

Variation in sentential complements in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English: a processing-based explanation

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1 Introduction

Sentential complementation, i.e. the situation that arises when a subordinate clause functions as an argument with respect to a governing element or head, as in ‘I think *that she will arrive tomorrow*’ or ‘*Calling the police* would be a mistake’, has been a prolific area of research for many years among English historical and non-historical linguists; see, among many others, Warner (1982), Fischer (1989), Mair (1990, 2006: 119-140), Duffley (1992, 2003, 2006), Fanego (1992, 1996a, b, c, 1997, 2004a, b, 2007), Rohdenburg (1995, 2006), Los (2005), Rudanko (1998, 1999, 2000), Miller (2002), Vosberg (2006), and De Smet (2007). Yet there are still many aspects of the complicated system of English sentential complements that have not been documented and analysed in detail, specially as regards developments since about 1700. In what follows, therefore, I propose to look at some of the changes affecting complement clauses in Late Modern English (1700-1900), and to interpret them in the light of the processing principles formulated by John A. Hawkins in his research on performance preferences in language (Hawkins 1994, 2004).

The chapter is organized as follows. Section 2 contains a brief account of the corpora used in this investigation. Section 3 outlines Hawkins’s performance-based theory. Section 4 gives an overview of English sentential complements and summarizes their development since Old English times (700-1100), with particular reference to the competition between infinitival and gerundive clauses in modern times. Section 5 offers an in-depth analysis of some of the changes discussed in Section 4. Section 6 shows how Hawkins’s model can be utilized to explain those changes.