The Loss of Bare Singular Noun Phrases in the History of English

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Introduction

Languages vary in the degree to which noun phrases can appear without overt determiners. English formerly allowed bare singular noun phrases in a variety of positions, while today they are only possible in unique role predicates (Obama is president vs. * Obama is lawyer). In this study we examine the loss of predicative and argumental bare singulars between Middle English and Early Modern English using the Penn Parsed Corpus of Middle English 2nd Edition (PPCME2) and the Penn Parsed Corpus of Early Modern English (PPCEME).

Theoretical Background

Among languages with grammaticalized number, there are a wide range of possibilities and restrictions on the availability of bare singular arguments and predicates. Munn and Schmitt's (2005) analysis of bare singular arguments and predicates makes the following prediction: the presence of bare singular arguments in a language depends on both the existence of bare singular predicates and a zero determiner (but not vice versa). Furthermore, non-BE predication will allow both role and non-role bare singular predicates, while in BE predication bare singular predicates will be restricted to role NPs (if allowed at all). Since English has a zero determiner from the Old English period forward, we predict that bare singular arguments will be lost before or with predicates, and non-role predicates before or with role predicates. Additionally, Kroch (1989) predicts that if the same change occurs in different contexts, the rate of change will be the same in all of them.

Methods

We created a representative list of 47 singular count nouns that appear in texts throughout the time period in question. For analysis purposes we divided this list into abstract nouns and concrete nouns, themselves divided into (i) unique roles, (ii) non-unique roles, (iii) animate non-roles, and (iv) other concrete entities. Because the Penn Corpora are not lemmatized, we compiled a list of spelling variants and used a CorpusSearch coding query to identify the head noun of each phrase. Noun phrases were also coded using CorpusSearch for their syntactic position (argument or predicate) and for the presence or absence of the indefinite article and other pre-modifiers that are in complementary distribution with it (definite articles, demonstratives, quantifiers, numerals, and possessive pronouns and noun phrases). Structures that condition or prevent bare count nouns throughout the history of English, such as

conjunctions and adjective modification, were excluded. Tokens were binned into seven time periods from 1150-1720. Using the coded data, we ran a series of logistic regressions using R.

Results

Our results show a universal decline in bare singular nominals throughout the period of investigation, with three clusters of curves: (1) arguments and non-role predicates at the bottom, (2) non-unique role predicates in the middle, and (3) unique role predicates at the top (since they survive into modern English). The relative positions of the model curves confirm the patterns predicted by Munn and Schmitt (2005). We are currently expanding our searches additional texts from the same time period, and will analyze the logistic models again to compare the rates of change.

References

Kroch, A. (1989). Reflexes of grammar in patterns of language change. Language Variation and Change, 1, 199–244.

Munn, A. & Schmitt, C. (2005). Number and indefinites. Lingua, 115, 821–855.