

WHAT MAKES A SYNTACTIC CHANGE STOP?
ON THE DECLINE OF PERIPHRASTIC *DO* IN EARLY MODERN
ENGLISH AFFIRMATIVE DECLARATIVE SENTENCES

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ABSTRACT

In Early Modern English, from about 1500 onwards, the periphrastic *do*-construction developed in all types of sentences, including affirmative declarative sentences. However, in the latter this development came to a halt and the number of such constructions continually declined in the course of the 17th century. This paper pursues the question of what hidden linguistic factors might have promoted the change and why it finally failed to succeed. Therefore it examines the use of periphrastic *do* in affirmative declarative sentences in the Early Modern English part of the *Hel-sinki Corpus*. In order to identify possible reasons for its decline, the study first discusses the origin of periphrastic *do* and then concentrates on the stylistic and functional variation that existed between the use of the innovative and the conservative construction. It will be shown what particular morphological, semantic and syntactic functions *do* could fulfill in such periphrases and why neither of these uses was conventionalized in the language.

1. Introduction

In Early Modern English, from about 1500 onwards, the periphrastic *do*-construction developed in all types of sentences. However, the rapid increase did not affect affirmative declarative sentences. After an incipient rise in the first half of the 16th century, this development came to a halt and the number of periphrastic *do*-constructions continually decreased in affirmative declarative sentences.

Aitchison (1991: 97) states: "...there are hidden linguistic factors which can either promote or hold back a change". We know a number of factors that can push forward a syntactic change: grammaticalization, typological constraints, phonological changes, analogical extensions, language contact, etc. In any case the change begins slowly with individual or cumulative innovations leading to a

situation of linguistic variation. Language change as such combines two phases: innovation and spread. Only if an innovation gets a foothold in a particular environment can we call it a change. With respect to syntactic changes Aitchison states that they also seem to follow the typical s-curve slow-quick-quick-slow pattern associated with sound change. It starts out very slowly, offering the language user the choice between an innovation and a well-established, conservative construction. Then, suddenly, the innovation expands into numerous other environments, i.e., it spreads through the society of speakers and through various linguistic contexts. Towards the end of the change the spread slows down again. Aitchison provides evidence for this scenario from the development of the progressive form and the *going to*-future in English.

However, sometimes an incipient change fails to “succeed”. There are several attempts to account for this selective failure of periphrastic *do*: Some authors make the regularization process responsible (cf. Ellegård 1953; Rissanen 1991), others provide a functional explanation, in the sense that the reasons for its incipient use by the time of its decline no longer existed and its use would no longer answer any functional needs in affirmative declarative sentences (cf. Smith 1996: 160), Denison (1993: 467) points to the fact that affirmative declaratives are different to the other “NICE” contexts for *do*, so that *do* does not really function as an operator here. Similarly, in a generative framework, Kroch (1989) states that the use of *do* in affirmative declaratives is not V to I raising.

If we look for the factors that held back the change, it seems necessary to identify the factors that had caused this particular innovation and the kind of variation that existed between the use of the innovative and the conservative construction. The following paper will be based on an analysis of periphrastic *do* in affirmative declarative sentences in the Early Modern English part of the *Helsinki Corpus*. I will try to find out whether its use was restricted to specific environments, thus answering certain functional or stylistic needs, or whether it was used in various kinds of environment and thus in free variation with the simple verb form. On that basis I hope to be able to get closer to the hidden linguistic factors that might have held back the change.

2. The emergence of periphrastic *do*

The origin of periphrastic *do* may be explained from different points of view, concerning either the innovation or the spread. The innovation itself may have been caused by language internal factors (cf. Engblom 1938; Visser 1963-1973) or imported through language contact. The occurrence of similar constructions in other Germanic languages (cf. Tieken-Boon van Ostade 1988) supports an internally based explanation, the main verb *do* having undergone a process of grammaticalization via semantic bleaching and syntactic reanalysis, with *do*

ending up as a grammatical operator, semantically empty, but syntactically obligatory. The evolution of periphrastic *do* may have been brought about by analogy with the increasing use of other periphrastic verb constructions towards the end of Middle English and in the course of Early Modern English. Further support may have been provided by foreign influence, in particular through Celtic substratum, if we consider that similar constructions are found in Celtic languages (cf. Preusler 1956; Poussa 1990) and that in the 16th and 17th centuries, the period in which we can observe the most drastic increase in the use of periphrastic *do*, many Irish speakers shifted to English bringing forth a new variety of English, Irish English, in which the use of periphrastic *do* even today is much higher than in Standard English.

The spread of a new construction may be due to various factors, too. These may be on the one hand sociolinguistically based, like fashion, prestige, group identity, and on the other hand functionally based: Once a new optional stylistic device has acquired a rather high functional load, it may be considered highly obligatory and such become part of the grammar of the language.¹

It seems as if the periphrastic *do* construction did not emerge because there was a need for it in the language, but only as a new stylistic device, which in certain contexts became more and more obligatory in the process of an ongoing grammaticalization, i.e. in interrogative and negative contexts, where it took over the function of question marker (formerly expressed by word-order change) and in combination with *not* as negative marker (which now can precede the verb, like all other verb modifiers). In affirmative declarative sentences, however, an incipient grammaticalization – encoding various functions – is obvious, but in neither of these functions could the use of *do* develop any degree of obligatoriness, which would have been an indicator of the accomplishment of this syntactic change.

3. Variation in the use of periphrastic *do* in Early Modern English

3.1. Stylistic variation

Periphrastic *do* was partly grammaticalized in Early Modern English. So it had lost its former lexical meaning and its syntactic function as a predicate binding other constituents. Its scope had been restricted to the main verb, which it supported in marking its verbal categories of person/number and tense. However, its use was still optional. It had not yet entered a process of becoming obligatory. Barber (1997: 193) states that it could be inserted or omitted at will,

¹ Stein (1990: 19) suggests that French influence (*faire*) may be significant with respect to the appearance of the *do*-periphrasis in verse. Ellegard (1953) also mentions this.

whereas today its use is strictly regulated. When it was used in affirmative declarative sentences it did not necessarily give the sentence emphasis, as it does today. According to Ellegård (1953) the regulating process began in the middle of the 16th century and lasted till 1700. By 1550 periphrastic *do* had reached its highest usage in affirmative declarative sentences, i.e., it was used in 10 % of all occurrences.

My data, however, given in Figure 1, shift the highest usage to about 1600, which corresponds to Rissanen's (1991) and Nurmi's (1999) findings.²

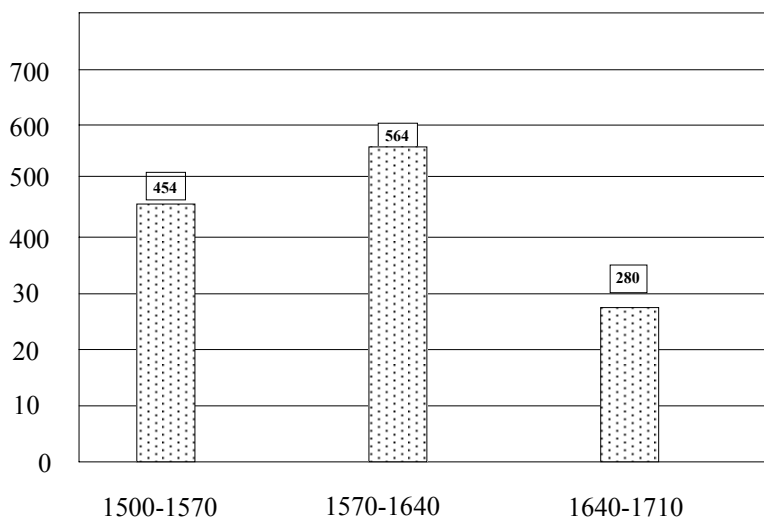


Figure 1. Periphrastic *do*-constructions in affirmative declarative sentences

Several scholars argued that *do* originated as a colloquial form in low status contexts (Koziol 1936; Marchand 1938-1939; Ellegård 1953; Samuels 1972a; Traugott 1972; Rissanen 1991); others (Barber 1997) point to the fact that in the late 15th early 16th century *do* is typical of formal and literary style. Our comparison of the use of periphrastic *do* in formal and informal text types shows a

² My data are based on an analysis of the occurrence of periphrastic *do*-constructions in affirmative declarative sentences in the Early-Modern English part of the *Helsinki Corpus*. Each subsection is of approximately the same size and contains the same quantity of similar text types with the only exception that E3 (1640-1710) does not include bible texts.

varying picture between the three periods.³ In the early 16th century it is far more frequent in formal contexts. Towards the end of the 16th century and the beginning of the 17th century – when it reaches its highest usage – its use, however, decreases drastically in formal contexts, whereas it becomes more widespread in informal types of text. Towards the end of the 17th century and the beginning 18th century, when normative tendencies and regularizations in the language are at issue, we can watch a further decline of its use in formal contexts, but now it is also drastically decreasing in informal texttypes. A picture of the development is given in Figure 2.

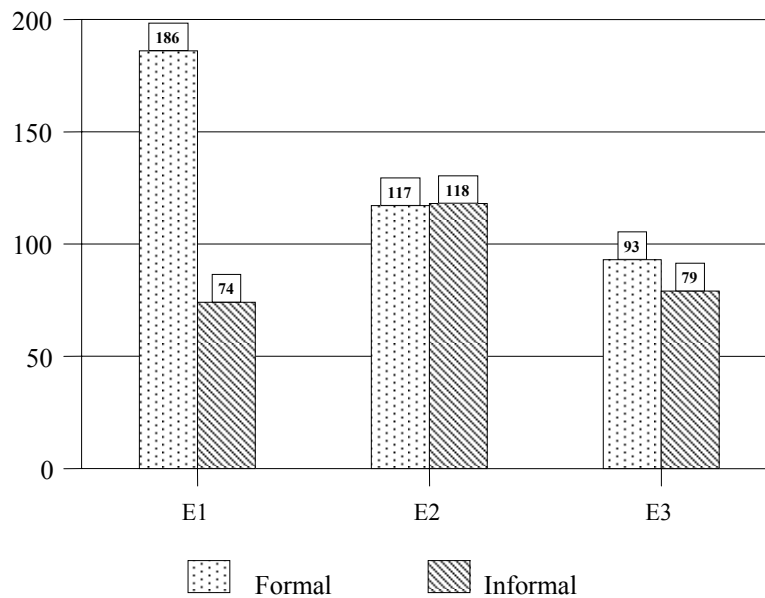


Figure 2. Periphrastic *do* in formal and informal text-types

³ Note that only affirmative declarative sentences were analysed, and only those texts were included that were clearly marked as formal (law, sermon, trial, official correspondence) or informal (comedy, diary, fiction, private correspondence). Both text categories contain approximately 133.000 words each.

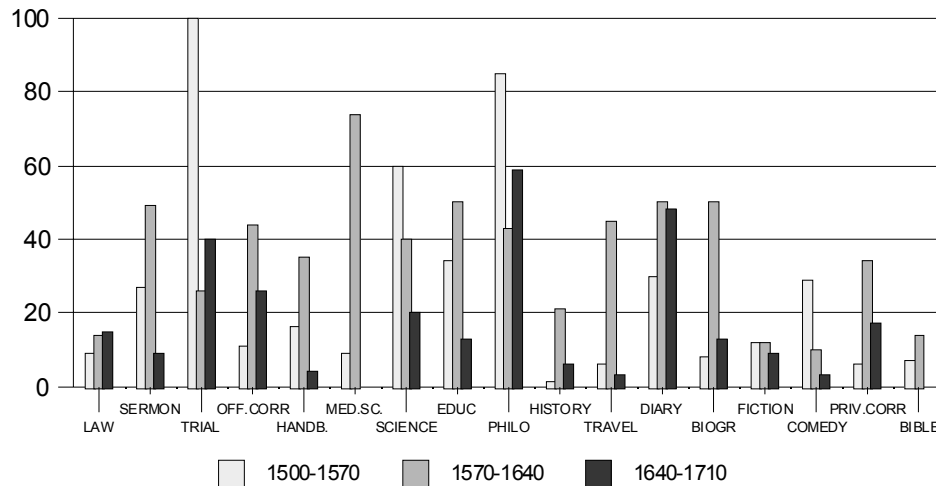


Figure 3. Distribution of *do*-periphrases in various text types

Now it seems that periphrastic *do*-constructions in affirmative declarative sentences were more widespread initially in formal speech, where their frequency maximum was concentrated on trial texts (cf. Figure 3). In the rest of the corpus, all texts that are not marked as formal taken together, the more frequent occurrence of periphrastic *do* is also restricted to a few text types, basically interactive ones, i.e. philosophical treatments and comedies, a text on geometry. Towards the end of the 16th century its use becomes equally frequent in formal and informal text types. Compared with the earlier period, we can see a fairly even distribution in all kinds of registers. Towards the end of Early Modern English, periphrastic *do* becomes again more or less restricted to a few subject matters, basically treatments on philosophy, law texts and trials. In these text types, especially law texts and trials, the periphrastic construction is predominantly used to express emphasis (1) or in copying the structure of a question in its immediate answer (2).

- 1) I A. B. *doe* swear That I. S. was really and truely my Prisoner
(E3 STA LAW STAT7, VII,75)
- 2) *Did* you see any body else but that Girl you speak of
My Lord, I *did* see the Girl there.
(E3 XX TRI LISLE, I, 113C2)

The stylistic variation may be an indicator for the fact that periphrastic *do* was originally used as an important stylistic device in formal texts, maybe basically trial texts. Then it began to spread into general use. Finally, it came to be considered informal, which led to its decline. This hypothesis, however, needs further investigation, especially a closer analysis of its stylistic functions in various text types.

3.2. Functionally motivated variation

In addition to the stylistic variation there is also a variation in the linguistic contexts of periphrastic *do*-constructions. Barber (1997) argues, e.g. that *do* spreads more rapidly with transitive verbs than with intransitive, that *do* is more likely used if there is an adverb before the lexical verb and that certain individual verbs resisted the *do*-construction more than others.

In affirmative declarative sentences periphrastic *do*-constructions began to be employed in various contexts with a slightly higher use in the present tense (743 instances, i.e. 57% versus 555 instances, i.e. 43% in the past tense). Their implementation may be seen as a contribution to communicative simplification (cf. Ihalainen 1982). All main clauses would then contain an operator, and the syntactic pattern (*do* + Infinitive) was available in the language. The following observations support this idea:

3.2.1. Morphological factors

In the course of its history the English verb had lost most of its inflectional devices to marking person, number and mood. Past marking had undergone a wholesale restructuring in that the ablaut-pattern had become unproductive and the dental suffix was increasingly employed as the new productive past marker. This erosion of inflections seems to begin to be “repaired” by the use of analytical *do*. However, as to person/number-marking it was just as defective as the main verb. But its frequent use in subordinate clauses (45%), many of which are combined with various shades of irrealis, like conditions (3), hypotheses (4), futurity (5) or reported speech (6), points to the fact that *do/did* might have been reinterpreted as a subjunctive marker.

- 3) Beneuolence, if it *do extende* to a hole conraye or citie,
(E1 IS/EX EDUC ELYOT, 147)
- 4) Sonne, I woold with all my heart have come unto you, if I *did thinke* I could have donne you any good, but I am ...
(E2 XX CORP MASHAM, 30)

- 5) *I doe set* my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a ...
(E2 XX BIBLE AUTHOLD, IX, 1G: 13)
- 6) You say, you *did write* to him upon the 2d of September?
(E3 XX TRI OATES, IV, 82.C1)

The majority of verbs that are supported by *did* in the past (83%) are either irregular (*run, begin, bring,...*), have a stem-final dental stop (*hurt, send, read*), or are of Romance origin (*appoint, appear, flourish,...*). Obviously *did* entered into competition with the inflectional past marker and thus served to avoid confusion between regular and irregular past formation, made the past marking clearer in case of a fusion of the stem-final stop with the past morpheme, and maybe most importantly, provided a means of regular tense assignment to the many newly borrowed verbs of Romance or Greek origin in the time of the Renaissance, without having to adjust the foreign (often rather long) words into an existing inflectional paradigm (7)-(10). This also holds for the person and number marking in the present tense, where 54% of the *do*-supported verbs are of Romance origin. Thus, the distinction between *do* and *did* begins to acquire the function of a sufficiently transparent and regular tense marker.

- 7) that he fyrste amonge the gentyles *dyd establysshe* the grounde of our fayth.
(E1 IR SERM FISHER, 1, 319)
- 8) This powder *doth consume* Phlegme
(E2 EX SCIM CLOWES, 11)
- 9) ...before her marido *did venir* home.
(E3 NN DIARY PEPYS, VII, 413)
- 10) ...but su cosa stava mala, which *did empescar*.
(E3 NN DIARY PEPYS, VII, 413)

Besides its inflection-replacing function *do* could also be employed as a “word class marker”. Due to the loss of inflectional morphology and an increasing tendency towards the invariant word, many lexical items could be applied in nominal or verbal positions as early as in Early Modern English. 19% of the items are of such an ambiguous character in our corpus. Among them are numerous words of Romance origin. The use of *do* underlines the verbal character of the main verbs and thus contributes to minimizing opacity in the language (11)-(14).

- 11) for euery Man of euery Estate *did colour* his naughty Affections with a pretence of...
(E1 XX TRI THROCKM, I, 69. C2)
- 12) I *doe purpose* god willing to be with the on saturday
(E2 XX CORP KNYVETT, 57)
- 13) And because founders of Colledges *doe plant*, and founders of Lectures *doe water*
(E2 EX EDUC BACON, 3V)
- 14) But these *doe respect* but a few things.
(E2 EX EDUC BACON, 4R)

This verb-identifying function is the more important the longer the distance is between the head of the Subject-NP and the verb (15), or if there is a coordinated or relative clause with deleted subject (16)-(17). In contact clauses, like (17) *do* seems to replace the missing subject relative pronoun, or at least it introduces the new subjectless clause. Even unambiguous verbs are thus identified. *Do* highlights the predicate that belongs to the subject mentioned earlier in the sentence. In (15) especially, where a whole clause is embedded between subject and predicate, it helps to focus the hearer's attention on the continuation of the main clause.

- 15) And the rocke, saith the Apostle in the first to the Corinthians, the tenth Chapter, *did follow* him.
(E2 IR SERM HOOKER, 43)
- 16) the Prisoner craued Indifferencie, and *did helpe* the Judges olde Memorie with his owne
(E1 XX TRI THROCKM, I,76.C2)
- 17) told us, that he knew of nothing *did more resemble* it,
(E3 NN DIARY EVELYN, 899)

3.2.2. Semantic factors

In the present tense *do*-support is often used to express a <HABITUAL> meaning (18). In our corpus: 43%. This use of periphrastic *do* is usually associated with substrate influence from Celtic languages.

- 18) For once in the yeere, which is the whole moneth of August, and sometimes part of September, many of the Nobility and Gentry of the Kingdome (for their pleasure) *doe come* into these high-land Countries to hunt,
(E2 NN TRAV JOTAYLOR, 135. C1)

In the past tense, *did* had originally been used as an anticipating pro-verb, which was now interpreted as underlining the factuality and thus the completion or accomplishment of the state-of-affairs denoted by the main verb. One specific use of this aspectual meaning is the expression of a sequence of states-of-affairs as in (19).

- 19) The same went to see Hampton court, where thei *did hunt*, and the same night retourne to Durasme place.
(E1 NN DIARY EDWARD, 272)

We may assume that *do* began to contribute an aspectual meaning to the verb, comparable to that of the plain form in Modern English, assigning it the feature <TOTAL> or <FACTUAL>. This is also in line with its habitual use in the present tense, where the focus of attention is not directed to a particular phase of the state-of-affairs, but to the total event. Thus, *do* begins to be employed to mark an aspectual distinction, but not (as Smith 1996 states) to express the imperfective meaning, but rather the factual one, which is realised in the present as <HABITUAL> and in the past as <PERFECTIVE>.

In contrastive contexts, like, e.g. adversative statements, the focus on the total fact reached by the use of *do/did* brings about an emphatic reading (20).

- 20) We *did hope* for a second Trial, but we could not obtain...
(E3 XX TRI OATES, IV, 82. C1)

3.2.3. Syntactic factors

Apart from morphological and semantic factors, there are a number of syntactic contexts that seem to favour periphrastic *do*-construction. However, Barber's (1997) argument that *do* spreads more rapidly with transitive verbs than with intransitive, could not be convincingly supported. After all, 42% of all verbs with *do*-support in our corpus are intransitively used. Often one has the impression that an inherently transitive verb, when it is used in an intransitive sense requires *do*-support to make the predicate complete, or to shift it more to the right in the sentence giving it more weight in the functional sentence perspective (cf. examples 6, 13 and 21, 22).

21) My deare, I *did write* to thee by the Fryday post,
(E3 XX CORP HOXINDEN, 272)

22) ...in Bethabara beyonde Iordan, where Iohn *dyd baptyse*.
(E1 XX BIBLE TYNDNEW, I, 20)

Furthermore the following syntactic constraints for the preponderance of periphrastic *do* could be identified:

- in cases of inversion
- whenever preverbal adverbs or longer adverbials are used
- when the verb is in coordination with one or more further verbs or predicates.

Inversion serves various communicative functions, such as forming a question (23), (24), expressing a condition (25), changing the thematic structure of the sentence (26), or placing the focus on a particular element of the sentence. Often, as in (26), a change of theme and rheme puts the verb or predicate into a focus position. In all these cases *do* is inserted as an operator to fill the place of the finite verb. In yes/no-questions (23) and conditional clauses (25), subject-verb inversion used to be the syntactic marker of these particular sentence types. When SVO had become a fixed pattern by that time, such a reordering (VSO) fell gradually out of use. If, however, *do* or any other auxiliary was used, it filled the place of the finite verb in pre-subject position, with the lexical verb being kept in its SVO slot.

23) *Doth* my talke *griue* you?
(E1 XX COME UDALL, L. 263)

24) what *dothe this proue* against me?
(E1 XX TRI THROCKM, I, 74. C2)

25) I am too apt to think, that those persons which have undergone so great a charge, to so little purpose, would willingly have disbursed as much money upon a publick good, *did* they but rightly *know* how to do it
(E3 IS EDUC HOOLE, 221)

26) This *do* wee *command* you, to deliure vnto him
(E2 XX CORO ELIZ, 402)

Inversion is also used in *wh*-questions (24) or whenever an object or adverbial is fronted (26)-(28). This is due to a former V2-order, which in Early-Modern English still seems to be prevalent. As a compromise between Av/OSV(O) and V2- structure, *do* follows the interrogative pronoun (24), object (26) or adverbial (27), (28), leaving again the lexical verb in its post-subject position. Such constructions have led to inversions with *neither* or *nor*, as we still find them in Modern English (28).

27) then *did* Sturmius *spend* such infinite, and curious paines vpon Cicero the Orator,

(E2 EX EDUC BACON, 18V)

28) And Iesus saide vnto her, Neither *doe* I *condemne* thee

(E2 XX BIBLE AUTHNEW, VIII, 1)

Many scholars have rightly argued that *do* is more likely used if there is an adverb before the lexical verb (29), (30). This is probably the context in which *do*-support in negative statements emerged. The adverb, originally in post-verbal position, is shifted into a pre-modifier position, which is the typical position of most noun- and adjective modifiers in English. Here we find a similar compromise as mentioned before. Although the adverb now premodifies the lexical verb, it still follows the finite verb.

29) One Experiment, which *does* very much *illustrate* my present Explication

(E3 EX SCIO HOOKE, 13.5, 47)

30) She sayd there was one woman which she *did* not *like*

(E2 IS HANDO GIFFORD, D4V)

Periphrastic *do*-constructions are also used to support coordinated verbs or predicates (31), so that the finite element need not be expressed twice, and the coordinated verbs are unified and thus understood as belonging to the same subject and/or (as in 31) even as governing the same object:

31) I am persuaded the deuill *doth seduce and bewitch* mens mindes:

(E2 IS HANDO GIFFORD, B4V)

4. Assumptions about the decline of periphrastic *do* in affirmative declarative sentences

Towards the end of the 16th century and the beginning of the 17th century periphrastic *do*-constructions had reached their highest usage in affirmative declara-

tive sentences. Their use had spread from formal to informal texttypes. Towards the end of the 17th century and the beginning 18th century, when normative tendencies and regularizations in the language were at issue, we can witness a drastic decline in its use in all types of contexts. No matter what the actual origin of this construction was, in declarative affirmative sentences it was used as an optional stylistic device that could be employed for a number of reasons: morphological, semantic and syntactic. Neither of these constraints can have been strong enough to extend its use to a general application to function as past marker, subjunctive marker, habitual aspect marker, perfective aspect marker, etc. *Did* lost the competition against the inflectional past marker probably because of reasons of least effort. Irreality could be more effectively expressed partly with the help of modals and partly by the simple past tense of the verb. Aspect distinctions became regularly marked by the progressive form, so that the simple form of the verb was sufficient to be interpreted as expressing the feature <TOTAL>. So that towards the end of the 17th century periphrastic *do* became more and more restricted to emphatic contexts, inversions (including questions) and constructions with preverbal adverbs (including *not*).

Thus, in the 16th century we can watch an incipient syntactic change. *Do* is about to establish itself as a verbal category marker. If we look at the s-curve pattern of this change we can see that it began slowly, leading to a situation of linguistic variation, but it never managed to go beyond this incipient stage, i.e. the rapid increase is missing. That means that the innovation in the restructuring of the whole tense-marking system in English was not successful. But it does not mean that *do* had not reached an operator function in affirmative declarative sentences. It had generally grammaticalized from a full lexical verb to an item carrying a grammatical function. This is part of a diverging development, or layering, with the former lexical verb existing side by side with the new grammatical item. So its decline in use cannot be equalled with a process of degrammaticalization. What we could witness is precisely a specialization of its operator function to highly restricted contexts, i.e. to inversions, negations and – in affirmative declarative sentences – to the expression of emphasis. In these contexts the use of periphrastic *do* came to be considered the norm. Therefore its application in other contexts was increasingly regarded as non-standard and as such probably stigmatized, although still in the 18th century grammarians, like e.g. White (1756: 69), characterize *do* as a tense-marker: “Do/did’ mark tense, like the endings: ‘I fight – I do fight’, ‘I fought – I did fight’... they are better expressed without [‘do’] ... for without the Sign we can do that in two words, which, if we introduce the Sign, will cost us three”. Similarly Lowth (1762: 57) states: “To express the Present and Past Imperfect of the Active and Neuter Verb the Auxiliary ‘do’ is sometimes used: ‘I do (now) love’, ‘I did (then) love’”.

Despite its decline in use, White (1756) still lists a number of functions of *do* that coincide very well with the factors that determined its use at the peak of its development, such as expressing passion, or earnestness, or in forming a question, or when preceded by an adverb or a negated conjunction, or when supplementary of the tense or place of any other verb, or even to form a rhyme. However, the grammarians in the 18th century particularly point to its emphatic force and its use in interrogative and negative sentences. Lowth (1762: 57) states: “Do’ and ‘did’ mark the action itself, or the time of it, with greater force and distinction: ‘Yes, I *did* love her (at that time)’. They are also of frequent and almost necessary use in interrogative and negative sentences”. And Greenwood (1711) argues similarly:

‘Do’ does Emphatically denote the Present Time and ‘Did’ the Preter Time ... in a more emphatical or expressive Manner.⁴

Greenwood (1711: 128)

... when we would express the Action more distinctly and fully, we make use of the Helping Verb ‘Do’; especially with the Adverb ‘Not’, ...

Greenwood (1711: 143)

Smith (1996: 158) states that innovations are unsuccessful because they do not cohere with the other tendencies in the language. In the case of *do* we must admit that its use as a tense marker would have fitted very well into the analytical structure of English. But from an articulatory point of view it would have been less economical (cf. White 1756 [1968]) and from a functional point of view it would have been overloaded. So we can say that a specialization to particular functions in the use of periphrastic *do* combined with normative tendencies and regularizations in the language, as well as least effort mechanisms, have influenced the “invisible hand” in the course of this syntactic change.

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⁴ Please note Greenwood’s (1711) own use of *do* in a non-emphatic context, but in connection with a preverbal adverb.

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