

How “perfect” was the Old English HABBAN + past participle periphrasis?

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The development of the HAVE + past participle structure in English has been the focus of attention of many a linguist for over the last one hundred years. Some of the more recent works include Visser (1963-1973) [2002], Traugott (1972), Mitchell (1985), Brinton (1988), Denison (1993), Carey (1994), (1995), Harris & Campbell (1995), Rissanen (1999), Lee (2003), van Gelderen (2004), Wischer (2004) and Kilpiö (2007). Its status as a fully-fledged perfect in the Middle English period is uncontroversial, yet there is still a good deal of disagreement as to its exact meaning and function in the Old English period. Probably the most radical view has been adopted by Carey (1994: 109) and (1995: 87), who contends that in Old English HABBAN + past participle was no more than a resultative construction and it did not acquire perfect meaning until early Middle English. Mitchell (1985: 298) and (1988: ch. 17), on the other hand, stresses the fact that the functions HABBAN + past participle realised in Old English differed from the ones of Present-Day English. However, most scholars opt for the recognition of the HABBAN + past participle construction as a genuine “perfect” since the earliest times of the written history of English, e.g. Brinton (1988), Trask (1996), Lee (2003) and Wischer (2004).

In this paper I argue for the recognition of Old English HABBAN in a structure containing a past participle as a fully-fledged perfect auxiliary. This will be done by referring Old English language samples to grammaticalisation parameters of possessive perfects set out by Heine and Kuteva (2006: ch. 4), who have established the correlations between structural changes that accompany grammaticalisation of ‘have’-perfects and the levels of their grammaticalisation in their crosslinguistic study of possessive perfects. The parameters include the nature of subject, the status of ‘have’, properties and valency of the past participle and the propositional meaning of the periphrasis. Apart from analysing these mainly structural properties of the construction, it will be shown that four basic uses of perfect in Present-Day English, i.e. resultative, experiential, continuing/persistent situation and “hot news”/recent past perfect, were all attested in Old English as well. Additionally, some problems with Carey’s (1994) and (1995) analyses in which she maintains the HABBAN + past participle structure in Old English reached only stative (resultative) stage on the grammaticalisation scale will be mentioned. I will refer to Carey’s arguments concerning the presence of anterior adverbials such as ‘before’ and ‘since’ in the present perfect, the presence of past participles of stative verbs following perfect HABBAN, the presence of the adverbials defining the manner of the past action and the type of subjects the HABBAN + past participle structure can take. It will be concluded that the HABBAN + past participle periphrasis was fully grammaticalised already in Old English.

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