This paper discusses the emergence and diffusion of the for...to-infinitive complement construction: this construction consists of the sequence for+NP+to+inf and typically forms a single constituent, whereby for introduces the notional subject of the infinitive, as in the PDE example It is rare for two people to talk about murder on a personal level.

It is commonly assumed (cf. Jespersen 1909-42: 302-6; Harris & Campbell 1995: 62) that the for...to-infinitive construction originated in LME/EModE in constructions such as It is {ADJ/ADJ+N} for NP to INF, (a) which replaced constructions (in OE and ME) in which a benefactive dative co-occurred with a to-infinitive (cf. Fischer 1988: 72); (b) where for NP is an NP governed by the adjective (+ noun) and to INF functions as extraposed subject (as Men sayen hit hadde be muche better for me to have surcesed of my service (1428; HC); (c) where the for NP was subsequently pulled into the to-infinitive clause, functioning as the subject of the infinitive.

The purpose of this paper is twofold: on the basis of corpus data (HC, OED, PPCME2, PPCEME, CLMET), (a) to examine in detail this locus of reanalysis of the for...to-infinitive construction; (b) to detail the development of the for...to-infinitive, from its EmodE use as extraposed subject, which corpus data show to be highly frequent, to verb complement in LModE.

(a) It is shown that the reanalysis It is ADJ [for NP][to INF] → It is ADJ [for NP to INF]? in EModE typically occurs in contexts in which the for NP can be construed as highly agentive, and as such facilitates reinterpretation of the for NP as subject of the infinitive (Indeed, corpus data show that the sentences in which It is ADJ for+NP+to+inf appears contain guidelines about what is proper for people to do; in these contexts, the for-NP denotes the people to whom the guidelines are directed, but at the same time, they are also the people that are responsible for living by that rule). Structurally, this reanalysis (i) may have been aided by the fact that benefactive for-NPs followed by an extraposed to-infinitive are significantly more common with the relevant adjectives (+nouns) than for-NPs without an extraposed to-infinitive; (ii) seems to correlate with the collocational strength between for NP and to INF: even though the for-NP as well as the to-infinitive constituents could be subject to movement (e.g., it is conuenyente for a housbande to haue shepe of his owne could be paraphrased as for a housbande it is conuenyente to haue shepe of his owne, or even to haue shepe of his owne is conuenyente for a housbande), these alternative word orders are not found in the relevant corpora.

(b) It is examined how the for...to-infinitive construction, from its original, highly frequent/entrenched use in extraposed subject function (in EModE), has spread to other syntactic functions which, to various extents share its semantic and structural features (distributional regularity – cf. De Smet 2006, ‘benefactive’ semantics of the for-NP; single-unit interpretation, no semantic dependence on any matrix in the clause). In some functions (e.g., relative postmodifier), most of these features are kept; in others (subject and subject complement), fewer are retained. An interesting development of the for...to-infinitive is its use as verb complement: It is hypothesized that this type of for...to-infinitives was relatively late in developing because for...to-infinitives functioning as verb complement are semantically and structurally farthest removed from the for...to-infinitives in extraposed subject function.

The development presented in this paper is in line with the recent, usage-based approaches to language change in that (i) it starts from an entrenched usage in a specific context, and expands from there (cf. Croft & Cruse 2004) and (ii) recognizes the importance of frequency and collocational strength.