
The Secrets of Non-finites

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“Be humble. Be teachable. And always keep learning.”
(Unknown)

The production which follows is a humble adventure within the territory of nonfinites in order to understand their features, meanings and most common uses. Any similarity with other grammatical incursions could merely be the product of sharing, with many grammarians and researchers, the feeling of experiencing curiosity.

“To be or not to be”; “Seeing is believing”; “The Importance of Being Earnest”; “To err is human, to forgive, divine”; “Loving is a gift”; “Each power has a certain motion/of setting the electric fluid in motion”; “Seek to be worth knowing rather than be well known”; “I am not lucky, I am blessed (blest?)”; “Chimney-pot falling from roof injures two”; “Campaign to save fishing lake”. These are just a few examples of the million places that NON-FINITES may take in our life. In fact, amongst those quotations and proverbs, popular sayings and titles of books, song lyrics and headlines, INFINITIVES, PARTICIPLES AND GERUNDS make their appearance and, with a halo of formality, convey meanings which sometimes finite verb phrases are not able to transmit.

Now, to begin with, the first question for us to answer is: What are nonfinites? According to Eckersley and Eckersley, “*The non-finites are the Infinitive, the Participles and the Gerund.*” (1973, p.230). In fact, a non-finite verb or verb-phrase (also known, in English, as **verbal**, **verbid** (Roberts, 1954, p.182) or **embedded clause** (Jacobs, 1995, p.81), and *verboides*, in Spanish) is simply a NON-CONJUGATED verbal form. It can either take the shape of any -ing word (such as a present participle or gerund) or be a base form verb (like the bare or full infinitives).

As to David Crystal (1998, p.74), “*Verb phrases are also classified into two broad types, based on the kind of contrast in meaning expressed by the verb: **finite** and **nonfinite**. The finite forms of the verb are those which signal contrasts of number, tense, person, and mood: the **-s form**, the **past form**, and some uses of the **base form**. The nonfinite forms do not vary in this way.*” Quirk and Greenbaum in ‘A University Grammar of English’ would say that “*The finite clause always contains a subject and a predicate, except in the case of commands [...] and ellipsis [...]. As nearly all independent clauses (in discursive English, though not in ‘block language’ [...]) are finite clauses [...]. In contrast, non-finite clauses can be constructed without a subject, and usually are. The four classes of non-finite verb phrase [...] serve to distinguish four classes of non-finite clause*” (1998, p.310).

In accordance with the English grammarians, I can assert that there are four types of nonfinite verbs or verbals¹: INFINITIVES, PRESENT PARTICIPLES, PAST PARTICIPLES AND GERUNDS, each of them performing a specific role within the statement –subject, object, complement, modifier-

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¹ From now on, I will be frequently referring to them by using the terms verbals or nonfinite phrases with the purpose of differentiating them from subordinate clauses.

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and, at the same time, taking the place of different parts of speech such as a **noun**, an **adjective** or an **adverb**.

In the case of both PRESENT AND PAST PARTICIPLES, the functions are limited to the *adjectival* and *adverbial* areas. They can be modifiers of nouns and also modifiers of verbs, thus working as pre or postmodifiers (also known as **reduced relative clauses**), such as in *a broken heart*, and adverbial adjuncts or complements such as in *while walking along the beach*. Curiously, PARTICIPLES can also be part of the speaker's comments, like in *strictly speaking* or *putting it frankly*. As regards GERUNDS, the functions are exclusively restricted to the *nominal* territory, so their syntactic functions will basically be those of the subject, object or noun-complement (the latter generally placed before a noun or after a preposition, as in *a frying pan* or *a pan for frying*). But, however hard it may be to believe, within the nonfinite phrases, it is the group of INFINITIVES the one which has the possibility of performing the widest range of roles, for they can indistinctly behave as *nouns*, *adjectives* and *adverbs*.

While trying to find the similarities between nonfinites and *verboides*, the first difficulty for a Spanish student of English Grammar to overcome could be the question of calling all the forms ending in '-ando/-iendo' GERUNDIO, and leaving the term PARTICIPIO only to the endings '-ado/-ido', which correspond to the past participial forms. As regards the INFINITIVO, the endings '-ar/-er/-ir' and the lack of an empty carrier probably make this 'verboide' a more friendly part of speech to deal with. Nevertheless, this inconvenience is only the tip of the iceberg compared with what comes next.

It is unbelievably remarkable that the peaceful battle of finites versus nonfinites does not have an end. One of the reasons could be associated to whether or not the percentage of finite verb phrases' usage may exceed the one that corresponds to nonfinites'. If we just take a look at a passage taken from the novel titled 'The Wedding'², we will clearly see how the writer resorts to a variety of nonfinite phrases, not only to convey meanings that finite verbs would not be able to transmit, but also to give his writing a more flowing and poetic (and why not romantic) rhythm that an ordinary conjugated verb phrase will be impelled to do:

*But it was the rose garden that attracted the most attention, and I followed Little as he grabbed a set of **pruning** shears and headed that way, **joining** the dozen workers who were already waiting for him. **Beautifying** the garden struck me as the type of job where it is impossible even **to know** where **to begin**, but Little started **pruning** the first bush while **describing** what he was doing. [...]. An hour later, the painters arrived; six men in **splattered** overalls emerged from a **run-down** van, and they helped the **landscaping** crew **store** the furniture in the barn. (2004, pp. 194-5)*

Another point to take into consideration has to do with the choice of nonfinite phrase type. Writers (and here anyone who dares write is included, both professional and amateur) should pay much attention to the fact that there exists a potentially infinite range of possibilities in which collocations play a fundamental role at the moment of taking the decision of using, for instance, an *infinitive* rather than a *gerund* or vice versa. This can be clearly seen in the following simple examples:

*The young woman stopped **to buy** cigarettes.*

*The young woman stopped **buying** cigarettes.*

While the first sentence tells us readers about that woman's reason for having stopped as well

² Sparks, Nicholas (2004).

as her probable habit of doing so, the second statement, possibly with a more positive connotation, shows us what this woman has stopped doing: the giving up of her smoking habit. Like the previous sentences, there are hundreds of similar cases that tend to make the student, the teacher, the speaker, and even the writer faces the dilemma of choosing one nonfinite form instead of another. However, there might be *moments* in which the subtlety of a difference could deprive us of making a so-called “accurate” choice:

I love walking? or I love to walk?

Sometimes, other problems that may crop up are related to whether or not a non-native student could cope with the simple fact of differentiating an -ing present participial construction from an -ing gerundive. For instance, what is the difference between a **running shoe** and a **running athlete**, a **sleeping bag** and a **sleeping beauty** or a **dancing floor** and a **dancing person**? In both cases the -ing verbals take a prenominal position, but in *running shoe*, *sleeping bag* and *dancing floor*, the -ing nonfinite form is definitely a GERUND, for it is functioning as the **complement** of the noun which follows it. The best way to test this is by turning the nominal complement into a prepositional one: a shoe **for running**, a bag **for sleeping** and a floor **for dancing**. In fact, the -ing verbal that comes right after the preposition is, without any doubt, a GERUND; thus we learn that after a preposition the -ing linguistic construction will always be gerundial. Contrariwise, the -ing forms of the counterparts are performing an adjectival role, therefore turning into present participial phrases which can be paraphrased by means of relative clauses: for instance, an athlete **who runs**, a beauty **who sleeps** and a person **who dances** –as if the participle were behaving like a ‘reduced relative clause’.

Now, here come our second and third questions: What are the *mysteries* that surround nonfinites? Why do they tend to cause us teachers and students so much trouble? In order to give them a proper answer, we shall dig into the depths of nonfinites, without obviously forgetting that they are still verblike forms which can easily take the place of nouns, adjectives or adverbs in accordance with their function inside the statement. As a matter of fact, some of those verbals can be considered 100% nouns or adjectives (that is the case of first-degree gerundives and nominalized participles, or full-adjectival-force present and past participials) depending on their syntactic function or on the other words that might accompany or surround them. Same spelling can become another obstacle to overcome if we had to decide whether we are facing a verb or a noun: **strike**, for instance, can be either a verb or a noun, but the context of the phrase or sentence will reveal us which part of speech it really is:

*There was a **strike** at a car factory last month. (noun)*

*Can lightning **strike** twice in the same place? (finite verb)*

*We heard the clock **strike** eight. (nonfinite verb)*

Perhaps the main inconvenience that nonfinites can cause is related, as already mentioned above, to spotting them and *differentiating* them from conjugated forms. Paul Roberts proposes this definition (1954, p.185) leading us to pay more attention to the differences between verbs and verbals rather than the similarities:

A verbal is a word that resembles the finite verb in its form and in its capacity for taking subjects and complements and adverbial modifiers, but differs in that it cannot complete a predication; the incompleteness of the verbal is indicated by numerous syntactic patterns that differ from the patterns that accompany finite verbs.

When analysing a sentence or paragraph –either from a syntactic or discourse perspective- we

should bear in mind the five features that FINITE VERBS have. Actually, the conjugated forms can show: *tense, number and person, mood, aspect* and *voice* (Policastro, 2017, p. 66). On the other hand, NONFINITE VERBS will only share two of the features described above: *aspect* and *voice*. Even though aspect or person cannot be so easily identified, as in the case of finite verbs, it does not mean that these characteristics are not present in verbals. A thorough analysis of nonfinite phrases will reveal that somewhere inside or outside the given phrase or statement (which serve as a context for the non-conjugated forms) the presence of a subject or the mood embedded in them could, to a great extent, be spotted by any careful student or reader.

So now, going back to our first main trouble on deciding whether we are in the presence of a finite verb or a verbal, we come to the conclusion that a surface structure subject which agrees in number and person with the verb will be the first clue to make ourselves sure that the verb phrase being analysed is, without any hesitation, a FINITE VERB. The examples presented below –which were taken from ‘The Wedding’- can reinforce this concept in contrast with the nonfinite form that shows off without carrying any of the features mentioned above:

*Leslie, the baby of our family, is currently **studying** (finite) biology and physiology at Wake Forest with the intention of **becoming** (nonfinite) a veterinarian. (p.13)*

The second obstacle to surmount is related to the fact of being able to *distinguish* verbals from other parts of speech, such as nouns, adjectives, adverbs and even prepositions and conjunctions. There is a series of linguistic factors that will help us mark them out from those parts of speech by showing their strong *verbal force*, for instance: a covert, an overt or a latent-evident or generic subject, as well as modifiers, complements and adverbials that may be part of the phrase or may appear anywhere within the context surrounding the phrase. In contrast, the use of determiners like articles or quantifiers as well as the possibility of pluralizing the word, premodifying it by means of an intensifier or using it in the comparative or superlative forms, will show our position in front of nonfinite-like-forms which are clearly far from being a verbal (even if we called them nonfinite phrases for the sake of our proper syntactic and semantic analysis). To illustrate such situations, the examples highlighted in the paragraphs below, also quoted from Nicholas Sparks’ novel, will certainly do:

*When I finished **preparing dinner** (gerundial phrase), Jane continued **filling me in on the rest of her day** (gerundial phrase), **going into detail about the cake [...] and the photographs [...]** (present participial phrase). In the warm light of the kitchen, I could just make out the soft creases around the corners of her eyes, the feathery **markings** (GERUND IN THE FIRST DEGREE, which equals a NOUN, PLURAL NUMBER) of our life together. (p. 71)*

*“He’s **amazing**,” (PRESENT PARTICIPLE FULL ADJECTIVAL FORCE, which equals an ADJECTIVE, for the writer could have perfectly written **more amazing** or **the most amazing**, instead) she said. “His work is **stunning** (again a PRESENT PARTICIPLE FULL ADJECTIVAL FORCE, which equals an ADJECTIVE, for the narrator could have perfectly said **very stunning**, for instance). Even Anna was **impressed** (PAST PARTICIPLE FULL ADJECTIVAL FORCE, with the same features as the PRESENT PARTICIPLE), and you know how she is.” (p.69)*

In our attempt to identify nonfinites, we may feel tempted to assume that all the **-ing** forms along with **to** forms can be an example of a verbal. But there is a popular saying that reads “All that glitters is not gold”, which reminds us of the importance of being really cautious at the moment of deciding to consider the word or phrase as either a nonfinite or another part of speech; i.e. not all the **-ing** and **to** constructions which we may encounter will be verbals or verbids. The proof lies in the sentences that follow:

*There were twenty policemen, **including** (PREPOSITION) a few private guards.*

*I explained **to** (PREPOSITION) my students how to identify nonfinities.*

***Owing to** (PREPOSITION) the war, prices rose considerably.*

*I am looking forward **to** (PREPOSITION) hearing from Tom.*

*There is nothing to say **concerning** (PREPOSITION) this.*

***Supposing** (SUBORDINATING CONJUNCTION, equals IF) he recognized you, what would you do?*

***Granting** (SUBORDINATING CONJUNCTION, equals ALTHOUGH/EVEN THOUGH) everything is correct, we still have to check it.*

Verbals have the capacity to surprise us at any moment. Regardless our knowledge about these troubling part-of-speech-outcasts or how much acquainted we might be with them, every time they make their appearance we tend to panic. In written productions our fear tends to accrue, especially if, as academic grammar students, we were asked to identify nonfinite phrases and, even worse, to analyse them following the special guides for that purpose. Our possible doubts: in the sentence *The living were taken to hospital*, is the word **living** a gerund or a participle? And what about the following statements?: *The living birds were transported in cages* versus *They were having tea in their living-room*. The word **living** has different functions in the sentences given above, in spite of keeping its shape in all of them. But, to be honest, we are in the presence of a present participle in the first two phrases –*The living* and *The living birds*– while the third one –*living-room*– clearly shows us a gerundive.

If we analysed those phrases in depth (linguistically speaking, in the deep structure), in *The living*, we are referring to the **living people**, i.e. those who are alive, in which case this -ing verbal will be considered as the head of the subject, PRESENT PARTICIPIAL PHRASE **NOMINALIZED**, thus showing the nominal force prevailing over the verbal one. In *The living birds*, the verbal *living* shows its strong more adjectival prenominal-position force, converting this word into a premodifier of *birds*, PRESENT PARTICIPIAL PHRASE (*which were alive*) thus requiring the application of its corresponding guide to be analysed. On the other hand, the compound noun *living-room*, carries an element that functions as a complement, for we could be talking about a room *for living*, in which case we will be in the presence of a nominal complement, GERUND in its SECOND DEGREE, where the percentage of nominalization of the verbal reaches the 50%, making it a more nounlike part of speech than a verblike one. And, as in the famous ‘Titanic’ movie song, the inconsistencies *will go on*.

There is a group of nonfinities which, until now, has not been formally presented: the PAST PARTICIPIAL PHRASES. We are all aware, as students of the English language, of the fact that past participles are part of the finite verb phrase when they conform to the pattern of the present perfect tense, for instance. We also know that this kind of past participle can be either regular (-ed) or irregular (-en). And sometimes that is all that we need to know or we want to know. But... what happens when the past participle makes its entrance in phrases like the ones that follow?

***Dazzled by the sunlight**, Tom crashed his car into a palm tree. (Adverbial adjunct of attendant circumstances)*

*The letter **written by the queen** was never found. (Post-modifier of ‘letter’)*

*His **clean-shaven** face helped us recognize him. (Pre-modifier of ‘face’)*

*The **wounded** were taken to the campsite. (Subject Participle Nominalized: in the deep structure, the wounded people/soldiers, which means that ‘wounded’ is the pre-modifier of*

'people/soldiers')

Perhaps what most of the academic English Grammar students strive to solve is the question of the nonfinite phrase *scope*, i.e. stating where the phrase begins and where it ends. They may perfectly see the four types of verbals, but at the moment of picking the whole phrase, doubts start to ramble in their minds. The following passages from 'The Wedding' can illustrate it, the words in bold being verbals while the underlined ones are almost sheer nouns:

*Leaving his room, I made my way to the courtyard. The morning was cool, even for autumn. The leaves were brilliant in the **slanting** sunshine, and the air carried the faint scent of chimney smoke. (p.23)*

*Aside from **the ticking of the grandfather clock** and the steady hum of the air conditioner, the house was quiet when I reached home. As I dropped my keys on the desk in the **living-room**, I found myself **scanning the bookshelves on either side of the fireplace**. (p.62)*

The more we talk about verbals, the more we find to define, contrast or discuss. The vast possibilities that they offer us are infinite, especially when it has to do with the improving of our writing skills. Our essays or papers may flourish if we were brave enough to put those on-the-tip-of-the-tongue nonfinites into action. But once more, we do not have to forget the **structural, syntactic** (or **grammatical**), **communicative** and **semantic differences** that exist between verbs and verbals in order to use the latter more accurately. One example of a **structural** difference –in spite of their surface structure coincidences- comes out when we contrast these two sentences:

My friend thought (that) the guests would not leave early.

My friend would hate (for) the guests to leave early.

If we decided to omit the complementizers introducing both the nominal clause and the infinitival phrase, we would discover that the clause can "survive" alone, still keeping its meaning and, above all, its **grammatical** or **syntactic function**; on the contrary, the nonfinite phrase would not be able to "stand alone", for it will make no sense.

Another case of **grammatical difference** has to do with the possibility of omitting or not the overt surface structure subject. The lack of an overt subject in finite clauses is quite impossible, at least in formal academic writing (an exception could be made in colloquial language, while narrating a series of actions performed out of a context given: "*Packed his suitcases, walked to the street, took a taxi and arrived at the airport on time*"), for it will make them become ungrammatical ones. But verbals do not necessarily require the presence of an overt subject: a covert subject will be enough to make the phrase part of a **grammatically correct statement**:

My friend would hate to leave early. GRAMMATICAL STATEMENT

My friend would hate that would not leave early. UNGRAMMATICAL STATEMENT

The **communicative** differences could be seen if we tried to turn nonfinite phrases into a declarative or interrogative statement: it will be impossible because verbals, once more, cannot "stand alone"; they are always embedded phrases that accompany verbs of requesting or commanding, which *prevents them from transmitting a coherent message on their own*:

My friend told the guests to leave early.

My friend ordered me to take the guests home.

Finally, the **semantic** dissimilarities have to do with a question of reality or unreality. On the one hand, finite clauses usually express a situation that has already happened –there is a *time reference*

marked in the verb tense used –and this can be clearly seen in the use of reported speech, which admits the different types of nominal clauses. On the other hand, nonfinite phrases will tend to refer to timeless situations, i.e. situations *without a time reference*, which have not happened yet, or hypothetical ones (in reality, to find out the point in time, we must take a look to the conjugated verb form that precedes the verbal):

My friend remembered that he had to take the guests home.

My friend remembered to take the guests home.

The underlined examples given above show us that embedded verbals could admit different interpretations as regards time. This also happens when we are dealing with the famous ‘subjunctive mood’ or ‘unreal tenses’ in formal sentences such as:

My friend suggested that the guests take a taxi. (When? Now? Tomorrow?)

My friend demands that the guests leave early. (Right now? Later?)

Obviously the context will help us find an answer, which demonstrates the wide range of possibilities that verbals can offer us at the moment of communicating our ideas via written or oral language. And, once more, the differences *will go on*.

Verbals are, without any doubt, a group of words that behave oddly and differently from their verb counterparts. The fact that nonfinite phrases can easily behave as nouns, adjectives or adverbs, can contain or not an overt subject (*It was difficult to tell them to leave/It was difficult for my friend to tell them to leave*), can lack time reference (*My friend forgot to tell them to leave early*) or can accompany certain conjugated forms such as reporting verbs (*My friend urged them to leave early*), can follow different prepositions (*The guests were reminded of leaving early*) or can be preceded by a possessive determiner (*The guests were reminded of their leaving early*) or noun in the genitive case (*My friends were reminded of Tom’s leaving early*) or can admit many interpretations make them look even more sophisticated. Furthermore, the possibility of splitting an infinitival phrase, these days, (*My friend was told to **quickly** remind the guests to leave*) goes beyond our expectations.

There still exist many taboos about verbals/nonfinites; nevertheless, I suggest that we did not fear them, that we can surpass the inconveniences that they could cause us and, above all, that we began breaking the ice either when encountering these vulnerable phrases (so that we could exploit their richness) or when applying them in the creating of our written and even our spoken productions. So, peace being restored, *life will go on*.

Epilogue

Standing on the porch, with autumn in full swing, I find the crispness of the evening air invigorating as I think back on the night of our wedding. I can still recall it in vivid detail, just as I can remember all that happened during the year of the forgotten anniversary.

It feels off to know that it’s all behind me. The preparations had dominated my thoughts for so long and I’d visualized it so many times that I sometimes feel that I’ve lost contact with an old friend, someone with whom I’d grown very comfortable. Yet, in the wake of those memories, I’ve come to replace that I now have the answer to the question that I’d been pondering when I first came out here. (p. 275)

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