Abstract: Learning from split infinitives
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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 &

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).