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Both to infinitive and to -ing complements may involve subject control in English, but the article points to major grammatical differences between these two types of construction. In spite of the differences, some higher verbs have vacillated between the two types of complement in recent centuries, often undergoing change in their complement selection properties. The study draws on the TIME Corpus and the Spoken Part of COCA, and shows that the verb commit oneself has selected both types of complement in recent American English. It also examines explanatory principles that can be invoked to account for the variation, with the emphasis on a semantic distinction between obligational and non-obligational contexts. The distinction, it is argued, plays a significant role in explaining variation between the two types of complement.

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1. Introduction

Dwight Bolinger, writing in 1968, formulated what has come to be called Bolinger's Generalization. This says that a “difference in syntactic form always spells a difference in meaning”. It is not always easy to pinpoint a difference between two forms that are close in meaning, but subsequent work has proved the value of the Generalization in directing attention to the meanings of different constructions and in thus guiding research at the syntax-semantics interface. The present study examines the application of the principle to comparing a type of *to* infinitive with a type of *-ing* complement in recent English. In such work, it would be possible to adopt a top-down method of surveying the history of writings on the subject, but here a bottom-up approach is adopted, where the focus is on one particular verb in English and its complement selection. To illustrate the patterns to be investigated, consider sentences (1a-b):

- (1) a. John wished to borrow money.
b. John resorted to borrowing money.

In (1a) the matrix verb *wish* selects a *to* infinitive complement, and in (1b) the

matrix verb *resort* selects what is here called a *to -ing* complement.

Sentences (1a-b) share a number of properties. It is assumed here that in each of them the complement of the higher verb is sentential, with its own subject. This is a somewhat controversial assumption to make, but several traditional and modern grammarians of English have made it. Apart from such an appeal to tradition, it may be noted that the postulation of an understood subject makes it easy to represent the argument structure of the lower predicate.

Another similarity between the sentences of (1a-b) is that in both the higher subject is an argument of the matrix verb, receiving a theta role from the higher VP. This means that the structures in question are both control structures, and that neither involves NP Movement or an *Acc -Ing* complement. Traditional grammarians did not use a particular symbol for an underlying subject, but in accordance with more recent work the symbol 'PRO' is employed here to represent the understood subjects of sentences of the type of (1a-b).

However, there are also robust syntactic differences between the patterns. First, it is observed that the two types of complement are not interchangeable, at least not in the case of the matrix predicates *desire* and *resort*. Both (2a) and (2b) are ill formed:

- (2) a. *John wished to borrowing money.
b. *John resorted to borrow money.

Further, it is observed that the substring that follows the word *to* may be ellipted in the case of (1a) but not in the case of (1b):

- (3) a. John wished to borrow money but Mary did not wish to.
b. *John resorted to borrowing money but Mary did not resort to.

On the other hand, the substring that follows the word *to* can be replaced by a pro-form such as *that* in the case of (1b), but not in the case of (1a):

- (4) a. *John wished to borrow money but Mary did not wish to that.
b. John resorted to borrowing money but Mary did not resort to that.

One way to account for such differences is to adopt the traditional assumption that the *to* of sentence (1a) is syntactically different from the *to* of sentence (1b). The *to* of (1a) may be termed an infinitive marker (Quirk et al. 1985: 1178-9, note a), and syntactically it is under the Aux (or Infl, see Chomsky 1981, 18-19) node. For its part, the *to* of (1b) is a preposition. It should be emphasized that while the term 'infinitive marker' is used here, it is not suggested that the infinitival *to* is devoid of meaning. On the contrary, it may carry a meaning, as may other terminal elements under the Aux node (For some discussion of the semantics of this kind of *to*, see Rudanko 1989: 36.)

The lower sentence that follows the preposition *to* in (1b) may be termed a nominal clause, which may be viewed as a sentence dominated by a NP.

Eschewing elaborate projections, the following syntactic bracketings for (1a-b) may be used as appropriate for the study of argument structure:

- (5) a. [[John]_{NP} [wished]_{Verb} [[PRO]_{NP} [to]_{Aux} [[borrow]_{Verb} money]_{VP}]_{S2}]_{S1}
 b. [[John]_{NP} [resorted]_{Verb} [to]_{Prep} [[PRO]_{NP} [[borrowing]_{Verb} money]_{VP}]_{S2}]_{NP}]_{S1}

The syntactic differences may then be explained in a straightforward fashion. The postverbal substring is a VP in the case of the infinitival *to*, but not in the case of the prepositional *to*. The former may therefore be subject to VP Deletion or its interpretive analogue, but the latter, not being a VP, is not subject to it. As for the pro-form *that*, *that* is an ordinary pro-form for a NP. This means that it is possible to use it in the case of the nominal clause complement that follows the prepositional *to*, as in (4b), but not in the case of the infinitival *to*, where no nominal clause follows the word *to*.

There is thus a syntactic bifurcation of the two kinds of *to*, and the structures concerned are sharply different from a grammatical point of view. However, in spite of the syntactic differences observed, it has been noted in the literature that certain matrix predicates – verbs, adjectives, and even nouns – have undergone variation and change between the two patterns in recent centuries. For the majority of verbs the change has tended to involve the spread of the *to -ing* pattern at the expense of the *to* infinitive pattern. Subject control verbs that have been discussed and illustrated in the literature as involving the spread of the *-ing* pattern include *object* and *look forward* (Denison 1998: 265-6; Rudanko 1998). There are some verbs in whose complements *to* infinitives have become more prominent in relation to *-ing* complements in recent times, including *fail* (see Denison 1998: 267; Rudanko 2000: 116-23), which used to select *of -ing* complements. However, overall the change has tended to be in favor of *-ing* complements, whether ‘straight’ or prepositional. The spread of *-ing* complements at the expense of *to* infinitives is a prominent feature of what has come to be called the Great Complement Shift, following pioneering work by Günter Rohdenburg (2006).

In the literature, the focus has generally been on verbs that displayed variation in the nineteenth or early twentieth century. The present study has a focus on twentieth-century English, and one verb exhibiting variation is investigated. This is the matrix verb *commit*, used reflexively. Here are two initial illustrations of it. (The illustrations in what follows are from the *TIME* Corpus unless specified otherwise. The date indicates the year of publication of the data in the *TIME* Corpus.)

- (6) a. National Airlines (New York to Miami) also committed itself to buy jets.
 (1955)
 b. ... has not yet committed itself to enforcing the new court deadline.
 (1970)

Examining the entry for *commit* in the second edition of the *OED* (1989), it is not easy to find the usage of (6a-b) recorded among the senses of the verb in that standard work of reference. The closest senses are two reflexive usages of

commit oneself, 10.d and 10.e. Sense 10.d is defined as ‘to pledge oneself by implication to a course (evil or risky)’, and it is illustrated for instance with *This is what comes of committing ourselves to an evil line of conduct* (1839, J. H. Newman, *Par. Sermon*).

The association of the sense with an ‘evil or risky’ course fits the illustration from J. H. Newman, but it does not quite fit the illustrations in (6a-b). At the same time, the more general sense ‘to pledge oneself ... to a course of action’ is appropriate enough to interpreting the sense of the verb in (6a-b). As for illustrations in the *OED*, the example from J. H. Newman is the only one under the sense in the *OED* where the verb takes a complement. The complement is clearly of the *to* NP type.

As for sense 10.e, it is defined as ‘to enter into commitment (sense 6 c)’. For its part, sense 6.c of *commitment* is given in the *OED* as follows:

an absolute moral choice of a course of action; hence, the state of being involved in political or social questions, or in furthering a particular doctrine or cause, esp. in one's literary or artistic expression; moral seriousness or social responsibility in artistic productions.

The first illustration of this sense is from 1948; here is an illustration from two years later:

- (7) ‘If you want to commit yourself’, writes a young imbecile, ‘what are you waiting for? Join the Communist Party.’ (*OED*, 1950, P. Frechtman, tr. *Sartre's What Is Literature*)

The references to an ‘absolute moral choice of a course of action’ and to ‘one’s literary or artistic expression’ in the definition of the sense of *commitment* seem rather narrow from the point of view of the illustrations in (6a-b).

In sentence (7), the verb does not have a complement, and this is also true of the other illustrations of the sense in the *OED*.

The *OED* is helpful in pointing to reflexive uses of *commit*, but the senses offered are somewhat narrow, and it is questionable whether they need to be separated. Illustrations such as sentences (6a-b) suggest that the verb has the broader sense of ‘enter into an undertaking’ or simply ‘undertake’.

The syntactic variation between *to* infinitives and *to -ing* complements of the verb *commit*, as in the sentences of (6a-b), is of theoretical interest because of the robust grammatical differences between these two types of sentential complement. That the variation is not illustrated in the second edition of the *OED* provides further motivation for discussing and comparing *to* infinitive complements and *to -ing* complements of *commit oneself*. This study sets out to carry out such a discussion and comparison. The purpose is not only to provide a more detailed picture of the argument structure of the verb *commit oneself*, but also to see if the argument structure of this verb can contribute to an understanding of the general properties of *to* infinitive and *to -ing* complements.

The approach in this study is corpus based. Two corpora are examined, the *TIME* Corpus and a section of the Corpus of Contemporary American English, COCA. The *TIME* Corpus is a corpus of American newsmagazine English, covering the entire life span of *TIME* Magazine from 1923 onwards. It is approximately 100 million words in size. As for COCA, it is approximately 380 million words, and it is divided into a number of segments, which are Spoken, Fiction, Magazines, Newspapers, and Academic. For this investigation, the Spoken text type is chosen. This is done partly for practical reasons, for it is necessary to start somewhere, and partly in order to consider an agile text type, alongside the text type of newsmagazine English.

2. Sentential Complements of 'Commit Oneself' in the *TIME* Corpus

The first task confronting any corpus-based study is that of deciding on an appropriate search string or on more than one string. In the present study two search strings are used, to collect data and to obtain information on frequencies. These are simply '[commit] *self to' and '[commit] *selves to.'

The search strings retrieve a largish number of *to* NP complements, as in (8):

(8) I have avoided committing myself to any candidate for President ... (1926).

The availability of *to* NP complements to *commit oneself* is worth noting, and such complements may have helped in the emergence of *to -ing* complements, given that *-ing* clauses are at the nominal end of sentential complements.

Turning to sentential complements, the frequencies of the two types of complement from the different decades of the corpus are in Table 1:

	<i>to</i> infinitives	<i>to -ing</i>
1920s	2	0
1930s	0	2
1940	6	1
1950s	10	4
1960s	13	7
1970s	7	10
1980s	4	7
1990s	2	3
2000s	0	5

Table 1. The frequencies of *to* infinitive and *to -ing* complements of *commit oneself* in the *TIME* Corpus

The number of words for each decade varies, but is in the region of some 8 to 12 million words. Here are the earliest tokens of each type:

- (9) a. No place, no opponent was named, but Dempsey committed himself to encounter either of the two logical challengers ... (1926)
 b. In effect, the No. 1 U. S. mail-order house committed itself to paying out approximately all it earned. (1936)

The frequencies recorded in Table 1 indicate that in the first two decades of the corpus both types of complement were extremely rare. From the 1940s onwards the numbers of tokens go up somewhat, and in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s *to* infinitives are more frequent than *to -ing* complements. In the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s *to -ing* complements are more frequent than *to* infinitives, but in the 1990s the numbers are low for both. In the first decade of the 21st century the number of *to* infinitives goes down to zero. The trend observed in Table 1 agrees with the general spread of *-ing* complements, both non-prepositional and prepositional, at the expense of *to* infinitives that has been observed for a number of other verbs, adjectives and nouns, and which is one part of what has been called the Great Complement Shift.

In order to have a sharper focus on variation in complement selection in the present material, it seems appropriate to examine the period from the 1940s to the 1990s. This excludes the 1920s, 1930s and 2000s. As only one pattern was found in these decades, it is hardly possible, in their case, to speak of variation. Here are the frequencies for the sixty year period from the 1940s to the 1990s:

	<i>to</i> infinitives	<i>to -ing</i>
1940-1999	42	32

Table 2. *To* infinitives and *to -ing* complements 1940-1999

Both syntactic and semantic principles have been proposed in the literature to explain the variation between *to* infinitive and *-ing* complements, including *to -ing* complements, in cases of variation. A syntactic consideration is the Extraction Principle. In his pioneering article Vosberg (2003) formulated it as follows:

Extraction Principle

In the case of infinitival or gerundial complement options, the infinitive will tend to be favoured in environments where a complement of the subordinate clause is extracted (by topicalization, relativization, comparativization, or interrogation etc.) from its original position and crosses clause boundaries. (Vosberg 2003: 308)

In Rudanko (2006) the principle was broadened to include the extraction of adjuncts out of complement clauses (see also Vosberg 2006: 63-7), and it has been shown to be a salient factor in a number of cases of variation. However,

in the present material there are only four extractions, and they are evenly spread, two for each pattern. Here is an illustration of each:

- (10) a. ... as regards the problems of society, the graduate is looking for a career in which he can commit himself to help solve these problems. (1968)
 b. ... orders for everything from helicopters and hydrofoils to the 490-passenger Boeing 747 jet continent hopper, for which Pan Am alone has committed itself to spending another \$525 million for deliveries starting in 1969. (1966)

Turning to a possible semantic factor, it should be observed at the outset that the task of semantic differentiation of the two patterns is a complex one. A full survey cannot be attempted here, but Allerton (1988: 21) observes that the “infinitive-gerund distinction, in its healthy state, can be summed up with the following features”:

Infinitive	Gerund
infrequent activity	regular activity
intermittent activity	continuous activity
interrupted activity	continuing activity
contingent/possible event	event presented factually
particular time and place	neutral time and place
specific subject	non-specific subject
more verbal character	more nominal character

Table 3. Allerton's summary of the infinitive-gerund distinction

Similar concepts have often come up in other comparisons of the semantics of the two types of sentential complement, and for instance with reference to the last distinction ‘more verbal character’ versus ‘more nominal character,’ there is no doubt that Allerton is right. There is a scale of sententiality or nouniness among sentential complements, and *to* infinitives are more sentential than *-ing* clauses (see Ross 1973). The point is linked to the idea that the *-ing* clause that follows the preposition *to* is a nominal clause, as argued at the beginning of the article. On the other hand, it is not easy to apply all the other ideas in comparing *to* infinitive and *to -ing* complements selected by *commit oneself*. For instance with respect to control, ‘specific subject’ versus ‘non-specific subject,’ it is certainly true that infinitive complements almost invariably involve an understood subject that is controlled, but so do many *-ing* complements. In the case of sentences such as (6a-b) and (10a-b) it is hard to make any distinction based on control, for both types of constructions involve straightforward subject control.

The proposal that is developed here originated from earlier studies on the adjective *accustomed* (Rudanko 2006, 2007, 2010a, 2010b). This adjective is similar to the verb *commit oneself* because it is likewise attested both with *to*

infinitive and *to -ing* complements involving subject control in twentieth-century English. Today that adjective generally selects *to -ing* complements in preference to *to* infinitives, at least in more agile text types such as newspaper English and the spoken language, but a great deal of variation was encountered in the course of the 20th century. Variation was at its peak in the 1920s and the 1930s. Here are two illustrations from that period of variation, also from the *TIME* Corpus:

- (11) a. ... in Andalusia businessmen and lawyers are accustomed to take life easily. (1931)
 b. Long have New Yorkers been accustomed to seeing each summer begin with some such headline as DITMARS SAILS TO HUNT BUSHMASTER, and with DITMARS BACK, NO BUSHMASTER. (1934)

On the basis of sentences of the type of (11a-b) it was proposed that a semantic distinction can be discerned between the two types of complement selected by the adjective. With respect to the *to ing* complement, it was suggested that the adjective 'conveys the sense of 'be used to', with the complement of the adjective expressing a regular situation' (Rudanko 2006: 39). As far as the *to* infinitive complement is concerned:

The sense of the adjective may be close to that of 'tend', with the complement of the adjective expressing a regular practice. There may thus be more of a sense of choice on the part of the referent of the matrix subject in the case of the *to* infinitive complement than in the case of the *to -ing* complement. (Rudanko 2006: 39-40)

The comments on the adjective *accustomed* and its complements emphasize the interplay of the sense of the matrix predicate and the type of complement selected. However, it is also possible to take the view that the sense of the adjective remains fairly constant and that the difference in sense is located in the type of complement. Adopting this perspective and building on the comment in Rudanko (2006: 39-40), it is proposed in Rudanko (2009, 2010a, 2010b) that a *to* infinitive complement with *accustomed* is associated with a [+Choice] context and that a *to -ing* complement is associated with a [-Choice] context. A prototypical [+Choice] context is one where the lower subject is agentive, as in (11a). A non-agentive lower subject as in (11b), on the other hand, involves a [-Choice] context, with the subject of *see* generally being linked to a nonagentive reading. (For more discussion, see Rudanko (2010a, 2010b). An even more prototypical type of [-Choice] lower subject is found in a sentence where the lower predicate is in the passive voice, as in (12):

- (12) In London last week correspondents noticed that Comrade Litvinov, once accustomed to being snubbed by Statesman Stimson at Geneva, now hobnobs in friendly fashion with Snubber Stimson's successor, Secretary of State Cordell Hull. (1933)

The distinction proposed for the adjective *accustomed* does not lend itself to the study of the verb *commit oneself* in exactly the same form. This is simply because the sense of the verb favors an agentive lower subject, with an element of choice entailed. For instance, while a passive lower clause is quite

normal with the adjective *accustomed*, as in *accustomed to being snubbed* in sentence (12), a combination of the type *commit oneself to being snubbed*, is hardly likely. However, it is possible to extend the notion of [Choice] to some extent, and to conceive of the distinction in broader terms. To get at the extended notion, consider (13a-b):

- (13) a. Kennedy's civil rights proposals were the broadest presented by any 20th century President. And he completely committed himself to fight for them. (1963)
- b. Thus believing that a true Zionist must necessarily commit himself to settling in Israel, Ben-Gurion has branded U.S. Zionists as hypocrites, and has fenced for years on the issue with Zionist President Goldmann. (1961)

The predicates *to fight for them* and *settling in Israel* both have agentive subjects, and a distinction simply on the basis of the semantic role of the lower subject does not help in this case. However, it is possible to extend the idea of choice. In (13a) the referent of the subject of *commit oneself* is presented as making the commitment freely and of his free will. However, sentence (13b) conveys a sense that the referent is under an obligation to make the commitment. The latter sentence involves some external agent or force acting on the will of the referent of the subject of *commit oneself*, with the person then entering into the commitment at least partly in response to the prompting or pressure. The term 'obligational context' is used here for this kind of context. On the other hand, the term 'non-obligational context' may be used for (13a), where the commitment is conceived as unprompted.

The setting up of a distinction between an obligational and a non-obligational context raises the question of what criteria can be used to support the distinction. This question is complex, and a full and definitive answer cannot be supplied here, but as a working hypothesis, it may be proposed that the presence of an obligational modal, as in (13b), is one type of grammatical reflex of an obligational context. In (13b) the force of the obligational modal *must* is reinforced by the adverb *necessarily*, but the context would be obligational even without such reinforcement.

It is possible to conceive of other reflexes of an obligational context. For instance, consider (14a-b):

- (14) a. The task force recommended that the Government commit itself to keep HOP going through the end of the century at first-year levels or higher. (1988)
- b. The U.S., he insisted, had committed itself to joining him in resuming the war. (1953)

(14a-b) express the idea of an external agent acting on the will of the referent of *commit oneself*, prompting the entity to enter into a commitment. The expression of such influencing cannot be limited to one type of grammatical construction. (14a-b) illustrate two potentially relevant constructions. In (14a) the complement is a *that* clause complement of the mandative verb

recommend. In (14b) the mandative verb *insist* is in a parenthetical and is used as a reporting verb, but the construction is related to *he insisted that the U.S. had committed itself to joining him in resuming the war*, and it is appropriate to view the context obligational because of the sense of insistence expressed by the verb.

In addition, it is possible to suggest that when the referent of the subject of *commit oneself* is presented as not making a commitment or as refusing to make a commitment, this may likewise come within the purview of the absence of a freely given commitment, since in this case there is no commitment. It may be added that negating the making of a commitment may be likely in a context where there is some sense of expectation or even obligation felt by someone that the referent of the subject should or might make a commitment. Thus a negative element together with *commit oneself* makes the context obligational. Consider (15a-b):

- (15) a. By annexing Texas, the U.S. certainly did not commit itself to relinquish what has been a fundamental cornerstone of its world policy. (1958)
b. The Justice Department, which earlier this week announced that it would make every effort to ensure complete desegregation by next fall, has not yet committed itself to enforcing the new court deadline. (1970)

Of the three types of obligational contexts described, the first two are similar in involving some form of pressure, whether expressed by way of a modal or by way of a mandative higher verb or a parenthetical, on the referent of the subject of *commit oneself* to enter into a commitment. The negative context broadens the concept of an obligational context, but is here treated together with the first two contexts under the label obligational. This decision is subject to further investigation of course, but adopting it here, it is observed in the light of the illustrations in (14a-b) and in (15a-b) that there cannot be any hard and fast rule invariably linking an obligational or a non-obligational context to one particular type of complement.

However, it is recalled that a *to* infinitive complement of *accustomed* was associated with a [+Choice] context and a *to -ing* complement with a [-Choice] context when grammatical variation between the patterns was at its height. A [+Choice] and a non-obligational context have a natural affinity, while a [-Choice] and an obligational context belong together. The default hypothesis for the matrix verbs *commit oneself* is therefore that at a time of grammatical variation between the two types of complement, a non-obligational context might favor a *to* infinitive complement, and that an obligational context might favor a *to -ing* complement. To put it another way, it might be expected that an obligational context would aid in the spread of the *to -ing* pattern.

Exploring the default hypothesis, the following frequencies of the two types of complement are observed:

	non-obligational	obligational
<i>to</i> infinitive	35	7
<i>to -ing</i>	19	13

Table 4. Frequencies of *to* infinitive and *to -ing* complements in non-obligational and obligational contexts

Non-obligational uses of *commit oneself* predominate for both *to* infinitive and *to -ing* complements, and among such uses *to* infinitives are prevalent. However, in obligational context *to -ing* complements are more frequent. Using the Chi-square test, it is observed that the difference based on the semantic distinction is significant at the 0.05 level of significance ($df = 1$).

Among the 20 tokens of obligational contexts, as many as 12 involve a negation of *commit oneself*, and the remaining 8 involve an obligational modal or a mandative higher predicate that expresses some influencing of the referent of the subject of *commit oneself*. In both groups, *to -ing* complements are more frequent than *to* infinitives, 6 to 4 in negative contexts and 6 to 2 in the mandative/modal contexts.

Overall, this study of the *TIME* Corpus suggests that the obligational versus non-obligational contrast is a semantic or contextual factor that may have played a role in complement selection at a time of grammatical variation between the two subject control patterns.

3. Sentential Complements of 'Commit Oneself' in COCA, Spoken Part

Turning to the Spoken part of COCA, partly in order further to investigate the obligational versus non-obligational factor identified in the section above, the two searches '[commit] *self to' and '[commit] *selves to' retrieve 103 and 75 tokens, respectively, that is, a total of 187 tokens. *To* NP complements are very frequent among the tokens, as in (16). (Illustrations in this section are from COCA, unless specified otherwise.)

(16) I don't think he's committed himself to one side or the other. (2007)

Of the 187 tokens, 72 are relevant, with sentential complements involving subject control. The corpus is 78.8 million words in size, and the 72 tokens thus represent a frequency of 0.9 per million words. Both types of sentential complement are found, and the overall frequencies of the two types are given in Table 5:

<i>To</i> infinitives	34
<i>To -ing</i> complements	40

Table 5. Frequencies of *to* infinitive and *to -ing* complements in the Spoken part of COCA

A slight majority of the tokens are thus of the *to -ing* type.

As far as extractions are concerned, there are four found, and three of these are in the context of *to* infinitive complements and one in the context of a *to -ing* complement. Here is an illustration of each:

- (17) a. ... these scenes serve as a harsh reminder of the depth of poverty and despair that the United States has committed itself to ease in Haiti. (1994)
- b. And what I've committed myself to doing, and everything we do, is to create limitless opportunities, so if someone distinguishes themselves, they can grow. (2002)

The larger proportion of *to* infinitives in relation to *to -ing* complements is consistent with the Extraction Principle, but the very low numbers mean that the Principle cannot be appealed to as an explanation in the present case.

Turning to the obligational versus non-obligational distinction, there are different obligational contexts found in the material. The three contexts of obligational modals, mandative contexts, and negative contexts are again included as obligational. As regards obligational modals, the modal *should* is the most frequent, but *ought to* is likewise found:

- (18) a. I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal before this decade is out of landing a man on the moon ... (1998)
- b. And I think we ought to all commit ourselves to trying to help him. (1996)

Other mandative contexts include a higher verb or a higher noun expressing the hope or the recommendation that the referent of the subject of *commit oneself* should realize or fulfil the action expressed by the lower clause.

- (19) a. We would like the United States, number one, to commit itself to defend our population against continuing aggression ... (1993)
- b. But we've been given the opportunity of making a new beginning and let's, for goodness sake, commit ourselves to say that the things that are awful in our past we will not allow to happen ever again ... (1999)
- c. I don't hear anyone recommending that that action be taken, that the United States commit itself to bringing about some kind of a solution, simply that the killing be stopped. (1991)
- d. Egypt's foreign minister said his nation hoped that all countries in the region will commit themselves to doing away with weapons of mass destruction. (1991)

As regards negations of *commit oneself*, only one token is found:

- (20) ... we couldn't join monetary union, we couldn't commit ourselves to going ahead into political union because ... (1990)

It is already clear from the illustrations provided that there cannot be any hard and fast rule linking one type of complement to one type of context. However, it is still of interest to examine the question, and a noteworthy tendency may be noted. The tendency is in line with what was observed in the *TIME* Corpus. Here are the frequencies of the two types of complement in the two contexts:

	non-obligational	obligational
<i>to</i> infinitive	31	3
<i>to -ing</i>	26	14

Table 6. Frequencies of *to* infinitive and *to -ing* complements in non-obligational and obligational contexts in the Spoken segment of COCA

The figures observed are significant at the 0.05 level of significance (df =1).

There is certainly scope for refining the non-obligational versus obligational contrast, but the two studies suggest that the factor may be added to the list of semantic considerations that may play a role in having an impact on the selection of complement at a time of variation between *to* infinitive and *to -ing* complements.

4. Concluding Observations

The nature of *to* infinitive and *to -ing* complements is a complex matter in English grammar, and comparing the two patterns raises intricate issues at the syntax-semantics interface. As pointed out in the first section, there are robust grammatical differences between the two patterns, and with many matrix predicates the two constructions are not in free variation. However, there are some matrix predicates that have selected both types of complement in recent English or that still do so today. *Commit oneself* is one such predicate. The idea underlying the present investigation is that such predicates may provide an insight into the syntactic and semantic properties specific to each type of complement.

The present study examined two such properties, one syntactic and the other one semantic. The syntactic property of extractions did not yield any result in the case of *commit oneself*, for it turned out that extractions were quite rare with this matrix predicate.

The semantic property was developed from earlier work on the adjective *accustomed*. The [+/-Choice] distinction relating to the nature of the complement subject that has been proposed for the adjective *accustomed* does

not lend itself to a study of *commit oneself* in its original form because lower subjects of the verb are overwhelmingly agentive, because of the semantics of the verb. However, the concept was broadened into one of obligational versus non-obligational contexts. An obligational context was argued to be one where the situation expressed by the sentence involves pressure on the referent of the matrix verb to make a commitment or where the making of a commitment is negated. The pressure in question can for instance be conveyed by the presence of such obligational modals as *must*, *should* and *ought to* modifying the content of the higher clause. By contrast, the key to a non-obligational context is that the commitment expressed by *commit oneself* is in this case conceptualized as occurring spontaneously and without an indication of noticeable external pressure.

Taking earlier work on *accustomed* into account, an obligational context was associated with a *to -ing* complement, and a non-obligational context with a *to* infinitive complement. The study showed that there cannot be any categorical rule linking an obligational context to a *to -ing* complement and a non-obligational context to a *to* infinitive complement, but that there was a noticeable and even weakly significant tendency in this direction. The tendency was first observed in the case of the *TIME* Corpus, but it was then also observed, at the same level of fairly modest significance, in the Spoken part of COCA.

It is therefore proposed here that a distinction relating to the conceptualization of *to* infinitives and *to -ing* complements should be considered as a principle to explain variation between the two complements at a time of grammatical variation. Such a conceptual distinction cannot be a stand-alone explanation, and the investigator should be sensitive for instance to the influence of a historical change in progress favoring one pattern at the expense of the other, as in the case of the adjective *accustomed*. However, the distinction deserves further investigation, to be undertaken on the basis of large electronic corpora and with the help of other matrix predicates that also select both types of complement in current English or that have selected them in recent English.

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