Abstract: Learning from split infinitives
Arnold M. Zwicky, Stanford University
September 2004

Through interactions with other conditions, the "splitting" of infinitives by adverbials is sometimes (virtually) obligatory, sometimes merely preferable to alternative placements. These facts support the familiar positions that *to* combines with VP, not V, and that adverbials "splitting" infinitives are merely VP-initial.

The obligatorily "split" cases involve Ps serving as (*over*), or as part of (*sort of*), adverbial modifiers of Vs. Their historical origin as Ps turns up as an intervention constraint: they bind tightly to their companion phrases, just as Ps and Vs do to objects. Huddleston & Pullum (2002) distinguish syntactic category and function here: category P, function Modifier.

This category/function separation can be applied to infinitival *to* itself, resolving the question of head (category V) vs. dependent (category Comp): category V, but function Modifier. To the details...

Background. There are four positional alternatives:
(1) Split: I want to immediately/never stop.
(2) Lower: I want to stop immediately/*never.
(3) Pre-*to*: I want ?immediately/never to stop.
(4) Upper: I *immediately/never want to stop.

The judgments on (2)-(4) are as paraphrases of (1), with the adverbial modifying *stop*. Upper adverbials can also be understood as modifying the higher verb. And many speakers discern a meaning distinction between Split and Pre-*to* placement, with the former "stronger" (action-directed), the latter "weaker" (state-directed).

Obligatory splitting I. Prepositional determiners like *over*, *up to*, and *more than*, which occur with numeral expressions (*up to sixteen visitors*), can also be used with verbs that incorporate such numerals: *double*, *triple*, etc.: *We expect our profits to up to double soon*. Lower position is impossible, and only a tiny number of Pre-*to* placements (all from very formal contexts) turn up in corpus searches. The intervention constraint on Ps holds even when they're serving the Modifier function.

Obligatory splitting II. Ditto for the P-incorporating determiners *sort/kind of*. Though these have very free occurrence as loose modifiers, as close modifiers they are subject to an intervention constraint, so that in *I want you to sort of stare at them*, the expression *sort of* absolutely cannot go Lower and also resists shifting to Pre-*to*.

Risky non-splitting. If the adverbial is *not* and the higher verb is a quasi-modal like *be going to*, *used to*, or *have to*, we have another conflict: *not* can't shift to Lower, and for most speakers it can't shift to Pre-*to* (*They are going not to stop*) because the quasi-modals have become inseparable, so the only way to avoid Split is to take the Upper route (*They aren't going to stop*), which risks introducing an ambiguity of scope.

Category/function mismatches. The mismatches are clear for P/Modifier. What about *to*? The array of puzzles set out in the literature and summarized in Huddleston & Pullum (2002) becomes comprehensible when we see that most of the properties of *to* are those of a modal V, but that *to* functions as a Modifier of VPs (so that, in particular, it doesn't head main clauses).