Auxiliary drop in Early Modern German

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1. Introduction

The so-called ‘afinite construction’ (Ebert 1986; 132ff, Ebert et al. 1993; 440ff) in Early Modern German (EMG) (ca. 1350–1650) is an ellipsis of finite auxiliaries (especially) in embedded clauses. It emerges towards the end of the 15th century (Biener 1925), spreads widely throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, but disappears again before ever taking over completely. Especially the latter fact makes it an interesting topic for studies on syntactic change and its principles. As modern Swedish shows a similar phenomenon of optionally dropping a finite perfect auxiliary in embedded clauses (Den Besten 1989, Julien 2000), the afinite construction and especially its licensing conditions are also interesting from a more ‘universal’ perspective. Both topics — the driving motives behind the syntactic change as well as the the licensing conditions on such an ellipsis of a finite auxiliary — will be addressed in this paper.

2. The afinite construction

The hallmark of the ‘afinite’ construction is that the finite auxiliary is omitted from a periphrastic verb form. When the construction emerges in EMG, it first affects the perfect auxiliaries (haben/sein ‘have/be’ + past participle) and then spreads to passive (sein/werden ‘be/become’ + passive participle) and constructions with haben/sein ‘have/be’ + zu ‘to’-infinitive. Furthermore, copulae (cf. (2)) and, rarely, future auxiliaries (werden ‘be(come)’ + infinitive) and modal verbs can be dropped.

In the analysis of a corpus of about 150,000 words, I found that 82% of these auxiliary ellipses occur in dependent clauses, especially in relative and adjunct clauses, cf. (1a) and (1b).
As the afinite construction spreads, ellipses in coordinations distinct from regular conjunction reductions such as Gapping become possible (cf. Section 2.2 below). An example for what Schröder (1985) calls ‘ungrammatical’ coordination ellipsis because the overt auxiliary in one conjunct is different from the covert one in the other in subject agreement, tense, lexical item, etc. can be seen in (2), where overt *is* ‘is’ is opposed to covert *hat* ‘has’. There are also examples where all auxiliaries are covert.

(2) (Lavater (1578;17v,02–04))

So ist gmein wenn der wyn im kopff

such is common when the wine in the head
überhandgenommen [...] vnd meister worden ist /

taken over [has] and master become is

‘This is typical when the wine takes possession of the head and becomes its master.’

In literary style, afinite constructions survive until well into the 20th century, however restricted to perfect and passive auxiliaries, and disallowing ‘ungrammatical’ ellipsis in coordinations. This literary use of uncoordinated afinite constructions is still felt familiar as ‘archaic/poetic’ style.

3. The emergence of the afinite construction

The afinite construction only emerges in the end of the 15th century, but spreads rapidly during the following two centuries. In some texts between 1650 and 1700, overt auxiliaries in embedded clauses are even exceptional, ellipsis being the default case (cf. Admoni 1980).

There are four questions suggesting themselves in this respect. First, why does the afinite construction emerge? Second, why does it emerge exactly at this time? Third, how is the ellipsis of the finite auxiliary licensed? And last, why does it never take over completely and even disappear again later, apart from very peripheral stylistic usages? The last question may constitute a certain
challenge to current theories of language change as proposed by Kroch (1994) or Lightfoot (1999), but will be dealt with in a separate publication.

Concerning the first question, it has been claimed that the afinite construction was never more than a stylistic variant and as such a legitimate option within the grammatical system. This is however where the second question becomes relevant: if that was indeed the case, why do we not find afinite constructions in Old or Middle High German? At least the perfect periphrases had developed a longer time before the emergence of the afinite construction (Ebert 1978:59). Nevertheless, perfect auxiliaries are only beginning to be dropped around 1500. Table (3) gives the percentages of dropped present perfect auxiliaries as opposed to non-elliptic forms.

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<th>1450–1500</th>
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<th>1600–1650</th>
<th>1650+</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ratio present perfect</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td>28.3%</td>
<td>70.3%</td>
<td>85.6%</td>
<td>90.1%</td>
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We therefore have to wonder whether there are conditioning factors related to this emergence. And indeed, there are.

As indicated above, EMG auxiliary ellipses are especially frequent in embedded clauses. Stronger in fact, they are especially frequent in embedded clauses with overt complementizers (there are no auxiliary ellipses in asyndetic embedded clauses in my corpus) and right sentential bracket. Here is the connection to the second question, that is, why they only emerge at the end of the 15th century: First, the possibilities for the formation of hypotactical constructions extend strongly in EMG, accompanied by an extension and refinement of the complementizer system as compared to MHG. The complementizer system is grammaticalizing in its present day form right in the period in question (Gelhaus 1972, Ebert et al. 1993). Second, the sentence-final positioning of the finite verb as a formal mark of embedded clauses is becoming fixed (Ebert 1980, Demske-Neumann 1990). Thus, the formal distinction of main and embedded clauses becomes explicit in this period. The increase in auxiliary ellipses in relative and adjunct clauses can be seen in the table in (4).

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>1450–1500</th>
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<th>1600–1650</th>
<th>1650+</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ratio relative &amp; adjunct clauses</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>14.6%</td>
<td>55.1%</td>
<td>65.3%</td>
<td>70.7%</td>
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It could therefore be claimed that due to these changes located in the T- and C-domains of EMG clause structure, the information coded in the finite auxiliary became redundant and could be dropped. This is what the third question is about and will be addressed in more detail in the following section.
4. Traditional assumptions about licensing conditions

In the traditional literature, three assumptions can be found. First, for the cases of total ellipsis it is argued that they may not even be ellipses, but rather constructions in which the participle alone can function as a full-fledged predicate instead of a finite verb (e.g. Biener 1925, Schröder 1985). Second, it is assumed that the auxiliary ellipses in coordinations are conjunction reductions under parallelism (e.g. Grimm 1898[1967];202). Third, it has been proposed (Behaghel 1928;491) that omitting an auxiliary can be a strategy of avoiding the contact positioning of two eponymous auxiliaries at a clause boundary, thus a form of haplology. Neither of these assumptions is entirely plausible.

4.1 Total auxiliary ellipsis is no ellipsis

Schröder (1985), argues that if there is no overt auxiliary (coordinated or uncoordinated sentences), there is no ellipsis at all, but the past participle (he is only talking about constructions with past participle, that is, perfect tenses and passives) is used as a full predicate instead of a finite verb. In the same vein, it is proposed by Behaghel (1928) that the old function of the participial prefix ge- as a perfective aspect marker, which as such could also combine with finite verbs, possibly caused the omission of the auxiliary to remain unnoticed. According to Ebert et al. (1993;386), however, resultative ge- + finite verb becomes very rare in the 15th century and disappears entirely in the early 16th century. As this is exactly the time when the afinite construction emerges, this correlation is doubtful. Furthermore, verbs with non-separable prefixes (5) which do not go with ge- and the existence of afinite constructions with copulae, or haben/sein with zu-infinitives, cf. (6), are evidence against this hypothesis.

(5) (Lavater (1578; 12r,25–12v,01))

eins teils darum- / dz jnen der dingen jr la‘bê
one part because.of that them these things their life
lang nichts sonders bega‘gnet [...]
long nothing special encountered [is]
‘For one part, it is because no such thing has ever happened to them in their whole life’

(6) a. (Herberstein (1557; 3v,23))

wo dein Hauibt [...] / daselbst werden auch vnsere Heubter sein
where your head [is] there.self will also our heads be
‘where there is your head, our heads will be as well’

b. (Rauwolf (1587; 12,27–29))

das also nichts sonders inn der Jnsel / dieweil sie nit
that thus nothing special in the island while it not
bewohnet wirt / zufinden [...] / dann allein die wilde Capparen
inhabited is to.find [is] than alone the wild capers
'that thus on this island, which is not inhabited, nothing special is to be found apart from wild capers'

Last, there are no obvious syntactic differences between sentences with and without auxiliary ellipsis, nor any context restrictions as there are with freely used participles in Modern German like the imperative use in (7).5

(7) Aufgepasst!
attention.paid
‘Attention please’

4.2 Auxiliary ellipses in coordinations are conjunction reductions

While there are of course regular coordination ellipses like Right Node Raising (RNR) or Gapping6 of finite auxiliaries in EMG as there have been in all historical stages of the language, many auxiliary ellipses in coordinations are rather similar to the uncoordinated afinite constructions as they do not have the properties known from Gapping or RNR. These cases include backward Gapping,7 forward RNR, cases where no finite auxiliary is present in any conjunct, and Schröder’s (1985) ‘ungrammatical’ coordination ellipses (cf. (2) above), contradicting a licensing under parallelism. Furthermore, there are apparent cases of elliptic auxiliaries in coordination with finite main verbs:

(8) (Schorer (1660; 6,11–12))
weil aber die Leuth vngleich [] / einer gern dß /
because however the people different [are] one preferably this
ein anderer was anders liet /
an other something else reads
‘but because people are different [and] one prefers to read this, another one something else’

All these cases suggest that it is perhaps only necessary that the abstract representatives of finiteness have to be parallel, not the actual identity of the auxiliaries.

4.3 Haplogogy?

Last, some researchers have suggested that cases like (9), which are rather frequent, are a form of haplogogy (Behaghel 1928:491, cf. also Ebert et al. 1993: 442).

(9) (Herberstein (1557; 2v,07))
Wer erstlichen der Reissen Herr gwest [] / ist zweiffelich /
who as.the.first the.gen Russian’s master been [is] is doubtful
‘who was the first leader of the Russians is unknown’

This is not very plausible in the light of the many cases without such an adjacency at the clause boundary or those cases where the verb following the gap is a different auxiliary or even a main verb.
5. The licensing conditions formalized

In this section, I will present a more formally grounded analysis of the licensing conditions on EMG auxiliary ellipsis. Two things we have discussed above will be crucial for the proposal. First, afinite constructions are overproportionally frequent in embedded clauses and second, coordination ellipsis does not seem to require full parallelism of the finite auxiliaries in the different conjuncts, but finiteness alone seems to be enough.

Generally, we can say that what an auxiliary itself spells out is finiteness information, that is, agreement with the subject and temporal information. The (semantic) function of finiteness can be seen as the anchoring of the verbal event in space and time (Svenonius 1996). It is generally seen as an operator mediating between the tense and agreement systems on the one hand (clause-internally relevant functional structure, the T/I-domain), and the higher, discourse/clause-externally relevant functional structure (the C-domain). According to Rizzi (1997), finiteness is a formal feature represented in syntax as the lowest functional head of the C-domain, thus establishing this link.

The question is, How can finiteness information be recovered in case its carrier, the finite auxiliary, is not spelt out?

According to Julien (2000), finiteness must be overtly realized for a clause to count as finite (Julien 2000:47). Besides the temporal dependency of the embedded clause from the embedding clause, Julien argues that the presence of an overt subject is a crucial factor in the licensing of the Swedish ha-deletion in embedded clauses. Nominative case has often been argued to be related to finiteness, which is why she relates it to Rizzi’s Fin-head. Julien assumes the presence of an overt subject to be sufficient to license the agreement part of the missing auxiliary.

As hinted at in Section 3, the presence of an overt complementizer is a crucial condition on EMG auxiliary ellipsis. We can assume that an overt complementizer or relative pronoun is a finiteness marker itself. Before we formalize this idea, we can also relate the obligatory presence of an overt complementizer in EMG afinite constructions to the recovery of temporal information.

For this, we can make use of an idea provided by Klein (1994; Section 11.2), namely that some complementizers can provide temporal information of their
own (such as before) while others are transparent for this information to be passed down from the embedding clause (such as that or relative pronouns).

These intuitive ideas can be formalized as follows.

Using an idea from Chomsky (2001), we would like to draw a link between finiteness and the presence of a complex of C- and T-head in the derivation. Chomsky assumes that T is a defective head, because by itself it is $\phi$-incomplete, that is, it does not by itself have a complete set of $\phi$-features (person, number and gender). As a consequence, it cannot assign nominative case to a subject on its own as can be seen in infinitives. For C on the other hand, Chomsky argues that it is always $\phi$-complete. T is $\phi$-complete only if selected by C (Chomsky 2001;8). As argued for by Julien, the presence of an overt nominative subject is an indication for the finiteness of a clause, so this correlation is crucial.

We will now combine the observations and assumptions made so far. If C is always $\phi$-complete and always entails a $\phi$-complete T, it follows that as soon as there is a C head present in the derivation, the respective clause is finite and has an overt subject. The finiteness of a sentence is therefore given by the presence of a complete C+T-complex. Furthermore, as the functional information regarding finiteness is already given by the presence of an overt C-head (filled with a complementizer/relative pronoun), it is not necessary (for EMG) to make it visible by a finite auxiliary in T. This fits in nicely with our discussion of the diachronic factors in Section 3.

A $\phi$-complete T allows the finite verb to agree with the subject. Julien's (2000) proposal, according to which the [+finite] feature of the clause is identified by the overt nominative subject can now be reformulated as follows: the $\phi$-features in T are uninterpretable at LF, that is, they have to be ‘neutralized’ in syntax (checking) (Chomsky 1995, 2001). This is done by agreement with the subject, whose $\phi$-features are always interpretable. An overt subject should therefore be sufficient to license non-overt agreement morphology in T. Because of the close connection of T and C, built into the theory anyway, no extra [+finite] feature has to be assumed.

Thus, the connection of obligatorily overt complementizers and subjects in EMG auxiliary drop is accounted for — C indicates that the clause is finite and the subject recovers the $\phi$-features of T.

A further assumption I would like to make is that part of the temporal information on T is or can be shared by C as well, cf. the possible temporal contributions of complementizers as discussed above (Klein 1994). I would like to claim that C contains temporal information not only in case of complementizers like German nachdem, bevor ‘after, before’ or als ‘when’, but always. In the general case, this will a sort of default-tense. In case of the complementizers just mentioned, it will be a specified variant. My proposal is that there is a feature $[\pm past]$ in C by default, and that it can be specified as $[+past]$ by a certain
lexical selection (complementizers like *nachdem* ‘after’) or by the embedding clause. In all other cases, it will surface as [−PAST].

As for the ‘ungrammatical’ auxiliary ellipses in coordinations as well as those coordination ellipses which cannot be explained in terms of Gapping or RNR, we suggested in Section 4.2 that the licensing parallelism of the conjuncts is not formulated in terms of superficial identity but must be defined on a more abstract level. We now understand that it is the the C+T-complexes of the two conjuncts that have to be parallel.

6. Concluding Remarks

The present paper tried to elucidate two facets of the auxiliary drop phenomenon known as the afinite construction in EMG. First, we discussed the conditions on the emergence of the afinite construction in EMG, identified as the refinement of the complementizer system and the development of the right sentential bracket. Second, a formal account of the licensing conditions to be assumed behind EMG auxiliary ellipsis was proposed. The crucial factor here was argued to be the spellout of finiteness information on C⁰ (together with overt subjects), rendering further spellout on an auxiliary unnecessary.
Notes

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1. Den Besten (1989) is the first to discuss the auxiliary drop phenomena of Swedish and archaic German in a formal framework, namely transformational grammar. His approach assumes that these ellipses are the effect of a domain-restricted deletion rule, with VP as its applicational domain, which is why it is bled by V2. As this approach is incompatible with the licensing approach taken in Section 5, which links EMG auxiliary drop to the overt expression of finiteness, it will not be pursued in this paper.

2. Reasons of space do not permit me to discuss my corpus analysis in detail. I have so far considered 16 texts partly from printed editions, but mainly from the Bonn IKP online corpus of EMG (http://www.ikp.uni-bonn.de/dt/forsch/fnhd/).


4. Cf. e.g. Grimm (1898[1967]; 202f).

5. For extensive discussion of the syntactic, semantic and pragmatic restrictions on such constructions, cf. Fries (1983).

6. Gapping is a forward ellipsis including at least the finite verb, i.e. the shared part is overt in the first, but not in the second conjunct. RNR is the sharing of right-peripheral material, not necessarily a constituent. Cf. Hartmann (2000).

7. Argued not to exist by Maling (1972) (contra Ross (1970)), now the generally accepted view.


10. There can be more temporal information encoded in the syntax of a sentence that may help recover functional information on dropped auxiliaries. In my corpus, 76% (average) of the auxiliary ellipses occur in perfect tenses. Assuming that participial morphology is provided by a special Asp head (cf. e.g. Demirdache & Uribe-Etxebarria (2000)), we get two temporal-aspectual heads in the clause structure. Even if one does not want to go as far as Julien (2000) as to assume a biclausal analysis of the perfect tenses in which the participial morphology is the reflex of a non-finite past, it seems reasonable to assume that the Asp-head expresses temporal boundedness of the verbal event. Furthermore, the form of the main verb (past participle, infinitive, zu-infinitive, …) will delimit the choice among possible auxiliaries.
References


