

Infinitive marking with *for*: a diachronic account*

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In standard modern English, an infinitive can only be marked with *for* if it also contains an overt subject, so that sentences like (1a) are ruled out. Furthermore, *for* is obligatory in contexts like (1b), where the infinitive is itself a sentential subject (cf. (1c)).

- (1) *Standard modern English*:
- a. * John went to the store for to buy bread.
 - b. For Mary to travel so far is no small thing.
 - c. * Mary to travel so far is no small thing.

To account for the pattern in (1), it is often assumed that *for* is a complementizer that is involved in licensing the overt subject of an infinitive, through Case-assignment by government in GB terms (Chomsky, 1981), or through checking of Case- or ϕ -features in Minimalist terms (Bošković, 1997; Martin, 2001).¹ PRO is then argued to have special properties that prevent it from appearing with *for* in (1a) (e.g., null Case or missing ϕ -features).

An interesting problem for theories based on such assumptions is that the distribution of infinitival *for* varies considerably across periods and dialects. In particular, sentences like (1a) (which I will call **subjectless *for to* infinitives**) are grammatical in many varieties of modern English (ModE) and frequent throughout Middle English (ME) (2a), and sentences like (1c) (which I will call **bare-subject infinitives**) are attested in late ME and early ModE (2b):

- (2) a. [he] went...into Naples *for to conqwere it* (CAPCHR, 112.2473)
b. for hit ys the custom of my contrey a knyght *allweyes to kepe hys wepyn with hym*. (MALORY, 63.2103)
'For it is the custom of my country for a knight always to keep his weapon with him.'

This paper focuses on the following questions: What feature(s) of the grammar of ME made sentences like those in (2) possible, and to what extent can modern dialect variation be explained as an inheritance of these features?

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¹See McFadden (2004) for an alternative account.

After providing a brief historical overview (§1), I present new corpus data showing that dialect variation with respect to *for* already exists in early ME, with eastern dialects treating *for* as a preposition and western dialects exhibiting a ‘low’ version of *for* located below C (§2). Neither version of early ME *for* is in C, which suggests that the complementizer analysis of *for* is a later, separate development. In light of these findings, I argue in §3 that at least some modern dialects that allow (1a) are descendants of *western* ME, preserving the low *for* alongside the complementizer *for* that emerges later. Under this treatment, no major revisions to theories of infinitival clause structure—such as the introduction of ‘optional’ licensing—are required.

1 Overview: *for* to infinitives in the history of English

The earliest *for*-marked infinitives are subjectless adjuncts from late Old English (OE). The examples in (3), like the handful of other attested *for*-marked infinitives from OE, are similar in interpretation to present-day *in order* clauses: they express the overall intention or purpose behind the main-clause action (examples from Visser, 1963, §949; see also Jarad, 2003a, §4.4.1).

- (3) a. þæt ge bien him on fultume...*Godes gerichtten for to setten and to driven.* (Harold, 1066)
 ‘that you be of assistance to them...(in order) to determine and carry out what is owed to God.’
- b. se kyng hit dide *for to hauene sibbe* of se earl Angeow, *for helpe to hauene* togænes his neue Willelm (OE Chron, an. 1127)
 ‘The king did it (in order) to have peace from that earl of Anjou, to have help against his nephew William.’

In ME, *for*-marked infinitives are extended to a wider range of contexts and correspondingly increase in frequency, reaching a peak in the 13th and 14th centuries (Mustanoja, 1960). The overall pattern is shown in Figure 1, with the ME period spanning the first four periods of the graph (1150–1500) and the early ModE period the last three (1500–1710). These data, and the data in Tables 1–5, are drawn from the Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpora of Middle English (2nd ed.) (Kroch and Taylor, 1999) and Early Modern English (Kroch et al., 2004).² Except where noted, the term *purpose infinitive* refers to

²Information about these corpora is available at <http://www.ling.upenn.edu/hist-corpora>. For this study, texts whose composition and manuscript dates belong to different periods were classified by date of composition, with the exception of the older *Lambeth Homilies* text, which is included in the first ME period.

any infinitive with purpose or rationale semantics, including tokens with non-subject gaps (e.g., *there was [a great flower pott]; for to sett trees in (e)_i*).³

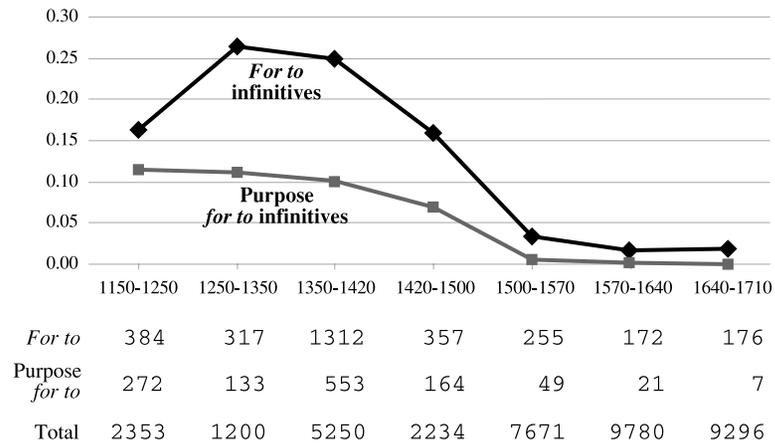


Figure 1: *For*-marking over all *to*-infinitives, 1150–1710

Notably, the majority of *for*-marked infinitives in ME have null subjects. The standard ModE system, in which infinitival *for* occurs only if it is followed by an overt subject, does not develop until the early modern period, long after subjectless *for to* infinitives have proliferated across dialects. ME infinitives with unambiguous overt subjects (i.e., whose subjects cannot be interpreted as matrix-clause arguments) show up either without *for* (2b), or with *for* following the subject (4). Likewise, sentences in which *for* is unambiguously a complementizer introducing a subject, as in (5), are unattested in ME (see Lightfoot, 1976; Visser, 1963, §905–914).

- (4) For it es a velany, a man *for to be curyously arrayede apon his heuede with perre*’ and *precyous stanes* (ROLLEP, 29.609)
 ‘For it is a disgrace for a man to be strangely adorned on his head with jewels and precious stones.’
- (5) For John to lose the race would upset Mary.

³Infinitives with non-subject gaps make up 3%–6% of all *to*-marked infinitives in the corpus, and excluding them would not materially alter the findings reported here. See note 7 for further discussion.

Sentences like (5) may have been enabled by a reanalysis of benefactive *for*-PPs in contexts like (6) (see e.g. Fischer et al., 2000):⁴

- (6) hit were shame [PP for me] [IP to se three knyghtes on one] →
 hit were shame [CP for [IP me to se three knyghtes on one]]
 ‘It would be shameful for me to watch three knights attacking one.’

Another source for the complementizer analysis could have been operator structures with overt subjects and non-subject gaps, e.g. (7), which started out (by hypothesis) as bare-subject infinitives under the preposition *for*:

- (7) there is fayre fourde [PP for [CP Op_i [C ∅] horse to drynke off t_i]] →
 there is fayre fourde [CP Op_i [C for] horse to drynke off t_i]
 ‘There is a pretty spring for horses to drink from.’

The reanalysis of *for* in this case would be driven by several factors: the word order, with the subject following instead of preceding *for* (cf. (4)); the fact that prepositions lose the ability to take infinitival complements (see note 6); and the independent need for a CP in an infinitival relative clause (see note 7).

Although a detailed discussion of these proposals is beyond the scope of this paper (see Garrett, 2004; Kroch and Pak, 2004; Lightfoot, 1976; Whitman, 2000, for further discussion), it is worth pointing out one feature they have in common: they are compatible with the idea that *for* never occupies C until the relevant reanalysis has taken place—a reanalysis that crucially involves the position of *for* with respect to the overt subject, presumably occurring in late ME or early ModE. An alternative scenario is possible, one in which *for* is already in C in early ME subjectless *for to* infinitives, as suggested by e.g. van Gelderen (1998). In §2 I provide arguments against this latter approach. I suggest that the complementizer analysis of *for* is unavailable in early ME because infinitives at this stage simply do not contain CPs—a proposal that will have important consequences for modern dialect variation.

2 Dialect variation in early Middle English

The texts in the early ME period of the corpus (1150–1250) come from two major dialect areas, the East Midlands and the West Midlands, with the former

⁴According to Fischer et al., there were in fact two reanalyses: the dative DP was reanalyzed as a subject in sentences without *for*, making sentences like (2b) possible; and the structure with *for* ‘followed the same route, albeit quite a bit later’ (p. 220). Both reanalyses, they argue, were facilitated by the fixation of VO word order in English, which entailed that the *for*-phrase was always adjacent to the infinitive.

represented by the *Ormulum*, the *Peterborough Chronicle*, the *Trinity Homilies*, and *Vices and Virtues*, and the latter by the *Ancrene Riwe*, the *Lambeth Homilies*, and the Katherine Group (*Sawles Warde*, *Hali Meidhad*, *St. Katherine*, *St. Juliana*, *St. Margaret*).⁵ As I show next, these two early dialects have already implemented radically different analyses of infinitival *for*.

2.1 Semantic distribution

While most early ME *for*-marked infinitives are purpose adjuncts (Figure 1), infinitival *for* also occurs in non-purpose contexts like (8):

- (8) a. þe beastlich mon...secheþ *for to* fallen in þis put
(ANCRIW-1,II.48.447)
'The beastly man will try to fall into this pit.'
b. & heo bigon on hire cneon *forte* cneolin adun. (MARGA,88.528)
'And she began to kneel down on her knees.'

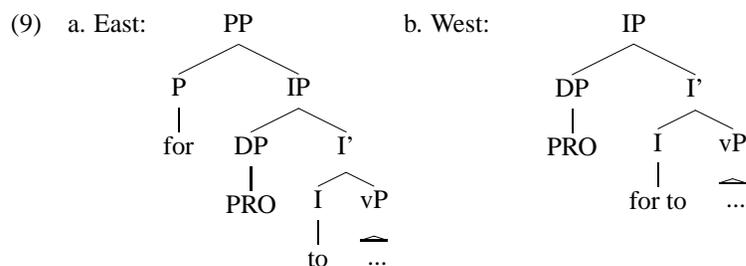
However, non-purpose *for to* infinitives in early ME are almost entirely restricted to western texts—which also have a higher rate of overall *for*-marking (Table 1).

	Total <i>to</i> inf's	<i>For to</i> inf's		Purpose <i>for to</i> inf's	
	N	n	%	n	%
East	1335	140	10.5	125	89.3
West	1006	244	24.3	147	60.2

Table 1: *For*-marking by region, 1150–1250

In the remainder of §2 I show that the contrast in Table 1 has a structural basis. The trees in (9) will serve as a reference point.

⁵Kentish texts are omitted from Tables 1 and 5; consequently, the values in these tables are lower than those in Figure 1.



Early ME East Midlands *for to* infinitives are PPs: the preposition *for* with an infinitival complement. Although such configurations are no longer possible (**Jane was surprised about to see Bill*), this analysis of eastern early ME is well motivated by a combination of facts. First, *for* is a preposition of purpose as far back as OE (e.g., *for arstafum usic sohtest* ‘you sought us for support’ (van Gelderen, 1998))—a plausible explanation for why *for*-marked infinitives are largely restricted to purpose contexts in eastern early ME (Table 1). Second, structures like (9a) are generally available in ME, appearing sporadically with prepositions other than *for* (Fischer, 2000; Lightfoot, 1976; Mustanoja, 1960, p. 540; Visser, 1963, §976):⁶

- (10) a. ...ha mahen beon i-stopen *in sotliche to luuien* (MARGA,79.389)
 ‘...they may be advanced in foolish loving’
 b. Hiss Drihhtin wel to cwemenn...*wiþþ to letenn swingenn himm*
 (ORM,I,220.1813)
 ‘to please his Lord well...by letting himself be scourged’

⁶I am not aware of a satisfactory explanation for the availability of (9a) in ME. Lightfoot (1976), Whitman (2000), and others argue that English infinitives originate as nominal structures, and that a surviving nominal feature in ME allows them to be PP complements. The problem with this account is that it predicts that infinitives should also be PP complements in OE, and yet neither bare nor *to*-marked infinitives are attested in this position (Visser, 1963, §976). Moreover, it is difficult to find independent evidence for the idea that infinitives are nominal in ME or even OE: they are modified by adverbs, assign accusative case, freely undergo extraposition, and never appear with determiners or possessive subjects (see also Roberts and Rousseau, 2003, §3.3.2). An alternative explanation for the pattern in question is that there is a general incompatibility between prepositions and the tense/irrealis features of *to*-infinitives, but that these features are absent in ME due to what (Fischer, 2000, p. 156) calls a ‘loss of semantic integrity’ which enables the ME *to*-infinitive to express simultaneity rather than future (e.g., *lith to wepe* ‘lies weeping’). This proposal seems to line up with the historical facts, given that ME is the only period when *to*-infinitives appear in such contexts, but its further motivations and predictions of course remain to be explored.

Third, eastern early ME *for* cannot be preceded by objects, adverbs, or other infinitival material (see §2.2–2.3). This is expected under (9a), since English does not allow subparts of PP complements to adjoin to PP (cf. **a book organically_i [PP about gardening t_i]*). Finally, *for*-marking is disfavored in eastern early ME subject infinitives (whether *in situ* or extraposed) affecting only 1 out of 63 tokens, as expected given that PPs generally cannot be subjects (see Jarad, 2003a, and references cited there). This ban is not imposed in the west, where 8 out of 57 subject infinitives are *for*-marked (e.g. (11); $p < .03$ by Yates' χ^2 and Fisher's exact tests).

- (11) hit is speatewile forte þenche þron (HALI,145.256)
 'It is horrible to think of that.'

Turning now to (9b), West Midlands dialects have a version of *for* located lower in the clause, most likely part of the same head as *to*. For convenience I have shown *for to* heading a single projection labeled 'IP,' but see Han and Kroch (2000) and Wurmbrand (2001) for arguments that *to* is an Aspect or Mood head below both TP/IP and NegP. The precise location of *to* (or *for to*) is not crucial to my discussion except where noted.

Notice that neither tree in (9) contains a CP. In the spirit of Fischer (1996), Jarad (2003a), and Kageyama (1992), I am assuming that the OE/early ME *to*-infinitive is a reduced structure that cannot project to CP. This hypothesis is motivated by the fact that certain structures believed to require a CP projection, notably *wh*-infinitives and infinitival relative clauses, are absent in OE and early ME—a gap that would be unexplained under the assumption that *to*-infinitives are CPs from their inception.⁷

An immediate consequence of the reduced-clause hypothesis is that neither version of early ME *for* can be in C. For eastern *for to* infinitives this is probably a desired result in any case, given that they pattern like PPs semantically and syntactically (see above). For western dialects, independent evidence that *for* is not in C is provided in the next two subsections.

⁷The infinitival relative clause is to be distinguished from another superficially similar structure, which I call the gapped purpose clause. Unambiguous infinitival relatives (e.g., *The first thing_i then to be had a care of (e)_i is that he be not too warmly clad*, where the infinitive modifies an *in situ* subject) do not occur in ME; but unambiguous gapped purpose clauses (e.g., *he toke it_i too brenne (e)_i in a grete fyre*, where the gap is coreferential with a pronoun) are attested from OE on. Crucially, gapped purpose clauses do not allow parasitic gaps or movement from embedded finite clauses, suggesting that even in ModE they are not CPs (see Jones, 1991, Ch. 3).

2.2 Placement of objects

In ME, as in OE, a DP object within an infinitive can precede both the nonfinite verb and *to*. I will refer to such objects as ‘preposed.’ If an infinitive is marked with *for* as well, the object can either precede or follow *for*. Interestingly, the word order varies by dialect just as expected given the structures in (9): the object follows *for* in the east (12a) and precedes *for* in the west (12b) This pattern is shown in Table 2.

- (12) a. *East*: ic am all iradi, te bien hersum godd anon to ðe deaðe *for* *mankenn to aliesen* (VICES1,117.1445)
 ‘I am fully prepared to be obedient to God until death to deliver mankind.’
 b. *West*: þreo Maries brochten deorewurþe aromaz *his bodi for to smirien*. (ANCRIW-2,II.274.469)
 ‘The three Marys brought valuable aromas to smear his body.’

	FOR>OBJ>TO	OBJ>FOR>TO	OBJ>TO (no <i>for</i>)	<i>To</i> inf’s with obj’s
East	50	1	147	778
West	2	16	48	469

Table 2: Object preposing, 1150–1250

While the data in Table 2 are consistent with the structures in (9), they are also consistent with another analysis, one in which western *for* is in C and object preposing involves movement to Spec,CP. Under such an account, however, we would expect these structures to have A’-movement properties, and they do not. There are no cases in which an object is moved ‘across’ another object, for example, even though such configurations are freely allowed in *wh*-movement and modern topicalization (13). If anything, ME object preposing follows A-movement constraints (see e.g. Jarad, 2003b);⁸ further evidence against the idea that western *for* is in C is provided in §2.3.

- (13) a. *Topicalization*: John_i, I drank wine with t_i
 b. *Unattested preposing*: *I went out [John_i to drink wine with t_i]

⁸Another possibility is that (some of) these infinitives have underlying OV word order, which is still available in early ME, particularly in the east (Kroch and Taylor, 1999).

2.3 Adverb placement

The pattern in Table 2 is repeated with adverbials: when an adverb or adverbial PP precedes the nonfinite verb in a *for*-marked infinitive, it shows up between *for* and *to* in the east, but before *for* in the west (Table 3). Note that adverbial PPs and polysyllabic adverbs occur in both positions.

	FOR>ADV>TO	ADV>FOR>TO
East	18	0
West	0	10

Table 3: Placement of adverbials, 1150–1250

Table 3 provides further support for the structures in (9). This contrast would be difficult to explain otherwise—even if there are multiple adjunction sites for adverbs within the infinitive, there is no particular reason why preverbal adverbs should *always* precede *for* in the west but never do so in the east.

More generally, Tables 2 and 3 show that western *for* cannot be in C. If it were, we would expect adverbs and DPs to be able to intervene between *for* and *to*, as in ModE (14a). On the other hand, we would not expect adverbs or DPs to be able to precede *for*, as in (14b) (see Roberts and Rousseau, 2003, §3.3.1). But neither of these predictions is borne out in western early ME—instead, we find exactly the opposite pattern, a fact that is naturally accounted for under the assumption that western *for to* is a single head below C.

- (14) a. For John never to visit again would be terrible.
 b. * Never for John to visit again would be terrible.

2.4 Orthography

Further support for the structures in (9) comes from spelling practices. *For to* could be spelled as one word, *forto* or *forte*, in ME. In early ME, however, this tendency was almost entirely restricted to western texts (Table 4). Again, these facts receive a natural explanation under the hypothesis that western *for to*, unlike eastern *for to*, is an inseparable unit in the syntax.

	One word	Two words
East	4	136
West	132	112

Table 4: Spelling of *for to*, 1150–1250

3 Implications: present-day dialect variation

While previous studies have shown that ME subjectless *for to* infinitives pattern differently in individual texts (see e.g. Quirk and Svartvik, 1970; Warner, 1982; van Gelderen, 1998), this study has revealed a broader, regionally based dialect difference concerning *for to* infinitives in early ME, shortly after they first appear. Regional variation with respect to infinitival *for*, then, far from being an exclusively modern phenomenon, is present from the beginning.⁹ These findings lend plausibility to the idea that present-day variation is inherited from early ME—a hypothesis I explore in this section.

Present-day dialect variation appears to be restricted to *subjectless* infinitives. While sentences like (15a) are grammatical in a number of ModE dialects—including Irish English (Corrigan, 2003; Henry, 1995), Scottish English (Macaulay, 1991; Miller, 1993), Tyneside English (Beal, 1993), Ozark English (Chomsky and Lasnik, 1977), and Ottawa Valley English (Carroll, 1983)—the obligatory presence of *for* in (15b) is not subject to variation.

- (15) a. % John went to the store for to buy bread.
 b. ...*(for) Mary to travel so far is no small thing.

In order to account for these facts, (Chomsky, 1981, p. 300) proposes that the licensing properties associated with the complementizer *for* apply ‘optionally’ in Ozark English. In modern terms, this would mean that *for* checks Case- or ϕ -features only optionally and can appear alongside PRO otherwise. The difficulty with this proposal is that it is unclear how such a system could be acquired in the absence of a clear historical or synchronic precedent.

In light of the patterns reported in §2, I offer a different approach—one in which modern infinitival *for* is *not* uniformly a complementizer.

⁹Notice the difference in word order between the OE (3a) (composed by a Wessex native) and (3b). A question for further research is whether (north)western *for to* has a distinct source (e.g., a calque of a similar construction in a contact language).

- (16) PROPOSAL: Modern dialects that allow subjectless *for to* infinitives are descendents of western ME. The use of *for to* as a single ‘low’ head, already well established in early western ME, has survived in these dialects alongside the newer version of *for* in C.

In §2 I showed that neither version of early ME *for* is in C. This finding is consistent with the hypothesis laid out in §1, that the complementizer analysis of *for* is a separate development from the use of *for* in ME subjectless infinitives. The complementizer *for* is distinguished from early ME *for* not only by when it first appears, but also by the degree to which it is incorporated throughout dialects. In particular, while the system that makes the complementizer obligatory in (15b) is established across dialects by the 17th century, the grammaticization of *for to* as a single ‘low’ head is never fully realized in all regional varieties of ME, as shown in Table 5:

	Total <i>to</i> inf’s	<i>For to</i> inf’s		Purpose <i>for to</i> inf’s	
	N	n	%	n	%
East	2708	496	18.3	187	37.8
South	810	139	17.2	76	54.7
West	1411	601	42.6	286	47.6
North	904	303	33.5	123	30.6

Table 5: *For*-marking by region, 1250–1420

Recall from Figure 1 that *for*-marking increases in the second and third periods of ME (1250–1420). Table 5 shows that most of this increase is contributed by northern and western, as opposed to southern and eastern, dialects (note that northern and southern texts are unavailable in the first period of the corpus). Eastern dialects do appear to have acquired a single head *for to*—since eastern *for* can now occur in non-purpose infinitives and be preceded by infinitive-internal material, as in (17)—but the overall frequency of *for*-marking remains low.

- (17) and preyen hire [of hir wepyng] for to stynte (CTMELI,217.C1b.13)
 ‘and ask her to cease her weeping’

In §1 I suggested that the complementizer version of *for* is introduced in late ME, perhaps due to a reanalysis based on the position of overt subjects with respect to *for*. Suppose that when this occurs, it disrupts the grammaticization of *for to* as a single head in southeastern dialects and infinitival *for*

comes to be analyzed exclusively as a complementizer, resulting in the system inherited by standard ModE. In northern and western dialects, on the other hand, the single head *for to* is already a stable feature of the grammar by late ME, and the advent of the complementizer *for* does not interfere with it. The two versions of infinitival *for* are able to coexist, resulting in the grammar inherited by modern subjectless *for to* dialects.

A number of questions remain to be answered, of course. Although most ModE subjectless *for to* dialects have not been studied in detail, it is clear that they vary considerably in terms of whether subjectless *for to* infinitives are allowed in purpose clauses only, or in control, ECM, and raising environments as well (see Carroll, 1983; Corrigan, 2003; Henry, 1995, for discussion). Under (16), the spell-out of the relevant head as *to* or *for to* is likely determined by sets of syntacticosemantic features that must be specified by dialect.¹⁰ While (16) may need to be elaborated accordingly, it has the advantage of automatically predicting that *for* and *to* will be adjacent in ModE subjectless infinitives—a prediction that is borne out, as far as I am aware.

Under (16), subjectless *for to* dialects differ minimally from standard English in that they allow *to* be spelled out as *for to* under certain conditions, a feature inherited from western ME. To the extent that (16) is empirically viable, it enables a simplified account of the pattern in (15). The properties of the true complementizer *for* can receive a uniform analysis—whether this analysis involves subject licensing (Bošković, 1997; Chomsky, 1981) or constraints on the distribution of null complementizers (McFadden, 2004)—and the possibility of variation or optionality need not be introduced. Subjectless *for to* infinitives like (15a) simply do not factor into such analyses, because the version of *for* seen here is not in C.

4 Conclusions

The contribution of this paper has been to draw a sharp distinction between the *for* in subjectless *for to* infinitives and the *for* in infinitives with subjects, and to show that variation in the former case does not pose a problem for theories of infinitival clause structure. Specifically, I have argued that infinitival *for* is not

¹⁰A further question concerns whether *for* and *for to* can co-occur in a single infinitive (e.g., *For Mary for to travel so far is no small thing*). In dialects where such sentences appear to be prohibited, e.g. Belfast English (Henry, 1995), it is possible that this effect is produced by a haplology mechanism in PF, rather than in the syntax proper (cf. the ‘double *-ing* constraint’). This possibility might be tested by e.g. manipulating the phonological weight of the intervening subject.

uniformly a complementizer across English dialects, but that some dialects have inherited from western ME a single head *for to* that alternates with *to*. This proposal is supported by a detailed study of historical data; indeed, one of the secondary contributions of this paper has been to show how large corpus studies can reveal patterns that might otherwise be obscured.

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