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# The Split Infinitive in Electronic Corpora: Should There Be a Rule?

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## Abstract

The controversy surrounding the split infinitive has been around for over a century. One of the main arguments invoked by those supporting the 'do not split the infinitive' rule is that split infinitives are simply unnatural phenomena that occur in language only by mistake. Corpus linguistics allows us to verify this argument. Is there a reality that shows people willing to freely split infinitives in their daily use of language, written as well as oral? If so, what types of adverbs are used as splitters and in what conditions? After making a concise presentation of the mentioned rule, this paper analyzes the occurrence of split infinitives in four corpora: (1) an academic one, Brown's Academic Words, dating from the 1960s, (2) a popular one, the Internet as searched through Google, (3) the British National Corpus (100 million words, 1980s-1993) and (4) the more recent American National Corpus (400+ million words, 1990 – 2008). The paper ends with a number of suggestions about teaching the split infinitive to ESL/EFL students.

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Whilst all modern grammarians agree that the split infinitive (the placing of an adverb between *to* and the *verb*, as in *to perfectly understand*) is not a grammatical error, there are still many Canadian universities, such as those of Lethbridge or Manitoba, that enforce the 'do not split the

infinitive' rule, at least at the departmental level.<sup>1</sup> There are also those who go much further, arguing that "the rule 'do not split infinitives' is a proper subset of the rule 'do not split verbs'" (Neely, 1978, p. 405). The split infinitive became subject of controversy late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and remains highly contentious. A look at blogs on the split infinitive shows that people still feel very strongly about this issue, arguing both in favour and against it.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the years, it has been used as one of the 'make or break' rules of good English usage (Crystal, 2003, p. 193).

Previous studies of the split infinitives have been largely limited to discussing whether it is correct or incorrect to use it. Most probably because of the debate surrounding it, academic research on the use of split infinitives seems to be at a bare minimum. A spring 2009 search of the ProQuest Dissertations and Thesis database for the 'split infinitive' term has identified only two entries. In each, the split infinitive is of tertiary importance. Three other databases showed a similar situation: Academic Search Premier (26 entries, only 5 from Academic journals), ERIC (4 entries, all relevant, over a 40 year-period), Linguistics and Language Behaviour Abstracts (20 entries, 30-year period, some of the entries in languages other than English).

Based on the analysis of the most recent language corpora, the current paper focuses on the adverbs used as splitters: are some adverbs used more often than others? If yes, what types of adverbs? Is there a pattern? Additionally, it tries to find out if the use of the split infinitive in the written language is on the increase.

This paper starts with a brief historical overview of the split infinitive, noting its usage and the making of the 'do not split' rule, followed by the arguments in favour and against using it. The second part provides a corpora-based analysis of when/how the split infinitive occurs. The last part analyzes the issue from the perspective of the English teacher: should

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<sup>1</sup> The rule is enforced at the following universities: Victoria ([http://web.uvic.ca/grs/web\\_pages/writing\\_guide.php](http://web.uvic.ca/grs/web_pages/writing_guide.php)), Manitoba ([http://www.umanitoba.ca/student/u1/images/Correcting\\_Split\\_Inf.pdf](http://www.umanitoba.ca/student/u1/images/Correcting_Split_Inf.pdf)), and Lethbridge ([http://classes.uleth.ca/200301/geog3225a/myguide2003.htm#\\_1\\_11](http://classes.uleth.ca/200301/geog3225a/myguide2003.htm#_1_11)).

<sup>2</sup> These are some of the blogs consulted: <http://arnoldzwickly.wordpress.com/2009/06/13/postings-on-split-infinitives>; <http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languageblog/archives/000901.html>; <http://www.dailywritingtips.com/what-is-a-split-infinitive>; <http://topics.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/10/27/to-boldly-go>.

we allow the students *to freely split* the infinitive or should we act *strongly to ban* its use?

## THE SPLIT INFINITIVE

### Origins

The first documented use of split infinitives goes back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Following the replacement of the Old English inflectional ending *-(i)an* by the particle *to*, it took little time before adverbs or pronouns were inserted between *to* and the verb: “for to him raede” (Layamon’s *Brut*, in Crystal, 2003, p. 45), “what movede the pape of Rome to thus accepte mennes personnes” (Wycliff, c.1380) or “to perfitylly knowe all manere” (*Secreta Secretorum*, c. 1400).<sup>3</sup> David Crystal, the editor of the *The Cambridge encyclopedia of the English language*, argues that, because of its occurrence during the Middle English period, “infinitive-splitting is by no means an unnatural process in English, as prescriptivists argue and certainly not a modern phenomenon” (2003, p. 45). In noting that Reginald Pecock (c.1395-c.1460) “is the most prolific splitter of infinitives of all times” (1992, p. 329), Olga Fischer, a professor of English language history at University of Amsterdam, supports Crystal’s opinion.

Notwithstanding its promising start, the split infinitive became lost. Robert William Burchfield, the editor of the third edition of *Fowler’s Modern English Usage*, one of the most famous British grammar books, argues that between the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century there was a ‘taboo’ on using split infinitives, examples being extremely rare (1996, p. 737). A search in the Corpus of Historical English confirms his assertion.<sup>4</sup> Hamlet’s famous ‘to be or not to be’ is full evidence in support of Burchfield’s view.

By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the split infinitive was back. Why did it resurface? There are two possible reasons. First, as Otto Jespersen suggests in his 1933 *Essentials of English Grammar*, “it has probably been brought about through the influence of similar word-orders: ‘with the object of further illustrating the matter,’ ‘he further illustrates,’ ‘that he may further illustrate’

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Burchfield, R. W. (1996). *The new Fowler’s modern English usage*, p. 737.

<sup>4</sup> I could identify only a handful of examples in the OED Corpus of Historical English, <http://corpus.byu.edu/oed>.

lead naturally to the construction ‘*in order to further illustrate*’” (p. 331). Second, “adverbials can be ambiguous in writing, where intonation is not available to assist in specifying grammatical relationships. This potential for confusion probably accounts for the popularity of the split infinitive, which eliminates all possibility of ambiguity” (Wilson, 1993).

### The Rule

As soon as the split infinitive seemed ready to make a comeback, a welcoming committee was set up to deal with this rather unexpected or unorthodox development. The main question was whether to accept it or not and the initial answer was that the split infinitive should be banned from English.

Opinions regarding the origins of the ‘do not split infinitives’ rule diverge. Steven Pinker attributes it to the 18<sup>th</sup> century prescriptive grammarians (1994, p. 374). For what it is worth, Robert Lowth, the author of the first pedagogical grammar, *A short introduction to English grammar*, and one of the best known prescriptive grammarians, does not seem to be the one who created this rule: the closest he comes to the split infinitive is in a quote from Shakespeare: “‘being mechanical, you ought not walk’ should be ‘ought not *to* walk’” (1774, p. 101). The main issue for Lowth is not the split infinitive but the fact that “*ought* is not one of the auxiliary verbs ... does not admit of another verb immediately following it, without the preposition *to*” (1774, p. 101).

One of the earliest mentions of the rule comes from the 1864 edition of Henry Alford’s *The Queen’s English*:

A correspondent states as his own usage, and defends, the insertion of an adverb between the sign of the infinitive mood and the verb. He gives as an instance ‘*to scientifically illustrate*’. But surely this is a practice entirely unknown to English speakers and writers. It seems to me, that we ever regard the use of *to* of the infinitive as inseparable from its verb. And when we have a choice between two forms of expression, ‘*scientifically to illustrate*’ and ‘*to illustrate scientifically*’, there seems no good reason for flying in the face of common usage. (p. 171)

Notwithstanding whether the rule was introduced during the 18<sup>th</sup> or the 19<sup>th</sup> century, its impact remains the same: “once introduced, a prescriptive rule is very hard to eradicate, no matter how ridiculous. ...

Anyone daring to overturn a rule by example must always worry that readers will think he or she is ignorant of the rule, rather than challenging it" (Pinker, p. 374).

Not everyone was happy with the actions initiated by the welcoming committee. Grammarians in particular seemed ready to take issue with the new rule. Henry Watson Fowler is by far the most outspoken scholar with regard to the uselessness of the rule. In his *The King's English*, written together with his brother, he notes:

The 'split' infinitive has taken such hold upon the consciences of journalists that, instead of warning the novice against splitting his infinitives, we must warn him against the curious superstition that the splitting or not splitting makes the difference between a good and a bad writer. The split infinitive is an ugly thing ... but it is one among several hundred ugly things ... Even that mysterious quality, 'distinction' of style, may in modest measure be attained by a splitter of infinitives. (1908, part 2, chpt. 25)

In 1924, Fowler co-wrote an entire book on the split infinitive. Still, his famous description of the split infinitive, which divides the English-speaking world into five categories based on the attitude towards the split infinitive, was originally published in the first edition (1926) of what proved to be his most successful book, *A Dictionary of Modern English Language*. He concludes: "we maintain, however, that a real split infinitive, though not desirable in itself, is preferable to either of two things, to real ambiguity, and to patent artificiality" (1965, p. 581).

### Modern Usage

Notwithstanding the welcoming committee's decision, the split infinitive became a permanent feature of English, justifying the grammarians' argument that there is nothing wrong with it. As a result, the dual image of 'it is grammatically correct but try to stay away from it', came to dominate most presentations of the split infinitive:

The most diligent search can find no modern grammarian to pedantically, to dogmatically, to invariably condemn a split infinitive ... No absolute taboo should be placed on the use of simple adverbs between the particle to and the verb ... Avoid

splitting infinitives whenever possible, but do not suffer undue remorse if a split infinitive is unavoidable for the natural and unambiguous completion of a sentence already begun. (Burchfield, 1996, p. 737-738)

Most dictionaries and writing guides present the split infinitive along this dual image. However, there are extremes. Peter M. Neely, a college teacher, argues that even famous writers err, and he offers Walter Lippmann's admission that "the split was a slip which had escaped detection" rather than a linguistic artifice (1978, p. 402). In the other camp, we have George Bernard Shaw's letter to the editors of the *Chronicle*: "the man is an ignoramus ... is now beginning to rebuke 'second-rate' newspapers for using such phrases as 'to suddenly go' and 'to boldly say'. I ask you, Sir, to put this man out ... without interfering with his perfect freedom of choice between 'to suddenly go', 'to go suddenly', and 'suddenly to go'" (Crystal, 2003, p. 195).

The dual image can also be presented through arguments in favour and against the rule. These arguments, collected from grammar books and writing guides, allow the reader to get a better understanding of why there is such a controversy over the use of the split infinitive.

### Arguments in Favour of the Rule

The prescriptivist objection: it is not a real feature of English, at least not of prestigious English. This is the most general, yet the most influential objection. It is based on a perception that the split infinitive should not be used. It gives no grammatical / scientific reason for it, except for common usage. The high number of examples in which the adverb is placed before or after the infinitive is the best evidence brought forward by those supporting the rule. Another way of looking at this reason is to say something like 'because it was not part of the language that I learned as a teenager/adult, I should not use it'.

The infinitive is a unit: there should be nothing between *to* and the verb. This is the argument that gives 'linguistic' backing to the rule.

The influence of Latin: there is no split infinitive in Latin; there should be none in English. The strange thing about this argument is that none of those who mention it cite a source, so that the Latin connection is no more than "part of the folklore of linguistics" (Bailey, 2006).

The rhythm of the sentence: it does not sound right. For example, Roy Copperud, a journalist who wrote a column on grammar and usage and

later became the editor of *Webster's Dictionary of Usage and Style*, who is not a supporter of the rule, argues that some of them "are objectionable because they sound awkward: *I want to consistently enforce discipline*" (1964, p. 202). This seems particularly true in the case of complex split infinitives, such as, we have *to consistently and thoroughly follow* the rules.

The 'language maven' complex: "hating the split infinitive is, for many, a sign of erudition" (Bailey, 2006).

The arguments favouring the rule seem to be of rather general nature. They are prescriptive and, except for the second one, which looks at the infinitive as a unit, are not based on grammatical explanations but on usage. This is not to say that they do not provide a more or less detailed analysis of the language; just that the "technical" evidence brought forward is not all that well argued. Still, what remains is that, as Robert Burchfield has synthesized it in his edition of *Fowler's Modern English Usage*, "all the evidence points towards the reality of the feeling that it is 'wrong' to split infinitives" (1996, p. 737).

### Arguments Against the Rule

The conflict between the needs of the infinitive (the two elements tend to stay together) and the needs of the adverb (its natural position is, generally, just before the verb): one does not overpower the other (Bryson, 1984). "If we do not boggle at 'He favors *really eliminating* discrimination,' why should we boggle at 'He wants *to really eliminate* discrimination?'" (Bernstein, 1977, p. 113).

It can be seen by analogy to the noun phrase: "the name [split infinitive] is misleading, for the preposition *to* no more belongs to the infinitive as a necessary part of it, than the definite article belongs to the substantive, and no one would think of calling "the good man" a split substantive" (Jespersen, 1933, p. 331).

The analogy with other verb phrases: if we accept structures such as 'he does not *really* want' or 'we did not *actually* talk to him', in which the adverb splits the auxiliary and the verb, what stops us from accepting the adverb between *to* and the *verb*? In other words, we should be allowed to "apply a pattern found in verb phrases that are not infinitives to those that are" (Close, 1987, p. 220).

The false analogy with Latin: "forcing modern speakers of English ... not to split an infinitive because it isn't done in Latin makes about as much sense as forcing modern residents of England to wear laurels and togas" (Pinker, 1994, p. 374).

The stylistic argument: “the effort to avoid the split infinitive at all costs has possibly resulted in more bad writing than the split infinitive itself” (Hacker, n.d.). Strict adherence to the rule makes it “by no means unusual to detect awkward and unidiomatic usage”, such as “She was forced *apologetically* to interpose a question at this point” (Quirk, 1985, p. 497).

The rhythm of English: “*To boldly go* has one big thing in its favour. It is following the natural rhythm of English.” (Crystal, 2003, p. 195). A similar view was expressed three decades earlier by American grammarian Roy H Copperud: “The acceptability of a split infinitive depends only on whether it damages the rhythm or meaning of the sentence.” (1964, p. 201).

Passing the ‘prove your version right’ ball to the other camp: the view shared by most grammarians that “there is no reason in logic or grammar for avoiding the split infinitive” (Cutts, 1995, p. 96) brings little to the debate, only asking the other side to prove its version correct.

Compound verbs: verbs such as *to undertake* or *to overthrow* can be seen as nothing more than split infinitives, so why not use the latter? (S. Leacock, quoted in Crystal, 2003, p. 195). However, when the initial verbs were modified into compound verbs (e.g., *to throw over* becomes *to overthrow*), they took on a new meaning.

The more general argument on whether *to* belongs to the infinitive or the preceding verb: “the phenomenon here described may be taken as evidence of the fact that *to* is often felt as belonging more closely to the preceding verb than to the infinitive ... *His book will sell well, it's bound to*” (Jespersen, 1933, p. 332). If it belongs to the preceding verb, then there should be no problem splitting *to* from the infinitive form.

Those who oppose the rule base their arguments on a detailed analysis of the language, considering the split infinitive as part of the wider question of “which, of several positions in a sentence, an adverbial can acceptably occupy” (Close, 1987, p. 218), or presenting it by analogy to other grammatical structures, such as noun or verb phrases. They also warn us that, although the ‘do not split’ rule cannot be supported in English, it has been *artificially* extended to other verb structures, such as *have + past participle* or *be + past participle*: “to have *just* heard ... to be *mortally* wounded” (Fowler, 1965, p. 581). Last but not least, they also employ a slightly different version of the main argument brought forward by those favouring the rule, noting the awkwardness caused by avoiding splits: “rigid adherence to a policy on non-splitting can sometimes lead to unnaturalesness or ambiguity” (Burchfield, 1996, p. 737).



It is somehow strange that, although the number and the quality of arguments against the 'do not split an infinitive' rule outweigh those in favour of the rule, the split infinitive's dual image remains so overwhelming. The biggest difference between the two camps is that, whilst one insists that split infinitives should be avoided at all times, the other is more flexible, noting that there are three types of splits: justified, ambiguous, as well as those who should be avoided (Garner, 2003, p. 743-744).

Having reviewed the origins of the split infinitive, the history of the "never split an infinitive" rule (Essay writing, 2007), as well as the arguments in favour and against the rule, it is time to move on to its occurrence in language corpora.

## THE PRESENT STUDY

### Purpose and Methodology

This paper presents a corpus-based study of the frequency of split infinitives. It searches three corpora: the Brown Academic List (1 million words, based on the Corpus Concordance English tool in Lextutor), the British National Corpus (100 million words), and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (400+ million words). It also uses the "meta-corpus" commonly known as Google. Its main purpose is to identify the most often recurring splitters (words that come between *to* and *the verb*) and whether there are any patterns in their use.

In his PhD dissertation, Mohammed Albakri compares use and usage of language in two American newspapers, the *New York Times* and *USA Today*. He analyzes occurrences that go against the main rules of good writing and concludes that *USA Today* is more open to using "bad" usages/features. As for the split infinitive, Albakri notes "the split infinitive occurs approximately 6% of all infinitive constructions in *NYT* and almost 10% of all infinitive constructions in *USA Today*. ... Most of the tokens for the split infinitive in both newspapers are infinitives split by an adverb and only 5 infinitives split by the negator *not* in *USA Today*" (2005, p. 145). He also argues that the typical adverbs used are circumstantial adverbs of manner (e.g., *significantly*) and that the use of the split infinitive seems to be motivated by a communicative need for emphasis (p. 146).

With regard to analyzing the split infinitive, one difference between this paper and Albakri's study resides in the fact that he was able to

identify an overall percentage for the use of split infinitives in all infinitive constructions. Because the corpora analyzed in here are much bigger than those searched by Albakri, it is unrealistic to find out the overall percentage. As the verbs that accept splitting seem to differ based on a number of criteria, which will be analyzed in detail in a coming paper, only an estimate will be provided in this paper.

Since most splitters are adverbs, the methodology employed focuses on searching for the occurrence of *to + adverb + verb*. The adverbs were chosen by this author based on their frequency as well as based on the bibliography consulted on the split infinitive. The British National Corpus and the Corpus of Contemporary American English seemingly have the tools required in order to identify the exact number of split infinitives. For both of them, it is possible to choose the verb in its infinitive or base form and thus avoid other splits, such as *to actually being*. The problem is that, for whatever reasons, the system is unable to identify all instances of split infinitives. For example, a search for *to not only* on the BNC identifies 23 entries (Figure 3). A search for *to not only + verb infinitive* identifies 1 entry (Figure 1); a search for *to not only + verb base* identifies 6 entries, all of them split infinitives (Figure 2); finally, a manual search identifies 10 split infinitives (Figure 3).

SEE CONTEXT: CLICK ON WORD OR SELECT WORDS + [CONTEXT] [HELP...]

	<input type="checkbox"/>	CONTEXT	TOT <input type="checkbox"/>
1	<input type="checkbox"/>	TO NOT ONLY COME	1

0.516

Figure 1. Search results for 'to not only + verb infinitive' on BNC

	<input type="checkbox"/>	CONTEXT	TOT <input type="checkbox"/>
1	<input type="checkbox"/>	TO NOT ONLY REDUCE	1
2	<input type="checkbox"/>	TO NOT ONLY PUSH	1
3	<input type="checkbox"/>	TO NOT ONLY PROVIDE	1
4	<input type="checkbox"/>	TO NOT ONLY MAINTAIN	1
5	<input type="checkbox"/>	TO NOT ONLY DETERMINE	1
6	<input type="checkbox"/>	TO NOT ONLY CONSOLIDATE	1
		TOTAL	6

Figure 2. Search results for 'to not only + verb base form' on BNC

1		TO NOT ONLY	23
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0.563

KEYWORD IN CONTEXT (KWIC)			More information...
1	KE2	S_conv	was heaving I tried to park by the erm garden centre, but <b>to not only</b> were there people all parked there, there was a great art
2	JSC	S_courtroom	five as a defence and your Lordship to do that would of had <b>to not only</b> set aside the counterclaim as a set off, but also to set a
3	KJS	S_brdcast_discussn	the way I see it going is that the E C will expand <b>to not only</b> Lithuania about being but also other, other, er forms of Soviet Rep
4	KLY	S_speech_scripted	Ps to mount a campaign to pressurize the government into providing adequate funding <b>to not only</b> maintain, but to improve mu
5	FML	S_unclassified	come from. So then you we can tighten in on the site <b>to not only</b> a place actually on the site but how far down they came from.
6	K1N	W_news_script	it works. Both Steve and Pete hope that their tape brings relief <b>to not only</b> Multiple Sclerosis sufferers, but to anyone who want:
7	AHG	W_newsp_brdshst_nat_arts	say . Venetia was a woman of unusual quality, as is testified <b>to not only</b> by her ability to make two such disparate figures as As
8	B03	W_newsp_other_report	speech , Mr. Malone spoke of the effort his team had made " <b>to not only</b> consolidate our work in this constituency, but to improv
9	CK3	W_pop_lore	we have not left it to late. In this series I hope <b>to not only</b> provide you with a list of the endangered animals, but also some fas
10	CHB	W_pop_lore	&equo; says Ed. The group are also computer buffs on a mission <b>to not only</b> push out musical frontiers but combine the whole t
11	FBN	W_pop_lore	) towards the core. Once this happens. the medium is said <b>to not only</b> reduce ammonia/nitrite to nitrate. but do one step furthe
12	FR2	W_ac_soc_science	economy for the growing rural population. Furthermore, these changes have spread <b>to not only</b> the more isolated areas but als
13	HPU	W_ac_soc_science	society might look like is closely, one might say intimately, related <b>to not only</b> the phenomena but also the data relevant to thos
14	AR9	W_non_ac_humanities_arts	very large and well-patronized pub, The Green Man. They open on <b>to not only</b> the main thoroughfares but also narrow alleys lik
15	CB9	W_non_ac_humanities_arts	throughout India the right-angled Swastika is ever present. Human psychology is reducible <b>to not only</b> the constituents of the at
16	H83	W_non_ac_soc_science	schema aesthetic begin to affect the total context of a work and start <b>to not only</b> direct attention but also change the way in whi
17	HCD	W_non_ac_soc_science	of research in everyday teaching, I am sure that it would lead <b>to not only</b> an improvement in the status of teachers but also act
18	FAH	W_commerce	sells to the widest possible market. To do this, it has <b>to not only</b> come up with single products but be able to place them in prod
19	FEW	W_commerce	. In many analyses of the labour markets, temporary working is referred <b>to not only</b> as a " non-standard " form of employment
20	HHV	W_hansard	outcome ? Mr. Sainsbury I entirely agree that a successful outcome is important <b>to not only</b> the British and European economie:
21	HXX	W_hansard	the Scottish agricultural scene. Under the MacSharry proposals Scotland would suffer disproportionately <b>to not only</b> other EC co
22	A0C	W_misc	sustained use cutlery receives in the catering industry. Price recommends all caterers <b>to not only</b> determine the micron thicke
23	GXX	W_misc	: New sources of sand, gravel and crushed rock will be needed <b>to not only</b> to meet the demand in Mid Wales, but adjoining are:

Figure 3. Search results for 'to not only' on BNC

Furthermore, the *to+adverb+verb* search is also unable to identify instances where there are two adverbs acting as a split, such as *to only just go* or “food, water, waste, and sanitation will likely be more challenged **to rapidly**, capably, and effectively perform the same duties”<sup>5</sup>. Whenever spotted, such instances are counted as split infinitives for the first adverb. Because of the two reasons, one has to prioritize the manual search. Whilst this can be done easily for *to+adverb* combinations that do not retrieve a high number of entries, what should one do in the case of those for which there are hundreds of entries? Such entries will be analyzed in three steps: first, a keyword search including *to* and an *adverb*; second, a ‘manual’ search for the verbs in the infinitive following the adverb; and third, a percentage indicator, called relevance rate, is calculated by dividing the second number to the first one.

$$\text{Relevance rate} = \frac{\text{Number of split infinitives } to + adverb + verb}{\text{Number of occurrences for } to + adverb}$$

Figure 3 shows the results for the *to+not only* search on the BNC:

- The number of occurrences for *to + not only* is 22
- The number of split infinitives is 10 (lines 2, 4, 8, 9, 10, 11, 16, 18, 22, 23)
- The relevance rate is 10/22, namely 45%

The relevance rate is an indicator that allows us to overcome the BNC and CCAE search engines’ difficulty in identifying the number of occurrences in which an adverb acts as an infinitive splitter. It does not give an exact number of instances but it comes really close to it. It is useful particularly in cases where the number of entries retrieved by the system for *to+adverb* is high. It also allows for an informed estimate when analyzing Google as a language corpus.

As a convention, each *to+adverb* combination that generates less than 100 entries will be counted manually and a number will be inserted in Table #1. For those that go over 100, a simplification mechanism will be used. The rate is calculated based on the first 30 entries. For example, the search for *to actually* in the CCAE returns 3085 entries; then, a manual

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<sup>5</sup> CCAE, search for *to rapidly*, entry #11, retrieved on November 27, 2009.

count shows that 29 out of the first 30 entries contain a split infinitive; as a result, the relevance rate is 29/30 or 97%. We have to note that the rate remains an approximation. The relevance rate will be inserted in Table #1. This means that whenever there is a number in Table #1, it signifies the exact number of occurrences, whereas a percentage indicates the relevance rate that multiplied with the number of *to+adverb* occurrences gives us the approximate number of occurrences for the adverb acting as an infinitive splitter. To make sure that there are no other words between *to* and the *adverb*, the “this exact wording or phrase” option in the Advanced Search Menu was used when searching in Google.

In order to see how language use changes in the short term (meaning months), the Google meta-corpus was searched three times: first in February 2009, second in June, and third in November 2009, each time adding more adverbs. The BNC and CCAE were analyzed again in February and November 2009. Whilst there was no difference for BNC, the numbers obtained for CCAE in November were slightly differed because the corpus has been updated with an extra 15 million words.

Some of the adverbs used in the search are based on Burchfield’s (1996, p. 738) and Copperud’s (1964, p. 202) suggestions. Others were selected based on results provided by the *to+adverb+verb* search in CCAE, presented as Table #3. A total of 80 adverbs were checked. Since the main aim was to identify the kind of adverbs that act as splitters, some of those that returned a negligible number of instances were dropped (e.g., *proudly*, *surely*), so that in the end only 70 adverbs are analyzed in detail. The search results are presented in Table #1.

**Table 1.** The Occurrence of Split Infinitives in Language Corpora

Source	LexTuto (Brown Corpus)	British National Corpus	Corpus of Contemporary American English	Google Advanced Search – Feb	Google Advanced Search – Nov.
<b>Adverbs</b>					
to absolutely	0	15	102	n.a.	768,000
+ verb		4	67%		40%
to accidentally	0	1	27	n.a.	1,060,000
+ verb		1	26		83 %
to actually	1	694	3,085	28,600,000	43,800,000
+ verb	1	90 %	97 %	97 %	93 %
to adequately	0	21	449	7,060,000	4,430,000
+ verb		21	100 %	97 %	96%
to always	0	69	914	15,400,000	13,000,000
+ verb		62	100 %	80 %	77 %
to at least	4	5	1,778	108,000,000	20,600,000
+ verb	0	4	57 %	7 %	7 %
to better	0	300	3416	n.a.	34,400,000
+ verb		17%	70%		23%
to boldly	0	12	49	432,000	1,220,000
+ verb		12	44	97 %	100 %
to briefly	0	24	138	n.a.	1,350,000
+ verb		16	90 %		80 %
to calmly	0	3	31	n.a.	123,000
+ verb		3	29		87 %
to carefully	0	33	350	4,800,000	3,510,000
+ verb		23	90 %	93 %	90 %
to clearly	0	28	263	n.a.	4,240,000
+ verb		20	93 %		73 %
to completely	1	87	680	15,800,000	9,080,000
+ verb	1	80	100 %	87 %	97 %
to consistently	0	12	160	2,300,000	2,040,000
+ verb		10	93 %	87 %	90 %
to constantly	0	29	357	n.a.	3,150,000

+ verb		22	97 %		97 %
to easily	0	15	295	n.a.	42,900,000
+ verb		11	97 %		100 %
to effectively	0	33	803	n.a.	3,990,000
+verb		32	100%		97%
to effortlessly	0	1	13	n.a.	376,000
+ verb		1	10		90 %
to enthusiastically	0	2	8	n.a.	74,900
+ verb		2	8		83 %
to entirely	0	9	48	607,000	805,000
+ verb		5	25	37 %	37 %
to even	3	348	3051	28,300,000	41,500,000
+ verb	1	57%	53 %	33 %	17 %
to eventually	0	44	484	n.a.	2,950,000
+ verb		35	100 %		97 %
to ever	0	70	1,132	19,300,00	9,080,000
+ verb		42	93 %	60 %	43 %
to finally	0	61	979	13,200,000	11,400,000
+ verb		57	100 %	97 %	90 %
to frequently	0	13	64	5,510,000	2,310,000
+ verb		5	32	Irrelevant <sup>6</sup>	Irrelevant
to fully	2	157	1,558	36,400,000	43,600,000
+ verb	1	97%	87 %	87 %	87 %
to fundamentally	0	3	97	n.a.	867,000
+verb		2	92		83%
to further	12	895	3,335	73,100,000	69,000,000
+ verb	4	32%	57 %	60 %	53 %
to gradually	1	21	228	2,110,000	1,760,000
+ verb	1	19	100 %	97 %	100 %

<sup>6</sup> The number of entries for 'to frequently' is somehow irrelevant because most of them are of the type *to Frequently Asked Questions*, most likely because each FAQ section is presented as a separate webpage and because they are usually presented as the webpage name/title and thus Google's search algorithm gives them priority.



to happily	0	2	28	207,000	233,000
+ verb		2	15	17 %	17 %
to hardly	0	6	14	156,000	132,000
+ verb		2	12	27 %	10 %
to immediately	0	22	405	11,700,000	11,300,000
+ verb		15	97 %	97 %	94 %
to instead	0	1	61	985,000	930,000
+ verb		0	35	60 %	0 % <sup>7</sup>
to just	5	917	7,617	62,800,000	101,000,000
+ verb	1	94 %	57 %	25-50 %	23 %
to kindly	0	6	10	n.a.	520,000
+ verb		3	9		70 %
to kind of	0	0	1391	n.a.	91,000,000
+ verb			97%		50% to 83% <sup>8</sup>
to methodically	0	0	20	n.a.	74,900
+ verb			21		87 %
to moderately	0	13	65	n.a.	808,000
+ verb		0	6		7 %
to more than double	0	14	81	643,000	503,000
+ verb		14	79	97 %	97 %
to more than triple	0	0	16	68,800	60,100
+ verb			16	100 %	100 %
to nearly	2	205	1,307	31,500,000	7,930,000
+ verb	0	7%	3 %	20 %	17 %
to never	0	20	624	10,500,000	7,380,000
+ verb		10	90 %	60 %	67 %
to not	1	192	4381	71,800,000	53,600,000

<sup>7</sup> There is no *to instead + verb* split infinitive among the first 30 entries. However, the relevance rate goes as high as 40 % inside some of the next lots of 30 entries.

<sup>8</sup> The first entries are somehow biased because of advertising for a song called Kind of Blue. On the following 30-entry slots, the relevance rate increases by around 50%.

+ verb	1	53%	93 %	67 %	70 %
to not only	1	23	542	8,540,000	6,340,000
+ verb	1	10	90 %	57 %	73 %
to occasionally	0	8	98	847,000	746,000
+ verb		7	77	47 %	53 %
to often	1	12	67	1,500,000	1,210,000
+ verb	1	2	23	7 %	3 %
to only	3	435	1773	n.a.	58,500,000
+ verb	0	27%	17%		33%
to perhaps	0	87	349	1,530,000	1,730,000
+ verb		37	60 %	27 %	27 %
to probably	0	14	246	n.a.	167,000
+ verb		5	77%		60 %
to properly	3	45	590	n.a.	28,500,000
+ verb	3	37	100 %		100 % <sup>9</sup>
to quickly	0	50	811	n.a.	45,200,000
+ verb		47	97 %		97 %
to quietly	0	8	135	483,000	895,000
+ verb		8	93 %	67 %	83 %
to quite	1	121	153	2,180,000	1,900,000
+ verb		10 %	37 %	7 %	10 % <sup>10</sup>
to rapidly	0	15	217	8,350,000	4,410,000
+ verb		8	77 %	70 %	90 %
to rarely	0	1	19	n.a.	105,000
+ verb		0	14		27 %
to really	0	297	5,190	28,000,000	46,400,000
+ verb		80 %	93 %	90 %	97 %

<sup>9</sup> The greatest majority of entries are “how to *Properly* + Verb” type.

<sup>10</sup> One reason for the low relevance rate is the fact that, however wrong or strange this may seem, ‘quite’ is used as the spelling for the verb ‘quit’, e.g. “how to quite smoking”. A Google search using the “to quite” identifies about two million entries, with about half of the first thirty entries being misspells of *quit* as *quite*.

to regularly	0	23	137	n.a.	1,880,000
+ verb		22	83 %		83 %
to seriously	0	26	354	n.a.	2,530,000
+ verb		23	97 %		73 %
to simply	0	121	1288	17,700,000	12,600,000
+ verb		87 %	87 %	10 % to 60 % <sup>11</sup>	60 %
to slowly	0	24	241	2,080,000	1,710,000
+ verb		19	90 %	23 %	40 %
to sometimes	0	22	150	931,000	873,000
+ verb		9	67 %	7 %	17 %
to sort of	0	8	1733	n.a.	93,500,000
+ verb		6	90%		63%
to still	2	86	742	n.a.	1,300,000
+ verb	0	39	80 %		57%
to strongly	0	15	188	n.a.	520,000
+ verb		8	90%		53%
to successfully	0	42	683	n.a.	11,500,000
+ verb		40	90 %		87 % <sup>12</sup>
to suddenly	0	39	318	1,180,000	974,000
+ verb		38	97 %	53 %	50 %
to temporarily	0	20	206	n.a.	698,000
+ verb		18	90%		93%
to thoroughly	0	9	156	n.a.	2,130,000
+ verb		9	93%		97%
to totally	0	33	232	2,110,000	1,770,000
+ verb		24	90 %	47 %	53 %
to usually	0	2	10	n.a.	334,000
+ verb		1	6		17 %

<sup>11</sup> The rate is variable because of companies / web pages called *Simply Whatever* – the further we go down the list, the higher the rate, because the links to those sites tend to subside and be replaced by simpler links.

<sup>12</sup> The greatest majority of entries are “how to *Successfully* + Verb” type.

## DISCUSSION

The very small number of split infinitives in Brown's Academic List shows that, although half a century has passed since Fowler's rebuttal of the rule, it was still enforced during the 1960s. As the Brown corpus is rather small, it can be argued that a higher number of words might result in increased occurrence of the split infinitive. Still, the same corpus has been considered highly relevant in analyzing other language features, and that relevance transfers to the split infinitive. Another possible explanation is that universities are institutions that actively follow the rules of 'good' grammar. The fact that some Canadian universities still emphasize the need to avoid split infinitives, as mentioned in the beginning, reinforces this statement.

The difference between British and American usage of split infinitives is obvious. Even considering the circumstances (the American corpus is four times bigger and more recent), it seems that, in general, the Americans use the split infinitive at least three to four times more often than the British. Another finding relates to the use of double adverbs as splitters: the Americans use double adverbs such as *at least*, *not only*, *kind of*, and *sort of* hundreds of times more often than the British. This signifies that, whilst the British also split their infinitives, using a compound adverb to split them is almost forbidden. The research findings allow us to clarify Burchfield's observation that "the negative adverbs *never* and *not* are often inserted in AmE, less commonly in BrE" (1995, p. 738) by pointing out that the Americans use *not* and *never* as splitters at least ten times more often than the British.

There is an extra category that includes *to more than double/triple*. On one hand, most scholars arguing against the 'do not split the infinitive' rule employ *to more than double* as one of the most relevant examples that splitting the infinitive is acceptable (the other such example is Star Trek's famous *to boldly go*). On the other, it is one of the very few examples of two-word (or compound) adverbs (*more than*) used as splitters. Another feature that makes *to more than double/triple* rather special is its role in the sentence. Whilst over 95% of the entries identified in the corpora show it acting as a verb, there are also situations in which it acts as a comparative adverb, usually modifying a noun phrase: "miss a payment, and the interest rate skyrockets, sometimes to more than double the rate" (CCAE, ex. #5), "spot prices for natural gas in California have risen to more than

double national rates despite the fact that ...” (CCAЕ, ex. #31), or “the nerve swelled to more than double” (ANC, entry # 52).<sup>13</sup>

In fact, the adverb *more* acts as a splitter most often in the case of compound splitters. A search for *to more + adverb + verb* on the CCAЕ identifies over 300 occurrences, such as *to more fully understand* (20), *to more accurately reflect* (13), *to more closely match* (12), *to more clearly define* (6), or *to more effectively manage* (5). This number places it among the top splitters (right at the bottom end). In keeping with the general proportion, a search for *to more + adverb + verb* on the BNC identifies 21 entries, which makes it again part of the top splitters.

The most unexpected finding was the millions of instances of split infinitives identified by Google. Those entries were retrieved using the “this exact wording or phrase” option in the Advanced Search Menu and were analyzed based on the same methodology as for the language corpora, using the relevance rate. It can easily be argued that the ratio of thirty entries is insignificant when considering that we are evaluating millions of entries. To at least partly respond to this kind of criticism, in many cases not only the first thirty entries were ‘manually’ verified but also thirty entries that came much later on the list (e.g., the entries 430 to 460). The differences in the relevance rate were below 10%.

If we consider the Google-searched meta-corpus as the basis for descriptive grammar, the ‘do not split the infinitive’ rule seems to have become obsolete. Whilst there is no denying that the number of occurrences is in millions, one should always keep in mind that Google’s search algorithms are not perfect and that a good number of those entries are repeats. Furthermore, its research mechanism is not friendly towards language analysts – as web pages come on and go off the net every single minute, the search results keep changing not on a monthly but on a daily bases. It is really frustrating to have all your numbers computed today and to realize the next day that they have changed by a couple of millions, sometimes by as much as double or half what they were before. What happens when the interval between two searches is measured in months? In terms of sheer numbers, it is very difficult to establish any pattern that would allow us to correlate the November, June and February searches for split infinitives. The number of entries retrieved goes up or down seemingly at random, from a few extra percentage to as much as five time fewer entries (e.g., *at least*). However, even as the number of entries changes greatly from February to June to November, the relevance rate

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.americancorpus.org>.

does not vary all that much (less than 20%). Those numbers are relative and they need to be considered as such but the fact remains – there are millions of split infinitives out there.

Google's search mechanism also plays an important role: it looks at the titles first and, since *How to Properly/Easily/Quickly Do Something* is an appealing title, there are numerous such titles. Another explanation relates to the fact that most entries are of the How To type (e.g., at least 73% of the entries using *properly* as an infinitive splitter are of the *How To* type). Only about less than a quarter of those entries contain *to properly/easily/quickly + verb* in context, without *how* before *to*, either in the title or in the body of the web page. Advertising also plays an important role: due to Google's policy of retrieving the first entries based on business criteria, they might be misleading.

One should add in the fact that the Internet is not reserved for native-English speakers. For example, as discussed in footnote #11, there are numerous instances when *quit* is simply misspelled as *quite*. Many web pages are written by speakers of English as second or third language and this leaves us with a tricky question: do we modify the rules of English language usage according to how second language speakers use it or based on native use?

The main focus of this research has been on identifying the kind of adverbs that act as splitters. Based on sheer numbers (relevance rate multiplied by the number of occurrences for the splitters that occur most often), the most often used infinitive splitters are presented in Table #2 (note that the adverbs written in italics under "Nov. Google Search" were not analyzed during the February search). The numbers next to them indicate the number of occurrences as splitters. As previously explained, the high numbers are approximated based on the relevance rate.

**Table 2.** Most Often Used Splitters

British National Corpus		American National Corpus		Nov. Google Search		Feb. - Google Search		Brown Academic Words	
Just	860	Really	4800	<i>Sort of</i>	59 million	Not	47 million	properly	3
Actually	625	Just	4350	<i>Kind of</i>	+50	Further	44	further	3
Further	285	Not	4050	really	45	Fully	37	completely	1
Really	240	Actually	3000	<i>Quickly</i>	44	Actually	27	even	1
Even	200	Better	2400	Actually	41	Really	25	fully	1
Fully	150	Further	1900	<i>Easily</i>	40	Just	+19	Gradually	1
Only	115	Even	1600	Fully	38	Completely	13	just	1
Simply	105	Sort of	1550	Not	37	Finally	12	not	1
Not	100	Fully	1350	Further	36	Always	12	not only	1
Completely	80	Kind of	1300	<i>Properly</i>	28	Immediately	11	often	1
Always	62	Simply	1100	Just	23				
Finally	57	Ever	1050	Only	19				
Better	50	At least	1000	Immediately	10.6				
Quickly	47	Finally	970	Always	10				
Ever	42	Always	900	Finally	10				
Successfully	40	Effectively	800	Successfully	10				
Still	39	Quickly	780	Completely	9				
Suddenly	38	Completely	650	Better	7.8				
Perhaps	37	Successfully	615	Simply	7.5				
Properly	37	Still	600	Even	7				
Eventually	35	Properly	590	Not only	4.6				
Effectively	32	Never	560	Never	4.4				
Totally	24	Not only	490	Adequately	4				
Seriously	23	Eventually	480	Rapidly	3.9				
Carefully	23	Adequately	450	Ever	3.9				
Constantly	22	Immediately	390	Effectively	3.8				
Regularly	22	Constantly	350	Clearly	3.1				
Clearly	20	Seriously	340	Carefully	3.1				
Slowly	19	Carefully	315	Constantly	3				
Gradually	19	Only	300	Eventually	2.9				

As shown in Table #2, the splitters are more or less evenly distributed amongst the four main categories of adverbs: manner, time, frequency, and degree. This distribution challenges Albakri's view, based on his analysis of the *New York Times* and *USA Today*, that the typical adverbs used as splitters are circumstantial adverbs of manner (2005, p. 146).

The findings partially confirm Burchfield's (1996) assertion that the most often used splitters are "simple adverbs such as *even, ever, further, just* or *quite* ... almost as common in this position are simple adverbs in *-ly* (*actually, finally, fully, nearly, really, simply, utterly*)" (p. 738). Except for *nearly* and *quite*, which do not make it to the top thirty, as well as *utterly*, for which the BNC gives no instance as a splitter, Burchfield has been able to correctly identify the most often used adverbs in splitting the infinitive. However, his opinion that simple adverbs are used more often than simple adverbs in *-ly* does not hold true: although the first category adverbs are found mainly in the first half of the top, overall the two categories are evenly split in the BNC and ANC-based lists, as well as on the November search on Google. The nine simple adverbs in the BNC and CCAE are among the first twenty-two entries. Furthermore, the majority of adverbs identified in the top thirty are adverbs in *-ly* type .

Trying to interpret the findings from Copperud's perspective is difficult. He argues that "these split infinitives are objectionable because they sound awkward: I want to *consistently* enforce discipline; His purpose was to *effortlessly* be promoted; Jones was ordered to *immediately* embark" (1964, p. 202). Is Copperud referring to the way in which the adverb itself sounds or to how it sounds between *to* and the verb? The fact that *consistently* and *immediately* belong to the high-occurrence category proves that it is not wrong to use them.

Grammarians R. A. Close's article on the split infinitive identifies a number of conditions that are conducive to splitting the infinitive. He uses the term subjuncts, which "is applied to adverbials that are semantically subordinated either to a whole clause or sentence, in which case they have 'wide orientation', or to part of a clause, when their 'orientation' is 'narrow'" (1987, p. 222). In his view, the subjuncts "perform the important communicative function of enabling the speaker to give an indication of how the verb he uses is to be interpreted. That function can be fulfilled most effectively if the adverb is placed as close as possible to the verb itself" (p. 225). The findings partly confirm Close's assertions that most splitters:

a. Act in order to mark completion (p. 224). The research findings confirm Close's assertion: adverbs like *actually, really, completely,*



*constantly*, are part of the most often used adverbs, the first two being amongst the top four.

b. Mark an inclusive or exclusive relationship with other possible occurrences (p. 225). Close is correct again: adverbs such as *even*, *simply*, and *only* are part of the most often used adverbs list.

c. Act with occurrences that “can be imagined as taking place sooner or later along a time scale” (1987, p. 224). The findings partly confirm this by showing *suddenly*, *finally*, and *gradually* as being amongst the most often used splitters, be it towards the lower part of the top.

d. Usually act as “subjuncts of ‘narrow orientation’ modifying a gradable verb”, as illustrated by “I wanted to *totally* accept him” or “Don’t ask me to *thoroughly* approve” (p. 223). Close has taken this assertion from Quirk (1985, p. 497) and has refined it by identifying different degrees. Whilst the subjuncts indicating the maximum, such as *totally* or *thoroughly*, have turned out a number of entries, they are not amongst the most often used adverbs. Things are different for those indicating high, moderate or minimum degrees, which are present in really low numbers: *highly* (a BNC search for *to highly* recovered 41 entries, none of them being a split infinitive), *quite* (rarely used), *rather* (a BNC search for *to rather* recovered 32 entries, none of them being a split infinitive), *more or less* (a BNC search for *to more or less* recovered 15 entries, only two of them being a split infinitive), *barely* (a BNC search for *to barely* recovered 10 entries, only one of them being a split infinitive), *hardly* (acts as a split infinitive only twice on the BNC) and *scarcely* (a BNC search for *to scarcely* recovered 3 entries, only one of them being a split infinitive).

Close identifies another category of subjuncts, namely those that are “narrowly oriented to the subject as well as the verb”, such as “Please ask Mr. Pewsey to *kindly* call me back” (p. 225). As the corpora analysis shows, adverbs such as *kindly*, *cordially*, *frankly*, or *humbly* are very rarely used (e.g., the BNC offers only one entry for either *to cordially* or *to humbly*), disproving Close’s assertion.

Those in doubt over splitting an infinitive might use Table 3, which includes the most often used split infinitives and the number of times they occur, as retrieved by a *to + adverb + verb* general search on BNC and CCAE.

**Table 3.** Most Often Used Split Infinitives

British National Corpus		Corpus of Contemporary American English	
To actually get	37	To better understand	670
To really get	27	To really get	308
To actually do	25	To just be	292
To even think	22	To really be	230
To actually go	20	To just go	218
To just go	20	To still be	216
To actually put	19	To just get	207
To actually make	17	To just say	207
To actually say	17	To always be	195
To fully understand	17	To just sit	193
To actually be	16	To really make	172
To actually see	16	To fully understand	164
To even consider	16	To even think	163
To sort of get <sup>14</sup>	16	To just let	135
To just get	15	To actually get	129
To just sit	15	To really understand	129
To further reduce	13	To just take	127
To still be	13	To actually do	124
To actually find	12	To actually be	115
To actually have	12	To actually see	112
To further develop	12	To actually have	111
To just have	12	To actually go	109
To sort of say	12	To finally get	109
To actually look	11	To really do	109
To better understand	11	To really see	109
To fully appreciate	11	To really take	108
To greatly increase	11	To fully appreciate	99
To sort of give	11	To just keep	99
To sort of make	11	To really look	98
To actually come	10	To just do	97

As can be seen, all the adverbs presented in Table #3 can be found in the upper part of Table #2. The examples presented in it confirm Albakri's conclusion that the split infinitive is used mainly as a mean of emphasizing, of fulfilling the communicative need for emphasis (2005, 146). Except for the compound adverbs *at least*, *kind of*, and *sort of*, both

<sup>14</sup> Considering that the search mechanism has retrieved only 8 entries for *to sort of*, it is a bit odd to find *sort of* as a splitter in so many instances. They all check, which means that the search mechanism seems to have a weakness of a sort for *sort of*.

British and American English use the same adverbs as splitters. The difference in the use of split infinitive in American and British English remains obvious. However, Table #3 does not confirm the findings in Table #1 and #2; it makes it seem that the Americans use the split infinitive only two to three times more often than the British. Table #3 can serve as a tool for the ESL/EFL teacher of English for Academic Purposes or for those teaching advanced level of ESL/EFL writing classes.

The linguistic corpora show that people at all levels and in all situations split the infinitive.<sup>15</sup> The third column in the lower part of Figure #3 identifies the keywords in context, detailing the registers in which they are used. Diversity seems to be the general rule for the use of split infinitives: although some of them seem to occur more often in speaking, others appear mostly in writing. They cover all genres too, from academic and news to prose and fiction.

Last but not least, how many split infinitives are there as compared to the use of infinitive constructions? Although answering this question is part of a future research project, a partial answer will be provided in Table #4. Most of the 40 verbs analyzed in here have been selected based on the *to+adverb+verb* general searches on CCAE and BNC that have generated Table 3. The results were derived by dividing the number of split infinitives (*to + adverb + specific verb*) to the number of infinitives (*to + specific verb*).

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<sup>15</sup> The ANC and BNC have an option showing the register in which the words are used. They have over 70 registers, such as spoken, academic, news, poetry, or medical. Also, the entries are arranged chronologically.

**Table 4.** The Use of Split Infinitives in all Infinitive Constructions

<b>Verb</b>	<b>Corpus of Contemporary American English</b>	<b>British National Corpus</b>
To understand	5.2 %	1.0 %
To get	0.8 %	0.5 %
To be	0.4 %	0.1 %
To go	0.8 %	0.4 %
To say	0.8 %	0.4 %
To sit	2.7 %	1.3 %
To make	0.5 %	0.2 %
To think	1.2 %	0.7 %
To let	1.5 %	0.6 %
To have	0.6 %	0.2 %
To see	0.5 %	0.1 %
To take	0.8 %	0.3 %
To appreciate	7.6 %	2.0 %
To keep	0.5 %	0.1 %
To look	1.2 %	0.5 %
To do	0.3 %	0.2 %
To put	1.1 %	0.5 %
To come	0.7 %	0.3 %
To give	0.8 %	0.4 %
To increase	2.5 %	1.1 %
To reduce	3.0 %	1.0 %
To develop	1.4 %	0.7 %
To know	0.4 %	0.1 %
To consider	3.3 %	0.9 %
To serve	1.6 %	0.6 %
To walk	1.6 %	0.6 %
To prepare	2.4 %	0.0 %
To try	1.2 %	0.6 %
To investigate	3.3 %	0.2 %
To leave	0.7 %	0.2 %
To disagree	10.4 %	2.3 %
To explore	2.5 %	0.8 %
To examine	3.8 %	0.3 %
To meet	0.9 %	0.2 %
To stay	0.5 %	0.1 %
To agree	2.8 %	0.3 %
To enjoy	2.8 %	0.8 %
To play	0.7 %	0.1 %
To protect	0.8 %	0.4 %
To complicate	17.8 %	2.5 %
To feel	1.2 %	0.3 %
To measure	2.8 %	1.1 %
To participate	1.7 %	0.5 %
To manage	4.1 %	0.5 %
To consider	3.3 %	0.9 %
To differentiate	3.6	1.0 %
To contrast	2.4	0.0 %
To compare	1.7	0.2 %
To argue	0.6	0.2 %
To comprehend	4.6	3.5 %

As can be seen, except for the rather 'discouraging' pair of *to disagree* and *to complicate*, the second part of Albakri's finding that the "split infinitive occurs approximately 6% of all infinitive constructions in *NYT* and almost 10% of all infinitive constructions in *USA Today*" (2005, p. 145) seems difficult to accept. Table #4 confirms again the difference in the use of split infinitives by American and British speakers. A different search, in a coming paper, will focus on verb categories and registers (written versus oral, academic versus news) and thus should give us more insight into the types of verbs that are open to splitting. Until then, it would be safe to say that Table #4 serves as yet another way to illustrate the controversy over the use of the split infinitive: whilst for some verbs the percentage is counted in double digits, for others it does not exist at all.

Considering the rule's origins, as shown in the first part of the paper, and our more or less disregard of it, as highlighted by the corpora, this paper will now present the practical sides of the controversy surrounding the split infinitive.

## PRACTICAL USE

### Why Teach the Rule

The main reason invoked by those in favour of the rule has to do with the intended readership. To put it simply, "the curiously persistent belief that the split infinitive is widely condemned" (Bryson, 1984, p. 134) is still out there, stronger than ever. One can not run the risk of upsetting a language maven: "Avoiding split infinitives is not foolish when we are writing a high-stakes document - say, for example, a letter of application for a job - because the reader of that document may well be someone who immediately dismisses all infinitive splitters as careless rubes unworthy of being hired." (To Split or Not to Split Infinitives, 2008). The best solution invoked by those supporting the law is to reformulate the entire sentence and, if possible, to avoid the infinitive altogether. Even the most famous split infinitive has no escape from the Academic mavens: "To avoid using a split infinitive, be sure to place the 'to' immediately adjacent to the verb form. E.g., *to boldly go* is a split infinitive. It is more correct, if less exciting, to say *to go boldly*. Or you can be correct and exciting at once with *boldly to go*." (Essay Writing Guidelines, 2007).

The next argument is more scientific / linguistic: there are instances where it is better *to not split* the infinitive. They range from "certain split

infinitives are not usual in certain situations" (Split your infinitives?, n.d.), with no examples whatsoever, to more detailed presentations of awkward split infinitives such as "The company hopes *to substantially increase* profits; They promised *to at all times obey* the law of the land", where "unsplitting these infinitives results in more graceful phrasing: *to increase* profits substantially; *to obey* the law of the land at all times" (Hacker, n.d.).

Some scholars also argue that, whilst using simple adverbs to split the infinitive is acceptable, the situation is different for compound split infinitives: "only 23 percent of the Panel accepts the split infinitive in this sentence: *We are seeking a plan to gradually, systematically, and economically relieve the burden.* The panel is more tolerant of constructions in which the intervening words are intrinsic to the sense of the verb. Eighty-seven percent of the panel accepts the sentence *We expect our output to more than double in a year.*" (The American Heritage Book, 1996, § 59).

### Why There Should Be No Rule

Some writers consider that "there is nothing wrong with splitting an infinitive, and it is practically impossible to find a recognized authority who condemns it" (Bryson, 1991, p. 337). As shown in this paper, split infinitives are ever more present at all levels of language. The Internet has given people the freedom *to simply disagree* with such a rule, allowing them *to plainly express* their opinion without worrying that someone who reads their posts or looks over their web pages will decide *to deservedly punish* them and move away to another page if they see a split infinitive.

The 10% figure identified by Albakri, representing the number of split infinitives per total infinitives in *USA Today* (2005, p. 145), yet to be proved relevant for the larger corpora, together with the tens of millions of examples found on the Internet, dismantles another argument invoked by the rule's supporters: "the frequency of slips, when compared to the frequency of unsplit infinitives, is sufficiently low as to convince me that they occur more or less at random" (Neely, 1978, p. 403).

Language is a living organism; it changes continuously. What failed to make sense to Henry Alford over 150 years ago might be considered acceptable today for the same reason that Alford dismissed it in the first place: it has become common usage. Nowadays, except for some University Departments, few scholars argue in favour of the rule. The dispute has shifted towards "whether the use of infinitives should be avoided when this can be done with no sacrifice of clarity or naturalness versus no effort whatsoever should be made to avoid them" (Israel, n.d.).

## Teaching the Split Infinitive

Finding any exercises on how to split the infinitive is an (almost) impossible quest. On the other hand, finding exercises about how to un-split a split infinitive is relatively easy.<sup>16</sup> Rather unexpectedly, they come from the Academic milieu, which has become an advocate of the oxymoron that is so characteristic of the issue: there is nothing wrong with the split infinitive, yet you should do your best to avoid it. Considering that most of those arguing against the rule are grammarians, many of them associated with the academic milieu, it is somehow strange to see that universities are most conservative when it comes to the rules of English usage.

As teachers, it is important to make our students aware that there is no 'do not split the infinitive' rule and that, most importantly, "the GMAT, SAT, and TOEFL tests allow split infinitives as credited (i.e., correct) answer choices" (Erin, n.d.).

Should we actually teach our students how to split the infinitive? We can certainly show them how to do it, if they wish, but should we impose it on them? One possible exercise for the ESL/EFL learners would be to ask the students to identify the use of split infinitive by people around them. At the easiest level, they can start by looking for split infinitives in a newspaper or magazine. At the higher level, they could use the search tools provided by the BNC and the CCAE by, for example, analyzing the use of split infinitives in a register that is of particular importance to them (e.g., written academic). They could also build their own corpora, based on what they have produced in the past, to see if they are actually using the split infinitive in their writings.

The previous analysis of corpus linguistics allows the teacher to present a list of the adverbs that are most often used as infinitive splitter, together with a list of the most often occurring split infinitive combinations of verb and adverb. The message to the advanced ESL/EFL students who wants *to better understand* the use of English is: feel free *to creatively split* infinitives whenever the sentence makes sense to you. However, should they plan to enrol in certain universities they should definitely check their future department's policy on the use of split infinitives.

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<sup>16</sup> Here are some examples: [http://www.bristol.ac.uk/arts/exercises/grammar/grammar\\_tutorial/page\\_65.htm#splitex](http://www.bristol.ac.uk/arts/exercises/grammar/grammar_tutorial/page_65.htm#splitex) [http://www.umanitoba.ca/student/u1/images/Correcting\\_Split\\_Inf.pdf](http://www.umanitoba.ca/student/u1/images/Correcting_Split_Inf.pdf).

## CONCLUSION

After reviewing the literature on the 'do not split the infinitive' rule, one can safely state that the controversy surrounding it remains very much alive. The corpus-based language analyses employed in this paper demonstrates that the rule is becoming obsolete. The Corpus of Contemporary American English reveals tens of thousands of split infinitives. Google takes that number into hundreds of millions. What grammarians have argued for an entire century seems to finally be catching up with the practice: as long as the sentence makes sense, there is no logical or grammatical reason *to purposely avoid* the use of split infinitives.

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