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THE COMMON-/OBJECTIVE-CASE SUBJECT OF THE GERUND IN MIDDLE ENGLISH*

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As noted in *OED* (s.v. *-ing*[1] 2), the most notable development of the English gerund is its acquisition of certain verbal properties; namely, those of: (1) governing an "accusative" or direct object (e.g. He practises *writing letters*); (2) governing a predicative or complement (e.g. the habit of *being late*); (3) being modified by an adverbial adjunct (e.g. the habit of *speaking loosely*); (4) indicating tense and voice by means of compound forms (e.g. of *having written* a letter; the necessity of loving and *being loved*); and (5) taking a common-case subject or objective-case subject (e.g. I insist upon *Miss Sharp appearing*; What is the use of *me speaking*?). Thus, the English gerund, which began as a pure noun, has broadened its syntactic role beyond anything characteristic of its own past history or of the other Germanic languages. Although a gradual evolution, the evidence collected to date strongly suggests that the Middle English period was definitely crucial to this process. Nevertheless, exactly when and how this syntactic development took place remains a subject both of much scholarly debate and limited in-depth inquiry. This short paper attempts to examine the fifth verbal feature, that is, the development of the common-case subject or objective-case subject of the gerund in the Middle English period. The corpus consists of 183 ME texts, or almost all important ME verse and prose texts, both literary and non-literary, written from about 1100 to about 1500 and currently available in print. (The abbreviations and dates of composition are generally based on *Middle English Dictionary* [Ann Arbor, Michigan: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1955–: 'Plan and Bibliography'].)

Like a verb, the gerund may have a subject of its own, expressed or unexpressed. However, its expressed subject, in accordance with its nominal origin, has normally been indicated by a noun in the genitive case or a possessive pronoun from OE down to the present day, or by a periphrastic genitive with *of* from ME onwards, as illustrated by the following examples:

(1) OE þurh *Paules* bodunga/mid *his* blatsunge; ME of þe tyme of *dedes* commyng/in *ȝowre* here being/fro the arysing *of the sonne*; ModE of *my young lord's* coming home/You don't like *my* saying that. [Visser]

*This is a slightly revised version of a paper I read at the Panel Discussion on Mediaeval English, with Dr. Raymond Bruce Mitchell (Oxford) as commentator, held at Doshisha University on November 24, 1984. I should like to express my sincere gratitude for the valuable comments and suggestions I received from Dr. Mitchell.

As previous studies (e.g. Mustanoja 1960, p. 574 and Kisbye 1971, p. 58) point out, however, a common-case subject (i.e. a noun in the common case) or an objective-case subject (i.e. a pronoun in the objective case) has also been on record since ME, and has steadily gained ground down through ModE, as in:

(2) 1848 Thackeray, *Van. Fair* XI 48 I insist upon *Miss Sharp appearing*.

a stock example quoted in *OED* (s.v. *-ing*[1] 2) and many other studies. As a result, it is often difficult to decide whether a given *-ing* form is to be construed as a gerund or as a present participle, as in: "I remember *Tom saying* so." The use of the common-case or objective-case subject, however, shows that the gerund, which was a pure noun in origin, has furthered its verbal character in one more respect. In this connection, we may quote Jespersen's comment that:

(3) the rise of the construction in question is the latest step in a long and most interesting development, in which the ing adopts more and more of the specific verbal qualities and is more and more freed from the restrictions which at first were inherent in it as in other substantives. [Jespersen 1926, p. 150]

The actual history of the gerund with its subject in the common or objective case has been a much-discussed problem among scholars because of some differences of opinion as to its development. In his 1926 article (p. 155), Jespersen stated that: "If I am not mistaken, it begins to appear about the year 1700." Criticizing this view held by Jespersen, van der Gaaf (1928, pp. 65-72) argued that it was in use long before 1700, as was evidenced by a number of examples from about 1300 onwards, and that it was probably of French origin. Rightly noting that van der Gaaf's quotations contained numerous wrong or amibiguous examples, Jespersen (*MEG*, V [1940], § 9.4.1) maintained his old—although slightly (and tacitly) revised—view, insisting that the construction began to be frequent about 1700, and that it could be explained as a natural native development. By contrast, recent scholars, such as Mustanoja (1960, p. 574), Brunner (1962, p. 357), Kisbye (1971, p. 58), and Schibsbye (1974, p. 123), have generally agreed that this construction began to appear about 1300. Visser (1966, §§ 1096－1103), however, went even further, asserting that it had been used since the beginning of the 13th century, as in the following quotation:

(4) c1225 *King Horn* (MS Ld) 873－74 To morwe schal be þe fiȝtyng At *þe sonne op rysyng*.

Visser ascribed its origin to the decay of inflectional endings in ME, which often made it impossible to distinguish the genitive from the accusative or common case. Apart from this

lack of consensus on earlier incidence, however, previous studies seem to agree that the construction was scarce down to about 1600[1] but that it constantly gained ground thereafter, especially in Present-day English,[2] as a result of a variety of circumstances, formal and syntactic,[3] in spite of some puristic grammarians' strictures on it.[4]

Our ME material indicates that the subject of the gerund is normally expressed by a genitive or a possessive pronoun and is also occasionally represented by a noun in the common case or a pronoun in the objective case. There are also, however, some borderline cases, such as:

(5) *Arth. & M.* 8801－02 þo bigan kniȝtes rideing･･･*tabours dassing;*[5] *Cursor* 25487－89 Iesus, þat wald after mid-night, Þi swete face, þat was sa bright, With *Iuus spitting* file; Chaucer *Bo.* I.pr.4, 110－11 thurw *the same accusours accusynge* I am condempned; *Dest. Troy* 1625－26 And in the moneth of may mekil þay vsit, With *floures and fresshe bowes fecchyng* of somer.

In these examples, owing to the non-existence of the apostrophe at the time, it is difficult or even impossible, without contextual aid, to make a formal distinction between common-case plural and genitive plural or singular.

When these examples with their seemingly plural noun ending in *-s* are excluded, there still remain 58 possible ME examples with a noun subject in the common case, and seven instances with a pronominal subject in the objective case.Their chronological distribution is shown in the following table:

(6) Common- and Objective-case Subjects before Gerunds

	Common Case	Objective Case	Total
1100－1200	0	0	0
1200－1250	2	0	2
1250－1300	4	0	4
1300－1350	9	0	9
1350－1400	14	1	15
1400－1450	21	3	24
1450－1500	8	3	11
Total	58	7	65

1) See Visser 1946, § 370 (pp. 427－28)

2) See Visser 1966, § 1100.

3) See, for example, those enumerated by Jespersen (1926, pp. 155－56).

4) See especially Fowler, H. W., *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965), pp. 215－18.

5) In his edition (EETS 277, Glossary s.v. tabours), Macrae-Gibson construes this *tabours* as genitive plural.

This table suggests that the gerund with a noun subject in the common case occurred from the first half of the 13th century, while the gerund with a pronominal subject in the objective case developed from the second half of the 14th century, but that both constructions remained very rare throughout the remainder of the ME period.

Let us first discuss the gerund with a noun subject in the common case. In view of the importance of the earliest-known stage of development of this construction, all of the limited number of possible examples collected for the period up to 1350 are quoted below:

(7) ?c1200 *HMaid.* 36/377 of *wif* 7 weres *gederunge*, worldes weole awakeneð

(8) *Ib.* 42/437–38 ter walde wakenin of *wif* 7 weres *somnunge*, richesce 7 worldes weole.

(9) ?a1300 *Arth.& M.* 5131–32 Lete we now ben her cominge And speke we of *þe children fiȝting.*

(10) *Ib.* 8799 Passed was þe *dayspringing.*

(11) ?a1300 *KAlex.* 911 Cler and fair is *day-springyng* (also in 4283).

(12) a1325 *Cursor* 2395–97 Bot son quen he had seised þat land, þat in þan fel a hunger strong, Thoru *corn wanting* or thoru werre.

(13) *Ib.* 8445 *His fader biding* wel he heiled.

(14) *Ib.* 28771 For suilk it es *sant paule bidding* (cf. MS Cotton Galba: For þis same es *saint paules biding*).

(15) c1330 *Seven Sages* 1421 men···kepen him til *þe sonne vprising.*

(16) a1338 Mannyng *Chron.* 682 ffor *þe quene comyng* he was fol glad.

(17) *Ib.* 1187 At morn y *þe sonne rysynge* (also in 9237 and 12143).

(18) a1350 *MPPsalter* 49.2 Fram *þe sonne arisyng* vn-to þe going a-doune.

After 1350, some typical examples are quoted in the following (19)–(29):

(19) c1378 *PPl.B* VIII 31–32 The wynde and the water and *the bote waggynge* Maketh the man many a tyme to falle and to stonde (cf. *PPl.A* IX 26 *the waggyng of the bot*; *PPl.C* XI 34 *waggyng of the bote*).

(20) a1400 *PConsc.* 1952–53 And what es mare uncertayn thyng, þan es þe tyme of *þe dede comyng* (cf. 1969 *þe dedes comyng*; 1971 of *dedys commyng*).[6]

(21) *Ib.* 4779 Til þe tyme of *þe son doun gangyng.*

(22) c1400 *Emare* 973–75 Emaré thawȝte her sone ȝyng Aȝeyn *þe Emperour kommynge* How þat he sholde done.

6) It is of some interest to note that in *PConsc.* (a1400) *the dede commyng* (the common case subject) is found twice (1953, 2901),(þ)*e dedys commyng* (the genitive subject) four times (1969, 1971, 1977, 2167), and *the commyng of* þe *dede* (the periphrastic genitive subject) once (2015).

(23) a1415 Mirk *Fest.* 58/22 He made also mynde of Symones and *Anne aȝeyncomyng* (note the preceding genitive *Symones*).

(24) c1420 *Alph. Tales* 296/25−26 he had bene ioyfull of *his bruther commyng.*

(25) c1440 *PLAlex.* 49/11−12 Thay began for to faghte at *þe son-rysynge*, and faghte to *þe son-settyng.*

(26) a1450 *Gener.* 596−97 The knyghtes all, and the squyers truely, Were full sory of *his sone departeng.*

(27) ?c1450 *Merlin* 321/36 thei shulde move at *the first cok crowynge.*

(28) a1460 *Towneley Pl.* 228/12 at last shall we be out of *hart langyng.*

(29) a1470 Malory *Wks.* 706/30−31 by *youre myght encresyng*[7] ye have desceyved many a full noble knyght.

Despite the pattern in which the common-case subject precedes the gerund, many of the above quotations seem to permit a different interpretation. In the two earliest instances, namely (7) and (8), the inflectional genitive ending *-s* may be taken as being added to the whole group of words connected by *and* ("wif 7 were"), not to the second noun ("were") alone. In the third oldest instance (9) and in the later (16) and (24), some confusion with the appositive participle may be presumed, as Mustanoja (1960, p. 574) observed. These instances, together with (13), (15), (17), (18), and (23), may allow of yet another interpretation. That is, the noun before the gerund may, in fact, be a survival of OE genitives without *-s*, in the light of the fact that the *s*-less genitive was used in all ME dialects, especially Northern,[8] as in the following:

(30) *Cursor* 1297 of his *fader* care; Chaucer *TC* I 678 thi *brother* wif; Capgr. *Chron.* 195/28 On the *qween* side.

Some others, e.g., (10), (11), (15), (17), (18), (25), (27), and (28), may be compounds of 'common-case subject+gerund'. Combinations of this sort should, however, be compared with the following citations:

(31) *Arth.& M.* 3865 in *þe sonnes vpriseing*; *MPPsalter* 106/13 Fram *þe risyng of þe sunne* vnto þe goyng adoune; Trev. *Barth.* 127a/a by *crowinge of kockes* [*MED*] ; Caxton *En.* 80/10 aboute *y*^{e} *goyng vnder of y*^{e} *sonne*; etc.

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7) In his *Some Facts concerning the Syntax of Malory's Morte Darthur* (Amsterdam: M. J. Portielje, 1932), § 269, Dekker notes that the word *myght* hardly allows of a genitive construction.

8) Cf. Mustanoja 1960, pp. 71−72.

These quotations seem to testify that, as van der Gaaf (1928, p. 71) asserted, the type *(the) sun rising* consisted of *(the) sun* + *rising* and was possibly not considered a compound in ME.[9] Van der Gaaf (1928, p. 69) also maintained that this frequently occurring ME idiom *þe son rising/going down* was an imitation of OF *le soleil levant/colchant*. Whether our ME idioms are OF calques or not, it can hardly be denied that they are somehow connected with the OF idioms.[10]

Thus, practically all the examples before 1300 and many of the later ones are found to permit at least different interpretations. If these ambiguous examples are regarded as illustrations of the gerund with a common-case subject, this construction could be said to have occurred from the beginning of the 13th century (?c1200 *HMaid.*), thereby agreeing with Visser's contention. If, on the other hand, the ambiguous examples are left out of consideration, the construction in question could be said to appear only about 1300—its earliest indisputable example being from a1325 *Cursor* 2379—and to remain extremely rare throughout the ME period. This view would support the opinion of most modern scholars.

As for the gerund with a pronominal subject in the objective case (i.e., *me*, *him*, *them*, etc. instead of *my*, *his*, *their*, etc.),[11] earlier studies[12] show that examples have been recorded since about 1500, but that this construction was not really current until after about 1800, when it became increasingly frequent. Visser (1966, § 1102) provides only three instances from late ME (i.e., all from Caxton), all of them being first quoted by Kellner (1892, § 418). According to the data available, however, this construction occurred much earlier than had previously been noted, appearing from about 1400, as indicated by the following illustrations:

(32) ?a1400 *RRose* 2061–62 Sire, if thee lyst to undirstande, I merveile *the* (=thee) *askyng this demande*.[13]

(33) c1400 *Ld. Troy* 6317–18 he was war of *hem comyng* and of here malice and here thynkyng.

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9) Gaaf (1928, p. 71) says, however, that in *PLAlex.* 76/20, *þe son rysyng* apparently means 'the East'; in such a case the term 'compound' might be justifiable.

10) Note, for instance, that Caxton's *the sonne goyng-vnder* (*En.* 84/25–26) directly translates F. "de souleil couchant".

11) Constructions with *her* as subject are not treated here because it cannot formally be decided whether it is a possessive or a personal pronoun in the objective, as in: Bokenham *Sts.* 5701 "And of *here* þedyrgoyng þis was þe entent"; Malory *Wks* 42/16–17 "1 shall telle you the cause of *hir* commynge": etc.

12) See, for instance, Kisbye 1971, pp. 58 and 63, and Schibsbye 1974, § 7.4.7. Cf. also Visser 1966, § 1102.

13) Visser places this instance under the type *'the* + gerund + object', but this *the* is not the definite article *the*, but a pronoun in the objective case *the* 'thee', functioning as the subject of the *-ing* form. Cf. Skeat's edition of *RRose* (Oxford, 1899).

(34) c1420 *Alph.Tales* 11/22−25 hur accusers···desirid hym to com vnto þer place and see hur ···þe day of *hym commyng* drew nere.

(35) *Ib.* 178/12−13þer was so many fendis in þer quere, þat with sight of *þaim goyng vp and doun*, þe ta side falid in þe psalm.

(36) 1477 Caxton *Prol.& Epil.* 29a. 151−52 Humbly requyryng and besechyng my sayd lord to take no displaysir on *me so presumyng*.

(37) c1477 *Ib.* 71a.65−67 Moost humblie besekyng my···lorde, the Kyng, and also the Quene to pardon *me so presumyng*.

(38) 1481 *Ib.* 96b.24−25 humbly besechyng his Hyenes to take no displesyr at *me so presumyng*.

These seven are all the examples found in our ME corpus, four of them (i.e., (32)−(35)) being over half a century earlier than those quoted from Caxton first by Kellner and subsequently by Visser (i.e., (36)−(38)). Hence it can be said that the gerund with a pronominal subject in the objective case appeared as early as about 1400, but that it remained exceedingly scarce throughout the late ME period, much more so than even the gerund with a noun subject in the common case.

To sum up: being a noun in origin, the gerund has expressed its subject in the genitive (possessive) throughout all periods of English. In the course of the ME period, however, a common-case or objective-case subject also began to be used, although it was still extremely rare even in late ME. This research discovered possible examples of the gerund with its noun subject in the common case from ?c1200 (*HMaid.*), about a century earlier than its first firm example so far pointed out, namely the one from a1325 *Cursor*. However, practically all the examples from before a1325 *Cursor* seem to permit alternative interpretations. The gerund with an objective-case pronoun as subject, though even rarer, was found as early as about 1400 (to be more specific, in ?a1400 *RRose*), over half a century earlier than its oldest example previously established, that is, the one from 1477 Caxton *Prol.& Epil.* It can be concluded, therefore, that the gerund's verbal property of taking a common-case subject or objective-case subject was at a stage of formative development possibly in the early ME period, but at least by the late ME period.

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