

An Endangered Marker. On the Loss of Swedish *att* after *kommer* and some Parallels in English.

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1. Background

Both English and Swedish have an infinitive marker, *to* and *att*, respectively, and in both languages the marker is a weak element with a tendency to be lost. In English, there are several well-known cases of the marker being phonetically merged with a preceding verb, and sometimes, when informal direct speech is being rendered, this is reflected in writing. On the Internet, in February 2006, Google finds 31 million hits in English texts for *gonna*, 26 million for *gotta*, 24.1 million for *wanna* and 2.15 million for *oughta*. More to the point of the present paper, the marker may disappear altogether as a result of it being felt that the preceding verb has the character of a bona fide auxiliary and therefore deserves to be allowed to pattern with the others in being followed by a *to*-less infinitive. The so-called marginal auxiliaries *dare* and *need* may be used with or without an infinitive marker on the following verb.¹ The auxiliary *ought* is practically always cited as *ought to* in pedagogical grammars, but as pointed out by Quirk et al. (1985: 139), the infinitive marker is sometimes dropped²: “Elicitation tests on young people have shown that, for both AmE and BrE, in nonassertive contexts the *to*-less *ought* construction is widely acceptable, and for some speakers even

¹ Grammatical differences and restrictions connected with the two constructions need not concern us here.

² In the previous Quirk et al. (1972:82), this *to*-dropping was described as occurring in AmE. Huddleston & Pullum (2002:109) share this view: “especially in AmE”.

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preferable” ... “*Oughtn’t we (to) send for the police?*”³ Similarly, Huddleston & Pullum (2002:109) note that there is “a growing tendency ... for it to be constructed with a bare infinitival in non-affirmative contexts”. On the other hand, Biber et al. (1999) report no findings of that kind from their 40-million-word corpus, in spite of its large proportion of spoken language.⁴ *Ought* is actually the best English parallel to the Swedish construction to be discussed here (*kommer (att)*), in that it is usually cited with a *to* but in actual use sometimes drops it. For the discussion which is about to commence, it is worth noting that *to* is only dropped when *ought* is used without *do*-support in negative sentences and questions, i.e. in structures where, typically, there is material intervening between *ought* and *to*.

Like English, Swedish has no inflected form in the verb system to express future time. Basically two expressions are available, one with an established auxiliary (the present tense form *skall*, the etymological counterpart of English *shall*) and one with what is originally a main verb (the present tense form *kommer* of the verb *komma* “come”, which is also in full use as a main verb). The *kommer* construction, which is non-volitional, was formerly used mainly in formal writing but is becoming increasingly frequent in spoken Swedish. Traditionally, the construction has not been regarded as fully grammaticalised, because the following infinitive has always required the Swedish infinitive marker *att*. In pedagogical grammars, this has generally been signalled by citing the form in question as *kommer att*, much in the way that English *ought* is cited as *ought to*, in spite of the fact that *att* and *to* go with the following infinitive and not with the “auxiliary”. However, in recent years (but with stray examples from earlier times), the *att* is being dropped to an increasing extent, which makes *kommer* pattern with the rest of the Swedish set of established modal auxiliaries (which, by the way, is very similar to the

³ The testing was done by Jan Svartvik and David Wright. The detailed results are to be found in Svartvik & Wright (1977).

⁴ As described in Biber et al. (1999:25), in terms of words, the corpus has 16% conversation and 14% speech classified as non-conversational.

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set used in English).⁵ This adaption to the auxiliary system is one main reason for the disappearance of *att*. Another reason is phonetic in character. This particular *att* (there are others, with a different etymological background) is regularly reduced to a simple [o] in colloquial spoken Swedish, which tends to be lost because of its shortness and lack of stress or to be phonetically more or less merged with an initial vowel in the following main verb.⁶

2. Purpose

It is the purpose of this paper to report on an empirical study of how far the Swedish grammaticalisation process in question (as reflected in the loss of the infinitive marker) has gone in the younger generation, as evidenced by usage among Swedish university students of English at Göteborg University in 2005/2006.

3. Method

308 newcomers to the English department (for first-term studies) were asked to write down their translations of two short English sentences into Swedish.

I am convinced that the war will be over in two weeks from now

Will John and his twin sister really start school this year?

Expressions for future time were expected in the translations but no instructions were given as to what was being investigated.

⁵ *Språkriktighetsboken* (2005:356) links *kommer* with some other, less auxiliary-like, verbs which also vacillate in the use of the infinitive marker for the following verb, e.g. *försöka* “try”, *lova* “promise” and *sluta* “stop”.

⁶ The rare term *subaudibility* seems appropriate here to describe the weak phonetic status of the marker.

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In order to limit the group of informants to people with maximum experience of Swedish, the students were asked to state their “first language (mother tongue)” and only those who wrote “Swedish” were selected for the statistical part of the investigation. The final number of participants then went down to 308. In the presentation to follow, they have been divided into three age groups: (a) born in 1979 or earlier, (b) born in 1980-1983, (c) born in 1984-1987, i.e. aged 18-21 at the time of testing.

The testees cannot be regarded as a cross-section of the Swedish population, not even in the age groups in question. Most of them come from the south-western part of Sweden, they have actively chosen to study English at a university, an overwhelming majority of them are female, and in the sub-group defined for the statistics, everybody’s first language is Swedish. Still, the results are interesting because many of these students can be expected to go on to teaching positions or jobs in which they are involved in the production of Swedish text.

The ideal informant was supposed to translate the sentences as follows, and this was actually done in the majority of cases.

Jag är övertygad om att kriget **kommer (att) vara** slut om två veckor

Kommer John och hans tvillingsyster verkligen **(att) börja** skolan i år?

It should be obvious that the crucial difference between the sentences is the distance between the “auxiliary” *kommer* and the infinitive marker *att* plus the main verb.

4. Results

Apart from a few cases where the English sentences were misunderstood, there occurred variant translations using (reasonably correctly) the present tense, which is used to express future time with far greater freedom in Swedish than in English, or the established auxiliary *skall*. It was not unusual for participants to use different future constructions in the two sentences, with variation both between *att* and zero and between *att* or zero and alternative constructions.

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4.1 Individual stability

The following pie-charts demonstrate to what extent individuals have settled for one construction throughout the two sentences: consistent zero or consistent *att*. A third sector includes indiscriminately all those cases where the constructions were not identical, i.e. not only cases of *att* in one and zero in the other.

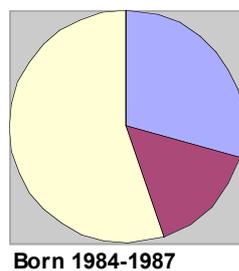
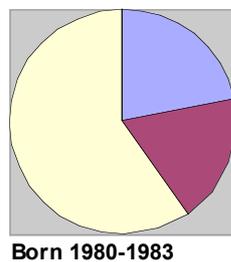
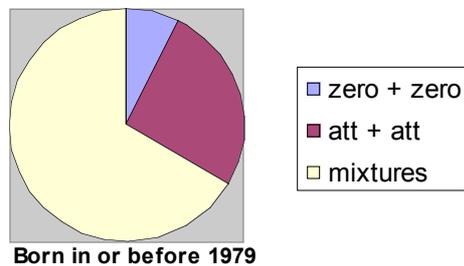


Figure 1. Choice and consistency

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It is evident that it is the oldest students (aged 26+) that have the greatest tendency to vary their constructions. This is also the category in which “consistent zero” is very rare (5 students out of 66, i.e. 7.5%), whereas this construction is consistently used by 42 out of 143, i.e. 29%, of the youngest (aged 21 or less).

4.2 Proportions of ‘att’

The hypothesis underlying the construction of the test sentences was that *att* would be more easily lost when it was not linked directly to *kommer*. This was amply confirmed in the experiment, as will be demonstrated in the following bar charts, which are only based on those translations that did use *kommer* (not some variant) in the sentence accounted for.

4.2.1 Proportions of ‘att’ in the contiguous verb phrase (sentence 1)

In strings where there is no distance between *kommer* and *att* plus the infinitive of the main verb, *att* is still very much alive: Even among the youngest informants, *att* “remains” in more than half of those translations which use either *att* or zero. The difference between the two youngest groups is marginal in this situation.

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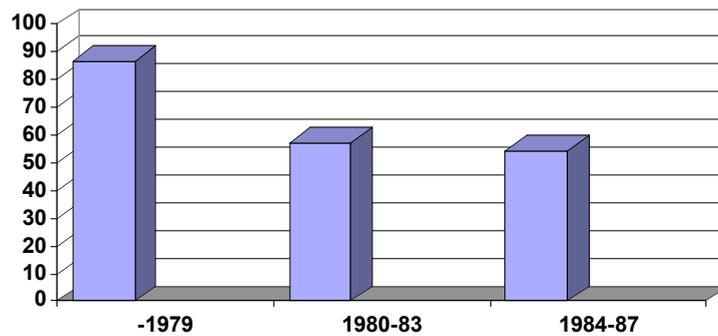


Figure 2. Proportions of *att* in a contiguous verb phrase

4.2.2 Proportions of 'att' in the interrupted verb phrase (sentence 2)

When the contact between *kommer* and *att* is broken by intervening words, the tendency to drop the marker increases dramatically in all three age groups. In this situation, the biggest difference is not between the oldest and the others but between the two youngest groups.

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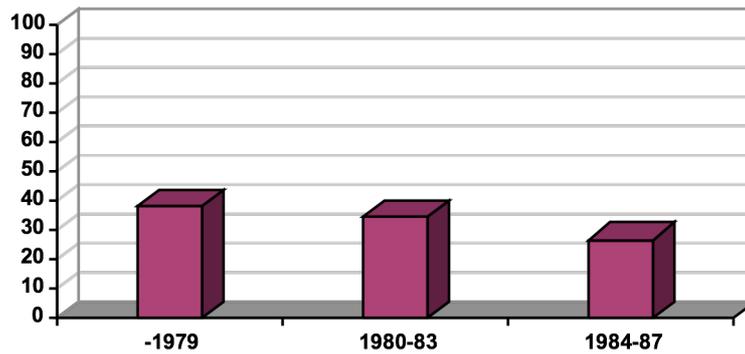


Figure 3. Proportions of *att* in an interrupted verb phrase

4.2.3 Proportions compared

The effects of the difference between the two structural situations can be studied in the following bar chart, which is a simple conflation of the two previous ones.

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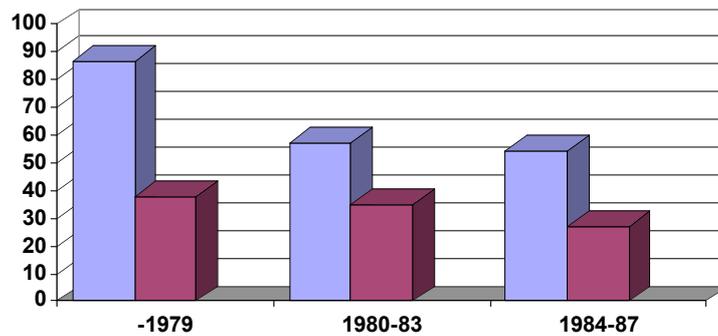


Figure 4. Comparison of the effects of structural variation over age groups

5. Concluding remarks

That the infinitive marker of the main verb is being lost after *kommer* is not a novel observation. *Svenska Akademiens Grammatik (SAG)*, published in 1999 and the biggest modern grammar there is of the Swedish language, says (1999, vol. 4: 243-244) that *komma* normally takes an infinitive phrase which includes an infinitive marker but adds in a footnote: “It is becoming increasingly common to drop the infinitive marker after temporal *komma*, both in spoken and in written language” (my translation). Hultman (2003:145) notes that the construction seems to be on the increase in both spoken and written language and that *komma* will thus pattern with other auxiliaries. He adds, however, that the construction is regarded as not quite correct. *Språkriktighetsboken* (2005:358) expresses surprise that it has taken so long for *kommer* to drop the *att* and notes that there are many grown-up native users of Swedish who simply lack the *kommer att* sequence in their linguistic repertoire.

The observations quoted above are confirmed by this investigation, which has its main merit in the addition of a statistical dimension: Statements like “increasingly common” and “on the increase” can now be given more substance.

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As always, there is room for further research, in this case as to what other factors may influence the choice between *att* and zero for the infinitive following *kommer*. Other structural variables may include negation, and phonetic ones may concern the initial sound of the main verb and possibly the stress pattern of the string. In a sociolinguistic perspective, the experiment should benefit from being replicated in the Swedish compulsory school system.

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