

Comparative Conservatism, Syntactic 'Radicalism'? What's History Got to Do with it

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1 Background

On the basis of diachronic evidence we analyze comparative inversion, CI, (1). CI is standardly T-to-C (cf. Merchant 2003). Theory-internally appealing, this view is worth reconsidering. CI cannot be T-to-C once the database is historically enhanced. Two more scenarios for what could have given rise to CI are excluded. CI involves neither T-to-C nor a subject movement to Spec,TP. The proposal is sketched in (2).

2 Databases, types of evidence

The study is primarily based on the Penn-Helsinki Corpora of Historical English (PPCME2, PPCEME, YCOE). For counting, we restricted attention to clausal comparative structures, CCS (*Minimally contain finite verb and subject*). The guiding question was: How is CI realized and explained? Combining facts from the history of English, evidence from syntax-semantics, and numerical findings, the proposal is that CI is a showcase of syntactic archaism, but not due to C-grounded V2 effects. While phrase-structure and the displacement options which interact with CI change from OE to ModE (cf. Fisher et al. 2000; Kroch 2000), CI keeps its representation without true V2, given in (2), up to modern grammars.

3 Failure of verb movement as an explanation of CI

A viable historical test for distinguishing displacement to T vs. C is the distinction of two subject types (e.g. Kroch et al 2000). For simplicity, assume the subject linearly after T is in Spec,VP. Though CI is attested in OE and CCS often occur with pronouns – they never invert: . We capitalize on this strong diagnostic, follow up its development, and argue that movement to C was never involved in CI. More generally, verb movement fails to predict the developments of CI. For example, there is a dramatic fall in the rates of CI between the last period of ME and EModE. This

may seem up the alley of a scenario that links up to the loss of verb-movement. But crucially, many comparatives are attested with the copula. And since the copula has not stopped “moving” in the modern grammars (Emonds 1976), we cannot blame the quantitative steep post-M4 decline on loss of V-to-T, in particular given that the decline in the sub-study on the copula is no less remarkable. Second, serious timing issues obtain (in any major account of loss of V-to-T) if we relate CI to V movement.

4 Further corpus findings & diachronic diagnostics

We controlled for parameters that might have interfered. E.g. whether a different underlying representation of degree constructions caused a different surface output in CCS (cf., e.g., Beck et al. 2004). Both OE and ME CCS passed the relevant tests (as ModE). Harder-to-gather evidence such as the wide scope issue in comparatives (Heim 2006) could also be confirmed (cf. eg). With the basic syntax-semantics controlled for, we found additional evidence for the proposal. This included the interaction with pronouns that were not in the nominative, full DP subjects that are allowed to stay structurally low, existential constructions, a.o. To sketch one more pertinent development in slightly more detail: The rates of CI (prima facie surprisingly) increase between OE/M1 (=first ME period in PPCME2). However, this is not a post-OE “operatorization” reflex of CI (A well-known operator context in OE was eg the particle *þa* and operatorization of verb movement spreads in certain (non-comparative) contexts and dialects e.g. in ME). However, the CI increase cannot be ascribed to the (dialect-sensitive) increase in pronoun-inversion in ME for quantitative and qualitative reasons. We give a different solution. For the OE/M1 rise in particular, we capitalize on the observation that T-final structures were available in OE but not in ME. We observe that in a T-final structure, CI is generally obliterated. The strong numerical upshot of this is consistent with the currently suggested view but not with the standard one. Further, extrapolating Pintzuk’s (1991) findings for the relevant clause types, our figures for CI matched this combined prediction as well.

5 Extensions and summary

5.1 More vestiges

There certainly is a subject requirement in ModE run-of-the-mill clauses. But it appears in our case study less pervasive (diachronically - CCS show lack of subjects until later than standardly assumed- and partially even for (E)ModE). First, the frequency of CI is much lower in ModE than in ME. The question arises whether there are any instances of CI in (E)ModE in favor of archaic low subjects. Some of these effects are well known (e.g. auxiliary-clusters; Huddleston & Pullum 2002; Culicover p.c.); others, are less explored. Cases in point involve, for instance,

syntactic environments in which an overt subject is optional/dispreferred by some speakers, cf. (9). An additional point that we explore is the delimitation of CCS (cf., e.g., parallelism) in maintaining the archaic representation in a diachronic context.

5.2 Summary

The current work offers data and tests that diachronically endorse a theoretically non-standard but historically no-news syntax in so-called inversion in comparatives.

5.3 Examples

- (1) *Harvard undergrads, however, were unmoved. They generally give the impression of being far more supportive of their president than **is the faculty**.*
- (2) [CP Comp Op... [TP(Subj₁)/Ø T[=fin.verb/Aux/etc] .. [vP Subj₂ t_v ...]]
- (3) *?[THAN FINITE ELEMENT PRONOUN] (not-found configuration for OE)

Two types of scenarios that the paper gives arguments against:

- (4) CI should show a steady decline towards ModE due to receding verb-movement(s).
- (5) CI is a development “on the rise”, which requires an independent explanation.
- (6) *Næfre ic maran geseah eorla ofer eorþan ðonne **is eower sum*** (*Beo.*, III.247)
never I greater saw of-warriors on earth than is of-you one
- (7) *For trewer loue was neuer bytwene two men [**þen _ was bytwen þe kyng and Thomas**], whyll hit last.* (ME: PPCME2).
- (8) *Yet knew shee no more of this matter alas [**then knoeth Tom our clarke what the Priest saith at masse**].*(EModE: PPCEME);
- (9) *the complexity of thought may be less **than is assumed** by AI-workers* (BNC)

Selected References

- Fisher, O., A. van Kemenade, W. Koopman, and W. van der Wurff (2000). *The Syntax of Early English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
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- Kroch, A., A. Taylor, and D. Ringe (2000). The Middle English verb-second constraint: A case study in language contact and language change. In S. Herring et al., eds., *Textual Parameters in Old Language*. Benjamins, Amsterdam, pp. 353-91.