On the gradual evolution of do-support in English
Aaron Ecay
Univ. of Pennsylvania
ecay@sas.upenn.edu

Ellegård (1953) presents evidence that the auxiliary verb do of Modern English arose through semantic bleaching. However, there is little syntactic evidence bearing on the mechanics of the bleaching – only the start and end stages have been observed. This talk will present evidence that the bleaching of do did not proceed in a single step. There was an intermediate stage at which do was merged in a low functional head, namely v, the projection that hosts the external argument of the verb. At this stage, do retained some of its semantic features.

This result has two consequences. First of all, it describes a relationship between Modern Standard English do-support and the use of do as an auxiliary in affirmative declaratives found in nonstandard varieties of English, Dutch, and German (as described in Tieken-Boon van Ostade et al. 1998), as well as during the emergence of do-support. Secondly, it raises a question about the atomicity of linguistic changes. From an ex post facto standpoint, it is easy to conceptualize major changes, such as the rise of do-support, as monolithic and inexorable. Several facts combine to make such a conceptualization suspect. Results like that presented in this talk and that of Han & Kroch (2000) showcase internal divisions of syntactic changes, and the results of Benincà & Poletto (2004) demonstrate that the endpoints of change are subject to variation. Given these data, richer possibilities for linguistic variation (and the transmission from speaker to speaker thereof) must be entertained than those derived from treating syntactic changes such as do-support as the resetting of a single macro-parameter.

There are three novel sources of evidence that support the claim of an intermediate stage in the evolution of do-support. The first is the existence of sentences such as those in examples (1) and (2) below. These sentences have the T position filled by a modal or have, and unambiguously non-causative do appears between T and the verb. This clearly demonstrates that the base position of do in these sentences is lower than that of modals or have.

Further support for this hypothesis is provided by the right-hand graph below. There, populations of sentences with an auxiliary verb (modal or do), an overt subject, and an adverb that occurs between the subject and the verb are represented. The two possible positions for the adverb are represented in (3) below. The graph shows the proportion of sentences in each category that have the adverb in position Adv\textsubscript{2}. The modals exhibit virtually no variation in this measure in the time period shown, and indeed throughout the time period from late Middle English to (at least) the early twentieth century. This constancy of behavior is explained by the fact that modals are consistently merged in T during the entire time period in question. As is evident, however, between 1525 and 1550 do behaves differently than the modals. The fact that do surfaces to the right of an adverb more often than modals supports the hypothesis that do merged lower.

A final argument that supports the present hypothesis comes from examining the effect of the presence of an agentive subject on the use of do in affirmative declaratives. This can be seen in the left-hand graph below. Three classes of verbs are shown there. The first are transitives (with an overt object). The second are typical unaccusatives, and the third are the intransitives not included in the unaccusative class (labeled as “unergatives”). The transitives and the unergatives have virtually identical rates of do-support, whereas the unaccusatives exhibit a much lower rate. Given that transitives and unergatives share the presence of a base-generated subject in Spec(vP) and agentivity features on the head of that projection, these data support identifying that projection as the one headed by do in affirmative declaratives.

\footnote{Concretely, the authors present data from an Italian dialect which exhibits do-support of the Modern Standard English type, but appearing in questions only.}

\footnote{Data from earlier time periods is not reported, as sentences with both an appropriately-positioned adverb and auxiliary do are too scarce to constitute a meaningful sample.}
Affirmative declaratives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Proportion do-support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1450</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1550</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1650</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Auxiliary positioning wrt. adverb

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Proportion Aux &gt; Adv</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1550</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1600</td>
<td>0.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1650</td>
<td>0.90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

(1) He hes done petuously devour
   the noble Chaucer of makaris flour
   (Wm. Dunbar “Lament for the Makars” c. 1505)³

(2) consequently it wyll do make goode drynke
   (A. Boorde Introduction of Knowledge a. 1542)

(3) Subj Adv₁ Aux Adv₂ V

---

References


Ellegård, A. The auxiliary do: the establishment and regulation of its use in English. Almqvist & Wiksell, Stockholm (1953).


³I am grateful to D. Ringe for bringing this example to my attention.