THE GERUND IN THE FUNCTION OF SENTENCE CONDENSER

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1. This article deals with the gerund as a means of sentence condensation with the aim to find out to what extent its condensing capacity applies to different syntacto-semantic configurations occurring in texts. It is assumed that this capacity of the gerund is limited since where it alternates with a finite clause the two structures, though expressing the same clause element in a given sentence, differ in significant syntactic features.¹ The finite clause contains the subject and the verb is realized by a finite verb phrase, whereas the gerundial construction most commonly lacks an overt subject and the verb is realized by a nonfinite verb form, whose verbal categories are restricted to tense and voice.

Expression of secondary predications by gerundial, as well as participial and infinitival constructions, typical of Modern English, has been labelled by the term sentence condensation, or complex condensation, because it makes it possible to express "entire complexes of content" (Mathesius, 1975, p. 146). Thus, in situations where there exist two alternative ways of expression – finite clause on one side and a gerundial construction on the other, the gerund may be looked on as a means of complex condensation.²

The following discussion presents partial results of a larger study³ which treated the gerund occurring in contemporary narrative prose as an obligatory and optional clause element. It attempted to map out the status of the gerund in the grammatical system of Modern English as it is presented in academic grammars of contemporary English, and focused on its actual use as a means of sentence condensation, as compared with the frequency of its use. The research was done from a solely synchronistic point of view. The material for the analysis was excerpted from works of narrative literature by the contemporary British authors Malcolm Bradbury (MB), Anita Brookner (AB), Margaret Drabble (MD), David Lodge (DL), V. S. Naipaul (VSN) and Fay Weldon (FW). All the works were first published in the 1980s and 1990s. The examined corpus contained 904 instances of the occurrence of the gerund in various syntactic functions. In order to delimit gerundial constructions functioning as sentence condensers it was necessary to find sentences in which the actual gerund could theoretically be realized by a finite clause. It was assumed that if the gerund in a particular syntactic function could be replaced by an alternative finite clause without the whole sentence becoming ungrammatical, it could be considered a sentence condenser.
2. Since the replacement of the gerund by a finite clause is a matter of syntactic structuring, only such expressions and structures superordinate to the gerund (verbs, adjectives, nouns, some prepositions) came into account which theoretically allow both ways of expression.

2.1. Within the examined corpus of 904 instances, 175 sentences were found (19.4% of the total) which contained gerundial constructions regarded as theoretically admitting replacement by a finite clause. Detailed analysis of these structures showed that in 133 cases (76% of the 175 instances theoretically replaceable by a finite clause) it was possible to replace the gerund by an alternative finite clause easily, without having to solve relevant obstructive factors, i.e. factors which influenced either the interpretation of the resulting structure or made it stylistically awkward, or ungrammatical.

In 22 cases (12.1% of the instances theoretically replaceable by a finite clause) the replacement appeared problematic because there occurred significant limiting conditions, having the character of obstructive factors, which had to be solved, but whose solution brought about profound changes: the resulting structure appeared to be a debatable compromise.

In 20 cases (11.9% of the instances theoretically replaceable by a finite clause) the replacement of the gerund by an alternative clause was not feasible. The reasons were mainly connected with the syntactic structure of the original clause containing the gerund, which would be disrupted by the introduction of an alternative finite clause instead of the gerund, with a new interpretation of semantic relations in the resulting structure, or with significant changes in FSP in the resulting sentence.

2.1.1. Detailed consideration showed that replacement by an alternative finite clause of the gerund in the function of subject and subject complement may be regarded as peripheral mainly because the number of sentences with these clause elements realized by the gerund was rather limited: 54 cases of the gerundial subject (3.8%), and 18 cases of the gerundial subject complement (2%) out of the total of 904 instances of the gerund in various syntactic functions.

Apart from this, only 3 gerunds (5.6%) in the function of subject and 2 gerunds (11.1%) in the function of subject complement theoretically allowed the replacement by an alternative finite clause.

Theoretically, in qualifying copular predications the subject can be realized by a finite clause (apart from the infinitive), but there are certain restrictions. The actual replacement of the gerund depends on a number of limiting conditions con-
connected with explicit expression of the semantic relations as a consequence of the introduction of a particular conjunction and a finite verb into an alternative finite clause, and with potential change in the distribution of communicative dynamism. Unlike the gerund, a finite clause in the function of subject seldom occurs in the preverbal position; the extrapolation with the anticipatory it as the formal subject in the initial position is more common, but on the other hand, the use of such structuring might cause changes in the distribution of communicative dynamism of individual clause elements within the resulting sentence.

(1) "I can't think it's very cheerful, living with this stuff on the walls." (MD, p. 326)
   Potential alternative: a) "… that you live with this stuff on the walls." (?)
   b) "… when you live with this stuff on the wall." (?)
   c) "… if you live with this stuff on the wall." (?)

Although referring to a particular situation at a particular moment, the utterance seems to express an evaluation of more or less general validity, conveyed by the gerundial construction, whereas the alternative finite clause (with a concrete subject and a finite verb) somehow excludes this aspect of evaluation, the resulting structure sounding more topical and personal than the original structure. Apart from this, it seems more acceptable to use the conjunctions when or if instead of that here, but then, of course, the semantic aspects of "time" or even "condition" are introduced into the meaning of the resulting sentence.

2.1.2. Out of the 18 instances of the subject complement realized by the gerund only 2 (11.1%) seemed replaceable by an alternative finite clause. They were both copular identifying predications:

(2) The only thing was not being able to talk to anyone. (MB, p. 53)
   Potential alternative: The only thing was that I wasn’t able to talk to anyone.

(3) "… I find the worst thing is not being able to quarrel with one's wife" … (MB, p. 151)
   Potential alternative: "… I find the worst thing is that one is not able to quarrel with one’s wife" …

In the other structures, the gerundial constructions were introduced by the preposition like. This preposition, conveying the meaning of "evaluation by means of resemblance", cannot be replaced by the conjunction that, should be retained and as such, can only be followed by a nominal element (either a genuine noun or a non-finite form of the verb).4

2.1.3. The replacement of the gerund in the function of premodifier is impossible because of its pre-head position. In this position, the gerund, regarded as a syntac-
tic noun, conveys a general semantic meaning "something (an instrument, a place…)
which is used for something/doing something", i.e. it functions as a classifier. The
gerund and its head-noun form a syntagma called "fixed" combination or "collo-
cation", in which the gerundial premodifier could only be replaced by a periphras-
ic structure placed in postposition. This procedure would cause profound syntactic
as well as semantic changes.

(4) the sleeping pill (VSN, p. 144)
    Potential alternative: the pill which is used for falling asleep (?)

(5) a laughing matter (MD, p. 15)
    Potential alternative: a matter which is/can be joked about (?)

2.1.4. The number of cases in which the replacement by an alternative finite clause
is possible has increased significantly with structures containing the gerund in the
function of appositive postmodification of abstract nouns expressing mainly ex-
trinsic modality, or human judgement rather than control of an action (e.g. chance,
fear, feeling, hope, idea, impression, probability…). In spite of the fact that a num-
ber of gerundial constructions in this function allowed the replacement by an alter-
native finite clause (35 out of the total of 206, i.e. 17%), certain relevant obstruc-
tive factors appeared (such as the syntactic arrangement of the structure containing
the gerund, different semantic interpretation of the sentence as a consequence of
new semantic relations introduced into an alternative finite clause by the conjunc-
tion and finite verb, the difficulty of finding a suitable means of expressing the
general agent), which influenced (more or less) the character of the resulting sen-
tence, and had to be taken into account.

(6) "I began rather fancifully to propose the idea of privatizing the universities" …
    (DL, p. 312)
    Potential alternative: "I began rather fancifully to propose the idea that the uni-
versities should / could / might be privatized" … (?)

The obstructive factor is the necessity of finding a suitable modal auxiliary. Each
of the suggested modal verbs expresses a specific aspect within intrinsic or extrinsic
modality which can hardly be unequivocally inferred from the original gerundial
construction because of its typical vagueness allowing a range of aspects of mean-
ing. On the other hand, the implied general agent of the gerund is preserved by
the passive in the alternative finite clause, and hence does not obstruct finite con-
struction.

Out of the 35 cases of potential replacement of the gerund in the function of post-
modifier by an alternative finite clause, there were 3 (8,6%) in which it proved in-
feasible. In all of them the gerundial constructions were linked to other noun phrases forming a coordinative postmodifier. The replacement of the gerund by a finite clause would disrupt the syntactic arrangement of the original syntactic structure of the postmodifier made up by genuine or syntactic nouns.

(7) And already a feeling of being lost, of truth not fully faced, of a world whose great size I had seized … (VSN, p.105)

Potential alternative: —

2.1.5. The gerund in the function of direct or prepositional object occurred exclusively after verbs taking an object realized by a verbal or deverbal noun. They are abstract verbs conveying mainly "phases of action", "cognition", "affective stance", "avoidance", "effort", and "facilitation". Owing to their semantic-syntactic characteristics, some of these verbs also take direct (or prepositional) objects realized by a finite clause.

The analysis of alternative finite clauses replacing the gerundial constructions in the function of direct and prepositional object showed that a vast majority of the gerunds theoretically allowing such replacement (54 cases out of the total of 244, i.e. 22.13%) really admitted it (46 cases, i.e. 85.2% out of the 54 theoretically replaceable gerunds).

(8) "I wouldn't advise setting the dogs on anyone …" (FW, p. 71)

Potential alternative: "I wouldn't advise that you (should) set the dogs on anyone …"

(9) … she remembered waking some time before and hearing a door close quietly … (AB, p. 36)

Potential alternative: … she remembered that she had woken some time before and heard a door close quietly …

Recurring obstructive factors were mainly connected with the necessity to express explicit semantic relations as a consequence of the introduction of a conjunction, a subject (this factor also applies to ex. (8)), and a finite verb into an alternative finite clause. In 3 cases (5.5 %) the replacement was obstructed by the necessity of explicit interpretation of the communicative function in the alternative clause, which was vague or ambiguous in the original structure containing the gerund (ex. 10):

(10) "…I have a migraine, Angus, would you mind stroking the back of my neck?"

(MB, p. 160)

Potential alternative: —

The replacement of the gerund by a finite clause would be possible if mind + gerund expressed "asking for permission"; this communicative function, however, involves different agents of the actions expressed by the finite and nonfinite form.
In (10), **mind + gerund** expresses a different communicative function – "a polite request". These differences in communicative functions connected with differences in agency entirely block the alternation.

Another limiting factor which also recurred was the syntactic arrangement of the original structure containing the gerund usually coordinated with a noun phrase or more noun phrases. An alternative clause used instead of the gerund would impair the syntax of the structure, and thus the replacement was ruled out (ex. 11):

\[
\text{(11) } \text{I remember the drive and the detour with my new neighbour, his talk of the people and the beauty of various "bits", and his pointing out to me the cottages in the lane ... (VSN, p. 286)}
\]

Potential alternative: —

2.1.6. Unlike gerundial constructions in the function of object of monotransitive verbs (non-prepositional and prepositional) which could often be replaced by an alternative finite clause, none of the gerundial constructions realizing the second (prepositional) object of ditransitive verbs allowed replacement by a subordinate finite clause in the same syntactic function. An explanation is found in the grammatical government (in conjunction with the semantic meaning) exerted by the verb on its complements which did not allow the second object to take any other form than a prepositional phrase (a preposition and its complement realized by a nominal expression: a real, deverbal or verbal noun, or a gerund) (ex. 12):

\[
\text{(12) } \text{I tried my hand at writing a novel, and sent it to Mary Fisher's publishers. (FW, p. 240)}
\]

Potential alternative: —

2.1.7. As for the possibility of replacing the gerund in the function of adverbial by an alternative finite clause, out of the 195 gerundial adverbials found in the examined corpus (i.e. 21.6% out of the total of 904 gerundial constructions) only those were analyzed which were introduced by prepositions functioning also as subordinating conjunctions (including the preposition for). The range of gerunds allowing potential replacement thus embraced the adverbials expressing "time position" introduced by the prepositions after (22 cases, i.e. 11.3%) and before (26 cases, i.e. 13.3%) used as conjunctions in alternative finite clauses, in (3 cases, i.e. 1.5%), on / upon (7 cases, i.e. 3.6%), replaced by the most common time conjunction when, adverbials expressing "cause" introduced by the preposition for (3 cases, i.e. 1.5%), which was replaced by the neutral conjunction because, and adverbials conveying the semantic categories of "preference" and "comparison of non-equivalence" introduced by the prepositions rather than (3 cases, i.e. 1.5%) and than (5 cases, i.e.
2.6%), respectively, both functioning as conjunctions. The number of the gerundial constructions in the function of adverbial theoretically allowing their replacement by a finite clause was 69 (i.e. 35.4%).

Only the gerundial constructions conveying the semantic categories of "time" and "cause" proved to be replaceable by finite dependent clauses (exx. 13–16):

(13) But she noticed with sorrow, after waving him goodbye, that he had not touched the plate of little delicacies she had salvaged for him … (AB, p. 133)
Potential alternative: But she noticed with sorrow, after she waved him goodbye, that he had not touched the plate of little delicacies she had salvaged for him.

(14) Or had the guests waited until midnight, the witching hour, before turning into swine? (MD, p. 39)
Potential alternative: Or had the guests waited until midnight, the witching hour, before they turned into swine?

(15) In travelling to India I was travelling to an un-English fantasy, and a fantasy unknown to Indians of India: … (VSN, p. 141)
Potential alternative: When I travelled to India, I was travelling to an un-English fantasy …

(16) … but she knew well enough, on waking, that their (her children’s) arms had long outgrown her enfolding. (FW, p. 176)
Potential alternative: … but she knew well enough, when she woke, that their arms had long outgrown her enfolding.

In the analysis of individual alternatives certain limiting conditions, or obstructive factors recurred, known already from the previous analyses; mainly:
– stylistic problems connected with the recurrence of the personal pronouns with identical reference:

(17) She would try to watch them surreptitiously, before putting them in the laundry basket for her mother to inspect. (MD, p. 140)
Potential alternative: She would try to watch them surreptitiously, before she put them in the laundry basket for her mother to inspect. (?)

– difficulties connected with explicit expression of the semantic relations within a finite clause:

(18) She had stopped, then, in Florence, where her parents had arranged for her to spend the night, before catching the morning train to Perugia. (MD, p. 189)
Potential alternative: She had stopped, then, in Florence, where her parents had arranged for her to spend the night, before she caught (?) / was going to / was to catch the morning train to Perugia. (?)
– problems connected with potential disruption of the syntactic arrangement of individual clauses (finite or non-finite) within the resulting structure, especially in sentences containing the expression *than*, which could theoretically be used as a conjunction conveying "comparison of non-equivalence" (CGEL, 1985, pp. 1127–8).

(19) "At her age there should be more to life than buying clothes." (AB, p. 96)
Potential alternative: —

(20) She had better things to worry about than sitting near the brow of a motorway flyover in a clapped-out old Renault 4 in the pouring rain. (MD, p. 267)
Potential alternative: —

In spite of these limiting conditions, which considerably affected the actual process of replacing the gerund by a finite clause, or even made it impossible, most of the analysed gerundial constructions in the function of adverbial appeared to allow such replacement (47 cases out of 69 cases regarded as theoretically replaceable, i.e. 68.1%).

3. Having taken into consideration the actual process of replacing individual gerundial constructions by their potential alternatives, we can make the following summary:

In the analyses of the individual gerundial constructions in various syntactic functions, and their potential clausal alternatives, there recurred certain problems or difficulties which can generally be regarded as blocking or obstructive factors, having an impact not only on the actual process of replacing but also on the resulting finite clause, functioning as an alternative of the gerund.

These factors can be classed into several categories according to the linguistic phenomenon which they involve, the frequency of their occurrence and the extent to which they affect (or even prevent) the actual replacement:

3.1. Obstructive factor involving the necessity to express a subject of an alternative finite clause, and its form: this factor mainly presents stylistic problems connected with the need to reintroduce subjective, objective or possessive forms of personal pronouns with identical reference, or on the other hand, problems caused by potential confusion of individual referents of the personal pronouns occurring in the clauses. This difficulty seems to be one of the main obstructive factors (see exx. 17, 21, 22):

(21) ... the more she protested her love of walking, the more paradoxically certain she was of securing a lift to her own front door. (MD, p. 220)
Potential alternative: … the more she protested her love of walking, the more paradoxically certain she was that she would be able to secure a lift to her own front door.

(22) He wasn't complaining, he liked the idea of being "called away" … (VSN, p. 229)

Potential alternative: He wasn't complaining, he liked the idea that he would / might be called away.

3.2. Obstructive factor connected with the necessity to express a subject conveying the general agent in finite clauses functioning as alternatives of gerundial constructions with the covert subject regarded as the general agent: this problem can be solved by using various lexical means (see exx. 3, 23):

(23) It contained only this idea of getting by, of lasting, of seeing one's days out.

(VSN, p. 217)

Potential alternative: It contained only this idea that a person / one / could get by, last, see one's days out.

Sometimes the only solution seems to be the passive (see exx. 6, 24):

(24) She sat in lecture theatres and nodded eager agreement as the Young Turks of the Faculty demolished the idea of establishing a single, univocal meaning for a literary text. (DL, p. 46)

Potential alternative: … as the Young Turks of the Faculty demolished the idea that a single, univocal meaning for a literary text could be established.

3.3. Obstructive factor connected with the necessity of expressing explicit semantic relations within an alternative finite clause: in general, the gerund seems to be neutral or vague in expressing semantic relations, and thus allows a certain freedom in their interpretation. However, this is no longer possible with the introduction of a particular conjunction and a finite verb into an alternative finite clause (there are difficulties connected with the choice of modal auxiliaries expressing different types of modality, with the choice of the tense of the finite verb, or with the interpretation of the communicative function of a finite clause) (see exx. 1, 8, 10, 18, 25, 26):

(25) She had thought of trying to sell her old car at a give-away price to Brian and Alix, … (MD, p. 354)

Potential alternative: She had thought that she would / could / might sell her old car at a give-away price to Brian and Alix, …

(26) "It was great, working with you …" (MD, p. 373)

Potential alternative: a) "It was great that I had worked/ had been working with you …" (?)

b) "It was great when I was / had been working with you …" (?)
3.4 Obstructive factor connected with the syntactic arrangement of the original structures containing the gerund: this problem mainly involved multiple clause elements realized by coordinated gerunds and noun phrases, forming a syntactic unity, copular predications with both the subject and subject complement realized by gerunds, or adjectival relative clauses containing an expression superordinate to the gerund. This factor made the actual replacement impossible (see exx. 7, 11, 12, 27):

(27) ... he was bluffing it out, insisting on his respectability, on not being an American Negro, on not being fazed by the aeroplane and by the white people. (VSN, p. 101)
Potential alternative: —

This problem also involved sentences with the gerundial adverbial of comparison introduced by the expression than, which could theoretically be converted into a conjunction introducing a dependent finite clause. None of the structures containing this type of the gerundial adverbial allowed the replacement (see exx. 19, 20).

3.5. Obstructive factor connected with the position of the gerundial construction: this factor emerges mostly in replacing gerunds functioning as adverbials, whose position, dependent on a number of various conditions (e.g. whether they are obligatory or optional, whether they are contextually bound, or are part of the rheme of a syntactic unit...), varies from initial, via medial, to final. Having analyzed all the 195 gerunds in the function of adverbial found in the examined corpus, we came to the conclusion that gerunds placed in the final position in the sentence structure could be replaced by a finite alternative clause more easily than gerunds placed in the initial or medial position (see exx. 28, 29)

(28) Mr. Wilcox Senior had retired in 1975 after working all his life, first as a toolmaker, later as a store supervisor ... (DL, p. 171)
Potential alternative: Mr. Wilcox Senior had retired in 1975, after he had worked all his life, first as a toolmaker, later as a store supervisor.

(29) ... her mother ... had talked vividly and amusingly, before falling once again into the sorrow of reminiscence. (AB, p. 116)
Potential alternative: ... her mother ... had talked vividly and amusingly, before she fell once again into the sorrow of reminiscence.

It was the replacement of the gerund in the medial position (mostly within complex sentence structure and having a parenthetical character) that seemed to bring about certain problems, such as potential impairment of the original syntactic structure as well as a certain change in the distribution of communicative dynamism (see exx. 30, 31, 32):
(30) *Ruth, after leaving Mrs. Trumper's employ, went straight to a students' café in the university area of the city and spent an hour or so drinking coffee and watching the young people who came in and out.* (FW, p. 108)
Potential alternative: *Ruth, after she left Mrs. Trumper's employ, went straight to a students' café in the university area* .

(31) *The man who had never been safe became, upon leaving her, safe to her.* (MD, p. 46)
Potential alternative: *The man who had never been safe became, when he had left her, safe to her.*

(32) *But it was to the other folder that her hands went and, on opening it, she moved instinctively to the table* . (AB, p. 10)
Potential alternative: *But it was to the other folder that her hands went and, when she opened it, she moved instinctively to the table.*

4. The obstructive factors connected with the replacement of the gerund by a finite dependent clause suggest certain qualities and features of the gerund which make it distinct from its potential alternative. These qualities, such as the co-occurrence of a preposition, often conveying a blend of semantic meanings, the retention of the verbal government, the absence of an overt subject, as well as the absence of a conjunction and a finite verb, typically allowing a certain vagueness in the expression and interpretation of temporal and other semantic relations, modal meanings and communicative functions, are fully exploited in the construction of sentences, usually of more complex structure.

At this point a question arises whether in a particular syntactic function where both syntactic means may appear, the gerund should be regarded only as an alternative of a finite clause, restricted in its function only to reducing the number of finite clauses within a sentence, or whether it can be regarded as a synonym of a particular finite clause, having similar, but not identical meaning. Apart from the apparent reduction of the number of finite clauses, the gerund (owing to its qualities) makes it possible to introduce into a sentence (or a clause) a range of various shades, semantic indications or nuances, and thus to make the language as a means of communication, more flexible, sensitive and capable of expressing complexity of thought. Owing to this, it seems appropriate to look upon the gerund from this angle, and to regard it as a most flexible means of expression at the syntactic level.
Note

1 In some cases the gerund can alternate with the infinitive, which, as a non-finite form, shows the same limitations as the gerund does, in comparison with the finite clause: the absence of the subject and significant limitations in the expression of verbal categories.

2 The phenomenon of complex condensation is closely connected with the nominal trends typical of Modern English sentences described by Vachek (Vachek, 1974)

3 The Status of the Gerund in the System of Modern English with Respect to its Condensing Function (Petrlíková, 2005)

4 In substandard language (as well as in American English) the preposition like can function as a conjunction. Then, in structures of that type the replacement is theoretically possible.

Bibliography

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Since the gerund behaves as a finite verb form with respect to complementation and modification, it qualifies to form secondary predications. In this role, it is regarded as one of the means of complex sentence condensation. In a number of such cases, there is a theoretical possibility of replacing the gerund construction by a finite dependent clause.

Detailed consideration of 175 potential clausal alternatives has shown that there recur certain problems that appear as blocking or obstructive factors having an impact not only on the actual process of replacement, but also on the resulting finite clause functioning as an alternative of the gerund.

The limiting factors can be classified into several categories according to the linguistic feature which they involve, their frequency of occurrence and the extent to which they affect the actual replacement.

On the other hand, they suggest certain qualities of the gerund which make it different from its potential alternatives and which can be fully exploited mainly in the construction of more complex sentences. Apart from the apparent reduction of the number of finite clauses, the gerund makes it possible to introduce into a sentence a range of various shades of meaning, semantic indications and nuances, and to make thus the language more flexible and capable of expressing complexity of thought.