

Ancient Languages First Aid

VERBALS: PARTICIPLES, INFINITIVES, GERUNDS, AND GERUNDIVES



SECTION 8. VERBALS

'Verbals' is a term used to describe 'verbal nouns' and 'verbal adjectives' as a group. These parts of speech are so named because they possess some grammatical elements which come from verbs and others which come from nouns or adjectives respectively. This makes them a unique part of speech which will not necessarily have a direct equivalent in English. They will often have a range of meanings, translations, and functions, and this is not something to be afraid of. Verbals may seem confronting but there is no need to worry about them; with practice and perseverance they will become just like every other part of speech in an ancient language, and they are nothing you cannot handle.

SECTION 8.1. VERBAL NOUNS

'Verbal nouns' are parts of speech which **possess grammatical elements from both verbs and nouns**, as their name suggests. They take their root form from a verb, but take their properties from a noun. E.C. Woodcock in his *A New Latin Syntax* §20 describes the origin of the verbal noun as an early man looking at his world. He sees a wolf running: that is, he sees a noun doing an action. We know this as a verb, but verbs have not fully formed yet. He can only express himself by the word for 'wolf' and the word 'to run'; *running* is the *name* of the action. Both of these are nouns, the first a regular noun and the second an abstract Noun. The ancient man says the word for wolf and the abstract noun for running; he is describing the wolf, and the verb 'to be' is understood in the clause: 'The wolf [is] running'.

Grammatically, the word 'running' is the same as if he said 'the wolf [is] a dog'. 'The wolf' is nominative and singular and so too is 'running' which agrees with it. The verb 'to be', even when it is understood, cannot take a verb; it must take a noun, pronoun, or substantive adjective. This is the same in English: for example, 'the man *is* talking,' 'the house *is* burning,' 'your parents *are* to be respected,' and 'this work *is* to be done.' So if 'the wolf' has the properties of a noun – here number and case – and 'to run,' or 'running,' also has number and case as well as being the predicate of the verb 'to be,' then they are both nouns. However, the root of 'to run' or 'running' is an action, which makes it a verb. It is therefore a verbal noun.

There are three types of verbal nouns: two are common in ancient languages, and one is specific to Latin. They all have different functions and translations. They are called the infinitive, the gerund, and the supine.

SECTION 8.1.1. THE INFINITIVE

The 'infinitive' is so named because it is a **non-finite** form of the verb. It cannot stand alone and make sense. It has the properties of a verb in that its root will always be an action and that it has tense (although this is not a sense of time but aspect; for more on this see Section 1.0.8, Verbal Aspect). It also possesses the properties of a noun, like case, in that it can stand as the predicate of a noun subject and agree with it; it can also be the complement of the verb 'to be', which must take a predicate in the same case as the subject.

The infinitive has many uses. The three which are the most common are the use as an **abstract noun predicate, the prolative infinitive, and the accusative and infinitive construction.**

The use of the infinitive as an abstract noun predicate was shown above; the verbal form takes on the case of a noun and becomes the predicate of the verb 'to be'.

Some examples of this use of the infinitive are:

Peace is *to be loved*.

To live is *to love*.

To win is my goal.

To learn is rewarding.

In all of these examples the form of the verb 'to be' are all 'is'.

The **prolative** use of the infinitive is where the infinitive form is incorporated to **complete the meaning of a verb.** Some common verbs, in English and in ancient languages are 'want,' 'have,' 'need,' and 'wish,' and these can also serve as a prolative in their infinitive form:

I want *to go* home.

I have *to eat* food.

I need *to breathe* air.

I wish *to have* money.

Note well that the objects in the accusative case are responding to the original verbal notions begun by the verbs and completed by the prolative infinitives; the noun and the prolative infinitive are both in the accusative case and are technically the object of the main verb.

In languages without punctuation, in order to differentiate between elements like direct and indirect statements, the language needed to change the verb forms to allow for clarity. For this reason, some ancient languages use infinitives in indirect statements after verbs of 'knowing' and 'perceiving'.

The subject, formerly in the nominative case, goes into the accusative case to differentiate it from other nouns in the sentence, and the verb goes into the infinitive, corresponding in tense with the original verb. The infinitive is also in the accusative case, and with the noun being in this case too, the whole unit is the object of the main verb. This is known as the **accusative infinitive construction**.

Examples of this are:

I know that you are smart > I know you *to be smart*
'you' is accusative; the infinitive is accusative and present tense

I saw that he ran > I saw him *to have run*
'him' is accusative; the infinitive is accusative and past tense

I believe that they will come > I believe them *to come in future* [to be coming]
'them' is accusative; the infinitive is accusative and future tense

SECTION 8.1.2. THE GERUND

The 'gerund' is a form of **verbal noun** which is used to define an action as a noun. Its name comes from the Latin verb 'gero' meaning 'to do, wage'. When we think of verbs and actions as a concept – a thing which is made up of action – that same 'thing' is now a noun. It takes its verbal properties from the verbal root which is an action, and as it is a concept, and thus an abstract noun, it can be used in clauses in place of a regular noun in all cases.

Some examples of gerunds are:

Running is fun.
He is afraid *of failing*.
We will win *by fighting*.

'Running', 'of failing', and 'by fighting' all take on noun cases: 'running' is nominative and singular; 'of failing' is genitive and singular; and 'by fighting' is instrumental (dative in Greek, ablative in Latin) and singular. All of these are neuter in gender. They therefore have all the properties of a noun – gender, number, and case. Despite this, they all derive from actions, and this gives them verbal qualities: they are thus verbal nouns.

SECTION 8.1.3. THE SUPINE

The 'supine' is an **abstract verbal noun** which appears **only in Latin**. It takes its root from a verb, but functions as a noun. Although it possesses the accusative, dative and ablative forms only, this is still enough to define it as having the properties of a noun; it even fits into the fourth declension of noun types. Its other functions are fulfilled by the infinitive and thus the two have a similar translation.

Woodcock, in his *A New Latin Syntax* §152, states that the supine acts like the infinitive and the gerund in that the accusative supine of a transitive verb governs an accusative object. In the accusative, the supine is used as a goal of motion and expresses end, aim, or purpose; it is found after verbs of motion or verbs implying motion.

An example is:

We were sent *to ask* for help > We were sent *in order to ask* for help

The ablative of source was an early use of the supine with adjectives. The ablative form was originally more prominent than the dative, but it can be easier to understand if we take the form with its dative meaning.

An example is:

'Easy *to do*' > 'easy *for doing*' (dative), or 'easy *in the doing*' (ablative)

The most common use of the supine is with the impersonal passive infinitive of the verb 'eo', 'to go', to provide the sense of the missing future passive infinitive.

An example of this is:

I thought that the letter *would be delivered* to you >
I thought the letter *to be delivered in future* to you

These examples might seem cumbersome and hard to digest in English; that is natural since we have no real English equivalent of the supine and must attempt at constructing a translation.

SECTION 8.2. VERBAL ADJECTIVES

'Verbal adjectives' were formed in much the same way as verbal nouns. Verbal adjectives **share properties of both verbs and adjectives**, in that they take their root from an action and take properties of gender, number, and case from adjectives. They also conform to the rules of agreement to which adjectives conform. They are naturally adjectival in that they describe a noun with which they are agreeing in gender, number, and case. There are two forms of verbal adjectives: **participles** and **gerundives**.

SECTION 8.2.1. PARTICIPLES

'Participles' are **verbal adjectives** which derive from a verb root. They agree with the noun which they describe in gender, number, and case. In English, participles and gerunds are differentiated by their placement in a clause, but in ancient languages they are clearly differentiated by their morphology and do not look alike. Participles can be used in a variety of clause types.

Examples of participles are shown below:

The *fleeing* man escaped.

Here, 'fleeing' is a present participle in the attributive position and agrees with 'man,' being nominative, singular, masculine.

We pursue those *having fled*.

Here, 'having fled' is a past participle in the predicative position and agrees with 'those,' being accusative and plural. The translation of past participles with 'having' can become cumbersome after a while, and it is often a fair translation to substitute something with a notion of a completed action, like 'after', so that it sounds more natural in English: e.g. We pursued those [them] *after they fled*.

I, *fleeing* tomorrow, will escape.

Here, '(will be) fleeing' is a future participle and agrees with 'I,' being nominative and singular.

Ancient languages also possess future participles which have several meanings and translations in English. The example used below comes from Ancient Greek and denotes purpose:

She will go [and] *will be freeing* her son > She will go *in order to free* her son.

SECTION 8.2.2. GERUNDIVES

'Gerundives' are **verbal adjectives** which possess the root of a verbal action and the properties of an adjective – that is, gender, number, and case. While describing the noun or pronoun with which they agree, **the gerundive carries with it a sense of necessity**. It takes this sense of necessity and combines it with the verbal root, creating a specific form of adjective for the noun or pronoun with which it agrees.

Some example translations are:

It is a job *worth doing*.

She is a *loveable* person.

Your work is *admirable*.

This country is *fit to be ruled*.