

A NOTE ON THE QUANTITATIVE EVALUATION OF THE VERB IN ENGLISH

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In 1955, J. Vachek published a paper entitled 'Some Thoughts on the So-Called Complex Condensation in Modern English.'¹ The paper was later reprinted in *Brno Studies in English* 3,² which contained also our 'Remarks on Complex Condensation Phenomena in Some English and Czech Contexts'³ with some statistics on the phenomena of complex condensation.

In the 'Remarks', the degree of condensation is expressed by means of the percentage of sentences containing a condenser. The numbers of sentences with a condenser indicate not only basic differences between English and Czech, but also differences between simple narrative prose (fairy tales), narrative prose and professional prose within each of the two languages. This approach can be further developed by contrasting the number of condensers with the number of finite verb forms, a method similar to that used by Renský in 'The Noun-Verb Quotient in English and Czech'.⁴

The method used in the 'Remarks' has the disadvantage that it takes into consideration only the *-ing* forms and the past participles⁵ while the infinitives are left aside. The reason for this procedure is that with the former it can always be decided whether they are instances of condensation or not, a decision which cannot be reached with the latter without some ambiguity. There are certain types of infinitives or infinitive constructions that cannot be taken for instances of condensation because in Modern English there are no parallel constructions with finite verb forms. As non-condensing infinitives are then classified a) infinitives after auxiliaries, b) infinitives functioning as the subjects of clauses (*To read books improves the mind*), c) constructions with infinitives which may generally be characterized as constructions with only one verb of action and may be subdivided into three sub-groups: i) infinitives after verbs expressing a wish: contemporary English has hardly any sentences with two finite verbs that could replace *I want to see the new film, If anyone wished to come after me, . . .*; ii) infinitives after the verbs *to start, to begin, to try, to desire*; iii) infinitives after verbs of sensual perception.

As condensing infinitives, on the other hand, may be labelled all infinitives expressing purpose, infinitives after the verbs *to seem, to appear etc.* (*It seems he is right*) and after the verbs *to decide, to ask etc.* (*He decided he would go there at once*).

J. Vachek's paper has shown the differences between Old English and Modern English in regard to the complex condensation phenomena. A comparison of *The Authorised Version* and of *The Moffat Translation*,⁶ made by O. Tichá (cf. 'Remarks' 100), revealed more condensers in the former version than in the latter.

Biblical texts, however, are available even from the times before 1611, and thus may be used for analysis covering the older stages of the development of English.

The oldest extract subjected to analysis from the point of view of the degree of

condensation is the West Saxon version of some chapters from the gospels.⁷ Although the extract is relatively short, it yields 300 instances of finite verb forms, which seems to be a quantity high enough for the indication of the main quantitative relations. The mentioned 300 finite verb forms are opposed to 15 instances of condensation (10 participles and 5 infinitives). The instances of condensation are exemplified by 1 and 2:

1. ...; and gangende into pam huse, he gemetton þæt cild... II.11

2... and we cwomon us him to geeadmedenne. II.2

The participles are mostly present participles and the infinitives are infinitives of purpose. As a non-condensing infinitive has been classified that of 3:

3. ..., he ondred pyder to farende... II.22

It can hardly be surprising to find that all the instances of condensation in the Old English version have their counterparts in the Latin version.⁸ The latter, however, is richer in condensers than the former — there are 54 condensers in the Latin text, i.e. 18 per cent, but only 15 condensers in the Old English text, i.e. 5 per cent.

The corresponding Middle English version can be found in Kluge's reader.⁹ The degree of condensation here surpasses that of the Latin version quoted above: 30.2 per cent of the number of finite verbs. Ex. 4 indicates a high degree of condensation.

4. Forsothe thei, seeynge the sterre, joyeden with a ful grete joye. And thei, entrynge the hous, founden the child with Marie, his modir; and thei fallynge doun worshipiden hym. And her tresours oponyd, thei offreden to hym giftis,... II.10—11.

The manuscript of this version is Bodl. Douce 369, which, according to Robinson,¹⁰ gives the so-called First Version, often referred to as the 'Hereford' translation after its author. Robinson writes about this version that it is 'a complete version of the Bible,..., in a form so close to the Latin that it approaches to a word-for-word translation. In all probability this... was intended to facilitate comparison of the English with the Latin... it must soon have been evident that a version more in accordance with the genius of the language, and consequently more intelligible, was a real necessity for the ordinary reader.' (140). The First Version was followed by the Second, its most probable author being John Purvey. His General Prologue puts forth his ideas on how Latin should be translated into English: 'First it is to knowe, that the best translating is out of Latyn into English, to translate aftir the sentence, and not oneli aftir the wordis, ...; ... an ablative case absolute may be resolvid into these thre wordis, with covenable verbe, *the while, for, if* — as gramariens seyn. As thus: *the maistir redinge, I stonde* may be resolvid thus: *While the maistir redith, I stonde*, ... Also a participle of a present tens, either preterit, of active vois, either passif, mai be resolvid into a verbe of the same tens and a coniunccioun copulatif. As thus: *-dicens*, that is, *seiynge*, mai be resolvid thus, *and seith*, either *that seith*.'¹¹

Another version, truer to the usage of those times, may be added to the two mentioned above: the biblical texts translated by Wyclif himself and quoted in his sermons. They are six shorter extracts,¹² but their total length can be compared with that of the other texts quoted in this paper. The ratio of condensers to finite verbs is 335 to 35 here, i.e. 7.45 per cent.

The Early New English and Modern English periods are represented by *The Authorised Version* and by *The Moffat Translation*. As both these versions present no limits in the way of material available, our comparison covers four different

extracts from the gospels.¹³ There are 123 condensers against 1200 finite verb forms in *The Authorised Version* and 161 condensers against 1125 finite verb forms in *The Moffat Translation*, i.e. 10.25 and 14.3 per cent, respectively.

The over-all results of the comparison of different versions of the same text coming from different stages of the historical development of English may be expressed as a series of degrees of condensation: 5 per cent for the Old English text, 7.45 per cent for the Middle English texts, 10.25 per cent for the Early New English texts and 14.3 per cent for the Modern English texts.

It may not be uninteresting to subject the above quoted materials to a quantitative analysis with regard to the communicative value of the finite verb form, in a way similar to that used in our 'Attempt at a Quantitative Expression of the Communicative Value of the Verb in English and Czech'.¹⁴ The present comparison, however, does not cover all the aspects of the communicative value of a verb form as analysed by J. Firbas,¹⁵ on whose findings the 'Attempt' is based. Out of the categories summarized in Table 7 of the 'Attempt',¹⁶ only the category of the amount of meaning has been used for the present analysis. The amount of meaning, expressed by means of a series of points ranging from zero to five, is ascertained for all verb forms that are conveyers of the primary grammatical categories. In the case of finite verb forms consisting of more words, the most evident conveyers of the primary categories are chosen. The average value for the whole text is then decided. Thus for the OE text this average value of semantic content is 3.79, while for *The Moffat Translation* it is 3.33. The difference is very slight but it should be borne in mind that the numerical values are purely arbitrary and are supposed to indicate the basic differences. The results show that the conveyers of the primary grammatical categories in Modern English are semantically weaker than those in Old English. The corresponding values for the Early New English and the Middle English texts are 3.40 and 3.53, respectively.

The degree of condensation and the semantic value of the conveyers of the primary grammatical categories may thus be summarized in the following table:

	OE text	ME text	ENE text	NE text
Degree of condensation	5	7.45	10.25	14.3
Semantic value	3.79	3.53	3.40	3.33

NOTES

¹ *Sborník prací filosofické fakulty brněnské university* A 3.63—77 (Brno, 1955).

² 'The Compactness of the Modern English Sentence', Chapter III of 'Some Less Familiar Aspects of the Analytical Trend of English', *Brno Studies in English* 3.9—78 (Prague, 1961).

³ *Brno Studies in English* 3.105—118 (Prague, 1961).

⁴ *Philologica Pragensia* 8.289—302 (Prague, 1965). A finite verb form, however, is regarded as a whole here and is not analysed into its respective components, nominal and non-nominal.

⁵ For the sake of brevity, all instances of condensation employing any of the *-ing* forms and the past participle are referred to as 'participial' condensation.

⁶ *The Moffat Translation of the Bible*, revised edition (London, 1953).

- ⁷ *The Gospel according to S. Matthew*, Chs. II—V, as reprinted in F. Kluge, *Angelsächsisches Lesebuch* (Halle, 1902).
- ⁸ *Biblia Sacra vulgatae editionis* (Coloniae Agrippinae, 1630).
- ⁹ F. Kluge, *Mittelenglisches Lesebuch*² (Halle, 1912).
- ¹⁰ H. W. Robinson, *The Bible in its Ancient and English Versions* (Oxford, 1940).
- ¹¹ Wyclif, *Select English Writings*, ed. by H. E. Winn (Oxford, 1929), p. 27.
- ¹² Winn 9—16.
- ¹³ Mat. 2—5, 26—27, Luke 9—10, John 5—6.
- ¹⁴ *Brno Studies in English* 7.103—18 (Brno, 1968).
- ¹⁵ 'More Thoughts on the Communicative Function of the English Verb', *Sborník prací filosofické fakulty brněnské university A* 7.74—98 (Brno, 1959).

RESUMÉ

Poznámka ke kvantitativnímu zhodnocení slovesa v angličtině

Na základě poměru mezi počtem kondensátorů a určitých slovesných tvarů se zjišťuje stupeň kondensace pro texty z různých údobí historického vývoje angličtiny. U určitých slovesných tvarů se současně zjišťuje sématická závažnost nositelů primárních mluvnických kategorií. Zatímco se stupeň kondenzace postupně zvyšuje, sématická závažnost nositelů primárních mluvnických kategorií klesá.