The paper focuses on German, French, English and Russian root infinitives (RI), i.e. infinitives used in matrix contexts. In the existing literature these constructions are sometimes analyzed as containing covert syntactic elements (either features localized on the clausal head or covert lexical items) which are associated with various non-assertive forces and induce non-finiteness (Kayne 1992; Brandt et al. 1992; Platzack & Rosengren 1998; Grohmann 1999, 2000; Grohmann & Extepare 2000, 2002). An alternative view relies on the idea that all RIs allow an identical structural representation, and that the interpretation has to be inferred on pragmatic grounds (Rizzi 1993/1994; Haegeman 1995; Reis 1995; Lasser 1997; Han 2000). However, neither approach seems to be sufficient. The ‘reductionist’ analysis has to posit idiosyncratic syntactic elements, which will not exist in contexts other than those for which they are posited. The ‘identical representation’ analysis fails to address the question of why RIs exhibit different structural properties. In addition, both approaches encounter a number of empirical problems.

I show that in the relevant languages RIs fall into several semantico-pragmatic types: (i) Imperative (German, French, Russian): *Einsteigen!* (ii) Deliberative (German, French, English): *Comment dire non?* (iii) Exclamative (German, French, Russian, English): *What, me worry?!* (iv) Desiderative (German, French, Russian, English): *Einmal richtig ausschlafen!* (v) Descriptive: *Eine ganze Pizza so schnell (zu) verschlingen!* (vi) Hortative (German, Russian) *Den Pullover umdrehen* (vii) Modal (Russian): *Mne exat’ ‘I have to leave’, and (viii) Narrative (French, Russian): *Et Maigret de gronmeler.* Each type exhibits very different grammatical behaviours as far as subject licensing, topicalization, questioning and some other properties are concerned. This implies that RIs form a natural class only inasmuch as they represent independently used non-finite forms. Each type can be analyzed as a construction in its own right.

The paper suggests a Construction Grammar analysis of RIs. I maintain, following existing research, that illocutionary force is directly incorporated into the formal representation of a syntactic pattern. However, it is not determined by the syntactic presence of a clausetypeing element. Instead, it follows from the network of inheritance between constructions. Illocutionary forces are not semantic values but higher level constructions that are exclusively defined in pragmatic and semantic terms and lack any morphosyntactic content. However, they may motivate the morphosyntactic properties of their actual realizations. Abstract illocutionary ‘super-constructions’ are further associated with particular linguistic forms and such associations become lower-level constructions. In other words, each illocutionary construction licenses a family of sub-constructions which inherit its semantico-pragmatic properties but are subject to different formal constraints.

RIs, then, share their basic meanings with other syntactic patterns. For example, the abstract Directive Construction is taken to be the grammatical corollary of the directive speech act. It licenses the family of imperative constructions, i.e. syntactic configurations whose structure contributes the semantic content associated with the Directive Construction and is to some extent motivated by it. Both Imperative RIs and regular imperatives are actual instances of the abstract Directive Construction, and some of their basic grammatical and semantic properties follow from this categorization. Narrative RIs inherit certain properties of the Declarative Construction, and so on. On this analysis information provided by the verbal form and information provided by the construction are clearly separated. The illocutionary force is not projected from the specification of the main verb, but is a property incorporated into the description of the constructional pattern, whereas the verbal form (the infinitive) is basically deprived of any illocutionary meaning of its own. This allows the same infinitival form to be used in a variety of independent functions.