

On the gradual evolution of *do*-support in English

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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.¹ 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.

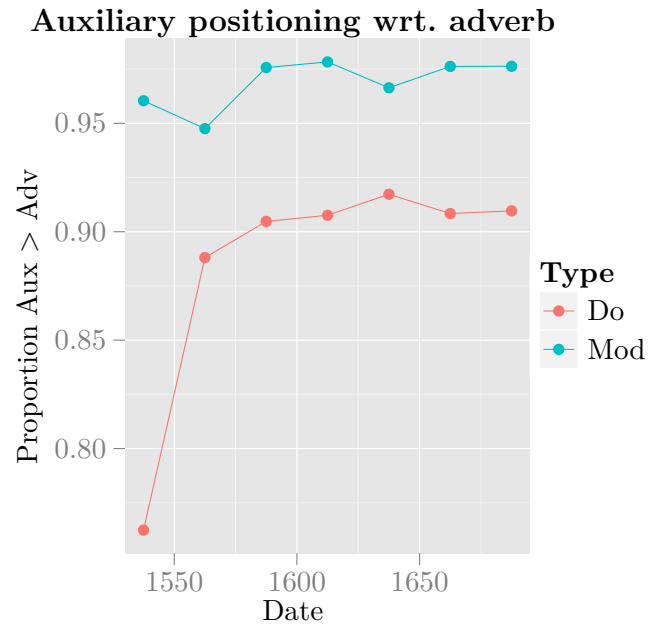
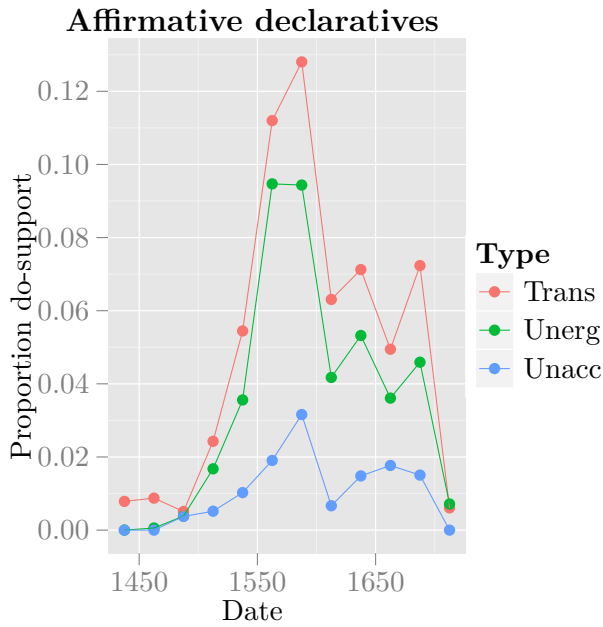
There are three novel sources of evidence that support the claim of an intermediate stage in the evolution of *do*-support. The first is the existence of sentences such as those in examples (1) and (2) below. These sentences have the T position filled by a modal or *have*, and unambiguously non-causative *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 Adv₂. 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.² 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(*v*P) and agentivity features on the head of that projection, these data support identifying that projection as the one headed by *do* in affirmative declaratives.

¹Concretely, the authors present data from an Italian dialect which exhibits *do*-support of the Modern Standard English type, but appearing in questions only.

²Data 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.



- (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

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