Performance, competence and extra prepositions

Chomsky and Miller’s (1963) separation of competence grammar and performance has recently been a much-debated issue (Arregui et al. 2006, Hofmeister et al. 2007, O’Grady 2007, Staum and Sag 2008). Because empirical facts about performance suggest an interaction between it and competence grammar, it is necessary that the motivations for certain phenomena be reevaluated. Staum and Sag’s (2008) experimental data speak in favor of gradient acceptability of relative clause constructions in which a preposition gets doubled. As the distance between the two prepositions increases, the clause becomes more acceptable, as in (1). This result predicts that corpus studies – ideally, of both historical and present-day English material – should reveal a preference for several words intervening between any doubled prepositions, thus demonstrating a continuous involvement of performance. To test this prediction I examined a sample of presidential papers (1990-2001) and found that the intervening material reaches eight words in two out of nine cases. This finding next led me to investigate the earliest, Middle English, records of extra prepositions with a view to verifying their performance-driven side. By extending my analysis to doubled and mismatched prepositions, first examined by Riley and Parker (1986), I arrive at a fairly complete picture of the ancestors of today’s extra prepositions.

Previously unnoticed historical data indicate that performance can interact with competence with varying degrees of strength, and with respect to a single phenomenon. For example, the early extra prepositions arguably fall out from the Middle English grammar shifting away from overt case marking so that prepositional phrases gain in frequency. In this scenario, insertion of prepositions accidentally produces effects viewed as mismatches. Consider (2), where the pied-pied preposition in fact is an instance of the genitive partitive. Similarly, preposition to is best interpreted as an analytic realization of the dative in (3). Since such mismatched prepositions appear next to doubled ones, the phenomenon cannot be uniform or simply a matter of both pied-piping and stranding a preposition in one clause. Conceivably, the grammar that itself promotes reference tracking by means of prepositions readily accepts extra prepositions in relative- and interrogative-clause environments. If so, the role of performance is slight, if any.

Interestingly, every Middle English mismatched preposition comfortably fits into the verb’s argument structure, which often isn’t the case in modern English (Riley and Parker 1986). Further, the amount of intervening material isn’t much of a factor. Just as the corpus of presidential papers favors short distances, so do the Middle English data (between three and six words). Additionally, I found four examples that represent a deliberate reduction of the distance, see (4). Given that prepositions may either follow or precede verbs due to the relatively free word order, their pre-verbal position should disfavor doubling. The corpus has another example similar to (4) with the same verb and reverse word order (5), a likely index of inconsistent use. Inconsistency is further reinforced by variable spelling. Apparently mismatched prepositions may arise when a prefix gets separated from a passive participle (6). This effect is due to the lack of a spelling convention at the time, though, as is clear from the distribution of the spellings of ‘inclepid’ in the same text: spelled together nine times, and separately three times.

Based on this evidence, I argue that Middle English extra prepositions have independent motivation supported by the changing grammar, while the modern phenomenon seems driven solely by performance. Note, however, that since there is no explicit case marking in today’s English, extra prepositions may be a way of tracking reference early on. This strategy possibly facilitates processing of relative clauses, which, unlike interrogative clauses, cannot take advantage of more informative wh-phrases. The sample of presidential papers supports this hypothesis in that among the nine examples, seven are relative clauses. The Middle English data too reveal a heavy bias toward relatives. If extra prepositions serve the same purpose both in Middle English and now, a shift in the division of labor between competence grammar and performance is evident.
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(1) I asked from which teacher at the new school he attended my son had gotten the bad grade from at the end of the quarter. (Staum & Sag 2008)

(2) & it is the same of whyche your god was enbawmed wyth when he was taken doun fro the crosse and layed in hys graue. (15c. Lyf of the noble and Crysten prync, Charles the Grete)

(3) This mocke muste my fadre here of hym to whom he had most his trust on (15c. The History of Reynard the Fox. W. Caxton)

(4) So ful he was of tresoun. / Þabot of whom ich er of teld, (14c. The romance of Guy of Warwick)

(5) A-ȝeyn hem come Archilaus / With the kyng Procenore— / Off whom I haue told of byfore; (The Laud Troy book)

(6) opyn thin eeȝen, and see oure desolacioun, and the cite, on whom thi name is yn clepid. (14c. The Holy Bible, containing the Old and New Testaments, with the Apocrpyhal books)

References


