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Syntactic surprises in some English letters: the underlying progress of the language

1. Introduction

There are three themes interwoven in this paper:

- Change from below
- Recent change in English syntax
- A Corpus of Late Eighteenth-Century Prose

I will start by saying a little about each, then look from various angles at the question of what ‘change from below’ might mean. The contexts I will discuss are all recent changes in English syntax as played out in examples from my eighteenth-century corpus. Despite my title, not all of the facts are surprises, but even a non-surprise can be instructive.

2. Change from below

‘Change from below’ notoriously means one of two things: either a change initiated by those socially lower down the scale, or a change driven by systematic factors below the level of conscious awareness. Often, but not always, the two definitions go together. Keeping them apart has always been difficult in sociolinguistic investigation of historical periods. Indeed discussions of historical change sometimes do not – maybe cannot – distinguish change from below and change from above at all: we just observe that ‘the language’ changed in some respect between period A and period B.

For the social meaning of change from below, Labov (2001) observes that it is not the most peripheral (here the lowest) social classes who lead change. He also states principles which apply especially to modern urban societies, and to phonology. Women often lead change, and also adolescents. Labov’s principles may need modification for non-urban or premodern societies.

Phonological change may operate differently from change in domains like syntax where functional pressure and meaning have more sway. Therefore it is not straightforward to apply Labov's observations to my material, since (a) society was not as urbanised as now, (b) women are poorly represented and adolescents hardly at all, and (c) I shall be discussing syntax.

3. Recent change in English syntax

I move now to change in syntax. In my work over the last ten years, I have concentrated mostly on late Modern English and Present-day English (henceforth PDE). One of the problems we face in this area is how to identify change at all. We can do so, for example,

- by personal observation and serendipity, comparing different periods.
- by comparing different varieties (British and American English, for example), and assuming that at least one must have diverged from a common source.
- from the comments of contemporary observers.
- and, once a change is known about, by looking for instances either of the old or the new usage.

Identifying patterns of change must precede any statistical work. In my chapter in the *Cambridge History of the English Language* (Denison 1998), I had recourse to all of the above, and for data I used various sources, including comedies and especially informal letters, but typically of educated middle-class speakers. This was taking change from below to mean change below the level of conscious awareness.

4. A Corpus of Late Eighteenth-Century Prose

Now I turn to my third theme, a corpus recently compiled at Manchester (and available to any interested scholar). It consists of letters held in the John Rylands University Library in Manchester, transcribed by Linda van Bergen and Joana Soliva, about 300,000 words in all¹. The letters were all written to Richard Orford, a steward of Peter Legh the Younger at Lyme Hall in Cheshire. They span the period from 1761 to 1790. Their language varies from utterly standard to barely literate, but none of the letter-writers – apart possibly

¹ For a fuller description of the project see van Bergen & Denison ([in press](#)). The corpus marks deviant word division with an underscore, but deviant word joining has been suppressed in the examples given here. Where appropriate, italics mark the relevant word(s).

from lawyers – is writing with posterity or permanent record in mind, so the letters often come close to ordinary spoken language. Much of the content concerns collection of rents, sending of goods, coal-mining, farming, the sending of money (whether bills, cash or banknotes – the last-named often sent in two halves by separate posts). There is a fair amount of personal information interspersed. We hear of illness, of travellers taking the waters at Bath or sea-bathing at Liverpool for the supposed health benefits, of men who get drunk and fall in coal-pits, and of at least two unfortunate young men who hang themselves – on which no further information is given. But the personal information is scrappy and at times frustrating. Consider this potentially salacious opening:

- (1) Dear Sir. John Atherton is gone off with Geo. Cundliffs wife on friday Morning he has contracted a greate many debts in the Neighborhood, more then you can Imagin in short every_body has suffer'd that had any thing to do with him, as Abraham Naylor has been Bro^t: up in the Coal pits and won that may be trusted, I have put him into Johns place at presant. if you Approve of him he may stay in it, if not, hope you will apoint another. (Samuel Rigby, 12 Jan. 1784)

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The writer, however, is more concerned to report the loss of an employee and the extent of his debts than to gossip about marital relationships. Example (2) comes at the end of what is otherwise a purely business letter:

- (2) Truly Glad I am to hear M^{rs}, Orford has met with a Son Dick (Harry Richardson, 20 Jun. 1773)

This *envoi* is odd, even if *Dick* should be intended to refer to the letter's recipient, Richard Orford, because in that year, 1773, the Orfords had a daughter, Ellen (Morgan 2005); perhaps the correct year is 1778.

5. Data

5.1 Progressive passive

I turn now to a number of constructions whose history can be illuminated by the corpus and which may be of relevance to the theme of change from below, starting with the progressive passive, as in *The interview was being recorded*. This particular combination of auxiliaries arrives far later in English than any other pairing. It is first found in the 1770s, is uncommon till the 1790s and then only in diaries and personal letters, and once it appears in print it gets

fiercely attacked by commentators through most of the nineteenth century. Before it was accepted, one of the common expedients for expressing the same thing was the passival – a progressive which is active in form but ‘passive in meaning’, as in (3) – (12) below. So the period of the corpus is exactly when we might expect a new sighting of an early progressive passive.

There is not a single one, and not for lack of opportunity: the passival occurs at least 10 times:

- (3) in my accounts which *are* now *printing* (Josiah Birch, 5 Aug. 1778)
- (4) that y^e meanest & lowest arts *are practising* by y^e friends of y^e. present ministry (Thomas Davenport, 21 Feb. 1784)
- (5) When you came over the other day to view ^{the} Road now *making* in Taxal. (John Dickenson, 26 Jan. 1771)
- (6) in consequence of some new works *carrying* forward by M^r. Iacson for taking out the Water from the River Goit, (Thomas Nicholson, 4 Mar. 1785)
- (7) but I tould him there *was* no preperation *making* for Marling, (James Grimshaw, 30 Sep. 1782)
- (8) I am told sev^l. applications *are making* for the office (Michael Hall, 20 Dec. 1773)
- (9) but sometime afterwds. I found proceedings *were carrying* on (Walter Kerfoot, 13 Aug. 1776)
- (10) About 3 Weeks ago I had a puncheon of Rum from my Son at Jamaica quantity 100 Gallons, 65 Gallons of which *is* now *Casing* up (C. Ridley, ?1772)
- (11) I have been at LiverpoolLe but there is no ship Sailing out for Maryland, M^r. Drinkwater who gives his Compliments to you will let you know when any *is fitting* out (Harry Richardson, 3 Feb. 1771)
- (12) how in the name of Goodness is it possible that two such Coalworks as we have *carrying* on can be so wanting in our Inspection to want Brick at either work. (Harry Richardson, 27 Apr. 1771)

Furthermore, there is another example where the progressive passive appears to be being avoided², and we have passive only:

- (13) I went to M^r Whites & order'd the Tea, which woud have sent by last nights Coach, only M^r White had no Lead large enough to Contain the Quantity but *is sent* by the Coach this Even^g (W. Burchal, 18 Jul. 1771)

² However, *is sent* in (13) could also represent PDE *has been sent* rather than *is being sent*.

And finally, there is one instance of a double *-ing* construction which some scholars associate with the grammar of that stage of the language before the progressive passive was enabled (Denison 1993: 441 f., Warner 1995: 537 f., 544 f.), and which is last found regularly in Jane Austen:

- (14) the time of your Comeing to Derby being now Approaching (Richard Hole, 1 Oct. 1783)

So the grammars of the texts in the corpus do not appear to license the progressive passive, insofar as largely negative evidence can be trusted. Is this a surprise?

Actually, no, according to one sociolinguistic account of the origin of the progressive passive (Pratt & Denison 2000), which suggests that it was first found in an area very close to Bristol. The earliest examples currently known are from Malmesbury (23 miles from Bristol), then in a writer from Trowbridge (less than 20 miles away), and then the construction is taken up by a coterie of radicals living in the Clifton area of Bristol from c. 1793–5, sympathetic to the French Revolution and at one time planning to start a commune in America. The core membership was made up of Robert Southey, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth, Charles Lloyd, Charles Lamb, Amos and Joseph Cottle, and Robert Lovell. They were introduced by Southey's childhood friends the Fricker sisters, and indeed Lovell married Mary Fricker in 1794, Coleridge married her elder sister Sara in October 1795, and one month later Southey married a third sibling, Edith. Another early user of the construction was the Irish novelist, Maria Edgeworth, who lived in Clifton in 1792–3, and whose full sister Anna married Dr Thomas Beddoes of 3 Rodney Place, Clifton, who was close to the Coleridge-Southey circle. I suggested that two dense and multiplex social networks – the Coleridge-Southey circle in the 1790s, and Lamb and Coleridge plus Keats, Shelley, etc. in the 1810s – were responsible for the spread of the construction. The earlier network seems to have used the construction in part subversively, to cock a snook at the literary and political establishments.

As for change from below, here the concept is rather murky, both from the point of view of social positioning of the speakers involved and of their awareness of what they were doing. The very earliest known users of the progressive passive are James Harris, 1st Earl of Malmesbury, and his mother, Elizabeth – probably higher gentry. The Southey-Coleridge circle can be roughly labelled as middle class. I have some evidence, but not at all certain, that the construction might have become a *marker* for them, a usage deliberately adopted as a badge of membership of a social group (or of opposition to the establishment). The later opposition to the 'barbaric' innovation sometimes regarded it as an affectedly schoolteacherish usage. So

what seems to us now an entirely natural part of English grammar, usefully expressive and making the auxiliary set-up particularly symmetrical and systematic, may not have been a change from below.

Now the Orford letters of my corpus represent a completely different world from that of the Southey-Coleridge circle. These are busy, working people. If their politics show, they are loyal tenants of the landed gentry and colliery owners and work for elections on their lord's behalf. They live in Lancashire and north Cheshire. So it is convenient for my hypothesis about the progressive passive that it does not show up here at such an early date. However, the hypothesis is very vulnerable to the discovery of new data from the 'wrong' time or place, and I would love to have access to many collections of private writing from different parts of the country between, say, 1760 and 1820. The general point I draw from this is that we cannot always talk about *the* history of English: the English language at any one epoch is a patchwork of different geographical and social dialects and different registers of use, and sometimes change is surprisingly local. Perhaps always, at first.

5.2 Perfect *have*

I turn now to another change in the auxiliary system. The infinitive of the perfect auxiliary *have* is often associated with non-occurrence or unreality, as in these invented PDE examples:

- (15) Be careful with that: you might *have* hurt someone.
- (16) They couldn't *have* managed it if they'd tried.

In earlier English it was common to insert an infinitival *have* – superfluous by PDE standards – to signal this meaning:

- (17) I forgot when you was at Haydock to *have* had some discourse about it (Shaw Allanson, 10 Nov. 1788)
- (18) was Oblig'd to Discount a bill of 54.3 [...] I did not Intend to *have* done it but the Weather has been so exceeding bad of late hurts our Trade — (W. Burchal, 16 Jan. 1772)

This *have* is generally unstressed and often reduced in speech to 've or *a*. The latter is common in the corpus both in 'superfluous' and standard positions:

- (19) I should *a* Come over to norbury this week but you comeing may answer the same purpose (Shaw Allanson, 14 Jan. 1784)

- (20) I Should *a* Com my_Self.but Have been Ill for Som time (William Bass, 16 Mar. 1772)
- (21) his money Shall be redy against The 25th of March; it wod *a* Shuted me better to *a* paid it in July or Auget; (John Buller, 21 Jan. 1774)
- (22) If I had nown Hee Could A sould It I Could like to A Boug^l: It (John Mercer, 2 Aug. 1790)
- (23) We sh^d. *a* Set the pit upon hard to_day & get up the Eye CoaL tomorrow had the Weather been good. (Harry Richardson, 1 Sep. 1767)
- (24) he sh^d, *a* been at Warrington yesterday at which time I c^d. *a* seen James Leigh but as he went to Manchester last night i'ts out of my Power to see him today (Harry Richardson, 16 Apr. 1772)
- (25) had it been in any other Quarter all the whole Fabric must *a* come down. – The damage done is but little. & of a fire c^d, never *a* been better in any part. of the House: (Harry Richardson, 6 Feb. 1773)
- (26) I sent for Ri. Melling to *a* come with the underlooker last monday Morning to *a* consulted him in regard to powder ^{^Sinking^} &c, he was taken bad just when mounting and promis'd he w^d. be with us as soon as possable he c^d, stir out. (Harry Richardson, 20 Jan. 1774)

Sometimes *have/'a* is lost entirely.

- (27) when I put the Letter into the poste did not know of sending so soon for the Colt or woud ø post_pond it (William Buller, 11 Oct. 1789)
- (28) he hath livd with M^r. Whitle at Hollingworth 13 or 14 years, and mostly taken care of the Cattle and might I beleive ø been there yet, had he not left to follow the Cotton Business (Abel Hyde, 22 Dec. 1778)

These could be simple mistakes, but the numerous parallels in Visser (1963–73: 2038 ff.) suggest that it is the genuine end-point of phonetic reduction.

What happens when *have* is reduced, but less so, so that the /v/ is retained? Then we get the notorious confusion between unstressed *have* and unstressed *of*, sometimes leading to the spelling <of> where standard English would demand <have>. Until recently, *OED* was claiming that the usage was jocular, citing examples from 1837 and 1844:

- (29) Soposing seven hundred and sixty [servants] to *of* advertised and the same number not to *of* advertised. (1837 W. Tayler, *Diary* 10 May in J. Burnett *Useful Toil* (1974) II. 181 [*OED*])
- (30) I never would *of* married in the world, ef I couldn't *of* got jist exactly suited. (1844 *Southern Lit. Messenger* 10 486/2 [*OED*])

I found an earlier one in a letter of the poet John Keats from 1819 (Denison 1998: 142):

- (31) Had I known of your illness I should not *of* written in such fiery phrase in my first Letter. (1819 Keats, *Letters* 149 p. 380 (5 Sep.))

The March 2004 draft revision of *OED* has one from an 1814 poem:

- (32) I never could *of* thought that force Could turn affection in its course. (1814 J. H. Reynolds, *Safie* 57 [*OED*])

Interestingly, the *Dictionary of National Biography* says of the author of (32):

In October 1816 Reynolds met Keats at Leigh Hunt's house in the Vale of Health in Hampstead. The two young men had much in common: born within a year of each other, they were from similar backgrounds and shared a fervent, idealistic commitment to poetry.

Is this a coincidence? I doubt it. Linguistic usage spreads among people in contact. The use of *of* for *have* has been available, if non-standard, for a long time. In any event, we can now demonstrate that it had been available for some time before Reynolds and Keats were born. The corpus allows us to push the date back another 40 years, as there are two clear instances in the eighteenth-century corpus. Example (33) certainly and (34) probably are by female correspondents:

- (33) the servant to the old Lady I sho~ld not *of* thought of after what had past, but I wonder at no_thing, wood will soon be a married woman, all_tho two cheshire men was named to me and when I say~d I Knew it to be fals I was not at all beleived however I shall tell you more when I see you all_tho I was won of those that did not beleive nor cold beleive what the old Lady say~d (Ann Legh, 27 Apr. 1773)
- (34) I should be very happy to *of* seen m^{rs}. Orford at Leek (D Langham, 18 Sep. ?1774)

This is where written evidence is immensely frustrating. If the spelling <of> represents unstressed [əv], then we have a purely graphic phenomenon, though one presumably correlated with a certain lack of education. It doesn't represent indubitable proof that the writers were not identifying this form with the perfect auxiliary *have*, though it is suggestive. Literary writers since the mid-nineteenth century have used that spelling as 'eye dialect'— visual evidence of usually comical illiteracy, but probably representing exactly the same pronunciation that they themselves would have used in conversation.

However, we know from the present day that many speakers genuinely identify the word with *of* and not with *have* and – crucially – are happy to give it a stressed pronunciation as [əv]. When that happens, we know for sure that we have a significant reorganisation of the auxiliary system. I would argue that the word has become an invariant, enclitic particle – not a verb at all – with a grammatical meaning to do with non-fulfilment or unreality. Corroboration for this includes frontings like

- (35) What *would've* you done? (1989–95 corpus, cited by Boyland (1998: 3))
- (36) a sentiment he *would have* probably denied (1961 Brown corpus G65 (1880))
- (37) 'I *should've never* went on a stupid blind date. They never work out.' (1992 Armistead Maupin, *Maybe the Moon* xv.225)

for which I only know of recent evidence, and the construction

- (38) Little Dombey was my friend at old Blimber's, and would have been now, if *he'd have lived*. (1848 Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son* xxxii.445.12)

which dates back to maybe the fifteenth century, though perhaps only the nineteenth in the form given above.

The spelling *of* within the verbal group is certainly a change from below in the 'unconscious' sense, and probably also to some extent in the 'underclass' sense.

5.3 Preposition stranding

Preposition stranding seems to occur in the corpus with almost 100% regularity. Here are three examples from among many:

- (39) but she is proper care taken *of* (Edward Ackers, 21 Mar. 1788)
- (40) and her_self and two Daughter are the lives she fixis *on*, (Thomas ?Manck or Bancks, 2 Aug. 1779)
- (41) The person whom I paid it *to* has been at a deal of trouble to find out the person whom it is drawn *upon* but without any success. (William Birchall, 15 Oct. 1790)

Notice that there is little alternative to preposition stranding in the passive of (39), though the word order is highly idiosyncratic, while in both the non-standard (40) and the rather formally couched (41) the potential alternative of 'pied piping' (*on whom she fixes, to whom I paid it*) is not selected. There are

hardly any occurrences at all of pied piping in the corpus. Here is one, though odd:

- (42) however I can let him see what I have done with the money I have already received, and *from who*, the remainder is due; (Henry Porter, 17 Nov. 1777)

I defer discussion of preposition stranding until another particle usage has been considered.

5.4 Phrasal verbs

Phrasal verbs in PDE have a very interesting phonological constraint, namely that the verb is nearly always monosyllabic or an initial-stressed disyllable. Consider these sets of PDE phrasal verbs from a similar semantic domain, some of them semi-productive:

- (43) get [somebody] down
 (44) cheese/piss/put/turn [somebody] off
 (45) freak/gross/put [somebody] out, etc.

It is presumably the phonological constraint which prohibits

- (46) *annóy [somebody] off, *irritate [somebody] out

Now this constraint did not operate – at least to the same extent – in the *Paston Letters* of the fifteenth century (Denison 1981: 148), nor does it appear to have had much effect in the eighteenth-century corpus, where we find:

- (47) adjourn out, declare off, inquire out [somebody], repair [something] up, return [somebody] back

Particle usage in English is notoriously problematic for formal models of syntax, but I believe that these two phenomena involving prepositional and adverbial particles are also a little problematic for the concept of sociolinguistically driven change. Both patterns, preposition stranding and the phrasal verb, are routinely (and correctly) regarded as characteristic of informal usage. It does not follow, however, that their growth is simply a matter of change from below. Consider each in turn. Although preposition stranding is certainly the informal variant compared to pied piping, it is also historically the *older* variant, which is inconvenient for a simplistic model in which change from below replaces an older usage with a newer one. As for the

phrasal verb, it is in widespread use in the corpus and apparently *less* constrained than it is in PDE. This paper does not attempt a serious study of frequencies, but even if it could be demonstrated that the long-term history of the Modern English period shows a continual rise in frequency of tokens and possibly types of phrasal verb, what (47) implies is that in at least one respect – its rhythmic shape – the pattern has recently become more tightly focused in the last two centuries. Change, then, is not merely a matter of numbers.

5.5 Pronouns

My last contexts concern pronoun usage, beginning with the complementation of double object verbs – those which take both an indirect (iO) and a direct object (dO). In Old English we find both orders, iO–dO and dO–iO (Koopman 1990). In standard PDE, [nonprepositional] indirect object precedes direct object:

- (48) Sue sent *her boyfriend* the information.
 (49) Sue sent *him* it.

In some dialects, especially if both iO and dO are pronominal, we find dO–iO:

- (50) Sue sent *it* *him*.

In the late eighteenth-century corpus, there are 10 instances of dO–iO, such as:

- (51) Shaw wished I wo'd write to you to know if you had given *it* *him*. (James Grimshaw, 8 Mar. 1788)

There is only one instance of the standard PDE order with pronouns, iO–dO. In context, however, this fact is not surprising. First, the order dO–iO is still normal in the Lancashire-Cheshire area today, and in standard nineteenth-century English it was far more widespread generally than it is now (Denison 1998: 239). In order to make sense of the 10:1 ratio noted above, it would be necessary to compare that result with similar corpora from other areas, in order to distinguish general chronological change from dialectal peculiarity. I have no information on the social distribution of the two word orders, but it seems safe to assert that any change in usage has been a change from below at least in the 'unconscious' sense.

The second pronoun usage I wish to discuss is case choice in coordinated noun phrases. In coordinated subjects it is well known that objective case is

readily used in colloquial speech where strict propriety might have expected a subjective form. The corpus furnishes a number of examples:

- (52) when *either him or me* will attend you at Groppenhall (Francis Ashley, 20 Nov. 1783)
- (53) Sur li hope you will Concider That *me* and my famely has been on It for this Hundred Yeare and upwards (Arthur Barton, 2 Sep. 1773)
- (54) for less Money, than both *me*, and my Servant, at Bid him (James Brown, 13 Jul. 1772)
- (55) My Wife & *me* are both between 28 & 29 Years of Age. (William Dumbell jr., 21 Jan. 1771)
- (56) that *nethar them nor himselef*, is wiling J shoud leve the hous (Richard Edensor, 21 Jun. 1767)
- (57) & either *him* or his Son, whoud bring it to Lyme (John Egerton, 23 May 1773)

There is an interesting ‘mixed’ example in:

- (58) as *him and I* Agreed (Joseph Drabble, 21 May 1771)

Here we have objective case in *him* but preservation of subjective case in *and I*. This form above all often appears when traditional grammar would demand an objective case:

- (59) If agreeable to you I sho^d. be very glad that a whole day might be dedicated at Hancocks of Disley for you *and I* and the Tenant and my mason and a mason or Carpenter of yours to settle this Business amicably in the Lump (B. Bower, 24 Jun. 1788)
- (60) which Butcher Ellam will not give up the key neither – to m^f. Grimshaw *nor I* – but has a_bused me and Call^d. me wors then a Chimney Sweep (James Bayley, 23 Jul. 1777)
- (61) J shall submit it to yourself, is it not a pity that the misunderstanding betwixt M^f. Jacson & *J* shoud not have a period put to it? (John Dickenson, 12 Sep. 1783)

Defaulting to objective case in coordination, as in (52)–(57), is clearly a change from below in the ‘unconscious’ sense. Conversely, the extension of subjective case in coordination, as in (59)–(61), especially in the sequence *NP and I*, looks like hypercorrection and so has elements of change from above. The social distribution of both types is complex.

6. Conclusion

My aim in this paper is modest. All I hope to have demonstrated is that, valuable and often neglected though it is as a factor in linguistic history, *change from below* has two potentially distinct interpretations, and furthermore, each of those interpretations can conceal quite complex paths of change.

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