

# The decline of *be surprised at/by* + gerund

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## 1. Introduction

The historical shift of the *be surprised at/by* constructions<sup>1</sup> and the choice of preposition in Present-day English have been examined in my previous papers, utilizing computer corpora (1999(a) and 1999(b)). During that research, historical changes in the composition of prepositional complements that have been taking place from late Modern English to Present-day English were brought to my notice. The changes seem to be particularly characterized by the decrease of gerunds and by the increase of *how*-clauses.<sup>2</sup>

In the data obtained from the corpora of Modern English, gerunds as in (1) appear quite often, whereas in the corpora of current English they occur so infrequently as to give the impression that their use is decreasing in current English.

- (1)a. I was a little surprised at seeing Cromwell here.  
(Henry Fielding, *The Works of Henry Fielding*, Vol. 6, p.53)<sup>3</sup>
- b. I know you are surprised at my talking to you like this.  
(Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p.124)
- c. Paul was surprised by seeing George Barry get out of a Broadway omnibus. (Horatio Alger, *Paul the Peddler*, p.78)

The sentences containing the *be surprised at* + gerund construction seem to have been prevalent as is evident from the fact that they are adopted in some dictionaries as illustrative quotations, shown below.

- (2)a. He was surprised at receiving a telegram from his parents. (Royal)<sup>4</sup>
- b. We were surprised at finding the house empty. (Collegiate)
- c. I'm surprised at you wanting a man like that. (Progressive)

The adoption of these quotations in dictionaries indicates that the construction has been accepted as established. However, considering the decrease of gerunds in the corpora of current English, a question arises as to whether it may be an outdated construction. Although gerunds are said to be increasing historically (e.g. Strang 1970: 100; Blake 1996: 330), investigation into the corpora indicates otherwise. It would be necessary then to show the decrease of gerunds statistically, by utilizing computer corpora, which have become essential in research of the usage of words or phrases of rare occurrence, such as the *be surprised at/by* construction, which may appear only a few times in one volume. After examining statistics concerning the decline of gerunds, it will be discussed how and why these changes have been taking place.

## 2. Corpus

The following corpora were used: The Modern English Collection (henceforth the Virginia Corpus as it was created at the University of Virginia); Public Domain Modern English Search (the Michigan Corpus); The British National Corpus (the BNC); The Cobuild Direct Corpus (the Cobuild Corpus).<sup>5</sup>

The Virginia Corpus<sup>6</sup> contains texts of Modern English from Shakespeare to Agatha Christie, but the majority are American and British novels from the 19th to the early 20th century (i.e., the 1920s).<sup>7</sup> The date range can be set for a search of a particular word or phrase in this corpus and it was set between 1700 and 1930 for the search of *surprised at/by* to focus on late Modern English. The search has revealed that examples from before 1700 and after 1930 were so few as to be considered negligible. Although the exact size of this corpus is not known, it is assumed to be several times larger than the Michigan Corpus,<sup>8</sup> which consists of approximately 14-million-words. The Michigan Corpus contains texts of late Modern English from about 1800 to 1930 but on a much smaller scale than the Virginia Corpus, so it may play a supplementary role to the Virginia Corpus. I will refer to the two corpora as the corpora of late Modern English.

The BNC<sup>9</sup> is a 100-million-word corpus and it contains a collection of over 4,000 texts of modern British and American English from 1975 onwards. Ninety percent of the text is in written English and the rest are texts of spoken English. The Cobuild Corpus is a 50-million-word corpus containing a wide variety of genres of texts of British English mostly from 1983 onwards. Ninety percent are texts of written English and ten percent consist of spoken English. I will call the BNC and the Cobuild the corpora of current English.

### 3. Analysis of data

#### 3.1 The decreasing use of gerunds

After search of the corpora for the phrases *surprised at* and *surprised by*, appropriate samples were classified according to the type

of complement: abstract nouns, other nouns, pronouns, gerunds, *how*-clauses and *what*-clauses.<sup>10</sup> The frequency of occurrence of each complement is shown in the table in the Appendix.

It is evident from the figures of the table that gerunds occurring as prepositional complements show a considerable decrease from late Modern English to current English. Gerunds after *surprised at* constitute a little over 16 percent of all the complements in the Virginia Corpus and 14 percent in the Michigan Corpus, while they have declined considerably in current English, appearing at a rate of 4 percent in the BNC and 3 percent in the Cobuild, the decrease from late Modern English to current English being more than 10 percent. Gerunds after *surprised by* make up 9.4 percent of complements in the Virginia Corpus and 7.5 percent in the Michigan Corpus, whereas they hardly appear in current English, with gerunds not occurring at all in the BNC and appearing at a rate of 0.5 percent in the Cobuild. Gerunds after *be surprised by* seem to be disappearing in current English.

### 3.2 Types of gerunds

The types of gerunds after *be surprised at/by* in late Modern English include those already shown in (1), such as gerunds with no subject (e.g. *She was surprised at finding him at such a place*), or gerunds with a pronominal subject in the genitive case (e.g. *He was surprised at her coming so early*). There are also types of gerunds which are not seen very often in current English. First, there are gerunds characterized by the frequent use of a nominal subject in the genitive case. Jane Austen and Charles Dickens are the authors who particularly favored this type of constructions, which, however, rarely occur in current English. Two examples are shown below.

- (3) a. It is impossible to be surprised at Miss Palmer's being ill.  
(Jane Austen, *Jane Austen's Letters*, p.492)
- b. He was not so much surprised at the man's being there.  
(Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, ch.40)

Some types of gerunds are seen in the late Modern English corpora but hardly appear in the corpora of current English. The gerund in (4a) takes a complex form involving a subject, a negative adverb and the perfect tense. The gerund in (4b) is a construction in which *there* serves as a subject in the accusative case.

- (4) a. I am surprised at his not having done so sooner.  
(Andrew Lang, *Red Fairy Book*, p.25)
- b. I was surprised at there remaining so many mechanical specimens as are seen in the museums.  
(Samuel Butler, *Erewhon*, p.233)

It may be summarized that in current English gerunds after *be surprised at/by* have not only declined in terms of quantity but changed their characteristics as well. We will explore why these changes have taken place and present some assumptions as to the causes of these changes in the next section.

#### 4. Some assumptions on the causes of change

In considering a language change, it may be possible to describe how a certain change has occurred, but it might be difficult or even impossible to explain why. Nevertheless, it is interesting and worthwhile to attempt to explain why the kind of changes mentioned above have taken place.

#### 4.1 The replacement of gerunds by *to*-infinitives

The decreasing use of gerunds may be attributed to the coexistence and competition of subjectless gerunds and *to*-infinitives<sup>11</sup> as in (5), and to the possible replacement of gerunds by *to*-infinitives.

- (5) a. I was a little surprised at seeing Cromwell here. (= (1a))  
b. I was surprised to see Darcy in town last month.  
(Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, p.328)

Because the two constructions are assumed to possess almost the same meaning,<sup>12</sup> and infinitives have been by far the more predominant construction of the two in a competitive environment, gerunds may have been felt to be redundant and been ousted by infinitives.

Let us now present the approximate occurrence ratios between *be surprised at/by* + gerunds and *be surprised* + *to*-infinitives, using the Virginia Corpus and the BNC respectively representing late Modern English and Present-day English. The results are approximately 1 : 16 in late Modern English and 1 : 90 in Present-day English.<sup>13</sup> Evidently, gerunds are decreasing, in comparison to infinitives, from late Modern English to Present-day English.

A similar phenomenon is observed in the alternation of 'aim to do' and 'aim at doing' constructions as in (6) (Tajima et al. 1995: 31-42).

- (6) a. We must aim at increasing exports.  
b. We must aim to increase exports. (Tajima et al.: 31)

It has been explained that 'aim at doing' is a British usage while 'aim to do' is a dialectal or American usage. Tajima et al. (p.38), however, draw the conclusion that without doubt the infinitives have become a standard usage today, not only in American English but also

in British English.

From what has been discussed above, the replacement of gerunds by infinitives may be considered to be a possible reason for the decreasing use of gerunds after *be surprised at/by*.

#### 4.2 The replacement of gerunds by clauses

Difficulties in having to choose the subject of a gerund in the proper case may be a reason for the decrease in use of gerunds. The choice of the case for the subject, either the genitive or the accusative,<sup>14</sup> has been discussed by a number of scholars (e.g. Curme 1931: 485-491; Quirk et al. 1985: 15.12-13; Blake 1996: 330). Quirk et al., for example, argue that “some are troubled by the choice of case” in (7a), and that “in some instances, an acceptable alternative is a *that*-clause, which is normally extraposed,” as in (7b).

- (7) a. My forgetting her name was embarrassing.
- b. It was embarrassing that I forgot her name. (Quirk et al., 15.12)

Although the subject in the genitive case is more common as in (3) presented above and (8a) below, the accusative case, rare though it may be in our data of late Modern English, is also used as in (8b).

- (8) a. I should not have been at all surprised by her Ladyship's asking us on Sunday to drink tea.  
              (Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, p.160)
- b. I suppose you are surprised at Hetty coming with us.  
              (Conan Doyle, *The Stark Munro Letters*, p.149)

These are good illustrations of the difficulty involved in the choice of the proper case for the subject of gerunds. In order to avoid the extra cognitive burden in making an appropriate choice, writers and speakers

may have begun to use a clause instead of the controversial gerund, as in (9b), in which the choice of the case is not forced upon them.

- (9) a. I am surprised at John's/John talking so rudely.
- b. I am surprised that/because John talks/talked so rudely.

The following statement made by Curme (1931: 486) may also support the assumption that the decreasing use of gerunds occurred because of the case: “The development of the gerundial construction is hampered at the present time by the lack of *s*-genitive forms in current English and by the lack of a clear form for the possessive referring to a female.”

Decreasing use of gerunds may be explained by the ambiguous nature inherent in gerunds. Concerning no-referentiality of the tense of gerunds, which may lead to ambiguity, Jespersen (*MEG* IV: 7.8 (1)) says as follows: “the *ing* (the verbal substantive in *ing*) had originally, and to a great extent still has, no reference to time: *on account of his coming* may be equal to ‘because he comes’ or ‘because he came’ or ‘he will come’, according to the connexion in which it occurs.”

(10a) could be an ambiguous example in terms of tense if it were taken out of context. (10b), a paraphrase of (10a), would be clearer and more explicit with the self-evident tense.

- (10) a. My uncle is quite surprised at my hearing from you so often.  
(Jane Austen, *Jane Austen's Letters*, p.65)
- b. My uncle is quite surprised that/because I hear/have heard/  
       heard from you so often.

Some of the gerunds used in an emphatic context could be interpreted to be what theoretical linguists call “concealed exclamations”<sup>15</sup> and paraphrased with a *how*-clause, which has become abundant in



Present-day English, as in (11).

- (11)a. I am quite surprised at your being so very thoughtless.  
(Charles Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby*, ch.55)  
b. I am quite surprised at how thoughtless you are/were.

Not only would (11b) remove the obscurity of the tense of (11a), if it were placed out of context, but it seems to sound more colloquial, vivid and emphatic in terms of style than a gerundial construction (although it may be presumptuous to rewrite Dickens' English).

In connection with style, such gerunds as already shown in (4) may be rewritten with a clause as in (12) to remove a bookish and literary tone and a shred of affectedness or awkwardness if used in an informal context, and to achieve a more colloquial and plain style. This may have to do with the trend of "Plain English" writing,<sup>16</sup> towards which society has been headed.

- (12)a. I am surprised that/because he did not do/has not done so sooner.  
b. I was surprised that/because there remained so many mechanical specimens as are seen in the museums.

In general, gerunds are said to be very concise and useful expressions which are capable of replacing clauses (e.g. Curme 1931: 485; Jespersen 1938: 186), but they are seemingly being replaced by infinitives or clauses in certain contexts. Our research into computer corpora shows that gerunds are decreasing and declining in such environments as after the *be surprised* constructions, where gerunds and infinitives are in competition, or where gerunds involve such ambiguity or unnaturalness as to be removed by the employment of clauses.<sup>17</sup> The same phenomena may have been occurring in similar contexts and

would be worth investigating.

## 5. Summary

Utilizing four computer corpora, historical changes of the prepositional complements of the *be surprised at/by* construction have been examined. The decrease of gerunds as prepositional complement is particularly observed to have occurred from late Modern English to Present-day English. Not only the quantitative decrease of gerunds but changes in their characteristics have also occurred. Some assumptions have been presented to explain the causes of these changes.

First, the decrease of gerunds may be explained by their possible replacement by *to*-infinitives, the more predominant of the two constructions, which convey roughly the same meaning. Secondly, gerunds seem to have been replaced by clauses for various reasons. Difficulty in choosing the case of subject for gerunds, either in the genitive or in the accusative, may be leading to the employment of clauses. Ambiguity in gerunds in terms of tense may be another reason for the replacement by synonymous clauses. Some gerunds, being concealed exclamations, may be replaced with *how*-clauses. Some others, which sound bookish, literary and unnatural in an informal context, may be rewritten with a stylistically more colloquial and plain clause.

### Notes

- 1 For the sake of convenience, the formula *be surprised at/by* is used, though not only the auxiliary *be* but sensory copular verbs like *look*, *seem*, *feel* are used as are the participial constructions without *be*.
- 2 This construction (e. g. *You will be surprised at how easy it is to talk to the president*) does not appear at all in the corpora of Modern English, but is abundant in the corpora of current English. The issue of the origin and increase of *how*-clauses after *be surprised at* will be treated independently from this paper.
- 3 Examples are taken from the corpora of Modern English (see note 5) and the computer concordance of Charles Dickens (<http://www.concordance.com/dickens.htm>). The author, the title and the page or chapter number are shown in parentheses.
- 4 Abbreviations for the dictionaries are as follows: *Royal* = *Obunsha's Royal English-Japanese Dictionary* (1990), *Collegiate* = *Kenkyusha's New Collegiate English-Japanese Dictionary* (5th ed., 1986), *Progressive* = *Shogakukan's Progressive English-Japanese Dictionary* (2nd ed., 1987).
- 5 The web-sites of each corpora are as follows: The Modern English Collection: <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/modeng/browse.html>; Public Domain Modern English Search: <http://www.hti.umich.edu/english/pd-modeng/>; The British National Corpus: <http://info.ox.ac.uk/bnc>; The Cobuild Direct Corpus: <http://www.cobuild.Collins.co.uk>
- 6 This corpus is constantly updated and the data was collected from the version as of November, 2000. The size of the data in this study, therefore, has become larger, compared to the data in my previous studies.
- 7 Translations from foreign works (e.g. Caesar, Dostoevsky, Hugo, Livius, Verne) are contained in this corpus but they were omitted from the investigation.
- 8 Detailed information concerning the Michigan Corpus is found in Hibino (2001: 50), for example.
- 9 For information on the BNC and the Cobuild, I refer to Saito et al. eds. (1998).
- 10 For the rationale of the method of classification, see Taketazu (1999b).
- 11 Curme (1931: 491) says "It [gerund] often competes with the infinitive in certain categories."
- 12 In respect to the meaning of the two constructions, Kruisinga (1931: §390) says: "When nouns or adjectives take both a stem and a prepositional ing

(*surprised to hear it, surprised at hearing it*) the difference in meaning between the two constructions is that between an adverb adjunct and a prepositional object. It may be compared with the difference between clauses with *that* and those with a conjunctive adverb, e.g. *I am surprised that he is not coming, I am surprised because he is not coming.* *Taishukan's Genius English-Japanese Dictionary* (1988) describes the two constructions as having the same meaning as follows: *I was much surprised at (receiving) a telegram = . . . to receive a telegram.* It may be concluded that the two forms have roughly the same meaning.

- 13 In the Virginia Corpus gerunds with no subject occur 44 times and infinitives over 700 times. In the BNC the occurrence of subjectless gerunds is merely 9 times while that of infinitives more than 800 times. These figures lead to the ratios presented above.
- 14 Different terms for the accusative case are used by different scholars. Quirk et al. refer to it as the “objective” and “common” case. Blake uses the term “oblique”. For the sake of convenience, following Curme, “accusative” is used throughout.
- 15 Concealed exclamations (e.g. Fukuchi 1995: ch. 3) are sentences in which a noun phrase can be paraphrased with such exclamatory words as *how* or *what*. Fukuchi (p. 62) paraphrases the sentence “You’d be surprised at the big cars he buys” into “You’d be surprised at what big cars he buys”.
- 16 Refer to David Crystal (1995: 193, 376–377), for example.
- 17 Needless to say, this is not to imply that gerunds in general are decreasing and declining. On the contrary, types of gerunds which we found scarce after *be surprised at/by* in the current corpora are still prevalent in many other environments in current English.

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## Appendix

## Frequencies of complements in the corpora

	Late Modern		Current	
	Virginia (1700~1930)	Michigan (1800~1930)	BNC (1975~)	Cobuild (1983~)
<i>at</i>				
abstract N	292 (60.3%)	86 (60%)	241 (59%)	88 (50%)
other N	17 (3.5%)	7 (5%)	16 (4%)	9 (5%)
pronoun	84 (17.4%)	28 (19.5%)	38 (9%)	19 (11%)
<b>gerund</b>	<b>79 (16.3%)</b>	<b>20 (14%)</b>	<b>16 (4%)</b>	<b>5 (3%)</b>
<i>how</i>	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	79 (19%)	45 (26%)
<i>what</i>	12 (2.5%)	2 (1.5%)	19 (5%)	9 (5%)
total	484 (100%)	143 (100%)	409 (100%)	175 (100%)
<i>by</i>				
abstract N	114 (77%)	31 (77.5%)	299 (74%)	162 (79%)
other N	10 (6.8%)	2 (5%)	29 (7%)	13 (6%)
pronoun	10 (6.8%)	4 (10%)	36 (9%)	17 (8%)
<b>gerund</b>	<b>14 (9.4%)</b>	<b>3 (7.5%)</b>	<b>0 (0%)</b>	<b>1 (0.5%)</b>
<i>how</i>	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	22 (5.5%)	6 (3%)
<i>what</i>	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	17 (4.5%)	7 (3.5%)
total	148 (100%)	40 (100%)	403 (100%)	206 (100%)

N: noun