Systematic Silence on the Rise: Diachronic Developments in the Licensing of vP Ellipsis

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Aims of the presentation

The present investigation is an exercise in exploring the value of multiple linguistic evidence in the change of low-frequency phenomena and the underlying grammatical factors. We discuss verbal ellipsis, a low-frequency appearance in the diachronic data (cf. (1)), and its consequences for the developing auxiliary system of the language

The licensing issue

The theoretical and empirical coverage of the presentation consists in an account of vP ellipsis (vPE) and its licensing conditions through the history of English. Ellipsis is understood as omission of material at the level of phonological form but with a semantic and in suitably defined cases also a structural representation (Hankamer & Sag 1976, Hoji 2003, Winkler 2005). Licensing conditions, simplified, say an ellipsis site needs an appropriate local syntactic configuration, e.g. c-command by the holder of an "auxiliary" position (Bresnan 1971; Lobeck 1995; Johnson 2001); cf. (2).

1.1   A diachronic argument

We concentrate on the licensing of vPE from Middle English (ME) to early ModE, essentially at times when the grammar was changing some of its key syntactic features. One of the most conspicuous changes undergone by English from ME to ModE consists in the rise of a class of lexical elements, particularly the core modals and auxiliary *do*, which had shown verbal characteristics before the diachronic reanalysis but behaved increasingly auxiliary-like subsequent to it. While there are distributional facts in favor of some version of the reanalysis account syntactically developed in the wake of the Lightfoot (1979), some of its components have also come under critique. The presentation argues that (i) there is place for refinement in the

syntactic account; (ii) ellipsis is a numerically low-frequency, but nonetheless crucial factor in identifying the properties of the class over time given some methodological assumptions; (iii) quantitative results, comparative evidence, and ellipsis diagnostics can be combined towards an account of the issues.

1.2   Syntactic structure and auxiliaries in early English

A syntactic account based on V-to-T dependencies ("frozen in place" via grammaticalization; cf. Roberts 1993 for discussion) has to face some problems: First, often invoked typical verb-movement properties are obliterated in earlier English since all verbal elements could be displaced, e.g., in questions and under the scope of negation, regardless of whether they were potential auxiliaries or not. In this connection, a further diagnostic is required. Second, it has been suggested (Warner 1993) that there is a gradual development of the class towards increased auxiliary-like properties. Third, we can combine the latter suggestion with the insight from work in the grammar-competition framework (GCF; Kroch 1989, Pintzuk 1991 a.o.) and assume that both an option with *bona-fide* first-merged auxiliaries and one without were available to speakers of English at least since ME. We will expect them to become salient one to the detriment of the other over large segments of time and data. This is essentially what the quantitative part of the presentation argues. Notice that that does not mean there will be more *do*'s or modals per tokens. Rather an increasing portion of the modals and *do*'s that appear in the data come as auxiliaries rather than main verbs from their lexical entries as a reflex of the grammar change.

1.3   Ellipsis in Middle and early Modern English

The follow-up question is: How can one tell obscured instances - which could stand for two distinct categories - apart then? One way of detecting the trend is the following. Since it is well known that genuine auxiliaries are the winning grammatical option over time in English, and crucially ellipsis hinges on their structural position via licensing, we expect ellipsis to also numerically rise as predicted under the assumptions of GCF. • We investigate how this prediction is borne out in the germane data-bases (Kroch & Taylor 2000, Kroch et al. 2004). Further, building on results from ME – cf. e.g. (3) – we discuss how ellipsis develops (ME/eModE) and where issues arise – e.g., at the transitions of the main periods. Notice that we can exclude on empirical grounds an alternative theoretical scenario under which full verbs could have potentially licensed vPE after their displacement given that full verbs did not license vPE in ME or eModE. • Generally, we observe that despite low-frequencies the average ratios of verbal ellipses per tokens drastically rise, also when cross-comparing the findings from the data-bases of ME and eModE to one another. • In terms of ellipsis theory, we test on the basis of the same data-sources that help us establish the numerical overall rise of ellipsis also the theoretical diagnostics from research on omission mechanisms. Besides verifying vPE essentials such as occurrence under an

auxiliary position, non-necessity of flanking (cf. gapping), occurrence under embedding, the possibility of cross-utterance relationship to an antecedent, and the *Backwards Anaphora Constraint*, we show the possibility of extraction from within the ellipsis sites. While some cases of *wh*-extraction were already available in ME, the contexts from which they could take place widened over the corpus segments. Finally, we note that there is numerical corroboration in the broadening auxiliary system of English from a different domain. The relative frequency of the licensing modals also increases in an area involved besides ellipsis, e.g., in counterfactuals (cf., e.g., Gergel 2004, McFadden & Alexiadou 2005).

To summarize: the presentation is aimed to investigate quantitative, comparative and theoretical aspects of the diachrony of ellipsis and the auxiliary system. It argues both for a rise over time and a specialization of ellipsis in grammar as a surface anaphora in English. This colludes with the increasing trend of "auxiliarization".

(1)   overall frequency of verbal ellipsis/tokens (PPCME2): 0.0084
(2)   a.*woodnessse […] persevereth lenger than doth dronkenesse* (Chaucer, CT)
        stupidity perseveres longer than does drunkenness [vPE & subj-aux. inversion]

        b. *Licenser* [$_{vP}$ …]

(3)   ellipses/tokens btw. 1250-1500 per corpus segment: 0.45% > 0.65% > 0.93

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