

## English Corner 8: gerunds and participles

It is easy to confuse **gerunds** with **participles** since both are verbal forms ending in **ing**, yet they have different functions; the former being a **verbal noun** and the latter a **verbal adjective**.

- Two examples in which **explaining** is used as a gerund and a participle, respectively, are [He rejected the possibility of a theory's **explaining** how osmolytes control volume regulation] and [He rejected the possibility of a theory **explaining** how osmolytes control volume regulation]. They differ only in the presence of an apostrophe in the first sentence, which indicates the genitive and thus the possession of a following noun (here the **gerund explaining**). (The **genitive** is often a sign that a **gerund** is referred to.)
- In the first sentence, involving the verbal noun (**gerund**), the possibility of a **specific** theory (one **that explains** a role for osmolytes) is rejected. In the second sentence, lacking the apostrophe, **explaining** is used as a verbal adjective (a **participle**) to describe the theory. Hence the possibility of **any** theory is rejected altogether (even one that explains a role for osmolytes).

**Gerunds** and **participles** can be distinguished by applying any of the following tests.

### Adding *the* and *of* either side of the –ing word

- It is a **gerund** if adding the words **the** and **of** either side of the **-ing** word makes sense or is still grammatical.
- The sentence [**Flying** planes is dangerous] becomes [**The flying of** planes is dangerous], which makes sense, so **flying** here is a **gerund** [a verbal noun (**planes being flown**) as subject of the verb **are**].
- By contrast [**Flying** planes are dangerous] becomes [**The flying of** planes are dangerous] which has a mismatch of subject (singular) and verb (plural), so **flying** here is a **participle** (a verbal adjective describing planes that are **in the air**).
- Similarly [We passed the professor **cycling** up the hill] becomes [We passed the professor **the cycling of** up the hill] which makes no sense, indicating that **cycling** here is a **participle** (a verbal adjective describing the professor who was **on his bicycle**).

### Removing the –ing word

- It is a **participle** if omitting the **-ing word** does not alter the meaning of the remaining sentence.
- [We passed the professor **cycling** up the hill] becomes [We passed the professor], in which the meaning is unchanged, so **cycling** is a **participle** (a verbal adjective describing the professor).
- Similarly with [**Flying** planes are dangerous] which becomes [Planes are dangerous], the meaning is also unchanged, so **flying** is a **participle** (a verbal adjective describing planes).
- However, [**Flying** planes is dangerous] becomes [Planes is dangerous], where the agreement in number of subject and verb is violated, so **flying** here is a **gerund** (a verbal noun as subject of the verb **is**).

### Changing the sentence order

- It is a **participle** if changing the sentence around, so that what governed the **-ing** verb becomes the subject, does not alter the meaning.
- [I saw **her wearing** a lab-coat] becomes [**She** was seen **wearing** a lab-coat], in which the meaning is unchanged, so **wearing** is a **participle** (a verbal adjective describing the woman).
- However, [We were surprised by **her wearing** a lab-coat] becomes [**She** surprised us **wearing** a lab-coat] where the meaning is changed (**we** are now wearing lab-coats), so **wearing** here is a **gerund** (a verbal noun possessed by her). Note the genitive (**her**) and gerund (**wearing**) together.

By Dr Trevor G Cooper (ctrevorg@gmail.com)