

Ask about English

'To be' or 'being'



BBC WORLD SERVICE LEARNING ENGLISH



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A question from Moacir Siqueira in Sao Paulo, Brazil:

Hello, my name is Moacir, I am from Sao Paulo, Brazil and I have a question about the use of the infinitive and gerund tense of verbs as subjects of sentences. For example, if we can say, as in Phil Collins' song: 'if leaving me is easy, then coming back is harder', and, as in Shakespeare's words, 'to be or not to be, that is the question', is it also right to say 'if to leave me is easy, to come back is harder' and 'being or not being, that is the question'?

Sarah Bradshaw answers:

Ok, well thank you very much Moacir. Well I think the first thing we should say is that grammatically speaking, of course it's possible for a gerund to be the subject of a sentence because it's a noun, it's acting as a noun, it's an 'ing' word acting as a noun. But I think what the key factor here is the choices that you've made, very interestingly, are all from artists. They're all from poets, they're from famous singers, and so what a famous singer or an artist might do to bend the rules and play with language, we wouldn't necessarily use in conversation.

If I could start with your example from Shakespeare – 'to be or not to be, that is the question' – and you contrasted that with 'being or not being, that is the question'. Both are grammatically correct, both convey precisely the same meaning that 'should Hamlet continue living or commit suicide?' – in the context of the play that was the character's decision, that was what he was contemplating, thinking about. But the first, obviously Shakespeare preferred a different rhythm, because the first 'to be or not to be' scans differently, it has a different rhythm than 'being or not being' and it has different consonant sounds – there is 'to' in there a couple of times as well as 'be'. So really it's a choice and taste issue with that example. Which do you prefer, Shakespeare's version or your own? There's exactly the same number of syllables in both those sentences.

Moving on to Phil Collins' 'if leaving me is easy, then coming back is harder' or 'if to leave me is easy, then to come back is harder'. The first example that Mr Collins uses is more generally used in conversation, it's a conditional with a gerund and a gerund. The second I think is something we can say isn't really grammatically correct. I would never, for example, teach the infinitive and the infinitive in both halves of a conditional sentence in that way. We would just select a different conditional sentence instead. We would say 'if leaving me is easy' in fact we would use the gerund. Does that answer your question?

Moacir: Ok, that is clear now.

Sarah: Ok, great. Well thank you very much.

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