

## What is 'infinitival *to*'?

Nearly all English dictionaries list infinitival *to* as a preposition.

Despite etymological justification, this cannot be right.

A PP with *to* is often OK where a *to*-infinitival isn't, or vice versa:

\* *They tried* [PP *to reconciliation.*] [PP bad]

*They tried* [VP *to reconcile.*] [VP good]

*They were amenable* [PP *to reconciliation.*] [PP good]

\* *They were amenable* [VP *to reconcile.*] [VP bad]

## Infinitival *to*: A preposition?

Same with these examples:

*This road leads* [PP *to the market.*]

[PP good]

\**This road leads* [VP *to get there quickly.*]

[VP bad]

\**I long* [PP *to Mongolia.*]

[PP bad]

*I long* [VP *to see Mongolia.*]

[VP good]

## Infinitival *to*: A preposition?

And the same with these:

[VP *To go on a cruise*] *would be boring.*

[VP good]

\*[PP *To Enseñada*] *would be boring.*

[PP bad]

\**The play bored me* [VP *to cry.*]

[VP bad]

*The play bored me* [PP *to tears.*]

[PP good]

*It's silly for you* [VP *to cry.*]

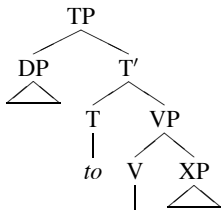
[VP good]

\**It's silly for you* [PP *to tears.*]

[PP bad]

## Infinitival *to*: a dummy Tense element?

Many recent accounts treat infinitival *to* as a sort of dummy realization of the tense:



This is perverse. The tense element always gets shifted to the end of the following inflectable item, and appears there as a suffix. That is the whole point of such nodes. But *to* is not a suffix, does not express tense, and does not shift.

Moreover, modals are supposed to occupy the slot in question, which would make a sensible treatment of *ought to* V or *is to* V impossible.

## Infinitival *to*: An auxiliary verb?

Infinitival *to* behaves a lot like a non-finite auxiliary verb (as noted by P. M. Postal; R. A. Hudson; R. W. Fiengo; and G. K. Pullum).

Stranded by Post-Auxiliary Ellipsis: *I already am* [<sub>VP</sub> e]  
*I don't want to* [<sub>VP</sub> e]

Stranded by VP Fronting: *And* [<sub>VP</sub> *eat it*] *you will* [<sub>VP</sub> e]  
*And* [<sub>VP</sub> *eat it*] *you're going to* [

## Infinitival *to*: An auxiliary verb?

Allows *not* before it:

*I expect you to serve our customers, not be rude to them.*

*You're here to serve our customers, not to scare them.*

but not following it when stranded:

\* *You should be eligible, but you may be not.*

\* *You could do that, but you ought to not.*

## Infinitival *to*: An auxiliary verb?

Most strikingly, it shows the effect discovered by Arnold Zwicky and Nancy Levin: it resists stress when stranded.

*\*He's reported to be dead, and he could **bé** [VP e] as far as the newspapers are concerned.*

*\*He should have fixed it by now, and he may **háve** [VP e] for all I know.*

*\*I couldn't get a job; it's difficult **tó** [VP e] in this economic climate.*

## Infinitival *to*: An auxiliary verb?

Despite these parallels, *to* is a highly anomalous verb:

- Never appears in an independent clause (even *beware* does!)
- No meaning at all, not even conventional implicature
- Specifically selected as head by other lexical heads (no other particular verb can really be said to be required in certain contexts)



## Infinitival *to*: An auxiliary verb?

Instead of occurring freely wherever a VP is allowed, *to* is

- sometimes optional: *He often helps to clear up* ~ *He often helps clear up*;
- sometimes obligatory: *I was made to act like an idiot* ✗  
\**I was made act like an idiot*
- sometimes forbidden: *They made me act like an idiot* ✗  
\**They made me to act like an idiot*

## Infinitival *to*: A subordinator?

Some of the facts about *to* suggest it might be a **Subordinator**.  
*CGEL* opts for this view, as did Postal & Pullum (1978).

Subordinator properties of infinitival *to*:

- does not inflect
- appears only in subordinate clauses
- semantically inert
- syntactically selected by certain lexical heads
- sometimes optional, like the subordinator *that*

## Infinitival *to*: A subordinator?

Yet *to* is also a horribly anomalous Subordinator:

- Attaches pre-VP, not clause-initially
- Co-occurs with another Subordinator (in *for you to do that*)
- Strands under ellipsis (*I don't want to \_\_\_\_\_*)

## Infinitival *to*: What is it really?

Infinitival *to* appears to have such unique and idiosyncratic behavior that once you have listed all its special features and privileges of occurrence, **there is nothing more to say**.

Nothing is gained by putting it in any category at all.

Some parsing systems in computational linguistics assign it to its own special category, **To**.

That is essentially the same as assigning it to no category at all. And it may be right.

# Prescriptive Poppycock Interlude

## SPLIT INFINITIVES

... to boldly go where no man has gone before

[Prologue to each episode of the original *Star Trek* series]

Books that actually claim the split infinitive is bad grammar are actually very rare. But there are a few:

‘Don’t split your infinitives. They’d rather remain intact.’

[Karen Elizabeth Gordon (1984), *The Transitive Vampire*]

# Prescriptive Poppycock Interlude

## SPLIT INFINITIVES

**In general, a belief that split infinitives are ungrammatical is diagnostic for deep ignorance about English grammar.**

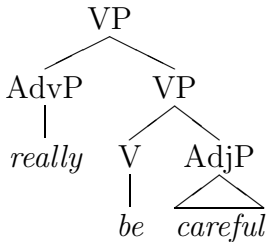
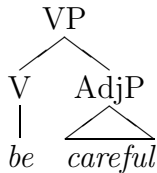
English has no part of the verb paradigm that is appropriately called ‘the infinitive’.

The plain form has many uses other than in infinitival complements (in imperatives, in subjunctives)

# Prescriptive Poppycock Interlude

## SPLIT INFINITIVES

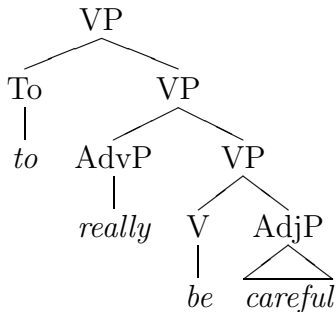
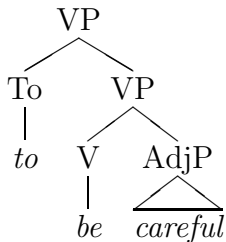
Adverbs are fine at the beginnings of verb phrases:



# Prescriptive Poppycock Interlude

## SPLIT INFINITIVES

And infinitival clauses, whatever their internal structure, are marked by a prefixed *to*:





# Prescriptive Poppycock Interlude

## SPLIT INFINITIVES

The sequence '*to at least try*' gets about 650,000 Google hits.  
Top hit (as of 16 January 2009):

*Employers have to realize that they have to at least try to  
explore possible reasonable accommodations . . .*

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?? *Employers have to realize that they have to try at least to explore possible reasonable accommodations . . .*  
(Wrong meaning.)

# Prescriptive Poppycock Interlude

## SPLIT INFINITIVES

E. B. White suggests:

“the [split infinitive] construction should be avoided unless the writer wishes to place unusual stress on the adverb.”

Curme (1930) also makes a remark that suggests this. But it is often the reverse of the truth, since English stress tends to fall on final VP constituents:

*My disappointment would be hard to adequately express.*  
*My disappointment would be hard to express adequately.*

# Prescriptive Poppycock Interlude

## SPLIT INFINITIVES

Split infinitives from *The Red Badge of Courage* by Steven Crane (published 1895, when Strunk was 26):

1. *He tried to* [VP *mathematically prove to himself that he would not run from a battle*].
2. *He began to* [VP *blithely roar at his staff. . .*]
3. *The youth had a thought that it would not be handsome for him to* [VP *freely condemn other men*].
4. *He waited as if he expected the enemy to* [VP *suddenly stop, apologize, and retire bowing*].

# Prescriptive Poppycock Interlude

## SPLIT INFINITIVES

Split infinitives from *Dracula* by Bram Stoker (published 1897, when Strunk was 28):

1. *I feared to disturb Lucy or her mother, and hoped to [VP only bring a servant to the door].*
2. *I said to him, “Go to Dr. Van Helsing, and ask him to [VP kindly come here at once]...”*

# Prescriptive Poppycock Interlude

## SPLIT INFINITIVES

More split infinitives from *Dracula*:

3. *And so we proceeded to* [VP *minutely examine them*].
4. *... the more I have studied, the greater seems the necessity to* [VP *utterly stamp him out*]...
5. *He seems to have power at these particular moments to* [VP *simply will*], *and her thoughts obey him.*

# Prescriptive Poppycock Interlude

## SPLIT INFINITIVES

Beyond the *to*-infinitive: *The Texas Manual on Style* (for lawyers) insists that **sequences of verbs** must be uninterrupted by adjuncts.

This is incompatible with *I will faithfully execute...*! And thus:

ROBERTS: *I, Barack Hussein Obama...*

OBAMA: *I, Barack...*

ROBERTS: *do solemnly swear...*

OBAMA: *I, Barack Hussein Obama, do solemnly swear...*

ROBERTS: *that I will \_\_\_ execute the office of president to the United States faithfully...*

OBAMA: *that I will execute...* [stops; puzzled smile]

ROBERTS: *faithfully the office of president of the United States...*

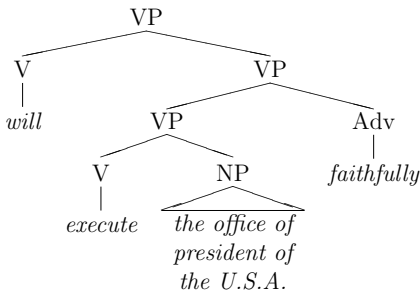
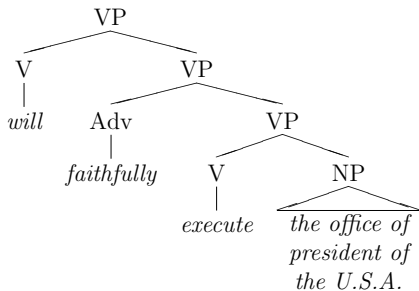
OBAMA: *the office of president of the United States faithfully...*



# Prescriptive Poppycock Interlude

## SPLIT INFINITIVES

The two structures:



# Prescriptive Poppycock Interlude

## SPLIT INFINITIVES

Why you as linguists should care about this stupid non-issue:

- educated Americans have no clue about any of this
- you are members of a tiny minority
- you are like M.D.s in a culture that reveres witch doctors
- if there is to be any future of sensible attitudes to language among the general public, it depends on you

# Prescriptive Poppycock Interlude

SPLIT INFINITIVES

## PartiallyClips

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LOOK, IF THEY WANTED A DOG WHICH SNIFFED EXPLOSIVES, THEY SHOULD HAVE SENT ME AN INVOICE FOR AN "EXPLOSIVE-HYPHEN-SNIFFING-SPACE-DOG."

WHAT THEY REQUESTED IN WRITING WAS AN "EXPLOSIVE-SPACE-SNIFFING-HYPHEN-DOG."



SO YOU BOMBED THE FBI OVER A PUNCTUATION RULE? YOU COMPROMISED NATIONAL SECURITY...

WHAT GOOD IS SECURITY IF ONE MUST COMPROMISE ONE'S PRINCIPLES?

THE RULES OF ENGLISH ARE NOT SUGGESTIONS TO CASUALLY FOLLOW AS ONE WISHES.

RIGHT.



LET THE RECORD SHOW THAT THE WITNESS SPLIT AN INFINITIVE.

...

I'D LIKE TO CHANGE MY PLEA TO "GUILTY."



YOU TOTAL-SPACE-NUT-HYPHEN-BASKET.