The Implications of *Fail to* + Infinitives

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Abstract

I will discuss the precondition of the subject’s controllability over the event in the use of *fail to* + infinitives. *He failed to be kinder to the classmate* is acceptable but *He failed to be tall* is unacceptable. The difference lies in whether the subject can cause or control the event. However, if the subject is limited to [+animate], we will make a wrong prediction about *The fire failed to ignite*. The sentence *The apple failed to be sweet* can be acceptable or not depending on the context. *Fail to* + infinitives are acceptable if there are metonymic links to persons who can cause the events. Even with a passive infinitive like *She failed to be seen by him*, the subject’s plan ‘to be seen’ should be the presupposition. As for sentences which express emotions, emotions are spontaneous, but they are different from ‘being tall’ in that they can be imperative: *Be angry* (vs. *?Be tall*). How can we explain the acceptability of a sentence expressing an undesirable event, like *The little sister never failed to get carsick*? Such statements are presumably uttered in irony.

Keyword: implications of verb phrases, the meaning and usage of *fail*
1. Introduction

This paper studies the nuances and usage of fail to+infinitives. In Section 2, I will discuss whether the subject’s controllability over the event is necessary in the use of fail to+infinitives. In Section 3 and Section 4, I will focus on the cases of passives and expressions of emotion, in both of which the subject’s controllability does not seem to be involved. In Section 5, I will discuss the necessity of expectations in relation to the occurrence of the event as well as the subject’s responsibility to cause the event. In Section 6 and Section 7, I will pick up two of the most often used collocations of fail to+infinitives, never/not fail to+infinitive and fail to see/understand, and look at their usages, followed by a conclusion in Section 8.

The judgment of acceptability of each sentence in this paper depends on the native speakers of English who have cooperated as my informants except examples cited from a novel, newspaper, dictionaries or grammar books and corpus data (British National Corpus Online (BNC) and WordBanksOnline). I use the term acceptable/ unacceptable in this paper to refer to strange sentences in meaning although they are grammatical in form.

2. Only controllable events in fail to+infinitives

(1a, b) are acceptable but (2a, b) are not acceptable. What are the differences between them?

(1) a. He failed to be quiet in the classroom.
   b. He failed to be kinder to the classmate.

(2) a. He failed to be tall.
   b. The child failed to be a girl.

Being quiet in the classroom or being kinder to somebody is an event which the subject of the sentence can accomplish if they intend to cause it. On the other hand, being tall or being a girl is an event that cannot be accomplished even if it is the will of the subject. Is it attributed to the self-controllability of the subject over the event described by to+infinitives? I don’t think this is the case because fire or baby, both of which are not assumed to have control over the event, can come as subjects of fail to+infinitives as in (3a, b).

(3) a. The fire failed to ignite.
   b. The baby failed to survive.

The subjects in (3a, b) do not have control to cause ignition or survival by themselves. However, we can imagine people to try to ignite or people to take care of the baby. If we assume such people behind the words ignite and survive, in terms of metonymy, it means somebody controls the events described. The explanation of acceptability is the same with (4).

(4) The patient failed to wake.

The subject patient cannot control the event of getting awake. However, it can be assumed there are people looking after the patient who can control this event, so fail to+infinitive is acceptable in (4). This is the case with the difference in the acceptability of the sentences in (5a, b). Why is (5a) unacceptable, but (5b) is acceptable when they are the same sentences on the surface?

(5) a. (The speaker finds an apple tree by chance and plucks one from the tree and bites it) ? The apple failed to be sweet.
   b. (The speaker is a farmer who produced the apple)
      The apple failed to be sweet.

We can think of people who try to make the apple sweet in (5b). However, in (5a) there is no intention to make the apple sweet on the part of the subject, so (5a) is unacceptable.

Similarly, (6a) is unacceptable because the subject’s intention to become beautiful is not assumed there, but (6b) is acceptable because the subject strives to be beautiful.

(6) a. (Mother refers to her two-year-old daughter)
    ? She failed to be beautiful.
   b. (She wants to be beautiful and has made an effort toward beauty every day.)
      She failed to be beautiful.

The unacceptability of (6a) can be explained in the same way as that of (2a, b). As the conclusion of Section 2, we must say the subject of fail to+ infinitive
is supposed to be a person or people who could cause the event by themselves or when the subject seems to lack such power, there must be people to cause the event behind the subject who are metonymically linked to the subject. And even if the event does not seem to be controllable, controllability depends on the context as in (6a, b).

3. The subject’s controllability in passives

Then, how about the cases where to+infinitives are passive? Passive state is thought of being unintentional on the part of the subject as in (7).

(7) He was seen leaving early by his neighbor, but he did not notice it.

However, let us compare the following sentences.

(8) a. She was not seen by him.
   b.? She failed to be seen by him.

Why is (8b) unacceptable while (8a) is all right and both seem to express similar situations? I think fail invokes her intentionality to cause the event of being seen by him. All the informants I asked about the judgment of the sentence said that (8b) would be acceptable only in a situation where the subject she had planned to be seen by him and made an effort to cause the event, but it did not succeed. This remark suggests to us that fail involves the intentionality of the subject even in a passive sentence. So it is strange to use fail in (9).

(9) (She had not expected she would be nominated as an award-winner.)
   a. She was not nominated as a candidate of the award.
   b.? She failed to be nominated as a candidate of the award.

If she had intended to be a candidate of the award, but couldn’t, (9b) would be acceptable in such a situation.

4. The subject’s controllability of emotions

Then, how about the case where to+infinitives express the subject’s feelings or emotions as in the examples of (10)? Emotions occur spontaneously.

(10) a. A psychiatrist who specialises in executive stress thought the fencing indicated that the person it protected felt an enormous sense of isolation and betrayal at the hands of people who had failed to be grateful for years of selfless public service. (BNC:A2A)

b. Having done so he folded the sheet of paper again, replaced it in his pocket, folded it back on itself and made to leave. The reporters protested vociferously and blocked his path. Di Leonardo looked flabbergasted, as never before in his experience had the media failed to be satisfied by the reading of a prepared statement. (BNC: HTT)

c. Mr Major said: “Everyone who has seen or learnt about these abuses can not fail to be disturbed. These abuses have to be stopped, and stopped speedily…” (WordbanksOnline: today0042)

d. A man would have to be totally deficient in imagination to fail to be struck with a kind of horror and awe. (BNC: A73)

e. Despite this, investors failed to be impressed and caused NAB stock to tumble. (WordbanksOnline: oznews0024)

f. Can anybody fail to be moved by those pictures. (sic)(BNC: UNF)

g. Few could have failed to be moved by Ashby’s distress or the pain of those closest to him when they appeared in the witness box. (WordbanksOnline: times0013)

(10b), (10c) and (10g) include negatives like never, not, and few, which means that people would always or usually have such feelings in the situations described respectively, so having such feelings is taken for granted in the given contexts.

As Table 1 and Table 2 show, fail to+ infinitives often occur with negative elements.

Table 1 The Occurrence of Negative Elements with Fail to+be moved in the Data of BNC and WordbanksOnline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Number of Fail (-ed) to+be moved</th>
<th>The Number of Negatives in Fail (-ed) to +be moved</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4 (BNC)</td>
<td>3 Negatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 Rhetorical Question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 (WordbanksOnline)</td>
<td>6 Negatives</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2 The Occurrence of Negative Elements with *Fail to+be impressed* in the Data of BNC and WordbanksOnline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Number of <em>Fail (&lt;ed&gt;) to +be impressed</em></th>
<th>The Number of Negatives in <em>Fail (&lt;ed&gt;) to +be impressed</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13 (BNC)</td>
<td>13 Negatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 (WordbanksOnline)</td>
<td>1 Negative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Observing the examples where negation is not involved, the word *betrayal* suggests that the speaker feels that the lack of enough gratitude did not meet his or her expectation in (10a). In (10d), the expression *a man who would have to be totally deficient in imagination* suggests that people are normally struck with horror and awe in such a situation. In (10e), the *despite* phrase implies that there was expectation that investors would be impressed. (10f) is a rhetorical question, so in normal cases people are moved by those pictures.

In the cases of emotion, the subject’s intention is not involved, but there is expectation of a state which is betrayed. Then should the requirement of *fail to+infinitives* be expectation rather than the subject’s intention? However, then we would not be able to explain why (2a, b) are not acceptable even when an expectation of the state is assumed, for example, when it was expected that he would be tall or the child would be a girl. What is the difference between (2a, b) and (10a)? It is that being tall or being a girl cannot be controlled by the subject at all, so the event cannot be caused by the subject while being angry or grateful can depend more on the subject because imperative is possible with *angry or grateful* as in (11a, b), but it is strange to say sentences like (12a, b).

(11) a. Be angry.
   b. Be grateful for what you have now.

(12) a. Be tall.
   b. Be a girl.

Fukui and Kitayama (2008:99) say that since *fail* has a strong connotation of failure or a failed attempt, it is not preferable to use *fail* where no trial is involved. Therefore, we should say (13b) instead of (13a).13

(13) a. We failed to arrive on time.
   b. We did not arrive on time.

Masamura (2002:170) also says that *fail* can convey not only failure of the event which the subject tried to cause, but inconvenience due to lack of the subject’s efforts to avoid it. Anyway, the subject’s involvement to cause the event is necessary.

Expectation of the event and the subject’s assumed controllability over the event including its metonymical links both seem to be necessary for the use of *fail to+infinitives*.

5. Expectation of the event

In (14a), *try* indicates that the subject *he* intends to be tender to a woman, but does not succeed. In (14b), *However hard he tried* also shows his efforts to cause the event he wanted. In these examples, expectation and intention to cause the event are both involved.

(14) a. Trapped by religion and machismom (*sic*), he tries and fails to be tender to a woman. (WordbanksOnline: umkags0087)
   b. However hard he tried, he somehow always failed to be the son she wanted; the son she truly deserved. (BNC: ACW)

In (15a), *hopes had been raised that agreement could be reached* shows it was expected that they could reach agreement, suggesting having made an effort toward the agreement. In (15b), *oddly for Madonna, she was too modest* suggests prior expectation and efforts to produce an interesting film can be assumed here.

(15) a. UNITED NATIONS (AP) —Member states failed to reach agreement Friday on a new U.N. treaty to regulate the multibillion dollar global arms trade, and some diplomats and supporters blamed the United States for triggering the unraveling of the monthlong negotiating conference. Hopes had been raised that agreement could be reached on a revised treaty text that closed some major loopholes by Friday’s deadline for action. But the United States announced Friday morning that it needed more time to consider the proposed treaty — and Russia and China then also asked for more time. *(The Daily Yomiuri, July 29, 2012)*
   b. What was *In Bed With Madonna* if not a
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film about Madonna? No, In Bed... was a documentary, and failed to be interesting because, oddly for Madonna, she was too modest. (WordbanksOnline: times0014)

Sometimes responsibility or functions to cause the event are implied in the uses of fail to+infinitives, as in the following examples.

(16) a. ...and the association calls on drivers to boycott models if manufacturers fail to make safety a priority. (BNC: A2P)
b. Two policemen who failed to notice a dead woman when they inspected her crashed car have been sacked. (WordbanksOnline: today0157)
c. He walked past the answering machine but neglected to look at it, and failed to notice the blinking light. (Michael Crichton, Disclosure: 259)
d. Sanders didn’t answer. He took the cellular phone down from his ear. The keypad and screen glowed bright green. Plenty of power. He looked at the phone and waited. After five seconds, it clicked itself off; the screen went blank. That was because the new generation of phones had an auto-shutdown feature to conserve battery power. If you didn’t use the phone or press the keypad for fifteen seconds, the phone shut itself off. So it wouldn’t go dead. But his phone had gone dead in Meredith’s office. Why? Forget that phone. Why had his cellular phone failed to shut itself off? (ibid.:311)
e. I will argue further that the company knew of Ms. Johnson’s long history of harassment, and has failed to take proper steps to investigate her behavior, either prior to this incident, or now. (ibid.:355)

In the examples in (16), the subjects’ responsibility for failure of the events, which should have been expected of the subjects, is assumed.

Even if the event described in the to+infinitive seems undesirable, it can change from undesirable to desirable depending on the context. As is the case of (17), being angry is usually a negative event, but it is considered positive here.

(17) The object of our anger is of course important. We can be angry about the wrong things. We can also fail to be angry about the right things, neglecting issues... (BNC: CGE)

On the other hand, the events in (18a-c) are only considered undesirable. These sentences say that such events occur most easily although they are negative ones.

(18) a. ...and the little sister who never failed to get carsick. (Konishi (2006:484))
b. Given its concern with the exercise of public power, political elites and government institutions, the modern study of politics can not (sic) fail to be sexist. (BNC: CM5)
c. It will come as no surprise to discover, then, that Spencer was highly critical of statutory intervention, arguing that it stifled liberty and led to rigidity and uniformity: a living growing organism, placed within apparatuses of dead, rigid, mechanical formulas, can not fail to be hampered and pinched.(BNC: EAJ)

The original meaning of fail is said to be deceiving, not meeting expectations (cf. OED’s v. fail), Seto (2007:330) and Masamura (2002:170)). This meaning of fail is seen in the nuances of fail to+infinitives.

However, it is assumed that the subjects in (18a-c) do not have control over the events described in the to+infinitives. What should we think about why fail to+infinitives are acceptable in (18a-c) despite the lack of the subject’s intention to cause the event? I will suggest that these sentences could be interpreted as ironical sentences. Irony expresses the opposite of what is desired. Even if the events described in the to+infinitives are undesirable ones in (18a-c), they are expressed as if they were the events the subjects want to cause. And combined with negative elements, the sentences mean the undesirable events described in to+infinitives always occur without fail, which is also an irony. That can lead to the effect of emphasizing the inevitability of the events.
6. Two types of never/not fail to

According to Konishi(2006:484), never/not fail to does not co-occur with time-specifying adverbs like today, yesterday, but is often seen with perfective forms.\(^7\)
That means it expresses a habitual event, an event which almost always occurs under certain conditions.

These expressions seem to fall into two types. One is a default event. The described event always happens under a certain condition irrespective of someone’s hope about the realization of the event as in (19a-c).

(19) a. It will come as no surprise to discover, then, that Spencer was highly critical of statutory intervention, arguing that it stifled liberty and led to rigidity and uniformity: a living growing organism, placed within apparatuses of dead, rigid, mechanical formulas, can not fail to be hampered and pinched.\(^{=18c}\)

b. This recipe never fails to impress people. (MEDAL)\(^8\)

c. You never fail to astonish me! (ibid.)\(^9\)

The other is a case where the subject’s intention is clearly involved like (20a, b).

(20) a. My grandson never fails to phone me on my birthday. (LDOCE\(^{+}\))\(^10\)

b. Since we listed in 1986, we have never failed to pay a dividend. (WordbanksOnline: oznews0042)

Expectation of the event is involved in both (19a-c) and (20a, b). The subject’s intention to cause the event is clear in (20a, b) while in (19a-c), the intention is implied with the use of fail to+infinitives.

7. Implications of fail to see/understand

Fail to see/understand is said to show the subject’s irritation as in (21).

(21) I fail to see/understand formal used to show that you are annoyed by something that you do not accept or understand: I fail to see why you find it so amusing. (LDOCE\(^{+}\))\(^11\)

English/Japanese dictionaries say that this expression is used to show disagreement against somebody’s idea and this expression is avoided when the subject is the first person pronoun because it might convey a subservient attitude. It is also said that the speaker admits rudeness when they use this expression.\(^12\)

Similar nuances can be noticed in the Japanese counterparts as in (22).

(22) a. watashi-niwa rikaidekimasen.

b. watashi-niwa wakarikanemasu.

Why can these expressions be used in displays of disagreement? On the surface, the expression admits that the subject I cannot understand what the person is supposed to understand and it is as if it were the subject’s fault that he or she cannot understand it. However, human beings usually do not want to admit their inability to understand in public. Then admitting it voluntarily seems to be ironical, suggesting the subject’s failure to understand should be attributed to the other person who cannot get their ideas across at all.

8. Conclusion

In the use of fail to+infinitives, the event described by to+infinitive is supposed to be controlled by the subject. Even if the subject is inanimate or, as in (3b), a baby, which does not have control over the event, fail to+infinitives are acceptable as long as people who can control the event could be linked to the subject.

Events which seem to be uncontrollable can become controllable depending on the context. Even in the cases of passives and emotions, the subject’s controllability over the event could be assumed to some extent.

To+infinitives express expected events and fail to+infinitives express that the expectations are not met.

The subject intends to cause the event of to+infinite in some cases, but in others, the subject should have done it in retrospect.

Undesirable events are also described in to+infinitives. These undesirable events can become desirable ones depending on the context. Otherwise, they can be interpreted as irony. These undesirable events always occur without fail, which leads to emphasizing the inevitability of the event.
Finally, I considered the collocations *never/not fail to* and *fail to see/understand*. There are two types for *never/not fail to* depending on whether the subject’s clear intention is involved or not. As for *fail to see/understand*, the expression can convey the subject’s irritation, disagreement, subservient-sounding, and rudeness. These nuances can be explained pragmatically.

References

6) Masamura, op. cit.
7) Konishi, op. cit.
9) ibid.
11) ibid.