

The Constructional Meaning of Infinitival Relative Clauses in English

Infinitival relative clauses (henceforth IRCs) can be simply defined as *to*-infinitive clauses which modify preceding nouns instead of being their complement (e.g. *I have something to eat* [IRC]). It is reasonable to hypothesize, however, that there are some restrictions on the use of IRCs, i.e. particular syntactic and semantic circumstantial patterns which IRCs enter into. Such restricted environments would help us discern the constructional meaning of IRCs. To a great extent, the constraints on the occurrence of IRCs can be described in terms of certain grammatical and lexico-semantic ‘triggers’ preceding the NP containing the IRC. The aim of this paper is to investigate the circumstances in which IRCs occur and to explore the constructional meaning of this grammatical structure. In particular, this paper will focus on the following four objectives: a) to cast light upon the nature of main verbs which co-occur with IRCs, b) to clarify the nature of the modifiers which precede the antecedent nouns of IRCs, c) to consider a general constructional meaning or schema for IRCs, and d) to investigate what sorts of *to*-infinitive clauses can be used as IRCs.

The organization of this paper is as follows. Section 1 gives a brief survey of previous analyses of IRCs, in particular, by Chomsky and Lasnik (1977) and Suzuki and Yasui (1994). Here the validity of introspective analyses of the target construction will be questioned, and the necessity of empirical corpus-based studies will be suggested. In section 2, the main verbs that take IRCs are scrutinized to detect the first trigger of the construction. Our corpus survey will clarify that five types of higher clauses precede an IRC. There seems to be a common denominator among these types of higher clauses of an IRC: these first triggers of an IRC are all concerned with ‘existence’ or ‘possession’. Taking this corpus finding, the following hypothesis is put forward: ‘The referent of the antecedent noun has to exist physically or conceptually when the situation denoted by an IRC is actualized. A major semantic property of the main verb of the clause is to warrant the existence/possession of the referent of the antecedent noun.’ Section 3 focuses on modifiers operating on antecedent nouns of IRCs. Based on the corpus evidence, it is found that the modifiers tend to express evaluative adjectival meaning (e.g. *good, best, right, etc.*). This is because these evaluative meanings are concerned with the realization of the IRC-situation. The syntactico-semantic aspects shared by the modifiers of these antecedents will be called the ‘second trigger.’ Section 4 draws upon the results of the earlier sections and explores the constructional meaning of the IRC in English, attempting to develop a schema for this construction. Comparing acceptable and unacceptable sentences, it is found that a *to*-infinitive clause in general has to express some “planned” situation in the future which is necessarily capable of being realized. Therefore, an accidental /uncontrollable situation is unlikely to be expressed by an IRC (e.g. *?He is the right person to come across*). However, this possibility is not merely inherent in the meaning of the *to*-infinitive: it is often supported by the context.

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