Constrained confusion

The gerund/participle distinction in Late Modern English

Hendrik De Smet
Research Foundation Flanders / University of Leuven

1 Introduction

English *-ing*-clauses as in (1) are non-finite clauses built around a verbal head in *-ing*. Although they all look suspiciously alike, some grammarians argue that *-ing*-clauses divide into gerunds and present participles (e.g. Jespersen 1940; Declerck 1991).

(1) a. He was ruthless, and as to *being a villain* – he probably was. (1993, BNC)
b. Ruth bit her lip and stared at him, *not knowing what to say or do*. (1993, BNC)
c. Until he told her what it was she couldn't even deny *having it*. (1992, BNC)
d. And even if she had cried out, who takes any notice of anyone *shouting, even screaming*? (1988, BNC)

The crucial difference is that gerunds are nominalizations, while present participles are not. This means that gerunds, unlike present participles, occur in the positions typically reserved for noun phrases. *Being a villain* in (1a) occupies the slot following a preposition, while *having it* in (1c) functions as direct object to a verb. Therefore, both are gerunds. In contrast, present participles occupy adjectival or adverbial positions. So, because *not knowing what to say or do* in (1b) functions as an adverbial clause, and *shouting* in (1d) functions as a restrictive relative clause to *anyone*, both are present participles.

The distinction between gerunds and participles is not generally accepted, at least not for Present-Day English. In the reference grammars by Quirk et al. (1985) and Biber et al. (1999) the distinction is simply not applied. In Huddleston & Pullum (2002) it is explicitly taken issue with, gerunds and present participles being replaced by a single category of "gerund participials". Regardless of whether the distinction makes synchronic sense, however, it has an uncontested basis in historical fact, as gerunds and present participles derive from historically distinct sources. Indeed, the divided opinions between reference grammars can be thought of as reflecting a situation of syntactic ambivalence that is simply the most recent stage in a gradual but incomplete syntactic merger (De Smet 2010).

The goal of this chapter is to outline the bigger picture of categorial collapse in the English system of gerunds and present participles and then to link it to the situation found in Late Modern English. As is to be shown, morphosyntactic changes that involve confusion between gerunds and present participles were few and isolated during the Late Modern period. Their very occurrence naturally testifies to a blurring of the lines between the two clause types – and of course the changes further contributed to the blurring. But the evident constraints on their occurrence show that the gerund/participle distinction was certainly not completely defunct in Late Modern English.

In what follows, Section 2 discusses the overall history of gerunds and present participles in more detail. Against that background, Section 3 presents a number of changes in Late Modern English. The focus is on complement constructions involving gerunds and present participles as this domain seems to particularly lend itself to confusion between the two clause types. By analyzing the immediate causes of the changes that are found to occur, it is shown that, even though the changes reflect a certain leakage between the categories of gerunds and present participles, most changes involved some additional trigger that was independent of the gerund/participle merger. Section 4, then, summarizes the argument and draws from it a nuanced picture of the status of gerunds and participles in the Late Modern period, and of the English gerund/participle merger in general.

As a terminological note, the following discussion uses the terms 'gerund' and 'present participle' where the data support (or at least do not contradict) the distinction. But the terms are only meant as descriptive shorthands for clauses in nominal and adjectival/adverbial positions respectively, without further analytical claims attached. Where the syntactic position of the clauses in question fits neither label, or where there is ambiguity, the more neutral term '-*ing*-clause' is used.

2 A crumbling distinction

Both gerunds and present participles developed from a phrasal source – a noun phrase in the case of gerunds; an adjective phrase in the case of present participles.[1] The source structure for gerunds is illustrated in (2). *Ðæra sacerda blawunge* is a noun phrase, complementing a preposition *ðurh*. Its head *blawunge* is a deverbal nominalization that behaves fully as a noun, taking the nominal dative singular ending in *-e*. The agent of *blawunge* is marked with genitive case, rather than nominative case as it would in a clause.

(2) ðurh *ðæra* *sacerda* *blawunge* toburston ða weallas
through the.GEN priests.GEN blowing.DAT burst the walls
(c1000, quoted from Visser 1963-73: 1165)
'through the blowing of the priests the walls burst'

The source structure for present participles is illustrated in (3). *Byrnendum* is a deverbal form but functions as an adjective premodifying the noun *ofne*. In agreement with its head, it takes the adjectival dative singular ending in *-um*.

(3) Ðas þri cnihtas het se cyning awurpan into *byrnendum*
the three knights commanded the king throw into burning.DAT
ofne (c1000, OED)
oven.DAT
'The king ordered those three knights to be thrown into a burning oven'

[1] The ultimate source for present participles might be an agentive nominalization, but few traces of this (if any) are still to be found by the beginning of the Old English record (see Nickel 1966).

The noun phrase and adjective phrase structures in (2)-(3) above developed into full-blown non-finite clauses – though the original nominal and adjectival patterns largely remained in existence alongside the clausal ones. The syntactic reconfiguration from adjective phrase to participle clause was already well underway in Old English (Swan 2003); the emergence of gerund clauses from noun phrases took place later, with truly clausal gerunds first appearing in the Middle English period (Jack 1988; Fanego 2004). But by the beginning of the Late Modern period, around 1700, both gerunds and present participles had, in terms of their internal syntax, acquired the syntactic apparatus of a non-finite clause, comparable to that of the English infinitive. This means they would potentially select subjects, objects, adverbial modification and the auxiliaries *be* and *have* (as shown in (4)).

(4) a. so that though firm and strong in the greatest part of it [i.e. a bridge], yet by *its being ruined in the most needful*, it is become impassable. (1672-81, PPCEME)

b. The next day they receiv'd order to ascend the Hill into the Castle, *the Rajah having appointed an House for them* (1672-81, PPCEME)

These clausalization processes rendered gerunds and participles syntactically more alike, while at the same time dissociating them from their phrasal sources. The likeness between gerunds and present participles was additionally reinforced by the fact that, for reasons not well understood, present participles in the course of the Middle English period switched to the *-ing*-ending and became inflectionally identical to gerunds (compare (3) and (4a) above). Not surprisingly, the subsequent history of gerunds and present participles shows evidence of interference between the two clause types and of growing lenience in their general distributional constraints (De Smet 2010).

For example, in Early Modern English, patients marked by *of* optionally appear in present participles, as in (5a), in all likelihood because at the time patients are variably marked with or without *of* in the gerund, as in (5b-c) (De Smet 2010: 1173).

(5) a. And whyle the kynge there was *shyppynge of his people*, dyuers of his lordes [...] were there arrestyd for treason (1516, PPCEME)
‘And while the king was there shipping his people, several of his lords were arrested for treason’

b. By *eating of Garlike*, a man may the safelier goe into a suspected aire, and by stinking places. (1563, OED)

c. I haue knowen three within the space of one yere in high Germany that toke the falling sicknesse by *drinking much newe Rhenishe wine* (1568, PPCEME)

Similarly, passival participles as in (6a), with active form but passive meaning, were probably modelled on the gerund, which used to be voice-neutral, as in (6b) (De Smet 2010: 1174).

(6) a. hym thought som treasone was *ymagenyng* (a1500 (a1450), quoted from Denison 1993: 390-391)
‘it seemed to him that some treason was being dreamt up’

b. the whilke, ilke man and woman þat of elde es, awe for to rescheyue anes in þe ȝere, [. . .], O payne of *doynge owte of Haly Kyrke* (c1440, HC)

'which each man and woman that is of age must receive once a year, upon pain of being put out of the Holy Church'

Influence also ran in the opposite direction. For instance, Late Modern English extraposed gerunds, as in (7a), underwent the influence of participial adjuncts, as in (7b), as both construction types developed a very similar discourse function, with the matrix clause evaluating the experience of the main participant of the *-ing*-clause (De Smet 2010: 1177).

(7) a. And it was funny *walking up there and nobody being there* (s.d., CB)
b. You'll have great fun *choosing a name for your duck* (s.d., CB)

In addition, throughout the Modern period, *-ing*-clauses emerge that are neither clearly gerunds nor clearly present participles (De Smet 2012: ch.6). For instance, the *-ing*-clauses in (9) are not nominalizations, since they do not alternate with other functionally equivalent noun phrases, but they also lack the alternations with adjectives, prepositional phrases or past participles that are characteristic of present participles.

(9) a. 'twill be this hour ere I haue done *weeping*. (1591, Visser 1963-73: 2209)
b. As you walk with a high German officer, the salutes of passing soldiers come so aimlessly that you wonder why he bothers *taking them*. (1942, TIME)

At the same time, some differences between gerunds and present participles have never been subject to confusion. Most notably, possessively marked subjects, as in (10a), remain an exclusively gerundial feature, just as subject-case subjects, as in (10b), remain exclusively participial. As a rule, no gerunds are attested with a subject-case subject,[2] and no participles are attested with a possessively marked subject.

(10) a. in the event of *my having misjudged the situation* (1989, BNC)
b. They met on the Ponte Trinita, *she seeing and calling out to him first*. (1990, BNC)

As Huddleston & Pullum (2002) argue, subject marking is not necessarily a good differentiator between gerunds and present participles, because the majority of *-ing*-clauses simply have no subject, and because both gerunds and present participles invariably allow the alternative of oblique-case subjects, as in (11a-b).

(11) a. What do you mean by *us being set in our ways*? (1991, BNC)
b. He knows how I feel, *me being an only child*... (1991, BNC)

Nevertheless, the resilience of subject marking to confusion indicates that language users are able to reliably distinguish gerunds from present participles at least in some cases some of the time.

The same ability to differentiate between gerunds and present participles seems to manifest itself – under the guise of probabilistic constraints – in patterns of formal variation in English dialects. For example, Labov

[2] But see De Smet (2010: 1174) for some possible counterexamples.

(1989) (based on Houston 1985) states that where there is variation between an /in/-realization of the *-ing*-form and the standard /iŋ/-realization, the former tends to be "favored most in progressives and participles, less in adjectives, even less in gerunds and least of all in nouns like *ceiling* or *morning*" (1989: 87). Similarly, studying dialectal data from Suffolk, Braeken (2011) shows that the optional *a*-prefix with *-ing*-forms, as in (12a), is almost exclusively attested with present participles – (12b) offers a rare counter-example of a gerund with *a*-prefix.

(12) a. And we anchored off here and of course I could hear some of the lads *a-playing about on the beach*. (FRED, quoted from Braeken 2011: 24)

b. and you used to go to and fro, to and fro with that rope all the time like that till you got up to the top. And by *so a-doing that* you could get forty pockets on the wagon (FRED, quoted from Braeken 2011: 27)

Together, all these observations can only lead to mixed conclusions. Even though the data reveal almost constant leakage between gerunds and present participles, they do not support the view that the two clause types have completely merged.

3 Leakage and resilience in Late Modern English complement constructions

The Late Modern period sees a number of changes that clearly reflect the ambivalent status of the gerund/participle distinction in English outlined in the previous section. I will focus here on one area of potential confusion between gerunds and present participles and survey the evidence of actual confusion occurring. The evidence confirms the picture of a partial merger between gerunds and present participles.

The area specifically at issue is at the meeting point of two historically distinct complementation patterns. One is the participial object complement construction, as in (13a). The other is the gerundial complement construction, as in (13b).

(13) a. As they advanced they heard the sound of music, and saw youths and virgins *dancing in the grove* (1759, CLMETEV)

b. Even now [...] people remember *Lady O'Dowd performing a jig at Government House*, where she danced down two Aides-de-Camp, a Major of Madras cavalry, and two gentlemen of the Civil Service (1847-8, CLMETEV)

As the examples in (13) show, both constructions most typically appear as a sequence of a verb, noun phrase and *-ing*-clause. For ease of reference, the noun phrase between matrix verb and *-ing*-form will here be referred to as NP_2 because it is the second noun phrase in the syntagm. Semantically, NP_2 provides the main participant of the verbal process denoted by the *-ing*-form, and the situation jointly construed by NP_2 and the *-ing*-clause provides the secondary participant to the matrix verb (i.e. that which is seen in (13a), or that which is remembered in (13b)).

Next to these similarities, there are also differences between the two constructions that betray their different origins. For a start, the *-ing*-clause in the participial object complement construction alternates with past

participles, adjective phrases and prepositional phrases, as in (14a), whereas the *-ing*-clause in the gerundial complement construction alternates with noun phrases, as in (14b).

(14) a. They saw the youths and virgins *close to delirium*.
b. Even now people remember *Lady O'Dowd's jig performance at Government House*.

Further, the participial object complement construction can be passivized, promoting NP_2 to the subject position of the matrix clause, as in (15).

(15) Youths and virgins were seen *dancing in the grove*.

In contrast, the gerundial complement construction predictably allows possessive marking on NP_2 (which functions as the gerund's own subject), as in (16a). It also allows omission of NP_2 (triggering control by the matrix subject over the gerund), as in (16b).

(16) a. Even now people remember *Lady O'Dowd's performing a jig at Government House*.
b. Even now people remember *watching Lady O'Dowd's jig at Government House*.

Finally, De Smet & Heyvaert (2011) show that present participles tend to retain time-stable semantics – a feature imposed by the adjectival slot they occupy. In the participial object complement construction this typically translates in a progressive reading for the event denoted by the complement (cf. Declerck 1981; Dixon 2005: 271; Gisborne 2010: 195-7). Gerunds are not subject to this constraint, allowing both perfective and imperfective interpretations. Compare the corpus examples in (17), where the participle in (17a) conveys progressive aspect while the gerund in (17b) is aspectually neutral.

(17) a. a friend, calling on him one day, found him *reading a little slip cut from a newspaper* (1895, COHA)
b. had they contemplated *my reading them*, they would doubtless never have written them (1876, COHA)

Returning to the two examples in (13) above, then, the syntactic evidence suggests different underlying structures, which can be roughly represented as in (18).

(18) a. They [saw [youths and virgins]$_{DO}$ [dancing in the grove]$_{OC}$]$_{VP}$.
b. Even now people [remember [Lady O'Dowd performing a jig at Government House]$_{DO}$]$_{VP}$.

Note however that most of the evidence of this syntactic distinction resides in alternation patterns, meaning that to infer it language users must draw on second-order generalizations, which are a step removed from immediately observable distributional evidence (Croft 2004). Note further that some of the crucial alternates have been growing less frequent – most notably possessively marked subjects in the gerund, but also adjectival object com-

plements. As a result, the evidence there is for language users to work from has been getting less accessible. The semantic evidence is more direct, but because gerunds are not strictly incompatible with progressive interpretations, it provides no truly distinctive criterion (cf. (17) above).

As might be expected, then, the syntactic distinction between participial object complement constructions and the gerundial complement construction has come under some pressure, just like the overall gerund/participle distinction. This is reflected in a series of innovations, which, however, have so far failed to completely upset the old system. Specifically, there is a handful of innovations in Late Modern English that clearly violate original gerundial or participial syntax, but that occur in very specific lexico-grammatical environments and that are mostly triggered by independent developments. In what follows, four such developments are considered. Each change occurred in the context of a specific matrix verb or set of matrix verbs – *want* and *need* (Section 3.1), *prevent* and *stop* (Section 3.2), *fancy* (Section 3.3) and *see*, *hear* and *feel* (Section 3.4).

3.1 Want *and* need

Want has long been used with passival gerunds, as in (19). In this pattern, the matrix clause subject provides the patient of the gerund, which can therefore be paraphrased with a passive infinitive (e.g. 'to be polished' in (19a), 'to be shaken up' in (19b)).

(19) a. It was but rough hewen by one of the prentises, and wanted *sum polishing by the forman* (1574, quoted from De Smet 2012: 181)

b. when she looks flat and wants *shaking up a bit* (1848, quoted from De Smet 2012: 181)

In the eighteenth century, *want* also entered the object complement construction, with past participles as object complement, as in (20).

(20) [he] called for a pint of beer, and wanted a steak *broiled*, which was done. (1744, OBC)

Soon after, *want* appeared in a new pattern illustrated in (21a). Here, the *-ing*-form is passival, but NP_2 behaves as if it is the object of *want* in a participial object complement construction, allowing fronting to subject position under passivization or extraction under relativization, as in (21b).

(21) a. If ... you Messrs. Apothecary and Taylor want your bills *paying* (1759-67, quoted from Visser 1963-73: 2362)

b. he was to make some memorandum with respect to some Dutch names that he wanted *putting on the watches* (1788, OBC)

The timing of the change indicates that the new pattern in (21) arose as a blend between the passival gerund and past participle (De Smet forthc.).[3] The new construction survives into Present-Day English and has extended to *need*, as shown in (22).

(22) a. Look, no Richard! I don't want things *stuffing down that hole*. Put it in the bin. (s.d., BNC)
b. Perhaps the gas cooker's broken and they need it *mending* (s.d., BNC)

The result is a pattern that violates both gerundial and participial syntax. Its passive meaning is (particularly from a Present-Day English point of view) at odds with the semantics of the present participle. Note also that the *-ing*-form lacks the time-stable (progressive, stative, habitual, ...) semantics usually associated with participial constructions. Semantically, then, the *-ing*-clauses at issue are closer to gerunds. However, their syntactic behaviour is that of a participle, and decidedly not that of a nominalized clause. As such, examples as in (22) would be hard to justify from the point of view of a grammar that maintains a strict distinction between gerunds and present participles.

3.2 Prevent *and* stop

The verb *prevent* appeared with gerund complements in the seventeenth century. Predictably, NP_2 could appear as an oblique form or with possessive marking – the former typically when NP_2 is a full noun phrase, the latter when it is pronominal, as in (23a-b) respectively.

(23) a. the dagger did not absolutely miss him, but wounded him in the left arm; but Octavio's youth, too nimble for Clarinau's age, snatching at the dagger as it wounded him, at once prevented *the hurt being much*, and returned a home blow at Clarinau (1684, CEMET)
b. these laths are to be tied round about the Pike's body, from his head to his tail, [...] to prevent *his breaking or falling off from the spit*. (1656, CEMET)

In the eighteenth century, however, *prevent* also made its appearance in what looks like a participial object complement construction, as shown in (24). Examples (24a-b) demonstrate promotion of NP_2 to the subject position of the matrix clause under passivization, while (24c) shows that NP_2 could be a reflexive form, indicating that it was not (necessarily) interpreted as the subject of the *-ing*-clause.

(24) a. but [they] were prevented *doing any more damage* by the Watch (1718, OBC)
b. she was sorry [...] that she had been prevented *telling me her story* (1768, CLMETEV)
c. I was obliged to jump over the box to prevent myself *falling*. (1779, OBC)

The pattern again survives into Present-Day English, as shown in (25), though it is more common now with the verb *stop*, as in (25b).

[3] A construction that looks like the opposite blend also occurs, as in *the car needs washed* (see e.g. Murray & Simon 1999).

(25) a. Further, Spenser helps us to discern cultural issues which Elizabethan institutions prevented *being openly represented*, notably the uneasiness generated by a woman ruling within a patriarchal culture. (1992, BNC)

b. Wherever you are grabbed, you cannot be stopped *using at least some of these weapons*, and every time one hits home, the attacker's pain will increase until he or she is forced to loosen the grip. (1989, BNC)

What caused the change was probably not just language users' inability to distinguish between gerundial and participial syntax. There was a third construction that is likely to have acted as a catalyst. This was the pattern with an object-controlled gerund introduced by *from* illustrated in (26). This *from*-construction allows extraction of NP_2, as in (26b), but when NP_2 is in its default position following the matrix verb, as in (26a), the construction differs from a gerundial complement with oblique subject only in the respective presence or absence of *from*.

(26) a. and then they mutually labour to cover it with the same sand, to prevent it *from being devoured by other fish*. (1656, CEMET)

b. He renews his vows to her of eternal love, and that he would perform what they were so unluckily prevented *from doing this morning* (1684, CEMET)

Given this situation, *from* could be reinterpreted as an optional element in the gerundial complement construction and this optionality could then extend to contexts with extracted NP_2, resulting in the innovative pattern in (24)-(25) above.[4]

Regardless of its immediate cause, however, the change in the complement constructions with *prevent* left another dint in the gerund/participle distinction. Since NP_2 in (24)-(25) above behaves as a separate constituent, the remaining *-ing*-clause cannot be a gerund, because it is not in a nominal position. But a participial analysis is not supported either, because the usual alternation patterns (with past participles, adjectives and prepositional phrases) are lacking, and because the *-ing*-clause does not have time-stable semantics.

3.3 Fancy

Contrary to *want* and *prevent*, *fancy* started out in the participial object complement construction. Its NP_2 was at first consistently an oblique form, as in (27a), and it sanctioned adjectival object complements, as in (27b).

(27) a. You can fancy me *ascending Monte Cavallo*, leaning against the pedestal which supports Bucephalus (1783, CLMETEV)

[4] Such a reinterpretation may have been facilitated by the fact that by the beginning of the eighteenth century the status of *from* as a preposition had become somewhat obscured, at least in the construction with *prevent*, as *from* rarely combined with other noun phrases than gerunds. Moreover, NP_2 often lent itself to being reinterpreted as the subject of the following *-ing*-form, e.g. in *In the evening Toobouratomida and his Wife, and a Man belonging to Tootaha, would needs lay all Night by the Casks to prevent <u>any more from being taken away</u>* (1768-71, CLMETEV)

b. One, who is inflamed with lust, feels at least a momentary kindness towards the object of it, and at the same time fancies her *more beautiful than ordinary* (1739-1740, CLMETEV)

Later, *fancy* also began to combine with gerundial complements, as is apparent from possessive marking on NP_2. The first examples are found with the imperative form *fancy* used as a marker of surprise, as in (28a-b). Indeed, in American English the gerundial construction remains restricted to this context. In British English, it spread to non-imperative uses of *fancy* as well, as in (28c).

(28) a. No right to interfere! Venetia, my little fellow-labourer, no right to interfere! Why all is yours! Fancy *your having no right to interfere at Cadurcis*! (1837, CLMETEV)
b. Fancy *his being taken for an Englishman*! Still more, fancy *his wishing to be so mistaken*! (1868, COHA)
c. She fancied *their falling into the hands of some speculator*, who, if he did not break the mother's heart by putting up a gasometer, would certainly wring it by building hideous cottages, or desirable marine residences. (1865, CLMETEV)

Why it was precisely *fancy* that made the crossover from the participial object complement construction to the gerundial complement construction is hard to tell, though again, there may have been special circumstances to facilitate the change. Specifically, the use of imperative *fancy* as a marker of surprise had just arisen and was particularly compatible with the gerund. Because the gerund invites a factive reading (Heyvaert 2008), it reinforces the mirative function of imperative *fancy* – i.e. an unusual situation is all the more surprising if it is a fact. The effect is particularly clear in (29) (note though that the same effect is certainly missing in (28c) above, again suggesting a subsequent generalization of the use in British English).

(29) a. [in response to the addressee unwittingly giving the speaker an important piece of information] "H'm. Fancy *your being able to teach me what you don't know yourself*!" (1891, CLMETEV)
b. My, what a pretty neeklace! It's new, isn't it? Pearls, too! [...] Real pearls! Angela, fancy *your having a string of real pearls*! isn't that wonderful! (1920, COHA)

Of course, if these functional-semantic considerations account for language users' choice of gerundial complements with *fancy*, it testifies to their awareness of the difference with participial object complement constructions, rather than a neglect of it, particularly considering that factivity is a direct reflex of the gerund's status as a nominalization (Heyvaert 2008). Even so, the change seen in *fancy* sets the stage for the later development in *see*, *hear* and *feel*, if only as a point of comparison.

3.4 See, hear *and* feel

See, *hear* and *feel* are some of the most prototypical verbs used in the participial object complement construction. Recently, however, a subtle change set in that obscured the syntactic status of NP_2 in the object complement construction, precisely with these verbs. This is evident from the construction's behaviour in Present-Day Eng-

lish. For a start, it is sometimes doubtful on semantic grounds whether NP_2 in a participial object complement construction with *see*, *hear* or *feel* is really the object of the matrix verb, as in (30a) (where what is heard is not the crowd but the crowd being addressed) or (30b) (where the subject does not necessarily see the terrorists).

(30) a. Fortunately, because I wanted no part of any event featuring gospel singers, I was not present to hear *an incredulous crowd being exhorted to "stamp on Satan"*. (s.d., CB)

b. We don't have any evidence yet that these acts have been tied to terrorists. But clearly, that might be the next step that you might actually see *terrorists taking attacks against military personnel in the United States*. (2008, COCA)

Further, as (31) shows, the construction is now attested with existential *there*, which is usually considered a subject-slot filler (cf. Breivik & Martínez-Insua 2008).

(31) a. We couldn't see *there being any problem*. (s.d., CB)

b. Can't see *there being much work here* (2010, COCA)

Finally, the whole sequence of NP_2 and *-ing*-clause can be the focus of a pseudo-cleft, as in (32).

(32) a. The last thing he felt was *it plunging into his chest*. (1991, COCA)

b. if you listen back to that tape now all you'll hear is *them twittering away* (s.d., BNC)

All this indicates that NP_2 in these examples might actually be the subject of the *-ing*-clause rather than the object of the matrix verb (cf. Declerck 1982 for a similar argument). If so, the sequence of NP_2 and *-ing*-clause must be interpreted as a single constituent, akin to a gerund. If gerunds really provide the model for change, the obvious next step would be for NP_2 to appear with possessive marking. This has in fact happened, as in (33), but just as when gerunds with possessively marked subjects first appeared with *fancy* (see above), the use comes with a factive reading. There is no evidence yet of a more generalized and semantically neutral use of possessive marking on NP_2 with *see*, *hear* and *feel*.

(33) a. Ile looked at her. The impact of being away ten months struck softly home. She saw *his staring* and said [...]. (1963, COHA)

b. Baryshnikov is one of the world's outstanding dancers and performers, and watching him in anything is a privilege. It is no use bemoaning the sad fact that his days as a brilliantly athletic virtuoso in classical ballet seem to be over. Time inevitably moves on. What is fascinating is to see *his mastering a new style and technique, and still managing to rivet our attention as of old*. (1992, BNC)

This casts some doubt on whether the change in the complements of *see*, *hear* and *feel* is simply due to confusion with gerund complement constructions. There is a general tendency for NP_2s to develop from matrix verb objects to complement clause subjects. This is, for instance, what gave rise to Exceptional Case Marking constructions (Los 2005) – compare (34a-b) (see also footnote 3 above).

(34) a. He dede comand..Douke..& kniȝt *To diȝt her hors*. (c1330 (?a1300), MED)
'He ordered Duke and knight to prepare their horses.'

b. He commaunded *false Edrik forto be slayne* (a1387, MED)
'He ordered that false Edrik be slain.'

In addition, for the perception verbs there is another possible model, viz. the AcI construction, illustrated in (35), whose NP_2 likewise is closer to being the subject of the subordinate verb than the object of the matrix verb.

(35) Olive felt *her temper rise*. (1991, BNC)

Be that as it may, the changes in the participial object complement construction with *see, hear* and *feel* violate original participial syntax and as such contribute to the general decline of the gerund/participle distinction.

4 Conclusions

The evidence discussed in the previous two sections makes for a complex picture. It is clear that innovations occurred that caused departures from the expected, historically motivated behaviour of gerunds and participles. The fact that such departures are possible in the first place indicates that a degree of lenience has crept into participial and gerundial syntax. Against the more general background of a disintegrating gerund/participle distinction, this is probably as expected or at least answers to a more general diachronic trend. But it is also clear that innovations are not the direct result of a decline in language users' awareness of the gerund/participle contrast. On the contrary, some of the changes even suggest continued awareness of the difference. More generally, the fact that no widespread confusion arises indicates that, despite superficial formal similarity, gerunds and participles most of the time continue to be recognized as such, at least within the lexicogrammatical environments delineated by the gerundial complement construction and the participial object complement construction.

This ambivalent situation is instructive of what ultimately drives the decline of the gerund/participle distinction in English. Here, too, the picture is complex. Sometimes, changes seem to be triggered simply by confusion and competition. The emergence of a blended complement construction with *want* is probably a case in point (Section 3.1). At the same time, there is a functional side to change. At its most straightforward, change exploits the functional potential of established constructions, as when *fancy* appears with gerunds because they reinforce its mirative meaning (Section 3.3). More generally, the clausalization of originally phrasal structures lands clauses in phrasal environments but exposes them to the general functional demands on clauses. For example, one core function of a clause is to predicate a situation of a subject. Tellingly, some of the changes observed above precisely result from the recruitement of an external noun phrase as subject of a non-finite clause, as in the development of the participial object complement construction with *see, hear* and *feel* (Section 3.4). Similarly, it is a core function of clauses to provide the template to profile central discourse participants in ways that accord with the information flow in a text. The increasing mobility of clausal participants observed in the complement structures of *prevent* answers precisely to that functional need (Section 3.2).

We can therefore see the partial collapse of the English gerund/participle distinction as resulting from a complex interplay between simple confusion and functional pressures that alienate non-finite structures from their historical phrasal sources and thereby in turn feed a blurring of the lines between historically distinct clause types. This process primarily happens locally, in specific lexico-grammatical environments with specific functional demands to satisfy, as well as specific structural opportunities to exploit.

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Data sources

BNC = British National Corus
CB = Collins Cobuild Corpus
CEMET = Corpus of Early Modern English Texts
CLMETEV = Corpus of Late Modern English Texts (Extended Version)
COCA = Corpus of Contemporary American English
COHA = Corpus of Historical American English
HC = The Helsinki Corpus of English Texts
MED = Middle English Dictionary
OBC = Old Bailey Corpus
OED = Oxford English Dictionary
PPCEME = Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Early Modern English
TIME = Time Magazine Corpus

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