

# A theoretical analysis of the English “*try and V*” construction

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## 1. Introduction

As Croft and Cruse (2004) indicate, investigations into seemingly idiosyncratic or idiomatic structures of a language often lead to fruitful reconsideration of its grammatical description. Such sentences as *we must try and hurry up* seem very common in present-day English and in fact, as Lind (1983: 550) states, this “*try and V*” construction has “good literary justification: the earliest example recorded by the OED [Oxford English Dictionary] is from 1671, a quotation from Milton: ‘At least to try and teach the erring soul’.” However, since this construction has a number of peculiar characteristics that do not readily fit in with English grammar in general, there appears to be occasional criticism by some prescriptivists who contend that the correct form of the sentence is *we must try to hurry up*. In addition, it is not quite clear whether or not there is a semantic difference between the “*try and V*” construction and the “*try to V*” construction. The aims of this paper, therefore, are to examine this “*try and V*” construction from various linguistic points of view and to clarify its rather puzzling attributes. This paper will first review the general properties of the “*try and V*” construction in terms of morphology, syntax and semantics/pragmatics. After more detailed discussion as to the base form of English verbs and pseudo-coordination, certain corpus research utilising the British National Corpus (BNC) will be carried out to explore the actual frequency of the construction, and then some conclusions drawn.

## 2. General properties

### 2.1 Morphological

First of all, the “*try and V*” construction has certain major constraints in morphology. Swan (2005: 54) states that “We often use *and ...* instead of *to* after *try ...* We only use this structure with the simple base forms *try ...* It is not possible, for example, with *tries, trying, ...*” and gives example sentences [1] - [3] (asterisk \* indicates the ungrammaticality of the example concerned):

- [1] **Try and** eat something.
- [2] I **tried to** eat something.
- [3] \*I tried and ate something.

Similarly, Sinclair (1990: 189) explains that “When the base form of ‘try’ is used, for example as an imperative or with a modal, it is sometimes used with ‘and’ followed by the base form of the second verb, rather than with a ‘to’-infinitive.” Also, Quirk et al. (1985: 979) observe that “This quasi-auxiliary use of *try* appears to be limited to the base form of the verb.” In the words of Biber et al. (1999: 738), “This discourse choice is not available when the verb *try* occurs with inflections such as *-ing* or *ed*”. Finally, according to Huddleston, Payne and Peterson (2002: 1302), “There are two forms that consist simply of the lexical base: the plain form,” as in [4], “and the plain present tense,” as in [5], “But the verb following *and* is always a plain form, as is evident when we test with *be*”, as in [6] and [7]:

- [4] Try and not be so touchy.
- [5] We always try and do our best.
- [6] We always try and be helpful.
- [7] \*We always try and are helpful.

In terms of morphology, therefore, the following are representative examples of the “*try and V*” construction. Firstly, there are sentences with both *try* and the second verb in the base form, as in [8] - [15] below , [8] and [9] being in the imperative, [10] - [14] in the

infinitive and [15] in the present subjunctive (although there may be a clash between formality of subjunctive and informality of *try and* in [15]):

- [8] Try and fix the problem.
- [9] No one try and fix the problem.
  
- [10] I'll try and fix the problem.
- [11] Let's try and fix the problem.
- [12] She didn't try and fix the problem.
- [13] She wouldn't try and fix the problem.
- [14] She wanted to try and fix the problem.
  
- [15] He insists that she try and fix the problem.

Secondly, it is also possible to have sentences with *try* in the general present tense and the second verb in the base form, as in [16] - [19]:

- [16] I always try and visit my parents.
- [17] We always try and visit our parents.
- [18] You always try and visit your parents.
- [19] They always try and visit their parents.

However, sentences with all the other morphological forms of *try* are not grammatical even if the form of the second verb is in the base form, as in [20] - [25], [20] being in the third person singular present tense, [21] in the past tense, [22] - [24] in the *-ing* form ([22] and [23] in the present participle; [24] in the gerund) and [25] in the *-en* form (the past participle):

- [20] \*She always tries and visit her parents.
- [21] \*She tried and fix the problem yesterday.
- [22] \*She was trying and fix the problem.
- [23] \*Trying and fix the problem, she went to the computer room.
- [24] \*Trying and fix the problem was not her choice.
- [25] \*She has tried and fix the problem.

## 2.2 Syntactic

There are also several syntactic constraints in the “*try and V*” construction. Crystal (2003: 227) mentions that “In such constructions as *I’ll try and see him*, *and* is not functioning as a coordinator, but as an informal equivalent of the infinitive particle *to ...* : *I’ll try to see him.*” According to Quirk et al. (1985: 978), “When they precede *and*, members of a small class of verbs or predications have an idiomatic function which is similar to the function of catenative constructions ... and which will be termed pseudo-coordination. The clearest example is *try*”. Thus, in the first place, the “*try and V*” construction has certain syntactic constraints essentially identical to those of the catenative “*try to V*” construction: *try* must share its subject with the second verb, and also there is no passive voice possible, as in [26] and [27]:

[26] \*To fix the problem will be tried by me.

[27] \*And fix the problem will be tried by me.

Nonetheless, there are also certain significant differences between these two constructions. Huddleston, Payne and Peterson (2002: 1302) point out that “this idiomatic construction [i.e. the “*try and V*” construction] is syntactically restricted so that *and* must immediately follow the lexical base *try*; this means that there can be ... no adjuncts: ... *We try hard and do our best* can only be ordinary coordinations.” Furthermore, it can be added that in the “*try and V*” construction the second verb must immediately follow *and* except for the negative *not*, as noted in Austin (2007: 100).

With regard to coordination, it is worth stating here that even if example sentences [20] - [25] above are converted from pseudo-coordinations into normal coordinations in order for the second verb to be properly coordinated with inflected forms of *try*, these sentences either remain ungrammatical, as in [29], [30], [31] and [33], or are grammatical simply as full coordinations with elliptical *try*, carrying different meanings, as in [28] and [32]:

[28] She always tries and visits her parents.

[29] \*She tried and fixed the problem yesterday.

[30] \*She was trying and fixing the problem.

[31] \*Trying and fixing the problem, she went to the computer room.

[32] Trying and fixing the problem was not her choice.

[33] \*She has tried and fixed the problem.

### 2.3 Semantic/Pragmatic

Several grammarians present a common view on the pragmatic aspect of the “*try and V*” construction. As already quoted above, Crystal (2003: 227) sees this construction as “an informal equivalent” of the *try* plus *to*-infinitive construction. Swan (2005: 54) simply says that “This is informal” as Sinclair (1990: 189) states that “Some speakers consider this to be informal or incorrect.” Quirk et al. (1985: 978) also deem the “*try and V*” construction “roughly equivalent” to the one with *to*-infinitive and “more informal in style”. According to Huddleston, Payne and Peterson (2002: 1302), “*And* can be replaced by the infinitival marker *to*, *and* being slightly more informal than *to*.”

In contrast, however, whether or not there is the semantic difference between the “*try and V*” construction and the *try* plus *to*-infinitive construction does not appear to be quite clear. Lind (1983: 562) argues that “It seems to me that the main difference between *try and* and *try to* is one of syntax rather than semantics ... And if a subtle semantic distinction exists it does not seem to be observed.” Fowler (1965: 652), on the other hand, tells the difference between the two, stating that “Though *try to do* can always be substituted for *try and do*, the latter has a shade of meaning that justifies its existence; in exhortations it implies encouragement—the effort will succeed—; in promises it implies assurance—the effort shall succeed”. Interestingly, referring to Fowler, Austin (2007: 102) expresses two opposite views: “The inadmissibility of *try* taking *and* in the inflected past tense would indicate that there can be no semantic difference”; nevertheless, “when the construction refers to the past the inference is almost always that the action attempted was not successful, which would fit in with Fowler’s hypothesis about *try and*.” In fact, it seems possible to argue that the action of the second verb in the “*try and V*” construction is basically felt to be, to a certain extent, less difficult.

Carden and Pesetsky (1977: 88), from a different viewpoint, discuss the implicative characteristics of the “*try and V*” construction, reporting that it is non-factive, as is the case for *try to*, since [34] does not entail [35]:

[34] John will try and catch Harry.

[35] John will catch Harry.

Indeed, by comparing [36] and [37] below, they further argue that “while *try to* and *try and* are both non-factive, *try and* is much closer to being a necessary condition verb than *try to*” (1977: 90) (question mark ? indicates the questionable acceptability of the example concerned):

[36] John didn't try to learn French, but living in Paris he just picked it up.

[37] ?John didn't try and learn French, but living in Paris he just picked it up.

As Austin (2007: 102) mentions, however, some future research seems to be necessary to elucidate the semantic difference, if any, between the two.

### 3. The base form of a verb

As discussed in section 2.1 above, the morphological constraints of the “*try and V*” construction have a great deal to do with the base form and the general present tense of a verb. Such terms as the base form and the general present tense, however, are not quite as straightforward concepts as they may appear to be. For instance, Quirk et al. (1985: 96-97) identify five morphological forms in English verbs other than the verb *be*: the base form, the *-s* form, the *-ing* participle, the past form and the *-ed* participle, and explain that “the *-s* form and the past form are called finite, whereas the *-ing* participle and the *-ed* participle are called nonfinite. The base form (the form which has no inflection) is sometimes finite, and sometimes nonfinite.” More precisely, the base form is finite when in “the present tense in all persons and numbers except 3rd person singular”, “the imperative” and “the present subjunctive”, and is nonfinite when in “the bare infinitive” and “the *to*-infinitive” (Quirk et al., 1985: 97). Thus, according to this classification, the general present tense is, in fact, regarded not as one of the distinct morphological forms of English verbs but as simply one finite form of the base form.

In contrast, Huddleston (1984: 84) adopts “‘tensed’ vs ‘non-tensed’ in preference to ‘finite’ and ‘non-finite’ for the distinction between the two major subsets of forms” on the grounds that “The tensed forms are those which belong to one of the two terms in the inflectional system of tense” and that “the non-tensed forms, on the other hand, do not enter into inflectional contrasts of this kind”. Hence, Huddleston (1984: 83) recognises six inflectional forms in English verbs: the past tense, the 3rd person singular present tense, the general present tense, the base form, the *-ing* form and the *-en* form, the first three of which

are tensed forms and the remainder non-tensed forms. According to this taxonomy, the base form of a verb only covers the infinitive, the imperative and the present subjunctive, and the general present tense is independent of the base form. In fact, Huddleston (2002), using the term “the plain form” and “the plain present tense” for the base form and the general present tense respectively, gives four reasons in support of treating the plain present tense as a discrete form: (i) overt morphological contrast with *be*, (ii) tense contrast, (iii) person-number contrast, and (iv) defective morphology of the modal auxiliaries (84-85).

However, according to Carden and Pesetsky (1977), the general present tense is “morphologically as well as phonologically unmarked” (82). They basically argue that, in terms of grammaticality, the general present tense *come*, as in [38], behaves differently from the past participle *come*, which is morphologically marked yet phonologically unmarked, as in [39] - [41], but behaves in the same manner as the base form *come*, which is both morphologically and phonologically unmarked, as in [42] - [43], although all three forms look exactly the same (85-86):

[38] They come visit us here once a year.

[39] \*John has come live with us.

[40] \*Has John come live with us.

[41] \*John hasn't come live with us.

[42] Did John come live with you?

[43] John doesn't come visit us very often.

This actually means that the general present form is identical to the base form morphologically as well as phonologically and, therefore, seems to support Quirk et al.'s (1985) interpretation of the base form rather than Huddleston's (1984) (2002). Indeed, it can be argued that this notion that the general present tense is included in the base form can explain the morphological constraints of the “*try and V*” construction very nicely. For, then, it is possible to simply state that both *try* and the second verb in the “*try and V*” construction are always in the base form, with regard to its morphology. Also, it may be added that the general present tense is probably “systematically identical” rather than “accidentally identical” to the base form after all, in Zwicky's (1991) terms.

#### 4. Pseudo-coordination

What seems of the most significance concerning the syntactic features of the “*try and V*” construction is that this construction has a rather bizarre form of coordination, which is often labelled pseudo-coordination, as briefly looked at in section 2.2. With regard to ordinary coordination, Greenbaum and Quirk (1990: 262) succinctly explain that “In syndetic [i.e. linked] coordination, ... the units are linked by a coordinating conjunction (or, more simply, coordinator) - *and, or, but*”, and “in coordination the units are on the same syntactic level”. In terms of meaning, the coordinator *and* can express various meanings. According to Crystal (2003: 227), apart from simple addition, as in [44], for example, *and* can express ‘result’, as in [45], and ‘sequence’, as in [46]:

[44] I take the bus and she takes the train.

[45] I ran hard and (therefore) caught the bus.

[46] I woke up and (then) got dressed.

Also, Quirk et al. (1985: 953) state that “When phrases linked by *and* function in the clause, they may express combinatory or segregatory meaning”, as seen in [47] and [48] respectively:

[47] John and Mary make a pleasant couple.

[ ≠ \*John makes a pleasant couple, and Mary makes a pleasant couple.]

[48] John and Mary know the answer.

[ = John knows the answer, and Mary knows the answer.]

On the face of it, the “*try and V*” construction seems to be in accordance with these properties of normal coordination; it joins two syntactically equal units, and appears to carry a certain sort of combinatory meaning. However, this construction also behaves as something different from this type of normal coordination. Quirk et al. (1985: 978-979) view the “*try and V*” construction as idiomatic and atypical, thus as pseudo-coordination, mainly because of the limited form of *try*, as observed in [49], and mention that “Instead of coordination, in such cases [as [49]], we have to use the *to*-infinitive”, as in [50]:

[49] \*He tried *and* saw us every day.

[50] He tried to see us every day.



In fact, according to Huddleston, Payne and Peterson (2002: 1302), the “*try and V*” construction “is very different ... from the ordinary use of *and*” and “In spite of the *and*, ... this construction is subordinative, not coordinative: *and* introduces a non-finite complement of *try*.” Similarly, Carden and Pesetsky (1977) point out that the *and* of the “*try and V*” construction is “a fake *and* rather than a real co-ordinate construction” and this construction comes from “a common complement-like structure” (82). They discuss several arguments for this: first, phonologically, “The fake-*and* reading normally takes a much-reduced [n] for *and*; the real-*and* reading normally has a pause at the site of the deleted complement followed by a full *and*” (85). Second, syntactically, in addition to the restrictions of the form of *try* and the second verb, “Parentheticals appear in the middle of real-*and* co-ordinations, but not in the fake-*and* structure” (86); hence, such sentences as [51] and [52] cannot be read as a fake-*and* construction, as discussed in section 2.2:

[51] John will try, unfortunately, and catch me.

[52] John will try and, unfortunately, catch me.

Third, semantically, if a real-*and* reading is forced for the “*try and V*” construction instead of a fake-*and* reading, one needs “more context to supply the deleted complement” (86). Overall, therefore, as Denison (2001: 139) states, “Generally speaking, the phenomenon of ‘pseudo-coordination’ ... in standard PDE [Present-day English] disallows morphologically different verbs on either side of *and*” and, in this pseudo-coordination “the second verb is a base form”.

## 5. Corpus research

### 5.1 Previous corpus research

By taking advantage of a 40 million word corpus of present-day British English and American English, Biber et al. (1999) discuss their findings on the *try* plus *to*-infinitive construction versus the “*try and V*” construction. According to them, “*try + to + verb* must be considered the usual, unmarked choice”, whereas “*Try + and + verb* is a colloquial structure that is relatively common in conversation but generally avoided in formal written registers” (739). Biber et al. (1999: 738) also report that “*Try + and + verb* is often used

when the verb *try* is itself in a *to*-clause ... In news and academic prose, nearly all occurrences of *try + and + verb* are in this context.” Additionally, they reveal that “*try + and + verb* is used more in BrE [British English] than in AmE [American English]”; in particular, in fiction, this construction is approximately ten times more frequently occurs in British English than in American English (738).

Lind (1983), using the data from fifty modern English novels that were first published in the 1960s, also conducts corpus research on the “*try to V*” construction and the “*try and V*” construction. Lind argues that the decisive factor in selecting the use of *try to* or *try and* seems to be “the avoidance of a repetitive *to* or *and* for euphonic reasons” (562). According to his research, in the context where the infinitive marker *to* precedes *try and* or *try to*, the numbers of examples found for *try and* and *try to* are 85 and 29 respectively (556). By contrast, in the context where the coordinator *and* precedes *try and* or *try to*, the numbers of examples found for *try and* and *try to* are 6 and 19 respectively (557). Lind also analyses whether or not the frequency of the use of *try and* increases in the context where the subject and the general present tense *try* are separated and hence the impression of the present tense may somewhat be neutralised, as in [53], as opposed to the context where the subject is immediately followed by the general present tense *try*, as in [54] (559):

[53] I get afraid, I start to sweat, try and break life with my webbed feet.

[54] They try and delay us, which is not very friendly.

He reports regarding this question that “No such difference can, however, be observed” (559).

## 5.2 *BNC corpus research*

Corpus study is often fairly suitable for pragmatic enquiries as well as for those of other linguistic fields, as the above previous research demonstrates. This paper presents more extensive research than the two preceding studies to investigate the actual use and pragmatic aspect of the “*try and V*” construction, making use of the British National Corpus (BNC), a 100 million word collection of both spoken and written present-day British English.

Firstly, the distribution of the “*try to V*” construction and the “*try and V*” construction

between spoken and written language has been examined. Table 1 below shows the test results: the total number of *try to* and *try and* found in the BNC spoken and written texts, their frequency per one million words and their percentages within each register.

Table 1 Total matches, frequency and percentages of *try to* and *try and* in the BNC spoken and written texts

|         |                               | <i>try to</i> | <i>try and</i> |
|---------|-------------------------------|---------------|----------------|
| spoken  | matches in 10,341,729 words   | 655           | 2,009          |
|         | instances per 1 million words | 63.3          | 194.3          |
|         | percentage (total: 2,664)     | 24.6%         | 75.4%          |
| written | matches in 87,284,364 words   | 8,052         | 1,892          |
|         | instances per 1 million words | 92.3          | 21.7           |
|         | percentage (total: 9,944)     | 81.0%         | 19.0%          |

*Try and* occurs in 194.3 instances per million words in speech, nearly nine times more frequently than in written English (21.7 instances per million words), whereas *try to* occurs somewhat more often in written language (92.3 instances per million words) than in spoken language (63.3 instances per million words). From a different viewpoint, in speech, *try and* is selected in 75.4% (2,009 matches out of 2,664) of the entire chances of choice between *try and* and *try to*, and *try to* 24.6%. In sharp contrast, in written language, *try to* is chosen in 81.0% (8,052 out of 9,944) of the cases, and *try and* 19.0%.

Secondly, when either the infinitive marker *to* or the coordinator *and* comes directly before, which of *try to* and *try and* is actually used has been inspected in both spoken and written context. Tables 2 and 3 below indicate the results of spoken texts and written texts respectively.

*Table 2* Percentages of *try to* and *try and* immediately after the infinitive marker *to* or the coordinator *and* in BNC spoken texts

|                                   |            | <i>try to</i> | <i>try and</i> |
|-----------------------------------|------------|---------------|----------------|
| the infinitive marker <i>to</i> + | total: 816 | 137           | 679            |
|                                   | percentage | 16.8%         | 83.2%          |
| the coordinator <i>and</i> +      | total: 177 | 41            | 136            |
|                                   | percentage | 23.2%         | 76.8%          |

*Table 3* Percentages of *try to* and *try and* immediately after the infinitive marker *to* or the coordinator *and* in BNC written texts

|                                   |              | <i>try to</i> | <i>try and</i> |
|-----------------------------------|--------------|---------------|----------------|
| the infinitive marker <i>to</i> + | total: 3,179 | 2,133         | 1,046          |
|                                   | percentage   | 67.1%         | 32.9%          |
| the coordinator <i>and</i> +      | total: 698   | 636           | 62             |
|                                   | percentage   | 91.1%         | 8.9%           |

When tables 1 and 2 are compared, it is observable that the percentage of *try to* after the infinitive marker *to* in table 2 (16.8%) is more than 30 % lower than that of *try to* in the entire spoken language in table 1 (24.6%) although the percentage of *try and* after the coordinator *and* in table 2 (76.8%) does not show much difference from that of *try and* in the whole speech in table 1 (75.4%). Also, if tables 1 and 3 are compared, the percentage of *try to* after the infinitive marker *to* in table 3 (67.1%) is nearly 20% lower than that of *try to* in the whole written texts in table 1 (81.0%) whereas the percentage of *try and* after the coordinator *and* in table 3 (8.9%) is indeed less than half the percentage of *try and* in the entire written language in table 1 (19.0%). On the whole, these results do seem to indicate

the effect of euphony, or *horror aequi*, on the choice between *try to* and *try and*.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to expound the linguistically anomalous qualities of the “*try and V*” construction in English to illustrate that language is an intricate system depending on multiple factors. Although it appears true that this construction shares common features with the *try* plus *to*-infinitive construction, now it seems clear that it does not entirely do so. In the “*try and V*” construction, the verb *try* is morphologically restricted to the base form (and the general present tense) of a verb, and the second verb the base form. Syntactically, the coordinator *and* functions to create not proper coordination but pseudo-coordination, or subordination, despite its appearance. Finally, while its semantic difference from the catenative *try to* construction is not yet quite evident, the pragmatic contrast can be said to be clearly distinct: *try and* is much preferred in speech and *try to* in written language. Also, a general tendency to avoid repetition of the same word/sound, as in *to try to* and *and try and*, is perceived in pragmatics.

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