An Analysis of to-Infinitives as Clausal Subjects

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As Egan (2008: 100) notes, to-infinitival clauses as subjects appear to collocate with a very limited range of predicators. However, previous studies of to-infinitival clauses as subjects (e.g. Egan (2008), Duffley (2003)) do not explain the reason why to-infinitives as subjects are used with a very limited range of predicators. Therefore, the aim of this presentation is to account for this reason. In order to quote instances of to-infinitives as subjects, I have used the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). Most of the downloaded instances collocate with the matrix verbs be, require, mean as in (1).

So why are to-infinitives as subjects used with very limited predicators? Sasaki (2018) claims that a to-infinitive like the one in (2) refers to a virtual event, but the virtual event corresponds to a certain future actual event and implicates a future event. This study also considers to-infinitives to be a type of virtual events. However, I claim that to-infinitives as subjects refer to a general event. For one thing, Langacker (2008: 438) claims that a to-infinitival clause “describes an event only in generalized fashion.” Additionally, a clausal subject is autonomous vis-à-vis the verb (cf. Langacker (1987: 236)) and is semantically less affected by the verb, as compared to the direct object in particular. It follows therefore that to-infinitives as subjects retain their generality, which is based on “virtuality” (Langacker (1999)), contrary to the case of to-infinitives as objects which are semantically affected by the matrix verb and often lose their generality as in (2).

(1) a. To walk 26 miles is a very difficult goal to achieve.
   b. To achieve this will require concessions on the part of both sides.
   c. …and to love nature means that you accept its force. (COCA)

(2) He intends/wants to achieve the goal.

Therefore, the to-infinitives in (1), which function as a clausal subject, retain their generality and refer to a virtual event; the to-infinitival clause in (1b) might seem to imply a future orientation, but it still retains its generality, as compared to the to-infinitival clause in (2). It is therefore valid to claim that a verb takes a to-infinitive as the subject only when it is compatible with a to-infinitive functioning as a clausal subject that refers to a general event. For example, in (1a), the verb be connects the general event designated by the to-infinitival clause with the general judgment, i.e. a very difficult goal. Also, in (1b), require expresses what is necessary to bring about the general event designated by the to-infinitival clause, and in (1c), mean defines what loving nature in general means. However, such verbs are very limited. For example, because to-infinitives as subjects describe an event only in generalized fashion and their trajector is not specific, they are not appropriate for the clausal subject of intend and want, which expect their clausal subject to specify the one who entertains the volition, as in (2). This presentation will show the data from COCA in more detail, and specify why to-infinitives as subjects collocate with a very limited range of predicators.

References
The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)