WHAT'S THIS SENTENCE DOING SHOWING UP IN ENGLISH?

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Sentences like the title of this note appear to pose a number of problems for existing accounts of English syntax. Despite this (or conceivably, because of this), they have not previously been mentioned in the literature to the best of my knowledge.

Like the "go fish" construction (see Zwicky, 1969; Schopen, 1971) they are restricted to a single form of the verb do, the -ing form, as shown in (1), compared with (2) and (3).

(1) a. What are you doing reading my mail?
   b. What were you doing reading my mail?
   c. What have you been doing reading my mail?
   d. What would you have been doing reading my mail?

(2) a. *What do you do read my mail?
   b. *What did you do read my mail?
   c. *What have you done read my mail?
   d. *What would you have done read my mail?

(3) a. *What do you do reading my mail?
   b. *What did you do reading my mail?
   c. *What have you done reading my mail?
   d. *What would you have done reading my mail?

(Some of the starred strings may perhaps occur with quite unrelated senses, especially given certain intonation contours or pauses, but none seem to be related to (1).)

Furthermore, not only the do must have the -ing ending; the other verb must also have it, as shown by (4).

(4) a. *What are you doing read my mail?
   b. *What were you doing read my mail?
   c. *What have you been doing read my mail?
   d. *What would you have been doing read my mail?

Note next that the construction is restricted entirely to interrogatives:

(5) a. *He is doing reading my mail.
   b. *Be doing reading my mail!
   c. *Would that he were doing reading my mail.
   d. *I don't like what he's doing reading my mail.

although the interrogative may be embedded, as (6) shows.
(6) a. I asked him what he was doing reading my mail.
   b. He told me what he was doing reading my mail.

(The construction appears, in fact, to provide a test for distinguishing cases like (6b), which have at least a tenuous relation to interrogatives, from cases like (5d), which do not.)

However, the question (1a) appears to be virtually unrelated to a question like (7a) or (7b).

(7) a. What are you doing?
   b. What are you doing, reading my mail?

Sentence (1a) does not ask what (7a) asks, for it presupposes that the answer to that question is (8):

(8) I'm reading your mail.

Yet the reply (8) to the question (1a) would be a wisecrack; in fact the important thing to know about questions like (1a) is that the only appropriate answer to them is some kind of justification or excuse for one's behaviour. And the similarity between (7b) and (1a) also seems to be fortuitous; notice that (1a) has an evenly falling intonation contour while (7b) has a major intonation break (as shown by the comma) followed by a new breath-group with its own question intonation, and notice also that (7b) is a yes-no question whereas (1a) is not.

Looking through the paraphrase set of (1a) for clues as to its deep structure seems unlikely to yield any results. The only sentences that are even roughly synonymous with (1a) are a ragged class that includes the examples in (9):

(9) a. What do you mean by reading my mail?
   b. Why are you reading my mail?
   c. What justification do you have for reading my mail?
   d. What are you reading my mail for?

Attempts to motivate derivations of (1a) from these and other sources soon founder on a mass of ad hoc special rules or wildly complicated statements of exceptionality, as the reader can easily verify. Perhaps the most promising line is to view the phrase reading my mail as a kind of locative. Note that locatives occur freely after the interrogative clause what are you doing with something like the same kind of semantic effect as in (7):

(10)a. What are you doing out there?
   b. What are you doing at police headquarters?
   c. What were you doing in the girls' changing room during prayers?

In particular, compare the examples of (10) with those in (11):

(11)a. What are you doing standing about out there?
   b. What are you doing phoning from police headquarters?
   c. What were you doing loitering in the girls' changing room during prayers?

However, to make use of such facts in order to motivate a derivation in which a locative preposition is deleted before the second -ing word, such sentences as (12) will be important evidence, and therefore the rather poor acceptability of (13) will be a significant drawback.
(12) They were making love all of yesterday, and they're at it again today.

(13) ?How long have you been reading my mail, and what are you doing at it?

A worse problem will be that no explanation will have been provided for the nonexistence of all the other sentences that would be produced by a general incorporation of this type of analysis into the grammar. Why, for instance, do we not get (15), in view of the fact that (14) is fully grammatical?

(14) I thought about opening a can of tomatoes, but I couldn't see any point in it.

(15) *You know there's no point in opening a can of tomatoes, so what are you doing in it?

The least of the problems the analysis will run into is the technical one that the deletion of the locative preposition will apparently be nonrecoverable (and this in itself is by no means an insignificant matter; cf. in this connection Fiengo and Lasnik, 1972, an important study which one hopes will prove the basis for a work of major length).

One last problem should be mentioned: it appears that the Doubl-ing Constraint of Ross (1972) would be violated by any surface structure of the type (1a) unless some S node intervened between the S dominating doing and the S dominating reading in deep ("remote") structure. What could the content of this extra clause possibly be? Or if there isn't one, why is the Doubl-ing Constraint not violated by the sentences in (1)? Could sentences like (1a) provide evidence to support the claim of Milsark (1972) that the Doubl-ing Constraint is wrong?

REFERENCES


