

## A CASE OF SYNTACTIC CHANGE IN ENGLISH

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### 1. The data

The following examples are representative of a frequently-used structure which at present lacks a regular place in grammars of English, or even a consistently used name. However, it can be seen from the source given for each of them that they are used within the formal registers of English and are unlikely to be part of ill-formed, transitory sentence forms.

- (1) a. It was never our intention to offend or distress Mrs P, whom we accept *behaved properly*. (*Sunday Times*, 26 April, 1992)
- b. He came out with guns blazing against the self-perpetuating *élite* of France's *grandes écoles*, whom one is assured *run everything worth running*. (*The Times*, 12 June, 1990)
- c. ...Bill Clinton hugging his wife Hillary, whom he says *will play an unprecedented role in his administration*. (*The Times*, 9 April, 1992)
- d. ...send the other to a colleague...whom you think *may be interested in joining...* (Letter from Equal Opportunities Higher Education Network, 7 April, 1992)
- e. I ricocheted to the 18th floor in the company of a leering youth, whom I hope *was the lift attendant*. (*The Sunday Times*, 10 May, 1992)
- f. The government will immediately want to know whom the MPs think *should fund the subsidy*. (*The Independent*, 26 January, 1993)

A characteristic of such sentences is the presence of the objective form of the relative pronoun, *whom*. Another feature is the absence of any other candidate for the subject role in the finite clause found in each example (and emphasised

there for convenience<sup>1</sup>). In the structures exemplified in (1), the case-marking of the relative pronoun is in all cases optional. Whenever government by a verb is occurring, the educated speaker will mark the object thus governed as objective. But it is clear from the examples of (1) that the objective *whom* is frequently found in educated usage. Although the default form is unmarked, it is only when introspection is called on that there is surprise and embarrassment among educated speakers who realise that their intuition has misinterpreted signals. Yet the response of British English speakers, at this discovery is subdued, as though the error of interpretation were forgivable: perhaps because the interpretation must be a negative one, detecting the absence of any other subject filler. Careful speakers, when attention is drawn to such structures, merely suggest the replacement of *whom* by *who*. Some American linguists, to whom I have put examples for comment, have taken strong exception to such sentences as those in (1), claiming that they would have no hesitation in marking the sentences wrong. As far as I can find, grammars of English do not generally include such sentences in their discussion. Quirk et al. (1985: passim) appear alone to have considered these sentences at all extensively. An example from that grammar is given as (2a).

- (2) a. ...the Ambassador, whom we hope *will arrive at 10 a.m.*  
 b. He came out with guns blazing against the self-perpetuating *élite* of France's *grandes écoles*, whom *one is assured run everything worth running.*

Of the sentence in (2a) (with emphasis added again to denote the finite clause), Quirk et al. argued (1985: 368) that 'Here the relative pronoun is the subject of *will arrive* but is felt to be in object territory in relation to *we hope* embedded in the relative clause'. But this comment achieves no more than descriptive adequacy offering no explanation of the sentences of (1), such as (1c), repeated for convenience as (2b). For example, the comment on (2a) by Quirk et al., misses the essential point that *we hope* can govern, in English, *only* a clause; *\*we hope the Ambassador* is ungrammatical. In this, of course, it is like *\*we are assured the élite* (in 1c) which could only be grammatical if passives, such as *be assured*, could govern NP.

## 2. Objective case-marking in English

The morphology of Modern English is not particularly robust or rich. This fact, of course, has been so striking for present-day linguists that it has led to the argument, in Universal grammar, that the apparent obligatory use of subject pronouns in English is a direct consequence of the morphological poverty of that language. One exception to this morphological poverty of English is precisely that of the objective case-marking of pronouns.

<sup>1</sup> I also show, by small capitals and double underlining, what I would call the 'comment' clause or verb. Its importance is that it is often taken, wrongly, to be the clause which, containing a verbal element, provides a verbal governor for the NP1 of the finite clause (a pronominal moved to become the relative pronoun).

- (3) a. That is the man<sub>i</sub> whom/who/ I like *t<sub>i</sub>*.  
 b. I don't know the teacher<sub>i</sub> who/whom/ you like *t<sub>i</sub>*.  
 c. That is the man who/\*whom/ likes me.  
 d. I don't know who<sub>i</sub> you are *t<sub>i</sub>*.  
 e. I don't know \*whom<sub>i</sub> you are *t<sub>i</sub>*.

The sentences presented in (3) show that objective case-marking is optional on a relative pronoun which is fulfilling the role of object (3a, b); but *not* if it is filling the role of subject (3c) or predicate (3d, e) (where it is coindexed with *t*, denoting a moved item). In other words, the form of the relative pronoun can always be unmarked, *who*, but *only* marked as *whom*, when the role fulfilled by the pronoun is that of object. Quirk et al. (1985: 367) rightly claimed that *whom* was the *marked* member of the pair *who/whom*. The continuing move of English away from rich morphology makes it normal for the unmarked form of relative pronouns to be preferred by educated speakers. English, as a configurational language, is not distorted by the absence of morphology. While educated speakers are no doubt aware of this, the drive to the recognition of prestige forms faces speakers with acknowledgment of archaic inflected forms. Thus speakers who would avoid being heard to say 'the man who I saw there' will accept more readily 'whom do men say that I am' (examples from Partridge 1980: 378)

## 3. Omission of relative pronoun

In standard English the concatenation of clauses, with covert complementiser is extensive. In (4) the covert complementiser is represented by [e], and *t*, here again shown co-indexed, is here conventionally used to represent the source of an item which has been moved.

- (4) a. Remember the man<sub>i</sub> [e] I like *t<sub>i</sub>*.  
 b. Remember the man \*[e] likes me.  
 c. [That/\*[e] Joan will be waiting] intrigues me.

What is missing from (4b), making it ungrammatical, is the essential subject-filler of English relative clauses (*who*). The relative pronoun cannot be grammatically omitted in English if it fills the role of subject in the dependent clause. Similarly, the complementiser cannot be omitted grammatically from the clause functioning as subject in a higher clause (4c).

## 4. The accusative and infinitive

English shares, with many languages, reminders of the *accusative and infinitive*, as shown in (5)

- (5) a. I like *him* to be at home.  
 b. I like *him* to be in trouble because I don't like him.

In both of these sentences the subject (emphasised for convenience) of the dependent infinitive clause is case-marked as objective. Sentence (5b) is included



to demonstrate, if such demonstration is needed, that the verb *like* can be characterised by two different arguments: [-S] (governing a clause), [-NP] (governing a noun phrase). There are similarities in French, though cases of *accusative and infinitive* in French are restricted principally to main verbs of perception. The *accusative and infinitive* structure is sufficiently common in English for it to have been given the special name of *ECM*.<sup>2</sup> In (6a, b) are further examples of the *accusative and infinitive* (or *ECM*) as it appears in English.

- (6) a. We accept her to have behaved properly.  
 b. We want her to have behaved properly.  
 c. A defendant, [[whom<sub>i</sub>] [justices expected [infin t<sub>i</sub> to be in court]]], was unable to attend.  
 d. A defendant,[[ whom] justices expected [ [e<sub>comp</sub>] [s t<sub>i</sub> would be in court]]], was unable to attend.

(6c) shows a case of ECM which has resulted from government of a non-finite clause by *expect*. This verb, however, can also govern a finite clause. It will be argued in this paper that the objective case-marking to which the NP1 of a non-finite clause (i.e. undergoing ECM) is subjected is paralleled in the case of finite clause government. The finite structure parallel to ECM (6c) is shown as (6d). Example (6c) has no parallel to the empty category [e] in (6d) representing the covert complementiser (*that*) governing [S..]. The non-finite clause (in (6c)) is clearly not different in its governor/governee relationship, and the parallelism of finite and non-finite certainly extends this far.

The present-day linguistic explanation for such *exceptional case-marking* (which linguists have so far generally applied only to non-finite clauses)<sup>3</sup> is either to allow verbs like *accept* and *want* exceptionally to assign objective case to the subject of the clause governed by them; or else, surely a different metaphor for the same change in bounding: to allow such verbs to delete the following brackets and thereby to gain governing access to the NP1 of the dependent clause.

### 5. Accusative and FINITE clause in English

The structures represented in (1) are here shown, slightly abbreviated but now with a structural notation relevant to the analysis proposed.

- (7) a. ...to offend or distress Mrs P, [[whom<sub>i</sub>] [we accept [[e] t<sub>i</sub> behaved properly]]].  
 b. ...the *élite*.. [[whom<sub>i</sub>] [ one is assured [[e] t<sub>i</sub> run everything worth running]]].  
 c. ...his wife Hillary, [[whom<sub>i</sub> he says [[e] t<sub>i</sub> will play an unprecedented role in his administration ]]].

<sup>2</sup> Exceptional case-marking, cf. Chomsky (1986: 190), where it is claimed that the structure is not found in French or German; but cf. my paper (1991) where I claim that it exists in French.

<sup>3</sup> This is not the place to enter into a discussion of the English infinitive structure. I might equally well be represented by *PRO*. I would argue that the infinitive complementiser for English is *for...to*. I shall be glad if this paper chips away at the unfortunate belief, among generative grammarians, that infinitives are fundamentally different from finite clauses.

- d. ...to a colleague...[[ whom<sub>i</sub>] you think [[e] t<sub>i</sub> may be interested in joining...]].  
 e. ...a leering youth, [[whom<sub>i</sub>] I hope [[e] t<sub>i</sub> was the lift attendant]].  
 f. The government will immediately want to know [[whom<sub>i</sub>] the MPs think [[e] t<sub>i</sub> should fund the subsidy]].

In (8) can be seen the grammatical structures of English which reflect the process of generating (1d), taken as the example in question.

- (8) a. *You think [that] [a colleague [may be interested in joining..]]*:  
 main clause governing finite clause;  
 b. *You think [that] [he/she may be interested in joining..]*:  
 pronominalisation;  
 c. *John says [[e] [he/she may be interested in joining..]]*:  
 (b) with empty complementiser;  
 d. *a colleague who<sub>i</sub> [you think [[e] t<sub>i</sub> may be interested in joining..]]*:  
 fronting of NP1 of subordinate clause, with fronting of pronominal;  
 e. *a colleague whom<sub>i</sub> [you think [[e] t<sub>i</sub> may be interested in joining..]]*:  
 the relative pronoun is marked as objective.

In (8e) the reason for the objective marking of *whom* cannot simply be that it is governed by *think*, in the 'comment' clause, since this verb, like *hope*, *be assured*, and others, including one sense of *like*, and of *want* in the case of ECM, does not have the argument [-NP]. Explanations of ECM usually imply that the NP1 of the embedded non-finite, if moved across the 'comment' clause and into the higher clause, will come under government by the main verb. It has rarely, if ever, been pointed out that ECM occurs even if the main verb could not be a governor of nouns or noun phrases.

The structures of (1) have a twilight status in the grammar of English. They are frequent in everyday educated usage. They are to be found even in written English<sup>4</sup>, in circumstances where presumably the language has been checked by another speaker. These sentences contain *whom*, a form, other things being equal, with educated prestige. When these sentences contain *whom*, with its educated prestige. They are typical of educated slippage. They are not usually taken as shockingly uneducated. The frequency of occurrence of such structures as those in (1) raises the possibility that these sentence structures could be to some extent grammatical. The notion of graded ungrammaticality is not particularly novel. Indeed the normal imperceptibility of syntactic change would be of this scalar kind.

### 6. Blending

The explanation offered for the structure by Quirk et al. rests on the possibility of a confusion between the subject function of the relative pronoun and its position

<sup>4</sup> I am grateful to my colleagues, Norma Rinsler and Anne Green, for sensitivity to their leisure reading which gave me the initial data and motive for this research. Professor Rinsler also drew my attention to obscure passages in an earlier draft. This led to such a revision that Professor Rinsler will not find it easy to recognise in this paper the paper that she read.



in “object territory”, or what I would prefer to call ‘under government’. The second part of this confusion must, as I have shown, lead nowhere. It is, nevertheless, of value to pursue the idea of what Quirk (private communication) has termed “blending”. The blending of two forms will produce a third. This is not easy to argue in the case of *accusative and finite*. It might be proposed instead that ECM and *accusative and finite* are cases of parallel evolution. But it is doubtful if there has been any interaction between the structures. The two structures are not easily comparable. The *accusative and finite* evolves from a subjectless structure; ECM applies to a structure in which the dependent subject is of central significance. The *accusative and finite* is found in adjectival dependent clauses; the domain of ECM is a non-finite dependent clause.

### 7. Hypercorrection

The term *hypercorrection* is frequently absent from discussions in linguistics. This absence is less surprising when it is realized that linguists usually stay clear of individual linguistic behaviour. For Stammerjohann (1975: 192) “Hyperkorrektheit im Bereich der Soziolinguistik bezeichnet das überkorrekte Sprachverhalten von Sprechern unterer Schichten, das als symbolischer Ausdruck aufwärtsmobilen Verhaltens auf die Übernahme der Sprachnormen der oberen, herrschenden Schichten gerichtet ist.” In Fowler (1992: 258b) hypercorrection is taken to be a matter of macrosociolinguistics “HYPERCORRECTION,... has a function,...to help constitute the speaker as a member of a higher, more powerful social class. Hypercorrection is not a reflection of an autonomous trend of ‘upward mobility’; it is a card in the bid for power.” Labov (1966: 88) chose the term hypercorrection “since the lower middle class speakers go beyond the highest status group in their tendency to use the forms considered correct and appropriate for formal styles.” Looking at the data of usage in English, Quirk et al. (1985: 14; 368) characterised precisely by the term *hypercorrection* the structures shown earlier in (1). What is missing from such data descriptions is the precise demarcation of the types of correction. The example of *hypercorrection* given by Hartmann – Stork (1972: 160) under *overcorrection*, is the well-known one of *between you and I* for *between you and me*. Such a case is that of an ungrammatical phrase in place of a grammatical one. It is clearly different from the correction that might produce the sentences of (1). When a grammatical sentence is uttered in place of an ungrammatical one, this is not *hypercorrection* but simply *correction*. There is nothing arising from the present study which supports the brief definition by Stammerjohann (1975: 191) “Übergenaues und unnatürliches Nachahmen von geltenden oder prestigebesetzten Sprachnormen.” The construction under study appears to be used by members of the middle class, in self-correction and adjustment to their peer group. To engage in self-correction, of any kind of behaviour is scarcely “unnatürlich”.<sup>5</sup> Moreover,

<sup>5</sup> Linguistics will never be of any help or interest to the wider public as long as “performance” behaviour is banned from consideration by *theoretical linguists* and left to sociolinguists. As long as this attitude remains, self-correction, like the causal ‘errors (random or characteristic)’ (Chomsky 1965: 3), will be lacking as an explanation and will remain as seeming “unnatural”.

in the present case, it might be said that an ungrammatical sentence seems to be offered in place of another ungrammatical sentence. We might perhaps term this *false correction*. Bynon (1992: 206a) argued that there ought to be a recognition of the close interrelationship between language change and the avoidance of stigmatized forms by means of *hypercorrection*. Language change in progress is clearly related to the decision by the speaker to use what I am terming the *accusative and finite*.

### 8. Hypercorrection and language change

There can be no doubt, since syntactic blending is at the origin of the *accusative and finite*, that the origin is also what Labov (1966: 84-85) termed one of the “PRESSURES FROM BELOW”, adding that by BELOW is meant “below the level of conscious awareness” and that the pressures “operate upon entire linguistic systems, in response to social motivations which are relatively obscure and [85] yet have the greatest significance for the general evolution of language.” Although Labov went on to deal with what he considered to be the overtly corrected language error (“PRESSURES FROM ABOVE”), the data dealt with in this present paper belong to the tacit knowledge of language by humans. In this respect the *accusative and finite* provides an important insight into the human processing of syntax. Within the limitations of certain lexical sets the syntactic structure which I have termed here *accusative and finite* remedies the possible utterance of even less grammatical sentences. The speaker avoids anticipated ungrammaticality by positing a parallel for the intuitively well-known *accusative and infinitive* or *ECM*. In the context of British English, the structure, though aberrant in its case-marking, is used by influential sources of written language. The structure bids fair to establish itself, because of its undoubted widely systematic origins, within the English language.

### 9. Conclusion

The parametric differences between languages may conceal essential differences. English, for instance, does not articulate concord in many parts of its grammar. French is different. I have argued (1990) that agreement in French marks the source of movement. This is exemplified in (9a, b)

- (9) a. J’ai vu ma fille.  
 b. Je li’ai vue  $t_i$ .  
 c. She doesn’t want me to be here because she doesn’t want me anymore.  
 d. [whom<sub>i</sub>] [[I am assured] [e]][ $t_i$  cheats everyone]].  
 e. That’s the man I am pleased [who/\*whom] will be escorting us in Spain.

In (9c, d) are reminders that both ECM and the present data equally involve movement. From the present data it cannot be inferred that the objective case-marking is the result of government by a transitive verb. There are more cases in the present data than in examples elsewhere of ECM of the “comment” verbs which cannot govern a NP, being only equipped to govern a clause. Moreover, in (9e) there is an example of a different ordering of clauses which results in the

relative pronoun being ungrammatical if marked as objective. Again, the optional marking becomes available only when the pronoun has been moved across a clause. It will be noted that it is not the distance in terms of words which results in the possibility of objective-marking; it is rather the violation of major clause boundaries that is significant. This is the only way to measure "syntactic length". The objective case-marking of the relative pronoun is a signal of significant movement. The result will surely add another feature to that configurational language that is known as English.

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