

# Infinitives, a.c.i. & n.c.i.

Latin MILC – W1, MT 2012

October 09, 2012

## 1 Uses of the pure infinitive

### 1.1 Nominal uses

The infinitive is part of both the nominal and verbal paradigm in Latin. It can be substantivized and thus employed as subject in a sentence, but can equally take verbal complements and adjuncts (e.g. objects, adverbs).

1. *Recte regere rem publicam ars difficillima est.* (Cic.Att.7,25)  
Governing a state properly is a most difficult form of art.

With impersonal expressions, e.g. piget me, opus est, mihi videtur, and copulative verbs, such as esse, haberi, putari, videri, the infinitive is quite common as a subject.

2. *Hospitem arcere tecto apud Germanos nefas putabatur.* (Tac.Germ.21,2)  
Amongst the Germani it was considered an outrage to keep a guest out of one's house.

Predicative adjectives or participles will appear in the accusative with infinitival subjects.

3. *Rebus suis contentum esse ea vera est felicitas.*  
Being content with one's possessions, that is true happiness.

### 1.2 Verbal uses

A number of verbs take an infinitive complement (prolative infinitive); they usually express concepts such as ability, necessity, obligation, desire, etc. Amongst them are: posse, (ne)scire, velle, audere. Predicatives here are found in the nominative.

4. *Caesar hostes longius prosequi veritus est.* (C.BG.5.52,1)  
Caesar shied away from pursuing the enemies any longer.
5. *Malim videri nimis timidus quam parum prudens.* (Cic.Marcell.21)  
I would rather appear too frightened than too careless.

Further note two uses of the infinitive that you will encounter, but **should not emulate** when writing prose yourself. Firstly, the historic infinitive, often used to denote past action where, for stylistic purposes, the action is focused without taking into account questions of time.

6. *Verres a Diodoro erepta sibi vasa dicebat; minitari absenti Diodoro, vociferari palam, lacrimas interdum vix tenere.* (Cic.Ver.2.4,39)  
Verres said the vessel had been stolen by Diodorus; he threatened him in his absence, cried out loud in front of everyone, and was sometimes close to tears.

Secondly, the epexegetic infinitive, which is common in Greek, in Latin is only a late import.

7. *Figere doctus erat, sed tendere doctior arcus.* (Ov.Met.5,55)  
He was skilled at piercing with a dart, but better at beding the bow.

## 2 accusativus cum infinitivo

The accusative with infinitive construction (a.c.i.) is regularly dependent on verbs of perception and expression (verba dicendi et sentiendi). The subject of the a.c.i. will occur in the accusative, as will any predicatives. Note that, in contrast to Greek, the subject of the a.c.i. needs to be expressed even if it is co-referent with the subject of the main clause.

8. *Decet cariorem nobis esse patriam quam nosmet ipsos.* (Cic.Fin.3,64)  
Our fatherland ought to be dearer to us than we ourselves.
9. *Platonem ferunt de animorum aeternitate sensitisse idem quod Pythagoram.* (Cic.Tusc.1,39)  
They say that Plato thought the same about the immortality of the souls as Pythagoras did.
10. *Non possum oblivisci meam hanc esse patriam, me horum esse consulem.* (Cic.Catil.2,27)  
I cannot forget that this fatherland is mine, and that I am their consul.

If the a.c.i. is initiated by a verb of command or prohibition, the passive infinitive is used where the person at whom the command or prohibition is directed is not mentioned.

*Caesar milites castra munire iubet.* vs *Caesar castra muniri iubet.*  
Caesar orders the soldiers to guard the camp. Caesar gives the order to guard the camp.

11. *Furem luce occidi vetant XII tabulae.* (Cic.Tull.50)  
The Twelve Tables prohibit executing a thief by daylight.

Whilst impersonal verbs with personal compliments take pure infinitives (s.a.), those that stand without such compliment take an a.c.i., e.g. *constat*, *apparet*, *perspicuum est*.

12. *Fuit fama Themistoclem venenum sua sponte sumpsisse.*  
Rumour had it that Themistocles took the poison of his own accord.

Do note, however, that these are tendencies, not hard and fast rules; some impersonal verbs take pure infinitives when talking about something in general, and an a.c.i. when referring to an individual.

*Oportet legibus obtemperare.* vs *Oportet cives legibus obtemperare.*  
One ought to obey the laws. The citizens ought to obey the law.

With some verbs, the construction has an influence on its meaning; the most common ones are (inf. // a.c.i.): *contendo* (I try // I claim), *cogito* (I intend // I believe), *scio* (I know how to // I know that), *statuo*, *constituo*, *decerno* (I resolve to // I declare).

I know that you said that. vs I know how to win.  
*Scio te hoc dixisse.* *Scio vincere.*

Time is expressed relative to that of the initiating verb: infinitive present for simultaneous, infinitive perfect for anterior, infinitive future for posterior actions; the infinitive future is further employed after verbs expressing hope, promise or threat. When a future tense is unavailable, a periphrasis with *fore ut* may be used (e.g. with impersonal verbs).

Note that irreal clauses (would..., would have ...) are expressed with the future participle and the appropriate infinitive of *esse* (*coniugatio periphrastica activa*).

13. *Putamus fore, ut id eos paeniteat.* (Cic.Phil.12,7)  
We believe that they shall regret it.
14. *Videmur quieturi fuisse, nisi essemus lacessiti.* (Cic.Orat.2,230)  
We would obviously have remained calm if we had not been provoked.

If a further accusative object is to be expressed within an a.c.i., is often passivized to avoid ambiguity; a famous counterexample (and thus ambiguous):

15. *Aio te, Aiacida, Romanos vincere posse.* (Enn.Ann.179)

I say, descendant of Ajax, that you can defeat the Romans / that the Romans can defeat you.

Finally, since the a.c.i. is the main (but not the only) means of conveying indirect speech, reference to the speaker is often required; such reference is made through *se*, *sibi*, and *suus*. Other pronouns do not refer to the subject.

16. *Sentit animus se vi sua, non aliena moveri.* (Cic.Tusc.1,23)

The mind feels that it moves by its own force, no by that of another.

### 3 nominativus cum infinitivo

The n.c.i. usually occurs only after *videri* and some *verba dicendi et sentiendi* in the passive (*putari*, *nuntiari*, *dici*). The subject of the n.c.i., as the name would suggest, is found in the nominative.

17. *Thales primus defectionem solis praedixisse fertur.* (Cic.Div.1,112)

It is said that Thales was the first to predict a solar eclipse.

Further, if a verb that usually initiates an a.c.i. is put in the passive, the n.c.i. often follows, esp. with verbs of command and prohibition.

18. *Parentes adire ad filios prohibentur.* (Cic.Ver.2.5,117)

Parents were prohibited to see their children.

### 4 References

For more detailed information and stylistic matters, cf. e.g. Arnold & Bradley's "Latin Prose Composition", chs. 5-7; Kennedy's "Revised Latin Primer" (use index); Menge's "Lehrbuch der lateinischen Syntax und Semantik", pp. 663-708.

## 5 Assignment

### 5.1 Translate into *idiomatic* English.

Further, comment briefly (one or two sentences) on the use of the infinitive.

1. *Cicero Romanis mori potius quam servire praestare censebat.*
2. *Regulus ad supplicium redire maluit quam fidem hosti datam fallere.*
3. *Dictator iussit bona rei proscribi.*
4. *Nego quemquam vestrum dicere posse se hoc nondum audivisse.*
5. *Mos est Athenis laudari in contione eos, qui sint in proeliis interfecti.*
6. *Civitatibus Germanorum maxima laus est quam latissime circum se solitudines habere.*

### 5.2 Translate into Latin.

Use the infinitive, a.c.i. and n.c.i. as appropriate.

1. He says that he has not sinned.
2. The soldiers answered that they would have gladly attacked the town in the preceding year, but that now they hoped for repose.
3. He hopes soon to attain to highest honours, but I believe that he will never win them.
4. She wrote that she had not yet seen her sister, but hoped that she would find her at home.
5. It seems that he was unwilling to become king, and preferred to be a private person.
6. It was clear that the destined day was now at hand.
7. Rumor has it that Caesar commanded the soldiers to catch elks.
8. Further I believe that Carthage must be destroyed.

### 5.3 Reading

For next week, please read the text below, ch. 1 of Sallust's *Bellum Catilinae*, and be prepared to translate it and discuss grammatical and stylistic points.

Omnis homines, qui sese student praestare ceteris animalibus, summa ope niti decet, ne vitam silentio transeant veluti pecora, quae natura prona atque ventri oboedientia finxit. Sed nostra omnis vis in animo et corpore sita est: animi imperio, corporis servitio magis utimur; alterum nobis cum dis, alterum cum beluis commune est. Quo mihi rectius videtur ingeni quam virium opibus gloriam quaerere et, quoniam vita ipsa, qua fruimur, brevis est, memoriam nostri quam maxime longam efficere. Nam divitiarum et formae gloria fluxa atque fragilis est, virtus clara aeternaque habetur. Sed diu magnum inter mortalis certamen fuit, vine corporis an virtute animi res militaris magis procederet. Nam et, prius quam incipias, consulto et, ubi consulueris, mature facto opus est. Ita utrumque per se indigens alterum alterius auxilio eget.

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Please hand in your assignment by Friday 6pm, either by email to [robin.meyer@ling-phil.ox.ac.uk](mailto:robin.meyer@ling-phil.ox.ac.uk), or by pigeon post to Robin Meyer, Wolfson College, Linton Rd.