

Some Remarks on Early Modern English: Shakespearian Grammar¹

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ABSTRACT

This paper briefly examines interesting anomalies found in Early Modern English (EME) (Shakespeare) and attempts to show just how those areas of language which, historically, remain prone to malformation and misanalyses, come to represent non-standard language structures. If, as has been advanced in current theories of syntax, functional/parameterized words are (i) highly variable, (ii) abstract (holding to a lesser degree of saliency) and (iii) are therefore prone to language change, then it should be of no surprise to us that such functional words/parameterizations may remain influx and open to error for a certain amount of time in earlier historical grammars of English.

Keywords: Early Modern English, Shakespearian grammar, Syntax, Parameters.

EARLY MODERN ENGLISH

This chapter briefly examines interesting anomalies found in Early Modern English (EME) (Shakespeare) and attempts to show just how those areas of language which, historically, remain prone to malformation and misanalyses, come to represent non-standard language structures. If, as has been advanced throughout this text, functional/parameterized words are (i) highly variable, (ii) abstract (holding to a lesser degree of saliency) and (iii) are therefore prone to language change, then it should be of no surprise to us that such functional words/parameterizations may remain influx and open to error for a certain amount of time in earlier historical grammars of English. Similar to what was shown regarding child language acquisition and the stages therein, EME could be described in the same way as adjusting to similar stages, at least on theoretical grounds. What is of interest to any student of (unedited) Shakespeare is the fact that any good dictionary could serve the reader quite well. While it is true that some EME lexical entries no longer survive

in (today's) Contemporary English (CE), a large portion of words do carry forward into CE. What is most striking to the student of EME, however, is the fact that **functional grammar** has seemingly passed through a number of incremental changes—dating back at least to Middle English (ME) of Chaucer's time (1340-1400). The sections below present a host of token examples of **language shift** whereby functional words/parameterization has undergone some amount of change (examples taken from E.A. Abbott).

PARAMETER SETTINGS

Parameters are strictly associated with functional categories and are therefore considered to be abstract in nature (in contrast to their lexical substantive counterparts). In Chomskyan terminology, Parameters (and the binary settings which they assume) are what is ultimately behind **language variation and language change**. Below, we consider some of the more salient parameters which are readily identifiable and active regarding diachronic change in language.

¹ This paper is pulled from a chapter entitled 'Some Remarks on Early Modern Grammar: Shakespearian Grammar' (Chapter 12), cited in *Minimum of English Grammar*, Vol. 1. Cognella Publications (2013).

Parameters in EME

Pro-drop

Contemporary English (CE) is a **non-pro-drop language** given the fact that it cannot drop the subject pronoun in declarative sentences. The pro-drop status in a language seems to correlate to the INFL-parameter given that [+INFL] highly inflected languages such as Spanish, Italian allow pro-drops to occur while in [-INFL] impoverished inflected languages such as English, French pro-drops are not allowed.

INFLection

CE is considered to have a minor/weak INFL parameter setting. This is made apparent by the fact that English doesn't project full morphological paradigms having to do with inflection—such as Tense, Case, Number.

(A footnote is offered at the end of this chapter which deals with the Inflectional and distinction between richly inflected Latin and weakly inflected Modern English as it has to do with Case marking).

Word Order

CE maintains an SVO (subject-verb-object) word order. Even in EME, word order was relatively fixed to an SVO constituent order with the occasional fronting that took place with e.g. Topic, Object, and Prepositional emphatic expressions. To find more variable word order, one has to go back to Middle English (ME). In ME, morphological Case played a much greater role in maintaining word order—e.g., Case would indicate whether or not a Noun was a subject or object, etc. Recall, Latin took a similar path in word order to the extent that case markings indicated word order. (See footnote at end of chapter). Moreover, recall that English has its roots as a Germanic language and that German maintains an SOV in nonfinite clauses, and SVO in finite clauses. Both facts should point to earlier phases of English which demonstrate other potential sources of variable word order. Although we find EME to be relatively fixed regarding word order, potential parameter variability leading to some word order instability made its way onto the scene in EME.

Below, we consider three such parameters alongside the appropriate EME data.

Pro-drop

Just as EME was relatively similar to CE with regards to word order, so too was EME relatively similar to CE with regards to pro-drop. One historical observation worth noting here is the fact that Middle French (MF) initially had a Pro-drop status in which subjects could optionally drop, like what we today find in Spanish and Italian. This was owing to the fact that earlier, intermediate grammars of French had a sufficiently strong morphological Agreement system to the extent that the Subject-Verb paradigm allowed for subjects to drop, being then made recoverable via the Agreement marking system. As the French paradigm weakened (to where it stands today, similar to that of Modern English) so too did Subjects become required to project—noting the *Pro-drop to INFL parameter correlation*.

Consider some examples of Pro-drop (=Ø) in EME as found in Shakespeare:

[+Pro-drop]: Omission of subjects in questions: Omission of second person *Thou* with {-st} verbal affix:

- 'Didst not Ø mark that?' (Othello)
(= Did not you mark that?)
- 'Hast Ø any more of this?' (Tempest)
(= Have you any more of this?)
- 'Canst not Ø rule her?' (Winter's Tale)
(= Can't he rule her?)

It seems that some allowance was made in EME to omit Pronoun subjects in obligatory second person Interrogative contexts. Interesting, the only acceptable pronoun-drop that survives today in CE is in second person imperative constructions: e.g. *Close the door!* etc. where the subject is made implicit by the diactics in the context of the expression. Further examples of EME as a [+Pro-drop] language come from examples of sentences with the usage of the auxiliary verbs *is, was, has, have*, etc. It seems that in EME, when such auxiliaries were used, there was a higher frequency of subject drop: albeit, subject drops were by far less frequent with first and second person plurals. Consider the pro-drop structures below:

- ...after some question with him [Ø was converted].
→ [he was converted]

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- ...and quickly [Ø will return an injury].
→ [I will return an injury]
- ...'T is his own blame: [Ø hath put himself from rest].
→ [He hath put himself from rest].
- And [Ø will no doubt be found].
→ [He will no doubt be found].

INFlection

EME had a wealth of inflection. There were three inflected forms of the Third Person plural verb:

(i) Northern {-es}, (ii) Midland {-en}, (iii) Southern {-eth}—e.g.,

They hop-es. They hop-en., They hop-eth.

Forms of the inflected Second Person singular:

{-s} 'Thou (You) runs. Thou fleets, thou torments.'

{est} {th} 'Thou seest. Thou sayst. Thou thinkest not of this.'

*Both {st} and {th} seemed to extend to third person forms as well:

'No man like he doth grieve. She taketh.'

Forms of the inflected Third Person Singular: e.g., {-s} 'He closes with you'

(Note: As will be mentioned below, the third person/singular/present tense {s} inflection seems to have been carried over from the nominal plural {s} as a kind of (erroneous / redundant) verb-to-subject agreement on number).

Modals, like main verbs, could take inflection:

- 'He will-s to come' (= He wants to come)
- 'Canst not rule her' (Winter's Tale) (= Can't he rule her)
- 'They oughten' (+Plural) (Lear. iv) (= They ought-to)

Examples of rich inflection in EME as found in Shakespeare:

[+INFL]: Plural adjectives and nouns alike (as in Spanish e.g., *carro-s rojo-s* (cars reds),

French e.g., *yeux rouges* (eyes reds)) suggest that EME too had a strong [+INFL] parameter setting (regarding both Noun and Adjective number agreement):

- 'The thicks lips' (Othello)
- 'Smooth and welcomes news'

Plural verbs (with plural subjects) add plural affix {-s}:

- 'His tears runs down'
- 'His faith and trust bids them'
- 'Here comes the townsmen' (Othello) (= The townsmen comes)
- 'They oughten' ({-en} Plural) (Lear. iv) (= They ought-to)

Such examples suggest that EME had a subject verb agreement for plural number—i.e., plural subjects (such as *His tears* required a plural verb *runs*). The verbal {-s} that occupies the third person singular present tense marker in CE could be thought of as perhaps originating and crossing-over from the simple plural nominal marker (-s) in EME.

Subject-Verb Agreement and Adjacency

There are a plethora of examples in EME showing ill-formed 'subject-verb agreements' due to adjacency considerations—viz., where the closest sounding noun adjacent to the verb tends to agree with the verb. What this indicates above all else was that the morphological paradigm in EME was not yet sufficiently stable to ward off the occasional intrusion of competing phonological factors in establishing correct subject-verb agreements. The examples below, though small in terms of the overall percentage of error rate in EME, nonetheless show just how functional grammar could be prone to misanalysis—in the forms of omission and commission.

Consider the example below:

- 'The posture of your blows are yet unknown' (The posture is/*are)
- 'Faith and trust bids them' (Faith and trust bid/* bids)
- 'Here comes the townsmen' (The townsmen come/*comes)

(Recall, such examples of errors were discussed in Chapter 9).

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The ‘adjacency principle’ on agreement could be extended to hold between Determiner and Nouns agreements as well. Consider what would be an ill-formed agreement in CE—e.g., ‘*This three miles*’. ‘*But one seven years*’. ‘*This many summers*’.

Case in EME

Early Modern English Case, being treated here as an instance of Inflectional morphology, seems to offer us another example of where parameterization remains in flux. In EME, the Nominative Case of subjects may take on Accusative Case in structures such as interrogatives which incorporate the Modal *Shall*, etc. Consider some of the examples below which show accusative subjects *us*:

- Shall’s (us) have a play of this?
- Shall’s attend you there?
- Shall’s to the capitol

(Here, the modal *shall* is functioning as a main verb).

And conversely, there are many instances where otherwise nominative case subjects seem to receive accusative case—i.e., *them* for *they*, *us* for *we*, *me* for *I*, etc.

Consider some of these anomalies of case in EME Shakespeare:

- All debts are clear between you and *I*. (= me)
- Which of *he* or Adrian... (= him)
- And yet no man like *he* doth grieve my heart. (= him)
- Yes, you have seen Cassio and *she* together. (= her)

Word Order

Word order in EME was predominately SVO (how it remains today) with some interesting exceptions to note.

The [Adj [DP]] structure: This Adjective Phrase (AdjP) DP structure was borne out in EME Shakespeare with examples such as the following:

- [AdjP Sweet [DP my mother]] (= My sweet mother)
- [AdjP Dear [DP my lord]] (= My dear lord)

- [AdjP Good [DP my brother]] (= My good brother)
- [AdjP Poor [DP our sex]] (= Our poor sex)

These few examples show that adjectives could insert outside and to the left of the DP. In CE, of course, adjectives must remain in-situ of the DP where the Adjective must modify the Noun within approximate adjacency.

Fronting

Fronting, which we include here as both incorporating adverbial as well as preposition movement, was a very common practice in EME, rendering and AdvSV order. Notwithstanding the fact that EME was relatively fixed to an SVO/Adv word order, there were possible movement operations which would be considered as ungrammatical in today’s CE.

Consider some examples of EME adverbial fronting below:

- *Eleven hours* I spent to write it over.
(= I spent eleven hours to write it over)
- To belie him I will not.
(= I will not belie him).
- *To say to go with you* I can not.
(=I cannot say I will go with you).

Emphatic Adverbs such as *never*, *ever*, *seldom*, *always*, etc. frequently trigger word orders where the subject follows the verb—i.e., an AdvVS order.

- [Was never a widow] had so dear a loss.
- [And so have I] a noble father lost.
- [Seldom smiles he]....

Grammar Change

Two main examples of a grammar change which occurred between EME and CE have to do with **Question** and **Negation** grammars. In today’s CE, one is required to insert either an auxiliary verb or a modal to form the interrogative (e.g., *Do/have/are/can/must you?* etc.). In EME, main verbs were licensed to invert in question grammars and assume the auxiliary slot (e.g., *Look I so pale?* for *Do I look so pale?*). A second change consisted of the negative grammar, whereby in CE, the rule is

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[Aux/Modal + not + main verb]. EME also licensed main verbs to form the negative grammar [main verb + not].

Questions

Main verbs inversion for questions

Examples of main verb inversions (as opposed to auxiliary/modal inversions) for questions are plentiful in Shakespeare:

- *Look* I so pale, Lord Dorset, as the rest? (Rich. III) (= Do I look so pale...?)
- *Revolt* our subjects? (= Do our subjects revolt?)
- *Forbid* him not? (= Do not forbid him?)

Negation

As an instance of *commission*, main verbs could be inserted into the negative grammar (i.e., [main verb + not]):

- I *care not* who know it. (Henry V)
- I *list not* prophesy.
- He *heard not* that. (Two Gent. of Verona)
- I *know not* where to hide my head. (Tempest)

As an instance of *omission*, and in addition to main verbs which often took on negation, the functional auxiliary verb *Do* could be omitted before the negative element *Not*:

- I not doubt. (Tempest)
- It not belongs to you. (Henry IV)

Other Grammatical Omissions

Past Participle omission

Other examples where functional elements of grammar go missing can be spotted with regards to past participle formations. Consider the deletion of the participles {*ed*}, {*en*} below:

- Well hast thou *acquit* thee? (Richard III) (= present perfect (*has thou acquitted*))
- These things indeed you have *articulate*. (Henry IV) (=OSV, present perfect (*have articulated*))
- He was contract to lady Lucy. (Richard III). (= passive, (*was contracted*))
- I have spoke/forgot/writ/took... (= present

perfect, (I have *spoken/forgotten/written/taken*))

- Have you chose this man? (Coriolanus)

Infinitive 'to' omission

There are also some examples of where the Infinitive {to} goes unmarked:

- Suffer him *speak* no more. (= to speak no more)
- If the Senate still command me *serve*. (= to serve)
- You were wont be civil. (= to be civil).
- He though *have* slaine her. (= He though to have slaine her).

In sum, it appears that with specific regards to Shakespeare's Early Modern English, one can best attempt to talk about the grammatical changes undertaken by revisiting what we know about functional parameterization. The following parameters looked at herein included notions of Pro-drop, Inflection, Case, Word Order, Movement, and Question and Negation grammars. The fact that these parameters seemed to take on either an optional or entirely different parameter setting speaks to notions of language change via functional parameterization.

A Footnote on Latin vs Modern English: Case/Inflection

It becomes quite an interesting observation to see just how certain Modern English Case marking has evolved from out of Latin and has since **lexicalized** into stems. The term *lexicalized*, as it is being used here, can mean 'turn into part of the stem' so that the whole word (original stem and historical morpheme case marker) has now become an idiomatic chunk. Consider below the progression from Latin Case markers to Old English Case Markers for the words *Lupus* (*wolf*) and *Stan* (*stone*) respectively along with how the accusative case marker {*m*} has become lexicalized in CE (18):

- **Latin Stem:** *lup*

Nominative: Lup-

us

 (= The *wolf* runs)
(NOM)

Genitive: Lup-

ī

 (= A *wolf's* tracks)
(GEN)

Accusative: Lup-

um

 (= I saw the *wolf*)
(ACC)

• **Old English Stem: *Stān***

Nominative:	Stān-	∅	(= the <i>stone</i> is heavy) (NOM)
Genitive:	Stān-	es	(= A <i>stone's</i> throw away) (GEN)
Dative:	Stān-	um	(=I gave the <i>stone</i> to him) (DAT, PLURAL)
Plural:	Stān-	as	(= The <i>stones</i>) (NOM/ACC, PLURAL)

(Note the English Accusative {m} as a case marker is also found in (18) below).

- Note how Latin genitive case [-ī] passes from {es} in OE, to {‘s} in CE:

e.g., who → who’s → whose (= lexicalized)

e.g., Tom → Tom’s

e.g., He → His (= lexicalized)

- Note how [-um] {m} (e.g., *Lup-um* [ACC]) and *Stān-um* (DAT) became English {m} for ACCusative case (*who* vs. *who-m*). Recall, English is a strict SVO word order language and so Case Inflection is no longer required to indicate subject vs. object. (It should be noted that {m} started out as a Dative case marker and shifted to marking accusative case). As a result of our SVO order, Case has largely disappeared. Latin, on the other hand, had a relatively free word order so case inflection was essential in order to indicate subject vs. object, object vs. indirect object (dative), etc. To the extent that English still maintains some Case markings, it is restricted mostly to Pronouns, (and arguably possessives), whereby subjects mark for NOM case and Objects mark for ACC case (and possessives mark for Genitive case {‘s}. Consider the affix case marker {m} in how it as progressed both from Latin and in OE to today’s Contemporary English (CE):

- NOM ACC NOM to ACC in IPA:

I → m	e	/m/+ /ay/→/mi/	(vowel change)
He → hi	m	/hi/ + /m/ → /hIm/	(vowel change)
They→the	m	/ðe/ + /m/ → /ðeIm/	(vowel change)
Who→who	m	/wu/ + /m/ →/wum/	

What is of interest to us here is the fact that only the ‘relic case marker’ {m} (italicized) found in the ACC form of the word *who-m* (and not for *him, them, me*) can be optionally deleted in Contemporary English (CE). This draws our attention to the ‘Sally Experiment’ introduced in Chapter 3 where the classic distinction was drawn between **Lexical** and **Functional** bound morphemes. What we can say here is two-fold: (i) while, as part and parcel of the historical record of the English Language, CE still survives with some old Latin-based case markings, (ii) most of the case markings have lost their legitimacy and have as a consequence become **lexicalized** and incorporated as being part of the idiomatic stem (as are the former three in the paradigm above) with only the latter example of case affix {-m} in *whom* continuing to mark formal ACC case. It is for this reason that the {m} in *who-m* often gets deleted since it serves only as an abstract/ functional grammatical case marking. Notice how it is impossible (with *asterisk showing ungrammaticality) to delete the other aforementioned lexicalized case markers that have since **incorporated** into the stem.

Lexicalized:

- the {m} in *them* cannot delete (*the-∅ (= them)),
- the {m} in *him* cannot delete (*hi-∅ (= him)),
- the {m} in *me* cannot delete (*∅-e (= me)),
but...

Case Marker:

- the {m} in *who-m* can delete—e.g.,

• *Who* does she like?

Where the proper grammar would be:

- *Whom* does she like?

FURTHER READINGS

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