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Report: Current Syntactic changes in English

(Based on the reading: Mair, Christian and Geoffrey Leech (2006). *Current Changes in the English Syntax*. In: *The Handbook of English Linguistics*. Eds. Bas Aarts and April McMahon. Oxford: Blackwell. 318-342.)

I Introduction

Syntactic change, compared to other types of changes, represents a challenge to linguists for three major reasons:

1. syntactic change takes place at a much slower pace
2. it tends to occur below speaker's conscious awareness
3. systematic, gradual transformations (such as the continuing increase in the frequency of the progressive aspect) tend to be "neglected" due to a focus on assumed syntactic innovations (such as the use of *like* as a conjunction)

Methodology:

- corpora were used; they allow an examination of samples of different varieties of writing at different times.
- Starting point: matching reference corpora **Brown (Standard AmE)** and **LOB (Standard BrE)**, pub. 1961
- Developments towards the end of the 20th century: **Frown (St. AmE)** and **F-LOB (St. BrE)**, pub. 1991/92

Advantages of electronic corpora as a research tool into syntactic change

- descriptive approach
- corpora fulfil a "negative" role in that they reveal changes that have proceeded in a different direction from one that had been assumed

Example i. taken from Barber's list of changes that were suspected to be going on in present day Standard English (1964: 130-44):

i. demise of the inflected form *whom*

→ corpus findings do not support this claim

- *whom* shows a high frequency in the British National Corpus (BNC)
- textual genre has to be taken into account: *whom* is more frequent in written than in spoken English
- Brown → Frown findings show an increase in frequency
- "positive" role: differentiated confirmation of an existing assumption or discovery of ongoing changes not noticed by observers

II Changes in the English Verb Phrase

❖ Modality

- modals only emerged as a separate syntactic category around the beginning of the Early Modern English Period
 - ongoing grammaticalization of semi-modals such as “have to” and “be going to”
 - semi-modals are much more frequent in spoken English
 - reduced pronunciation such as *gotta* or *gonna*
 - corpus findings show a decline in the use of modals during the later 20th century
- Least frequent modals *shall*, *ought (to)* and *need* (in auxiliary construction) have dropped
 - Mid-frequent modals *must* and *may* have declined drastically
 - Most common modals *will*, *can* and *would* have maintained their position

Table 14.3 Decline in the use of the modal auxiliaries in the four reference corpora (MAIR/LEECH 2006: 327)

	British English		Log likhd	Diff (%)		American English		Log likhd	Diff (%)
	LOB	F-LOB				Brown	Frown		
Would	3, 028	2,694	20.4	-11.0	Would	3, 053	2, 686	5.6	-6.1
Will	2, 798	2, 723	1.2	-2.7	Will	2, 702	2, 402	17.3	-11.1
Can	1, 997	2, 041	0.4	+2.2	Can	2, 193	2, 160	0.2	-1.5
Could	1, 740	1, 782	2.4	+2.4	Could	1, 776	1, 655	4.1	-6.8
May	1, 333	1, 101	22.8	-17.4	May	1, 298	878	81.1	-32.4
Should	1, 301	1, 147	10.1	-11.8	Should	910	787	8.8	-13.5
Must	1, 147	814	57.7	-29.0	Must	1, 018	668	72.8	-34.4
Might	777	660	9.9	-15.1	Might	635	635	0.7	-4.5
Shall	355	200	44.3	-43.7	Shall	267	150	33.1	-43.8
Ought (to)	104	58	13.4	-44.2	Ought (to)	70	49	3.7	-30.0
Need + V	87	52	9.0	-40.2	Need + V	40	35	0.3	-12.5
Total	14, 667	13, 272	73.6	-9.5	Total	13, 962	12, 287	68.0	-12.2

Table 14.4 Increase in the use of semi-modals in the four reference corpora (MAIR/LEECH 2006: 328)

	British English		Log likhd	Diff (%)		American English		Log likhd	Diff (%)
	LOB	F-LOB				Brown	Frown		
BE going to	248	245	0.0	-1.2	BE going to	219	332	23.5	+51.6
BE to	454	376	7.6	-17.2	BE to	349	209	35.3	-40.1
(Had) better	50	37	2.0	-26.0	(Had) better	41	34	0.7	-17.1
(HAVE) got to	41	27	2.9	-34.1	(HAVE) got to	45	52	0.5	+15.6
HAVE to	757	825	2.7	+9.0	HAVE to	627	643	0.1	+1.1
NEED to	54	198	83.0	+249.1	NEED to	69	154	33.3	+123.2
BE supposed to	22	47	9.2	+113.6	BE supposed to	48	51	0.1	+6.3
Used to	86	97	0.6	+12.8	Used to	51	74	4.3	+45.1
WANT to	357	423	5.4	+18.5	WANT to	323	552	60.9	+70.9
Total	2, 069	2, 275	9.2	+10.0	Total	1, 772	2, 101	28.4	+18.6

- over-all loss of frequency by ~ 10 % for both sets of corpora
- rise in over-all frequency of semi-modals, mostly due to increases for *need to*, *want to* and in AmE: *be going to*
- on the whole, semi-modals are much less frequent than core modals

Total Nr. of entries for *will* in F-LOB + Frown corpora: 5125

Total Nr. of entries for semi-modals : 4376

→ it cannot be deduced that semi-modals are increasing at the expense of core modals

	Modals	Semi-Modals
Spoken corpora (SEU and ICE-GB)	-17.3%	+ 36.1 %
LOB → F-LOB	- 9.5%	+ 10.0 %

- comparison between overall frequency of modals and semi-modals (ca. 4 million-word corpus of AmE conversation): in current spontaneous dialogue of Am. speakers, semi-modals are 62.5% as frequent as core-modals
- *have (got) to* is more than ten times as frequent as *must*

III Changes in the English Noun Phrase

- ❖ Over 5 % (statistically significant) increase in frequency of nouns
 - seems contrary to the assumption that written English is being influenced by spoken variety
 - Explanation: there not an increase in the nr. of NPs
 - increase is due to a greater density of nouns (and adjectives) per NP
 - significant increase (in both AmE and BrE) of noun + noun sequences
 - increase in common noun-compounding, e.g. *union leader*, *campaign coordinator*

IV The colloquialization of written English

- the passive is one of the foremost indicators of textual genre
 - **decline in the *be*-passive** (BrE: - 12.4%, AmE: - 20.1%)
- over the last two decades, prescriptive recommendations for the use of the passive have changed → esp. Am. style guides now advise against the use of passive in academic writing
- genre-differentiated analysis by Mair/Hundt:
 - significant decline in frequency of the passive (more so for AmE)

→ marked **increase for contracted forms** – both negative and verb contractions – in written media (also more dramatic in AmE)

V Conclusion

- there are recent developments of grammatical constructions which have been dynamic since the late 18th century but are still truly current because changes still happen today e.g. for the *get*-passive or *going to*-future, crucial structural changes had already taken place before 1776
- genuinely recent innovations are, for example, certain new progressives
- a continuation of a well-established long-term trend: general increase in frequency of progressives (Jespersen)
- grammaticalization as well as colloquialization are rather long-term factors that influenced the changes