

Adverb Placement in the History of English Modals

Eric Haeberli and Tabea Ihsane, University of Geneva

In Present-Day English (PDE) clauses containing a finite auxiliary, adverbs can occur after the auxiliary or before it, as shown in (1).

- (1) a. He will probably read it.
b. He probably will read it.

Although the post-auxiliary placement of the adverb in (1a) is clearly the unmarked option, the alternative order is regularly attested in corpora as well (e.g. Granath 2002, Jacobson 1975, Waters 2013). In this paper, we will examine the historical development of this word order option since the Old English period, focusing in particular on modals. The distribution of adverbs with respect to modals is of interest for two main reasons. First, it can shed new light on what has been argued to be a categorial change affecting modals in the Early Modern English period (cf. Lightfoot 1979 and much subsequent work). And secondly, given that, as we will show, the marked PDE word order has been a clear minority option throughout the history of English, this area of the syntax of English allows us to explore the question of how and why such a low-frequency phenomenon can be maintained diachronically. In this paper, we will analyze the placement of adverbs with respect to modals in the currently available parsed historical corpora, thereby obtaining a much more detailed picture of this empirical domain than in earlier work on this topic by Jacobson (1981), which was based on a very limited amount of sources.

Since Lightfoot's (1979) seminal work, the historical development of the English modals has attracted a lot of interest in the literature. With respect to the theoretical analysis of this development, two main positions can be distinguished. According to one view (e.g. Lightfoot 1979, 2006), modals are regular verbs in Old and Middle English and they then change word category from V to I(nflection) in the 16th century due to radical restructuring following certain other changes in the Middle English period. According to Warner's (1993) view, however, a subordinate 'auxiliary' word class within the category of verbs exists in Old English already and further developments then lead to the gradual emergence of a basic-level category for auxiliaries in the 16th century.

Variation in adverb placement as shown in (1) provides a hitherto unexplored empirical basis to evaluate these hypotheses. Within the first scenario described above, we might expect both modals and main verbs to have more or less identical distribution with respect to adverbs, and we would expect frequency developments of 'Adv - modal' (S-Adv-M-V) orders in Old and Middle English to match those for 'Adv - main verb' (S-Adv-V) orders. Differences should then start emerging only after the categorial reanalysis, i.e. in the 16th century. This is in contrast to the second scenario, in terms of which different distributional behaviours of modals and main verbs could potentially occur in Old and Middle English and be related to the assumption that modals and main verbs are already categorially distinct in some way.

In the first part of this paper, we will evaluate these hypotheses by comparing adverb placement with main verbs (cf. Haeberli and Ihsane 2013) to adverb placement with modals in early English. We will show that pre-auxiliary placement of adverbs is substantially less frequent than pre-verbal placement. Measured against the total number of clauses containing adverbs, the frequencies of pre-auxiliary and pre-verbal placement are two to five times lower in the former context in different subperiods of Middle English. Furthermore, when the S-Adv-V order increases rapidly at the end of the 15th century, the S-Adv-M-V order does not. These contrasts suggest that there is already a syntactic distinction between modals and main verbs in early English to which head-movement is sensitive. To evaluate this conclusion, we will examine alternative interpretations of our data that could be in line with Lightfoot's

account. In particular, we will examine whether the frequency differences in adverb placement between modals and main verbs could be related to non-syntactic factors or whether a redating of the categorial reanalysis of modals could be conceivable to account for the different trajectories of the two contexts at the end of the 15th century.

In the second part of this paper, we will consider the development of S-Adv-M-V order from Middle to Late Modern English. We will show that S-Adv-M-V is a very low frequency phenomenon throughout the history of English. In the 14 periods into which we have divided our data from 1250 to 1910, the frequency of S-Adv-M-V order among all clauses containing a modal and an adverb (i.e. including the orders S-M-Adv-V and S-M-V-Adv) is, with the exception of one period, always below 5%, and in six periods even below 2%. These frequencies increase somewhat if we assume that the variable context should be restricted to the domain to the left of the main verb (S-Adv-M-V vs. S-M-Adv-V; cf. Waters 2013), but they still remain below 5% in eight periods and below 10% in the remaining periods. These are frequencies that, in a regular S-shaped curve, have been considered as falling within the completed phase of a change (Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg 2003:55). The question that these data raise then is how an option like S-Adv-M-V can remain viable for such a long time despite its very low frequency of occurrence.

Several possible answers to this question will be examined. One possibility would be that S-Adv-M-V has become functionally distinct over time from S-M-Adv-V, and that the two are therefore not in direct competition. However, there is no clear evidence that this is the case. For example, it has been suggested that, at least in British English, S-Adv-M-V only occurs when the auxiliary is stressed. But this hypothesis has been shown to be untenable (Waters 2013:180), and our data confirm this conclusion. An alternative that we will explore is that S-Adv-M is maintained because in some contexts there is no true optionality in adverb placement, either because the position of the adverb affects the interpretation (contexts with contracted negation, e.g. *I really can't do this – I can't really do this*) or because the other option is ungrammatical (ellipsis, e.g. *Yes, I probably will* vs. **Yes, I will probably*). We will show that, although plausible, this hypothesis also has some shortcomings. Finally, a third option that we will pursue is to relate the maintenance of S-Adv-M-V order to prosodic factors. As we will show, Adv-M-V order is strikingly frequent when no overt subject is present as for example in conjoined clauses or in clauses with a subject trace. In these contexts, the frequency of Adv-M-V order as compared to M-Adv-V order is regularly above 25% throughout the history of English, with occasional peaks going above 50%. In a way that is reminiscent of what has been proposed for Scandinavian Stylistic Fronting, a subject gap may therefore provide a prosodically favourable context for Adv-M-V order, and this option can then be argued to be extended to clauses containing subjects, albeit at a low rate.

References

- Granath, S. 2002. The Position of the Adverb Certainly Will Make a Difference. *English Today* 18: 25-30.
- Haeberli, E. and T. Ihsane. 2013. Revisiting the Loss of Verb Movement in the History of English. Ms., University of Geneva.
- Jacobson, S. 1975. *Factors Influencing the Placement of English Adverbs in Relation to Auxiliaries*. Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell.
- Jacobson, S. 1981. *Preverbal Adverbs and Auxiliaries; a Study of Word Order Change*. Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell.
- Labov, W. 1994. *Principles of Linguistic Change: Internal Factors*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Lightfoot, D. 1979. *Principles of Diachronic Syntax*. Cambridge University Press.
- Lightfoot, D. 2006. Cuing a New Grammar. In A. van Kemenade and B. Los (eds.), *The Handbook of the History of English*, 24-44. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Nevalainen, T. and H. Raumolin-Brunberg. 2003. *Historical Sociolinguistics*. London: Longman.
- Warner, A. 1993. *English Auxiliaries: Structure and History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Waters, C. 2013. Transatlantic Variation in English Adverb Placement. *Language Variation and Change* 25: 179-200.