.SPAM@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx>
 - *Date:* Tue, 19 Apr 2005 14:59:23 GMT
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In article <1113902982.801459.167100@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx>, martinhipps2@xxxxxxxx wrote:

> it is: I would never start a sentence with an infinitive. The one

Des and Peter already came up with examples that sound fine to me. To put it simply, infinitives *can* grammatically begin sentences in certain circumstances.

> counterexample I can think of would be the song lyric "To know him is
> to love him" except here the sentence is in the form verb phrase = verb
> phrase and not the awkward verb phrase = noun phrase as in the previous
> example.

Some counterexamples collected from Google:

- (1) To be a nurse would be the best thing that could happen to me.
- (2) To have a car is a blessing.

And some examples with modifiers:

- (3) Just to get a job would be a step forward.
- (4) Not to get a mammogram would be a really bad message to take away from this.

Something is going on here, however. It was much easier to find examples of "to VERB is ADJ" than "to VERB is NOUN". I don't really have answer for the discrepancy.

> The basic problem is that students don't seem to be taught the
> difference between a gerund and an infinitive. At best they assume
> that "I enjoy swimming" is idiomatic and "I enjoy to swim" is still
> grammatically correct.

Then they haven't been taught about subcategorization. Some verbs can take both, and some can only take one or the other. Like most cases of subcategorization, it doesn't have a general pattern and must simply be memorized:

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(4) a. I like/hate/try/fear watching Oprah.
b. I like/hate/try/fear to watch Oprah.

(5) a. I enjoy/despise/avoid watching Oprah.
b. *I enjoy/despise/avoid to watch Oprah.

(6) a. *I want/ought/strive/decide watching Oprah.
b. I want/ought/strive/decide to watch Oprah.

> I have counter argued that you can meaningfully
> say "I watch the Summer Olympics because I love swimming" but not "I
> watch the Summer Olympics because I love to swim".

You can meaningfully say it; it just has a different meaning
(something like: my passion for being in the water myself gives me an
appreciation for the Olympics).

> Grammar books make it clear that a gerund is a noun and not a verb,
> that "running", "writing", "swimming" and "collecting stamps" are
> activities, abilities, pastimes and hobbies but some non-natives think
> the same can be said of an infinitive: they'll argue that when a person
> says "I love to swim" that "to swim" is the object of the verb "love"!

If it's not the "object", what is it?

Note: "objects" (by which I mean "complements" in the traditional
syntactic sense) don't have to be nouns (or noun phrases). They can
be prepositional phrases:

(7) I resorted [to watching Oprah].

tensed clauses:

(8) I know [John watches Oprah].

or as we have already seen, untensed (infinitive) clauses (4b,6b).

Do you have a clear definition of "object" in mind which classifies
"to swim" as not an object in "I love to swim"? Is this a syntactic
definition, a semantic one, or what? What sort of linguistic tests
will consistently classify something as "object" and "not object" in
the way you suggest?

And more important, is your definition more useful than a linguist's
definition of complement? (Or at minimum, equally useful?)

> Does anybody know of any grammar books that clarify this issue for the
> sake of students and teachers here who, for some reason, won't take the
> word of a native speaker? It could be hard to find such a reference
> because a native speaker would never say "To run is good exercise":
> nobody would think to write a rule to correct an error that nobody

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> would be expected to make.

Since sentences can start with infinitives, and infinitives can be equated with nouns, I'm not sure there is a nice general rule to describe the type of error you're describing. The infinitive and the gerund aren't completely synonymous: in some cases they can be interchanged with no significant change in meaning, but in many cases, they cannot.

To believe otherwise is a mistake.

Nathan

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• *Follow-Ups:*

- ◆ *Re: "To run is good exercise"?!*
 ◇ From: martinhipps2
- ◆ *Re: "To run is good exercise"?!*
 ◇ From: Peter T. Daniels

• *References:*

- ◆ *"To run is good exercise"?!*
 ◇ From: martinhipps2

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