The Verb *fear* in the History of English:
its Argument Structure, Complementation and Parenthetical Use

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The verb *fear* has undergone far-reaching changes during the history of English (Yieri 2009). In this talk, I will revisit some of those changes and analyse them with much larger corpus data than previously possible.

First, *fear* is one of the verbs losing "impersonal" argument structure (Möhlig-Falke 2012, Trips and Rainsford 2022), i.e., the ability to construct with a non-nominative experiencer, as in (1).

(1) Many tymes haue I feryd þe   wyth gret tempestys of wyndys.
    many times have I feared thee with great tempests   of winds
    'I have frightened you many times with great storms' (*Margery Kempe*, c. 1438)

I will discuss the time course of the rise of the modern argument structure, and link the change to past participles, the presence of an *a*-prefix, intransitive complementation, the rise of the verb frighten, coordination structures and a comparison with other psych verbs.

Secondly, 16th century affirmative *fear* is typically complemented with finite clauses, i.e. (2a) is preferred over (2b), negative *fear* with non-finite clauses, i.e. (3b) is preferred over (3a), as shown in Figure 1.

(2)   (a) I feare [that deitie Hath stolne him hence …] (OldFord, 1597)
       (b) Since who is feard, still feares [to be so feard] (JDrum, 1598)

(3)   (a) I do **not** feare [that you'l forfeit so much for so litle cause] (TLTL, 1580)
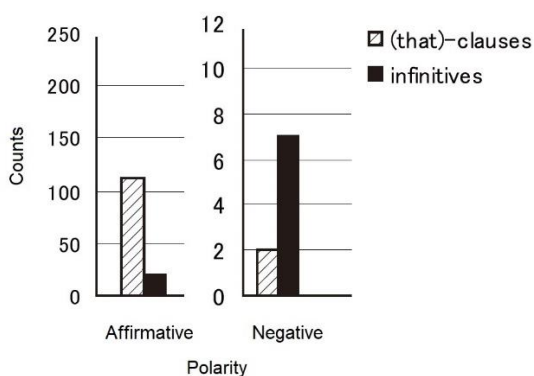   (b) That they feare **not** [to doe any kinds of harme] (AfM, 1572)

Figure 1: Raw frequencies of affirmative *fear* vs. negative *fear* followed by finite complements ((*that*)-clauses) and non-finite clauses (infinitives); other complement types ignored; based on data from Iyeiri (2009: 24, Figures 2, 3) for the 16th century

I will replicate the effect with a larger dataset and trace the association between complementation and polarity as do-supported negation becomes the norm in the following centuries.

Third, *fear* grammaticalised a parenthetical use (Hopper and Traugott 2003), as in (4).

(4) I crossed and thwarted you all, **I fear**, in wantonness. (COHA, LoganAF. 1828)

I will discuss difficulties in measuring parenthetical *fear* as well as its potential role in a recent increase in overt complementisers.

References

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