The Rise of Raising in Early Modern English

Modern English distinguishes between two structures, raising and control, that are surface-identical yet, nonetheless, differ structurally in crucial ways. These two structures are exemplified in (1):

(1)   a. $David_i$ wants [PRO_i to like syntax].   [Control]
           b. $David_i$ seems [t_i to like syntax].   [Raising]

In (1a), *want* is a control predicate, which means that the DP *David* does not raise from within the infinitival clause; instead there is a PRO subject. In contrast, *seem* is a raising verb that requires *David* to raise to the specifier of the highest TP. The difference between the two structures is that raising verbs, unlike control verbs, do not assign a theta-role to their external argument. Raising and control represent two subclasses of verbs that select non-finite complements in Modern English. The question is what makes a predicate either raise or control? Many attempts have been made to capture the semantic distinction between the two predicate classes (e.g. Stiebels, 2007). However, there are several confounds, including that some predicates in Modern English vacillate between raising and control complements. Furthermore, the conditions that license either raising or control may vary cross-linguistically and some languages do not even encode the distinction (Polinsky, 2013). Therefore, the question is what conditions license the emergence of such a distinction between raising and control predicates in the first place?

      The dramatic change in the history of English complementation has been extensively studied (De Smet, 2013; Los, 2005; Rohdenburg, 2006). However, prior accounts have mostly left out the raising-control distinction. The only existing prior diachronic study is Higgins's (1990) investigation of the development of *promise* and *happen* which led him to conclude that raising verbs emerged from control verbs. Hitherto, however, it has been unclear what triggered the conditions for this change. In this paper, we analyze the distribution of high-frequency raising and control verbs using the Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Early Modern English (Kroch, Santorini & Delfs, 2016). This period is of particular interest for this distinction since at the time non-finite complements were well established in the grammar and it seems like there were more subtle argument structure distinctions emerging with inevitable variation (e.g. Fanego, 2004).

      Our pilot study focuses on the ten most frequent verbs in Early Modern English which (in present-day English) take raising and control complements respectively. The complement-taking predicate was coded by hand based on PPCEME data. Figure 1 (overleaf) shows that there is a massive rise in frequency of to-infinitive complements overall during this period, but that this rise is driven by a very small number of verbs – particularly *seem* and *appear* – which are prototypical raising verbs. This indicates that raising as a structure emerges around or before 1500 and spreads dramatically during the Early Modern period on a lexically specific basis. In our paper we will also investigate the diagnostic structural properties of control and raising verbs (e.g. expletive subjects) and test models of lexically-specific syntactic change based on the Tolerance Principle (Yang, 2016; Irani, 2019).

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Figure 1: the 10 most frequent raising and control verbs in PPCEME by period