



ON THE NOUN PHRASE IN EARLY MODERN ENGLISH*

The need for major works in the study of English syntax from a historical perspective has been repeatedly stated by several scholars, including Prof. Rydén (1979):

In spite of all the work done in the form of comprehensive grammars (by Jespersen, Poutsma, Visser and others) [...] much remains to be discovered and 'explained' in historical English syntax. (p.33)

The lack of precise information about particular periods and syntactic patterns has hindered the creation of more comprehensive historical grammars of English, since the sources required have not been examined sufficiently yet. This need is primarily focused on the examination of specific structures exhibited in as many contexts as possible. Thus, the study of syntactic variation from a social-historical perspective is particularly compelling¹. Helena Raumolin-Brunberg has completed a work of these dimensions in the field of English syntax. This book is an analysis of noun phrase structures in the language of an early 16th century informant, namely Sir Thomas More. The aim of her work is to find out *how the choice of linguistic structures varies according to the situation of language use* (p.15), and she offers an exhaustive description of More's use of noun phrases in the maximum of situations, and observes as well variational patterns in his selection of this specific structure. Accordingly, Raumoulin-Brunberg incorporates her research within a situation dependent or intraspeaker variationist paradigm, in the line of studies carried out by Halliday, Biber or Crystal and Davy, rather than within the *speaker-dependent or interspeaker* paradigm adopted by Labov, Trudgill or Milroy.

The most important problem in the observation of linguistic change was posed, according to Milroy (1992) and others, when historical linguists, following de Saussure's conception of diachronic studies, conceived historical linguistics as the observation of successive synchronic stages of the language which were in themselves stable and free of variation. This has been empirically refuted by researches such as Labov's (1963) in Martha's Vineyard, in which he observed and evaluated the process of a particular change in progress. Hence, it can be said that any linguistic shift can be described by the observation of its progression, or by examining the results of that change in different stages of a language, that is, by placing correlative synchronic states in chronological order. Furthermore, it has to be borne in mind that no specific period or idiolect is completely uniform. Notwithstanding, even though a synchronic stage is not a fixed state of language, but is itself constantly changing, this does not imply that the comparison of specific stages of a language is an unsuitable theoretical means to carry out historical

studies. Presently, this is the only way of describing the changing (and stable) patterns of a language at any former period. In this book Raoumlin-Brunberg follows a historical approach in the sense that the study is concerned with a particular period of the English language; however, it is not strictly diachronical since it does not show the historical progression of the specific structures included in her research, but offers a synchronic descriptive account of the noun phrase in early 16th century English. She combines it with a variationist perspective that she includes within what is commonly known as register or functional/situational variation.

Since it is intended as a descriptive rather than explanatory work, the grammatical model implemented in this investigation follows the perspective employed in well-established grammars such as *A Grammar of Contemporary English* (Quirk et al. 1972) and *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (Quirk et al. 1985). Consequently, the possibility of using the results obtained in further research of this kind remains open. Raoumlin-Brunberg compares her own results with those obtained by Varantola (1984), Jucker (1989), and others, including traditional works like Mustanoja (1960), etc. Furthermore, this model provides an adequate description of the variant forms to be encountered in actual language use and a suitable account of noun phrase relations and structures. A quantitative framework is also employed to complement the qualitative methods used in the description of noun phrase structures as well as to provide for the absence of the native speaker's competence constantly hindering historical studies. Therefore, statistical charts and tables accompany this account of NP patterns in sixteenth century English.

This book is divided into two main parts, the first of which deals with the theoretical and methodological issues significant for variational analysis and grammatical description. It also comprises information about the corpus selected for research, in this case the writings of Sir Thomas More. Raoumlin-Brunberg selected More's writings as the source for her research because he is a very versatile author clearly representative of the "standard" of his time. The samples of his writings have been selected attending mainly to linguistic criteria rather than to their literary value. These have been stratified according to their genre/register in such a way that a proportional amount of data can be sampled for each stratum. The genres studied comprise chronicles, polemics and devotional and epistolary prose. This is widely accepted as a most convenient approach for this kind of study (Rydén 1966 and 1979) since it provides information about the language of an informant as produced for different linguistic situations. Furthermore, despite the possible idiosyncratic elements in it, it is usually legitimate to extrapolate the standard of the period from the language of its leading authors, and particularly of Sir Thomas More, whose language illustrates the prestige variety of Chancery, which is considered to be the direct antecedent of Standard Written English. A chapter dealing with specific theoretical considerations pertaining to the noun phrase is included as well. Matters concerning constituency and dependency relations within the noun phrase as well as coordination of noun phrases and other *problematic issues* such as verbal nominalizations, relative clauses, etc., are dealt

with here. It also discusses the variables selected for the study of the noun phrase. A short chapter concerning the state of noun phrase structures in Late Middle English completes the first part of this thesis.

The second part incorporates the results obtained from the statistical analysis of the variables studied. As mentioned before, the specific objective of this book is to study the structure of the noun phrase, both simple and complex; that is, the elements that constitute it, the dependency relations between headword and modifiers, and the way in which they are ordered as well as the relations by which noun phrases associate in the texts. The noun phrases were examined according to 30 different variables, affecting both the noun phrase itself and the context of the clause in which it is embedded. Four chapters have been devoted to the analysis of these variables (chapter six to chapter nine). Chapter six deals with the difference between simple and complex noun phrases as seen after the application of criteria that involve both linguistic and extralinguistic constraints. To the intra-linguistic constraints she assigns variables of the type of the "quality of the headword", the "syntactic function" and the "position" of the NP. The extralinguistic constraints as explicitly defined include the various text types she analyses and the different frequency of usage they show regarding both simple and complex noun phrase structures. Explicit reference is also made to different registers/styles, use of formulas and even the sex variable is taken into account in this respect. This use of the sex variable is obviously not related directly to More himself, but to the language he assigns to some of his female characters, which is considerably simpler than the one used by his male characters. Raumoulin-Brunberg's hypothesis is that *More might have wanted the queen's speech to represent women's more uneducated and less ornamented way of speaking in general*. Whether this is true of the speech of 16th century women, or of More's intention, is still an undissolved question, but it might be, nevertheless, a conscious effort on his part to mark the speech of his characters on the basis of a sexual difference.

Chapter seven contains the analysis of the noun phrases according to their length and implements the results with the observation of alterations brought about by the application of the linguistic constraints mentioned in the previous chapter, both individually and in combination. Chapter eight is an examination of the way in which headwords and determiners are distributed in the same text and the differences shown by each text as compared with the rest. These differences of usage shown by the various textual strata are significant, although in varying degrees depending on the variables applied (the category of the head of the noun phrase or its nature, the use of determiners, etc). The ninth is a lengthy chapter concerned with the complex NP and its structure. In this case a comparison with other studies, such as Varantola (1984), is also incorporated. This serves the purpose of showing changes in the syntactic patterns from Early Modern to Present Day English, regarding the *general structure of the NP* and the types of constituents.

The comparison of Early Modern English and Present Day usage goes on in chapter ten, which is conceived as a conclusion to this dissertation. Thus, later

innovations in the English language (such as 'its', 'one', '-body', etc) and elements now in disuse ('ye', 'ought/nought', 'mo', etc.) are accounted for in this chapter. Changes in the structure of the noun phrase have also occurred and Raoulin-Brunberg draws our attention to them in these last pages of her book. The use of a statistical analysis has been indispensable in the observation of some of these changes. This chapter also comprises a summary of the extralinguistic constraints affecting the NP patterning, and displays a grouping of the text types surveyed according to their application of noun phrases. These groups do not correlate with the genre classification made prior to the analysis, since texts formerly inserted in the same genre displayed significant deviations in their use of noun phrases.

Finally, all that is left to say is that this is a remarkable and very complete research on the syntax of the noun phrase as used by Sir Thomas More. This monograph fills a gap in our knowledge of English syntax and provides information useful for further research in this field. Last, it does fulfil the purpose for which it was intended in the first place, it does *make an inventory of the regular noun phrase structures that were available for the language user at the beginning of the EMode period and examines to what extent the different structures were chosen in actual language use in various types of writing.*

Notes

*HELENA RAUMOULIN-BRUNBERG, *The Noun Phrase in Early Sixteenth Century English. A Study Based on Sir Thomas More's Writings*. Société Néophilologique, Helsinki. 1991. 308 pp.

¹ Rydén (1979) p.34: *The social and regional stratification of English syntactic usage through time and the role of social variation in syntactic change are poorly known [...].*

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