ASPECTUAL LOSS AND RENEWAL

Onginnan, beginnan, start

Lynn Sims


1. Introduction

1.1. An overview of aspect

Beginning with the distinction between movements and actualities during the Classical period, the concept of aspect has received a great deal of attention in the literature. While aspectual expressions continue to be analyzed, they are now often discussed in terms of two distinct domains: lexical aspect and grammatical aspect. Lexical aspect is unmarked and reflects the inherent temporal property of a verb. At the most basic level, languages appear to express in their lexicons the same four classes of lexical aspect: states (i.e., know, believe), activities (i.e., run, walk), accomplishments (i.e., paint a picture), write (a letter), achievements (i.e., find, realize). Grammatical aspect, on the other hand, is more subjective, reflecting the speaker’s perspective on the internal temporal quality of an event (cf. Comrie 1976; Nordlander 1997). Smith (1997: 61) describes the function of grammatical aspect in terms of a camera lens that makes “objects visible to the receiver”. The object on which the grammatical lens is focused is an event, and this aspectual lens can focus on all or part of the event structure. Thus, grammatical aspect does not introduce an event but rather hooks into and shifts the temporal focus of an existing event. In English, grammatical aspect is formally marked by periphrastic constructions and inflectional morphology. This is best illustrated by the progressive, example (1), which indicates temporally continuous or ongoing events, and the perfect, example (2), which indicates complete or temporally specified events:
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(1) LaVesta is laughing.
(2) LaVesta has completed the assignment.

Similar to the structure of grammatical aspect, progressive aspect in Modern English (ModE) is expressed periphrastically and morphologically, as in (3), using the markers begin or start.

(3) LaVesta began/started singing.
(4) LaVesta began/started to sing.

In addition to occurring with state, activity, and accomplishment complements, progressives can occur with achievement verbs if the event is repeatable, as in (5), or if the subject is an unspecified plural or mass noun, as in (6) (cf. also Freed 1979). In these examples, the periphrastic construction results in an iterative-progressive expression.

(5) She began to guess/guessing. (Brinton 1988: 85, ex. 8g)
(6) Friends/people began to arrive at the party. (Brinton 1988: 85, ex. 8h)

As for the function of progressive aspect, it also mirrors that of grammatical aspect: an ingressive marker hooks into an existing event and what the lens focuses on is, to use Smith’s terminology, the entry into the event expressed by the non-finite complement.

English ingresses tend to develop from lexical verbs that express one of two spatial concepts: (1) movement of the agent toward or into an event or (2) movement of the event toward the agent (Brinton 1988: 114–115). Both concepts involve the semantics of motion, but the second also includes the notion of taking or receiving, as is evident in the Old English (OE) ingresses fan, tacan, and niman, which basically mean ‘to take, seize, receive’. As verbs in both groups grammaticalize, Brinton proposes that their semantics undergo a metonymic shift in focus rather than a gradual weakening of semantics. The metonymic process, as Hopper & Traugott (1993: 87) write, “involves specifying one meaning in terms of another that is present, even if only covertly, in the context”. That some progressives do not experience significant semantic bleaching as they become less lexical and more grammatical is not problematic. Semantic bleaching occurs later in the grammaticalization process as a verb acquires a more functional meaning (Hopper & Traugott 2003; see also Cardinaletti & Giusti 2001, who show that certain motion verbs in Southern Italian dialects retain their semantic content when used periphrastically). Excluding onginnan, OE ingresses shift into and remain in an overlapping boundary (in the sense of Heine et al. 1991: 221–229), somewhere between full verb and auxiliary (Sims 2008). Since they do not move any further than this hybrid-like position, the concept of movement which is inherent to the lexical form remains fairly intact. It is also important to add here that phonological reduction is a characteristic not a requirement of the grammaticalization process. As will be discussed below, onginnan is the only ingressive that experiences significant phonetic loss (gan), but evidence from ModE shows that begin is also susceptible to this process.

Diachronically, membership in the English progressive category reflects a degree of instability. Old English, for example, uses a number of Germanic forms to express the initiation of an event, particularly, -ginnan (and its prefixed variants onginnan, aginnan, ingannan, beginnan), fan (and its prefixed variants gefan, onfan, and underfan), weorpan, tacan, and niman (cf. Mustanoja 1960; Visser 1969, 1973; Brinton 1988; Sims 2008). According to the OED (s.v. begin), the most common OE marker is onginnan; beginnan and (on)fan are rare and weorpan, tacan and niman are even rarer. Though some ingresses fall out of use during the Middle English (ME) period, this period also sees the introduction of both native (i.e., seten, breken, bresten) and borrowed (i.e., commencen, become, proceeden) forms to the group. This cycle continues into Modern English, where we see the introduction of resume, recommence, get, and start. Although the native forms, begin and start, are used in similar syntactic constructions, major changes in the distribution of begin during the last twenty years suggest a decline in the use of this ingressive marker.

1.2. Data and methodology

I have examined major changes involving ingresses by looking at the secondary literature on English, such as Callaway (1913), Visser (1969, 1973), Mitchell (1983). I also used online sources such as the University of Toronto Dictionary of Old English electronic corpus of Old English, various Middle English electronic texts, the Helsinki Corpus, the Corpus of Dialogues, the Corpus of Contemporary American English, and the Corpus of Historical American English.

I have tried to be as descriptive as possible in this paper, focusing mainly on the cycle of loss and renewal. Therefore, I have kept linguistic theory in the background. This paper is informed, however, by a generative framework, particularly a Minimalist framework. I assume the presence of an expanded Inflecional Phrase (IP) that includes an Aspect Phase (AspP), and also the presence of an expanded Verb Phrase (VP) shell that includes a small v. I adopt Butt’s (2003) proposal that elements in small v can be interpreted as lexical, functional, or a mixture of both. I have included theoretical explanations when called for in the analysis.

2. Old English: differences emerge between ingressive forms

The *ginnnan stem is considered a Germanic verb with the root meaning of ‘to open, open up’ (OED, s.v. begin). *Ginnan is also thought to be cognate
with ON gina and OE gīnan, meaning ‘to gape, yawn’ and coming from a stem *gīr, which also appears in Old Slavonic zijati and Latin hiāre and means ‘to gape, open’. Thus, inherent to the root meaning of *gīnan is the concept of motion, and, as the OED states, the shift in meaning from ‘open up’ to ‘begin’ occurs frequently (i.e., ‘open’ a speech, ‘open’ fire, ‘open up’ negotiations). The use of a *gīnan form to mark ingressive aspect in early Germanic languages is well documented, and counterparts to OE on-ibeginnan include: Gothic da-gīnan, Old Saxon bi-gīnan, Old High German in-bi-gīnan, Old Frisian bi-gīna, and Middle Dutch ont-lī-bi-gīmen. Today, prefixed -gīnan forms are still used in English, German, Frisian, Dutch, Danish, and Norwegian.

Old English ingressive constructions, similar to the early Germanic counterparts, involve a bare infinitival complement, with the use of the to-infinitive arising during the OE period. Ingressive +foro constructions begin to occur in early ME, as well as ingressive +-ender-ing constructions. Thus, I begin with the form of the infinitival complement.

2.1 Complement patterns: bare infinitive vs. to-infinitive

As is well known, both the bare and to-infinitives are found in OE texts. However, the bare infinitive is often restricted to perception verbs, hātan and lātan, and the ancestors of ModE modals (can, deə, mea, mot, sceal, pearef, uton, wile) (Warner 1993: 136–139). With -gīnan forms in later OE texts, it is not unusual for a bare infinitive and a to-infinitive to co-occur in the same clause:

(7) Dā ongūnnon ealle da neddraen te covewenne hewra flesc
Then begun all the snakes to chew their flesh

(ÆHom. 11.488 [Sims 2008: 116])

The choice of complement type is often considered stylistic rather than syntactic. For instance, Brinton (1988: 270, n.20) argues that “no fundamental difference between the [infinitive] forms was felt” by the writer. More recently, Lösch (2000, 2005), examining ingressive constructions in Ælfric, proposes that the complement type (and the semantic strength of the ingressive marker) is determined by the discourse function of on-lī-bi-gīnan in pa V (finite verb in second position) and V1 (finite verb in first position) environments. Lösch (2005: 94) concludes that “gīnan-verbs only express ingression when followed by a to-infinitive, and cannot express ingression when followed by a bare infinitive”. Thus, with bare infinitives, ongīnan and beginnan are semantically bleached auxiliaries that express perfective aspect. While I basically agree with Lösch’ proposal that the to-infinitive strengthens the concept of ingressiveness,

I disagree with her conclusion that ongīnan and beginnan are semantically bleached auxiliaries when they occur with a bare infinitive. This conclusion does not hold across the board, especially since beginnan rarely functions as a non-aspectual complement.

Looking at the earliest examples of English ingressives, we see that the periphrastic use of -gīnan occurs c.700, involves the on-prefix, and, takes a bare infinitival complement:

(8) oð dat an ongūn fyrenne fremann
until one began atrocities to perform

(Beowulf 101)

With ongīnan, the bare infinitive appears to be the original form of the complement (Callaway 1913: 67). That the bare infinitive continues to be ongīnan’s main complement in OE is evident from the writings of Ælfric (late 9th cent.). Of his 248 ingressive constructions, only two occur with a to-infinitive (see Table 1). The following examples, from Ælfric’s Pastoral Care (Cotton manuscript), are typical of early English ongīnan constructions.

(9) pa ongūn ic ongemang odrum mistiscum & monigfeldum bissum
then began I among other various & manifold troubles

(10) dat hie oft ongīnne gisitian & refeian for hōra wandel
that they again begin to desire & to steal for their poverty

(ÆHom 45.341.3 [Sims 2008: 100])

Moving to the writings of Ælfric (approximately a century later than Alfred), we see that while his choice of complement with ongīnan reflects some variation, his predominate pattern, like Alfred, involves the bare infinitive (77%).

Looking next at beginnan, we see that this form appears c.1000 in the writings of Ælfric (OED, s.v. begin; see also Visser 1978: 1373).

(11) pa beγnūnne hi to cidene mid micelle ceoreunge ongegene
then begun they to quarrel with great complaint against

(ÆHom 21.304 [Sims 2008: 116])
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Table 1 OE *ginnan* Forms in Periphrastic Constructions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>bare infinitive</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>to-infinitive</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>onginnan</td>
<td>246</td>
<td>99%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alfred</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ælfric</td>
<td>649</td>
<td>98%</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other texts</td>
<td>977</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total onginnan</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aginnan</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With this ingressive marker, however, Ælfric's preferred complement is the to-infinitive (74%), which is almost the exact opposite of his usage with onginnan. From the outset, then, beginnan occurs mainly with the to-infinitive. Thus, I agree with Callaway's (1913: 66–67) suggestion that the to-infinitive is beginnan's original complement. The to-infinitive marks the aspectual event as [+], perfective with beginnan shifting focus to the initiation of that event. While the bare infinitive is found with beginnan up to approximately 1440, its use remains minimal compared to the to-infinitive. The difference between complement type with onginnan, aginnan, and beginnan is provided in Table 1 (from Sims 2008: 113, Table 4, compiled from data in Callaway 1913: 279–287).

After Ælfric, the use of beginnan increases while the use of onginnan decreases. However, just as beginnan makes its appearance, so does the phonologically reduced aginnan (< onginnan). Early examples of this phonological reduction are found in Skeat's (1887/1979) edition of The Gospel According to Saint Matthew (Matthew), which combines the Northern, Mercian, and two West Saxon versions of Matthew into one text. The Northern version (Lindisfarne Gospels) dates from c950 and is an interlinear gloss of a Latin original. The Mercian version (Rushworth Glosses) dates from c980 and is also an interlinear gloss. The two West Saxon versions are based on six different manuscripts but mainly on the Corpus (c1000) and Hatton (c1150) manuscripts, respectively. As we see from the following (from Sims 2008: 105), the West Saxon versions use aginnan.

(12) a. 7 agynod beatan his efen-peowas. 7 yt 7 drincb mid druncennum  
      (Corpus Matt 24:49)

b. 7 aginod beatan his efen-peowas. 7 ett 7 drincb mid druncennum  
      (Hatton Matt 24:49)

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c. 7 ongann slae heafudlinges his he ett wetedlice 7 dranc mið  
   druncennum (sic)  
   (Lindisfarne Matt 24:49)

d. 7 onginnan slae efnpeu his manducat (sic) him ponne 7 drincb  
   mið druncennum  
   (Rushworth Matt 24:49)

'and begins to strike his servants, and to eat and drink excessively'

While the Northern and Mercian versions do not use aginnan (Sims 2008), it appears twice in the Northern version of The Gospel of Luke — once as a full verb and once as an ingressive marker with the to-infinitive (Ogura 1977: 415):

(13) donne ongann bittih him getalode to cowdanne  
    then began within himself thought to say  
    (Lk 11:38 [Ogura 1977: 415])

A search of Luke shows that the Mercian counterpart to (13) does not have a reduced form of onginnan, but it does use the to-infinitive: donne ongan ... to cowdanen. The bare infinitive tends to be onginnan's main complement type up to a 1200, but then the to-infinitive becomes more frequent.

Finally, around 1200, onginnan disappears from the textual data. Aginnan disappears by the end of the fourteenth century; the last example is from 1340, in a text that also makes frequent use of beginnan (Mustanoja 1960: 610; cf. MED, s.v. aginnan; Visser 1969: 1372–73).

(14) ne dorre na, aginne wel to done  
    not dare not begin well to do  
    'dare not to begin to do well'  
    (Ayenbite 32)

Regardless of complement type, the -ginnan forms in (7) to (14) are not semantically weak — the concept of ‘begin(ning)’ is clear. But, by hooking into an existing event, on-la-be-ginnan shifts to a more general, more functional role — marking ingressive aspect. The reduction of on- to a-ginnan also suggests that this form has shifted further into the grammaticalization process than beginnan. Another sign of grammaticalization involves a verb’s argument structure, to which I now turn.

2.2. Impersonal constructions

In general, impersonal constructions have an objective case subject rather than a nominative case subject. In English, non-nominative subjects occur
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through approximately the fifteenth century (van Kemenade 1993: 163; see also Elmer 1981). In OE, onginnan often occurs with a non-nominative subject (Denison 1990, 1993), as in the following example:

(15) *pa ongan me langian for minre hafnynde
then began me-ACC to grieve for my imprisonment
then I began to find my imprisonment tedious' (LS 35 (Vit Parr) 330 [Denison 1990: 148])

In (15), the semantic role ‘experiencer’ is assigned to the subject me, suggesting that onginnan’s argument structure is defective and that the verb is beginning to grammaticalize. Here, onginnan has a single argument (the infinitival ‘event’) and the thematic function of the subject is assigned by the lower predicate (langian). Thematic transparency is a characteristic of the group of verbs which eventually become auxiliaries in English (cf. Denison 1993: 441; Warner 1993: 123). Thematic transparency is also a feature of onginnan in impersonal verb constructions.

While examples with onginnan in this construction are numerous, examples with beginnan are not. In the COE (Healey & Venezky 1980), I find only one, given below:

(16) da gesah he farlice poner strangtan wind
then saw he suddenly the powerful wind
and begunne here to ondredelen
and began him-ACC to fear
then suddenly he saw the powerful wind and [he] began to be afraid’

(AECHom II. 28 227.193 [Sims 2008: 91])

Denison also makes no mention of OE beginnan in this construction, but he states that it occurs “apparently once” in ME (1993: 235):

(17) Him bigon to gremien, & o grome grede
him-OBJ began to grow-angry and in rage cried-out
‘He began to grow angry and cried out in rage’

(St Marg [1] 42.10 [Denison, 1993: 235])

Warner (1993) also provides what he considers a possible ME beginnen example:

(18) *bo bigan ham alle to agrid
then began them all to fear
‘then they all began to be terrified’


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However, he does not consider the impersonal construction to be a strong criterion for isolating a potential auxiliary group. Warner (1993: 129–130, 256, n. 26) also suggests that beginnan, in addition to a few other OE ingressive markers, are “derived historically from senses in which they presumably selected their subjects”. Consequently, he suggests that not all OE ingressive become transparent aspect markers — a suggestion with which I agree, particularly with beginnan. Unlike onginnan, beginnan remains a hybrid-like form. The evidence for beginnan in non-nominative subject + impersonal verb constructions is extremely rare; therefore, I do not consider this to be a common construction for this ingressive marker. However, the examples do suggest that beginnan also has a defective argument structure and has, thus, entered the grammaticalization process.

Structurally, in these constructions, I consider both onginnan and beginnan to be generated in v (inside an expanded VP-shell). Locating both aspect markers in v recognizes two facts: (a) they are still interpreted as lexical because they retain their semantic content and show some agreement features (person and number) and (b) they show signs of being interpreted as functional because of their inability to theta-mark the subject and specify nominative case.

2.3. Non-aspectual function

The non-aspectual use of an ingressive marker happens when the form becomes semantically empty. We do begin to see this with onginnan in OE, but it is rare and only a few examples appear in the manuscripts (Brinton 1988):

(19) ge pa scirian mihh deman onginnan
‘you then judged the bright power [of Christ]’ (*began to judge)

(El 310b-11a [Brinton 1988: 160])

(20) Witoldie... ongann se hiredes ealdor to agylendenone bonpene
‘Certainly repaid (*began to repay) the elder of the house the penny’

(AECHom II, 5 46, 137 [Brinton 1988: 160])

Because non-aspectual onginnan has few, if any, semantic features, it is not relevant to the argument structure and is, thus, auxiliary-like in its function. Structurally, this means that non-aspectual onginnan merges into a functional position (AspectP) inside an expanded IP.

To recap the OE data: we begin to see important differences between onginnan and beginnan; onginnan prefers the bare infinitive, it can occur in non-nominative constructions, and can be used as a semantically empty auxiliary. Beginnan behaves just the opposite in all of these cases. Moving into the ME period, onginnan has already experienced more grammaticalization than beginnan.

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3. From Middle English to early Modern English: a period of continued change

Although (a)gan and begin continue into the ME period, begin becomes the most frequently used form, as we will see below. Though minimally used, the bare construction is lost as a complement to begin at roughly the same time (c1200) that an -ing complement is introduced. During this period, gan's infinitival complement becomes more restricted, to which I now turn.

3.1. The issue of tense: preterit vs. present

As the use of on-la-ginnan decreases, the use of gan increases. Gan appears in the Northern dialect around 1200 (the Northern and West Midland variants are cancon) and in the Southern dialect in the 1300s. Eventually, gan becomes a frozen preterit construction and its syntactic environment (and genre type — poetry rather than prose) narrows. The function of gan has been the focus of many studies, and a full discussion is beyond the scope of this paper (see Sims 2008 for a summary of key stylistic, metrical, and discourse proposals). By 1500, gan is considered archaic and eventually “passes out of use” (Visser 1978: 1572).

The predominance of preterit gan has been noted in the literature, and it is suggested that this may reflect the conventions of narrative style (cf. Mustanoja 1960: 610). However, Ogura (1997, 1998) examines the tense of OE onginnan and offers an alternative proposal. Ogura shows that the preterit form is used in significantly higher numbers compared to other forms and suggests that a connection exists between the frequency rate of preterit onginnan and its gradual shift to an auxiliary — a suggestion with which I agree. From a grammaticalization perspective, the preterit becomes a frozen construction, and the over-extended use of this form contributes to its continued bleaching and eventual loss of semantic content. That a preterit form grammaticalizes before (or instead of) a present tense form is not unique. Van Gelderen (2004: 180–199), for example, shows that while present tense see, a ModE perception verb, does not grammaticalize, preterit saw (with a bare infinitive complement) does. In this case, saw functions as an evidential auxiliary, checks [+] perfunctive, and expresses the completed nature of the aspecualtive event. In Table 2, I summarize Ogura’s (1997: 405–409) data.

During ME, present tense gan generally allows an ingressive reading (cf. Funke 1922; Häusermann 1930; Koziol 1932; Mustanoja 1960; Visser 1969; Brinton 1988). Likewise, in early ME texts such as Ormulum (c1200), example (21), and Layamon’s Brut (c1205–1250), example (22), preterit gan can also retain its ingressive semantics. For instance, the Brut has 380 occurrences of preterit gan (ganne(n)/gotten/gan/gon) and 21 occurrences of preterit agon (see Table 3), and the majority of these examples allow an ingressive reading of the aspect marker (Sims 2004).

Table 2 Preterit vs. Non-Preterit onginnan (summarized from Ogura 1997: 405–409).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Preterit onginnan + bare infinitive</th>
<th>Non-Preterit onginnan + bare infinitive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poetry</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bede</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WSCospels (Corpus ms.)</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ÆCHornl</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(21) 7 he gann penkenn off hinn self, And he began to-think of himself 7 off his miecle riche 7 of his great power, ‘And he began to think about himself and his great power’ (Orm 3274–3275 [Sims 2008: 142])

(22) 7 hit agon daiz en. and deor gnnen was yz en. and it began to-dawn and deer begun to-stir (Brut 13447 [Sims 2008: 143])

But, as we move through the ME period, preterit gan, unlike its present tense counterpart, frequently does not allow an ingressive reading (cf. Mustanoja 1960: 611–615):

(23) Syr Gawen his lewe con nyme Sir Gawain his leave [grammatical] to-take ‘Sir Gawain [did take] [took] his leave’ (SGGK 993 [Funke 1922: 25])

Like gan, preterit beginnen is common in ME, but unlike gan, its semantics do not weaken. In fact, Brinton finds only four non-aspectual examples:

(24) he bigan the fish to kippe ‘he seized (*began to seize) the fish’ (Havelock 894 [Brinton 1981: 185])

Thus, as a competitor to gan, the lack of non-aspectual beginnen strengthens its position as the predominant ingressive marker during the ME period.

3.2. Complement types: changes continue

In addition to a narrowing tense construction, gan's infinitival complement becomes more restricted, occurring mainly with the bare infinitive (contra Terasawa 1974; cf. Lichstein 1913: 33). Various forms of preterit gan occur
frequently in Layamon’s *Brut* (Caligula) and nicely illustrate the narrowing of complement type.

A similar pattern occurs in *King Horn* (*KH*) (c1250–1300), a poem fairly contemporary with the *Brut*. Approximately seventy preterit gan forms are in this poem, and the majority occurs with a bare infinitive.

In the *Brut*, *beginnen’s* use is minimal (43 total) compared to the *gan* forms, but like *gan*, its main complement is the bare infinitive (63%). However, we begin to see the decline of bare infinitives with *beginnen* as early as c1200 in *Ormulum*. Of the approximately forty-six *beginnen* occurrences in this text, none occur with a bare infinitive (cf. also Ogura 1997). By the mid-fifteenth century, *beginnen + bare infinitive* constructions basically disappear. A perusal of Kato’s (1974, s.v. *began*, *begyn*, *begynnyth*) concordance to the works of Malory (1469) supports this. Malory uses *beginnen + bare infinitive* only once, compared to approximately fifty *beginnen + to-infinitival* examples. After the mid-fifteenth century, the *to-infinitive* is the predominate complement. As we will see next, *beginnen* begins to lose its bare infinitival complement at the same time (c1200) that *forto* and -ing complements are introduced.

Returning to the data Table 3, we see that the *Brut* has one *forto* complement with *agon*, *KH* also has three *forto* complements with *gan*:

(25) *Horn gan for to ride*  
Horn began for to ride  

(*Horn, G. 1631 [Sims 2008: 148]*)

*Beginnen* also occurs with this complement. Though Visser (1969: 1373) and the *OED* (s.v. *begin*) state that *forto* is first attested with *beginnen* a1500, I find an early occurrence in *Ormulum* (c1200):

(26) *Biginnenn for to spellenn*  
Begin for to preach  

(*Ormulum 10887 [Sims 2008: 156]*)

Although *forto* infinitives occur with *ginan* forms during the ME period, their use is minimal compared to other complement types. After *a1500*, *forto* + -*ginan* constructions rarely appear (cf. Visser 1978: 1375); later occurrences (c1813), such as (27), are considered dialectal (Northern):

| Table 3 Preterit gan and its Complement Type in Layamon’s *Brut* (Caligula). |
|-------------------------------|------------|-----------|------------|----------|---------------|
| bare inf. | to-inf. | *forto-inf.* | -ing | total |
| *ginnen(gan)* | 316 (83%) | 64 (17%) | 0 | 0 | 380 |
| *agon (agon once)* | 21 (95%) | 0 | 1 (5%) | 0 | 22 |

In early English, constructions involving a preposition and durative infinitive ending in -*end-*ing are often used to express a continuous event, as we see from the following OE and ME examples, respectively:

(30) *on feohtende woron of nihte*  
on fighting were until night  
[they] were fighting until night  


(31) *hér he wes an slaying*  
there he was on hunting  
‘he was hunting there’  

(*Brut, Caligula 6139 [van Gelderen, 2004: 204]*)

The OE construction, (30), is considered to involve a copula verb + adjective; whether or not this construction is a precursor to the ModE *-ing* progressive, with ME *-ing*, (i.e., 31) a continuation of (30), is debated (cf. Jespersen 1940: 415). Similar ME constructions (possibly dialectal) also occur with *beginnen*:

(32) *Quen hæ þe ondorode his worde A sorreng hæ bigan*  
When they understood this word on-sorrowing they began ‘When they understood this word, they began grieving’  

(*Cursor M. 15518 [Visser, 1973: 189]*)
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In addition to two gan + -endel-ing examples, Visser (1973) includes ten begin + -endel-ing examples from c1205 to c1553. In some instances, different versions of the same text (i.e., Brat Caligula vs. Otho) vary between the two affixes. Some of Visser’s (1973: 1890) examples follow:

(33) fro hat he bi-gan syttynde in a churche of erd Amonges oper men ‘from the time that he began sitting in a church yard with other men’
(Life St. Alexius, Laud MS, 108)

(34) Tubal-Cain … began first graving in mettallis ‘Tubal-Cain first began engraving in metal’
(Capgrave, Chron. [ed. Hingeston] 8)

(35) some of them begin already giveng no credence to no man but if it be ‘some of them already stopped giving any credence to any man unless he be’
(St. Th. More, Wks, 687 D 19)

As we move from ME to early ModE, there is a "gap in the [-endel-ing] evidence" from 1553 to 1813, according to Visser. This gap is confirmed by examining the Corpus of English Dialogues (Kytö & Walker 2006). In this 1.2 million corpus of dialogues between 1560 and 1769, there is one instance from 1716, given in (36), whereas the corpus contains over 200 instances of begin + a to-infinitival complement.

(36) thereupon they immediately began breaking Mr Hurst’s windows
(CED-D4WOxford)

Two possibilities explain this gap: (a) it is accidental or (b) the -ing complement was dying out. What speaks for (a) is that of the ten begin + -ing-endel examples provided by Visser, only example (35) is questionable from a Modern English interpretation (and this may be due to the double negative construction). Thus, the aspectual nuances associated with the ME begin + -ing-endel examples is no different from the 1716 example, the Jane Austen (1813) example below, and the later examples (up to 1962) provided by Visser (1973: 1890).

(37) Unable to contain herself, she began scolding one of her daughters
(J. Austen, Pride & Prejudice II. 10 [Sims 2008: 162])

To recap the ME and early ModE periods: the context in which gan is used narrows (poetry rather than prose), the form becomes a frozen preterit construction, and its ability to express ingressive aspect declines. The use of begin to mark ingressive aspect increases; however, this form loses its bare complement but gains a for-to complement in addition to an -endel-ing complement.

ASPECTUAL LOSS AND RENEWAL

4. The Modern English period:
the rise of start and decline of begin

As discussed above, the to-infinitive remains and an -ing competitor is introduced. This latter complement, however, has a slow start. Below, we will see that ingressive start is introduced and becomes a competitor to begin. An overview of the ingressive and their complements as we leave the early ModE period is illustrated by a 588,820 word sample from the Helsinki Corpus, EMOD 1500–1700 (* indicates present tense endings):

(38) begin* to: 39; begin* -ing: 0; began to: 54; began -ing: 0
start *to: 0; start * -ing: 0; started to: 0; started -ing: 0

As the numbers from this corpus show, begin occurs only with a to-infinitive and start as an ingressive aspect marker does not occur. However, the use of start as a lexical verb with the sense of 'to initiate, begin' appears as early as 1595 (Sims 2005):

(39) Do but start an echo with the clamor of thy drumme.
(1595, Shakespeare, John, V.ii.167)

(40) He started a discourse of a talk he hears about the town.
(1666, Pepys’s Diary, 24 June)

4.1. The introduction of start

The origin of start is not exactly clear and its semantic history is complex. Similar to the *ginnen stem, the semantics inherent to start involve the concept of motion. Start comes from OE styrstan, which, in turn, is derived from the Germanic verb *sturjan, meaning 'to overthrow, precipitate, overturn' and (intransitive) 'to rush, to fall headlong, to gush out' (OED, s.v. start). Only one occurrence of styrstan is found in OE (Durham Ritual, a1000). Early periphrastic constructions with start do not express ingressive aspect, but they do demonstrate its inherent notion of movement and its grammatical-like function, as we see in (41) and (42):

(41) who so is nexte shulde sterte to geete her hoole fro hem
‘whoever is nearest should move to guard her den from them.’
(c1410, Master of Game, xxxiv [Sims 2005])

(42) Atte the dredfulle day he wolde axe acomptes where as there shalde none sterte to yelde answere
‘On that dreadful day he will demand account and none shall escape to yield an answer.’
(1450, Knight de la Tour (1868) 113 [Sims 2005])

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It appears that during the 1600s the meaning of *start* is extended and the new meaning expresses a more abstract notion of movement, one of initiating or beginning an action. With the added notion of ‘initiating/beginning’, *start* is now available for use in syntactic constructions similar to other ingressive (i.e. *begin*). In the mid-1800s, we begin to see examples of *start* + *V-ing* and *start* + (in) to- *V* constructions, as the following examples from Sims (2005) show.

(43) *I had before this written to Rose how we had best start agitating*  
(1833, J. H. Newman, *Letters & Correspondence* [OED])

(44) *Alexander finally started rehearsing the play in December*  
(1893, Henry James, *Guy Domville* [Lit. On-Line])

(45) *I saw a dog of this kind start to nibble at a flea*  
(1869, Mark Twain, *Innocents Abroad*, [OTA])

(46) *There would be no chance of crossing it [the river] for some days... even if it started to go down at once.*  
(1891, C. Roberts, *Adrift Amer.*, 181 [OED])

Although *start* is used as an ingressive marker by 1800, its use is considered ‘colloquial’, ‘vulgar’, and ‘irregular’ by early grammarians (Visser 1978: 1381; 1984: 1895). This attitude toward *start* may help explain its low frequency rate in texts from the 1800s. This early attitude may also be associated with formality levels which seem to be attached to *begin* vs. *start*. (My students indicate that they tend to use *begin* in more formal situations and *start* in less formal. A continued review of American newspapers suggests that papers tend to mirror this formality pattern: news and economic sections generally use *begin*, but leisure and sport sections use *start.*) In addition to formality perceptions, the verb classes to which *start*/*begin* belong may play a role in usage patterns: *start* is a weak verb, marking the periphrast and past participle with an -ed ending, while *begin* is a strong verb, marking the periphrast and past participle by an internal vowel change.

4.2. A phonetically reduced *begin*

At about the same time *start* begins to be used as an ingressive marker, a reduced form of *begin* appears. The *gan* + to-infinitive construction is said to be rare by the early ModE period, and the last example in Visser (1978: 1576) is from Shakespeare, given in (47). However, it is unclear if this is the reduced form of *onginman* or *begin*:

(47) *some... ‘gan to look The way that they did, and to grin like lions*  
(Cymb. V. iii, 35)

A search of the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), a corpus of 400 (+) million spoken and written words, shows that *gan* also occurs in texts from around 1800. Two examples are provided below. I consider these examples to be a reduced form of *begin*.

(48) *When round me ‘gan the air to melt*  
(1813, W. Allston, *Sylphs Seasons* [COHA])

(49) *Ho, ho – a feast! – I ‘gan to croak*  
(1848, J. M. Legare, *Orta-undis* [COHA])

While (48) and (49) may be influenced by poetic meter, this is not the case with similar constructions in the 1893 edition of *Voodoo Tales* (*VT*). The stories in *VT* were collected by the author from original sources in Missouri, and as is evident from the examples below, she attempts to represent the dialect in which the tales were told to her.

(50) *Bimeby dey laigs ‘gin ter trimmle an’ dey eyes ‘gin ter budge* (bulge)  
‘By-and-by their legs begin to tremble and their eyes begin to bulge’  
(*VT* 1893: 41)

(51) *Dat am mos’ gin’ly de way, honey, w’en folkses ‘gin ter ’mire deyse’fs*  
‘That is most generally the way, honey, when folks begin to admire themselves’  
(*VT* 1893: 81)

(52) *I ‘gun ter study ’bout hit in de night, las’ night*  
‘I began to think about it in the night, last night’  
(*VT* 1893: 120)

(53) *he feel so gay he ‘gun ter whistle de onles’ chune dat he know*  
‘he felt so gay he began to whistle the only tune that he knew’  
(*VT* 1893: 124)

It might be argued that *gin*/*gun* in (50) to (53) represent a phonological feature of certain varieties of American English, specifically the reduction of a weak or unstressed initial syllable (i.e., ‘fraid < afraid’). However, examples from COCA, above, and also from the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA), (54) below, argue against this conclusion since they do not all reflect nons-proto standard speech. Even though reduced forms are not common in the data, they appear as late as the 1990s:

(54) *Mitch said with vigor as he ‘gan to move*  
(1993, *Talismans Shannara* [COHA])

While I consider the ModE *gan* examples to be a reduced form of *begin*, its use is not standard and reflects a more informal and/or poetic style. However, this reduced form indicates that *begin* is susceptible to phonological reduction, further illustrating *begin*’s grammaticalized status.
4.3. The decline of begin: recent changes in distribution patterns

As we move towards the end of the 1990s, we begin to see changes in the distribution of begin and also its competitor start. Figures 1 and 2 represent present and preterit tense progressives found in COHA, a 400 (+) million word corpora of written texts. Looking at these figures, we see that present tense begin + to infinitive usage (Figure 1) has decreased sharply since the 1990s while preterit began + to infinitive usage (Figure 2) has decreased dramatically since the 1940s. Even though begin/began + to-infinitive shows significant changes in usage, it still appears to be the preferred ingressive marker with this complement.

On the other hand, when the -ing complement is involved, start has replaced begin in the rate of frequency, especially in the present tense. As Figure 1 shows, the use of present and preterit tense start increases with both the to-infinitive and -ing complement, but the -ing complement experiences a dramatic increase in both tenses, beginning around 1920.

Freed (1979: 69ff) demonstrates that begin and start do not share many semantic characteristics, with begin being more semantically restricted than start. Specifically, a person can start to do something (e.g. sneeze) and then not do it, but a person cannot begin to do (e.g. sneeze) something and then not do it. With a to-infinitival complement, it appears, then, that the aspectual

focus of start is on the onset of the event but the focus of begin is on the nucleus of the event. With -ing complements, neither ingressive marker allows the subsequent negation of the non-finite event (Freed 1979). Thus, the semantic restrictions associated with begin may influence the introduction of the new ingressive marker start. However, this marker is not a serious competitor to begin until a1920. Structurally, I consider both ModE progressives to be semi-lexical forms located in v moving to an expanded IP (i.e., M(ood) or A(spect)) to pick up to- ([+] perfective) or -ing ([−] perfective) and then moving to T(ense). Although both forms have grammaticalized, neither has moved as far along the grammaticalization process as the earlier ingressive onginnan.

5. Concluding remarks

In this paper, I have shown that clear differences emerge between the early progressives onginnan and beginnan in terms of complement type, impersonal constructions, and non-aspectual functions. These differences suggest that onginnan is already more grammaticalized than beginnan during this period. This, in turn, contributes to the decline of onginnan as an ingressive marker and the rise of beginnen as the main ingressive marker during the Middle English period. Although beginnan grammaticalizes, it never reaches the same stage as onginnan — an empty, non-aspectual form. Changes continue during the ME period, mainly in the type of complement, with beginnen.
losing the bare infinitive but also acquiring the -ing complement. Semantic
restrictions associated with begin may have influenced the introduction of
the new ingressive marker start during the (early) Modern English period.
More recently, distribution patterns suggest that the begin/began + to-infinitive
construction is declining while these ingressive markers are holding steady
in their frequency rates with the -ing complement. Start/started, on the other
hand, continues to gain ground, especially with the -ing complement. How
this competition between begin and start will end is, at this point, uncertain.

Note

1 Terminology for these two domains varies, reflecting the respective approach (i.e.,
semantic, syntactic, functional, formal). Alternate terms for lexical aspect include
aktionssatz, situation aspect, or inner aspect. Alternate terms for grammatical aspec
t include viewpoint aspect or outer aspect.

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