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Changes in transitivity and reflexive uses of *sit* (*me/myself down*) in Early and Late Modern English

Abstract

This paper seeks to establish if the Transitivity Hypothesis (Hopper & Thompson 1980) can explain the variation in the use of two reflexive strategies with the verb *sit* in Early Modern English (e.g. *I sat me down/I sat myself down*) and the verb's subsequent transitivization (e.g. *he sat me down*). By studying data from large historical corpora, we will re-evaluate the results of earlier research and establish why *sit* continued to be used with the simple reflexive strategy (i.e. with object pronouns) until the Late Modern period. In our analysis of the transitivization of *sit* (*down*), we focus on both micro-level semantic and syntactic factors and more general developments that have supported the transitivization of verbs in Late Modern English.

1. Introduction

The verbal system of English has undergone many changes in the course of history from the perspective of transitivity. For example, it is well-documented that many verbs that are typically intransitive in Present-day English could also be expressed in reflexive constructions in earlier periods (e.g. Mustanoja 1960: 100; Mitchell 1985: 113; Van Gelderen 2000). Even today, some reflexive patterns persist in dialectal usage and fossilized expressions (Peitsara 1997: 323, 349), and their archaic nature is occasionally exploited by fiction writers, who use them to index the speech of historical characters.

For example, although the reflexive pattern with *fear* (e.g. *I fear me that I cannot come*) had largely been replaced by an intransitive pattern in Early Modern English (Peitsara 1997: 325–328), we can still find it used in twentieth-century corpus data, particularly in historical novels (Example 1). Likewise, the reflexive use of *lie* (which is often used interchangeably with *lay*, as in Example 2) still enjoys marginal currency in Present-day English, probably in part because of a popular children’s bedtime prayer which dates back to the eighteenth century (*When I lay me down to sleep...*).

(1) **I fear me** both are false. (COHA,¹ Fiction, 1955)

(2) I would love to see a lot of things happen between now
and the time **I lay me down to rest.** (COHA, Non-fiction, 2009)

The semi-fossilized nature of these patterns becomes evident when we consider their limited potential for variation. For example, the patterns exemplified in (1) and (2) are largely restricted to being used in the first person singular. So, while *I lay me down* is well-attested in COHA, there are no instances of *he lay him down*, and the most recent token of *she lay her down* dates back to 1834 (see also Keenan 2002: 348). For most verbs, however, the earlier reflexive patterns are no longer available. For instance, motion verbs like *come*, *go* and *ride*, which could be used in reflexive constructions in Old and Middle English (e.g. Visser 1963: 321; Huber 2017), are invariably intransitive in Present-day English, and verbs of posture like *rest* and *stand* have likewise shed the earlier reflexive pattern in favour of the intransitive pattern (Examples 3 and 4).

(3) Pe king **him rod** an huntinge (Helsinki Corpus; *King Horn*, 1250–1350)
the king he-REFL ride-3SG-PRET to hunting
‘The king rode to the hunt.’

¹ COHA = *The Corpus of Historical American English* (Davies 2010).

(4) Þa **stod him up** Walwain (Helsinki Corpus; *Layamon*, 1150–1250)

then stand-3SG-PRET he-REFL up Walwain

‘Then Walwain stood up.’

In addition to this macro-trend which has favoured intransitive uses over reflexive ones, the pronouns that have been used to express reflexivity have changed in the course of history. The earlier simple reflexives, exemplified in (1) to (4), gradually gave way to the SELF-paradigm, which is also the paradigm still in use in Present-day English. This process started in Middle English and continued well into the Early Modern period.

Changes in reflexive strategies have been documented in detail in e.g. Peitsara (1997) and Van Gelderen (2000), but as both of these studies were done at a time when linguistic corpora and databases were much smaller than today, their analyses are often based on very low token frequencies and cannot therefore be considered conclusive in every respect.² Indeed, with new historical databases at our disposal, we are now in a position to complement the results obtained in earlier research with much larger datasets and shed more light on the variation between different reflexive strategies in earlier forms of English.

Our study focuses on a single verb that was one of the last verbs to hold on to the simple reflexive pattern: *sit*. We will study two research questions related to the use of *sit* in the Early and Late Modern periods. First, we will examine the linguistic contexts that affected the variation between the use of simple reflexives (e.g. *I sit me down*) and SELF-reflexives (e.g. *I sit myself down*) in the Early Modern period. Our results show that in order to understand the variation between the two reflexive strategies we must

² For example, Peitsara (1997), using the Helsinki Corpus, was only able to find 20 tokens of verbs of posture and change of posture (*lie, rest, sit, stand, lay, lift, raise, rouse*) for the entire Early Modern period (1500–1710). To compare, our data for *sit* alone includes 1,550 tokens (1500–1700).

pay close attention to what kind of event the clause describes aspectually. Our second question focuses on the development of a transitive pattern that has recently become increasingly popular, at least in American English (e.g. *he sat me down*). The history of this usage dates back to the eighteenth century, and our analysis reveals that the innovation was supported by an overlap between the uses of *sit* and *set*, on the one hand, and by a semantic preference according to which *set* was not well-suited for descriptions of events where the potency of the agent was realised only indirectly. We will explain both the variation in the simple and SELF-reflexives and the transitivization of the *sit N down* pattern in terms of the Transitivity Hypothesis, which was first formulated in Hopper and Thompson (1980).

This paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides some necessary background to the case studies discussed in this paper. We will first summarize some of the relevant literature on reflexivity and the history of reflexive verbs in English. This discussion is followed by a description of the Transitivity Hypothesis (Hopper & Thompson 1980), which will be the framework within which we interpret and analyse our data, as well as definitions of the aspectual categories that will be central to our analysis. Section 3 provides a description of the corpora and databases used in this study as well as a discussion on data collection and categorization. In section 4, we present the results of our case studies, and section 5 concludes the paper with a discussion of the main findings and some suggestions for future research.

2. Theoretical background and reflexivity in the history of English

2.1. Defining reflexivity

Reflexivity can be defined as a coreferential relation between the two arguments of a verb (see e.g. Lyons 1968: 361; Crystal 2008: 408). This relationship can be conventionally expressed by coindexing the arguments, as in (5a), while the differing indices in (5b) indicate that the referents of the pronouns should be understood as different entities.

(5) a. He_i hit himself_i.

(5) b. He_i hit him_j.

Reflexivity can be encoded in language in different ways. Reuland (2000: 14) makes a distinction between pronominal marking (e.g. Dutch *hem*, Icelandic *hann*), simplex anaphors (e.g. Dutch *zich*, Icelandic *sig*) and complex anaphors (e.g. Dutch *zichzelf*, English *himself*). In the first group, reflexivity is expressed with pronouns that have other (primary) functions in the language, e.g. to express object case. In the simplex group, the pronoun is only used to express reflexivity, while in the complex group the reflexive form consists of a pronoun followed by another element (e.g. *himself*). The difference between pronominal marking and the other two strategies can also be discussed in terms of a difference between pragmatic marking (pronominal strategy) and grammatical marking (simplex and complex strategies) (Ariel 2012: 41). These strategies are not mutually exclusive; rather, a language can make use of all these strategies to varying degrees. In Present-day English, the SELF-strategy is the dominant strategy, but the pronominal strategy can be used, for example, with some oblique constructions, as in (6) (from Ariel 2012: 41; see also Van Gelderen 2000: 111).

(6) He_i had no spots on him_i.

Furthermore, there are verbs whose meaning includes a clear element of self-directedness, such as *wash* and *shave* (cf. Ito 1978), which are sometimes called “semi-reflexives” in the literature (e.g. Quirk et al. 1985: 358). With such verbs, the reflexive pronoun is optional, and both *he shaved himself* and *he shaved* are perfectly grammatical. In other words, these constructions allow both implicit (or covert) and explicit (or overt) expressions of reflexivity (Lyons 1968: 361–362).

2.2. Reflexive strategies in the history of English

In English, the reflexive paradigm has undergone a change from marking reflexivity with simple accusative and dative pronouns to having *self*-marked reflexives (i.e. from the simple strategy to the SELF-strategy). This development was gradual, and it involved several steps that took place at different times for different verb types. The general line of development is relatively clear, however. First, in Old English only the simple strategy was used, and *self* was an adjectival word that could follow the pronoun to indicate emphasis (Example 7).

(7) Judas **hine sylfne** aheng.³ (Ælfric’s Homilies II, 250, 15)

Judas 3SG.ACC self-MASC.SG.ACC aheng-PRET-INDIC.3SG

‘Judas hanged himself.’

Gradually, during the Middle English period, sound changes led to the reinterpretation of pronoun+*self* combinations, so that the dative pronouns in structures like *me self* were reanalysed as genitives (Mustanoja 1960: 146). The adjectival *self*, on the other

³ See the OED for this obsolete verb meaning ‘hang’.

hand, was reanalysed as a noun, which in turn paved the way for the further grammaticalization of the pronoun+*self* forms into reflexive pronouns (see e.g. Keenan (2002) for a more detailed account of this process).

In Present-day English, the *self*-forms are locally bound whereas the simple pronouns cannot be locally bound, i.e. they are locally free (Keenan 2002: 329). This means that in (8a) *himself* is coreferential with *the king*, and in (8b) *him* is coreferential with *John*.

(8) a. John denied that the king_i sat himself_i down.

b. John_i denied that the king sat him_i down.

However, in Old English the simple strategy was the only way to mark reflexivity, and so both local and non-local binding relations were expressed with simple pronouns. Consequently, a sentence like (8b) would have been ambiguous regarding coreferentiality. The creation of the reflexive *self*-pronouns, starting with the use of *self* as a contrastive device in Old English and its merging with the dative and accusative pronouns in c. 13th century (Keenan 2002: 333–337), provided another strategy to express coreferential relations, and by the end of the 16th century, the *self*-forms had lost their obligatory contrastive function and took over local binding from the simple pronouns. According to Keenan (2002: 346–347), the shift in binding in the 1500s was largely due to the functional similarity of the *self*-pronouns and simple pronouns in reflexive expressions: a locally bound *self*-form was synonymous with a locally bound simple pronoun. The solution that presented itself was that the *self*-forms in object position came to require local antecedents, and the simple pronouns started to reject these – which is also the situation in Present-day English.

As shown in Peitsara (1997), the older simple strategy remained more common in English until the end of the Middle English period (1420–1500). However, the situation

changed rapidly in the sixteenth century: while in 1420–1500, 72% of all reflexives in Peitsara’s data were expressed with the simple strategy, in 1500–1570, the corresponding proportion is as low as 33%. In 1640–1710, the simple strategy only accounts for 2% of all reflexive uses (Peitsara 1997: 288), showing that the older strategy practically fell out of use within a period of approximately two hundred years. However, it should be noted that this overall development conceals some interesting variation. For instance, while many verbs of psychological events, such as *hate*, *love* and *pity*, are not attested with the simple strategy after 1500 in the Helsinki Corpus, verbs of posture, such as *sit* and *lie*, could still be used with simple pronouns in the late seventeenth century (Peitsara 1997: 322, 326). Furthermore, psych-verbs that express more involuntary actions, such as *fear*, *grieve* and *repent*, are attested with the older simple strategy as late as 1570–1640, confirming that the survival of the older pattern was in part dependent on verb type (see also Ito 1978 for a discussion of the syntactic versus semantic classification of reflexives).

There is also evidence that the diffusion of the SELF-strategy did not proceed at a steady rate in all genres and contexts of use. First, Peitsara (1997: 291–294) shows that the simple strategy persisted longer in oral genres in Early Modern English (see also Spies 1897: 157). Second, Van Gelderen (2000: 79) demonstrates that in Early Middle English (e.g. Layamon’s *Brut*), reflexive *self*-forms were particularly often used with third person pronouns and with prepositional objects. In Chaucer’s texts, on the other hand, first person forms stand out against second and third person forms by continuing to favour the earlier simple strategy. The importance of third person forms in the diffusion of the SELF-strategy can also be seen in the spelling of Early Modern texts. In Shakespeare’s First Folio, for example, forms like *himself*, *himsel(e)* and *him-self(e)* are used 428 times, but there are no examples of the form written separately as *him self(e)*.

By contrast, there are only two forms of *myself* but hundreds of *my selfe* (Van Gelderen 2000: 113). So, from very early on we see a split in the person system that has persisted in some of the archaic forms that were discussed in section 1 (e.g. *I lay me down to rest*).

2.3. The Transitivity Hypothesis in the context of this study

The Transitivity Hypothesis was first proposed by Paul Hopper and Sandra Thompson in an article published in *Language* (1980). In short, the hypothesis predicts that syntactic transitivity has semantic/pragmatic correlates, so that if a language expresses one meaning relationship with transitive syntax and another one with non-transitive syntax, the split should follow a principled semantic motivation predicted by the Transitivity Hypothesis. In their article, Hopper and Thompson (1980: 252) list ten relevant features that affect the overall transitivity of a clause (Table 1).

Table 1. Transitivity parameters according to the Transitivity Hypothesis.

		HIGH	LOW
A.	Participants	2 or more participants, A and O	1 participant
B.	Kinesis	action	non-action
C.	Aspect	telic	atelic
D.	Punctuality	punctual	non-punctual
E.	Volitionality	volitional	non-volitional
F.	Affirmation	affirmative	negative
G.	Mode	realis	irrealis

H.	Agency	A high in potency	A low in potency
I.	Affectedness of O	O totally affected	O not affected
J.	Individuation of O	O highly individuated	O non-individuated

What the Transitivity Hypothesis suggests, then, is that there is a cline of transitivity and that languages can organise the description of various kinds of events in different ways insofar as they follow the implications of the transitivity parameters listed in Table 1. For instance, while in English a clause like *I like beer* (which is relatively low in transitivity in terms of parameters B, D, E, H and I) is expressed with transitive syntax, in Spanish the same meaning is expressed with only one core argument, and the experiencer is encoded in the dative case: *me gusta la cerveza* (Hopper & Thompson 1980: 254). In the history of English, we find a similar impersonal construction (see e.g. Möhlig-Falke 2012; Palander-Collin 1999), showing that a low degree of semantic transitivity used to be connected with non-transitive syntax also in English, but in Present-day English all such meanings are expressed with syntactically transitive clauses.

The Transitivity Hypothesis was designed to account for the various ways in which languages encode meanings on the clausal level, and it has mainly been used in typological studies (see e.g. Næss 2007; Nordlinger 2011). However, the hypothesis has received relatively little attention as an explanation for diachronic developments. The reason for this is not entirely clear to us; if a hypothesis is able to explain synchronic variation both within individual languages and cross-linguistically, it stands to reason that it could offer new insights into language change as well. When it comes to expressions of reflexivity in English, the change from the simple to the SELF-strategy

could be interpreted as being motivated by the low degree of semantic transitivity expressed by reflexive clauses (insofar as the development is perceived as a change from accusative pronouns, which are used to mark core arguments, to *self*-reflexives).⁴ Furthermore, as we have already seen, some verbs actually retained the older simple strategy long after most verbs had adopted the SELF-strategy. Because the distinction between dative and accusative pronouns had been lost in Early Modern English, all reflexive clauses with simple pronouns can only be analysed as syntactically transitive in EModE.

What we are interested in establishing in this paper is whether the Transitivity Hypothesis might offer insight into the fact that *sit* was one of the only verbs to retain the simple reflexive strategy for a prolonged period of time. Why would this be? Was *sit* used in contexts that were high in semantic transitivity and which would therefore support transitive syntax? Of course, when studying *sit*, the agent in the described event is typically high in potency and acts volitionally, which means that most of the clauses in our data are high in transitivity according to these two parameters. However, there are other transitivity parameters that may show variation. More specifically, clauses with *sit* may express either action or non-action (e.g. *he sits down* vs. *he sits in council*; Parameter B, Kinesis) and be aspectually telic or atelic (e.g. *he sat down* vs. *he is sitting in the garden*; Parameter C, Aspect). These parameters are in principle independent from each other. For instance, according to our analysis *he sat in the garden for three hours* would be an aspectually telic description of a non-action. In our data, however, the parameters show nearly perfect overlap: there are only seven aspectually telic clauses that express non-action in the data. Furthermore, all descriptions of atelic

⁴ Hopper and Thompson (1980: 277–278) point out that in many languages reflexives have an intermediate status between one-participant and two-participant clauses. See also Mondorf (2016: 83–84), who extends this analysis to the dummy object *it*.

eventualities represent non-action. Because of this substantial overlap, we will report our results in section 4.2 only in terms of telicity, bearing in mind that the results also concern the *kinesis* parameter of the Transitivity Hypothesis. In our analysis, we will pay special attention to a frequent collocate of *sit*, namely *down*, which marks the clause aspectually telic irrespective of the tense of the clause or grammatical aspect. If we find that *down* is particularly often used with *sit* in the simple strategy, this would suggest that transitive syntax may indeed have been supported by a high degree of semantic transitivity in case of *sit*.⁵

We have categorized our data according to the analysis of aspectual categories in Rothstein (2004). First, we take an action to be a description of an aspectually non-stative event. In case of *sit*, this means that descriptions of change in posture are considered to be higher in transitivity in terms of kinesis (e.g. *he sat down*) than descriptions of stative posture (e.g. *he was sitting in a chair*). Second, we define an aspectually telic clause as one that includes an inherent endpoint (telic point) to the eventuality, which can be either potential or already realised (see also Dahl 1981). For instance, both *he sat down* and *he is sitting down* are aspectually telic. By contrast, *he is sitting in council* or *we sat by the fire* would be aspectually atelic. Finally, in our discussion of the recent transitivization of *sit*, we pay particular attention to the degree of potency of the subject referent (Parameter H: Agency) and the affectedness of the object (Parameter I: Affectedness of O). We will argue that one reason for why *sit* developed transitive uses in clauses like *he sat me down* was the fact that the transitive

⁵ We are not sure if it is entirely appropriate to analyse *sitting down* (to indicate a change in posture) as aspectually punctual in the context of the Transitivity Hypothesis. According to textbook definitions, punctual actions have no internal temporal structure or discernible stages (e.g. Comrie 1976: 42–43), and it seems to us that the act of *sitting down* does have temporal duration, albeit a very short one. However, the same can be said for *kick*, which is given as an example of a punctual action in Hopper & Thompson (1980: 252). If *sitting down* is considered to be aspectually punctual, Parameter D (Punctuality) will also be relevant to our analysis, so that clauses which describe a change in posture (e.g. *I sat me down*) are higher in semantic transitivity than those describing stative posture (e.g. *I am sitting by the fire*).

verb *set* was associated with descriptions of events with highly potent agents, who were in direct physical control of the patient and affected a change of state in it. *Sit* was therefore better-suited for descriptions of indirect causation, as in cases where an agent directs someone to sit down instead of physically making them to do so, and where the patient can act on their own free will.

3. Corpora and databases

Our study tracks the development of *sit* from 1500 to 2009. Because of the long time span, there are some obvious data-related challenges that need to be taken into account in the investigation. First, there is currently no corpus that would cover such a long period of time. Second, there is no corpus of British English that would extend all the way from the Early Modern period (or the start of the Late Modern period) to the present day.⁶ Consequently, we have had to use corpora of both British and American English in our research. As these corpora have been compiled according to different principles, and they also represent different linguistic registers, we will study the data in smaller batches and discuss some of the developments on a rather general level: due to the differences in corpus design, it would be highly problematic to compare frequencies across the corpora.

Our Early Modern data (1500–1700) are taken from the *EEBO Corpus*. The EEBO Corpus is based on the Text Creation Partnership version of the *Early English Books*

⁶ The *Corpus of Late Modern English Texts* (Diller et al. 2011) does cover the period from 1710 to 1920. However, even though the corpus is relatively large (it includes over 34 million words of text), it did not yield relevant results.

Online (EEBO-TCP; Phase 1 Collection), and it is available for research purposes via the BYU corpus interface. The corpus includes c. 755 million words of text, and each text includes metadata with which the author and the publication year of the text can be identified. The corpus is also annotated for parts of speech, although in this study we did not exploit this feature. The great benefit of the EEBO Corpus is its big size. To compare, the Early Modern part of the Helsinki Corpus, which was used e.g. in Peitsara (1997), only includes 551,000 words of text (see Kytö 1996). On the downside, the EEBO corpus is rather unstructured when compared to a carefully compiled resource like the Helsinki Corpus. For instance, no attempt has been made to balance the EEBO Corpus according to genre. Furthermore, the corpus may include several editions of a single text, which means that if the search results are not checked and sorted manually, the corpus may yield too conservative results. In this study, we have removed all duplicates from our material to ensure that the data are not skewed because of multiple editions.

Our eighteenth-century data come from the *Old Bailey Corpus* (OBC; Huber et al. 2012). The OBC includes accounts of spoken witness testimonies as they were reported in a periodical called *The Proceedings of the Old Bailey*. The eighteenth-century section of the OBC (starting from 1720) includes c. 5.3 million words of text. The corpus is a particularly interesting resource to study because it provides researchers with representations of spoken language from various layers of society and brings us as close to the speech of eighteenth-century Londoners as possible (see e.g. Huber 2007 for a detailed discussion). In our study, we are mainly interested in seeing whether the OBC includes examples of the emerging transitive use of *sit*. Although the corpus comes with rich sociolinguistic annotation, the topic of our inquiry is unfortunately too infrequent to permit a sociolinguistic analysis of the spreading innovation.

Finally, our data for 1810–2009 come from *The Corpus of Historical American English* (COHA; Davies 2010). COHA includes c. 400 million words of text, and it presents a relatively balanced sampling of texts from four genres: fiction, newspapers, non-fiction books and popular magazines. However, the relative proportion of each genre does not remain entirely stable in the nineteenth-century sub-corpus; for instance, newspapers are only included in the corpus from the 1860s onwards. Like the EEBO Corpus, COHA is also POS-annotated, and the metadata include information about the text's publication year and author. In this study, we examined COHA in order to investigate the most recent developments concerning the transitivization of *sit*.

All corpora were queried by using lexeme-based wildcard searches. The first part of the query included the forms *sit** and *sat**, which ensured that we would retrieve at least the great majority of all grammatical forms and spelling variants of *sit* and *sat* (e.g. *sit*, *sitteth*, *sittes*, *sittyng*, *sat*, *sate*, *satte*).⁷ The second part of the query included the first letter of the reflexive forms that could follow *sit*: *m**, *y**, *t**, *h**, *u**, *o**.⁸ It was necessary to use the wildcard function in these cases as well, as the texts from the Early Modern period include a great degree of spelling variation. We also studied the use of the transitive verb *set* in the EEBO Corpus. As the frequency of *set* is extremely high, we decided to focus on instances where *set* is followed by an object pronoun and *down*. We used the following query to extract the relevant forms from the corpus: *set* m*|y*|t*|h*|u* do**. Once all the relevant forms were retrieved from the corpora, we normalised the frequency data according to twenty-year periods. We decided to use this periodization simply because of ease of visualization – it holds no other significance.

⁷ An anonymous reviewer points out that dialectal forms *sutten*, *sot*, and *seet* were still in use in the Early Modern Period. We rechecked the EEBO Corpus for these forms but could not find relevant tokens.

⁸ The queries were designed to retrieve the following forms and all their spelling variants: *me/myself*, *you/yourself/yourselves*, *thee/thyself/thyselfes*, *him/her/himself/herself*, *us*, *ourselves*, *them/themselves/theirselves*.

4. Simple and SELF-reflexives with *sit* and the transitivization of *sit down*

4.1. Sit in the Early Modern period: Simple and SELF-strategies in the EEBO Corpus

Previous literature has mostly discussed the variation between the simple and the SELF-strategies in terms of systematic replacement: the SELF-strategy gradually took over the function of reflexive marking from the simple strategy in all contexts of use. However, this macro-trend does not accurately depict the changes in the use of *sit* in the Early Modern period. Figure 1 shows that the introduction of the SELF-strategy took place relatively late in case of *sit*: while most verbs had already started to favour the SELF-strategy over the simple strategy by the early sixteenth century, with *sit* the SELF-strategy remains relatively marginal for the entire Early Modern period. The frequency of *self*-forms does increase in the late sixteenth century and remains relatively stable throughout the seventeenth century, but it never surpasses the frequency of the simple strategy (see Appendix 1 for absolute numbers).

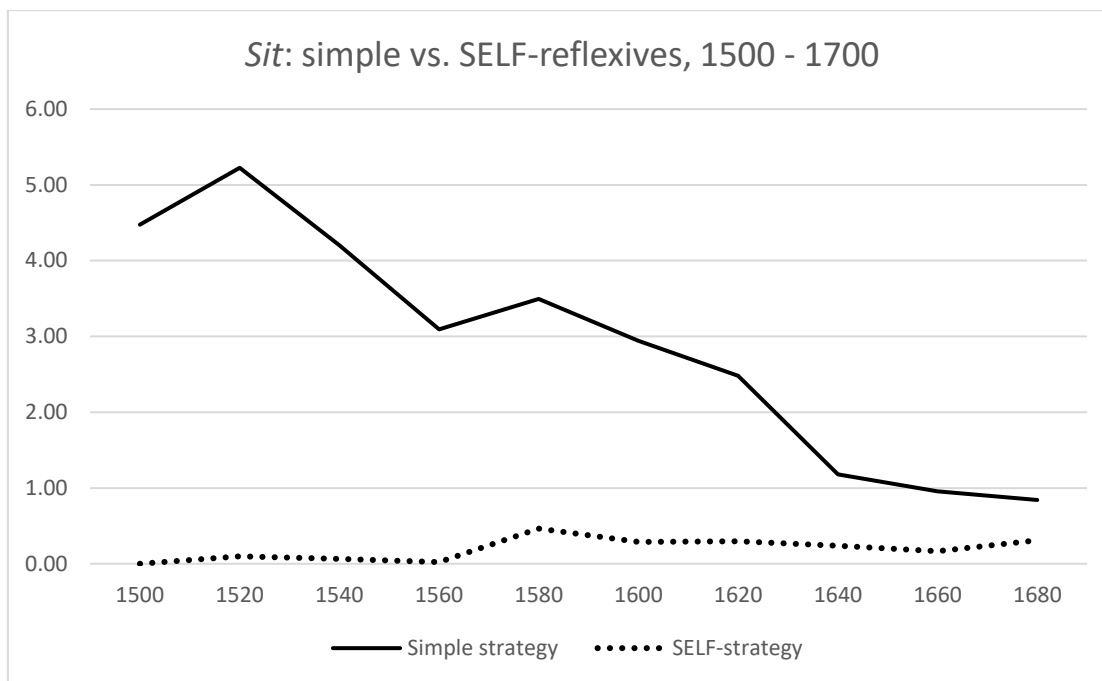


Figure 1. The simple and SELF-strategies with *sit*, 1500–1700. EEBO Corpus.

Normalised to 1/1,000,000 words.

The simple strategy, on the other hand, gradually decreases in frequency. This development starts in the 1520s, and by 1700, the normalised frequency has gone down from 5.2 to 0.9 tokens per one million words. It is unlikely that the starting point of this decreasing trend is a coincidence. As discussed, *self*-forms became generally more frequent than simple pronouns in reflexive patterns in the late 1400s and the early 1500s. It is therefore conceivable that the fall of the simple strategy with *sit* is related to this macro-level process: as the simple reflexives became less frequent with other verbs, they also became less frequent with *sit*. Figure 1 also shows that the demise of the simple strategy follows a reversed S-curve with a rapid onset from c. 1520 to 1560, a plateauing period from c. 1560 to 1600, and again a faster decline thereafter. That we are able to see an S-curve in the first place might indicate that *sit* developed rather independently of other verbs or verb types. In the very least, it follows a different S-curve than most verbs which had adopted the SELF-strategy by the early 1500s (for

discussions on S-curves and language change, see e.g. Nevalainen 2000: 339; Croft 2000: 183; Denison 2003).

We can interpret the data depicted in Figure 1 as showing two simultaneous large-scale developments. On the one hand, the simple reflexive strategy is on its way out of English grammar, and this macro-level change also affects the use of *sit*. On the other hand, we see evidence of another trend whereby many verbs that could pattern with reflexive marking in older forms of English gradually lost this potential. It should be noted in this context that, as with many other verbs, reflexive marking with *sit* has always been optional. *Sit* has been used intransitively since the Old English period, and according to Peitsara (1997: 322–323) and data from the EEBO Corpus,⁹ the intransitive pattern has always been the dominant pattern. Consequently, the decline of reflexive uses of *sit* in Figure 1 should be taken to depict a gradual loss of a secondary usage pattern, and implicitly, the reinforcement of the primary intransitive pattern.

Importantly, and somewhat surprisingly, Figure 1 also suggests that the two reflexive strategies are not linguistic variants: the simple strategy is not replaced by the SELF-strategy in the period studied. This raises the question of whether the two strategies might in part have been used to describe different kinds of events in Early Modern English, and this is in fact what our data suggest. Examples (9) to (14) illustrate the typical usage of both the simple and the SELF-strategies with *sit*.

(9) Here will I **sit me downe** and fixe mine eye upon the ruines of you wretched towne. (EEBO, 1594)

(10) I **sate me downe** there vpon the stayres or steps. (EEBO, 1623)

⁹ Unfiltered corpus data suggest that only c. 10 per cent of all tokens of *sit* were reflexive in the Early Modern period.

- (11) We **sat us down** under the shadow of a great tree that stood by it self.
(EEBO, 1653)
- (12) ... by the counsaile and aduise off certeine persons he returned and **sat him self downe** in the pastors place with the seniors. (EEBO, 1574)
- (13) With that they **sate themselves** to eat, which Clarinda did very heartily.
(EEBO, 1692)
- (14) He **sitteth himself** in council dayly, and disposeth affairs of most weight in his own person. (EEBO, 1655)

In examples (9) to (11), we see the simple strategy used first in the present tense (Example 9), and then in the past tense (Examples 10 and 11). In all these cases, the pattern is followed by the adverb *down*, indicating a change in posture and the completion of the action. In (12) to (14), on the other hand, we see the SELF-strategy used in the past tense (Examples 12 and 13) and the present tense (Example 14). Similarly to examples (9)–(11), example (12) is also followed by *down*. Example (13), by contrast, is used without *down*, while example (14) illustrates another meaning of *sit*: ‘to sit in council’.¹⁰

In order to tease out the subtle differences in the use of the two reflexive strategies with *sit*, we will now turn our attention to the question of what kinds of events were described with the simple and the SELF-strategies from the perspective of lexical aspect. More specifically, we are interested in determining whether the simple strategy was associated with descriptions of aspectually telic events, and consequently, with meanings related to a high degree of semantic transitivity.

¹⁰ An anonymous reviewer points out that the *self*-form in examples like (14) can also be read to indicate emphasis. We agree, and we acknowledge that while we have done our best to exclude clearly emphatic uses from our data, some of the forms included in the analysis remain ambiguous.

4.2. Expressing telic and atelic aspect with the simple and the SELF-strategies

In section 2, we hypothesized that the prolonged use of the simple strategy with *sit* may have been supported by meanings associated with a high degree of semantic transitivity. Our data provide support to this hypothesis, showing that the simple pattern is more strongly associated with telic descriptions than the SELF-strategy. Figure 2 shows that the proportion of telic uses ranges from 93% to 97% in the simple strategy,¹¹ while the corresponding proportion for the SELF-strategy varies from 33% (1600–1620) to 91% (1660–1680). (See Appendix 2 for absolute numbers).

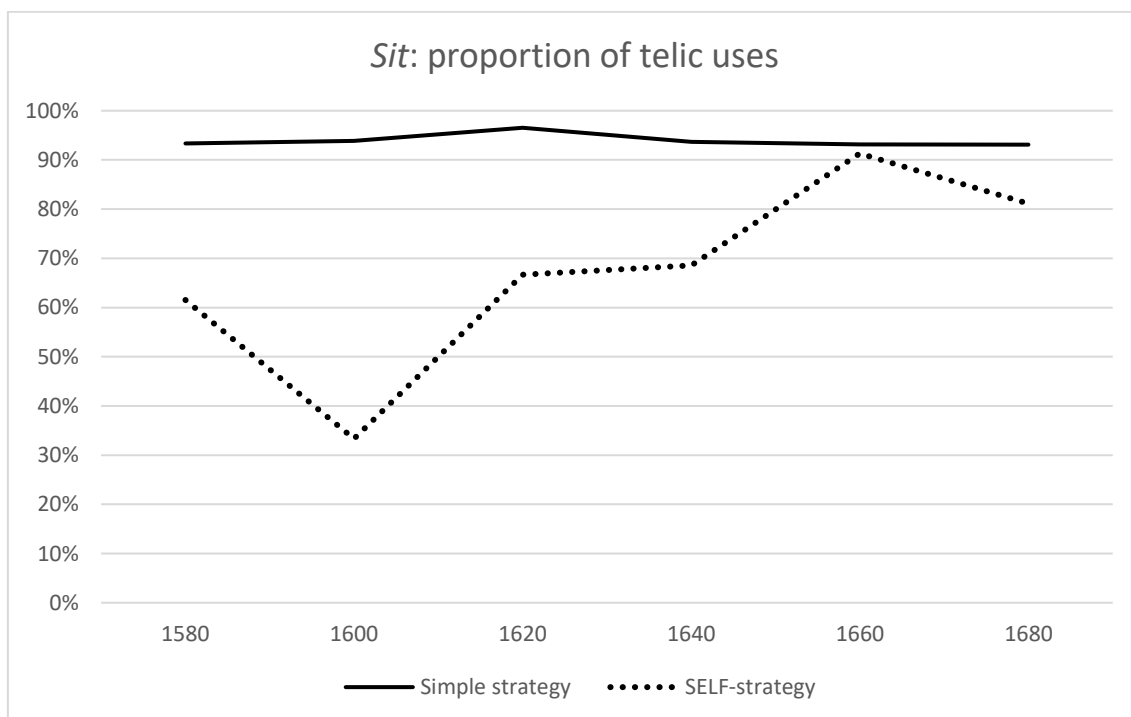


Figure 2. *Sit*: the proportion of telic descriptions with the two reflexive strategies, 1580–1700. EEBO Corpus.

¹¹ Here, we only discuss data from 1580 to 1700 as the frequency of *self*-reflexives is too low to be compared with the simple strategy prior to the 1580s.

In addition to the difference in the use of the two reflexive strategies depicted in Figure 2, the strategies also differ in terms of their co-occurrence with *down*, which functions as an overt marker of telicity with *sit*. While *down* is a frequent collocate of *sit* in both reflexive strategies, our data show that it was particularly associated with the simple strategy in the period studied (1580–1700): 981 out of 1,092 tokens of *sit* are used together with *down* in the simple strategy (89.8%), while in the SELF-strategy, only 82 out of 163 tokens of *sit* co-occur with *down* (50.3%). In other words, instead of being used to express physical posture, the simple strategy was specifically used to indicate a change in posture, and this was overtly encoded in the clause by using the telic marker *down*. Figure 3 shows the proportion of the use of *down* in both strategies. Absolute numbers are given in Appendix 3.

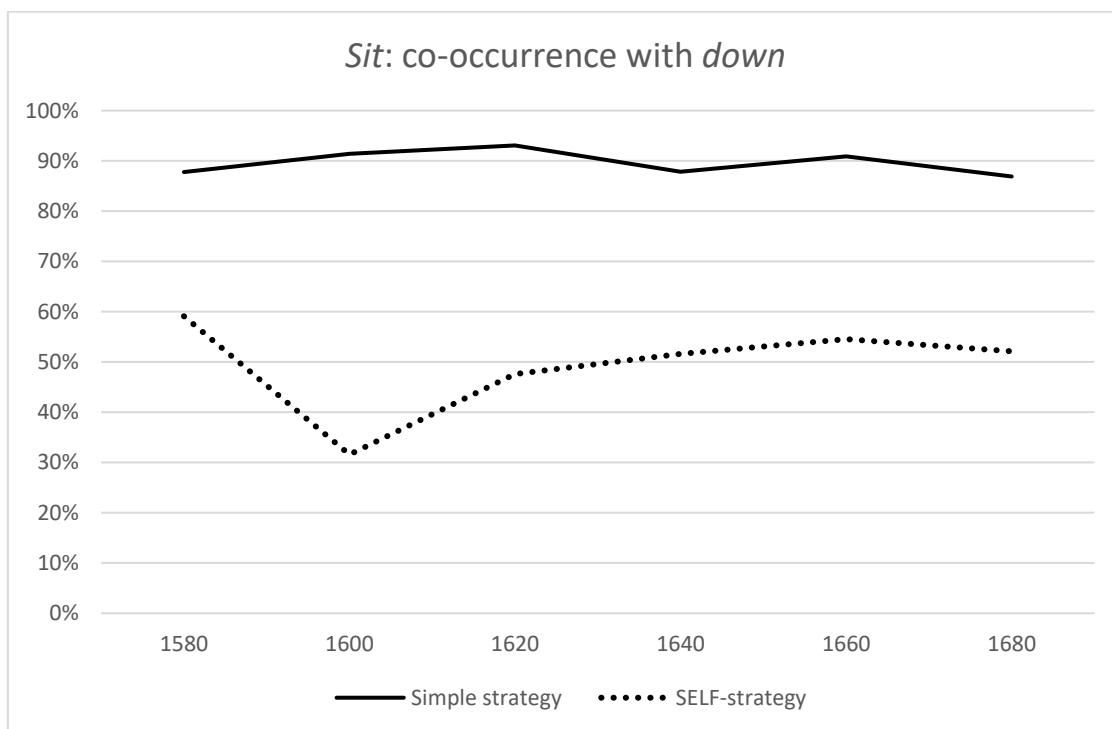


Figure 3. *Sit down* with the simple and SELF-strategies, 1580–1700. EEBO Corpus.

To illustrate the difference in the use of the two strategies, let us take a look at some representative examples of the use of the SELF-strategy in the EEBO Corpus.

- (15) When Iethro saw Moses his sonne in law, **sitting himselfe alone** and iudging the people, from morning vnto even, he did not lesse then reprocue him for it. (EEBO, 1599)
- (16) For it was the manner in those daies the king should determine causes of great waight **sitting himselfe in open court**. (EEBO, 1601)
- (17) After the end of this speech I deliuered Sir Thomas Greshams letters, when as he tooke me by the hand, and led me downe a long court to a palace where there ranne a faire fountaine of water, and there **sitting himselfe in a chaire**, he commanded me to sit downe in another, and there called for such simple musicians as he had. (EEBO, 1600)
- (18) He **sate himself down** in a book-seller's shop. (EEBO, 1601)

In (15), the SELF-strategy is used to express posture, and the event described is aspectually stative (and therefore atelic; see Rothstein 2004: 14–17). In (16), on the other hand, we find the *self*-form used in the sense ‘to sit in court’, while in (17) the SELF-strategy is used to indicate a change in posture without *down*, and in (18) with *down*. Significantly, none of the uses exemplified from (15) to (17) are commonly expressed with the simple strategy, which – as we have seen – is very strongly associated with the kind of usage in (18), i.e. a change in posture and the use of *down*. The stative meaning in (15) is very rarely expressed with the simple strategy in our data, and we found no examples of ‘to sit in court’ expressed with the simple strategy.¹²

In sum, we conclude that in the Early Modern period the simple strategy was typically used to express a change in posture. In other words, it was particularly often

¹² An anonymous reviewer raises the possibility that the question may also be about the fact that simple pronouns cannot be used in an emphatic function. As noted previously, the *self*-forms are indeed often ambiguous between emphatic and non-emphatic readings, and we cannot completely rule out this possibility. We will discuss this issue in more detail in section 5.

used in descriptions of aspectually telic events. The connection between telicity and the simple strategy is particularly evident in the frequent use of the adverb *down*. The SELF-strategy, by contrast, shows greater variation in its use. In addition to descriptions of telic eventualities, the SELF-strategy was also used to describe different kinds of atelic/stative meanings, such as sitting in a chair/throne or sitting in judgment. Furthermore, the frequency of *down* is generally much lower in the SELF-strategy than in the simple strategy. Based on these findings, we conclude that the simple strategy was indeed strongly connected with meanings that are high in transitivity in the sense of Hopper and Thompson (1980), and this may have affected its longevity in the Early Modern period.

4.3. *The transitivization of sit down*

4.3.1. *Overlap between sit and set and early examples of the transitivization of sit down*

In this section, we focus on the second research question of our study, the transitivization of *sit down*. Before discussing the data, however, it is necessary to pay attention to a phenomenon that will be relevant to our analysis: the overlap in the use of the intransitive verb *sit* and the transitive verb *set* that is evident in both Middle English and Early Modern English texts (see OED s.v. *set* 3). We have not been able to identify any functional motivation for this overlap in our data or in previous literature (e.g. Visser 1963: 322). Indeed, while in principle *setting one/oneself down* might indicate a difference in meaning from *sitting one/oneself down*, in that *setting one/oneself down*

may not indicate a sitting posture, there are corpus examples like (19) and (20) in which a sitting posture is clearly indicated with *set*.¹³

- (19) He setled himselfe to heare the rest of the seruice, and **setting him downe in his chaire**, hee came to his first admiration... (EEBO, 1612)
- (20) ... and coming into the church, **he set him down in a seat** just before master clark. (EEBO, 1660)

Our data on *set down* consist of 139 tokens from 1553 to 1685. The data show that when *set* was used in its causative sense (i.e. when it was not confused with *sit*), the clause describes an event that was high in semantic transitivity according to a number of parameters: a potent and volitional agent (Parameters E and H) affects a change of state in a highly individuated patient (Parameters I and J). Furthermore, the clause is a description of an action (Parameter B) that includes an inherent end-point (Parameter C). If the patient was human, this meant that they were either carried, physically assisted or forcefully set down, as exemplified in (21)–(23).

- (21) ... and **the quene of Orqueny** toke Arthur by the hande & **set him downe** by her (EEBO, 1560)
- (22) **He which carried the valiant Frenchman prisoner**, was constrained to **set him downe** vpon the hard ground (EEBO, 1601)
- (23) **I** raised him vp, then **set him downe** againe, then puld him here (EEBO, 1606)

¹³ The overlap may simply have been due to the vowel quality in *sit* and *set*, which may have been similar enough for some speakers to use the two verbs interchangeably. Indeed, our data also include examples of *sit* used instead of *set*, as in “to prepare and sit [pro *set*] themselves for the exhibition” and “to sit [pro *set*] himself with horse and arms”.

Bearing in mind that *set down* was used to describe events that were high in semantic transitivity in the EEBO data, let us now observe a new meaning for *set down* that emerged in the late seventeenth century: ‘to cause or allow (someone) to alight from a vehicle’ (OED, s.v. *set down* 4b). Examples (24) and (25) illustrate this new usage.

(24) ... then I desired the coachman **to set me down**. (EEBO, 1664)

(25) **You shall set me down** in Lincolus-inn-fields then. (EEBO, 1672)

The meaning expressed in (21)–(23), where the patient was physically assisted or forcefully set down, contrasts in two important ways with the meaning illustrated in (24) and (25). First, in (24) and (25) there is no direct contact between the coachman and the passenger, at least not necessarily; the agent is therefore not described to be as potent in these examples as in (21)–(23). Second, although the coachman is in control of the coach, the passenger is in full control of alighting from the coach, and so the patient is not affected by the action to the same extent as in examples (21)–(23). In short, *set* had previously not been associated with the kind of indirect causation exemplified in (24) and (25).

We would like to argue that this usage provided a particularly favourable context for *sit* to be used transitively instead of *set*. The occasional confusion in the use of *sit* and *set* can be regarded as a precondition for the early transitive uses of *sit*, but we suggest that what truly facilitated the transitivization process was the fact that *sit* was not associated with the same semantic constraints regarding the high potency of the agent and the affectedness of the patient as *set*. The first examples of transitive uses of *sit* in our data come from the 1720s and the 1730s (from *the Old Bailey Corpus*).

(26) ... **when he sat her down**, he drove away with the cheeses. (OBC, 1727)

- (27) ... and then from thence we all, but Howard, went home in a Coach; **they sat me down at my Door**, and then they discharged the Coach. (OBC, 1733)

It should be noted that this usage is very rare in our data with only four tokens in the eighteenth-century sub-corpus (there are three more tokens in the nineteenth-century section of the OBC). Nevertheless, the data do show that the earliest transitive uses of *sit* took place in a context that was associated with a low degree of semantic transitivity. After *sit* became associated with transitive uses in these contexts, its usage started to extend to contexts illustrated in (21)–(23) – the ones where the agent is in direct contact with the patient and physically assists them to sit down, as in (28) and (29). The difference between examples (21)–(23) and examples (28) and (29) is, of course, that in (28) and (29) the patient’s sitting posture is implied. In (22) and (23), by contrast, it is also possible that the patient was set down in a lying posture. There are altogether ten tokens of this particular usage in the entire OBC, five of which are from the eighteenth century.

- (28) They [...] carried me into the Room where the Boy was, and **sat me down by the Fire**. (OBC, 1735)
- (29) When they had got me into the house, **they sat me down** gently into a chair, they did not hurt me at all. (OBC, 1745)

To sum up this section, we have seen that *sit down* started to be used in transitive constructions in the early 1700s. We have suggested that this development was facilitated by two factors: i) the overlapping use of *sit* and *set*, and ii) the creation of a new meaning (‘to allow someone to alight from a vehicle’) with which *set* was not perfectly compatible. Furthermore, it is possible, in principle at least, that the transitivization of *sit* may also have been facilitated by its persisting association with

transitive syntax in the simple reflexive strategy. In the following section, we will discuss the most recent developments of this transitivization process by studying data from nineteenth- and twentieth-century American English.

4.3.2. Recent developments in the transitivization of *sit down*: evidence from COHA

The data from COHA show that *sit down* was used in nineteenth-century American English in much the same way as it was in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century British English. First, both the simple and the SELF-strategies are attested in the data, although they are on a path of steady decline (Figure 4; see Appendix 4 for absolute frequencies).

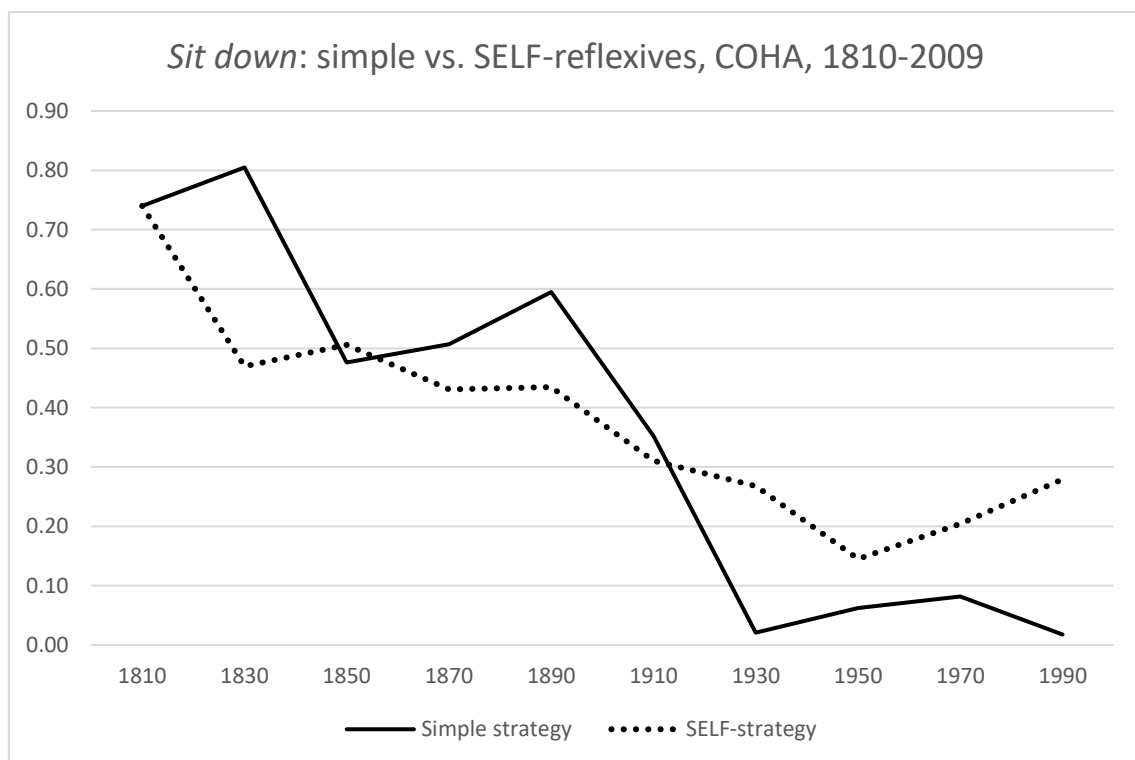


Figure 4. *Sit down*: the simple and SELF-strategies in American English, 1810–2009. COHA. Normalised to 1/1,000,000 words.

When it comes to transitive uses of *sit down*, COHA includes examples that are similar to examples (28) and (29), which were taken from the OBC. In (30) to (32), the agent either carries the patient or lifts them up from the ground and then makes them sit down.¹⁴

- (30) ... and scrambling up the rocks where the waves could not reach her, **he sat her down** and took breath. (COHA, Fiction, 1847)
- (31) ... **the old lady** would shake her, and bring her back, and **sit her down** on the chair so hard as to make her cry with pain... (COHA, Fiction, 1853)
- (32) **He** lifted him high and **sat him down** emphatically, but not injuriously. (COHA, Fiction, 1864)

Starting from the 1870s, we begin to find examples of transitive uses of *sit down* where the agent is not necessarily as high in potency as in examples (30)–(32). While it is possible that the patient was physically made to sit down in examples (33) and (34), it is equally possible that they were simply gestured or told to sit down.

- (33) And when **she** saw his face pale with suffering, she forgot all about the rehearsal, and shook his hand with sisterly heartiness – the word “sisterly” came to her mind most opportunely – and looked at him with the utmost gladness, and **sat him down** by the window. (COHA, Fiction, 1873)
- (34) **The Governor** took me at once to his own room, and **sat me down** at the table. (COHA, Fiction, 1899)

Despite the occasional examples of (potentially) indirect causation represented in (33) and (34), most transitive uses of *sit down* still express direct causation in the 1900s and

¹⁴ Examples (30) and (32) could also be analysed in terms of the overlapping use of *sit* and *set*. Example (31), on the other hand, clearly involves setting the patient in a sitting posture.

the 1910s. However, things start to change in the 1920s and the 1930s. First, we begin to see ambiguous cases where the patient is first *led*, *taken*, *brought* or *escorted* into a room and then *sat down*. All these verbs can be conceptualized as describing an event where the agent is in direct contact with the patient while leading them into a room, and then physically assists them to take a seat (i.e. the agent is highly potent), but they can also be read so that the patient is following the agent and verbally directed or motioned to sit down (i.e. the potency of the agent is lower). Examples (35) to (37) illustrate such ambiguous uses from the 1920s and the 1930s, and Figure 5 presents our data from COHA divided according to the frequency of direct causatives, indirect causatives and ambiguous cases (see Appendix 5 for absolute frequencies).¹⁵

- (35) **Daniel led** Aunt Matty back into the house and **sat her down** on a sofa in the library. (COHA, Fiction, 1930)
- (36) I reckon what they said was true, but **he brought** that child home and **sat her down** at the table with all the rest of them (COHA, Fiction, 1935)
- (37) “Dry your eyes,” **Myrtle** said, **leading** Margaret to the divan, **sitting her down**, and then seating herself beside her friend. (COHA, Fiction, 1938)

¹⁵ In Figure 5, we have only classified cases like (35)–(37), where *sit N down* is preceded by a verb like *lead* or *bring*, as ambiguous.

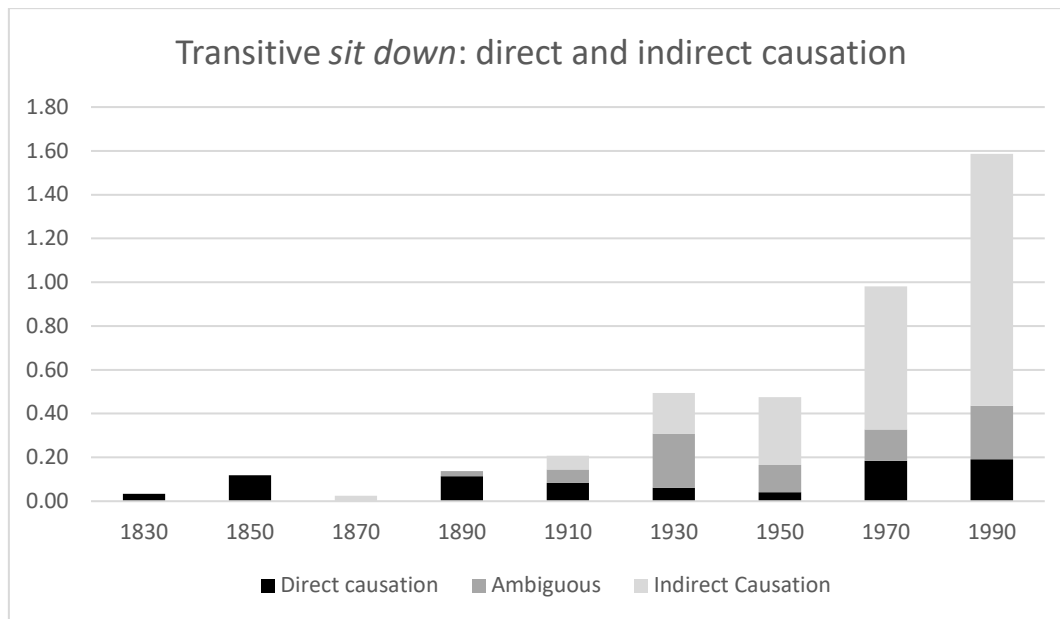


Figure 5. Transitive *sit down*: direct causatives, indirect causatives and ambiguous cases, 1830–2009. COHA. Normalised to 1/1,000,000 words.

It is, of course, true that the transitive construction itself assigns a certain degree of control to the agent, and it is consequently easy to find examples where the patient is given little choice in deciding whether to sit down or not; in (38), for example, the patient is practically forced to sit down for a discussion. However, the patient's act of assuming a sitting posture is not overtly described to be physically affected by the agent of the clause, and hence we have categorized this kind of usage as an example of indirect causation.

- (38) **His father sat him down** and made him choose which parent he would live with. (COHA, Magazines, 2005)

Indeed, in many cases the potency of the agent is difficult to assess; it is always possible that the agent physically directs the patient to take a seat, but this cannot be deduced from the context. However, our data do include examples where the agent is clearly very low in potency, as in (39), where two journalists discuss the possibility of inviting

Bill Clinton, who at the time was a presidential candidate for the Democratic Party in the U.S., for an interview. Such examples can be classified as indirect causatives with high confidence.

- (39) Ken, do you think **we can sit Clinton down** and have him talk to the camera? (COHA, Magazines, 1992)

To summarize, our data suggest that the recent transitivity of *sit down* has proceeded from infrequent expressions of direct causation to relatively frequent expressions of indirect causation. Data from the 1920s to the 1940s suggest that this process may have been facilitated by ambiguous uses where the agent was described as leading or escorting the patient into a room, but physical contact between the two participants was not made explicit. The most recent dataset from 1990–2009, on the other hand, shows that in Present-day American English, the main function of the transitive *sit down* is to express indirect causation. According to our analysis, we conclude that *sit down* has thus filled a functional slot that *set* was unable to fill due to its association with expressions of high semantic transitivity.

5. Discussion and conclusions

In this paper we have discussed the development of a single verb in the history of English: *sit*. Our goal has been to study the variation between the simple and the SELF reflexive strategies in the Early Modern period and the transitivity of *sit down* in Late Modern English. In our analysis of the two reflexive strategies, we paid particular attention to the linguistic contexts in which the strategies were used. The motivation for

studying this question arose in part from the fact that earlier studies of variation in reflexive strategies were based on relatively small datasets (Peitsara 1997 in particular). Consequently, while previous studies were able to provide fascinating insights into many aspects of the variation and change of the English reflexive system, they necessarily suffered from the limited amount of data on which the analyses were based. By focusing on a single verb, and by comparing the variation between the simple and the SELF-strategies in different linguistic contexts, we hope to have shown that it is worthwhile to look back on previous research with new data and see if we can uncover more detailed information about a historical phenomenon that has already been subject to meticulous research in the past.

In section 4.1, we showed that, as far as *sit* is concerned, the simple and the SELF-strategies did not occupy the same functional space and that they were not truly linguistic variants. In particular, the simple strategy was strongly associated with the use of *down*, which served as an aspectual marker to indicate that the action included an inherent end-point (a change in posture). However, there is one confounding factor that we briefly mentioned in our discussion of the use of the two reflexive strategies; namely, the fact that the *self*-forms might in some cases indicate emphasis instead of reflexivity. More specifically, we cannot entirely rule out the possibility that the *self*-forms that were used in some of the atelic descriptions ('to sit in council/judgment') are emphatic instead of reflexive, and the fact that simple reflexives are not attested in this particular usage in our data may suggest that the *self*-forms should indeed be understood to indicate emphasis. However, even if this is the case, it will not have a substantial effect on our results: if we remove these data from our analysis, 79% (128/163) of all *self*-reflexives are used in telic descriptions in 1580–1700, while the corresponding

proportion for simple reflexives is 94% (1,027/1,092). This difference is still statistically highly significant ($p < 0.0001$).

As argued, our findings can be explained particularly well by the Transitivity Hypothesis: a high degree of semantic transitivity supported the persistence of transitive syntax in the simple reflexive strategy. We are not aware of other studies that explain historical variation and change in the English reflexive system from the perspective of the Transitivity Hypothesis, and our results suggest that it would be interesting to investigate other verbs and verb types from this angle as well. While it is possible that *sit* has developed along a path of its own – as might be suggested by the S-curve in Figure 1 – it is also possible that the Transitivity Hypothesis could explain the variation in the use of the reflexive strategies with other verbs. One obvious candidate to study would be *lie*, which is in many ways similar to *sit*: not only can it be used with the simple strategy in Present-day English (albeit in a very restricted way), it has also been confused with its transitive counterpart *lay* since the Middle English period (just like *sit* and *set*; see e.g. Visser 1963: 322).

However, it should also be pointed out that although the Transitivity Hypothesis has been credited for establishing significant connections between semantic event structure and syntactic structure, the theory has also faced some criticism. For example, as already pointed out in Tsunoda (1985), Hopper and Thompson (1980) do not consider the possibility that the transitivity parameters might affect syntactic structure to different degrees. Furthermore, the Transitivity Hypothesis makes some counterintuitive predictions, suggesting, for example, that a one-actant clause like *Susan left* is in fact higher in semantic transitivity than a two-actant clause like *John likes beer* (see e.g. Lazard 2002: 178). It is obvious that if the Transitivity Hypothesis is found to be useful in the description of historical transitivity and/or intransitivity processes, there

are still open questions in the theory that need to be resolved (see e.g. LaPolla et al. 2011).

In our second case study, we argued that the transitivization of *sit* was facilitated by the fact that the transitive verb *set* was associated with features of high transitivity and was therefore ill-suited for expressing the meanings which emerged with the transitive *sit down*, i.e. different kinds of indirect causation. In addition to semantic transitivity, there have been large-scale processes at work in English grammar which may also have had an indirect impact on the transitivization of *sit*. First, McMillion (2006) shows that the number of labile verbs (verbs that can be used both transitively and intransitively; e.g. *he broke the window* vs. *the window broke*) has steadily increased in English throughout the Modern period, and it is plausible that this tendency may also have supported the transitivization of *sit*. Second, as observed in Algeo (2006), for example, many verbs that used to take prepositional complements in earlier forms of English can now be used transitively, particularly in American English (e.g. *he graduated high school* vs. *he graduated from high school*). Some studies (e.g. Kirchner 1955) suggest that this trend can be traced all the way back to the Early Modern period (see also Rohdenburg 2009; Callies 2018). Indeed, in addition to the semantic factors affecting the transitivization of *sit* that were discussed in this paper, the potential effect of these macro-processes should certainly be acknowledged, even if the extent of their influence may not be possible to assess or quantify with precision.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. The absolute frequencies of the simple and the SELF-strategies, 1500–1700. EEBO Corpus.

	1500	1520	1540	1560	1580	1600	1620	1640	1660	1680
Simple	10	53	67	133	196	244	202	173	132	145
Self	0	1	1	1	26	24	24	35	23	53

Appendix 2. The absolute frequencies of telic descriptions in the simple and the SELF-strategies, 1580–1700. EEBO Corpus.

	1580	1600	1620	1640	1660	1680
Simple	183	229	195	162	123	135
Self	16	8	16	24	21	43

Appendix 3. Occurrence of *down* in the simple and the SELF-strategies, 1580–1700. EEBO Corpus. Absolute frequencies.

	1580	1600	1620	1640	1660	1680
Simple	172	223	188	152	120	126
Self	13	6	10	16	12	25

Appendix 4. The absolute frequencies of the simple and the SELF-strategies, 1810–2009. COHA.

	1810	1830	1850	1870	1890	1910	1930	1950	1970	1990
Simple	6	24	16	20	26	17	1	3	4	1
Self	6	14	17	17	19	15	13	7	10	16

Appendix 5. Transitive *sit down*: direct and indirect causatives and ambiguous cases, 1830–2009. COHA. Absolute frequencies.

	1830	1850	1870	1890	1910	1930	1950	1970	1990
Direct causation	1	4	0	5	4	3	2	9	11
Indirect causation	0	0	1	0	3	9	15	32	66
Ambiguous	0	0	0	1	3	12	6	7	14
Total	1	4	1	6	10	24	23	48	91