

# Pronominal vs. nominal forms of direct object in Late Modern through Present-day English

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## 1. More thoughts on (in)transitivity: An introduction

Transitivity has attracted the attention of researchers for about half a century, with its nature being examined mostly within the range of transitive clauses (Hopper and Thompson 1980). In the last two decades, the study of transitivity began to be readdressed from the perspective of intransitivity in conversation (Thompson and Hopper 2001), which provides fresh insights into the discourse-pragmatic correlates of grammar with (in)transitivity. This study is one of the papers given at the international symposium: *More thoughts on (in)transitivity and related issues in the history of English (The 92nd Annual Conference of English Literary Society of Japan (ELSJ-92) Web Conference)*, organized by the present author, in cooperation with Takuto Watanabe, Jerzy Nykiel, Fuyo Osawa and Yoshitaka Kozuka. We traced the history of (in)transitivity from Present-day English (PDE) to Old English (OE) on several issues.

## 2. Increase in pronominal forms and formulaic expressions

This study examined the vicissitude of pronominal/nominal forms of direct object in Late Modern English (LModE) through PDE, with a focus on the two typical transitive verbs, i.e. *kill* and *break*. The data used for this study were all from *the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA, 1810s-2000s)*, especially both past tense and present/past perfect forms that denote a completed action.

The survey results tell us that these two verbs have a strong tendency to co-occur with pronominal objects. In the case of *kill*, *(have/had) killed him* is found to be by far the most frequently used sequential expressions as in (1); other related expressions such as *(have/had) killed her/himself/me/you/it/one/etc.* can be considered to have developed in clusters by analogy with *(have/had) killed him* over time.

(1) “They killed him in the War; I guess. Yes, that’s what happened to him.” (1936 *The home place*: FIC, COHA)

Interestingly, the past tense form is preferred across time in terms of frequency, which implies that in American English, past tense forms can be used where perfect forms are traditionally used (see Otsu 2019 for details; cf. Elsness 1997).

On the other hand, some of the most frequently used sequential expressions with *break*, e.g. *broke the ice*, *broke the silence (of something)* and *broke the news*, might have been conventionalized as formulaic forms; transitivity may be lower despite their full nominal forms. In addition, such examples as *break it (off/up)/in two/in(to) pieces/down/open/in half/etc.* may imply that *break* can often be used as low transitive verbal chunks or formulaic expressions, as in (2); *broke it* was the most frequent usage in this survey.<sup>1</sup> All in all, even typical transitive verbs such as *kill* and *break* turned out to be intransitive-oriented over time.

(2) *Chick caught his hold, but the Senestro broke it almost instantly.* (1951 *BlindSpot*: FIC, COHA)

## 3. Intransitive-oriented over history

Building on the investigation results, I argue that the strong preference of pronominal forms over nominal ones in verbal expressions with *kill* reflects the lower degree of transitivity (cf. Thompson and Hopper 2001 and Shibasaki 2010). Pronominal forms indicate referentially a shorter distance from the last mention; information retrievable from the immediate context (i.e. recency-of-mention effect) may have enabled the increasing rate of pronominal forms, which may be compatible with what Halliday (1994: 179) calls ‘clause by exchange’ in interpersonal communication. Forms of reference salient enough in discourse can be realized as forms of less phonetic substance, subsequently giving rise to ‘object deletion’ (Thompson and Hopper 2001). The other verb *break* tends to co-occur with nominal objects; however, the majority of its high-frequent expressions can be regarded as formulaic expressions

that have some bearing on the lower degree of transitivity, which lends support to some seminal studies in intransitivity on PDE (Kärkkäinen 1996; Thompson and Hopper 2001).

### 3. Implications for future studies

Omission of direct objects, which is not addressed but implied in this study, can be a good topic for my future study; since salient items in discourse are often used as pronominal forms, they can be elided so long as speakers can retrieve relevant information from the immediate discourse, regardless of whether they are grammatical subjects or objects (Givón 1990: 905). In this line of reasoning, Parviainen (2019) investigates the omission of direct objects of transitive verbs in nine varieties of English, i.e. Fiji, Hong Kong, India, Jamaica, Kenya, the Philippines, Singapore, Great Britain and the United States, from the *International Corpus of English*. She concludes that while object omission can be seen most frequently in both Indian and Singapore English, it is not found in British and American English (i.e. ‘parental varieties’). Whether the increasing degree of object omission can be witnessed in the history of British or American English will promote a better understanding of the transition of (in)transitivity.

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### Notes

1. As is often pointed out in works on LModE (e.g. Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2009: 85), past tense forms are used as a part of perfect constructions as follows. This may be one of the reasons why the form *broke* is frequently witnessed in LModE through PDE instead of its past participle form *broken*.

- (i) *England has broke the treaty of amity and commerce, made by our glorious Washington;*  
(1815 *The Fair Americans*: FIC, COHA)

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### Corpus

*The Corpus of Historical American English (COHA, 1810s-2000s)*, more than 400 million, under the supervision of Mark Davies. (<https://www.english-corpora.org/coha/>) (last access: June 30, 2020)