



CATENATIVE VERBS AS VERB-TO-VERB LINKING DEVICES IN
ENGLISH: A STRUCTURAL-SEMANTIC ANALYSIS

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Abstract. *Catenative verbs constitute one of the most productive verb-to-verb linking mechanisms in English, allowing a matrix verb to be followed directly, within the same clause, by a subordinated non-finite verb in the to-infinitive, bare infinitive, or gerund-participle form (want to leave, help pack, admit taking, keep working). Because the resulting sequence has no overt conjunction and can itself serve as the site for further catenation (I want to try to start learning to swim), catenative constructions form open-ended chains that are structurally distinct both from ordinary subordinate clauses and from auxiliary-plus-main-verb sequences. This paper examines the formal criteria that identify catenative verbs, the semantic classes into which they fall, the factors governing complement selection, and the constraints on chain length and structure.*

Keywords: *catenative verb, verb chaining, non-finite complementation, to-infinitive, gerund-participle, grammaticalization, English syntax.*

Introduction. Among the devices English uses to link one verb to another within a single clause, catenative verbs occupy a special place: they permit a governing verb to take a bare non-finite verbal complement — a to-infinitive, a bare infinitive, or a gerund-participle — without any intervening conjunction,



complementizer, or relative pronoun.¹ The term “catenative” (from Latin *catena*, ‘chain’) reflects the defining property of this class: catenative verbs can themselves be embedded as the complement of another catenative verb, producing chains of theoretically unlimited length, e.g. I want to try to start learning to swim, in which *want*, *try*, *start*, and *learning* are successively linked without a single coordinating or subordinating conjunction.² Although catenative verbs have long been noted in reference grammars, their status as a distinct verb-to-verb linking category — rather than a subtype of ordinary complementation — deserves more systematic treatment, particularly in a contrastive and pedagogical perspective for learners whose first language (such as Uzbek) marks equivalent relations through converbial morphology rather than complement-taking verbs.

1. Formal criteria for catenative status

A verb qualifies as catenative when it satisfies three formal tests. First, the linking test: the verb takes a bare non-finite verbal complement without any overt linking element (compare *deserves to win* with the ungrammatical **deserves that to win*). Second, the chaining test: the complement verb can itself be catenative and take a further non-finite complement, producing recursive embedding (*deserves to try to win*). Third, the subject-sharing default: in the unmarked case the matrix subject controls the understood subject of the complement verb (*He deserves to win* = *He wins*), distinguishing catenative

¹Huddleston, R., Pullum, G.K. (2002) *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

²Huddleston, R., Pullum, G.K. (2005) *A Student's Introduction to English Grammar*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



constructions from raising and small-clause structures where control patterns differ.³

Catenative verbs must further be distinguished from two adjacent categories. They differ from auxiliary verbs (modal and primary) in that catenatives retain full lexical content and ordinary verb morphology (they inflect for tense, agreement, and aspect: wants/wanted to leave), whereas auxiliaries are a closed, morphologically defective class.⁴ They also differ from copular — traditionally called “linking” — verbs such as be, seem, and become, which connect a subject to a predicative complement (an adjective or noun phrase) rather than to a second verb; the terminological overlap between “linking verb” in the copular sense and the verb-to-verb “linking” function of catenatives is a frequent source of confusion in pedagogical grammars and should be kept terminologically distinct.

2. Semantic classes and complement selection

Catenative verbs fall into recurrent semantic classes that correlate, though imperfectly, with complement choice. Aspectual verbs (begin, start, continue, keep, stop) encode the phase of an event and typically alternate between to-infinitive and gerund with little or no meaning difference (began to rain / began raining). Modal-like and volitional verbs (want, wish, intend, agree, decide, refuse) overwhelmingly select the to-infinitive, reflecting a forward-looking, irrealis orientation toward an as-yet-unrealized event. Verbs of memory and emotive stance (remember, forget, regret) alternate between infinitive and gerund with a systematic meaning contrast keyed to temporal reference: the gerund complement denotes an event prior to or concurrent with the act of

³Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G., Svartvik, J. (1985) *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. London: Longman.

⁴Huddleston, R., Pullum, G.K. (2002) *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



remembering, while the infinitive complement denotes an event that was, or is, to be carried out (forgot to go vs. forgot going).⁵

A further complicating factor is hendiadys-like coordination, in which a catenative relation is formally disguised as coordination through and, most typically with verbs of motion (come and see, go and get, try and finish). In such cases the two conjuncts are not interpreted as two independent events but as a single catenative-like macro-event, and the construction alternates, in varieties that permit it, with the corresponding bare-infinitival catenative (come see, go get) — evidence that the and-construction is best analyzed as a colloquial reflex of catenation rather than as ordinary clausal coordination.⁶

3. Chain length, ambiguity, and processing constraints

While catenative chaining is recursively available in principle, usage data show a strong preference for chains of two or three links; longer chains, though grammatical, place increasing demands on working memory and are correspondingly rare outside constructed examples. Chain-internal ambiguity also arises when a catenative verb permitting both infinitival and gerundial complementation is itself embedded under a further catenative verb, since the scope of negation, aspect, and modality can in principle be constructed at more than one link in the chain. These processing and interpretive pressures suggest that catenative chaining, although formally unbounded, is functionally self-limiting, with discourse tending to redistribute longer conceptual sequences across separate finite clauses rather than a single maximally extended catenative chain — a tendency that parallels, from the opposite typological

⁵Huddleston, R., Pullum, G.K. (2005) *A Student's Introduction to English Grammar*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁶Chalker, S. (1984) *Current English Grammar*. London: Macmillan.

direction, the register-sensitive limits observed on converb chaining in languages such as Uzbek.⁷

This typological positioning of catenative constructions has been argued explicitly within Role and Reference Grammar, where catenative verb constructions in English have been shown to share the core syntactic and semantic properties standardly used to identify serial verb constructions (SVCs) cross-linguistically — single-event interpretation, shared argument structure, and the absence of an overt linking conjunction — despite English not usually being classed as a ‘serializing’ language.⁸ This comparison, which draws on the broader cross-linguistic typology of serial verb constructions,⁹ and on subsequent work refining the comparative concept of SVCs,¹⁰ situates the English catenative construction within a broader cross-linguistic space of verb-to-verb linking strategies that also includes converbial chaining, reinforcing the relevance of catenatives to contrastive work on languages that favor converbs, such as Uzbek.

4. Catenatives on the lexical–grammatical cline

Catenative verbs are frequently cited in grammaticalization studies as verbs caught mid-way between full lexical status and auxiliary status. Verbs such as *going to* (realized phonologically as *gonna*), *have to*, and *need to* show partial bleaching of their original lexical meaning (motion, possession, requirement) in favor of a more grammatical, modal-like function (futurity,

⁷Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G., Svartvik, J. (1985) *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. London: Longman.

⁸Roberts, J.R. (2012) Serial verbs in English: An RRG analysis of catenative verb constructions. *Functions of Language*, 19(2), 201–234.

⁹Sebba, M. (1987) *The Syntax of Serial Verbs*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

¹⁰Haspelmath, M. (2016) The serial verb construction: Comparative concept and cross-linguistic generalizations. *Language and Linguistics*, 17(3), 291–319.

obligation), while retaining enough verbal morphology (going to/went to; needs to/needed to) to remain formally distinct from the core modal auxiliaries.¹¹ The catenative construction is therefore not merely a synchronic curiosity of English complementation but a productive site through which new grammatical markers continue to emerge, making it of direct relevance to both synchronic syntactic description and diachronic grammaticalization theory.

Conclusion

Catenative verbs represent a formally and semantically distinct category of verb-to-verb linking in English, characterized by bare non-finite complementation, recursive chainability, and default subject control. Complement selection (to-infinitive, bare infinitive, or gerund-participle) is governed by lexically specific subcategorization that correlates only loosely with semantic class, and chain length, though formally unbounded, is functionally constrained by processing pressures. Positioned on a cline between lexical verb and grammatical auxiliary, catenative constructions offer a productive window onto ongoing grammaticalization in English and a clear point of contrast with languages, such as Uzbek, that encode comparable verb-to-verb relations through converbial morphology rather than complement-taking matrix verbs — a contrast that merits further corpus-based and pedagogical investigation.

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