LINGUISTIC VARIATION AND CHANGE: MIDDLE ENGLISH INFINITIVE

Frančiška Trobevšek Drobnak

Abstract

In Middle English the old inflected infinitive lost its supine function and gradually replaced the uninflected infinitive in all positions, except in the complementation of modal and a limited number of other verbs. According to most linguists, the choice between the to infinitive and the bare infinitive was either lexically or structurally conditioned. The theory of linguistic change as the assertion of weaker or stronger linguistic variants postulates the affinity of stronger variants for more complex, i. e. functionally marked grammatical environment. The author tests the validity of the theory against the assertion of the English to infinitive at the expanse of the bare infinitive after the Norman Conquest. The results confirm the initial hypothesist that the degree of formal markedness of the infinitive concurred with the degree of the functional markedness of grammatical parameters.

Introduction

1.1 In most grammar books of present-day English (PDE) the infinitive is defined as "the verb's basic form, which can be used alone (*bare, simple* or *zero infinitive*), or with the particle to (*to-infinitive*)" (Crystal 1994: 162). The use of the bare infinitive is restricted to the position after modal auxiliary verbs (*I may be late*), after the auxiliary *do* (*I did answer your letter*), and to the complementation of a small number of verbs such as *have, let, make, see* and *hear* (McArthur 1996: 471). The infinitive is used either on its own or as the predicator of a non-finite clause. Both constructions alternate with nominal phrases, participial non-finite clauses, and finite nominal, relative or adverbial clauses. With some verbs the choice of the infinitive (or infinitive clause) instead of a corresponding nominal, relative or adverbial clause is optional.

> *To meet you was a great pleasure. That I met you was a great pleasure.*
> *I hope to see you again. I hope that I can see you again.*
> *The problem to address first is unemployment. The problem that must be addressed first is unemployment.*
> *Press four digits to set the alarm. Press four digits so that you set the alarm.*

1.2 In the course of the history of the English language, the following pairs of structures were, at some point of time, syntactic variants:

• the bare infinitive and the *to* infinitive,
• the *to* infinitive and the *for to* infinitive,
• the infinitive (clause) and a subordinate finite *that* clause.

The present day distribution of the bare infinitive, the *to* infinitive, and *that* clauses must have been reached quite some time before the year 1500. The table below collates all the occurrences of infinitival forms in the first three chapters of the Gospel according to St Mark in *The New International Version of The Holy Bible* (NIV, 1982), and corresponding constructions in *King James Bible* (KJB, 1611), Wyclif's Bible translation (Wyclif, 1378), and Skeat's edition (1871) of Old English Gospels (Corpus MS, 10th century). In the Old English sample the inflected infinitive is used either as a supine (*com to for-spilanne*), a post-modifier in a nominal phrase (*anweald to hælanne*), or as a post-modifier in an adjectival phrase (*alyfede to etanne*). The distribution of the bare infinitive and of the *to* infinitive in Wyclif's text is the same as in the two Modern English Bible translations. The bare infinitive occurs only after modal verbs. While some subordinate finite clauses in the Old English sample are replaced with infinitive clauses in Wyclif, no such contrast exists between Wyclif's sample and the two Modern English samples. There are no *for to* infinitives in Wyclif's text.

NIV, 1982	KJV, 1611	Wyclif, 1378	Corpus MS, 10th century
1/2 will send	I send	y sende	ic asende
will prepare	shall prepare	schall make	se ge-gearwaþ
1/7 will come	cometh	schal come	cymþ
worthy to stoop & untie	worthy to stoop & unloose	worthi to knele & vnlace	þæt ic ... bugende uncnytte
	shall baptize		fullaþ
1/8 will baptise	came to pass	schal baptise	-
1/9 -	will make you to become	was don	þæt yit beoþ
1/17 will make you fishers	taught	schal make you to be	lærde
1/21 began to teach	have to do	tauyte	
1/24 do want	art come to destroy	-	com to for-spilanne
have come to destroy	do obey	hast come to distrie	hi hyrsumiaþ
1/27 they obey	she ministered	they obeyen	heo þenode
1/31 began to wait	suppered not to speak	sche servede	he hi sprecan ne let
1/34 would not let ... speak	-	suffride hem not to speke	-
1/36 went to look	let ... go	-	-
1/38 let ... go	may preach	-	þæt ic bodige
can preach	canst make	that I preche	miht geclensian
1/40 can make	say nothing	maist clense	ne secge
1/44 don't tell	began to publish	seye to no man	ongan bodian &
1/45 began to talk		bigan to preche &	widmærsian
	could enter	publische	mihte gan
could enter	could not come	myyte go	ne mihton inbringan
2/4 could not get	easier to say	myyten not bringe	eþre to secgenne
2/9 easier to say	may know	liyter to seyeye	þæt ye witon
2/10 may know	power to forgive	wite	anweald to forgyfanne
authority to forgive	he taught	power to forgyue	he lærde
2/13 began to teach	he eateth	he tauyte	he ytt
2/16 does eat	came to call	he eet	com þæt ic clipode

NIV, 1982	KJV, 1611	Wyclif, 1378	Corpus MS , 10th century
2/17 have come to call	can fast	cam to clepe	sceolan fæstan
2/19 can fast	will come	moun faste	cumaþ
2/20 will come	shall be taken	schulen come	biþ acyrred
will be taken	shall fast	schal be takun	hi fæstaþ
will fast	it taketh away	schulen faste	he afyrþ
2/21 will pull away	doth burst	he takith awei	tobrycþ
2/22 will burst	will be marred	schal breste	biþ agoten
will be ruined	began to pluck	schulen perishe	ongunnon pluccigean
2/23 began to pick	is lawful to eat	bigunnen to...plucke	alyfede næron to etanne
2/26 is lawful to eat	that they might accuse	was leeueful to ete	gymdon þæt hi gewregdon
3/2 reason to accuse	-	aspieden to accuse	he alyfþ to donne
watched to see	lawful to do	-	þeahtedon
3/4 lawful to do	took counsel	leeueful to do	þæt hi þenodon
3/6 began to plot	should wait	maden a counsel	þæþ hi æthrinon
3/9 told to keep	pressed for to touch	schulde serue	forbead þæt hi ne
3/10 were pushing to touch	that they should not make	felden to touche	gesweutelodon
3/12 orders not to tell		thei schulden not make	anweald to hælanne
	power to heal		hlaf to etanne
3/15 authority to drive out	could eat	power to heele	mæg adrifan
3/20 able to eat	can cast	myyten ete	mæg standan
3/23 can drive	cannot stand	may caste	clipedon
3/24 cannot stand		may stonde	
3/31 sent s.o. to call		clepiden him	

Table 1: Collated readings of infinitive clauses and corresponding constructions in different Bible translations

There have been many attempts to account for the varying distribution of the above listed syntactic variants in the past. Some of the them are described below.

Bare infinitive vs *(for) to* infinitive: origin and use

The precursors of the PDE bare infinitive and of the PDE *to* infinitive were the Old English *uninflected infinitive* and the Old English *inflected infinitive* respectively.

2.1 The Old English uninflected infinitive consisted of the present stem of the verb and the suffix *-(i)an: beran* 'to bear', *lufian* 'to love', *hieran* 'to hear', *writan* 'to write'. The suffix *-an* evolved from the Indo-European affix **-ono-* of the verbal noun (*nomen actionis*), and the nominative/accusative case ending **-m* (cf. Latin *-um* of neuter nouns, e.g. *templum*). The same suffix survived as the infinitival ending *-an* in Old High German and Gothic. In some verbs the ending *-an* had been reduced to *-n: beon* 'to be', *seon* 'to see', *don* 'to do', *gan* 'to go'.
Example: IE **bʰer-ono-m* > Germ. **ber-ana-m* > OE *beran* 'bear'(Kisbye 1971: 1).
Due to the general weakening of unaccented vowels to *e* [ə] in Late Old English, the Early Middle English marker of the bare infinitive was *-en* [ən], but the suffix was very rare in verbs of French origin. In Northumbrian, the final *n* of the infinitive disap-

peared already in Old English, in Midland dialects by the year 1300, in the south it survived until the fifteenth century (Wright 1928:72). The loss of the word final *n* preceded by an unaccented vowel affected other grammatical forms besides the infinitive (the present plural indicative and subjunctive, the plural of weak nouns and adjectives), but not necessarily at the same time. In Wyclif, for instance, the final *n* consonant is lost in disyllabic infinitives, but still preserved in plural present indicative forms and in past participles of strong verbs. After the loss of *n*, the subsequently word final *e*[ə] ceased being pronounced, first in Scottish and northern dialects (by the middle of the thirteenth century), later in the Midland dialects (by the middle of the fourteenth century) and latest of all in the southern dialects, especially in Kent. The exact dates are difficult to determine, since *e* was usually retained in writing. In Chaucer's poetry, word final *e* was generally pronounced in disyllabic words with a long stem-syllable at the end of the line, and mostly silent in other positions. It is nevertheless safe to assume that by the end of the fourteenth century word final *e*[ə] had been lost in all forms and in all dialects (Wright, ibid). As a result, the form of the PDE bare infinitive is identical with the base form of the verb:

OE *beran* > ME *ber(e(n* > NE (to) *bear* ['bɛə]

The Old English *inflected infinitive* consisted of the particle *to*, the present stem, and the suffix *-enne/anne* (e.g. *to beranne*). It evolved from a prepositional phrase: the particle *to* was originally a directional preposition/adverb meaning 'towards', the suffix *-enne* was the dative ending of the verbal noun, which was in West Germanic declined like ordinary nouns of the *ja-declension*. The variant suffix *-anne* appeared in Old English, probably through analogy with the suffix *-an* of the uninflected infinitive (Kisbye 1971: 7). Due to the loss of word final *e*, and the shortening of long consonants in Middle English, the suffix *-enne/-anne* coalesced with the suffix *-an* of the uninflected infinitive at an early stage, especially in northern dialects. In Northumbrian poetry the preposition *to* was followed by the uninflected infinitive from the earliest days.

The first few examples of the *for to* infinitive appeared already in Old English. The marker initially served as an indicator of purpose, replacing the old inflected infinitive in the supine function. It soon followed the course of its predecessor, however, and became an ordinary infinitival marker. Around the year 1300 the use of the *for to* infinitive reached its peak, then it declined and survived only in some northern regional dialects (Hughes & Trudgill 1966: 116).

2.2 The precursors of the bare infinitive and of the *to* infinitive did not start out as syntactic variants. The uninflected infinitive appears in prose and verse of the earliest times (Closs Traugott 1992: 242-46). It was used, alone or as the predicator of an infinitive clause, in many syntactic functions:

• subject of the main clause:

... *lufian his nehstan swa hine sylfne ... is mare eallum onsćgdnyssum* (Corpus MS: St Mark) 'to love one's neighbour as oneself is the greatest of all commandments'

• object of transitive verbs:

... *he wilnaþ micle worldlare habban* (Alfred: Cura Pastoralis) 'he wanted to have great education'

- object controlled predicator with verbs of commandment or perception:

... & ealne þone here he het mid þæm scipum þonan wendan (Alfred: Orosius) 'and he commanded the whole army to leave with ships'

... þa bebead se biscop þeosne to him lædan (Bede: Historia Ecclasiastica) 'then the bishop commanded to lead this one to him'

... þa geseah he sumne fiscere gan (Apollonius of Tyre) 'then he saw a fisherman go'

- complement of modal verbs:

... ne cannst þu huntian butan mid nettum (Ælfric: Colloquy) 'you cannot hunt except with nets'

- adverbial adjunct:

... nu ge moton gangen... Hroþgar geseon (Beowulf) 'now you can go see Hroþar'

By contrast, the Old English inflected infinitive was of relatively limited occurrence in verse, and quite rare in prose. Initially a prepositional phrase, it was used as a supine, expressing purpose, obligation or volition (Closs Traugott, ibid). It was consistently used after deontic verbs *agan* 'to possess and have as a duty' and *habban* 'to have', and frequently as the infinitive complement of adjectives, especially of adjectival predicates such as *gearu* 'ready', *geornfull* 'eager' and *eaþe* 'easy'. It was very rare in nominal functions, except as the subject of an impersonal verb:

- *...he cymþ eft to þam micclum dome, to demenne eallum mancynne* (Ælfric: Homilies) 'he will come again to the great doom, to judge all mankind'

- *...& þa syndon swyþe fægere... on to seonne* (Alfred: Orosius) 'and those are very beautiful to see'

- *...þæt þu swiþge geornfull wære hit to gehieranne* (Alfred: Boethius) 'that you were very eager to hear it'

- *...him is leofre... to feohtanne* (Alfred: Cura Pastoralis) 'it is more desirable to him to fight'.

2.3 Already in Old English, but particularly in Middle English, the inflected infinitive lost its supine function and *to* became "a meaningless infinitive sign" (Kisbye 1971:2). Whether it was this lexical weakening of the preposition that propelled the "perceptible increase of the use of *to* infinitives down throughout the OE period" (Kisbye, ibid.), or the weakening was in fact the consequence of its proliferation, is difficult to ascertain. Fisher (1992: 317) believes that it was the general reduction and loss of inflections which rendered the infinitival endings *-an* and *-enne/anne* inadequate to distinguish the infinitive from the supine. The introduction of the *for to* infinitive in Early Middle English lends credence to such interpretation, since the marker initially served as an indicator of purpose. The *for to* infinitive did not stand in contrast to the *to* infinitive for long. Since the thirteenth century on, the choice between the *to* and the *for to* infinitive was "largely dictated by metrical conditions" (Kaartinen & Mustanoja 1958:179). Chaucer used both markers, with some verbs, like *beginnen, desiren, hopen, lernen,* even all three infinitival constructions (Fisher 1992: 316). The markers *to* and *for to* are sometimes found side by side after the same matrix verb:

...thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,

and palmers for to seeken straunge strondes... (Chaucer: Prologue to Canterbury Tales)

Roughly at the same time when the *to* infinitive started to replace the bare infinitive in most syntactic functions, the ratio of infinitive clauses to subordinate finite *that* clauses changed significantly in favour of the former, as is verified by the statistics of the prose texts in the Helsinki Corpus (Los 1997: 26). Many finite verbal complements (*that* clauses) which are found in the Old English translation of the Gospel according to St Mark (Skeat, ibid), are rendered as *to* infinitives in Wyclif's translation:

- *... ne eom ic wyrþe þæt ic his sceona þwanga bugende uncnytte*
  ... y am not worthi to knele doun, and vnlace his schoone (Mk 1/7)
- *... ic do inc þæt gyt beoþ sawla onfonde*
  ... y schal make you to be maad fisscheris of men (Mk 1/17)
- *... ne com ic na þæt ic clypode riht-wise*
  ... Y cam not to clepe iust men (Mk 2/17)
- *... hi gymdon ... þæt hi hine gewregdon*
  ... thi aspieden hym to accuse him (Mk 3/3)
- *... hi ut eodon þæt hi ge-sawon*
  ... thei wenten ut to se (Mk 5/14)

Bare infinitive vs (for) to infinitive: some current doctrines and open questions

According to most linguists, the choice between the *to* infinitive and the *for to* infinitive soon became haphazard and motivated by metrical reasons, but the selection of the bare infinitive vs *(for) to* infinitive was either lexically or structurally conditioned.

3.1 Callaway (1913) investigated the correlation between the semantic type of the matrix verb and the type of complementation in Old English. He divided all verbs into three groups: those that occur only with the bare infinitive, those that occur only with the *to* infinitive, and those that occur with either of the two forms. He discovered that all semantic groups of verbs, with the exception of modal verbs and verbs of perception, appear on all three lists, and assumed that the variation must be accounted for on syntactic grounds. Comparing the nominal and the infinitival complementation of verbs, Callaway concluded that verbs taking accusative objects are more likely to be followed by bare infinitives, and that verbs taking objects in the dative or genitive case are more likely to occur with *to* infinitives. Verbs that can be followed by either infinitive are verbs that can be followed by objects in different cases (Callaway, 1913:63).

Kaartinen & Mustanoja (1958) concluded, on the basis of statistical studies of Late Middle English prose, that two parameters affected the selection of a particular infinitive: the "intimacy" of the relationship between the matrix verb and the infinitive, and the physical distance between them. Quirk & Svartvik (1970) deduced the

same from the statistical studies of Chaucer. The degree of "intimacy", as understood by these and other authors (Sanders 1915, Ohlander 1941), is proportional to the degree of grammaticalisation of the matrix verb. It is highest when the matrix verb is void of referential meaning, as in the case of modal and other auxiliaries. The same structurally based approach is advocated by Warner (1982:116ff), who ascribes the propensity of modal verbs to bind with bare infinitives to their auxiliary status. According to Plank (1984:339), the same tendency is at work when contracted verbal forms *wanna, gonna, bounta, gotta* govern bare infinitives.

Fisher argues for functional reasons behind the selection of bare vs *(for) to* infinitives in Middle English. The latter were preferred when the activity was perceived as taking place sometime in the future (Fisher 1992: 321). It is by this future orientation, reminiscent of the original supine value, that to this day the *to* infinitive stands in contrast to the present participle in the complementation of verb such as *remember, stop, try* etc. (Biber & al. 1999: 693-739).

Los (1998: 1-36) believes that the *to* infinitive expanded as an alternative to subjunctive *that* clauses, especially those expressing intention, purpose or volition, and not as a substitute for the bare infinitive. The ratio of *to* infinitives to *that* clauses in the prose texts of the Helsinki Corpus stayed the same throughout the Old English period, but changed dramatically from 23% to 74% in the transitional period from Old English to Middle English. According to Los, this change is far more drastic than the change of the ratio of *to* infinitives to bare infinitives. The probability that the decrease in *that* clauses is unrelated to the increase of *to* infinitives is extremely low (Los 1998: 28).

3.2 Notwithstanding some differences of opinion as to the lexical or structural grounds for the distribution of infinitive forms in Middle English, linguists agree that the *to* infinitive started replacing the bare infinitive because of the phonetic instability of the (unaccented) suffix *-en* (see above). The questions that have not been thoroughly addressed, but are by no means less intriguing, are:

(a) What is the common denominator of the environments (lexical, structural) which favoured the substitution of the *to* infinitive for the bare infinitive, since the substitution was not absolute?

(b) What was it that not only triggered off but enhanced the weakening of the Old English inflection *-an* to the extent that it could no longer perform its function of marking the infinitive?

Infinitive forms and their affinity for complex grammatical environment

4.1 The substitution of the *to* infinitive for the bare infinitive in Middle English can be viewed as a linguistic change bringing into prominence the stronger of two linguistic variants. The theory of linguistic change as the assertion of stronger or weaker linguistic variants was first introduced in the framework of *natural phonology* (Stampe 1979, Donegan 1985), and *natural morphology* (Mayerthaler 1981). In syntax, it was

applied by Rydén (1979) and a group of linguists at the University of Ljubljana (Orešnik 1990: 5-12). On synchronic level, the theory postulates that of two linguistic variants one is formally "stronger" and the other one "weaker". The stronger variant is more elaborate and transparent to decode, the weaker is less elaborate, more economical and more obscure to decode. The stronger of available variants is consequently favoured whenever communication is rendered difficult by extra-linguistic or linguistic circumstances, including the grammatical complexity (markedness) of the message (Orešnik ibid, Orešnik 1999). On diachronic level, the theory postulates that *post status nascendi* stronger variants correlate not only with complex extra-linguistic (pragmatic) circumstances of communication, but also with relatively complex grammatical environment. The situation is reversed in the case of weaker variants: they are favoured in relatively simple pragmatic and grammatical environment. In later stages of their proliferation, stronger variants are less likely to expand to simple grammatical environment, and weaker variants are less likely to expand to complex grammatical environment.

4.2 From the point of view of the theory described above, the loss of the infinitival suffix *-en* was the assertion of the weaker of two variants, the stronger being the bare infinitive with the suffix *-en*. By contrast, the substitution of the *to* infinitive for the bare infinitive was the assertion of the stronger of two variants at the expense of the weaker variant - the bare infinitive. The infinitival suffix *-en* would be expected to persist longest in relatively complex grammatical environment, and the bare infinitive would be expected to resist its substitution in less complex grammatical environment.

The validity of the theory can be empirically tested. In the pilot study carried out by the author of this paper, the ratios of infinitives with specific infinitival markers were computed for different syntactic functions. The infinitives analysed were those occurring in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales (*The Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *The Wife of Bath's Tale*). Chaucer's text was chosen because of the general consensus that in his time different forms of infinitives featured as syntactic variants. The results of the analysis are presented in Table 2.

infinitive markers	[- to, - en]	[- to, + en]	[+ to, - en]	[+ to,+ en]	[+for to, - en]	[+ for to, + en]
entire text:	65.3	10.1	14.8	3.8	5.0	1.0
function: S	-	-	100	-	-	-
function: SC	19.8	-	60.0	-	20.2	-
function: MC	88.4	11.6	-	-	-	-
function: VC	9.1	17.9	54.5	-	18.5	-
function: NC	-	-	69.8	9.8	10.3	10.1
function: AdjC	-	-	71.6	28.4	-	-
function: A	-	-	30.3	29.7	50.0	-

Table 2: Ratios of infinitives with specific markers (in %) in different syntactic functions. Chaucer : Canterbury Tales (The Wife of Bath's Prologue & The Wife of Bath's Tale)

The infinitives featuring in the text display the following degrees of formal markedness:

- [- to, - en]: bare infinitives, the suffix -*en* lost;
- [- to, + en]: bare infinitives, the suffix -*en* preserved;
- [+ to, - en]: *to* infinitives, the suffix -*en* lost;
- [+ to, + en]: *to* infinitives, the suffix -*en* preserved;
- [+ for to, - en]: *for to* infinitives, the suffix -*en* lost;
- [+ for to, + en]: *for to* infinitives, the suffix -*en* preserved.

  They perform the following syntactic functions:
- S - the subject;
- SC - the subject complement;
- MC - the complement of a modal verb;
- VC - the complement (object) of a transitive verb;
- NC - the complement (modifier) of a noun;
- AdjC - the complement (modifier) of an adjective;
- A - the adverbial adjunct.

Of all the infinitives in the text, 75.4% are bare infinitives, 65.3% with no suffix -*en*, and 10.1% with the suffix -*en*. The ratio of bare infinitives is highest in the position after modal verbs (MC - 100%), most of them featuring without the suffix (88.4%). The frequency of bare infinitives is lower in the function of the verbal complement (27%), more than two thirds of them still displaying the suffix -*en*. About twenty percent of all infinitives used as subject complements (SC -19.8%) are bare infinitives with no suffix -*en*. There are no instances of bare infinitives in other positions (functions).

There are 18.6 % of *to* infinitives in the entire text, most of them marked only with the particle *to* and not with the suffix -*en*.. They are used as noun complements (79.6%, 12.3% of them with both markers), as adjective complements (100%, 28.4% of them with both markers), and as adverbial adjuncts (50% of all infinitives, half of them with both markers).

The ratio of *for to* infinitives in the text is low (6%), which makes the results statistically less reliable. Their ratio is highest in the function of adverbial adjunct (50%).

4.3 The results of the pilot study yield substantial credence to the theory that formally more elaborate (more marked) infinitives concur with more complex grammatical environment. The conspicuous absence of *to* infinitives after modal verbs, as well as the absence of bare infinitives in nominal functions (subject, noun complement, adjective complement, adjunct) suggest that the complementation of modal verbs is grammatically less complex environment than the complementation of full lexical verbs, nouns and adjectives, and adjuncts in particular. The studies performed by the authors cited under 3.1 confirm the affinity of the *(for) to* infinitive for specific grammatical environment:

- verbs taking more objects (ditransitive verbs) rather than monotransitive verbs;
- full lexical verbs rather than modal verbs;

• dislocation from the matrix verb (adverbial adjunct function) rather than position immediately after the matrix verb (verbal complementation);

• future reference in relation to matrix verb rather than simultaneous reference;

• matrix verbs requiring subjunctive subordinate clauses rather than matrix verbs requiring indicative subordinate clauses.

The same values of grammatical parameters hinder the loss of the suffix -en. In bare infinitives, for example, it is absent after modal verbs, but preserved in almost 50% of occurrences after non-modal verbs. In *to* infinitives the probability of the suffix is highest (almost 50%) in the function of adverbial adjunct.

4.4 The affinity of stronger, i.e. more elaborate/more formally marked, linguistic variants for more complex environment can be explained in terms of fundamental Gricean pragmatics. The speaker does not explicitly encode what needs no encoding (Grice's *Maxim of Quantity No 2*, 1975), and always follows ..."the principle of the least effort, which makes him restrict his output of energy, both mental and physical, to the minimum compatible with achieving his ends" (Martinet 1962: 139). From that point of view, the absence of any formal marking of the infinitive after modal verbs is due to the fact that no such marking is required to identify the infinitive as a verb. The expected (default) complement of a modal verb is, from the hearer's point of view, another verb, since modal verbs are devoid of referential meaning. Although the auxiliary *to be* is equally grammaticalized, the infinitive used as the subject complement must be adequately marked. Unlike modal verbs, the copula is most frequently followed by non-verbal structures, e.g. nominal or adjectival phrase.

Concluding remarks

The Gricean *economy principle*, which seems physiologically conditioned, is not without functional constraints. It is always kept in balance by the second overwhelming principle of communication: the *efficiency principle* (Sperber & Wilson's 1986). The speaker will choose that linguistic variant which seems optimal from the viewpoint of his/her assessment of the addressee's ability to correctly and promptly decode the intended message. From this point of view, the choice of a stronger variant means yielding to the efficiency principle, and the choice of a weaker variant means yielding to the economy principle. The loss of word final -en in Middle English did not affect all verbal (and other) forms indiscriminately. The suffix -en was retained in the past participles of strong verbs, and to this day it remains a very productive derivational morpheme (*widen, shorten, straighten* etc.). The traditionally postulated sequence of events in the case of the weakening of the old infinitival ending, which is *phonetic weakening* ⇒ *functional inadequacy,* should perhaps be reversed: *functional inadequacy* ⇒ *unrestrained phonetic weakening*. The infinitival suffix -en was dispensable because a less equivocal marker, the particle *to* was available. The choice of the *to* marker over the -en marker works in favour of the efficiency principle, enhancing transparency and facilitating the identification of the form.

Most changes that affected Late Old English and Early Middle English can be viewed as the choice of the stronger of available linguistic variants: the substitution of prepositional phrases for case endings, the emergence of expanded tenses, the expansion of periphrastic comparison, but also the elimination of ambiguous multi-functionalism in morphology and syntax, the balancing of syllable length etc. The propensity to yield to the efficiency principle rather than to the economy principle was so dominant throughout the Middle English period that it must have been imposed by some "outer circumstances" (Mey 2001: 181). Social stratification, multilingualism and dialect variation in England after the Scandinavian invasion and the Norman conquest constituted a sociolinguistic environment not very different from the one encountered centuries later in overseas colonies, where pidgins and creoles evolved (Fenell 2001: 133). The conditions of communication were complex enough to initiate the assertion of stronger linguistic variants. They first appeared in complex grammatical environment and gradually spread elsewhere, except to where their purpose was no longer served.

University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

WORKS CITED

Biber, D., Johansson, S., Leech, G., Conrad, S., Finegan, E.. *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English.* London: Longman, 1999.

Callaway, M. *The Infinitive in Anglo Saxon.* Washington: Carnegie Institution, 1913.

Closs Traugott, E.. "Syntax", v: Hoggs, R. M. (ed). 1992. *The Cambridge History of the English Language, Volume I.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Crystal, D. *The Penguin Dictionary of Language*, 2nd edition. London: Penguin, 1994.

Donegan, P. J. *On the Natural Phonology of Vowels.* New York and London: Garland, 1985.

Fenell, B. A. *A History of English. A Sociolinguistic Approach.* Oxford: Blackwell, 2001.

Fisher, O. "Syntax", v: Blake, N. (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the English Language, Volume II.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Grice, H. P. "Logic and Conversation", v: Cole, P., Morgan, J. (eds.) *Syntax and Semantics, 3: Speech Acts.* New York: Academic Press. 41-58, 1975.

Hughes, A., Trudgill, P. *English Accents and Dialects*, 3rd edition. London: Arnold, 1996.

Kaartinen, A., Mustanoja, T. F. "The use of the infinitive", v: *A Book of London English 1384-1425. NM 59*: 179-92, 1958.

Kisby, T.. *An Historical Outline of English Syntax.* Tryk: Akademisk Boghandel, 1971.

Los, B. "The rise of the to-infinitive as verb complement", v: *English Language and Linguistics 2(1)*: 1-36, 1998.

Martinet, A. *A Functional View of Language.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962.

Mayerthaler, W. *Morphologische Natürlichkeit.* Wiesbaden: Athenaion, 1981.

McArthur, T. (ed.) *The Oxford Companion to the English Language.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

Mey, J. L. "Accessibility and activation", v: *Festschrift Eli Fischer-Jorgensen.* Copenhagen, 2001.

Ohlander, U.. "A study on the use of the infinitive sign in Middle English". *SN 53*:58-66, 1941.

Orešnik, J. "Introduction to the subsequent three papers in the present volume". *Linguistica XXX:* 5-12,1990.

Orešnik, J.. *Krepke in šibke dvojnice v skladnji. Strong and Weak Variants in Syntax.* Ljubljana: Slovenska akademija znanosti in umetnosti, 1999.

Plank, F. "The modals story retold", v: *Stories in Language 8*: 305-64, 1984.

Rydén, M. *An Introduction to the Historical Study of English Syntax.* Stockholm: Almquist & Wiksell International, 1979.

Sanders, H. *Der syntaktische Gebrauch des Infinitivs im Frühmittelenglischen.* Heidelberg: Winter, 1915.

Skeat, W. (ed.). *The Gospel according to Saint Mark. In Anglo-Saxon and Northumbrian versions synoptically arranged, with collations exhibiting all the readings in the MSS.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1871.

Sperber, D., Wilson, D.. *Relevance: Communication and Cognition.* Cambridge MA.: Harvard University Press, 1962.

Stampe, D. *A Dissertation on Natural Phonology.* New York, London: Garland, 1979.

The Holy Bible. New International Version. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1982.

The Holy Bible. Containing the Old and New Testaments set forth in 1611 and commonly known as the King James Version. New York: American Bible Society, 1811.

Warner, A. R. *Complementation in Middle English and the Methodology of Historical Linguistics.* London:Croom Helm, 1982.

Wright, J., Wright, M.E.*An Elementary Middle English Grammar.* 2nd edition. Oxford: Clarendon, 1928.