

Changing patterns of English split intransitivity

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Background. A syntactic *split intransitive* pattern is one which divides intransitive verbs into two classes, typically one which allows the pattern and one which does not. The following examples illustrate from Present-Day English (PDE):

- (1) *Lucy outtalked/outswam/*outarrived Chris.*
- (2) *talker, swimmer, *arriver*

Many since Perlmutter (1978) have suggested that all intransitives fall into one of two classes – “unergatives” like *talk* and *swim* and “unaccusatives” like *arrive*; further, it has been hypothesised that the semantic basis of these classes is invariant between languages. In the present author’s doctoral dissertation this is argued on the basis of synchronic data from a range of languages to be too simplistic. Rather, it is suggested that different split intransitive behaviours within and between languages identify different classes; these classes can be described in terms of semantically-based syntactic features [\pm volition], [\pm initiation], [\pm process], [\pm transition] and [\pm result], for example:

	volition	initiation	process	transition	result
<i>work, play</i>	+	+	+	–	–
<i>cough</i>	–	+	+	–	–
<i>swim, run</i>	+	+	+	+	–
<i>melt, burn</i>	–	–	–	+	–

Summary of findings. This paper extends this line of research into the diachronic domain by considering how split intransitive behaviours have changed in the history of English. This has not been much studied previously, with the exception of split intransitive auxiliary selection behaviours (McFadden 2017 is a recent example of research into this area). The present paper has three main findings. Firstly, split intransitivity in historical stages of English is amenable to description in terms of the same set of features as above. Secondly, at no point in the history of English have split intransitive diagnostics identified just two classes; rather, *contra* Perlmutter, at each stage multiple different overlapping classes can be identified. Thirdly, changes to the classes identified by each construction are construction-specific, further reinforcing the conclusion that we are dealing with multiple independent behaviours rather than a simple binary division of intransitives into unergatives and unaccusatives.

Characterisations of the pathways of change for the different constructions, with approximate dates, are summarised below (OE: Old English; ME: Middle English):

- (3) **Availability of *out-*:** *run* (14C) > [+volition,+process,+transition] (15C) > [+volition,+process] (15/16C) (> [+process], ongoing)
- (4) **Availability of *-er:***
[+volition] (OE) > [+intransitive] (16C) > dies out in favour of competing system (17C)
> [+volition,+process] (16/17C) (> [+process], ongoing)
- (5) **Availability of cognate objects:** [+volition,+process] (from 15C) (> [+process], ongoing)
- (6) **Availability of causative alternation:** [+intransitive] (OE) > [-initiation] (PDE)

(7) Availability of resultatives:

[−initiation,−process,+transition] (18C?)

> [−initiation,−process,+transition] AND [+process,+transition] (19C)

(8) Availability of adjectival past participles: [+transition] (little change)

(9) Availability of auxiliary BE: [−process,+transition] (ME) > NONE (19C)

References

McFadden, T. (2017) On the disappearance of the BE perfect in Late Modern English. *Acta Linguistica Hafniensia* 49:2, 159–75.

Perlmutter, D. M. (1978). Impersonal passives and the Unaccusative Hypothesis. In *Proceedings of the 4th Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society*, pp. 157–90.