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DOI 10.51313/Freeside-2020-2-1

It Takes Two to Tangle: A Look at Syntactic Changes and Rhetoric Value of The Absolute Infinitive Construction in English

Abstract

This paper discusses certain internal changes and external influences which affect the language and the way the speakers respond to them by utilizing the economy principle as part of a rhetorical strategy. Furthermore, it also touches upon some diachronic changes which occurred within the structure of the absolute infinitive constructions (AIC) throughout its development focusing on the period from Middle English or “a period of experiment and transition” (Lenker 2010: 6), through the 17th century, commonly referred to as ‘the age of normalization and correctness’, up till the end of the 19th century, called Modern English or Late New English. This timeframe is of special interest since the language was going through tremendous structural and syntactical changes which involved losing most of the language’s grammatical inflections triggering the re-establishment of its basic word order.

Keywords: absolute infinitive construction (AIC), non-extended and extended types and subtypes, Old English (OE), Middle English (ME), Early New English (ENE), Modern English (ModE), SOV (subject-object-verb), SVO (subject-verb-object), Proto-Indo-European, word order, rhetorical device, the economy principle in language.

Introduction

Heraclitus (c. 535 – c. 475 BC) once said, “You cannot step into the same river twice”, meaning that everything is constantly changing, everything is in motion. This claim can also be used metaphorically for a language which is in a way also a ‘river’. A language is never static, albeit rather slowly, but it is also changing. If one looks back to the very beginnings of English, one may find striking differences and say that Old English sounds and looks nothing like Modern
English in terms of its pronunciation, orthography, vocabulary, grammar, and, of course, syntax.

As the river is influenced by the weather, its slope, and the shape of its streambed, so does a language become impacted by its speakers, other languages and, of course, time. The influences which a language experiences are never insulated; in fact, they are reciprocal and cause a chain reaction of other events. For instance, the stress shift in Proto-Indo-European was just enough to start a series of changes in English affecting all its levels. As a result of its placement on the first syllable, the inflections which received the stress before, gradually get half-stressed and subsequently completely unstressed making them unnecessary and redundant. The loss of the case and gender inflections initiates further word order changes, causing a massive grammatical restructuring.

Therefore, in the light of the above listed examples, the overall goal of this paper is to fill a gap in linguistics with a comprehensive corpus-based analysis of the absolute infinitive construction. This paper also intends to define and investigate its origin and rhetorical value, as well as to trace the journey of the AIC from its birth till the end of the 19th century since all possible diachronic alternations which took place in English are well patterned in these constructions.

As a matter of fact, there is no definition of the AICs in literature as such considering that they are still neglected by the linguists. Thus, in this paper it is described as a non-finite syntactically organized group of words but is quite flexible as to its position in the sentence. Structurally, the AIC consists of an infinitive and / or one or more complements and is marked by distinct punctuation in writing and intonation in speech expressing the speaker’s attitude towards certain information (Albert 2017). This structure “explicitly marks textual cohesion” (Lenker 2010: 4), hence, can shape the meaning of the entire sentence or subsequent sentences, eg. “And for to make a short tale, he smote down three brethren of Sir Gawain’s, that is for to say Mordred, Gaheris, and Agravain”– “To make a story short, he fought (killed) the three brothers of Sir Gawain, that is Mordred, Gaheris, and Agravain” (Malory, 89).

In order to conduct this research, a corpus of no less than 310 (75,000 pages) Middle English, Early New English, and Modern English literary texts have been analysed, and 2,500 examples of the AIC have been collected and studied. The number of the AICs detected in different periods varies: in Middle English it is 646 (26%), in Early New English – 544 (22%); however, towards the 19th century their number considerably increases up to 1,310 (52%), which is 2.24 times more compared to the previous periods (see Figure 1.)
The origin of the AIC in English

Firstly, to identify its origin, it is necessary to refer to Old English texts as any claims about its indigenousness must be supported by the presence or absence of this grammatical phenomenon in the period which precedes the studied one. For this reason, it has been established that the AIC is deeply rooted in Old English in the form of a simple finite sentence: *secge ic þe to soðe* (Beowulf 2000: 590) – ”for I say it truly” (Nagy 2005: 63-64; Albert 2017), which comes to be restructured in early Middle English.

Given the aforementioned example, it can be seen that the Old English ”version of the AIC” consists of an explicit subject and a finite verb form accompanied by its complements. Nonetheless, towards the Middle English period, to conform to new stylistic, morphological, and syntactical demands, such sentences undergo some drastic changes and evolve into constructions. This suggests that their subject becomes reduced to a structurally implicit one, and the finite verb transforms into the infinitive. The AIC often contains the usual verbal complements (object, subject complement, adverbial), realized through adjective, noun and adverbial phrases as in *to put it in a nutshell, to be brief, to tell the truth or to express myself less figuratively.*

The reflection of the basic word order change in the AIC

Moreover, to gain a better insight into the word order changes in English, one must refer to the common ancestor of Indo-European language family, the Proto-Indo-European language spoken between 4500 BC and 2500 BC. Its masterful, though partial reconstruction, shows that English was a predominantly or even a ‘consistently’ OV language in its earliest stages.
(Lehmann 1974) since it was accomplished by means of enriched suffixation. In this sense, Old English with all its dialects resembles Proto-Indo-European, still it should not be typified as a solely OV language, considering it was already undergoing certain structural changes and was steadily drifting towards a VO word order. That being said, it does not at all mean that there were only the two discussed word order patterns in Old or Middle English. Actually, there coexisted all kinds of permutations of subject, verb, and object, such as OSV, OVS, VSO, or VOS, but they were not as widespread.

In this regard, the distinguished English scholar Henry Sweet in his *History of English Sounds* introduced an excellent linguistic classification of the three historical periods:

“I propose, therefore, to start with the three main divisions of *Old*, *Middle*, and *Modern*, based mainly on the inflectional characteristics of each stage. Old English is the period of *full* inflections (*nama*, *gifan*, *caru*), Middle English of *levelled* inflections (*naame*, *given*, *caare*), and Modern English of *lost* inflections (*naam*, *giv*, *caar*). We have besides two periods of *transition*, in which *nama* and *name* exist side by side, and another in which final *e* is beginning to drop” (1873-1874: 160).

This means that changes in grammar necessitated the changes within the word order which was steadily becoming more analytical.

Obviously, this shift towards analyticity, that is SVO, did not happen instantaneously. As a matter of fact, it was a slow and meandering process during which the frequencies of various grammatical forms and word orders were competing and changing due to the process of the levelling and eventual loss of most of the grammatical inflections. However, this switch required substantial time and took place in several stages, often resulting in the inconsistent use of various sentence patterns and morphological forms, which can still be traced in later stages. At the same time, it is also worth mentioning that the infinitive, with the *-en* inflection already lost, freely alternates with the inflected one in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* as in: “for to speke al playn” (Chaucer 1992: 252) vs. “to tellen shortly the conclusioun” (Chaucer 1992: 488).

It is also interesting to observe how in Middle or even Early New English, both synthetic, that is, inflectional, and analytic, non-inflectional, forms could coexist within the same construction. In Old English the infinitive was simply marked by a full *-an* inflection without the particle *to* as in *tellan* (to tell) or *sprecan* (to speak). In Middle English texts the infinitive is used with the levelled inflection *-en*, yet it is now preceded by a preposition *to*, which expresses intention: *to tellen* or *to speken* as “in order to, with the aim of doing
something”, for example: “to spken short and pleyn” (Chaucer 1992: 32). However, over time the preposition to loses its lexical significance and thus is no longer able to satisfactorily fulfil its original function. This is why it is reduced to a mere particle with no lexical meaning of its own (Albert 2014: 8-9), and to compensate for this loss, the preposition for steps in as a new indicator of ‘purpose’, eg. “forto telle trowthe” (Gower 2008: 2442), “for to spken of hir conscience” (Chaucer 1992: 7).

Oftentimes two prepositions for can be observed within the same construction. most likely to secure and reinforce the lexical meaning of the infinitival marker to but “by the end of the Middle English period for changed its intrinsic features towards desemantization and grammaticalization” (Albert 2014: 8) which means that “lexical items lose phonological weight and semantic specificity and gain grammatical functions” (Van Gelderen 2008: 245), as in for “shortly for to tellen at on word” (Chaucer 1992: 135), “for shortly for to seyn” (Chaucer 1976: 52).

Gradually, for to, which was often spelt solidly as one word forto, follows in the preposition to’s footsteps and turns out to be grammatically redundant. Eventually, it disappears by Early New Engle due to the economy principle which “aims at the maximum effect with the least input” (Zhou 2012: 100), giving way to the ’reanalyzed’ particle to, eg., “not to spken of it profanely” (Shakespeare 1992: III, 32) or “to use a purer phrase” (Fielding 1991: 711). This entire process of the grammaticalization of these prepositions can be briefly represented in the following way: tellan < to tellen < for to tellen < forto (for) tellen / telle < to tell.

To support this view, Gell-Mann and Ruhlen explain the changes within the structure of a word and a sentence, stating that a language may begin with a relatively high frequency of SOV and a low of that SVO. As the language changes, the distribution of SVO may increase at the expense of SOV until there emerges a stage referred to as ‘free word order,’ in which the frequencies of both orders are quite similar. A final stage may occur when the usage of SVO becomes high and that of SOV low. It is here that both grammaticalization and internal reconstruction have played and will continue to play a crucial role in further elucidating the precise processes of diachronic change that lead from one state to another (2011: 17290-17295).

At this point, it can be stated that not only does the structure of a simple or complex sentence exhibit the steady shift towards VO grammar in Middle English and onwards, but the absolute construction, as well. By looking at the distribution of SOV and SVO word orders in the AIC throughout its development (see Figure 2), a striking similarity with the evolution of unmarked
SVO word order in a simple sentence of that time can be observed. Indeed, in Middle English, the SOV word order prevails (SOV > SVO) with 361 and 221 instances respectively, though by the end of Middle English, the frequency of two competing word orders must have been equal at some point (SOV ≈ SVO), because during the transition period the two grammatical systems are most likely to be in use by the two different generations of speakers (Pintzuk 1996: 258). Then, in Early New English, SVO increases its frequency in the AICs at the expense of SOV (SOV < SVO), which is 56 and 361, respectively. Ultimately, towards Modern English, which plays a decisive role in shaping the structure and role of the AIC in the language, the texts of that period overwhelmingly display a VO-biased distribution. The examples show that the AIC eventually settles down with only 54 examples of OV word order, thus becoming a minority pattern; whereas 1,170 constructions already reflect a VO grammar.

![Figure 2. Distribution of SOV and SVO in AICs](image)

**Structural types of the AIC and their distribution in literary texts**

Similarly, a closer analysis reveals some other salient features concerning its structural types and word order patterns in different periods. Normally, the AIC splits into non-extended and extended types depending on the number of the verb complements. Non-extended types are followed by a noun, stance or linking adverb, or adjective, as in “to tell the truth, sooth to sayne” (Chaucer 1976: 65), “to speak frankly, shortly forto saye” (ibid.: 254), or “to be short”. The subtypes of non-extended constructions remain the same (V < infO, OV < inf, AdvV < inf, V < infAdv, AV < inf, V < infA), and structures with the infinitive in the final position are only scarcely represented in the Early and Modern English texts. This signals that the AICs were rather susceptible to general changes in the language.
The extended types in their turn consist of more than two constituents and can be of a mixed complementation resulting in heavier structures, which provide more detail eg., “to talk quite practically” (Hardy 1991: 232), “to express myself less figuratively” (Fielding 1991: 263), “to declare it in fewe words” (Elyot 1998), “but to speak more largely of the kingdom of God, both by nature and covenant” (Hobbes 1999).

Conversely, by looking at the range of the AICs in English literary texts, one can notice a considerable variety of such constructions which operate with 13 subtypes both in Middle and Early New English as in “soothe forto telle platly” (Gower 2008: 8180); “to the point right for to go” (Visser 1966: 1051), “a short tale to make” (Shakespeare 1992: 44); “plainly the truth to tell” (Cowley 2002: 70). Yet, their number becomes progressively smaller by the 19th century, where only 8 subtypes have been detected, eg., “to speak quietly among oursells” (Scott 1995: 245-246), “to speak the honest truth” (Austin 1992: 285). To put it differently, their structure comes to be more rigid, extremely grammaticalized and thereupon the AICs begin to function as formulae.

The findings also demonstrate that the number of the AICs and their subtypes is quite close in both Middle and Early New English, but in the 19th century, not only does the number of the AICs double, but these formations manifest less structural variety. For example, nearly all structures with the infinitive in mid and final positions disappear as compared to Early New English, eg. OV_{inf}O: “true to tell thee” (Shakespeare 1992: 367) and AdvV_{inf}O: “promptly to speake it” (Jonson 2009). However, AdvV_{inf}O remains and is supported by 3 examples in Modern English, which may have been used for solely stylistic purposes.

The same is true for the constructions with the infinitive in the final position. They occur in Early New English but are not as numerous as in Middle English, eg., AdvOV_{inf}: “plainly the truth to tell” (Cowley 2002: 70), AOV_{inf}: “a short tale to make” (Shakespeare 1992: 44), and OadvVinf: “but to the point shortly to proceed” (Skelton 1992: 8). By the Modern English period, all these extended structures cease to exist.

Simultaneously, the length of the construction in the Modern English period becomes shorter and its components become sequentially fixed following the VO pattern, as in “to acknowledge the truth” (Fielding 1991: 12), “to use Pierre’s expression” (Gaskell 2001: VII). The latter implies that after a long synchronic competition of the two word-orders, SVO proves to be the most useful for maintaining a healthy equilibrium within the language system (see Figures 3-4 and Table below).
Numerical representation of non-extended and extended AICs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Non-extended AICs</th>
<th>Extended AICs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SOV</td>
<td>SVO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ME</td>
<td>323</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENE</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>229</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ModE</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>933</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: one-word AICs were not included: ME – 64, ENE – 126, ModE – 86.

The role of the economy principle and rhetorical devices in shaping the AIC

Another interesting feature of the AICs is that the usage of the non-extended type outnumbers the extended ones in poetic and later in prosaic texts as well (see Figure 5). This phenomenon, in my opinion, is linked to two causes. The first can be attributed to the use of rhetorical devices, whereas the second – to the application of the economy principle in language.
The research results raise the issue of why these constructions were so fashionable and preferred by so many authors. Rhetoric, or the art of speech, played a crucial role in the Old and Middle Ages which can be primarily explained by the culture of writing and reading. Before and well after the introduction of printing in England, the books were not designed for silent reading, but rather for reading aloud to an audience. This is the reason why McKeon thinks that rhetoric played an important role during the 4th-14th centuries, proliferating in and encompassing various types of discourse. It contributed not only to the methods of speaking and writing well, of composing letters and petitions, sermons and prayers, legal documents and briefs, poetry and prose, but to the canons of interpreting laws and scripture, to the dialectical devices of discovery and proof, to the establishment of the scholastic method which was to come into universal use in philosophy and theology, and finally to the formulation of scientific inquiry which was to separate philosophy from theology (McKeon 1942: 32).

With the objective to achieve the desired results, the texts had to be masterfully composed, and various persuasive techniques and language ornaments were carefully chosen. As time went by, certain rhetorical devices also infiltrated the language of poetry. David Hume (1758), a philosopher and historian, highlights that oratory is a virtue and “Eloquence at its highest pitch, leaves little room for reason or reflection, but addresses itself entirely to the desires and affections, captivating the willing hearers, and subduing their understanding” (2007: 85). For this matter, the writers and poets had to turn to some powerful grammatical and lexical techniques to "strike the right note".

In prosaic texts, during the Chaucerian, Shakespearian, and the Enlightenment periods, not only were the authors attempting to exercise certain emotional impact by favouring
lengthier, more elaborate and flowery AICs, but they also strived to establish a personal relationship with the reader or auditor via the text. For instance, Chaucer in *Troilus and Criseyde* uses 13 constructions per 100 pages, Shakespeare – only 8 in *Hamlet*, whereas Fielding in his *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* manifests a strong adherence to the AICs and uses 20 constructions, which is 1.5-2.5 times more as compared to the above authors. These numbers confirm the AICs’ growing popularity and their preference by the authors in different phases of the history of English. In Locke’s understanding, such constructions as the AICs are, in fact, “particles”, which connect parts, or whole sentences together. Besides words which are names of ideas in the mind, there are a great many others that are made use of to signify the connexion that the mind gives to ideas, or to propositions, one with another. The mind, in communicating its thoughts to others, does not only need signs of the ideas it has then before it, but others also, to show or intimate some particular action of its own, relating to those ideas. (Locke 1999: 459-460)

He further emphasizes that such structures do not merely embellish the text but are fundamental for the understanding of the content and add to “the clearness and beauty of a good style” (Locke 460). The communicator must have such words in their repertoire “to show what connexion, restriction, distinction, opposition, emphasis etc.” (ibid.) they give to each respective part of the discourse.

To mistake in any of these, is to puzzle instead of informing his hearer: and therefore it is, that those words which are not truly by themselves the names of any ideas are of such constant and indispensable use in language, and do much contribute to men’s well expressing themselves (ibid).

As seen, the AICs are not simple adornments; rather, they boast a rich semantic value and assist the reader through the text or utterance. Their purpose is to primarily clarify “the hows and whens of the proposition…, or about the truth value of the proposition as far as the speaker is concerned” (Lenker 2010: 37), how the speaker is speaking and how the utterance should be interpreted or perceived. These constructions can be easily integrated into the sentence where they perform different functions based on their semantics: evaluative, qualifying, connective and specifying (Albert 2016: 99).

On the one hand, evaluative and qualifying types are more subjective as they add the voice of the author and reveal his or her personal attitude towards the information, cf. “all the soothe for to saye” (Chaucer 1976: 198), “to speak to you like an honest man” (Shakespeare, 1992: 49), “to tell your honour the evendown truth” (Scott 1995: 58) and “for to speke properly”
“to speak feelingly of him” (Shakespeare 1992: 133), “to be less abstract” (Poe 1992b: 474). On the other hand, connective and specifying types are more factual which help the readers to follow the author’s train of thought more easily and enable them to anticipate the content of the forthcoming sentences. Cf.: “to tellen shortly the conclusioun” (Chaucer 1992: 488), “to return to his question” (Defoe 1991: 149), “to commence then” (Poe 1992a: 156) and “but for to spoken of her eyen cleere” (Chaucer 1976: 248), “but nowe to speke of the inestimable price and value of mercy” (Elyot 1998: 2), “to explain this seeming paradox at once” (Fielding 1991: 698).

Undoubtedly, their recurrent employment in both prosaic and even poetic texts is largely based on the implementation of rhetoric principles primarily owing to the spread of Cicero’s De Inventione, De Oratore, Aristotle’s Rhetoric and other influential works on the same topic during the Middle Ages (Nordquist 2020: 1). As Copeland and Ziolkowski put it

…rhetorical teaching survived through late antiquity and into the Middle Ages because of its intellectual and cultural prestige, and in the course of its survival it took on other forms and found many other purposes” (2006: 488).

Indeed, writers and thinkers of that time embraced the rhetoric and incorporated it into the texts of diverse genres.

Therefore, the economy principle seemed to have been working on two distinct levels in the AICs: syntactic and pragmatic. Syntactic presupposes a natural simplification of the construction’s form; whilst pragmatic, or oratorical, involves quality persuasion (ethos, pathos, and logos) by utilizing different techniques.

In addition, by the 19th century a tendency towards simplification and being succinct appears quite distinctly in both types of the AIC. This shift was also prompted by some external triggers which were the Old English speakers influenced by the close contact with the speakers of Old Norse and their mutually intelligible dialect. In view of the fact that Old Norse had already lost most of its inflections by that time but shared similar vocabulary with Old English, people would clearly choose the easiest way of communication by dropping the inflections and using a different word order altogether. Leopold rightly suggests that the speakers’ endeavour to be distinct and economize on words and it is nothing more but “the innate tendency of man, wisely given him by nature, not to spend more energy on any effort than necessary” (Leopold 1930: 102). Certainly, the language is an important tool of communication which must be easy to use. According to Zhou, human beings’ capacity to identify and memorize information is also limited which is why they inherently attempt to be more lucid and concise (2012: 100).
Thence, the modification in grammar and syntax fully relates to rhetorical purpose and the economy principle in language or, as Zipf explains it in *Human Behavior and the Principle of Least Effort* that the minimum expenditure of work is achieved by a maximum economy at work calling it “the singleness of the superlative” (1949: 2). In other words, this principle is designed to optimize and balance the linguistic system by achieving the maximum efficiency using a minimum amount of effort. Basically, there is a natural “tendency towards economy as a composition of two contrary forces – effort limitation on the one hand and needs satisfaction on the other” so as to amend some “defects and imperfections of the language” (Vincentini 2003: 38, 40-41) and not to compromise effectiveness and efficiency in communication.

Since language is never static, this means that it is constantly changing on all its levels and these changes as seen from the above-mentioned examples are interdependent and cyclical: the loss of inflections influences the words’ grammar and sentence structure along with the words’ pronunciation and spelling. On this account, it can be assumed that the economy principle works on all linguistic levels causing reciprocal influences and adjustments.

**Conclusion**

The evidence presented in this paper demonstrates that during the Middle, Early New, and Modern English periods, the structure of the AIC is characterized by a greater degree of syntactical complexity, but a different frequency of all its (sub)types. Modern English is marked by using structurally simpler constructions due to the eventual fixing of the SVO word order and of course the application of rhetoric as well as the economy principle functioning in the language. Thereby a shift takes place towards a more succinct and less versatile construction, using no more words than necessary. On the surface, however, the tendency towards simplification of the AIC and being economical appears to be quite obvious. In fact, behind this phenomenon, there is a complex and competing interface between the grammar, syntax, pragmatics, time, and speakers of the language, where all these separate parts adjust to and complement each other as parts of the jigsaw puzzle fit together, thus creating the so much-needed stability in the language.

All in all, it can be concluded that for many centuries the AIC was manipulated and played with in multiple ways regarding its structure and semantics. It has proved itself to be extremely flexible, rich and has fully stood the test of time. The AIC has come a long way to gain its present shape, and, to be sure, it will definitely continue to remain productive in the years to come.
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