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# A Research on the Gerund in ME and Early Mod E

Yoshikazu Ueno

The gerund was originally a pure noun without any verbal characteristics. A little research on the gerund in the Early Modern English period will show that the *ing* form, still retaining some substantival characteristics, was rapidly gaining ground as a *verbid*. We might think that verbal characteristics of the *ing* began to appear in the Middle English period. The purpose here is to investigate how the *ing* behaved in Early Modern English and Middle English: The verbal characteristics were much weaker in Middle English than in Early Modern English.

## General Remark

What we call the gerund today is expressed in the form of *-ing* which has both verbal and substantival characteristics equally. In contrast, in a formal sense, to the finite forms of verbs, the gerund is not restricted by person, number, or mood, though it has both the voice and tense of a finite verb. For this reason the *ing* form is not called “finite verb”, but “infinite verb”, “non-finite verb”, or “*verbid*”.

The gerund was originally a verbal noun or an action noun in *-ing*; until about 1250 also with the form *-ung*.\* For instance, *bodung* (<*bodian*) ‘preaching’, *lichting* (<*liehtan*) ‘giving light’, *snyting* (<*snytan*) ‘sneezing’, *warnung* (<*warnian*) ‘warning’. In the Old English period the form *-ung* was more frequently used than the other. After about 1250, however, the former was absorbed into the latter. Our “*tiding*” derived from the Old English “*tiduug*” (<*tidan*).\*\* This kind of *-ing* was a feminine noun and possessed only the meaning of action or movement without any characteristic of a finite verb. The suffix *-ing* or *-ung* is supposed to have originated from the “*-ugga*” in the Old Germanic

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\* Curme, *Syntax*, §50 1.

\*\* Cf. Weekly, *The English Language*, p. 36.

language.\* The suffix -ung used in German today, which forms feminine nouns, such as die Kleidung or die Wohnung, still possesses the original characteristic of the suffix of the Old Germanic language.

It is one of the most remarkable phenomena in the long history of the English language that the pure noun has acquired more and more of the syntactical characteristics of the finite verbs. This will be made clear when we compare English with German, which has nothing equivalent to the English gerund.\*\* Although being a phrase, the gerund might be regarded as serving as a clause and it is quite different from the ordinary construction "preposition+noun". The reason is sought in the fact that the gerund can take a subject, an accusative and dative object, a predicative, and adverbial modifiers. Therefore Poutsma names it a "gerund-clause"\*\*\* and Curme regards it as belonging to the "abridged clause".\*\*\*\*

As to the distinguished fact that such a pure noun in Old English has acquired verbal characteristics, Jespersen says as follows. "The history of the forms in *ing* is certainly one of the most interesting examples of the growth from a very small beginning of something very important in the economy of the language. The *ing*, as I shall for shortness call the form with that ending, began as a pure substantive, restricted as to the number of words from which it might be formed and restricted as to its syntactical functions. It seems to have been originally possible to form it only from nouns, cf. modern words like schooling, shirting, stabling; as some of the nouns from which ings were derived had corresponding weak verbs, and new ings were made from other weak verbs... But it was a long time before ings were made from strong verbs; a few occur in the very last decades of the Old English period, but most of them did not creep into existence till the twelfth or thirteenth century or even later, and it is not, perhaps, till the beginning of the fifteenth century that the formation had taken such a firm root in the language that an *ing* could be formed unhesitatingly from any verb whatever (apart from the auxiliaries *can*, *may*, *must*, etc., which have no ings).\*\*\*\*\*

We can say that there are two important stages in the history of the verbal noun. The first stage is in the Middle English period, as Jespersen suggests above, when the suffix -ing came to be freely combined with the stems of the strong verbs. Precisely

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\* Cf. 山川喜久男『英語における準動詞の発達と特質』p. 125.

\*\* In a dialect of Köln, there is such an expression as "Er ist am Kommen."

\*\*\* *A Grammar of Late Modern English*, Ch. XIX.

\*\*\*\* *Syntax*, §20 3.

\*\*\*\*\* *Growth and Structure of the English Language*, §207.

speaking, most of the action nouns with the ending -ung or -ing were substituted for foreign constructions with such suffixes as “-ion”, “-ance”, or “-ism”. For example, “swy-telung—manifestation”, “costung—temptation”, “reowsung—repentance”, “fulcuning—baptism”. Accordingly the action nouns decreased in number while there appeared such dual forms as “tempting” and “temptation”. The ing form kept developing on and on, until at last it came to be treated syntactically like the finite verb.\* This is the second stage of the development of the verbal characteristics of the gerund.

These verbal characteristics began to appear in the Middle English period, but before researching how the verbal noun and the gerund behaved in those days, firstly we shall survey how strongly the verbal characteristics were felt by the people in the Early Modern English period. And secondly we shall trace back to the ing forms in the Middle English period. Among the verbal characteristics we shall pick up the one—how the ing form governed its object.

The verbal characteristics of the gerund will be examined in works of W. Shakespeare, B. Jonson, and C. Marlowe\*\* in the Early Modern English period and in works of G. Chaucer\*\*\* in the Middle English period.

## I

The reasons why we choose only Shakespeare, Jonson, and Marlowe among many famous men of letters are that these three were the most outstanding of the dramatists, and that drama, besides being a rising genre in literature at that time, was becoming increasingly popular with all classes. It might be considered, therefore, that the drama of those days reflected the feeling of the general people for the English language.

In the Early Modern English period the ing was rapidly gaining ground as an infinite verb, while it was still regarded as the survival of its original form into Early Modern English: both the verbal and substantival characteristics are found intermingled in the works of those days. Before that period when the ing was treated syntactically as a noun rather than a verbid, the object of the action or movement it indicated was expressed in one of the following ways: (1) it might be put in the genitive case (e. g. books reading),

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\* Cf. Curme, *History of the English Gerund*, trans. Kobayashi pp. 2-3.

\*\* *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. P. Alexander, London and Glasgow (Collins), 1954. *Ben Jonson*, Vols. III-V, C. H. Herford and P. Simpson, Oxford (Clarendon Press), 1954. *The Works of Christopher Marlowe*, ed. C. F. Tucker Brooke, Oxford (Clarendon Press), 1957.

\*\*\* *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson, London (Oxford University Press), 1970.

(2) it might form the first part of a compound (e. g. books-reading), (3) it might be added after the preposition “of” (e. g. reading of books). The construction (1) has already died out, while the rests are still used.\* According to van der Gaaf, it is considered that the construction (3) took the place of the other ones or that all of them united into one.\*\* Determiners were placed before the ing. This old use still survived in the Early Modern English period when another kind of construction of putting the object directly after the ing was arising.\*\*\* So in the Early Modern English period were there four ways of expressing the object of the ing: (a) the reading of books (2) reading of books (3) the reading books (4) reading books.

Now we shall quote examples from the works of the three dramatists and then research the frequency of them.

#### Construction (a)

Abbott says that this construction seems to have been looked upon as colloquial.\*\*\*\* The quotations below show that the function of the ing is not at all different from that of the noun in general.

The iterating of these lines brings golds, ... —Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus* 592.

...will I re-importune him Vnto the making of his testament, ... Jonson, *Volpone*. I. iv. 89-90.

...and I remember the kissing of her batler, and the cow's dugs her pretty chops hands milk'd; and I remember the wooing of a peascod instead of her. ... —Shakespeare, *As You Like It* II. vi 46-50.

It is very surprising that there are two examples in which, we might think, the ing has a verbal characteristic.

The quickly doing of it is the grace. —Jonson, *The Alchemist* IV. iii. 104.

I warrant you, he will not deny it; if he be not hoarce with thofe ten repeating of it. —Jonson, *Eastward Ho* V. v. 16-17.

The two ings above are modified by “quickly” and “often”. These modifiers are adverbs rather than adjectives. One reason might be sought in the fact that “often” was archaically used as an adjective in the days when Jonson wrote it. The other reason is that “often”

\* Cf. Jespersen, *Growth and Structure of the English Language*, §207.

\*\* See *The Gerund Preceded by the Common Case*, §7.

\*\*\* Cf. 大塚高信『シェイクスピア及聖書の英語』pp. 149-155.

\*\*\*\* See *A Shakespearian Grammar* V. §8. 42.

was adverbially used with gerundial and verbal substantives.\* This kind of construction in which the substantival ing and the adverb appear at the same time is out of date today. Only one example is found in Chaucer though we shall see it in II.

We might say that the two ings above possess both verbal and substantives equally.

#### Construction (b)

The substantival characteristic is the weaker only because the ing is not preceded by any determiner.

But methinks he should stand in fear of fire, being burnt ei' th' hand for stealing of sheep. —Shakspeare, *2 King Henry VI* IV. iv. 58-60.

Casting of dollers is concluded lawfull. —Jonson, *The Alchemist* IV. vii. 43.

Also in this construction the ing is sometimes modified by an adverb.

...I haue in writing here of purpose, it cost me two shillings the tricking. —Jonson, *Every Man out of his Humour* III. iv. 68-69.

That the Guise durst stand in armes against the king, For not effecting of his holiness will. —Marlowe, *The Massacre at Paris* 883-885.

#### Construction (c)

This construction was often used in the time of Shakespeare.\*\* Onion calls it “very characteristic of the period”.\*\*\*

You need not fear, lady, the having any of these lords;... —Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice* I. ii. 90-91.

Besides, the seeing these effects will be Both noisome and infectious. —Shakespeare, *Cymbeline* I. v. 25-26.

The ing is modified by an adverb:

...whereof I reckon

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\* Cf. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. Often B. adj., and Jespersen says that “Of is chiefly found when the substantival character of the gerung is shown by the use of the definite article or some other adjunct.” See *Essentials of English Grammar*, 31. 21.

\*\* Cf. 大塚高信『シェイクスピア及聖書の英語』p. 150.

\*\*\* *An Advanced English Syntax*, §181.

The casting forth to crows thy baby daughter  
 To be or none or little, though a devil  
 Would have shed water out of fire ere done't. ... —  
 Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale* III. ii. 187-190.  
 ...but there is  
 No danger in what show of death it makes,  
 More than the locking up the spirits a time,  
 To be more fresh, reviving. —Shakespeare, *Cymbeline* I. v. 39-42.

#### Construction (d)

Below are examples which contain two of the alternatives current in the Early Modern English period.

##### (a) & (b)

Wee are so busie for the receiuing of these courtiers here, that I can scarce be a minute with my selfe, for thinking of them: —Jonson, *Poetaster* II. i. 3-5.

##### (b) & (d)

Thou art so fat-witted with drinking of old sack, and unbottoning thee after supper ... —Shakespeare, *1 King Henry IV* I. ii. 2-4.

##### (c) & (d)

Sir, I feare I may doe wrong to your sufficiencies in the reporting them, by forgetting or misplacing some one. ... —Jonson, *Cynthias Revels* I. iv. 39-40.

Attempts have been made to prove that each construction has its own way of expressing its object. Our next step is to investigate which construction was most frequently used at that time. The frequency of use of each construction is given in the table below. The number there is the ratio of the frequency of the construction.

	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)
Shakespeare	15	7	3	45
Jonson	8	5	1	22
Marlowe	1,5	2	0	2
mean	6	3	1	16

The table above shows that the construction (d) was most frequently used in the Early Modern English period, and that Shakespeare and Jonson have similar tendencies,

and that Marlowe employs the construction (b) as often as the construction (d).

## II

As previously mentioned, the verbal *ing* began to acquire some verbal characteristics in the Middle English period. The verbal characteristics are found only when the *ing* takes its object directly without the preposition “of” and when the *ing* is modified by the adverb. There was no passive gerund nor perfect gerund. Curme explains that these two new “complex *ings*” came into existence in the sixteenth century.\*

We shall deal with the four constructions in which how the *ing* governs its object. The construction (c) was very rarely found in the time of Chaucer.

### Construction (a)

According to Jespersen, this construction was a regular one in Middle English.\*\* The *ing* used here is a pure noun. For example,

I have gret norysynge of thyn hele, and that is, the sothe sentence of governance of the world, that thou bylevest that the governynge of it is nat subgit ne underput to the folye of thise happes aventurous, but to the resoun of God. —Chaucer, *Boece* I. Prosa 6. 84-88.

The “governynge” has nothing but the value of a pure noun “governance”. Below are some examples:

...that is the ende why that men sholde do goode werkes, for in the acomplissynge of grete goode werkes lith the grete gerdoun. —Chaucer, *The Parson's Tale* 737-740. And al dischevele, with hire heres cleere,

In habit swich as women used tho

Unto the buryinge of hire frendes go,

She sit in halle with a sorweful sighte. —Chaucer, *The Legend of Good Women* 1829-1832.

For certes, in this world ther is no wight that may be conseyllid ne kept sufficently withouten the keypyng of oure Lord Jhesu Crist. —Chaucer, *The Tale of Melibee* 1295-1305.

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\* See *Syntax*, §50 2. The expression “complex *ing*” is given by Kruisinga. See *A Handbook of Present-day English*, II. §137.

...whan the thought is makid Godis knyght by the sekyng of cleer trouthe to comen to the verray knowleche of God. ... —Chaucer, *Boece* IV. Metrum 1. 14-17.

The heete of this seed is the love of God, and the desiryng of the joye perdurable. —Chaucer, *The Parson's Tale* 120.

There is nothing verbal in all the ings above. But the following example contains an ing which has a verbal characteristic by combining with an adverb.

This sacrement bitokneth the knyttyng togidre of Crist and of hooly chirche. —Chaucer, *The Parson's Tale* 840.

#### Construction (b)

So far as I have researched, this construction seems to have been used as frequently as the construction (a) in Chaucer.

Some examples are shown in the following:

For al the nyght he shoop hym for to swynke  
In carynge of the gold out of that place. —Chaucer, *The Pardoner's Tale* 874-875.  
“Swiche wreche on hem, for fecchyng of Eleyne,  
Ther shal ben take, er that we hennes wende,  
That Manes, which that goddes ben of peyne,  
Shal ben agast that Grekes wol hem shende. —Chaucer,  
*Troilus and Criseyde* V. 890-893.

As, whan a thyng is shapen, it shal be—  
That soone after the mydnyght Palamoun,  
By helpyng of a freend, brak his prisoun  
And fleeth the citee faste as he may go. —Chaucer,  
*The Knight's Tale* 1466-1469.

Now been ther thre manere of almesse: contricion of herte, where a man offreth hymself to God; another is to han pitee of defaute of his neighebores; and the thridde is in yevyng of good conseil and comfort, goostly and bodily....—Chaucer, *The Parson's Tale* 1025-1030.

Also in this construction is there one example in which the ing is modified by an adverb.

Men may also refreyne venial synne by receyvynge worthily of the precious body of Jhesu Crist; by receyvynge eek of hooly water. ... —Chaucer, *The Parson's Tale* 384-385.

In Chaucer there are many ings which are used in both the construction (a) and the construction (b).

### 1. Get

construction (a)

Forwhy, for as moche as by the getyng of blisfulnesse men ben makid blisful, and blisfulnesse is dyvinite, than is it manifest and open that by the getyng of dyvinite men ben makid blisful. Right as by the getyng of justise... and be the getyng of sapienee thei ben makid, wise... whan they han geten dyvinite thei ben makid goddes. —Chaucer, *Boece* III. Metrum 9. 130-150.

“And certain is,” quod sche, “that by the getyng of good men ben ymakid gode.” —*Boece* IV. Prosa 2. 66-67.

In the getyng of which good the strenghe of good folk is ful wel yseene. —*Boece* IV. Prosa 2. 158-159.

construction (b)

Afterward, in getyng of youre richesces and in usyng hem, ye shul alwey have thre thynges in youre herte, that is to seyn, oure Lord God, conscience, and good name. —*The Tale of Melbee* 1624.

In the example of the construction (b), the construction (d) is also used in a parallel way.

### 2. Take

construction (a)

But what yif that in bodyes to ben feled (*that is to seyn, in the takyng of knowl-echyng of bodily thinges*),... —*Boece* V. Prosa 5. 1-3.

construction (b)

...as is the manere in takyng of houres, and ley thy label on the degre of the sonne. ... —*A Treatise on the Astrolabe* 29. 6-8.

### 3. Accuse

construction (a)

Of the nombre of whiche accusours, oon Basilius, that whilom was chased out of the kyngis servyse, is now compelled in accusyng of my name for nede of foreyne moneye. —*Boece* I. Prosa 4. 111-115.

For certes thilke same day was resceyved the scusyng of myn name by thilke same accusours. —*Boece* I. Prosa 4. 129-131.

construction (b)

#### 4. Keep

##### construction (a)

...ye lete the keypyng of youre persone for youre presumpcioun. ... —*The Tale of Melibee* 1314.

Certes, the avricious man sheweth no pitee ne misericorde to the nedeful man, for he deliteth hym in the keypyng of his tresor, and nat in the rescowyng ne releevyng of his evene-Cristen. —*The Parson's Tale* 804.

##### construction (b)

And al be it so that it seme that thou art in siker place, yet shaltow alwey do thy diligence in keypyng of thy persone. ... —*The Tale of Melibee* 1321.

...‘Do greet diligence,’ seith Salomon, ‘in keypyng of thy freend and of thy goode name; for it shal lenger abide with thee than any tresour, be it never so precious.’ —*The Tale of Melbee* 1638-1639.

#### 5. lose

##### construction (a)

...the lesyng of thilke blisfulnesse ne be nat sorwful to hym. ... —*Bocce* IV. Prosa 6. 310.

##### construction (b)

Namoore, up peyne of lesyng of youre heed! —*The Knight's Tale* 1707.

#### 6. Break

##### construction (a)

Certes, the brekyng of this sacrement is an horrible thyng. —*The Parson's Tale* 841.

##### construction (b)

First, brekyng of feith; and certes, in feith is the keye of Cristendom. —*The Parson's Tale* 874.

Though there are some other verbs belonging here, six kinds of verbs will do.

##### Costruction (c)

Only one example is found in *The Romaunt of the Rose*.

Sire, if thee lyst to undirstande,  
I merveile the askyng this demande. —2051-2062.

The ing in the following may belong to the construction (c) though it takes no

object:

...the boylynge up from the botme. ... —Chaucer, *Boece* 1. Metrum 7. 5.

Construction (d)

In this construction the *ing* takes its object directly and is freely accompanied by an adverb. Below are some of them.

...in preisyngre greetly Melibee of myght, of power, of richesse, and of freendes, despisyngre the power of his adversaries, ... —Chaucer, *The Tale of Melibee* 1018. Thanne is discipline eek in knokkyngre of thy brest, in scourgyngre with yerdes, in knelynges, in tribulacions, in suffryngre paciently wronges that been doon to thee, ... —Chaucer, *The Parson's Tale* 1050-1060.

The *ing* takes a clause as its object:

And yet the harde thinges, as stones, clyven and holden here parties togidere ryght faste and harde, and defenden hem in withstondyngre that thei ne departe nat lyghtly atwynne. —Chaucer, *Boece* III. Metrum 10. 142-146.

The *ing* is sometimes preceded by its object especially when the “taking” combines with the “vengeance”.

...it is nat to repreve in yevyngre of juggement ne in vengeance takyng, whan it is sufficeant and resonable. —Chaucer, *The Tale of Melibee* 1031.

Thanne seye I that in vengeance-takyng, ... —Chaucer, *The Tale of Melibee* 1344. But whoso wolde considere an alle vengeancees the perils and yveles that myghte sewe of vengeance-takyngre, a man wolde nevere take vengeance, and that were harm; for by the vengeance-takyngre been the wikked men dissevered fro the goode men, ... —Chaucer, *The Tale of Melibee* 1428.

This is one example in which the *ing* precedes the noun.

And yet seye I moore, that right as a singuler persone synneth in takyngre vengeance of another man, right so synneth the juge if he do vengeance of hem that it han disserved. —Chaucer, *The Tale of Melibee* 1434-1435.

Now we shall try to know which construction Chaucer uses most frequently. The

frequency of each construction is given in the table below. Like in the table in I, the number is the ratio of the frequency of the four construction.\*

(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)
60	60	0	30

Judging from the table above, it is clear that Chaucer uses the construction (a) as frequently as the construction (b), and more frequently than the construction (d). The table also shows that the verbal characteristics in the four constructions were less strongly felt by Chaucer than by Shakespeare, Jonson, and Marlowe.

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\* The data for the table are quoted only from Chaucer's works in prose. They are *The Tale of Melibee*, *The Parson's Tale*, *Bocce*, and *A Treatise on the Astrolabe*.