

Infinitive marking with *for*: a diachronic account

In standard English, infinitival *for* can only appear when it is immediately followed by an overt subject, and sentences like (1) are ruled out:

- (1) John went to the store *for* to buy bread.

Whether this is because the null subject is an anaphoric pronoun, a null-case PRO, or a movement trace, it is generally assumed that *for* is a **complementizer** with features that bar it from appearing before null subjects. To explain the fact that (1) is grammatical in some dialects of English, both Koster and May (1982) and Henry (1995) maintain the basic assumption that *for* is a complementizer, but posit that it has special features (optional government or lowering) that distinguish it from standard English *for*. Through a detailed study of the development of *for to* infinitives in the history of English, I show that this basic assumption is not necessary. Infinitival *for* occupies different functional projections not only across periods but also across regions within the same period, suggesting that present-day dialects can accommodate sentences like (1) by allowing an additional position for *for* rather than by assigning special features and operations to the complementizer itself.

Although the use of *for* in Middle English infinitives has been chronicled before (Garrett 2004, Mustanoja 1960, Quirk and Svartvik 1970, van Gelderen 1998, Warner 1982, among others), previous studies have been restricted to one or two texts per period. The standard account is that *for* was originally used to mark purpose infinitives, then became “weakened into a mere sign of the infinitive, equal to *to*” (Mustanoja 1960), then declined in frequency in late Middle English before it came to be used as a subject licenser. The present study, based on the Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Middle English (Kroch and Taylor 1999) and the Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Early Modern English (Kroch, Santorini and Delfs 2004), confirms this story (see Figure 1) but also reveals a striking dialect distinction that is already present when the *for to* construction first shows up in early Middle English. Specifically, *for* in this period is used almost exclusively to mark purpose in the East Midlands, but has a more general distribution and a higher frequency in western texts (see Table 1). Furthermore, this basic distinction correlates with the location of *for* in the clause. In the west, *for* and *to* are obligatorily adjacent, while in the east, *for* and *to* can be separated by an adverb or preposed object (e.g., *Forr sillferr thar to reccnenn*; see Table 2). This pattern is consistent with the idea that *for* is a preposition of purpose in the east, while in the west either *for* heads a projection lower down in the clause or *for to* has been interpreted as an allomorph of *to*.

An additional important fact is that the use of *for* to license subjects did not develop until the 16th century. Sentences like (2) where the subject **precedes** *for* were grammatical throughout Middle English:

- (2) For it es a velany, a man *for* to be curiously arrayede upon his heuede with perre and precyous stanes, and all his body be nakide and bare, as it ware a beggere. (*Richard Rolle's Epistles*, ?1348, West Midlands)

Factors contributing to the development of the present-day system from the system represented in (2) include: (a) loss of case morphology, allowing oblique arguments of matrix verbs to be reanalyzed as infinitival subjects (Visser 1963-1973); (b) introduction of ECM and raising constructions (Kroch and Pak 2004); (c) reanalysis of benefactive preposition *for* as infinitival *for* in sentences like *It is good for John to exercise* (Fischer et al. 2000); and (d) loss of object preposing, which removes possible evidence for having *for* lower down in the clause and allows it to be reanalyzed as a complementizer. Importantly, none of these factors rule out the use of *for* as a purpose marker (as in (1)) or as a preposition associated with a matrix predicate (*I long for to go*), or of *for to* as an allomorph of *to*. Rather, the fact that these applications show up in different combinations in present-day dialects of English is unsurprising. In other words, speakers may associate a given piece of phonological material with more than one functional position, suggesting that (a) as in Carroll 1983, grammars that allow (1) can be analyzed without positing special features and operations in Comp, and (b) the presence of *for* in sentences like (1) does not in itself constitute evidence for a CP projection (as assumed by e.g. Landau 2003).

Figure 1. The decline of purpose *for to* infinitives as a fraction of all purpose infinitives

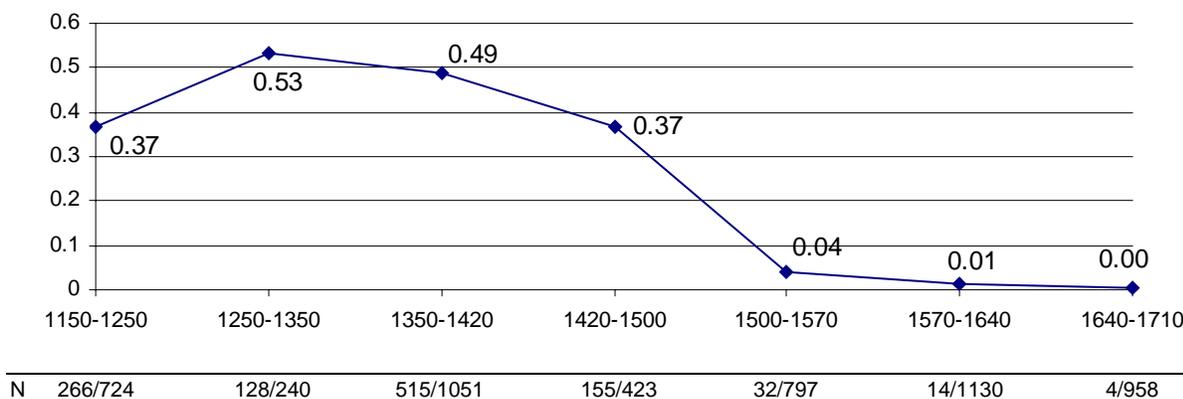


Table 1. Purpose infinitives with *for* in early Middle English (1150-1250)

Region	Total <i>to</i> infinitives	<i>For to</i> infinitives		Purpose <i>for to</i> infinitives	
	N	n	%	n	%
East	1335	140	10.5	130	92.9
West	1007	244	24.2	154	63.1

Table 2. Object preposing in early Middle English (1150-1250)

Region	<i>for</i> > OBJ > <i>to</i>	OBJ > <i>for</i> > <i>to</i>	OBJ > <i>to</i> (no <i>for</i>)	Total <i>to</i> infinitives with objects
East	48	1	147	778
West	2	16	48	469

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