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The Difference in Meaning between Begin (Start) to-V and Begin (Start) V-ing

Kenji SONODA

Abstract Regarding the difference between begin (start)+infinitive and begin (start)+gerund, there are some who simply dismiss it by saying that there is not much difference between the two. There are, however, cases in which there certainly exist some differences in meaning between the two. This article explores, first, the validity of Declerck's differentiation between the two, and then discusses some major differences that exist between the two: the differences in terms of potentiality and performance, and in terms of a point in time and duration in time. All in all, I am sure that I was able to make a number of important new discoveries in this study that had not been made by the grammars in the U. S. and the U. K.

Key Words : potentiality, performance, a point in time, duration in time

1. Introduction

With regard to the difference in meaning between begin (start)+infinitive and begin (start)+gerund, there are some who say that there is not much difference between the two. Swan (1995 : 296) says that "Usually there is no important difference" between the two forms in (1a) and (1b).

(1) a. She began playing/to play the guitar when she was six.
   b. He started talking/to talk about golf but everybody went out of the room.

Alexander (1988 : 319) also says that "These verbs (begin, start, etc.) can be followed by a to-infinitive or -ing without any change in meaning."

We cannot, however, dismiss this matter simply by saying that there is not much difference between the two, because, while there are cases in which there would be no difference, there are certainly cases in which there are differences in meaning or usage between the two. Thus it is the objective of this article to examine what kind of differences there are between begin (start)+infinitive and begin (start)+gerund. This article deals with, broadly speaking, first, Declerck's differentiation, and second, some actual differences that can be observed between the two. In the first part, I will argue that the way of Declerck's differentiation is not exhaustive enough or not appropriate enough, and in the second part, I will discuss some major differences more minutely than Declerck.

2. Declerck's Differentiation between Begin (Start) to-V and Begin (Start) V-ing

2.1. An intentional or unintentional meaning

Declerck (1991 : 506) says that "The infinitive is used to refer to an unintentional situation." In fact, just as Declerck says, the infinitive is certainly used to refer to an unintentional situation as the examples in (2) suggest. However, it should be noted at the same time that the infinitive is also used to imply an intentional situation like the examples in (3) show.

(2) a. Suddenly the room started to spin and the air became so thick that it was hard to breathe.
   (Joan E. Lloyd and Edwin B. Herman, Dial 911)
   b. Levinson founded his firm in 1997, when the price of gold began to climb again.
   (The New Yorker, July 17, 2000)
   c. ...when Blaze began to wheeze, I hurried to pull the cork and pour....
   (Hester Kaplan, "Live Life King-Sized")
   d. The children began to get excited....
   (Jhumpa Lahiri, "Interpreter of Maladies")
(3) a. I began to examine Rajij while my other crew members took a set of vitals.
   (Joan E. Lloyd and Edwin B. Herman, Dial 911)

1 Department of General Education, the School of Allied Medical Sciences, Nagasaki University
b. Researchers began to document developmental delays and behavioral problems....  
*(The New Yorker, July 17, 2000)*

c. In the darkness he started to think.  
*(Samrat Upadhyay, "The Good Shopkeeper")*

d. So we started to expose him to Madison Square Garden....  
*(Ina Yalof, The Story of a Hospital)*

Declerck goes on saying in connection with begin (start) → gerund that it is used to refer to an intentional action. The gerund is certainly used to refer to an intentional action as the examples in (4) indicate. However, on the other hand, as the examples in (5) clearly show, the gerund is also used to imply an unintentional action.

(4) a. The two detectives went back to their office and, beginning at ten that evening, methodically began phoning each upstate prison.  
*(Reader's Digest, June 2000)*
b. That was the signal for Eric to begin removing his heart.  
*(ibid.)*
c. Back at the rehab centre, Dorine began sticking posters of planes all round her bed.  
*(Reader's Digest, July 2000)*
d. “First, they started charging a dollar an acre for letting me hunt....”  
*(The New Yorker, July 17, 2000)*

(5) a. We had been performing CPR for about a minute when the man gave a sigh and began breathing on his own.  
*(Joan E. Lloyd and Edwin B. Herman, Dial 911)*
b. She missed her parents so much that she began sobbing again.

*(Ha Jin, "In the Kindergarten")*
c. Then her daddy started crying again....  
*(Steve Yarbrough, "The Rest of Her Life")*
d. When the plan was announced in June, Sogo sales started slumping, right in the middle of the summer gift-giving season....  
*(TIME, July 31, 2000)*

Then, how frequently is an intentional or unintentional meaning implied in the infinitive and the gerund, although there are cases that are too ambiguous to decide whether it is an intentional or unintentional meaning that is implied? Therefore, it would be only a general tendency that can be grasped in such an attempt.

Table 1 gives an approximate number of instances of intentional or unintentional meaning implied in the infinitive or gerund in spoken and written English.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Spoken Eng. (The Story of a Hospital)</th>
<th>Written Eng. (The Best American Short Stories 1999)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>An implied meaning</td>
<td>Begin to V</td>
<td>Start to V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An intentional meaning</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An unintentional meaning</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambiguous in meaning</td>
<td>(6)</td>
<td>(1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. An intentional or unintentional meaning in begin (start) V-ing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Spoken Eng. (The Story of a Hospital)</th>
<th>Written Eng. (The Best American Short Stories 1999)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>An implied meaning</td>
<td>Begin V-ing</td>
<td>Start V-ing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An intentional meaning</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An unintentional meaning</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambiguous in meaning</td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(10)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 shows that in spoken English in the infinitive an intentional meaning is implied more often than an unintentional meaning, and that in written English an intentional meaning is implied almost as often as an unintentional meaning. That contradicts what Declerck argues. Table 2 suggests that, although in the gerund in spoken English an intentional meaning is implied more frequently than an unintentional meaning, in written English an unintentional meaning is also implied in the gerund rather frequently. This also differs from what Declerck says.

All of this might imply that it is somewhat inappropriate to differentiate between the infinitive and the gerund based on intentional or unintentional meaning.

2.2. Repetition

2.2.1. Repetition over an unspecified period

Declerck (1991: 506) says that the infinitive is used "to express a habit, i.e. the repetition of situations of the same kind on different occasions over an unspecified period." And he cites the following:

(6) Two years ago John began to work. He still does.
The Difference in Meaning between \text{Begin (Start)} \text{ to-V} and \text{Begin (Start) V-ing}

When the same kind of situation is repeated on different occasions over an unspecified period, there are numerous instances of them in which the infinitive is used in lieu of the gerund, just as Declerck says, like the following:

\begin{itemize}
\item a. He began to sleep in the days and stay up late at night. 
\text{ (Lorrie Moore, "Real Estate")}
\item b. He grew...and he started to speak English. 
\text{ (The New Yorker, July 11, 2000)}
\item c. I started to buy them when I was sixteen. 
\text{ (Ina Yalof, The Story of a Hospital)}
\item d. When you're on Patient Information, you begin to get familiar with names of people. \text{ (ibid.)}
\end{itemize}

However, there are also instances in which the gerund is used in such cases, like those in (8). In these instances at least once a day, often, every time, and sometimes mean "on different occasions."

\begin{itemize}
\item a. My brother began stopping by her house at least once a day to give updates.... 
\text{ (Reader's Digest, July 2000)}
\item b. "We often wake up in the morning and just start talking," says Pam. \text{ (ibid.)}
\item c. Every time I dip into the water for a swim, some Mediterranean Messenger of Love start rapping to her. 
\text{ (Junot Diaz, "The Sun, the Moon, the Stars")}
\item d. "But sometimes she starts talking right in the middle of a song." 
\text{ (Tim Gautreaux, "The Piano Tuner")}
\end{itemize}

All of this shows that in order to suggest repeated action on different occasions over an unspecified period, the gerund is used almost as often as the infinitive. This is an argument that also disagrees with what Declerck explains.

\subsection{2.2.2. Repetition over a specified period}

Declerck says that the gerund is used "to express repetition of a situation within a single period of time." In fact, as he says, when we want to express repeated action within a single period of time, there are instances in which the gerund is used. In all of the following instances each action is performed over a specified period.

\begin{itemize}
\item a. When you're a four-year student, you start interviewing early in that year for the places.... 
\text{ (Ina Yalof, The Story of a Hospital)}
\item b. They had walked about 30 metres when three teenagers came out of the crowds and started punching Scott in an unprovoked attack. 
\text{ (Reader's Digest, July 2000)}
\item c. ...but as he again tried to pull the woman out of the street, she removed one of her shoes and began beating in the face with it. \text{ (ibid.)}
\item d. Once the top starts jiggling, he says, it'll be done in fifteen minutes. 
\text{ (The New Yorker, July 17, 2000)}
\end{itemize}

However, contrary to what Declerck says, to imply repetitive action within a single period of time, the infinitive seems to be used as frequently as the gerund. In all of the following instances, the action is performed over a specified period.

\begin{itemize}
\item a. Immediately he started to set up ground rules. "I make telephone calls, I use the bathroom, I don't use a commode." 
\text{ (Ina Yalof, The Story of a Hospital)}
\item b. Her patience did not last long, though, and soon she began to shift restlessly in her seat. \text{ (ibid.)}
\item c. For some reason, about 100 meters into the race, Schwartz began to let out war whoops.... \text{ (Reader's Digest, July 2000)}
\item d. Ruth began to shriek. "Get out of here! Get out of here right now! All of you! ..." \text{ (Lorrie Moore, "Real Estate")}
\end{itemize}

All of this suggests again that it would be meaningless to make a distinction between the infinitive and the gerund in terms of repetition over a specified or an unspecified period. Declerck seems to have brought into his discussion too strictly the idea of time distinction like "over an unspecified period" or "over a specified period." This kind of timeframe seems to be unnecessary.

All in all, Declerck does not seem to have been very successful in differentiating in meaning between \text{begin (start)+infinitive} and \text{begin (start)+gerund}. It would be necessary to differentiate them from a different point of view.

\section{3. Some Major Differences between \text{Begin (Start)} \text{ to-V} and \text{Begin (Start) V-ing}}

3.1. Potentiality and performance

Quirk et al. (1985 : 1192) say that in (11a) and (11b), there is no observable difference of meaning between \text{start+infinitive} and \text{start+gerund}. 

\begin{itemize}
\item a. ...began stopping by her house at least once a day to give updates.... 
\text{ (Reader's Digest, July 2000)}
\item b. "We often wake up in the morning and just start talking," says Pam. \text{ (ibid.)}
\item c. Every time I dip into the water for a swim, some Mediterranean Messenger of Love start rapping to her. \text{ (Junot Diaz, "The Sun, the Moon, the Stars")}
\item d. "But sometimes she starts talking right in the middle of a song." \text{ (Tim Gautreaux, "The Piano Tuner")}
\end{itemize}
(11) a. Lucy started to write while in hospital.  
           b. Lucy started writing while in hospital.  
They say, however, that in (12a) and (12b) there  
is a difference in meaning between the two. That is,  
(12a) suggests that the activity may not yet have  
begun, while in (12b) the activity is already ongo-  
ing.

(12) a. He started to speak, but stopped because  
           she objected.  
           b. He started speaking, and kept on for  
more than an hour.

Quirk et al. (1985 : 1192) call what started+infinitive in (12a) implies “potentiality” and what  
started+gerund in (12b) implies ”performance.” The differentiation of this kind between ”potentiality” and ”performance” can also be seen in Jacobs (1995 : 298). Jacobs says that, in (13a) the complaining may not yet have begun, while in (13b) the complaining is ongoing. Thus (13a) might show potentiality, and (13b) performance.

(13) a. Humphrey started to complain.  
           b. Humphrey started complaining.

He says further that (14a) ”allows for the interpreta-  
tion that Humphrey had not yet uttered his  
complaint,” whereas in (14b) ”the first syllable or  
more of the complaint had been uttered,” and thus the  
gerund ”represents a more fully realized activity.”

(14) a. Humphrey started to complain but chang-  
ed his mind when he saw the plum pudding and custard.  
           b. Humphrey started complaining but chang-  
ed his mind when he saw the plum pudding  
and custard.

A study based on my corpus also clearly shows  
that there are instances in which start+infinitive implies potentiality. (15a) shows that Claude tried to say that the woman needed a boyfriend, but in reality, she did not say so. The spaced periods (.....) in the first sentence in (15a) also vindicates that. In (15b) the first started to say suggests potentiality, whereas the second started to sing implies a kind of performance:

(15) a. Claude picked up a screwdriver, ”You  
ought to get out more. A woman your  
age needs....” He started to say that  
she needed a boyfriend, but then he  
looked around at the dry-rotted cur-  
tains, the twelve-foot ceilings lined  
with dusty plaster molding....  
(Tim Gautreaux, ”The Piano Tuner”)  
           b. An injured little smile came to her lips.  
She straightened her back and started  
to say something to him, but instead  
she looked at Claude, at his embar-  
rassed and hopeful face. Then, to his  
amazement, she started to sing, and  
people looked up as though Patsy Cline  
had come back, but without her country  
accent, and the whole room got quiet  
to listen. ”Crazy,” Michelle sang, soft  
as midnight fog outside a bedroom win-  
dow, ”crazy for feeling so lonely.”  
( ibid. )

In connection with this problem of potentiality  
and performance, there is something that has to be  
added here. Is this potentiality confined only to  
start+infinitive? Does begin+infinitive not suggest  
it? Yasui et al. (1987 : 173-75) say so. They argue  
that begin+infinitive does not imply potentiality.  
They say that (16b) has the meanings expressed in  
both in (17a) and (17b), but that (16a) has only  
the meaning expressed in (17a).

(16) a. Barbara began to study for her exams  
last week.  
           b. Barbara started to study for her exams  
last week.

(17) a. Barbara did some studying for her exams  
last week.  
           b. Barbara started to study for her exams  
last week but then she didn’t do any  
studying.

However, Yasui et al. seem to be wrong. Although  
start+infinitive seems to imply potentiality more  
often than begin+infinitive does, begin+infinitive  
also seems to suggest potentiality. Jespersen (1909-  
49, V : 196) says that ”Begin to sometimes implies  
that an action is interrupted or not finished.”  
Additionally, in the quotation that Wierzbicka  
in connection with (18a) that ”to be appropriate,  
Mary must have rained at least a few blows  
on John (.....),” but Dixon says concerning (18b)  
that (18b) ”could be said when she had merely  
raised the stick but had not yet brought it down  
upon his head (perhaps she will, or perhaps she  
won’t).”

(18) a. Mary began hitting John.  
           b. Mary began to hit John.

Furthermore, it is highly probable that in (19)  
began+infinitive implies potentiality.
The Difference in Meaning between Begin (Start) to-V and Begin (Start) V-ing

(19) She began to say something, then changed her mind.
(The Kenkyusha Dict. of English Collocations)

3.2. A point in time and duration in time
I believe that the fundamental difference between begin (start)+infinitive and begin (start)+gerund would be the difference between a point in time and duration in time. In begin (start)+infinitive the emphasis is placed on a point in time, whereas in begin (start)+gerund it is placed on duration in time. Yule (1998: 224) says that "Activities and processes are events that have duration, and we could simply say that the gerund is strongly preferred when we refer to duration in time." He goes on saying that "The infinitive seems to be preferred when a point of time (i.e. not duration) is being referred to as a beginning...." And he quotes the following:

(20) I turned the key and the engine suddenly started to splutter into life.

Yule continues saying that the infinitive is also used when the point in time is the start of a possible series like (21a), which means possible repeated action, and that the gerund is preferred when the repeated action is not a possible, but an actual, ongoing event like (21b).

(21) a. He begins to sneeze if a cat comes near him.
   b. He begins sneezing if a cat even comes into the same room.

Quirk et al. (1985: 1192) say much the same thing. They call this repeated action "multiple activities," and say that when the multiple activities are involved, the gerund, which has the progressive aspect, is preferred. They say that in (22) the gerund is more appropriate than the infinitive.

(22) a. He began to open all the cupboards.
   b. He began opening all the cupboards.

3.2.1. Adverbs or adverbials and a point in time or duration in time
3.2.1.1. Adverbs or adverbials and a point in time
Generally, suddenly co-occurs with the infinitive.

(23) a. Suddenly his vision began to tunnel, he started to sweat, and...he collapsed.
   (Joan E. Lloyd and Edwin B. Herman, Dial 911)
   b. Suddenly, with no coaxing, the child, a boy, begins to wail.
   (Ina Yalof, The Story of a Hospital)
   c. He suddenly began to shake uncontrollably, then, with an effort, relaxed.
   (COBUILD ON CD-ROM)
   d. Suddenly the room started to spin and the air became so thick that it was hard to breathe.
   (Joan E. Lloyd and Edwin B. Herman, Dial 911)

Semantically suddenly suggests a point in time, and begin (start)+infinitive also suggests a point in time, because in begin (start)+infinitive the emphasis is put on an inceptive moment, i.e. a point in time. That explains why suddenly is compatible with the infinitive. And it also explains at the same time why there are more instances in which suddenly co-occurs with the infinitive more often than with the gerund, the latter of which implies duration in time, not a point in time. This does not necessarily mean, however, that the co-occurrence of suddenly with the gerund is unthinkable. Although instances are few, suddenly or all of a sudden or all at once can co-occur with the gerund.

(24) a. Now here she was modelling in the nude and suddenly a couple of teachers, who’d never appeared in life-drawing before, started coming to classes.
   (COBUILD ON CD-ROM)
   b. "I thought something was wrong when all of a sudden he started drinking water nonstop," says Michelle, a nutritionist. (Newsweek, Nov. 4, 2000)
   c. All at once several boys started chasing the rabbit, which turned out to have a crippled hind leg.
   (Ha Jin, "In the Kindergarten")

However, begin (start)+gerund in itself suggests duration in time that is incompatible with a point of time suddenly implies. It may easily explain why suddenly is used less frequently with the gerund.

3.2.1.2. Adverbs or adverbials and duration in time
Always, often, usually, regularly, every morning, etc. are semantically opposite to suddenly, all of a sudden, or all at once. While such adverbs as suddenly imply a point in time, such adverbs or adverbials as always, often, usually, regularly, every morning, would (past habits), suggest habitual activities, or duration in time. It means that these latter adverbs or adverbials tend to co-occur with the gerund as the examples in (25) clearly show.
(25) a. Rhoda's one who always starts swing-
ing.
   (Ina Yalof, *The Story of a Hospital*)
b. As you start mowing more often, reas-
   sess your lawn.
   (COBUILD ON CD-ROM)
c. Patients usually start talking to me as
   soon as the elevator doors close.
   (Ina Yalof, *The Story of a Hospital*)
d. People started singing and writing to me
   all the time, asking me to be on all
   sorts of different television and radio pro-
   grammes... (COBUILD ON CD-ROM)
e. Among other jobs in the glasshouse, do
   not forget to start regularly watering
cyclamen corms to bring them into life
   again. (ibid.)
f. After Coleman completed his overnight
guard duty, he said he started cleaning
toilets every morning.
   (*The New Yorker*, July 3, 2000)
g. Every time I moved my finger just a mil-
   limeter, the blood would start welling
   out and one of the surgeons would say,
   “I don’t want to be melodramatic.”
   (Ina Yalof, *The Story of a Hospital*)

This does not mean, however, that the co-
ocurrence of *always, often, usually*, etc. with the
infinitive is not possible. Examples like (26) can be
found in which these adverbs co-occur with the in-
finitive, but these adverbs of frequency tend to co-
occur with the gerund more often.

(26) Very often a four-year-old child will begin
to talk about dying. (ibid.)

3.3. Spoken and written English

Generally, in spoken English *start* occurs more
frequently than *begin*, the reason probably being
that *start* is less formal than *begin*. Then what
about *start*+infinitive or *start*+gerund? Which
one occurs more often?

Tables 3 and 4 give an approximate number of in-
stances of each form in spoken and written English.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3 Spoken Eng.</th>
<th>(The Story of a Hospital)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Begin to-V</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Start to-V</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Begin V-ing</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Start V-ing</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4 Written Eng.</th>
<th>(The Best Amer. Short Stories 1999)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Begin to-V</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Start to-V</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Begin V-ing</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Start V-ing</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tables 3 and 4 show that in spoken English *start*
+gerund occurs most frequently of the four forms,
and that in written English *begin*+infinitive ap-
pears most often of the four forms. These findings
of mine are totally in accordance with Biber et al.
(1999: 704, 741) and *LDOCE* (s.v. *begin* and *start*),
the latter of which is based on the British National
Corpus and the Longman Lancaster Corpus.

Then why is *start*+gerund used most frequently
in spoken English and why is *begin*+infinitive used
most often in written English? No one seems to
have given an answer to the question. One of the
reasons might be that *start* is preferred in spoken
English and *begin* in written English. Another rea-
son would be their way of pronunciation. That is,
*start* doing and *begin* to do are much easier to pro-
nounce than the other forms, say, *start* to do or
*begin* doing. In *start* to do, the [t] sound occurs
three times, whereas in *begin* doing the [gin] sound
is closely followed by another, similar [in] sound,
all of which might make it a little awkward to
pronounce them. And that might possibly make
people choose another different form.

4. Conclusion

In this article I first stated the inappropriateness
of Declerck’s differentiation between *begin* (*start*)+
infinitive and *begin* (*start*)+gerund. Then I argued
that *begin* (*start*)+infinitive can imply potentiality
and *begin* (*start*)+gerund performance, that in *begin*
(*start*)+infinitive the emphasis is put on a point in
time, while in *begin* (*start*)+gerund it is put on du-
ration in time, and that in spoken English *start*
+gerund is used most often, whereas in written
English *begin*+infinitive is used most frequently.

NOTES

with 74 physicians, nurses, and other health-related
personnel who work at a large hospital in New
York City, and had them talk freely about their
jobs, their daily lives, their view of life and other
The Difference in Meaning between Begin (Start) to-V and Begin (Start) V-ing

things, taping these conversations with them, and she later transcribed them word for word into the 357-page book. In my study the descriptive parts in this book were excluded.


REFERENCES
Kenji Sonoda

Begin (Start) to-V と Begin (Start) V-ing における意味の相違

園田 健二

要 旨  begin (start) to-V と begin (start) V-ing の意味の相違について，最初は Declerck (1991) が示した双方の間の相違について批判し，その後，potentiality と performance, a point in time と duration in time などの観点から双方の相違を検討した．この point of time と duration in time は begin (start) to-V と begin (start) V-ing の意味の根本的な相違を示すので，point in time を示す begin (start) to-V は suddenly, all at once なるような語と共起し，duration in time を示す begin (start) V-ing は always, often, usually, regularly などと共起している。

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