**Tracing the sentential complements of *prevent* through centuries**

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*Abstract*

*The paper examines the three sentential complements that the verb* prevent *can select in present-day British English: the types* prevent me from going*,* prevent me going *and* prevent my going*. In American English, only* me from going *is used alongside the archaic* my going*. The article explores how the relative frequencies of the competing variants have fluctuated from early 18th century to early 20th century and present-day in British and during the 19th century in American English and analyses trends in the competition. Mair (2002) has suggested that the present-day variation in British English is a grammatical change in progress whereby verbs of prevention, with* prevent *as their spearhead, will increasingly select complements without the preposition* from*. This suggestion is evaluated with diachronic data: when did* me going *start advancing in frequency in British English, or disappear from American English? Where does the* poss-ing *form figure in this speculated change?*

**1. Introduction**

In present-day British English, *prevent* can select three different sentential complements, demonstrated below:

(1) I prevented them from leaving.

(2) I prevented them leaving.

(3) I prevented their leaving.

Mair (2002) has observed that the historically more common prepositional variant with *from* (*from-ing*), exemplified in (1), is in British English nowadays equally frequent with the variant without the preposition *from* (*0-ing*), as exemplified in (2). According to Mair (ibid.), the so-called archaic gerund with the subject of the -*ing* clause in the genitive or possessive case (*poss-ing*), exemplified in (3), can also be found today, but is notably more rare than the other two complements. Even though today, American English only appears to use the *from-ing* form, Mair surmises that in earlier American English the variant without *from* in (2) was apparently used to some extent. According to Dixon (1995), the *0-ing* variant is also found in present-day Australian English, so American English may be alone in favouring *from-in*g among the various Englishes in the world.

Mair (2002) proposes that this situation is a case of a constellation where British and American English are diverging, with British English the innovative language variant. The LOB (1961), FLOB (1991), Brown (1961) and Frown (1991) corpora show that the type *me going* has become equal in frequency to *me* *from going* over the 20th century, whereas the type *prevent my going* was rare in all corpora. *Prevent* may be leading a grammatical change among semantically similar verbs of prevention (*hinder*, *block*, *stop*, etc.) that may also eventually start dropping out the preposition in British English. A preliminary look at some data from the British National Corpus does not indicate such a change[[1]](#endnote-1), but more recent corpus data might prove more fruitful. Another question is whether British English truly is the leading variety of English in this matter, considering Dixon’s (ibid.) claim that Australian English also uses the *0-ing* form.

Historically, all three sentential complements mentioned above are attested with *prevent* since at least the 17th century. Visser (1973: 2352) gives examples of the *0-ing* construction from the 16th century, noting that *prevent* is “now often found with *from* before the form in

*-ing*” — a strange observation, considering that Mair (2002) assumes the prepositional *from-ing* complement to have appeared earlier than *0-ing*. Visser’s examples of the *from-ing* and *poss-ing* constructions date only from the 18th century onwards, though surely both are earlier in origin.

The *OED*, on the other hand, seems to suggest that *0-ing* has appeared later with *prevent* than *poss-ing* or *from-ing*, even though examples are given from as early as the 17th century. The *OED* notes rather cryptically that “*prevent me going* appears to be short for *prevent me from going*, perh[aps] influenced by *prevent my going*”. Unlike Mair (2002), the *OED* sees *0-ing* as a reduced form of *from-ing*, possibly derived from the archaic *poss-ing* complement. Visser (ibid: 2363) mentions that the *poss-ing* variant has declined dramatically in frequency with *prevent* since the 19th century, possibly pointing out a period when *0-ing* has started to advance in frequency, being “influenced” by *poss-ing*.

A recent article by Heyvaert et al. (2005) corroborates the finding that *my going* is very rare today with *prevent* in British English. What is not known for certain is what part this variant has played in the past in the competition between the more common variants: the note by the *OED* about the influence of *poss-ing* on *0-ing* is mere speculation. Visser (1973) claims that the decreasing use of *my going* since the 19th century is peculiar to *prevent*, but does not provide systematic corpus evidence.

A diachronic study by Kirsten (1957, cited in van Ek: 1966) and van Ek (1966) has examined the variation between the sentential complements of *prevent* in the 18th and 19th centuries with corpora of modest sizes and of “old-fashioned” structure, as compared to the carefully constructed and balanced electronic monster corpora of today.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | ***prevent* poss -*ing*** | ***prevent* acc -*ing*** | ***prevent* NP *from -ing*** |
| Kirsten 18th century | 25 (30%) | 8 (10%) | 49 (60%) |
| Kirsten 19th century | 48 (53%) | 5 (6%) | 37 (41%) |
| Van Ek 1950-1964 | 2 (5%) | 14 (38%) | 21 (57%) |
| Cobuild corpus | 32 (6%) | 120 (23%) | 367 (71%) |

*Table 1. Studies of* prevent *and its sentential complements by Kirsten (1957) and van Ek(1966) Table adopted from Heyvaert et al. (2005).*

Even though the number of the tokens of *prevent* found in Kirsten and van Ek’s data sets are modest, they show some interesting features in the variation. In Kirsten’s study*, from-ing* is the most common and *poss-ing* the second most common during the 18th century, whereas in the 19th century their positions are overturned. In van Ek’s data from the middle 20th century, however, *from-ing* is again the most common sentential complement. The variant *me going* (called *acc-ing* by van Ek) was rare in Kirsten’s data, but in van Ek’s data from the 20th century it is definitely more common than *poss-ing*. In the end, however, the amount of data in both studies is of very modest stature and the relative frequencies of the complements are suggestive at best. A comprehensive study with much more data is in order.

Judging by the collection of studies introduced above, the roughly equal competition between *from-ing* and *0-ing* in British English is surprisingly recent. As Mair’s (2002) study showed, *0-ing* was still overwhelmed by the prepositional *from-ing* as late as 1961, but in 1991 the variation was practically at a 50:50 ratio with the base form of *prevent*. Such a rapid change invites attempts to explain the progressively more even variation. When and why can the preposition *from* be left out of the complement clause?

The complexity principle formulated by Rohdenburg (e.g. 1995, 1996, and 2000) is a valuable contribution as an explicator from a functional point of view. The principle predicts that out of two near-identical complementation variants, the structurally more explicit one (*from-ing* with *prevent*) will have advanced in frequency over time at the expense of the less explicit variants, (*0-ing* and *poss-ing* with *prevent*). The more explicit variant will be found more often in cognitively complex environments than the less explicit variants.

Such cognitively complex environments in the case of *prevent* would be passivized sentences; cases where *prevent* is followed by a long or complex object noun phrase; or sentences where *prevent* and its complement are intervened by a whole clause. In (4), the object NP of *prevent* is followed by a long insertion separated by commas, creating a distance between *prevent* and the prepositional complement. The result is a sentence structure that is cognitively difficult to process, but this task is certainly made easier by the use of the preposition *from* before the *-ing* form, explicitly connecting the complement and its head word semantically.

(4) It may prevent extraordinary powers, like that of compulsorily acquiring land, from being abused... (BNC)

Similar instances are easy to find where it is not hard to understand why the author has chosen to include *from* in the complement clause:

(5) But the fight did not prevent the fundamental beliefs in the nation and "the historic integrity of the island of Ireland", as nationalist parties described it in their New Ireland Forum (1983 -- 4: i. 28), from remaining basic to the perceptions of both parties. (BNC: A07, 317)

Rohdenburg’s (ibid.) complexity principle rests on the hypothesis that structurally explicit variants will be favoured over less explicit variants. This is because explicit constructions are easier to process cognitively, especially in sentences with complex structures, like passivized sentences. As was mentioned, in present-day American English the prepositional variant is indeed dominant, which is exactly what the principle formulated by Rohdenburg predicts. In British English, on the other hand, the less explicit variant *me going* seems to defy the principle, although with one remarkable exception: it is hardly ever used in the passive:[[2]](#endnote-2)

(6) I was prevented from going. /\*I was prevented going.

Furthermore, as a consequence of the complexity principle, the more explicit variant(s) will reign over less explicit ones not only synchronically, but from a diachronic point of view as well. In the case of *prevent*, *from-ing* is the more explicit variant, whereas *0-ing* and *poss-ing* are less explicit. The archaic variant *poss-ing* is the structurally least explicit option, due to its ambiguity as a nominal-verbal hybrid. Rohdenburg’s principle provides a partial explanation from a synchronic point of view, considering the examples given above, but its diachronic dimension has been somewhat neglected.

In present-day British English, the syntactical or cognitive complexity of a sentence can apparently protect the historically more common and structurally more explicit variant *from-ing* against the advancing *0-ing* variant to some extent. In a recent study on *prevent* (Babováková, 2005) with data from Collins COBUILD corpora, it was found that the increasing length and complexity of insertions and object noun phrases between the matrix verb *prevent* and the -*ing* participle tended to favour the explicit variant, *from-ing,* though not to any striking degree*.*

On the other hand, when the object noun phrase of *prevent* consisted of only one word, *from-ing* was likewise predominant, regardless of the nature of the noun phrase (pronoun vs. common noun). Theoretically, short object NPs after *prevent* could give leeway to the *0-ing* variant. The predominance of *from-ing* following both short and long object noun phrases may simply reflect the overall distribution of the competitors in the corpora used, which ranged from roughly 57% to70%. It is only in the case of passivization that the complexity principle is virtually watertight – but otherwise there appear to be no hard and fast rules to the variation from the point of view of syntactical and cognitive complexity.

Semantic distinctions between the variants, though unsubstantiated by systematic study, have been suggested. Dixon (1991: 236) proposes that *0-ing* is used when the agent denoted by the subject in the sentence employs direct means to prevent something; and *from-ing* is accordingly used when indirect means have been employed. Rudanko (2002: 58) offers that *from-ing* may involve indeterminacy, while *0-ing* has a sense of immediacy and external observability. Moreover, he suggests two different readings of *prevent* which entail two different underlying structures: the ‘bring about’ reading, which is connected to an NP Movement structure, and the ‘act on’ reading, which is connected to a control structure. The problem with any semantic description, such as the suggestion by Dixon (1991) that *from-ing* involves indirect means of prevention on the part of the agent and *0-ing* direct means, lies with sentences with underdefined contexts. The notion of direct or indirect means in the act of prevention can only apply with animate and non-abstract object noun phrases, or preventees. The distinction can only ever apply to part of the data.

A phenomenon where the preposition *from* is increasingly more often left out of a complement clause is certainly intriguing, especially as the change has happened so rapidly. Wherever the competition will lead in the future, it is of interest to examine how it has developed, and what kind of factors direct the choice of the different complements. There seems to be room for a quantitatively more extensive study on the frequencies of the competing variants through the history of both British and early American English.

In order to fulfil this goal, this paper traces the evolution of the sentential complements of *prevent* in British English from the 18th century to early 20th century by using the extended version of the Corpus of Late Modern English (CLMET: 1710-1920) and British National Corpus for late 20th century British English. The data for American English of the 19th century was gathered from the publically available version of the corpus of Early American Fiction (EAF), part of the Chadwyck-Healey corpus. The interplay between the variants will be examined: Is the decline of *my going* related to the success of *me going*? Does the complexity principle apply to the diachronic data to the same extent as in present-day British English?

**2. CLMET 1 (1710-1780)**

The Corpus of Late Modern English Texts (CLMET), compiled by Hendrik de Smet at the University of Leuven, utilises the online text collections of the *Project Gutenberg*[[3]](#endnote-3) and the *Oxford Text Archive*[[4]](#endnote-4) and it contains texts of British English from 1710 to 1920. The extended version of the corpus has a little less than 15 million words[[5]](#endnote-5), offering a fair amount of data for exploring the frequencies of different complementation variants. The three subcorpora of 70 years each (1710-1780, 1780-1850 and 1850-1920) have no overlap as regards authors and texts selected. Many different genres from literary to non-fiction are represented, as well as men and women from different social classes. Nevertheless, there is an inevitable bias towards upper-class male writers.

Table 2 below shows the raw frequencies, percentages and normalized frequencies per million words of each complement type of *prevent* in the first part of CLMET (henceforth CLMET 1). Passivized instances of *prevent* are shown separately, as they can have an effect on the choice of complement. In addition to the complementation variants *prevent me from going* (*from-ing*), *me going* (*0-ing*) and *my going* (*poss-ing*), the table shows the frequencies of simple –*ing* clauses and instances of *poss-ing* with *her* as the subject, since it is impossible to know the case of the pronoun in such cases. Leaving them out from both the *poss-ing* and *0-ing* counts is not a matter of huge concern because they are not terribly numerous. The frequency of nominal complements is also shown.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Complement** | **Raw frequency** | **%** | **Norm. frequency** |
| *From-ing* | 100 | 18 | 33 |
| *From-ing* passive | 10 | 0.8 | 3.3 |
| *0-ing* | 11 | 2 | 3.6 |
| *0-ing* passive | 1 | 0.2 | 0.3 |
| *Poss-ing* | 62 | 11 | 20.4 |
| *Her –ing* | 7 | 1.3 | 2.3 |
| *-ing* | 8 | 1 | 2.6 |
| Nominal | 359 | 64.7 | 118.2 |
| **Total** | 555 | 100 | 182 |

*Table 2. CLMET 1 (1710-1780)*

The most conspicuous thing in the variation is that nominal complements are by far the most common with *prevent*: they form over 60% of all occurrences (example (7) below). Of the sentential complements, *from-ing* is the most common with 18% (example (8)), followed by *poss-ing* with 11% (example (9)). The variant without *from*, *0-ing*, is only represented by 2%, in stark contrast to the present-day situation in British English (example (10)).

(7) Early activity may prevent late and fruitless violence. (CLMET 1 extended: 1710-1780. Burke, *Thoughts on the present discontents*)

(8) The pretence was to prevent the King from being enslaved by a faction... (CLMET 1 extended: 1710-1780 Burke, *Thoughts on the present discontents*)

(9) ...as I said before, great care is taken to prevent your being carried away... (CLMET 1 extended: 1710-1780. Fielding, *The Governess*)

(10) The equality of rank between these functionaries did not prevent their functions being, even in their origin, distinct... (CLMET 1 extended: 1710-1780 Gibbons, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*)

What is intriguing, however, is that both *from-ing* and *0-ing* were used in the passive voice, even if *0-ing* was exhibited only once in such a case.

(11) There was only added, she was sorry, but from what penchant she had not considered, that she had been prevented telling me her story... (CLMET 1 extended: 1710-1780. Sterne, *a Sentimental journey through France and Italy*)

The ratio of ten passives with *from-ing* against one with *0-ing* is certainly more “equal” than that in BNC, where only one instance of passive *0-ing* was found in the whole 100 million words corpus, against dozens and dozens of instances of *from-ing* in the passive.

It would be wrong to claim that determining the complement status of *0-ing* is always crystal clear. One example in particular left some room for doubt and was left out of analysis. When in doubt, one can employ for instance the extraction method (Abstrichemethode) suggested by Somers (1987: 509-510), which attempts to find out whether an element of suspect complement status is semantically closely associated with the verb under analysis.

(12) HOUSE OF COMMONS, FEB. 27, 1740-1. DEBATE ON THE SECOND READING OF A BILL TO PREVENT INCONVENIENCIES ARISING FROM INSURANCE OF SHIPS. (johnson 1740-1 - parliamentary debates )

In (12), the idea may be to prevent “inconveniencies”, which happen to arise “from insurance of ships”. It does not matter where the inconveniencies arise. The idea may also be to prevent inconveniencies *from* arising from insurance of ships in particular. It may be important that the inconveniencies arise from insurance of ships and nothing else. As a sole example of such ambiguity with *0-ing*, and none of the kind with any of the other complements, the question of separating complements from adjuncts does not seem to rise very often with *prevent*.

Considering the data from the perspective of Rohdenburg’s (1996) complexity principle, it seems to hold for the CLMET 1 data in the sense that *from-ing*, the structurally most explicit complement, is the most common of the sentential variants. On the other hand, *poss-ing*, the least explicit complement, is not that much behind in frequency. The nowadays common *0-ing*, however, is still rare at this point, and is expected to advance in frequency over time, which would of course run against the complexity principle.

The complexity principle also maintains that when *prevent* is found with a long or complex object NPs, or the sentence itself is syntactically complex or the complement is preceded by an intervening clause, *from-ing* should be preferred. The preposition *from* naturally helps in the cognitive process of analyzing such sentences of greater complexity, as well as producing them. As we have already seen, in CLMET 1 *prevent* seems to prefer *from-ing* when passivized, but not perfectly exclusively.

In the CLMET 1 data, most of the object noun phrases of *prevent* with all sentential complements are relatively short, comprising from one to four items. The nature of the noun phrase may affect the choice of complement, for instance pronouns may ease the use of *0-ing*, but no clear patterns were found in this respect. However, none of the *0-ing* examples had a whole intervening clause inserted between *prevent* and its complement, as was the case in a couple of *from-ing* examples:

(13) ... in order to prevent an affection which she found she had already too much indulged from influencing her to grant him any farther favours... *(Haywood , the fortunate foundlings)*

It seems fair to say that *from-ing* is the preferred option in such syntactically complex sentence as the one above. On the other hand, *0-ing* is another, probably emerging possibility for less complex environments. As for *poss-ing*, its use is almost exclusively restricted to personal pronoun objects of *prevent*, nicely corroborating the complexity principle for its part. From a historical perspective, one can deduce that *poss-ing* was the oldest variant without a preposition, used nearly exclusively with pronoun objects. It may have paved the way for another variant, *0-ing*, which can more conveniently be used with both personal pronoun and common noun object noun phrases of *prevent*.

**3. CLMET 2 (1780-1850)**

The number of texts chosen for the second time period is double from that of the first time period (46 texts in CLMET 2 against 23 texts in CLMET 1), which explains the greater number of tokens of *prevent* in CLMET 2. The normalized frequency for *prevent* overall is only somewhat larger in CLMET 2: 191.5 instances per million words against 182 instances in CLMET 1.

It is the relative proportions of the sentential complements showcased by Table 3 below which make things interesting. The nominal complements seem to have gone down in frequency from 118 occurrences per million words in CLMET 1 to 103 occurrences in CLMET 2. The prepositional variant *from-ing* now sports an even higher percentage of all complements of *prevent* with 26%, against 18% in CLMET 1. The normalized frequency of 49.8 instances per million words in CLMET 2 shows a remarkable increase from the 33 occurrences per million words in CLMET 1. At this point, it looks like Rohdenburg’s (1996) complexity principle indeed is at work: it predicts that the most explicit variant *from-ing* should have advanced over time. *Poss-ing* still comes at second place with 10%, showing only a very slight decrease in frequency from the first time period as regards its normalized frequency.

The *0-ing* variant seems to have become ever so slightly more common: it forms almost 3% of all complements and has a frequency of five instances per million words in CLMET 2, as against less than four in CLMET 1. Nothing to write home about, but in retrospect one can trace the incipient increase in the frequency of *0-ing* around this time period. Interestingly, *0-ing* was also found in the passive voice in four instances, which again suggests that the complexity principle is not yet in full force.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Complement** | **Raw frequency** | **%** | **Norm. Frequency** |
| *From-ing* | 285 | 26 | 49.8 |
| *From-ing* passive | 48 | 4.4 | 8.4 |
| *0-ing* | 30 | 2.7 | 5.3 |
| *0-ing* passive | 4 | 0.4 | 0.7 |
| *Poss-ing* | 112 | 10.2 | 19.6 |
| *Her –ing* | 21 | 1.9 | 7.7 |
| *-ing* | 3 | 0.3 | 0.5 |
| Nominal | 593 | 54.1 | 103.6 |
| **Total** | 1096 | 100 | 191.5 |

*Table 3. CLMET 2 (1780-1850)*

Perhaps a more significant sign of the advance of *0-ing* is in the nature of the sentences. We can recall that in CLMET 1, *0-ing* was only found with object noun phrases of four items long at the most, which includes articles, conjunctions and other cognitively diminutive words. In CLMET 2, however, some instances of slightly longer object noun phrases were found with *0-ing*. In (14), we can count as many as eight items between *prevent* and the *-ing* clause, creating cognitive distance between them. Example (15) is another case where the object noun phrase of *prevent* is rather long.

(14) The covering was sufficiently thick to prevent the heat of the summer air and sun thawing and corrupting it. (*Darwin – voyage of the beagle*)

(15) ... and thus prevent the magical fascination of that face again appealing to the sympathies... (*disraeli – venetia*)

Mostly, however, *0-ing* was found with shorter and simpler object noun phrases. In nine cases, the object noun phrase was a pronoun. When an intervening structure was found, *from-ing* was always used, as exemplified in (16). It is not difficult to understand why the preposition *from* is needed here. The complexity of the sentence is further acknowledged by the writer by the added comma before the preposition *from*.

(16) The rigidity of a fireproof building prevents the movement of long shafts or axes which drive the machinery, from being impeded by the friction... (*babbage – the economy of machinery and manufactures*)

The difficulty with the complexity principle is that as regards passivized sentences, *prevent* does not follow the rule. There were as many as four examples of *0-ing* with *prevent* in the passive. Clearly these cases are separate from the overall advance of *0-ing* over time, since in present-day English it is not found in the passive, or they may be a sign of the instability during the initial stages of a grammatical change. The advance of this complement is not entirely up to the effect of the complexity principle, especially since its advance over time itself runs counter to the idea behind the principle.

**4. CLMET 3 (1850-1920)**

The number of texts in the third time period of CLMET is not much higher than in the second time period, yet there are some interesting developments to be seen. As Table 4 below shows, in CLMET 3 the nominal complements are even more conspicuously less numerous than before: from 118 occurrences per million words in CLMET 1 and 103 instances in CLMET 2, they are now found with only 68 occurrences per million words. This can be explained by the overall decrease in the frequency of the verb *prevent* over time: the downward curve has led to 124 tokens per million words, down from 191 in CLMET 2.

As far as the sentential complements are concerned, *from-ing* is still by far the most common with 24%. When looking at its normalized frequency, however, we can see that it is suddenly significantly less common in CLMET 3 when compared to CLMET 2: 30 instances per million words, as against 50 instances in CLMET 2. Another conspicuous change is that *0-ing* has now replaced *poss-ing* as the second most common sentential complement with a proportion of 8.5 % of all instances, as compared to *poss-ing* with nearly 8%.

The normalized frequencies show the change more strikingly: *0-ing* had five instances per million words in CLMET 2, but in CLMET 3 as many as 10 occurrences per million words. *Poss-ing*, on the other hand, has come down from 19 instances per million words in CLMET 2 to barely 10 instances per million words in CLMET 3. Considering that *from-ing* is still taking the lead among the sentential complements, the increase in the frequency of *0-ing* must be due to the corresponding decrease of *poss-ing*. This is not entirely unexpected, considering the similarity of the complements in their surface form, as well as the speculation made in the *OED* that *poss-ing* may have had something to do with the emergence of *0-ing*.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Complement** | **Raw frequency** | **%** | **Norm. frequency** |
| *From-ing* | 191 | 24.3 | 30.6 |
| *From-ing* passive | 24 | 3 | 3.8 |
| *0-ing* | 67 | 8.5 | 10.7 |
| *0-ing* passive | 1 | 0.1 | 0.2 |
| *Poss-ing* | 61 | 7.8 | 9.8 |
| *Her –ing* | 10 | 1.3 | 1.6 |
| *-ing* | 3 | 0.4 | 0.5 |
| Nominal | 429 | 54.6 | 68.6 |
| **Total** | 786 | 100 | 124 |

*Table 4. CLMET 3 (1850-1920)*

Looking closer at the data, this time there was only one case of passivization with *0-ing*. Once again, the vast majority of the examples with *0-ing* had short object noun phrases after *prevent*, or personal pronoun objects. No complex intervening structures were found between *prevent* and the complement, as was observed in earlier time periods as well.

With *from-ing*, on the other hand, there was more complexity allowed with regard to both the sentence structure and the nature and length of the object noun phrases. The *0-ing* variant is obviously gaining foothold at this point, slowly but steadily, making inroads specifically in “cognitively simple” environments, as it were.

The normalized frequencies of each complement from the first time period to the third one are enlightening when examined together on a timeline. Figure 1 below shows the progression of each complementation variant from CLMET 1 to CLMET 3.

*Figure 1. The normalized frequencies of* from-ing*,* 0-ing *and* poss-ing *in CLMET 1, 2 and 3.*

The first thing that jumps out in Figure 1 is that *from-ing* is by far the most common sentential complement in all time periods. There is a curious increase in its frequency around the middle time period, which leaves room for speculation, but does not really affect our primary concern. The variant without *from*, i.e. *0-ing*, has advanced with a slowly rising curve, unimpressive even at the end of the timeline, but known to be surging up by the middle of the 20th century on the basis of other studies mentioned previously in this paper.

The progress of *0-ing* is mirrored in a very clear fashion by the decrease in the frequency of *poss-ing*. The frequencies of these variants evolve to a point where their lines of progression cross each other and continue on their trajectories, judging by the present-day scarcity of *poss-ing* and the contrary prevalence of *0-ing* together with *from-ing*. It is very likely that the structurally least explicit complement, *poss-ing*, has been replaced by *0-ing*, which not only is structurally more explicit but also carries with it a more informal feel from a stylistic standpoint in today’s English. The interplay between *poss-ing* and *0-ing* is logical enough, but why *0-ing* has become such a serious competitor to *from-ing* in more recent times is unclear from the point of view of the complexity principle.

There may be an additional aspect to the complexity principle that aids the advance of *0-ing*. When looking at the different verb forms of *prevent*, it becomes clear that the variation is not as straightforward as the total numbers would suggest. Table 5 below shows that the *0-ing* complement is rarely found with other verb forms of *prevent* than the base form. *From-ing*, however, is mostly used with both *prevent* and *prevented* fairly evenly. The same goes for *poss-ing*, though not to the same degree. With *from-ing*, there is probably an echo from its exclusive use in passivized sentences which causes it to be preferred with *prevented*.

Considering the different time periods, *0-ing* is rarely used with any other verb forms than the base form until CLMET 3. Even though *prevented* is its second favourite, it is a stretch to call it common. *Poss-ing*, on the other hand, has been used with all verb forms quite equally, though less so in CLMET 3.

The number of occurrences of the other verb forms than the base form of *prevent* is not very high for any time period, but shows a clear pattern. When there is a window for using the advancing complement *0-ing*, it is usually when *prevent* is in the base form. The reason for this may lie in the complexity of the verb forms: *prevent* is the morphologically most simple, whereas *prevented* and *preventing* have an added syllable.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **CLMET 1** | ***prevent*** | ***prevents*** | ***preventing*** | ***prevented*** |
| *From-ing* | 47 | 3 | 7 | 53 |
| *0-ing* | 9 | - | 1 | 2 |
| *Poss-ing* | 36 | 6 | 3 | 17 |
| **CLMET 2** | ***prevent*** | ***prevents*** | ***preventing*** | ***prevented*** |
| *From-ing* | 152 | 20 | 20 | 93 |
| *0-ing* | 22 | - | 1 | 7 |
| *Poss-ing* | 63 | 10 | 3 | 36 |
| **CLMET 3** | ***prevent*** | ***prevents*** | ***preventing*** | ***prevented*** |
| *From-ing* | 88 | 12 | 13 | 78 |
| *0-ing* | 49 | 5 | 2 | 11 |
| *Poss-ing* | 47 | 1 | 1 | 12 |

*Table 5. The raw frequencies of the complements of* prevent *according to verb forms*

There is another possible reason for the interplay between the complements and the different verb forms of *prevent*. Rohdenburg (1995) has defined the *horror aequi* restriction, which entails that speakers avoid near-identical structures in vicinity of each other. In the case of *prevent*, this means that the less explicit complements *poss-ing* and *0-ing* should be avoided with the verb form *preventing*. Considering example (17), this seems a logical assumption.

(17) The door was closed, preventing me entering/my entering/me from entering the room.

With this in mind, we can see that *from-ing* is indeed preferred in the majority of cases with *preventing*. By now it has become obvious that the advance of *0-ing* is not quite as straightforward as Mair (2002) makes it out to be – there are multiple factors involved, some hindering and some facilitating the increasing use of *0-ing* with *prevent*.

**5. EAF (1809-1874)**

The corpus of Early American Fiction (EAF) used in this study goes by the same name as a subcorpus in the Chadwyck-Healey corpus, but the version used in this paper includes only 173 works by 51 authors from the 19th century. This smaller version contains approximately 11.9 million words[[6]](#endnote-6), covering the years 1809-1874, and it was used as a source of American English before the 20th century. This smaller version of EAF was obtained from the Electronic Text Collection at the University of Virginia[[7]](#endnote-7), and it includes all the works that are publically accessible. The original, full version of EAF in the Chadwyck-Healey corpus has more than 730 works by more than 130 authors from the time period of 1789-1875[[8]](#endnote-8) .

Unsurprisingly, the Early American Fiction corpus only contains fictional texts. It is still better than nothing, since earlier American English has not been previously studied as regards *prevent* and its sentential complements. As was explained in the introduction, present-day American English uses *prevent* with the prepositional variant *from-ing* to the complete exclusion of *0-ing*, even though *poss-ing* is probably found on occasion. There is most likely a prescriptive motive behind this tendency, as can be seen in a quote from a prescriptive American grammar, *The Origins & Development of the English Language* (1964: 241; cited in Visser, 1973: 2352), where *0-ing* with *prevent* is considered incorrect use.

“It is doubtful that either Sir Richard or Daniel would pass American College Board Examination, for Sir Richard also says 'prevent him getting back next term'..”

The *0-ing* variant is felt to be less formal or less proper than *from-ing* or *poss-ing*. One can speculate that American English is stricter than British English as regards its prescriptive guidelines in language use, or perhaps more standardizing in nature, and this is reflected in the choice of complements after *prevent*, among other things.

When looking at the data from EAF, shown in Table 6 below, the first striking difference between earlier American English and British English as far as *prevent* is concerned is that the verb is not found nearly as often in American fiction of the 19th century. The verb is found with only 76 occurrences per million words, as against 191 occurrences per million words in CLMET 2, which represents roughly the same time period in British English. It is possible that the genre of the texts, fiction, is a factor in this situation.

Another important thing to notice is that *0-ing* *was* indeed used in American English in the 19th century, unlike in the present day. Out of 907 tokens of *prevent* altogether, *0-ing* was selected as the complement in 29 cases, forming 3% of all the complements. This figure is in fact practically the same as in CLMET 2 of the same time period in British English. This goes on to show that the divergence between British English and American English with respect to this particular verb and its complements is a relatively recent phenomenon indeed, as was speculated by Mair (2002). Just as in British English, *0-ing* can also be found in the passive voice in American fiction, exemplified by three instances.

Nevertheless, *from-ing* was the most common sentential variant of *prevent* in American English as well as in British English in the 19th century. This complement forms 27% of all complements, which is very similar to the situation in CLMET 2 of the same time period. As regards its normalized frequency, on the other hand, it is not nearly as common as in British English with only 20 occurrences per million words, as against 49 occurrences per million words in CLMET 2. This is a consequence of the overall smaller frequency of *prevent* in American fiction compared to British English. On the other hand, the *poss-ing* complement is proportionally more common in EAF than in CLMET 2, probably due to the smaller proportion of *0-ing* complements.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Complement** | **Raw frequency** | **%** | **Norm. frequency** |
| *From-ing* | 245 | 27.1 | 20.5 |
| *From-ing* passive | 46 | 5.1 | 3.8 |
| *0-ing* | 26 | 2.9 | 2.2 |
| *0-ing* passive | 3 | 0.3 | 0.25 |
| *Poss-ing* | 130 | 14.3 | 10.9 |
| *Her –ing* | 34 | 3.7 | 2.8 |
| *-ing* | 9 | 1 | 0.75 |
| Nominal | 414 | 45.6 | 34.6 |
| **Total** | 907 | 100 | 75.9 |

*Table 6. EAF (1809-1874)*

Just as was the case in the British English data, *0-ing* is found mostly with short object noun phrases of only two or three items long, counting articles and other function words. A couple of exceptions were found, however. In example (18), there is a whole relative clause inserted between *prevent* and the complement clause. In (19), the object noun phrase of *prevent* is rather complex as well.

(18) ... the rest stood hallooing like mad-men to prevent any alarm that Wehle might raise attracting attention...

(19) One was to prevent any knowledge of the existence of his niece coming to the ears of the trustees...

Intervening material this long makes it definitely harder to interpret the sentence, aptly demonstrating the motivation to prefer structurally explicit complements such as *from-ing* in sentences like this.

When looking at the different verb forms of *prevent*, a similar phenomenon appears as in British English: out of the 29 occurrences of *0-ing* in EAF, 21 were found with *prevent* and 8 with *prevented*. This complement obviously favours the base form, or rather; the base form occasionally allows the use of this complement.

Moreover, the possibility of using *0-ing* in the passive again complicates the picture, just as in the British English data. The complexity principle is not an absolute rule when it comes to its guiding power in the choice of the sentential complement after *prevent*. Even so, it is undeniable that in American English the *0-ing* complement was never particularly common in comparison to *from-ing* and is today non-existent.

The general dynamic between the sentential variants seems to be that *from-ing* leads the pack, whereas *0-ing* and *poss-ing* vie for second place, both in British English and American English. The situation remains fairly similar in both Englishes until after the 19th century, when British English and American English have started to diverge more quickly with regard to *prevent* and the *0-ing* variant. What has caused this divergence with respect to one particular verb is open to speculation.

**6. British National Corpus**

The British National Corpus (BNC) contains roughly 100 million words. A lemma search for *prevent* produces 10,000 tokens and then some as a result. In order to get some idea of what the general ratio between *from-ing* and *0-in*g might be in the BNC, one must choose subcorpora to keep the amount of examples reasonably low. For this study, the spoken section was an easy option, since the BNC Web search facility allows restricting the search to this section only. Two additional subcorpora were also created: one which contains texts with the genre label “arts”, and one which contains texts categorized as broadsheet newspapers.

Examining transcribed texts demands no further justification. The subcorpus of texts from the genre of arts is hoped to shed some light on whether the variation between the sentential complements varies according to the formality of the text. Broadsheets, for their part, represent another very different genre of writing, to give further variety to this selection of data.

The number of *poss-ing* variants in each subcorpus was remarkably small, as was expected. There was one instance found in the spoken section out of 121 tokens of *prevent* in total; two in the genre of arts out of 163 tokens; and four in broadsheets out of 107 tokens. Considering the overall number of examples in these subcorpora, it seems safe to label *poss-ing* marginal with *prevent* in present-day British English.

Consequently, we can examine the variation between the competing *from-ing* and *0-ing* complementation variants in relation to each other. The ratio of these complements with respect to each other is presented in Table 7 below for each subcorpus.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Spoken section** | ***From-ing* %** | ***0-ing* %** |
| **Total** | 45 | 55 |
| **Base form *prevent*** | 40 | 60 |

Total nr of examples 121

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Arts** | ***From-ing* %** | ***0-ing* %** |
| **Total** | 78 | 22 |
| **Base form *prevent*** | 73 | 27 |

Total nr of examples 163

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Broadsheets** | ***From-ing* %** | ***0-ing* %** |
| **Total** | 50 | 50 |
| **Base form *prevent*** | 43 | 57 |

Total nr of examples 107

*Table 7. The variation between* from-ing *and* 0-ing *the BNC subcorpora, Spoken section, Arts and Broadsheets.*

Even though there are not that many examples of *prevent* in the spoken section in total, the ratio between *from-ing* and *0-ing* probably reflects the real situation: *0-ing* is slightly more common than *from-ing* with 55%. Moreover, as we saw in connection with older British English, the base form of *prevent* seems to allow *0-ing* to be used more often. In the spoken section, the ratio is as high as 60% in favour of *0-ing* with the base form of *prevent*!

In the arts genre, on the other hand, the roles are completely reversed. In general, *from-ing* leads with 78%, which strongly suggests that the formality of the text type is a factor hindering the use of *0-ing*. With the base form of *prevent*, however, *0-ing* is slightly more common than in general, which agrees with all the previous results.

In broadsheets, the situation is exactly 50:50 between *from-ing* and *0-ing*. Once again though, *0-ing* leads the competition with the base form of *prevent* with 57%. With newspapers we perhaps have a relatively low level of formality in writing, or the newspaper writing style as an innovative genre of writing may be spearheading the change towards the increasing preference for *0-ing*.

All in all, if we were to look at these frequencies and nothing else, Mair’s prediction certainly would seem convincing – that *0-ing* may be overthrowing *from-ing* as we speak. But as we have seen in the case of individual examples, there are certainly other factors than some general, straightforward grammatical change in the lexicon.

In the passive voice, *prevent* resists *0-ing* very effectively, as well as when the object noun phrase is long and/or complex. Any intervening material such as subclauses between *prevent* and the complement tend to tip the scales in favour of *from-ing*, even though there may be signs of an opposite development. In example (20), for instance, *0-ing* is used even though there is a lot going on between *prevent* and the *–ing* clause, making it hard to process. In example (21), the meaning of the sentence is slightly ambiguous because of the lack of the preposition *from*.

(20) ... there was nothing to prevent the current investigation into the West Midlands Serious Crimes Squad looking into ‘any other matter … if there are grounds for suspicion’. (Broadsheets)

(21) Some Labour MEPs and independent socialists have long argued this is the way to prevent a stranglehold over European integration being exercised by national governments. (Broadsheets)

Obviously it is possible to use *0-ing* in cognitively fairly complex environments such as these, but not to the extent that it could be used in passive sentences, nor with whole subclauses between *prevent* and the complement. Leaving out the preposition definitely increases ambiguity and the difficulty of interpretation when the complement is a long way from the matrix verb.

In the end, it is clear that Mair’s (2002) study only revealed the tip of the iceberg. Overall, the variation between *from-in*g and *0-ing* may seem equal as far as their frequencies, but upon closer inspection they have their respective turfs, so to speak, where they hold each their own better than in other areas. In spoken British English, the preposition *from* is clearly often left out with ease – possibly due to the relative brevity of spoken sentences and hence their cognitive simplicity from a structural point of view. In highly formal written genres, which do not shy away from long and complex sentences, *from-ing* is naturally preferred as the more articulate variant. Broadsheet newspapers, on the other hand, may favour *0-ing* because their texts are produced at a fast pace and may not allow for careful language use. It is also in the nature of newspapers to promote novelties in language, for one reason or another.

**7. Conclusion**

In this paper we have seen how the variation between the sentential complements of *prevent* has evolved from the 18th century to late 20th century in both British and American English. The starting point was that today, the complements *me from going* and *me going* compete in British English, but not in American English. This situation has allegedly developed quickly over the 20th century, if Mair’s (2002) data is to be trusted. The data from the Corpus of Late Modern English have shown this to be a simplification.

Moreover, we compared the situation in British English through centuries with that in Early American English. The data from the Early American Fiction corpus suggests that British English and American English did not diverge as regards the sentential complements of *prevent* until the end of the 19th century, or early 20th century at the latest – in any case, the change was rather swift. The proportions of the *from-ing*, *0-ing* and *poss-ing* complements were still highly similar in the Early American Fiction corpus to those in the second part of the CLMET corpus, which represents roughly the same time period, i.e. the major part of the 19th century.

There have been several attempts at explaining the close competition, ranging from Rohdenburg’s (e.g. 1996) complexity principle to Dixon’s (1991) and Rudanko’s (2002) proposals regarding semantic and underlying structural distinctions. Mair (2002) has suggested that *prevent* is spearheading a grammatical change whereby semantically similar verbs in British English (e.g. *hinder*, *block*, *stop, deter*) are increasingly favouring the variant without *from*, perhaps eventually ousting the prepositional complement completely. It seems unlikely at the moment that such a process could be carried to completion, considering the strong preference for the prepositional variant in passivized sentences with *prevent*, as well as otherwise complex sentences which are cognitively difficult to process.

The three time periods of the CLMET corpus showed the intriguing interplay between the sentential complements of *prevent*. The *from-ing* complement was the most common throughout, whereas the *poss-ing* and *0-ing* complements mirrored each other in an evolution where *poss-ing* decreased in frequency while *0-ing* increased in frequency. The advent of the present-day situation where *from-ing* and *0-ing* are supposedly equal is seen at the end of the timeline where *from-ing* has dropped somewhat in frequency, closer to the other two variants.

The subcorpora from the British National Corpus chosen to represent present-day British English confirmed to a certain degree the claim by Mair (2002) that *from-ing* and *0-ing* are equal competitors. It was in fact found that they are used to differing degrees according to the nature of the texts. In spoken texts, *0-ing* was indeed equal to *from-ing*, as well as in newspapers. In the formal genre of arts, *from-ing* was by far more common.

More spice for the stew comes from the strange preference for *0-ing* whenever *prevent* is in the base form. This phenomenon was observed in all corpora, and it is probably another function of Rohdenburg’s complexity principle. The principle does not explain everything, but appears to remain a valuable part of the overall picture.

There is no doubt that several different factors are at play governing the variation and the choice of the nearly identical complements. Their distribution in relation to each other probably has not stabilized yet, following a very rapid change over the 20th century. On a more general level, it is possible that through its historical advance, the *0-ing* variant is simply more and more often seen as an unbiased choice from a prescriptive point of view, in the sense of the authors’ intuition about normative rules of language use. On the other hand, if both variants continue to be used on a par as regards their relative frequencies, it is possible that they seek out their own niches of use.

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1. For instance, among the hundreds instances of *hinder* in the BNC, only one example of *me going* was found. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Only one instance of a passivized *me going* was found in the BNC by using a tag sequence search. Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 1238) also maintain that passivization with *me going* is not possible. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. [http://ota.ahds.ac.uk/](%20%20http://ota.ahds.ac.uk/) [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. [http://www.gutenberg.org](%20%20http://www.gutenberg.org)/ [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The count of roughly 15 million words was obtained by using the Monoconc program. The word counts listed on the website of CLMET (<http://www.http://perswww.kuleuven.be/~u0044428/>) were obtained by using Microsoft Word, and these figures are different from those obtained by using Monoconc. This is probably due to differences in these programs in counting borderline cases, like hyphenated words, as either one or two words. In any case, de Smet recommends using the Monoconc figures. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Rounded to nearest 100,000 words. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. [http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/eaf/](%20%20%20http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/eaf/) [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. All information found from [http://collections.chadwyck.com](http://collections.chadwyck.com/) [↑](#endnote-ref-8)