

Multiple constructions and multiple factors at work: the actuation of auxiliary *do*

The present paper intends to reflect on the mystery of actuation by taking another look at the emergence of auxiliary *do* in early Middle English. The origin of auxiliary *do* is a topic that has long puzzled historical linguists and has generated a robust amount of studies (cf. Engblom 1938; Ellegård 1953; Visser 1963; Denison 1985; Poussa 1990; Garrett 1998). While there is little doubt that over a century of research has increased our understanding of the factors that underlie the emergence of auxiliary *do*, there is still no agreement upon what construction(s) and what factor(s) contributed to its development. In particular, it is surprising to see that many existing accounts have approached the origin of auxiliary *do* in a similar fashion. Most scholars in fact have attempted to draw straight lines between auxiliary *do* and a single ancestor, and have considered the different possible source constructions as being independent of each other.

The perspective taken in this paper differs from previous studies in that it does not focus on one possible explanation, but examines the role of several source constructions and factors. The first construction considered is causative *do*. The resemblance that some causative *do* patterns bear with the later auxiliary construction led several scholars to consider causative *do* as the source for auxiliary *do* (cf. Ellegård 1953). In line with this type of analysis, I argue that the pattern in which the subject of the infinitive verb is not expressed, as in example (1), is the one that contributed to the syntactic development of auxiliary *do*. The second construction taken into account is elliptical *do*. I suggest that this type of construction, in which *do* has no semantic content and is attested from early Old English texts, see example (2), played a role in the semantic development of the auxiliary construction.

- (1) And wulleth that if the seid Thomas paie or **do** **paie** to the seid Margaret yerly xviii
And wills that if the said Thomas pays or causes pay to the said Margaret yearly 18
li.
pounds
'And wills that if the said Thomas pays or causes to pay 18 pounds yearly to the said Margaret'
(Paston Letters: 229.39)
- (2) Ne luze þu na onnum; ac **dudest** god
Not lied you not men; but did God
'You did not lie to men, but you did it to God' (Lambeth Homilies: 93.798-799)

In addition to the constructions illustrated above, it is suggested that a crucial role in the emergence of auxiliary *do* was played by a number of system-internal factors that characterised English at the beginning of the Middle English period. Specifically, these factors involve (i) the developments within the causative verb system and (ii) the availability of the constructional schema [Vaux - INF] in early Middle English. It is argued that these factors contributed to weaken the position of causative *do* in the causative system and reinterpret *do* as an auxiliary verb.

The account described in this paper contributes to the ongoing discussion on language change and tackles, in particular, the issue of why a particular instance of change occurs at a specific point in time. Ultimately, the analysis presented here suggests that the problem of actuation can, at least partially, be solved if a multiplicity of causes is taken into account, which include (but are not limited to) the diachronic development of the construction(s) involved in the change and the synchronic state of the language when the change took place (cf. De Smet et al. 2015).

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