

## On Prenominal Participles

Alan Bunyan

## ABSTRACT

The present paper surveys some of the information available in English to learners on the topic of English prenominal *-ing* participles, together with some tentative suggestions as to ways in which such information might be revised or supplemented.

Keywords: active, adjective, gerund, participle, premodification, prenominal, present

## INTRODUCTION

The prenominal use of *-ing* participles (a.k.a. 'present participles' or, more accurately, 'active participles') is a difficult area of English grammar, not least because prenominal participles must be carefully distinguished from other ostensibly similar forms, most notably participial adjectives, such as 'interesting' in

[1] This is an interesting book.

which, unlike pure participles, e.g. 'falling' in

[2] We saw some falling leaves.

can take premodification by degree adverbs such as 'very', yielding grammatical

[3] This is a very interesting book.

as compared with ungrammatical

[4] \*We saw some very falling leaves.

That which, however, the two prenominal *-ing* forms exemplified above have in common is that in both the implicit agent of the action that they denote is the noun that they precede: the book interests (people) just as the leaves actually do the falling. Thus both of the above must in turn be clearly distinguished (for phonetic, as well as syntax-related, reasons<sup>\*1</sup>) from the superficially similar category of attributive gerunds, such as

'reading' in the expression 'reading glasses', whose meaning is 'glasses for reading', not 'glasses that read'.

As if all of the above were not a sufficient cause of confusion for the learner, it is even possible to cite cases in which what is effectively the same *-ing* form (i.e. viewed from a semantic-etymological standpoint) can function attributively as either a participle or a gerund, e.g. 'flying' in

[5] They saw a flying saucer.

(i.e. a saucer-like object that flew – prenominal participle), versus its gerundial homomorph in

[6] They built flying machines such as planes.

whose most plausible interpretation is manifestly 'machines for flying' (even though, in this case, we cannot deny the incidental truth that the machines themselves do fly).

In the course of this paper, we shall (primarily for the reference/attention of authors of books or websites on English grammar) be investigating a cross-section of commonly available English grammar reference sources, with the aim of establishing what kind of guidance the intermediate-to advanced-level English learner who wishes to study English grammar in English (rather than via his/her own native language)<sup>\*2</sup> may currently expect concerning both how to distinguish between prenominal active participles and other ostensibly

similar forms, and, in particular, the natural and appropriate use of the former. We shall also be highlighting certain inadequacies and inconsistencies in said sources and making some tentative suggestions as to specific ways in which the information provided might usefully be supplemented or improved.

## SURVEY

To begin with what is arguably one of the most influential English grammar authorities of all, R. Quirk, S. Greenbaum et al.<sup>1)</sup>, under the heading 'Premodification by *-ing* participles' (p.1325-1327), make a number of observations concerning prenominal *-ing* participles (i.e. as distinct from true participial adjectives), which may essentially be summarized as follows:

- (1) Habituality/permanence is a major factor determining the ability of a participle to function as a premodifier. By way of example, natural 'the wandering minstrel' (i.e. one who habitually wanders) is compared to unnatural 'the wandering man' (used to indicate a man seen wandering somewhere at some particular time), with regard to which latter case a complemented postmodifier construction (e.g. 'the man wandering down the street' ) tends to be preferred.
- (2) (Notwithstanding the above) Where an attributive participle is used to indicate a temporary rather than an habitual state, it tends to be in cases where the resulting participle+noun combination evokes a concept considered to be in some way iconic or universal, accounting for natural 'a smiling face' as opposed to relatively unnatural 'a smiling person'.<sup>3</sup>
- (3) A further factor can be choice of article<sup>4</sup>, with the indefinite article tending to make for greater acceptability, cf. natural 'an approaching train' versus (esp. in BrE) relatively unnatural 'the approaching train'.<sup>5</sup>
- (4) Expressions such as 'a continuing commitment' , 'an ongoing concern' or 'a voting member' are typically restricted to technical or journalistic usage.

Of the various reference sources reviewed here, however, Quirk et al.'s<sup>1)</sup> treatment of prenominal participles versus participial adjectives is by far – and, given its seminal status, perhaps unsurprisingly – the most comprehensive. Treatment of the topic in others is, on the whole, disappointingly scanty.

Nonetheless, some authorities do at least have some alternative terminology to offer. Grammar website Pattern Based Writing – Quick and Easy Essay<sup>2)</sup>, for instance, prefers to term prenominal participles (somewhat confusingly, perhaps) 'participle adjectives' , whilst T. Vartiainen & J. Lijffijt<sup>3)</sup> term participial adjectives 'adjectival participles' . A. Downing & P. Locke<sup>4)</sup>, on the other hand, not only favour the label 'participial modifiers' for prenominal participles, but even offer a highly refined 3-way classification of participial adjectives (p.478) that takes account of both etymological factors (deverbal vs. non-deverbal origin) and syntactic versatility in terms of common occurrence or otherwise within the verb phrase.

Interestingly, some authorities take Quirk et al.'s<sup>1)</sup> terminology but apply it rather differently. English-Language-Grammar-Guide.com<sup>5)</sup>, for instance, cites 'sleeping' in 'a sleeping dog' as a participial adjective, even though 'sleeping' manifestly fails to satisfy Quirk et al.'s<sup>1)</sup> main criterion of adjectivity (p.413), in that we cannot say '\*a very sleeping dog' . Among other apparently contradictory uses of Quirk et al.'s<sup>1)</sup> terminology are The Internet Grammar of English<sup>6)</sup>, which lists as examples of participial adjectives both 'energy-saving devices' and 'fact-finding mission' (despite the evident unacceptability of '\*very energy-saving devices' and '\*a very fact-finding mission' ), Useful English<sup>7)</sup> , which cites 'promising' in 'a promising actor' as a participle (despite the fact that we can say 'a very promising actor', and that the expression most certainly does not refer to an actor who either habitually makes, or is even in the process of making, promises<sup>6)</sup>) and M. Lester & L. Beason<sup>8)</sup>, who elect to term 'boring' in 'boring teachers' a participle (p.100), despite its clear qualification to be considered a true adjective (cf. 'very boring teachers' ). Vartiainen et al.<sup>3)</sup> draw a thought-provoking distinction between 'freezing' in 'freezing water' (meaning simply 'extremely cold water' ), which, they claim, is

adjectival, and the same *-ing* form in the same expression but when used in the more scientifically precise sense of 'water in the process of becoming ice', which, they assert, is a participle. A slight doubt regarding the former claim must, of course, be that we cannot say '\*very freezing water', but this could simply be an instance of the same semantic/stylistic restriction that, at least by the lights of prescriptive grammarians (cf. also Quirk et al.<sup>1)</sup>, p.404), disallows degree-adverb modification of any adjective denoting an absolute or extreme state (cf. '?a very unique vase', '?a very perfect day', etc.).

Finally, no survey would be complete without at least a brief mention of authorities who appear to shed very little, if any, real light on the issue of prenominal participles. Arguably the least helpful is Online English Grammar Learning<sup>9)</sup>, which, in a section whose title includes the word 'modifies' (sic.), cites no fewer than two ungrammatical or misspelled examples ( 'A sleeping lion cannot catch a prey' and 'The girl is nursing the wondered bird' \*7). Others worthy of mention include R. Huddleston & G. Pullum<sup>10)</sup>, who confine themselves to noting (p.80) that 'approaching' in 'an approaching train' exemplifies an attributive gerund-participle functioning like an adjective (but without any comments as to what restrictions might govern the occurrence of such a form), English Practice<sup>11)</sup>, which, despite listing no fewer than 7 distinct uses of the English active participle, fails to mention its functionality as a premodifier (whereas it does include premodifier function under the uses of the past participle), Grammar-Quizzes.com<sup>12)</sup>, which avoids categorizing any *-ing* form as an adjective, preferring instead the blanket term 'participle modifier' (and consequently failing to draw any distinction between 'roasting' in 'a roasting chicken' and 'loving' in 'a loving husband', despite the fact that the latter admits modification by 'very' whereas the former does not), G. Al-Monem<sup>13)</sup>, who likewise makes no attempt to distinguish categories of prenominal *-ing* forms, and Education First<sup>14)</sup>, which, under the heading 'The Present Participle as an Adjective' lists 'amazing' in 'an amazing film' alongside 'burning' in 'a burning house' and 'setting' in 'the setting sun', despite the fact that 'amazing' would seem

to belong, notionally at least (i.e. notwithstanding the prescriptive stylistic objection cited earlier), with true adjectives such as 'interesting' and 'exciting'.

## CONCLUSION

There seem to be two main problems that face any learner endeavoring to research, in English, the correct use of prenominal *-ing* forms in general and, specifically, of prenominal active participles: one is the general paucity of information on the subject, and the other is the array of confusingly similar, yet often quite different, terms that those authorities who do treat the topic choose to employ.

It is to be hoped, therefore, that in the near future some comprehensive attempt to address or rectify those issues will be made by (a) increasing the amount of available information, and (b) establishing a greater degree of terminological consistency.

## FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Not only is adverbial modification naturally impossible, but the phonetic realization differs, in that an attributive gerund takes the phrase stress (a FLYing machine), whereas a prenominal participle normally does not (a flying SAUcer). The only generalized exception occurs when some kind of distinguishing emphasis is required by context, e.g. in an exchange of the following sort:

A: *I saw a flying SAUcer while I was swimming in the sea.*

B: *You mean in the water?*

A: *No, I said a FLYing saucer, not a FLOATing saucer!*

However, an interesting specific group of apparently arbitrary exceptions consists in such expressions as 'DRINKing man' (cited also by G. Radden & R. Dirven<sup>15)</sup>, p.155), 'WORKing man' (along with its pejorative cognate 'WORKing girl'), and 'THINKing man', all of which, despite being unquestionably participial in terms of meaning (man who works for a living, man who thinks (deeply), man who drinks (alcohol), etc.) are invariably pronounced as gerundials.

- <sup>2</sup> While there is naturally no suggestion here that grammar books or websites on English grammar

written in languages other than English are inherently inferior as sources of information on the language to those written in English, or indeed that all English grammar reference sources written in English are the work of native speakers of the language and therefore to be regarded as in some way infallible, it seems intuitively obvious that, as a general rule, those authorities who elect to write on the subject of English grammar in English are likely to be, if not educated native speakers (and consequently relatively reliable sources of information on the language), persons possessing at the very least an extremely high degree of fluency and near-native level linguistic competence. It is therefore unsurprising that some more advanced students will actively prefer to obtain their information on English grammar and usage directly from sources written in English rather than from those composed, however competently, in other languages.

<sup>3</sup> The present author, on the other hand, considers it possible that an alternative explanation might account for this, to wit that 'smiling' in 'a smiling face' is functioning non-inherently (i.e. similarly to 'beautiful' in 'a beautiful singer' used to denote the beauty of the singer's voice rather than that of her face). Further, viewing non-inherence as a subcategory of metaphorical usage, there also seems to be a case for arguing that the acceptability of a prenominal participial construction tends to increase according to its level of metaphorical applicability, and, conversely, to decrease according to its level of literality, accounting for e.g. acceptable 'running water' and 'a sitting duck', and apparently similar yet unacceptable '\*running people' and '\*a sitting boy', whilst, regarding the acceptable expression 'a sitting president', we might argue that he is to be viewed as symbolically, rather than literally, sitting at his presidential desk!

<sup>4</sup> It might, however, be more accurate/helpful to refer to definite determiners in general rather than simply to articles, since, if anything, an even greater degree of strangeness can be noted in e.g. '?this/that approaching train'.

<sup>5</sup> There are, however, some problems attaching to this point, for not only (as Quirk et al.<sup>1)</sup> freely

admit, p.1326) do some speakers not find 'the approaching train' exceptionable, but it is not even difficult to cite completely converse cases. E.g. compare natural definite NP 'the coming year' with its unnatural indefinite counterpart '?a coming year'.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Quirk et al.'s<sup>1)</sup> primary criterion as listed above. However, in fairness, it should be pointed out that Useful English<sup>7)</sup> casts serious doubt on the validity of said criterion in citing clearly participial 'flying' in 'a flying bird', 'moving' in 'a moving train' and 'growing' in 'growing interest', all of which refer to ongoing, rather than to habitual, actions. (A bird that habitually flies would normally be termed 'a bird capable of flight' rather than 'a flying bird'.)

<sup>7</sup> My underlining. ('Prey' is a non-count noun; wondered = wounded?)

## REFERENCES

- 1) R. Quirk, S. Greenbaum et al.: A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language, New York: Longman (1985)
- 2) Pattern Based Writing: Quick & Easy Essay [URL [https://patternbasedwriting.com/elementary\\_writing\\_success/true-adjectives-determiners-part-iciple-adjectives/>](https://patternbasedwriting.com/elementary_writing_success/true-adjectives-determiners-part-iciple-adjectives/>)] (retrieved Aug. 23, 2019)
- 3) T. Vartiainen & J. Lijffijt: Premodifying -ing participles in the parsed BNC [URL<<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/a6e3/7f0cc9add815affdf4259ee5f570a65b2f43.pdf>>] (retrieved Aug. 23, 2019)
- 4) A. Downing & P. Locke: English Grammar – A University Course, New York: Routledge (2006)
- 5) English-Language-Grammar-Guide.com [URL <<http://www.english-language-grammar-guide.com/present-participle.html>>] (retrieved Aug. 23, 2019)
- 6) The Internet Grammar of English [URL <<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/internet-grammar/adjectiv/particip.htm>>] (retrieved Aug. 23, 2019)
- 7) Useful English [URL <<http://usefulenglish.ru/grammar/the-participle>>] (retrieved Aug. 23, 2019)
- 8) M. Lester & L. Beason: The McGraw-Hill

- Handbook of English Grammar, New York: McGraw-Hill (2004)
- 9) Online English Grammar Learning [URL  
<<http://onlineenglishtools.blogspot.com/2011/07/modifires.html>>] (retrieved Aug. 23, 2019)
- 10) R. Huddleston & G. Pullum: The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language, Cambridge: CUP (2002)
- 11) English Practice [URL  
<<https://www.englishpractice.com/grammar/participle/>>] (retrieved Aug. 23, 2019)
- 12) Grammar-Quizzes.com [URL  
<<https://www.grammar-quizzes.com/passive4.html>>] (retrieved Aug. 23, 2019)
- 13) G. Al-Monem: Pre-modifiers in English [URL  
<<https://www.uoanbar.edu.iq/HumanitarianEducationCollege/catalog/4-ghfraan.pdf>>] (retrieved Aug. 23, 2019)
- 14) Education First [URL  
<<https://www.ef.com/ca/english-resources/english-grammar/present-participle/>>] (retrieved Aug. 23, 2019)
- 15) G. Radden & R. Dirven: Cognitive English Grammar, Amsterdam: John Benjamins (2007)
- 
- Accepted Sep. 12, 2019  
Published Dec. 20, 2019  
Correspondence:  
Alan Bunyan  
Osaka Shin-ai College, 2-7-30 Furuichi,  
Joto-ku, Osaka 536-8585, Japan  
(E-mail: alan@osaka-shinai.ac.jp)

大阪信愛学院短期大学紀要 54: B2 (2020)

## 名詞前位分詞について

本論考では、英語名詞前位「-ing」分詞に関して英語文献における情報の一部を調査し、そういった情報を改善・補足する方法に関する暫定的な提案をする。