

The Split Infinitive in Modern English Grammar

Matinyan Gayane

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Since I first started learning and teaching English, I have observed many grammar rules change and several grammar “taboos” disappear. This has occurred because the language, as we know, is a living mechanism, in the constant process of developing and adapting to the needs of the speakers. Languages never stop changing and neither do their grammars.

One of the changes in English grammar is the wide use of the split infinitive in all registers, both formal and informal. Let us look at the following passage which I could have written as an introduction to my article to illustrate the use of the split infinitive.

“I would like *to just begin* my article, which is an attempt *to carefully study* the split infinitive, with a preface *to vividly demonstrate* how *to effectively use* this structure. It is hard for me *to clearly recollect* seeing a split infinitive in the sentence for the first time, but I seem *to fully recall* the strange yet strong impression it made on me. For me English has always been a language *to truly admire*, as it manages *to easily and creatively produce* some new, seemingly “ungrammatical” trends and patterns which tend *to soon become* accepted. The next thing *to now mention* is the skepticism my students have whenever I tell them *to not think* of split infinitives as grammar mistakes and *to correctly use* them in the right context instead.”

As many as 12 patterns with the split infinitive can be found/spotted in the paragraph above, none of which sounds incorrect or unnatural to my ear/ to me.

We know that the infinitive is one of the non-finite forms of the verb which has both verbal and nominal properties, as well as tense, aspect and voice distinctions. It can be used in different syntactic functions, such as the subject, predicative, part of a compound verbal predicate, attribute, object, and adverbial modifiers.

Unlike many other languages, such as old Latin, Greek, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Russian and Armenian, where the infinitive is a single word mostly with a typical ending, the infinitive in English is formed with the

particle “to” and the base form of the verb. However, there are cases when the *bare infinitive*- without the particle “to”- is used. As a rule, we have the bare infinitive with most modal verbs, with auxiliary verbs, and with a small group of verbs (hear, feel, let, make, etc.) and expressions (had better, would rather, cannot but, etc.).

The term “split infinitive” is used when a word, usually an adverb, is placed between the particle “to” and the base form of the verb, thus *splitting* or *dividing* the infinitive.

As Kenneth G. Wilson suggests in his book “The Columbia Guide to Standard American English”, “Ideally, English adverbs immediately precede the verbs they modify, or come at the end of the predicate and modify it or the whole sentence, or modify the entire sentence rather than just the verb by appearing at the beginning of the sentence. These generalizations also describe the placement of adverbial modifiers of infinitives; these adverbials, however, can be ambiguous in writing, where intonation is not available to assist in specifying grammatical relationships. This potential for confusion probably accounts for the popularity of the split infinitive, which eliminates all possibility of ambiguity”. [9; 410]

For decades English students were instructed that splitting the infinitive was incorrect and such cases were generally classified as grammar mistakes.

The idea that no adverb can be placed in the middle of an infinitive was introduced by Henry Alford, the Dean of Canterbury in the second half of the XIX century and the author of books on the English language. He was one of those Victorian scholars who tried to impose some rules of Latin grammar on English grammar, among which was the prohibition against splitting infinitives. According to it, the Latin infinitive, being a single word, was never split, consequently it was decided that splitting an infinitive was a grammatical mistake.

It should be mentioned, however, that there existed numerous examples of split infinitives in literature before and after the XIX- century “rule”. Since the end of XIX century the use of split infinitives has been gaining ground despite occasional criticism from grammarians.

Moreover, the situation has been changing rapidly in the last few decades, resulting in an impressive growth in the use of the split infinitive. According to researchers at Lancaster University and Cambridge University Press, split

infinitives are now nearly three times as common in English as they were thirty years ago. They have attracted widespread scientific interest due to the existence of abundant convincing linguistic evidence. In his book *A Dictionary of Usage and Style*, R.H. Copperud, an American grammarian, wrote “The acceptability of a split infinitive depends only on whether it damages the rhythm or meaning of the sentence.” [2], and according to *The Britannica Book of English Usage*, “... the truth is that the split is desirable whenever its avoidance would prove awkward or affected or misleading”. [8; 343]

We have amassed extensive data from present -day English corpora which confirm the existence of split infinitive in different varieties of English and which are going to be analyzed in this paper. We will look at the patterns of split infinitives, the different adverbs that are used as splitters, as well as the most frequently occurring “infinitive + adverb” combinations.

It can be argued that splitting the infinitive is widely acceptable, and in some contexts even preferable.

For example, there is a difference between these three sentences where the adverb comes before or in the middle of the infinitive or at the end of the sentence:

*I use the flowers to **beautifully** embellish desserts and iced drinks.*

*I use the flowers **beautifully** to embellish desserts and iced drinks.*

*I use the flowers to embellish desserts and iced drinks **beautifully***

In the second sentence flowers are used nicely, whereas in the first one the floral embellishments are applied in a beautiful way. And when the adverb “beautifully” is placed at the end of the sentence, it could refer either to the way the flowers are used or the desserts and drinks are embellished.

Accordingly, when the pattern with a split infinitive expresses the meaning in a more precise and clear manner, it should be preferred over the traditional pattern.

Here are more sentences to illustrate that proposition:
(2) *You should expect problems **to occasionally crop up**.* (If the adverb “occasionally” is placed before the verb “expect”- “*You should **occasionally expect problems to crop up***”, the meaning of the sentence is different, but when being placed in the final position “*You should expect problems **to crop up occasionally***” it could refer to either verb –“expect” or “crop up”).

(3) *She awakens in her room **to unexpectedly find** her childhood friend,*

Raoul, with her. (The adverb “unexpectedly” may have two more positions – before the infinitive “to find” -*She awakens in her room **unexpectedly to find her childhood friend, Raoul, with her***”, where it refers to the process of awakening and at the end of the sentence, “*She awakens in her room **to find her childhood friend, Raoul, with her unexpectedly***”. where it could refer to both *awakening* and *finding* somebody.)

(4) *The other reviewers seem to **generally** be praising this book.* (Positioning “generally” before “seem” does not carry the same meaning, as it modifies the verb “seem”- “*The other reviewers **generally** seem to be praising the book.*)

Whether or not to split the infinitive is an individual choice sometimes and it is hard to say which form is more precise or expressive. The sentences below contain constructions with split infinitives but we can see that positioning the adverb after the infinitive does not make a big difference.

(5) *We tend **to nervously smile** and hint that we’re uncomfortable without ever really saying it.*

*(We tend **to smile nervously** and hint that we’re uncomfortable without ever really saying it.)*

(6) *The trick is **to selectively give up** specific battles, rather than **to globally capitulate**.*

*(The trick is **to give up** specific battles **selectively**, rather than **to capitulate globally**.)*

On the other hand, there are cases when the pattern with a split infinitive does not add extra clarity and precision to the utterance, neither does it enhance the meaning. If placing a modifier in a (traditional) position outside of an infinitive does not result in an unclear or awkward sentence, it is advisable to avoid using a split infinitive.

The following sentence with a split infinitive (7) *The girl is said **to now be 17***” will definitely sound better with the adverb “now” at the end of the sentence: *The girl **is said to be 17 now**.*

We will now look at some sentences with the split negative infinitive, the pattern with “not” between

“to” and the base verb, which is a special case of the split infinitive construction and is of particular interest to researchers and learners.

(8) *Our targets for the day were **to cycle 200+km and to not get lost**.*

(9) *Do you think if we all made an agreement **to not interrupt** or criticize each other, we could accomplish more?*

(10) *I'll cover my ears and pretend **to not listen**.*

(11) *It's so true, and I'm making an honest effort **to not fall** in the same trap.*

The numerous samples from English speaking corpora reveal that the more traditional pattern of the negative infinitive “not to do”, with “not” before “to” is still dominant over the split one but according to *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*, the two patterns are semantically equivalent and acceptable. [4; 803]

Interestingly, no attempts have yet been made to paraphrase one of the most famous Shakespearean quotes into “*To be or to not be*”. When asked for comments, my university students told me that “*to be or to not be*” left them puzzled and they would definitely prefer the traditional “*to be or not to be*” quote. On the other hand, they did not find anything wrong with the title of the new Korean romantic drama “*It's OK to not be OK*”, explaining it by the fact that when they first saw the title, it contained a split infinitive and they quickly got used to it. By the way, the small search that I did on the Google with the key words “*It's OK to not be OK*” and “*It's OK not to be OK*” showed that the majority of the entries contained a split infinitive in the title, yet there were quite many with the traditional negative infinitive, which is clear proof that the translation from Korean was done in the conventional way, without splitting the infinitive.

The following argument can serve as a good justification for the choice between the two variants of the negative infinitive. Whenever the negative particle “not” is used to add clarity and reduce ambiguity of the meaning, or when it is done to lay emphasis on the negativity of the sentence, it should be given preference, otherwise the infinitive is not usually split.

For example, splitting the infinitive can remove ambiguity in this example:

(12) *You have the power **to not support** violence.*

If we had the sentence “*You have the power not to support violence*”, it could either mean “Your power is in the ability to prevent violence” or “You have the power to hinder something else than violence”, whereas the sentence with the split infinitive definitely means that you are capable of not supporting violence.

Sometimes the word that precedes the negative infinitive can make the difference. Let us look at some examples with “how” and compare the two patterns “How **to not do sth**” versus “how **not to do sth**”.

In the examples below the split negative infinitives “how to not say” and “how to not judge” can be interpreted as “how to avoid or stop doing the things mentioned, like saying hurtful things and judging a book by its cover”.

(13) *I often remind my kids about **how to not say hurtful things** to others.*

(14) *The lists became part of a class discussion on stereotypes and **how to not judge a book** by its cover.*

In the case of “how not to do sth” it is not the actions that should be stopped or prohibited, but the improper or wrong ways of conducting foreign policy and dressing:

(15) *This stands as a textbook lesson in **how not to conduct foreign policy**.*

(16) *He then escorted her into society, told her what to say and **how not to dress**.*

It is obvious that “how not to dress” in this sentence cannot mean “how to stop getting dressed and stay naked”.

We will proceed now to analyze the more widespread cases with split infinitives when we have adverbials between “to” and the base verb. Adverbials are words or groups of words, modifying or defining the verb or the sentence. The most widespread adverbs used to split the infinitive are those of manner, frequency, time, cause and consequence, degree, measure and quantity.

Let us now look at some examples of infinitives split by adverbs:

(17) *The gate’s open enough for us **to barely squeeze** through.*

(18) *I have been blessed **to never have been** without a job despite the economy.*

(19) *It’s hard not to come to any other conclusion than it’s time **to quite seriously put** impeachment back on the table.*

(20) *It may cost them a lot more to develop alternatives than **to just have it** landfilled at the present time.*

(21) *We were finally given the green light **to at least move** out of the way of traffic.*

(22) *This allows the monitoring electronics **to more accurately estimate** battery charge.*

(23) *Those women do not work outside their home, except **to daily collect** eggs from the chicken coops.*

(24) *His cousins had refused **to even come** to dinner.*

(25) *We have got **to very much deal with** the underlying tensions if we are going to survive.*

(26) *Revenue for the company is expected **to more than double** this year to \$12million.*

A close study of the sentences suggests that the traditional “unsplit” infinitive could be used in some of them with the same effect, but there are cases where splitting the infinitive is the only or the better choice. For example, the adverbs “*just, never, at least, daily, even, more accurately, quite seriously*” could have their usual positions in the sentences, without splitting the infinitives or changing the meaning, e.g. *This allows the monitoring electronics **to estimate** battery charge **more accurately**.*

On the other hand, we cannot place the adverbs “more than, very much, barely” in any other position in the sentence, no matter how hard we try.

The adverbials that act as infinitive splitters are mainly adverbs of manner, time, frequency and degree, the most often used among them being “*absolutely, actually, almost, always, at least, briefly, better, calmly, completely, constantly, easily, even, eventually, ever, finally, fully, further, generally, gradually, immediately, just, nearly, never, not only, occasionally, often, only, perhaps, properly, quickly, really, rapidly, regularly, seriously, simply, slowly, sometimes, strongly, successfully, suddenly, thoroughly, totally*, etc. [6; 121]

As the linguistic corpora reveal, split infinitives with these adverbs are mostly used to emphasize the meaning of the message.

The quantitative analysis of the sentences with split infinitives shows that the adverbs “just, further, really, actually, better, only, even” are far more commonly used to split infinitives, with thousands of sample sentences in The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA).

(27) *The key to karaoke is **to just pick** a song that’s personal to you.*

(28) *We are always open **to further engage** in this discussion.*

(29) *I am also glad **to really have had** my eyes opened on this issue.*

(30) *It might be a good idea **to actually contact** your health care provider sooner rather than late*

(31) *A staggering 92% of high school teachers feel they don’t have the data necessary **to better understand** students’ college preparation needs.*

(32) *You can choose **to only report** the second set of scores to prospective colleges.*

(33) *His cousins had refused **to even come** to dinner.*

Furthermore, the comparative or superlative degrees of adverbs are also positioned between “to” and the verb for more emphasis, as in the following sentences:

(34) *This allows the monitoring electronics **to more accurately estimate** battery charge.*

(35) *When you expect others **to most often agree** with your point of view, that is a symptom of having a strong need to be right over others.*

Also, in many cases adverbs are modified by other adverbs of degree, such as “so, very, quite, rather, at least, not only”, which clearly gives the messages more importance, for example:

(36) *You’ll be able **to rather clearly make sure** that you are doing the reservation at the lowest prices possible.*

(37) *Cleaning up industrial pollution like mercury from power plants is going **to quite possibly cost** jobs in traditional industries.*

(38) *And the connectedness allows them **to so often feel** more satisfied with their college experience and remain far more involved beyond their graduation.*

(39) *This used **to very often lead** us to exasperation and frustration.*

(40) *When I teach a daily Yoga class, I’d want **to at least once talk** about something “extraordinary”.*

(41) *That weight of those words is going **to not only be** amplified around the world, but sealed in our history.*

Far less frequent are the cases of split infinitives with adverbial phrases, such as “at last, step-by-step, little by little”, for example:

(42) *They can continue **to little by little clean up** the system over time.*

(43) *Heinlein unfolds the revolution in a meticulously detailed style, using lengthy conversations between the characters about how **to step-by-step overthrow** the authority of an overwhelming power.*

We will now focus on the syntactic functions of the split infinitive and split infinitive phrases in the sentence. The careful analysis of such patterns in the sentence indicates that they have the same functions as traditional infinitives and infinitive phrases, and can act as the subject of the sentence, as the object, as a complex object, as a predicative/subject complement, as attributes to nouns, as part of a modal verbal predicate, as part of a verbal aspect

predicate, as adverbial modifiers of purpose and result.

All the above-mentioned functions are illustrated in the following sentences:

(44) *General Hooker and his men **used to frequently enjoy** the hospitality offered here in their off-duty hours.* (COMPOUND VERBAL ASPECT PREDICATE)

(45) *The commission **would have to twice sign off** on the proposal and hold at least one public forum.* (COMPOUND VERBAL MODAL PREDICATE)

(46) *It is important **to thoroughly investigate** the case before filing it, because it cannot be withdrawn later.* (SUBJECT COMPLEMENT/ PREDICATIVE)

(47) *One way **to absolutely get rid of** the malware is as you described: reinstall the system from scratch.* (ATTRIBUTE)

(48) *This makes it easier **for a user to quickly perform** advanced tasks in Windows 8.* (COMPLEX OBJECT/ FOR-TO-INFINITIVE CONSTRUCTION)

(49) *You can choose **to only report** the second set of scores to prospective colleges.* (OBJECT)

(50) *Kathryn was **too big a girl to still be** in diapers.* (ADVERBIAL MODIFIER OF RESULT/ CONSEQUENCE)

(51) ***To further protect** its population, the Southeast Asia country is also expanding its booster vaccine shot programme to cover those aged 50 to 59 years from early October.* (ADVERBIAL MODIFIER OF PURPOSE)

In our view the most common syntactic functions of the split infinitive in the sentence are those of the object, predicative, attribute, purpose adverbial and compound predicates.

The detailed analysis of compound verbal modal predicates shows that the verbs “to be able to” and “to have to” are much more common in combination with split infinitives than other modals, for example:

(52) *We accept that people **have to sometimes live** in a world in which other people's speech offend them.*

(53) *Afterwards, I **was able to really digest** the day's events, along with the many invoices and emails.*

Sometimes more than one infinitive splinter can be used in a compound verbal predicate- either two adverbs or an adverb and a prepositional phrase.

(54) *He **was able to really, as a virtuoso, come up with** a solution to what I think is an insurmountable problem.*

(55) *And so she **had to just kind of write** a letter to herself.*

(56) *I **had to just almost crawl** down to the liquor store.*

(57) *Then I **was able to really sort of clearly see**, for the first time, just how unfun it is to sit in the audience.*

On the other hand, the study of compound verbal aspect predicates highlights the high frequency of split infinitive patterns following the verbs “to continue, to begin/start, used to”, e.g.

(58) *Ken's health and well-being **began to immediately improve**.*

(59) *My sister **used to always talk** about living in Paris for a year, and it sounded so awesome.*

(60) *Unaware of our whisperings, Mudcatt **continued to just sit** there and smile and eat nothing.*

One of the common misconceptions about the use of the split infinitive is that it is mainly used in oral and informal speech and is rather rare in formal speech and academic writing. However, the data of corpus-based research, done by ... in his paper prove the erroneousness of this assumption. Contrary to the popular opinion, the split infinitive is a common and accepted grammatical structure both in informal spoken language and in academic literary works.

The difference between the two registers, however, lies in the choice of the verbs and the splitting adverbs. According to ..., The following verbs and adverbs form the top splitting constructions in the spoken genre – *to get, to be, to go, to make, to say + really, just, actually*.

In the academic register, however, we have another group of longer and more complex verbs and

adverbs, such as “*to understand, to examine, to explore, to disagree, to develop, to investigate + better,*

fully, further, strongly”[6; 124]

Interestingly enough, the comparison between some of the most common patterns with split infinitives in both registers shows similarity in meaning, and phrases like “to fully/better understand” and “to really/just get” can convey the same message in the sentences below:

(61) *If you ignore your emotions you **won't be able to fully understand** your own motivations and needs, or to communicate effectively with others.*

(62) *As outsiders, most of us can't understand a neighborhood that burns itself down. **To really get it**, you have to live there.*

It is interesting to note that two of the most often occurring infinitive splitters on the lists were “kind of” (meaning: rather, to some extent) and “sort of” (meaning: to some extent, in some way or other), which are very informal and typical of American English only. The sentences below contain those two phrases:

(63) I had **to kind of teach** myself how to write.

(64) It allows people **to sort of see** those anomalies, and I think that’s very valuable.

It should be mentioned that all the examples of split infinitives for our research were provided by the COCA, the one-billion-word corpus of contemporary American English. [10]

According to R. W. Burchfield and H.W. Fowler, authors of the book “The New Fowler’s Modern English Usage”, a considerable difference can be spotted between the British and American uses of split infinitives, with the British splitting the infinitive three to four times less frequently than the Americans do. Besides, the British hardly ever use compound adverbs, such as “not only, at last, at least” to split infinitives, whereas the latter are quite common in American English. [1; 201]

The findings of another recent study by S. Phoocharoensil, a Thai grammarian, suggest that professional English learners evidently produce a greater number of split infinitives than intermediate learners, whose proficiency level is lower. [7; 28]

As highlighted in this paper, the current usage of the split infinitive has become a standard feature of English grammar and its increasing presence at all levels of language has made the “*Never split the infinitive*” rule almost obsolete.

The most remarkable result to emerge from the data under research is that English speakers have started *to not avoid* the use of split infinitives and *to creatively split infinitives* as long as their sentences make sense.

There are still questions that could be part of a future research project on the split infinitive, such as examination of the full extent of split infinitives in comparison with traditional infinitive patterns, investigation of the types of verbs open to splitting and in-depth research into the different registers where split infinitives are regularly used.

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Տրոհված անորոշ դերբայը ժամանակակից անգլերենի քերականության մեջ

Մատինյան Գայանե

Ամփոփում

Հանգուցային բառեր. *անորոշ դերբայ, տրոհված անորոշ դերբայ, ռեգիստր, մակբայ, շարահյուսական գործառույթ*

Հոդվածը դիտարկում է անգլերենի ավանդական քերականության մեջ դեռևս պահպանվող կանոնը, ըստ որի՝ չի կարելի տրոհել անորոշ դերբայը: Այդ կանոնը խստորեն գործել է հատկապես 19-րդ դարում և բացատրվել է այն իրողությամբ, որ անգլերենի քերականությունը մեծապես հիմնվում էր լատիներենի քերականության վրա, իսկ լատիներենում անորոշ դերբայը չէր տրոհվում (իրականում այն բաղկացած էր մի մասից և չէր կարող տրոհվել): Բազմաթիվ լեզվական փաստերով և օրինակներով ցույց է տրվում այդ «կանոնի» անհամատեղելիությունը ժամանակակից լեզվական իրողություններին ու զարգացումներին, չնայած ըստ որոշ ակադեմիական տեղեկագրքերի՝ տրոհված անորոշ դերբայի գործածությունը դեռևս չի քաջալերվում, իսկ հաճախ նաև մերժվում է պաշտոնական լեզվական ռեգիստրում օգտագործելու համար, բացառությամբ այն դեպքերի, երբ տրոհումից հրաժարվելը կառաջացներ իմաստի աղավաղում կամ երկիմաստություն: Հոդվածում քննարկվում են անորոշ դերբայի տրոհման շարժառիթներն ու նպատակահարմարությունը տարբեր համատեքստերում, ինչպես նաև վերլուծվում են այնպիսի դեպքեր, երբ անորոշ դերբայի ավանդական և տրոհված ձևերն ունեն տարբեր, հաճախ երկիմաստ, իսկ երբեմն էլ հակառակ իմաստներ, օրինակ՝ երբ ժխտական անորոշ դերբայի ավանդական և տրոհված ձևերն օգտագործվում են «how not to do/ how to not do» («ինչպես չանել») արտահայտության մեջ: Ուսումնասիրության են ենթարկվում անգլերենի ամենաշատ տրոհվող անորոշ դերբայներն ու ամենատարածված տրոհիչ-մակբայները լեզվական տարբեր ռեգիստրներում, և համեմատվում են տրոհված անորոշ դերբայի գործածության հաճախականությունն ու բնութագիրը բրիտանական և ամերիկյան անգլերենում:

Расщепленный инфинитив в грамматике современного английского языка

Матинян Гаяне

Резюме

Ключевые слова: *инфинитив, расщепленный инфинитив, регистр, наречие, синтаксическая функция*

В статье рассматривается все еще действующий в грамматике закон традиционного английского языка, согласно которому нельзя расщеплять инфинитив. Этот закон неуклонно действовал особенно в 19-ом веке и объяснялся тем, что грамматика английского языка в большинстве основывалась на грамматике латыни, в котором инфинитив не расщеплялся, так как состоял из одного компонента и не мог делиться.

Многочисленными языковыми фактами и примерами показана несовместимость данного «закона» с современными языковыми реалиями и развитием, хотя до сих пор некоторые академические предписания не рекомендуют применять расщепленный инфинитив, часто в официальных лингвистических регистрах даже запрещается их использование, за исключением случаев, когда отказ от расщепленного инфинитива приведет к смысловым нарушениям, либо к многозначности.

В статье рассмотрены мотивы и целесообразность применения расщепленного инфинитива в разных контекстах. Также анализируются случаи, когда расщепленная и традиционная формы инфинитива имеют разное значение, часто многозначны, или противоположны по значению, например, когда расщепленная и традиционная формы отрицательного инфинитива употребляются в выражении “how not to do/ how to not do” («как не делать»). Проведено исследование по выявлению степени употребительности расщепляемых глаголов и разделяющих наречий в разных лингвистических регистрах, а также сопоставляются частотность употребления и характеристики расщепленного инфинитива в британском и американском вариантах английского языка.

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