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To Convince Someone To Do Something
in Present-Day American English*

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1. Introduction and Previous Studies

The aim of the present study is to observe the recent rise of the *to*-infinitive construction of the verb *convince*, which is in usual cases followed by *that*-clauses and *of*-phrases, by analyzing contemporary American English. The expansion of *to*-infinitives with this verb is often considered to be a feature of American English. The example below illustrates this newly-arising construction:

- (1) By working behind the scenes he nearly *convinced* Delaware *to emancipate* slaves gradually with compensation.
(COCA, 1999)

It is mainly in usage guides and grammars that the rise of *to*-infinitives with *convince* is noted. *The American Heritage Book of English Usage* (1996: 84), for example, states that “the traditional rule does not appear to have much of a future about this verb” by referring to the increasingly common use of *convince* followed by *to*-infinitives. Similarly, Peters (2004: 418) remarks that it is a construction which appeared in American English during the 1950s,

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pointing out that this usage of *convince* implies “mobilizing action.” In Burchfield’s (1998: 182) words, *convince* with this usage implies the meaning of *persuade*: “This verb [*convince*], which has been in use in English in various senses and constructions since the 16c., began to be controversially used in the 1950s (with *to*+infinitive) to mean ‘persuade’.” Thus, while the rise of *to*-infinitives with this verb is well-known, detailed descriptions of this syntactic development have rarely been available in the literature, except in usage guides and dictionaries.¹ The present study intends to trace the spread of this newly-expanding construction in contemporary American English.

In the present paper, I will investigate the following electronic corpora for this purpose: (1) the 1930s–1950s and 1970s–1990s data of the *TIME* Corpus (the main corpus of this study);² (2) the 1990s data of the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), Spoken and Academic only; and (3) *The Oxford English Dictionary* on CD-ROM (2nd edition). The examples in this study are all quoted from them.

2. Overall Tendencies

Previous studies suggest that the rise of *to*-infinitives is observed with *convince* from the 1950s in American English, but on the

¹ The verb *convince* has rarely been the central concern of discussions in previous studies, while there are studies which refer to it in passing. Skandera (2003), for example, mentions the existence of *that*-clauses, *of*-phrases, and *to*-infinitives with *convince* in Present-day English, while his principal focus of discussion is placed elsewhere.

² The *TIME* Corpus and COCA are provided freely by Mark Davies at Brigham Young University at: (<http://davies-linguistics.byu.edu/personal/>) (accessed 1 May 2010). The *TIME* Corpus covers the period from 1923 to the present day, while this study investigates only the data of the 1930s–1950s and the 1970s–1990s.

whole the use of *to*-infinitives is quite restricted throughout the twentieth century. In the *TIME* Corpus, the data of the 1930s-1950s include 1,801 examples of *convince*, of which only eighteen illustrate the use of *to*-infinitives. Likewise, the data of the 1970s-1990s include a total of 1,586 examples of *convince*, of which only 55 illustrate the use of *to*-infinitives.³ The following graph demonstrates the frequencies of *that*-clauses and *to*-infinitives per 100 occurrences of *convince* in the *TIME* Corpus:

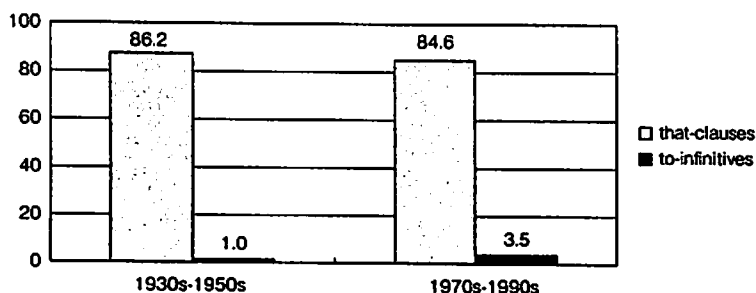


Figure 1: Frequencies of *that*-clauses (including the ellipsis of *that*) and *to*-infinitives per 100 occurrences of *convince* in the *TIME* Corpus

Some illustrative examples of the two constructions follow:

- (2) The U.S. hoped to *convince* Hussein *that* the time had come for him to join the peace process and to strengthen Sadat's position in the negotiations ... (*TIME*, 1978)⁴
- (3) But a friend of his, a history professor, *convinced* him it was a wonderful document of the period. (*TIME*, 1999)
- (4) The record will show that I've spoken more times to more people and *convinced* more people *to vote* for Mondale and Ferraro than anybody else in the field, ... (*TIME*, 1984)

³ Here I count only the examples of the verbal use of *convince*. I have manually excluded the examples of *convincing* used as an adjective.

⁴ Examples where the verb *convince* is not finite are counted in the present study.

The graph shows that while *to*-infinitives are marginal they are certainly on the increase in the 1970s–1990s.

Apart from *that*-clauses and *to*-infinitives, *convince* is also followed by clauses introduced by interrogatives and by the prepositional phrase most typically introduced by *of*,⁵ as illustrated below, but these constructions are not shown in Figure 1. The goal of the present study is to investigate the recent expansion of *to*-infinitives with *convince*, and accordingly other constructions are mentioned only in the context of highlighting the main purpose of the present discussion:⁶

- (5) Mr. Hull, the President and Secretary Wallace sat down on a Sunday afternoon in the State dining room to *convince* newshawks *how* great would be the benefits, *how* little the pain of the operation. (TIME, 1935)
- (6) An assumption so strong that it may *convince* the second-class group *of* the need to imitate, ... (TIME, 1970)

As hitherto discussed, *to*-infinitives are indeed increasingly evidenced with *convince* from the 1950s onwards in American English, but even in the second half of the twentieth century, the use of this construction seems to be restricted, counting less than five percent in the 1970s–1990s data of the *TIME* Corpus. The situation differs significantly, however, depending upon the type of English analyzed. COCA (Academic) provides 1,886 examples of *convince*, of which 315 illustrate the *to*-infinitival construction, and COCA (Spoken) yields 3,468 examples of *convince*, of which as many as

⁵ Besides the preposition *of*, the corpora under investigation provide examples like the following where a different preposition is used: *If I had not been really convinced about O.J. right at the outset ...* (COCA, 1996).

⁶ *That*-clauses are often mentioned in this study, since they are so frequent as to function as a kind of reference construction while discussing the development of *to*-infinitives.

553 illustrate the use of *to*-infinitives. Figure 2 shows the normalized frequencies of *that*-clauses and *to*-infinitives (per 100 examples of *convince*) in the 1990s data of the Academic and Spoken of COCA, together with the corresponding data extracted from the *TIME* Corpus:

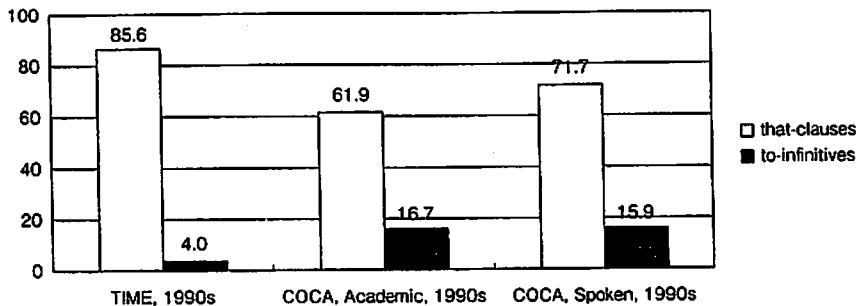


Figure 2: Frequencies of *that*-clauses (including the ellipsis of *that*) and *to*-infinitives per 100 occurrences of *convince* in the *TIME* Corpus and COCA (Academic and Spoken) in the 1990s

The graph reveals that the extent to which *to*-infinitives increase is conditioned by the type of English investigated. As far as the *TIME* Corpus and COCA are concerned, the employment of *to*-infinitives seems to be most restricted in journalistic English, represented by the *TIME* Corpus, whereas it is much more frequent in the spoken variety, and surprisingly in a way, in academic English as well.⁷

3. The *To*-infinitival Construction in the Active and Passive Voices

It has been revealed above that the rise of *to*-infinitives with *convince* is a slow process even in the second half of the twentieth cen-

⁷ See Hundt and Mair (1999), who claim that the language of academic writings is inclined to be more conservative than the language of journalistic prose.

ture, although in some genres of English it is more markedly observed than in others. The present section provides further details of the development of *to*-infinitives in Present-day American English. More specifically, the rate of the expansion of *to*-infinitives is quite clearly conditioned by whether *convince* occurs in the active or in the passive voice. Here I employ the terms active and passive voices in a fairly broad sense by including non-finite forms. For example, the following are both regarded as examples of the active voice:

- (7) The fact that education *convinced* the vast majority of tourists *to overcome* this natural desire to touch the dolphins illustrates that it can be a powerful component in management of ecotourist sites. (COCA, 1998)
- (8) The response against the proposed series was strong enough to *convince* ABC *to cancel* the project, although, to recoup its monetary losses on the pilot, ABC sold it to a cable channel which occasionally airs it as a movie. (COCA, 1997)

Likewise, the following are both illustrations of the passive voice:

- (9) Whenever the Lord has been *convinced to widen* His mercy or extend His patience it has been at the behest of a fool. (TIME, 1980)
- (10) I mean, Moses, for people who are familiar with the Bible, had a terrible time being *convinced* by God *to go* before Pharaoh because he could not speak. (COCA, 1990)

As far as the examples of *convince* explored in this study are concerned, there exists an explicit contrast between the active and passive voices, the former being more advanced in terms of the development of *to*-infinitives. See Figure 3, which depicts the frequencies of *that*-clauses and *to*-infinitives per 100 occurrences of *convince* in the TIME Corpus:

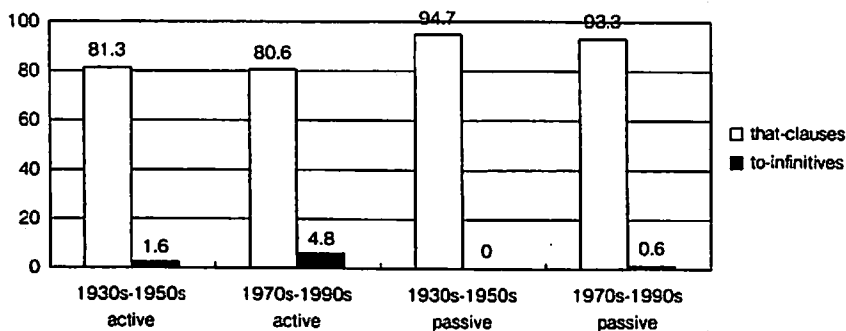


Figure 3: Frequencies of *that*-clauses (including the ellipsis of *that*) and *to*-infinitives per 100 occurrences of *convince* in the active and passive voices in the *TIME* Corpus

It is transparent in this graph that the rise of *to*-infinitives is much more pronounced in the active than in the passive voice, though in both cases it is infrequent. Since the examples of the active voice are more numerous (2,232 examples of *convince* in all) than the passive voice (1,155 examples of *convince* in all), the overall tendency of the verb *convince* as described in the previous section has been to a large extent a reflection of the state of affairs of the active voice. In the passive voice, the use of *to*-infinitives is even more marginal, though it exists, as Figure 3 displays.

The contrast is more pronounced in COCA, where the rise of *to*-infinitives is more noticeable. Here again, it is a phenomenon most typically observed with the active voice, both in the Academic and Spoken data of the 1990s. See Figure 4, which again displays normalized frequencies per 100 occurrences of *convince*.⁸

⁸ Here again, the raw frequencies are lower in the passive voice than in the active voice, but not significantly lower: the Academic provides 1,050 examples of *convince* in the active voice vs. 836 examples in the passive voice, and the Spoken yields 1,840 examples of *convince* in the active voice vs. 1,628 examples in the passive voice.

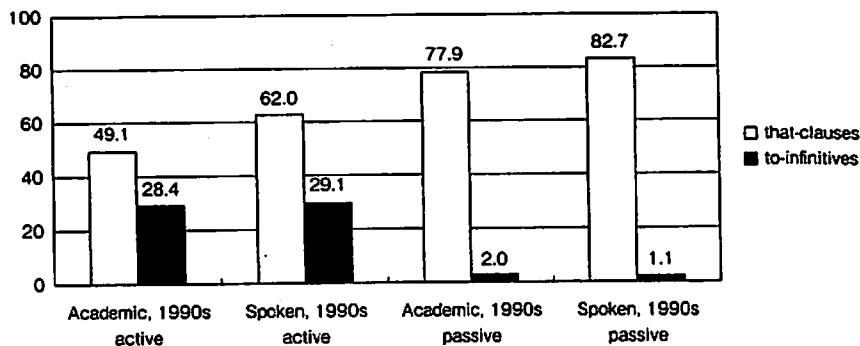


Figure 4: Frequencies of *that*-clauses (including the ellipsis of *that*) and *to*-infinitives per 100 occurrences of *convince* in the active and passive voices in COCA

While *to*-infinitives are much more frequent in COCA than in the *TIME* Corpus, this is largely a situation of the active voice only, as the above graph exhibits. In the passive voice, by contrast, the occurrence of *to*-infinitives is much more limited, and almost as infrequent as in the *TIME* Corpus.

Considering the fact that *convince* when used with *to*-infinitives conveys the meaning 'persuade,' which the *OED* (s.v. *convince*) notes only from the twentieth century, this new meaning is probably percolating into the usage of this verb in the active voice first. It is in fact noteworthy that nearly 30 percent of the examples of *convince* in the active voice are used in this newly-defined sense in the 1990s in COCA. Clearly, the nature of this verb is in transition today. By contrast, the traditional sense of *convince* is fully retained in the passive voice. Interestingly enough, some phrasings are more or less fixed and almost idiomatic in the passive use of *convince*. See, for instance, the following examples where *convince* occurs in the past participle construction along with verbs of motion and conveys the state of mind of the person who is involved in the motion:

- (11) And we came away *convinced* that he'd have no trouble proving that the quotes he gave us came from all levels of the White House hierarchy, all the way to the top.

(COCA, 1994)

- (12) Scott ran away repeatedly from foster care, *convinced* his father would take him home. (COCA, 1994)

These are examples of *convince* used in the non-finite form.

Regarding the finite use of the same verb in the passive, examples like the following merit particular attention:

- (13) Calderon wrote allegory, *I am convinced*, because at a certain point in his literary and religious development he could conceive of no other way to write. (COCA, 1992)
- (14) The president, *I'm convinced*, is on a signing strategy. (COCA, 1995)

I am convinced / I'm convinced as illustrated above is fixed in this form and parenthetical in nature. It is listed as a clausal pragmatic marker under the category of "first-person pronoun + present-tense verb/adjective" by Brinton (2008: 2). Furthermore, third-person examples of a similar kind also occur parenthetically in a fairly fixed form, whether or not they may be defined as clausal pragmatic markers:

- (15) Words must, *he was convinced*, provide order. (COCA, 1993)

Thus, the passive use of the verb *convince* is rather tightly linked to *that*-clauses, though the conjunction *that* itself may in fact be absent as the parenthetical use illustrated by (13)–(15) shows.⁹

⁹ The absence of the conjunction *that* is particularly noticeable in the Spoken of COCA, and this is where the distinction between the Spoken and the Academic is noteworthy. Although this is partly ascribable to the frequent occurrence of the parenthetical use of *convince* in the Spoken genre of COCA, it does not explain the whole difference. The non-existence of *that* is noticeably common in the Spoken in general even when the verb *convince* occurs in non-finite forms.

4. The Expanded Use of *To*-infinitives in Historical Terms

Finally, I would like to concentrate upon the historical aspect of the development of *to*-infinitives with *convince*. The fact that previous studies often deal with *convince* and *persuade* together is significant in this respect (e.g. Wilson (1993: 114), Burchfield (1998: 84), and Peters (2004: 418)). There has most probably been confusion between the two verbs, and the construction of *persuade* may have been transmitted in a way to the verb *convince* when it took up the meaning 'persuade.' In relation to this, it is relevant to mention that *decide* also takes the same construction when it is used with the meaning 'persuade,' as Austin (2006: 100–101) mentions. She provides the following example given by Noel Osselton (most probably, personal communication),¹⁰ who in fact quotes it from the *Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary*:¹¹

- (16) It was this which finally *decided* me *to come* to India.
(Austin (2006: 100))

This is in accordance with the contention by Dirven (1989: 120) that "predicates denoting indirect causation or influencing other people" can take the *to*-infinitive. Dirven provides a list of illustrative verbs, in which *convince* is included. In fact, it is almost a classic argument to connect the use of *to*-infinitives to the implication of a goal, and a number of studies are available in this line.¹²

Although I take the same position, I would still consider that it is

¹⁰ Austin does not provide bibliographical details for Osselton.

¹¹ Austin quotes some additional examples from Poutsma (1926), but they are from the nineteenth century.

¹² A number of studies in different linguistic schools discuss the allative nature of the *to*-infinitive, referring to the original sense of the preposition *to*. Haspelmath (1989), for example, deals with this matter in the context of grammaticalization, while studies like Hamawand (2002) treat the same theme within the framework of cognitive linguistics.

worthwhile to investigate the development of *convince* in a broader historical context. While the *to*-infinitival construction is regarded as a feature only from the 1950s in American English, the quotation base of the *OED* provides some examples of *to*-infinitives in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as the table below displays:

	16th c.	17th c.	18th c.	19th c.	20th c.
<i>That/zero</i>	0	10	16	46	65
<i>To</i> -infinitive	3	6	0	0	9

Table 1: The frequencies of *that*-clauses (including the elliptical use of *that*) and *to*-infinitives after *convince* in the *OED* (raw frequencies)

Some illustrative examples of *to*-infinitives in earlier periods are:

- (17) You must ... *convince* all these patcheries *to be* falsly burdened upon your Church.
 (1581, James Bell, *Walter Haddon against Osorius*)
- (18) Other Arguments, whereby they *convinced* their doctrine *to be* true.
 (1638, William Chillingworth, *The Religion of Protestants*)

Obviously, *convince* in these examples does not convey the mobilizing sense of ‘persuade,’ but simply the original meaning of the verb. There is also a long gap between the early Modern English attestation of *convince* + *to*-infinitives and the twentieth century, when the construction reappears in the *OED*. It is, therefore, difficult to directly link the *to*-infinitival construction in early Modern English to the present-day occurrence of the same form. Still, the existence of *to*-infinitives with this verb in the early Modern English period is intriguing, since it is a period when a major shift of complementation was taking place with various verbs in English. As I discuss in Iyeiri (2010), a number of English verbs experienced the shift from

that-clauses to *to*-infinitives (First Complement Shift), and the path of the development of *convince*, which was still a new loanword in English, was also to merge into the major historical stream, although *to*-infinitives were not established in the end. Another interesting feature of *convince* is its development into a parenthetical, especially in the form *I am convinced/I'm convinced*, since this is another path frequently attested in English (also called the First Complement Shift) as a consequence of the weakening of *that*-clauses, which itself is perhaps due to the decline of the subjunctive (see Iyeiri (2010)).

To sum up, the development of *to*-infinitives and that of the parenthetical use of the verb are both in keeping with the historical paths which a number of verbs followed in the history of English. For some reason, the path of the development of *to*-infinitives was abandoned for a long time in the case of *convince*, but now it is recycled in the present day, though in a slightly different way, when the verb faces the merger of meaning with *persuade*. In other words, the path of development from *that*-clauses to *to*-infinitives in the history of English now functions as a model in the recent development of *convince* in the twentieth century.

5. Conclusion

I have hitherto discussed the development of *to*-infinitives with *convince* in contemporary American English. While the existence of this new construction is often noted in dictionaries and grammars of contemporary English, detailed analyses are rarely available in existing studies. The above discussion has revealed that there is indeed a rise of this construction in twentieth-century American English, but even in the 1990s its use is relatively limited, at least in the journalistic English of the *TIME* Corpus. The situation differs, however, when different genres are investigated. The Academic and Spoken of COCA, for example, display some notable occurrences of *to*-infinitives with *convince*.

Findings in the above discussion include the significant gap in the occurrence of this construction between the cases where *convince* is used in the active and passive voices. Most examples of *to*-infinitives are found in the active, whereas the use of the same construction is extremely limited in the passive. This contrast is observed both in the *TIME* Corpus and in COCA, although it is more marked in the latter, where the rise of *to*-infinitives is a more significant feature of *convince*. In view of the fact that the newly-arising construction is linked to the newly-expanding meaning of the same verb, i.e. 'persuade,' the change of the nature of *convince* takes place in the active voice first. In the passive voice, the change of the meaning of this verb has not really taken place, but the verb is often encountered in the form *I am convinced/I'm convinced*, indicating that it is developing into a so-called parenthetical.

Finally, the present paper dealt with some possible mechanisms behind the increase of *to*-infinitives with *convince*. The most likely explanation relates to the transmission of the construction of *persuade* to *convince*, when the latter verb took up the meaning of the former. This is convincing as the same phenomenon is evidenced with other verbs like *decide*. Simultaneously, however, it is also interesting to note the fact that there were some examples of *to*-infinitives in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the shift of complements from *that*-clauses to *to*-infinitives was commonly observed with various English verbs. Although *to*-infinitives in the early Modern English period did not in the end successfully percolate into the verb *convince*, which was still a newly-borrowed word at the time, the path of development was certainly being paved at this stage. The verb now recycles this path for a different purpose in the present day, when it faces the stage to widen its meaning, most probably under the influence of *persuade*.

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