THE GERUNDIAL CONSTRUCTION IN A DIACHRONIC PERSPECTIVE: PAST AND PRESENT*

Abstract

In Modern English the gerund, historically a nominalized verb in –ung(e), is marked by a gradient of increasing verbalization, from full noun (the reading of the book) to nearly full verbalization (... John having read his essay very carefully), which is due to morphological syncretism in Early Middle English with the present participle in –ind(e). It is demonstrated that this (re)verbalization can be traced diachronically from its incipient phase to Modern English. It also allows us to fine-tune our terminology as to the most recent stage in terms of verbalized or verbal gerund, which at first sight seems to be a contradictio in terminis. In light of the data it is argued that –ing forms after verbs of perception (We saw him working in the garden) can also be interpreted as (semi-)gerunds, featuring at the extreme right of the gradient; “semi-”, because such structures lack one nominal property, viz. the genitival subject (...*his working in the garden). The historical history and development of the gerund in English can be described as a triadic process: VERB – NOUN – VERB.

1. The gerund revisited

In present-day linguistics the category of the gerund in all its facets is very well defined; see, e.g., Huddleston (1984: 312–317). Yet for the present purposes we need to recapitulate some of its major characteristics. Given its verbal roots, the gerund is best defined as a nominalized verb in –ing. By definition, gerunds can only function in nominal slots, which is in sharp contrast with the homomorphous present participle. Syntagmatically their potential is very varied and rich in English, ranging from fully noun-like properties to fully verb-like ones, as shown in the gradient below, based on Dekeyser, e.a. (2008: 319–320).
I suggest taking *appreciate* as the main verb, which can select a gerundial clause as its complement.

I appreciate

Type A

(1) the deft solving (...)
(2) the deft solving of the political crisis
(3) ? the president’s solving of the political crisis

Type B

OBJECT (4) *the (deft) solving the political crisis
(5) the president’s / his solving the political crisis
ADV (6) the president’s / his solving the political crisis deftly
AUX (7) the president’s / his having solved the political crisis deftly

Type C

NON-GEN (8) the president / him having solved the crisis deftly

Note that by NON-GEN is meant either an unmarked noun or a personal pronoun in the accusative.

The syntactic features of the gerundial construction can also be presented in a matrix:

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<th>DET</th>
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<th>GEN</th>
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<th>AUX</th>
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Though derived from verbs, nouns in –ing with concrete meanings such as *drawing* ‘picture’, etc. or *handling* ‘act of dealing with’, etc. are normally not included in the category of the gerund; see amongst others Lees (1964: 64–65).

In (1–3) the gerunds are all fully nominalized, with a determiner, an adjective and, possibly, also an *of*-object. In present-day English the use of (3) is very much constrained. Yet in the prescriptive tradition of the 19th
century it used to be recommended as the only “correct” form, given the
nominal status of the gerund; see Dekeyser (1975: 169–177). I shall have to
return to this matter later in this paper, more particularly in Section 3 at the
end.

From Type A to B we are transgressing the noun/verb-like borderline.
First, direct objects governed by a gerund + DET/ADJ do not at all occur in
the English of these days. By contrast, gerundial constructions with no overt
subject or a “subject” in the genitive case are and have always been
compatible with verbal attributes, such as objects (5), adverbs (6) and all
kinds of auxiliaries (7). Actually, all of them are syntactic hybrids.

Type C, then, exemplified in (8) above, only shows verb-like properties
and was not accepted as “good usage” for a very long time.

The gradient of increasing verb-like patterning is also marked by an
underlying evolutionary dimension, which helps us to understand the
remarkable flexibility and dynamics of the English gerund as a “bi-polar
category”, both noun and verb. This matter will be looked into in the
following sections and actually constitutes the bulk of this paper.

2. An excursion into the past

Just like any other Germanic language, Old English (OE) had nominalized
verbs with the suffix –ung/–ing: langung ‘longing’. They were exclusively used
as full nouns and, unlike the gerundial constructions in the post-OE periods,
they did not govern any verb-like complement. Typologically, they are
precisely the same as present-day reading ‘the act of a person who reads’, etc.,
briefing ‘a meeting at which information is given’, etc., handling ‘approach,
method’, etc., or Dutch lezing ‘lecture’, tekening ‘drawing’ and many more,
German Ernennung ‘appointment’.

Here follow a few examples, all of them cited in Visser (1966: 1065–
1066):

(1) Aelfric, Hom. I, (1, 18 ḍa wæs gefyld Hieremias witegung (verb witegian).
[then was fulfilled Jeremiah’s prophecy]

(2) Aelfred, Bede (Smith) 605, ii To digolnesse and to stilnesse becom ḍære
godcunden sceawunge ancorlifes. (verb sceawian)
[came to the privacy and solitude of the divine contemplation of an anchoret’s
life]

(3) Aelfred, Bede (Smith) 407, i He ongean arweorthian ḍa drowunge haligra
martyra. (verb drowian)
[He began to honour the suffering of the holy martyrs]
In (1) the gerund is the subject, in (2) an inflected adjective occurs, while in (3) the gerundial subject is in the genitive case.

Visser (1966: 1068) also mentions a few cases of an –ung/-ing form followed by a direct object, but he rightly notes that these are translations from a Latin verbal form in –(i)endo or a Latin infinitive.

(4) *Vesp. Ps.* 118, 9 in *haldunge* word ðín [in custodiendo sermones tuos].

However interesting these examples are, for the development of the modern gerund Middle English is the crucial “locus of change”, here English parts company with other Germanic languages like Dutch and German.

The first two centuries of Middle English were characterized by a bewildering medley of gerundial and participial suffixes, into the description of which we cannot go here. Moreover, we do not need to, since this issue is abundantly documented in the relevant literature. So, to cut a long and complex story short, we can confine ourselves to the very essentials. In the Southern dialects a present participle with –ind(e) prevailed; the dental stop tended to be weakened and consequently dropped. Because of the (near) identity with the gerund (–ing) syncretism of these verbal forms was the eventual outcome, coupled with or followed by the gerund acquiring the capacity of patterning as a verb, which it borrowed from the participle. That this structural innovation began in the South, with its –inde participles, is more than a matter of sheer coincidence. Here correlation is undeniably causation (or *cum hoc ergo propter hoc*). Two examples from Visser (1966: 1096) may suffice here:

(5) Langland, *P.Pl.* B XIV, 186 Confession and *crauyn*g thy merci shulde amende vs.


Such “verbalized” gerunds could and did retain their noun-like properties, even the use of the definite article as in (7), which is ungrammatical in present-day English.

(7) Shoreham, *Poems* 84, 153 Hyt was y-bore To the *beryynge* that noble corps of ihesu cryst. (Visser 1966: 1097)

In the following sections I shall deal in some more detail with the development of the verb-like potential of the gerundial construction resulting from syncretism.
2.1 Direct objects and adverbials

Typologically Middle English marks the transition from the traditional (OE) SOV word order to Modern English SVO. Hence we come across examples of both OV (8–9) and VO (140), cited by Mustanoja (1960: 574–575), and also in (1) above:

(8) *Body and Soul* 375, Laud MS merci *criende* lutel availede.

(9) Langland, *PPl. B* vii 87 usage ... *of seyntes lyves* *redynge*

(10) Chaucer, *CT* H Mcp. 67 in *lifting* up his hevy drunken cors.

And these are two examples for the gerund with an adverbial (also from Mustanoja 1960: 575):


(12) Chaucer, *CT* I Par. 620 swich *cursynge* wrongfully retorneth again to him that curseth.

In these examples the use of direct objects (in whichever position) and of adverbials is clear evidence that the gerund is taking on verbal properties in Middle English.

2.2 Auxiliaries

The available data suggest that complex verb phrases with *have* for the perfect tense and *be* for the passive voice were still in an incipient phase in Late Middle English, if occurring at all. Such phrases fully developed in Early Modern English; again see Mustanoja (1960: 573):

(13) Shakespeare, *Ven.* 810 Mine eares... Do burne them selues, for *hauing* so offended.

(14) Ellis, *Letters* II i 59 ...may suffer their goods and cattels to remayne in the feilds (sic) day and night without *being* stolen.

Here the main verb of the gerundial construction appears in the form of an –*ed* or an –*ing* participle as the lexical verb at the end of the phrase, while the auxiliaries have become the markers for the gerund. As such, it matches (finite or non-finite) complex verb phrases with an auxiliary marked for tense, aspect, etc. followed by the main verb in a participial form. Once again,
examples like these provide convincing evidence for the ongoing verbalization of the gerund from ca. 1500.

2.3 The “subject” of the gerund: genitives and non-genitives

Hundreds of pages (literally) have been devoted to this controversial issue, first in an overwhelmingly normative, even outright prescriptive strain (mainly during the 19th century, but also in the early 20th century), then more recently in a scholarly descriptive approach.

In Old English, with gerunds as full nouns, the subject was invariably expressed in the genitive, either preceding or following the –ung/-ing form; see examples (1–3) above.

In Middle English the genitival subject was normally preserved even after the syncretism of the gerundial and participial categories, as evidenced by the following two examples in Visser (1966: 1166):

(15) c1300 King Alys. (Laud MS) 2901 Mury hit is in sonnes risynge.

(16) c1366 Chaucer A B C 130 my Fadres chastisyng... dar I nought abiden.

In the next example, also from Visser (1966: 1168), a possessive pronoun is used:

(17) c1377 Langland P. Pl. B XIV, 141 It semeth nought that ye shulle Haue heuene in yowre here being and heuene her after.

According to Mustanoja (1960: 574) unmarked nouns have been recorded since the beginning of the 14th century. However, he admits that several of the earliest attestations “are somewhat doubtful”. In this context the juxtaposition of the following two examples in (18), providing the same text of two different versions from the same source, is quite interesting (Mustanoja (1960: 574):

(18) K. Alis 2883 MS L mury it is in sonne rising; mery it is in sonnes risynge MS B 2897

Below another example from Visser (1966: 1177) is adduced:

(19) c1438 Bk. Marg. Kempe 164, 7 that the eyr beyng bright & cler shulde be so sone chongyd...

Relevant material proves pronouns in the accusative to be a late 15th century innovation, i.e. nearly 200 years after the introduction of unmarked
nouns; see Visser (1966: 1183). In the subsequent centuries, too, up to ca. 1800, instances tended to be scarce. Here are a few, again from Visser (1966: 1183):

(20) 1477 Caxton, *Prol. to Life of Jason* (Blades) 140 Moost humble besekyng my sayd most drad souerayn...to pardon me so presuming (Kellner).

(21) 1589 George Puttenham, *The Arte of Poesie* (Arber) 172 I trust they will beare with me writing in the vulgar speech.

(22) 1749 Fielding, *Tom Jones* (Everyman) XVI, V though she had not expressly forbidden me writing, yet that must be an omission from forgetfulness.

My 19th century data (Dekeyser 1975: 179–189) show a steady and significant increase of unmarked nouns throughout this century, whereas the frequency of accusative personal pronouns, though slowly rising, remains rather restricted, i.e. ca. 5%. It is worth pointing out that all but a few 18th and 19th century grammarians categorically reject the non-genitive expression on the ground that gerunds are nominals and so require a subject in the genitive; some of them even insist on using the objects as of-phrases; again, see Dekeyser (1975: 169–177). In present-day English non-genitives seem to be firmly established, though apparently less so in more formal English (Lees 1968: 72, Huddleston 1984: 221), which may well be put down to the lingering impact of the earlier normative or prescriptive tradition.

In what follows I shall briefly examine the factors that may have given rise to the use of non-genitives.

One factor that must have contributed to the spread of unmarked forms are nouns with inanimate denotations, which normally do not take the genitival suffix. Yet prescriptive grammarians, such as Murray, whose extremely popular and widespread *English Grammar* was first published in 1795, used to insist on: “Much depends on the rule’s being observed”, instead of “the rule being observed”, cited in Dekeyser (1975: 170), which no native speaker is likely to use these days. In this context it is worth noting that no less an author than Jane Austen consistently complied with the grammarians’ dicta in nearly all the examples I recorded for my corpus (Dekeyser 1975: 184)3. And here is Visser (1966: 1167), once again, who cites an interesting instance on that score (23):

(23) 1811 Jane Austen, *Sense & Sensibility* 238 Elinor was prevented ... by the door’s being thrown open.

Next, most indefinite pronouns, if not all, have no genitive case at all: *each, some, both, either*, etc.; this also holds for complex phrases like *either of us, all of them*, etc. For details see Jespersen (1965: 124–125).
In particular contexts sentences can be “pragmatically ambiguous”. Let us look at just two examples:

(24) I’ll always remember Mary / her **complaining** about her health all the time.

(25) I’ve always disagreed with John / him **pretending** the holocaust has never occurred.

Strictly speaking, it is arguable that Mary / her and John / him can function respectively as a direct object (24) or a prepositional complement (25); in this case the –**ing** forms are predicative complements. Conversely, in a given context such –**ing** forms could and did shift to gerunds: “What do I remember?” or “What have I disagreed with?” Cases like these are pragmatic issues, which must have resulted in the increasingly common occurrence of non-genitives through time. Such structures were then analogically extended to contexts where the predicative complement interpretation has to be ruled out, which is mostly the case. Example (22) above is an unambiguous one in this respect; in my interpretation that also holds for (20) and (21).

But why then do these pronouns occur in the objective case instead of the nominative? It is arguable that this is due to the “range” of the immediately preceding transitive verb or preposition, which seem to “govern” them. A very telling example can be found in Visser (1966: 1184):

(26) 1667 *Pepys’s Diary*, May 26 That they may not have what I have built against my will in case of me and my brother’s **being** without heirs male.

Here **of** seems to govern the adjacent pronoun but apparently not the more remote noun.

Another argument in favour of this “governing” theory is the very fact that gerundial constructions in subject function are not normally compatible with accusative forms as their “subject”:

(27) His (?him) **being** unable to attend the meeting was not accepted as an excuse.

In addition, the homomorphy of the objective and genitive forms of feminine *her* must undoubtedly have contributed to the expansion of gerunds with an accusative “subject” as well.

3. Back to the gradient as an evolutionary sequence

The gerundial constructions given under Type A are rooted in the Old English tradition and even beyond (Germanic); they are all cases of fully nominalized verbs. The crucial innovations took place in the course of ME,
when gerunds and present participles in –*ind(e)* morphologically coalesced; as pointed out earlier, this period was the “locus of change”.

Type B presents a survey, in broad chronological order, of the ever increasing “verbalization” of the gerund through time. Constructions like (ungrammatical) (4) were common from the 14th century on and throughout the Late ME period and Early Modern English. Visser (1966: 1217) quotes an extensive passage from Henry Sweet’s well-known *English Grammar*, 1898, II, 105:

(28) In the last example the pluperfect is used by the fact that the going for a walk preceded seeing the donkey, and it is used here because *the seeing the donkey* is the really important event.

This seems to suggest that the direct object construction was still more or less firmly established in the English of that time. However, since the beginning of the 20th century gerunds complemented with a direct object and preceded by the definite article seem to have gone out of use. Visser’s latest quotation dates from 1905 (Visser 1966: 1217):


Direct objects and adverbials overall, Type B (5) and (6), also emerged simultaneously with the “new” gerund; see examples (8–12). Complex gerundial VPs with an auxiliary, Type B (7), began to be used from Late ME to gain momentum in the course of Early Modern English; see examples (13–14).

Type C shows the full verbalization of the gerund, obviously apart from its nominal function in the sentence. Unmarked nouns in subject position instead of the traditional genitives are also a feature of Late Middle English just like the auxiliaries; see examples (18–19). By contrast, subject pronouns in the objective case only began to trickle in the course of the late 15th century, and were scarcely attested even in Early Modern English; see examples (20–22). It needs to be stressed here that these constitute the latest innovation in the verbalization process, which now seems to have reached full completion. The gradient unmistakably shows an ever increasing verbalization through time of an originally nominalized verb from noun-like to verb-like. The wheel has come full circle.

One case in the gradient (see p. 18) has not been gone into thus far. While (4) is definitely ungrammatical in present-day English, (3) is not, at least in a particular context. Lees (1968: 64) rightly observes that there are two different semantic types of gerundial constructions: a nominal one and a gerundive one.
Let us look at the following carefully chosen sentences; the examples are mine, the comment is based on Lees (1968: 64–67).

(30) His **reciting** of Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* was appreciated by the entire audience, because he did it so impressively.

(31) His **reciting** Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* was appreciated by the entire audience, because he hardly knew English.

The comment given in the **because**-clause is vital. Example (30) expresses an action, a way of doing something, and can nearly always be paraphrased as:

(32) The way (that) he recites...

Conversely, (31) expresses a fact and is paraphrasable as:

(33) The fact that he recites...

Action nominals (see p. 18) as in (2) are fully nominalized gerunds as contrasted with what Lees (1968: 71–72) calls the “gerundive” nominal. Consequently, action nominals are only compatible with an **of**-object (if a transitive verb is involved), as in (30) above, and modifying elements are adjectives, never adverbs. So in the same example the adjective **beautiful** could be inserted (*His beautiful reciting of...*), while **beautifully** is ungrammatical here: *His reciting of... beautifully...*

This matter has been thoroughly and definitively looked into by Lees (1968) and also Declerck (1991: 495–501), so we do not have to enter into another detailed analysis. Just one minor remark on Declerck (1991: 497) can be made. He labels all the gerunds that I have subsumed under B and C “nonnominalized”, although he frankly admits at the same time that the term “is not quite accurate”. Actually it is a **contradictio in terminis**: all gerunds are nominalized one way or another. In light of the (hopefully convincing) diachronic evidence presented in this paper “verbalized gerund” is more appropriate, at least the way I see it, or for that matter simply “verbal gerund”, as opposed to the “nominal gerund”.

Typically, some action nominals like **handling**, **dealing** or **killing** have acquired lexical status in that they nowadays feature as lexical items in English dictionaries, designated as “noun” or just “n.”, which seems to indicate that lexicographers tend to regard them as nouns in their own right. They lie towards the boundary between –**ing** nouns with concrete denotation (*her writings*, etc.) and Lees’ action nominals proper.
4 In retrospect

In this contribution I have attempted to demonstrate that a diachronic approach to the gerundial construction, however superficial and concise, contributes to a better understanding of it. As pointed out earlier more than once, as a category the gerund is characterized by a noun/verb polarity that emerged and gained momentum in the course of Middle English and also Early Modern English, and which underlies its remarkable flexibility and broad functionality unlike comparable structures, say in Dutch or German.

It is clear that the history and development of the gerund in English as a whole can best be captured in terms of a triadic evolutionary process: VERB – NOUN – VERB.

5 Epilogue: the –ing form with verbs of perception

Finally I want to briefly address the –ing form governed by verbs of perception and some others. All but a few grammarians, including Declerck (1991: 460–461), analyse them as present participles. I shall argue in this subsection that there are good grounds to assume that they can also be regarded as a separate gerundial type in a specific interpretation, at least when verbs of perception are involved.

Let us start from the following examples:

\[(34)\] a. We saw him perform Molière on the beach.
   b. We saw him performing Molière on the beach.

*Prima facie*, it looks as if (34a) and (34b) only differ in terms of grammatical aspect. Indeed, the subclause in (34a) focuses on the performance as such, while (34b) stresses the ongoingness or progressiveness of it.

But things are not that simple. The classical “litmus test” to discover the direct object is asking either a *what* or a *who* question. Now it unmistakably appears that, whereas (34a) only allows *what*, (34b) can be an appropriate answer to both of them, which is also borne out by two possible paraphrases:

\[(35)\] a. We saw him while he was performing... *(whom...?)*
   b. We saw that/how he was performing... *(what...?)*

It can be inferred from this that paraphrase (35a) proves that *him* in (34b) can be interpreted as the object modified by a participial object complement. By contrast, paraphrase (35b) shows the entire structure *him performing Molière on the beach* to function as the direct object, and so has to be taken as a gerundial clause filling a nominal (object) slot in much the same way as:
(36) Do you mind him performing Molière ...?

However, there is one major syntactic constraint on the latter interpretation: the syntactic property of using a subject in the genitive is ruled out with –ing forms complementing verbs of perception:

(37) *We saw his performing Molière...

Yet there is no denying that, apart from this constraint, there are good grounds to regard these –ing forms as nominals. However, seeing that one feature of the gerundial construction is lacking, I suggest using the term “semi-gerund”.

Now, how can we possibly account for the non-occurrence of subjects in the genitive? For one thing, the unmarked noun and/or accusative pronoun as in (34a) may well affect the choice of the form of the subject used in –ing clauses like the one in (34b), given their near grammatico-semantic equivalence. In addition, the dichotomic analysis as presented in (35ab) actually suggests an underlying functional ambivalence: both object of the main verb and subject of the –ing clause (so, who and what), which probably precludes genitival forms throughout. This then provides us with another plausible argument to refer to these –ing forms as semi-gerunds.

For the sake of completeness we should also look at some other verbs complemented with –ing forms in exactly the same way as verbs of perception are. These are: catch, discover, find (physical discovery of a presence), keep, leave, send, start and have (in a causative meaning); see Dekeyser et al. (2008: 316–317). The analysis used above cannot be applied here, because neither the what question nor the that clause paraphrase can be used as relevant parameters. In most cases the object complement analysis is the more plausible one, as in:

(38) She caught him stealing wheat from the barn. (while he was stealing...).

(39) The patrolman found the asylum seekers wandering in Central Station. (in the process (of wandering).

In other cases though, these constructions resist any straightforward analysis in terms of parsing:

(40) I'll have you walking again in three weeks, the doctor said.

(41) The teacher’s words of praise set me dreaming.

The most acceptable and consistent solution here is just to take them as sui generis constructions.
Now that we have worked out a survey of the gerundial construction in a diachronic perspective and extended our discussion to verbs of perception, I propose the following adjusted terminology scale:

\[ (-\text{ing nouns}) \quad \text{nominal gerunds} \quad \text{verbalized gerunds} \quad \text{semi-gerunds} \]

Type A

Type B + C

Type D

As observed at the beginning, \textit{-ing} nouns with concrete meanings do not qualify here. Lees (1968: 64) refers to “our” Type A as “action nominal” as compared with “gerundive nominal” for types B and C. This does not seem to be very consistent; “action nominal” is a semantic category, but how then are we to understand “gerundive”? The term “verbalized” is more to the point; for convenience’s sake, it can be replaced with “verbal”, or even simply “gerund”. At the extreme right end we find the semi-gerund, ranging intermediately between full gerunds and present participles, which, as a matter of course, fall outside the scope of this scale; see examples (38–41) above. Needless to stress that this scale, once again, reflects the development of increasing verbalization of an originally fully nominalized verb through time.

So the fine-tuning bears both on the use of “verbal(ized) gerund” and the extension of the gerundial construction to what I have called “semi-gerund”. \textit{Quod scripsi, scripsi.}

NOTES

* The present article is a slightly adjusted and extended version of a contribution which originally appeared in the Festschrift offered to Renaat Declerck (KU Leuven): Cappelle B. and Wada N. (eds.) 2010. \textit{Distinctions in English Grammar Offered to Renaat Declerck}; see list of references below.

1 This paper does not draw on any primary linguistic material. Nearly all of the examples have been selected from Visser’s \textit{Historical Syntax} and Mustanoja’s \textit{Middle English Syntax}, both of them treasure-troves to the historical linguist. I have preserved these authors’ references to their sources as such.

2 As most of you may not be familiar with the Old English language, I have chosen simple and, at the same time, relevant examples, supplemented with a Modern English version in order to make them more accessible. Also note that \textit{th}-, whether voiced or voiceless, is spelled in Old English either with “thorn” or with “eth” \textit{ð}; for practical reasons I have used the latter. Finally, to render the somewhat fronted OE /æ/ the usual ligature \textit{æ} is used. As to understanding, Middle English does not present any particular difficulties, so translations have been omitted. In addition, all the relevant phrases/clauses in the examples are printed in italics.

3 The pervasive prescriptivism, which may well have influenced Jane Austen in her writings, emerged in the course of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century and was continued into the subsequent century and even beyond. A major landmark in this tradition was Lindley Murray’s \textit{English Grammar} (1795), with its innumerable reprints and enlarged editions. See Dekeyser (1975) and, as to the 18\textsuperscript{th} century, also Leonard (1929).
It ought to be pointed out that Henry Sweet was the very first truly descriptive grammarian in the history of English grammar writing; see Dekeyser (1975: *passim*) on that score.

Dekeyser at al. (2008: 318) refer to this *ing* form as a “quasi-gerund”. With the benefit of hindsight, I now consider “semi-gerund” a more accurate term, as “quasi-gerund” tends to evoke a rather negative connotation: indeed, semi-gerunds are more than mere quasi-gerunds.

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