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The Rhetorical Value and Message-Bearing Function of Split Infinitives in TIME Magazine[1]

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1. Introduction

The split infinitive, typified by structures such as *to boldly go*, has long been a topic of controversy—one that is not purely grammatical but shaped by broader ideological and stylistic preferences. The resistance to such forms, often framed in prescriptive discourse, reflects attitudes toward linguistic authority, genre conventions, and perceived decorum. In this way, the controversy itself functions rhetorically, indexing not just syntax but also social positioning and communicative stance. in English usage, often criticized as grammatically deviant. Traditionally proscribed by usage guides, it has nonetheless persisted across genres due to its expressive flexibility. Recent linguistic scholarship, including Crystal (2006) and Huddleston and Pullum (2002), recognizes its increasing acceptance, particularly in journalistic and spoken English.

The construction involves the insertion of an adverbial element between the infinitival marker *to* and the verb like the example (1) in below.[2]

(1) Samsung's savvy Korean-American marketing chief, **to boldly suggest** that he hopes to surpass Sony in brand recognition by 2005.　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　(2002/3/25)

This study investigates the rhetorical utility and pragmatic implications of split infinitives, drawing upon the TIME Magazine Corpus (1923–2006) to evaluate how these structures contribute to meaning, emphasis, and discourse flow. By analyzing this grammatical construction in a historically significant American journalistic context, the study sheds light on how syntactic variation reflects broader discursive strategies. Building upon earlier observations of split infinitives in American presidential rhetoric (Fukumoto, 2024), which emphasized not only syntactic positioning but also how rhetorical intention—such as emphasis, rhythm, and contrast—shapes cognitive framing and communicative impact, this paper aims to reassess the construction's functional potential in mass media writing, focusing on its diachronic development, contextual variability, and stylistic motivations. While previous corpus-based studies have focused largely on frequency or prescriptive attitudes (e.g., Perales-Escudero 2011; Calle-Martín & Miranda-García 2009), little attention has been paid to how these structures may serve communicative strategies within mass media. This paper aims to fill this gap by adopting a functional-pragmatic approach to usage trends in a corpus with clear editorial continuity.

2. Background and Research Questions

Historically viewed through the perspective of prescriptivism, split infinitives have often been cited as violations of grammatical purity, largely due to their perceived disruption of the *to+verb* sequence. Traditional grammars strongly discouraged their use, despite no syntactic rule being violated. Recent linguistic works (Crystal 2006; Swan 2017) have challenged this stance, arguing that the supposed rule lacks a defensible grammatical foundation.

In corpus-based linguistic research, Close (1987) provided an early functional account of split infinitives, while Calle-Martín & Miranda-García (2009) traced historical frequency shifts using diachronic corpora. Perales-Escudero (2011) conducted a genre-based frequency study and highlighted the persistence of the form across registers. Phoocharoensil (2012) compared learner corpora and standard English, suggesting educational implications. Gonzales and Dita (2018) demonstrated split infinitive usage across varieties of World Englishes. These studies, while quantitatively robust, generally overlook genre-specific rhetorical motivations and nuanced effects.

Fukumoto (2024), in a study of U.S. presidential addresses, showed how split infinitives align with prosodic phrasing, enhance thematic salience, and avoid end-focus distortions. Extending this line of inquiry, the present study integrates discourse-pragmatic frameworks with empirical corpus analysis. The research aims to answer the following questions:

1.　How have split infinitives evolved diachronically in TIME Magazine from 1923 to 2006?

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[2] Emphasis in the examples in the text is by the author.

2. What rhetorical or pragmatic functions do they serve across different decades and discursive settings?
3. In what ways do split infinitives enhance communicative efficiency, reader orientation, and textual clarity within journalistic prose?

3. Data
The primary data source is the TIME Magazine Corpus, compiled by Mark Davies (2008–), encompassing over 100 million words from TIME magazine issues published between 1923 and 2006. The corpus includes roughly 275,000 articles and is accessible through the BYU interface. Its large temporal span, editorial consistency, and status as a leading U.S. publication make it ideal for investigating diachronic patterns and stylistic evolution.

The search query "to ly_r _v?i" was used to extract split infinitives containing -ly adverbs, such as *to boldly go* or *to fully comprehend*. The choice to focus on -ly adverbs is motivated by their clear adverbial function, semantic weight, and frequency in English. After retrieval, each token was manually examined and coded for its syntactic environment, verb type, adverbial category, decade, and discourse function. Contextual excerpts were classified by genre (e.g., editorial, feature article, quote), speech/writing mode, and thematic field (e.g., politics, science, human interest).

Analytically, the study combines qualitative discourse analysis with a frequency-based survey. The pragmatic framework incorporates Grice's (1975) conversational maxims and Sperber & Wilson's (1986) Relevance Theory. Particular attention is paid to the maxim of Quantity (providing sufficient information), Manner (clarity and brevity), and Relation (relevance to context). By evaluating how split infinitives conform to or violate these maxims, the study aims to identify their functional role in guiding reader interpretation and managing information flow.

4. Diachronic Distribution and Contextual Trends
Split infinitives in TIME appeared with varying frequency across the corpus timeline, reflecting broader stylistic and ideological trends in American journalism. The 1920s and 1930s saw sporadic usage, often embedded in political reporting, legal discussions, and foreign affairs coverage. Notable examples include expressions like *to democratically elect*, *to boldly tackle*, *to legally entrench*, and *to totally exterminate*. These instances tended to occur in declarative or assertive contexts, where the adverb added evaluative force or ideological framing:

(2) Not for a long, weary while will it be possible **to democratically elect** a 'President of China.'
(1928/10/22)
(3) We must have a conference **to boldly tackle** this much bigger problem in all its aspects.   (1933/02/13)

(4) By passing a bill... British Tories hope **to legally entrench** the upper house...   (1932/11/21)

Such examples reflect the use of the split infinitive as a tool to frame political agency and institutional critique with rhetorical sharpness. They suggest that even at times of lower overall frequency, the construction was chosen for targeted communicative impact.

During the 1940s–50s, usage declined, likely due to stylistic conservatism influenced by wartime editorial policies and the dominance of formal news reporting styles. However, the construction persisted in direct quotations, opinion columns, and reflective commentary, suggesting its continued viability in dialogic or subjective registers:

(5) We don't feel ready **to blindly follow**.   (1941/6/2)

From the 1960s onward, the stylistic shift toward more explanatory and reader-friendly prose[3] catalyzed an increase in split infinitive usage. This was particularly evident in science, education, and feature writing. Common verbs included *understand*, *comprehend*, *analyze*, and *perceive*, often modified by adverbs like *fully*, *really*, or *clearly*:

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[3] The term refers to writing styles that emphasize clarity, accessibility, and processing ease, often associated with late-20th-century journalistic evolution.

(6) You have to be aggressive in your studies **to really understand** what you're doing. (1983/3/28)

(7) The ability **to fully understand** and consent is a prerequisite... (1969/11/7)

This stage marks the beginning of a gradual normalization of the construction, especially in informational prose. The rhetorical function expanded beyond assertiveness or irony to include epistemic precision, metacognitive signaling[4], and facilitative reader orientation.

Most notably, a sharp increase in frequency occurred in the 1990s and accelerated further into the 2000s. According to frequency data from the TIME Corpus, the overall split infinitives rose from 9.94 per million words in the 1980s to 31.33 in the 1990s and reached 53.21 in the 2000s. This exponential growth coincided with broader transformations in media language: a shift toward informal tone, greater cognitive accessibility, and syntactic flexibility suited to fragmented, digitally mediated reading environments. TIME's stylistic evolution reflected a move from institutional detachment to individual voice—foregrounding clarity, emphasis, and rhetorical immediacy.

In addition, the 1990s–2000s surge corresponded with new discursive demands in reporting on science, health, technology, and global affairs—topics requiring precise articulation of degrees, conditions, and processes. Split infinitives became an effective syntactic resource for encoding these nuances within the space constraints of journalistic prose.

The construction's growing ubiquity during this period suggests that it had become not merely tolerated but functionally integrated into TIME's editorial toolkit. In these later decades, split infinitives not only marked stylistic modernization but also encoded journalistic values of interpretive transparency and cognitive salience. In short, the form had become rhetorically indispensable in shaping how information was delivered, qualified, and framed in a rapidly changing communicative landscape.

5. Rhetorical Functions
5.1 Focus and Emphasis
Split infinitives often function to highlight adverbial elements in ways that foreground not just syntactic constituents but conceptual salience. By inserting the adverbial directly between the infinitive marker and the verb, writers manipulate reader attention to specific modalities or degrees of action. This positional choice transforms emphasis into a rhetorical cue, encoding evaluative stance and guiding interpretation. In this sense, such constructions do more than reorder sentence elements—they participate in meaning-making itself, where form becomes a medium of conceptual prioritization.
For example:

(8) It is no easy task for our two countries **to really understand** each other. (1997/10/27)

In this sentence, *really* intensifies the challenge of mutual comprehension. From a Gricean perspective, this satisfies the maxim of Quantity by providing specificity and the maxim of Relation by foregrounding the evaluative stance. More importantly, the insertion of *really* signals the speaker's meta-awareness of epistemic complexity. Such usage does not simply amplify but marks a shift in interactional alignment, signaling to the reader that the utterance is framed from a reflective or contrastive perspective. The rhetorical emphasis thus carries both informational and attitudinal load.

Additionally, corpus data show that high-frequency collocations such as *to really understand*, *to fully grasp*, and *to clearly see* frequently occur in argumentative and persuasive writing. These phrases are not merely intensifiers; they enact metapragmatic commentary, signaling that the writer is alerting the reader to a concept's interpretive or cognitive threshold. In this way, the construction does not just highlight content—it models how the reader should engage with that content. While some prescriptivists might object to redundancy, the rhetorical payoff in terms of interpretive focus is evident.

Although Grice's theory was not originally designed for syntactic microstructures, many corpus pragmatists (e.g., Aijmer 1996) have applied the theory productively to textual positioning strategies. The split infinitive's utility in highlighting scope and emphasis aligns with these broader discourse patterns.

5.2 Rhythmic and Prosodic Effects

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[4] Epistemic precision refers to linguistic strategies that express degrees of certainty or knowledge; metacognitive signaling refers to language that guides the reader's understanding of how to interpret or process a claim.

Another key function is the enhancement of sentence rhythm and natural prosody. Journalistic writing often mimics spoken cadence to promote accessibility, and this rhythmic alignment enacts a cognitive simulation of spoken discourse. Such simulation fosters reader engagement and facilitates comprehension, effectively linking the rhetorical structure of the sentence to cognitive processing—thus reinforcing the rhetorical-cognitive interface central to the interpretive act. The positioning of the adverb before the verb also contributes to the maintenance of natural stress patterns, allowing the reader to anticipate the semantic peak of the utterance and thereby reducing ambiguity in real-time interpretation.

(9) **To fully understand** how a protein works... (2000/3/3)

Here, *fully* precedes the verb *understand*, allowing the reader to anticipate the sentence's informational weight. This structure avoids prosodic awkwardness associated with end-weighting or delayed emphasis. In contrast, *to understand fully* may sound formal or stilted in journalistic tone. Rhythmically optimized phrasing thus aligns with TIME's communicative ethos of clarity and immediacy.

Moreover, this structural rhythm not only contributes to aesthetic fluency but also performs an affective function. The reader's internalization of rhythm facilitates an embodied reading experience—one that feels natural and unforced. As Tannen (1989) and Chafe (1982) have shown, prosody and rhythm are not merely secondary to message delivery but are primary mechanisms of discourse coherence and information packaging. Thus, the rhetorical choice of split infinitives reflects a conscious or intuitive strategy for maximizing discourse alignment between writer and reader.

5.3 Cognitive Load Management and Reader Orientation
Split infinitives can also reduce reader processing effort by positioning semantic modifiers where they are most predictable—thereby not only facilitating comprehension but also advancing rhetorical strategy. The ease with which a reader interprets the clause contributes to message fluency and argumentative strength, subtly reinforcing the intended emphasis and interpretive salience of the utterance. This aligns with cognitive models of sentence processing that emphasize incremental interpretation and the preference for early semantic disambiguation (Frazier, 1987).

(10) I defy him **to publicly deny** it. (1949/11/28)

The placement of *publicly* highlights the rhetorical weight of *deny*, while preparing the reader for the nature of the denial. The modifier's early position helps constrain the interpretive path before the verb is fully processed. Although this effect has not been directly measured for split infinitives, Staub (2010) has shown that modifier placement influences fixation time and regression patterns in eye-tracking studies. These findings support the idea that syntactic positioning can modulate reader attention and comprehension.

Importantly, split infinitives not only facilitate real-time parsing but also serve as markers of syntactic transparency. By foregrounding evaluative or manner adverbs, the construction makes explicit what is often left implicit in unmarked infinitive forms. This explicitness has rhetorical consequences: it supports inferential reasoning, reduces the risk of misinterpretation, and encourages alignment with the writer's intended epistemic stance. In genres like journalism, where clarity and trustworthiness are paramount, such cognitive clarity translates directly into rhetorical credibility.

Thus, reader-oriented positioning in split infinitives exemplifies how processing efficiency and communicative intention operate in tandem—not as separate domains but as mutually constitutive elements of rhetorical design.

6. Socio-Stylistic Factors
The rise of split infinitives in TIME correlates with broader cultural shifts that redefined both journalistic practice and public language norms. From the 1960s onward, the magazine gradually adopted a more conversational, accessible, and flexible editorial voice. This change emerged alongside wider societal movements toward democratization, individual expression, and resistance to traditional authority—a climate that also fostered linguistic innovation. TIME's editorial stance, what Firebaugh (1940) described as "irreverence toward authority", provided a discursive space for stylistic experimentation including the increased use of constructions previously deemed improper, such as the split infinitive.

Split infinitives, once stigmatized, came to signal clarity, naturalness, and audience alignment, thereby socially encoding a rhetorical stance that contributes to genre-specific meaning-making. In the

context of TIME's evolving discourse, their adoption paralleled a shift from authoritative detachment to dialogic immediacy. Writers used split infinitives not just to adjust rhythm or highlight adverbial content, but to project a voice that was both precise and personable. Their grammatical form thus became a stylistic signature in modern journalism.

Importantly, the construction's emergence as a mainstream rhetorical resource mirrors larger patterns in linguistic change. As Millar (2009) observed with modal verbs, TIME's language has gradually become more functionally driven, favoring constructions that foreground speaker intent, gradience, and epistemic nuance. Split infinitives are emblematic of this shift. By permitting adverbs to occur in informationally salient positions, they support more nuanced claims and highlight metalinguistic stance— hallmarks of contemporary professional discourse.

The construction also played a role in genre hybridization[5]. As TIME increasingly ambiguates the boundaries between editorial, feature writing, and soft news formats, split infinitives offered syntactic versatility adaptable to a range of tones. Their rhetorical adaptability made them an ideal fit for a publication navigating the tension between institutional authority and stylistic dynamism.

In summary, the trajectory of split infinitives in TIME reflects not only a grammatical evolution but also a cultural and communicative recalibration. Their uptake marks a point where linguistic form becomes of social alignment[6], where rhetorical structure itself embodies the values of accessibility, immediacy, and cognitive transparency central to contemporary journalistic voice.

7. Conclusion

This study examined the rhetorical and pragmatic functions of split infinitives in TIME Magazine across eight decades. The findings reveal that these constructions are not merely stylistic anomalies but serve vital communicative roles. Their increased use corresponds with significant shifts in journalistic tone, cultural expectations, and discourse practices that increasingly valued clarity, immediacy, and interpretive transparency.

The rhetorical role of the split infinitive highlighted in this study can be summarized as follows.

Table 1 Rhetorical function of the extracted examples

Function	Description	Example
Focus and Emphasis	Highlights evaluative stance, epistemic depth	*to really understand, to fully grasp*
Rhythm and Prosody	Simulates spoken cadence, avoids end-weighting	*to fully understand how a protein works*
Cognitive Load Reduction	Positions modifiers predictably to ease parsing	*to publicly deny it*
Reader Orientation	Models how to interpret claims (metapragmatic cueing)	*to clearly see*
Transparency and Trust	Enhances journalistic clarity and rhetorical credibility	supports Gricean maxims & Relevance Theory

These findings underscore that the split infinitive has evolved not merely as a stylistic convenience or grammatical variation, but as a rhetorically and cognitively salient structure whose form participates actively in meaning-making. The construction's ability to modulate rhythm, control interpretive alignment, and encode communicative stance confirms that form and function are inseparable in language use. Its development from a stigmatized construction to a stylistically marked and pragmatically efficient device in TIME reflects broader linguistic trends that prioritize accessibility and audience engagement.

Theoretically, this study supports the claim that syntactic choices are integral to rhetorical strategy and not secondary to semantic content. The deployment of split infinitives reveals how grammatical form

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[5] This refers to the merging of different textual conventions (e.g., news, opinion, narrative) within a single article format, often observed in late-20th-century journalism.

[6] An indexical expression links language form to social meaning (e.g., formality, solidarity).

can encode speaker intention, establish coherence, and guide inferential reasoning. In this way, the structure exemplifies the principle that rhetorical form is itself a bearer of message—an embodiment of the communicative act.

Future research could explore genre-comparative corpora to determine whether the patterns identified in TIME are mirrored across other journalistic or non-journalistic registers. Additionally, experimental methods such as eye-tracking or ERP could provide empirical evidence of cognitive processing effects associated with split infinitive positioning. Such studies would further illuminate how grammatical variation intersects with rhetorical function, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of form-function unity in discourse.

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