DO NOTHING BUT + V:  
From parallel form to bare infinitive*

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Abstract

This paper examines the development of sentences featuring the sequence do nothing but followed by a lexical verb, as in He has done nothing but improve all season. Data are presented which show that, before 1500, the lexical verb in the construction always had a form parallel to that of do but after 1700, it nearly always takes the form of a bare infinitive. The reason for the change is identified as a convergence of several factors promoting reanalysis of a bare form lexical verb as an infinitive.

1 Introduction

In this paper, I examine certain aspects of the history of what—for want of a better term—I call the DO NOTHING BUT construction. Two Present-Day English (PDE) examples can be seen in (1)–(2).

(1) By the time that one of his profession (Tony Armstrong-Jones) married the Queen’s sister in 1960, the status of photographer was assured—and films like Blow Up, not to mention the antics of David Bailey and Patrick Lichfield in the 1960s, did nothing but enhance it.
(The Guardian, 24 January 2004, 18)

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(2) Even Sir John Stevens (David Blunkett's least favourite top cop) can do nothing but grovel: 'We must be grateful it was an attention-seeker, not an intruder with more sinister purposes.' Indeed, how true. (The Guardian, 18 August 2003, 17)

Here the verb do is followed by the sequence nothing but and another verb, which takes the bare infinitive form (enhance, grovel). The meaning of the combination is roughly equivalent to that of only ('such films and antics only enhanced it'/'he can only grovel').

Although the behaviour and structure of this construction have not attracted a great deal of scholarly attention, a proposal for an analysis of it is found in Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 1263). They suggest that the bare infinitive in the construction should be viewed as an example of a 'matrix-licensed complement', entailing that its form is determined not by the word but (which Huddleston and Pullum take to be a preposition) but by elements of the clause containing but. The more descriptively oriented grammar of PDE by Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartvik (1985) does not mention the existence of the construction as such. However, Quirk et al. (1985: 1067) provide a description of the few contexts outside modal verb groups that license the use of a bare infinitive, and these contexts are said to include prepositions of exception such as but; the example sentence given is She did everything but make the bed. This seems to imply that sentences like (1) and (2) should also be analyzed in this way.

A further piece of information about DO NOTHING BUT can be found in several historical grammars of the language (Jespersen 1940: 215; Visser 1969: 1493 fn.2) and also in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED; Simpson 2004, s.v. nothing A II.9). There it is noted that the construction has undergone a change through time. In earlier English, the construction sometimes featured a second verb that was not a bare infinitive but a finite form, as in examples (3)-(4).\(^1\)

(3) For Jean se de wel spriceth & þa word na gelast, he ne deð nan For that he who well speaks and the words not carries-out, he not does no þinges buton fordernþ hine syllfe. thing but condemns him self.

'Because anyone that speaks well and does not carry out those words, he does nothing but condemns himself.' (ÆLett 4 (Sigewicþ) B1.8.4.4; OED s.v. nothing A II.9.a (b))

(4) They found but vi. children, to whom they did nothing but tooke away They found only six children, to whom they did nothing but took away their chains that was about their necks whereby incontinent thel were their chains that were around their necks whereby immediately they were mused in white swannes. transformed into white swans.

\(^1\)In these and all following examples, the second verb is given in bold type.

In what follows, I will address the causes for the change in the nature of the second verb as exemplified in (1)-(2) vs. (3)-(4). In doing so, I will suggest that it would be misguided to take the data at face value and focus only on the element in the construction that undergoes visible change. Rather, it is necessary to view the visible change in the context of the syntax and semantics of the construction as a whole. More careful inspection of this context reveals that the construction does not remain static while only the verbal form changes: the change in the verbal form is a consequence of a change in the status of the construction itself. To model this change in status, which is plausibly taken to be an instance of grammaticalization, I will make use of the concept of zero semantics (Postma 1995). The central idea will be that, while each of the elements in historical examples like (3)-(4) has its ordinary full lexical meaning, this is different in modern examples like (1)-(2), where two of the elements have reduced or null meaning. This semantic difference is also reflected in the syntactic structure of the sentences at the different periods.

2 Earlier studies: a review

For the DO NOTHING BUT construction in PDE, Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 641-643, 1263) propose an analysis whereby the word but is a preposition with the meaning 'except'. Noting the exceptionally wide array of complement types that can follow but and its synonyms (except, bar, save), they suggest that such prepositions of exception take a complement which is licensed not directly by the preposition but by an element of the clause containing the PP. Among the examples that Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 642) give to illustrate this notion of 'matrix-licensed complements' are sentences (5)-(7).

(5) I can't think what to advise [pp except staying at home].

(6) I don't intend to do anything [pp except to wait for news].

(7) There's nothing any of us can do [pp except be cautious].

Use of the gerund in (5), the to-infinitive in (6) and the bare infinitive in (7) is sanctioned by elements in the matrix clause: advise in (5), intend in (6) and can in (7), which can be seen to license these forms in sentences (8)-(10) (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 642).

(8) I advise staying at home.
I intend to wait for news.

We can be cautious.

This analysis, which in a sense makes the prepositional phrase transparent to complement selection, seems successful in accounting for the wide variety of complement types found after the relevant prepositions. Apart from various verbal forms, these also include NPs as in We invited everyone [except John], PPs as in He works here all days [except on Friday], adverb phrases as in This thesis treats the topic in every way [except competently], and others. It also captures the intuition that the complement of P in these cases needs to be interpreted as being part of the matrix clause, i.e. the semantics of the sentence at some level includes constituents such as the underlined groups of words in (8)-(10) and invite John, work here on Friday, and treat the topic competently in the sentences just given.

Huddleston and Pullum also apply this type of analysis to the DO NOTHING BUT construction. However, the way they do this is problematic. The example they give is shown in (11).

(11) He does nothing but waste people's time.

They suggest that 'the bare infinitival is licensed by do nothing + the proposition of exception' (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 1263). This would make selection of the verbal form in (11) rather different from the cases in (5)-(7), where it is one specific lexical item rather than a phrase that is responsible for the form selected. In (5), for example, the choice for staying (rather than to stay, stays, or stayed) is determined by the verb advise, but not by the combination of advise and its object (the fronted element what).

For the sentence in (11), it is also difficult to see in what sense do nothing can be said to select a specific verbal form, let alone to understand why this should be the bare infinitive rather than any other form. Claiming that it nevertheless does, amounts to considering the construction to be a grammatical idiom, in which use of the bare infinitive does not follow from any general principle. This also appears to be the way Quirk et al. (1985: 1067) view the facts, since they state that the bare infinitive may follow prepositions of exception, but do not further comment on the reasons why this context should be hospitable to this form. Fortunately, as we shall see in what follows, it may not be necessary to accept the conclusion that selection of the bare infinitive in (11) is entirely unmotivated. As we shall see also, the Huddleston-Pullum analysis can be used, but it applies to historical examples like (3)-(4) rather than modern ones such as (1)-(2). For the latter, a different analysis seems to be called for.

An important descriptive point about the construction in PDE is made in the OED (s.v. nothing A II.9.a (b)). Here, we are told that, when following the verb to do, the combination of nothing and the 'limiting particle' but is usually followed by the bare infinitive, but when to do itself takes the form doing, it is followed by the gerund. An example illustrating this second possibility can be seen in (12).

(12) Indeed, I seem to be doing nothing but waving goodbye at the moment.

(The Guardian, 11 April 2003, 10)

This option of having a parallel form after doing (but not after other forms of do) is not mentioned by Huddleston and Pullum (2002). However, it is clear that it represents a further obstacle to their analysis of the construction, as well as a challenge to any alternative for it. A further descriptive point about the construction made in the OED concerns the change already identified in §1 above: we are told that DO NOTHING BUT was 'formerly followed by a verb in the corresponding inflected form' (s.v. nothing A II 9). Examples given to illustrate this former usage include (3), (4) and (13).

(13) The doulphin dyd nothing, nyxt ne day, but admonished his daughter.

The dauphin did nothing night nor day but admonished his daughter.

(1485 CAXTON tr. Paris & Vienne (1868) 61; OED s.v. nothing A. II.9.a (b))

Historical examples given in the OED to illustrate the use of the bare infinitive include (14) and (15).

(14) Fou schalt... do nothing but occupie þe wip hure in praireres. You shall... do nothing but occupy you with her in prayers.

(1400 Bk. to Mother (Bodl.) 68; OED s.v. nothing A. II.9.a (b))

(15) He doeth nothing but stabbeth the slave.

He does nothing but stab the slave.

(1601 J. Jonson Fountain of Self-love III.ii.sig.F; OED s.v. nothing A. II.9.a (b))

Use of a finite form in (14), i.e. occupies instead of occupie, might be unlikely on account of the fact that do itself is an infinitive. But pairs like (13) and (15) show that there was apparently variation in Middle English (ME; i.e. the period 1100-1500) and early Modern English (EModE; i.e. the period 1500-1700) between a finite form and the bare infinitive for the verb following does/did nothing but. However, no information about the frequencies of the two forms (and other ones) is given in the OED, nor is anything said about the precise diachrony of the variation, or the reasons for its genesis and apparent subsequent demise.

In Visser (1969: 149f), the existence of the two variants is also noted, but this is done in the context of a discussion of the origins of periphrastic do. Visser suggests...
that sentences like (15) might originally have had 'factitive' do, i.e. a use of do in the generalized meaning of 'carrying out, acting in some way'. Later, such sentences might have been reinterpreted in such a way that do came to be viewed as a periphrastic verb governing the following infinitive. Visser's focus is therefore not on the origins of the pattern in (15) (or the loss of that in (13)), but on the way use of the infinitive might act as a trigger for further change. Nevertheless, his idea of a development from factitive to empty do will turn out to be a useful one in §4. Trying to make somewhat more explicit its structural implications, I will propose here that it can form the basis of an analysis of modern DO NOTHING BUT.

In Jespersen (1940: 214f), it is suggested that in examples with finite forms such as (3), (4) and (13), the word but is simply an adversative conjunction. This would mean that these examples all have clausal coordination, with the rule of conjunction reduction being responsible for the non-overt nature of the subject in the second clause. This in itself is a plausible suggestion, which we shall also make use of in §4. However, it can not apply to any OE examples, such as (3), since but(on) only developed into an adversative conjunction after the OE period. If the clausal coordination analysis is correct for ME examples like (4) and (13), it must represent an innovation and the question then arises what the earlier structure of sentences like this was. Moreover, Jespersen also does not discuss the factors responsible for the rise of the now standard bare infinitive in the construction, or provide quantitative data on the use of the construction in its various forms through time.

The upshot of this review of earlier work on DO NOTHING BUT is that it makes available certain interesting facts and ideas. The factual information, however, is somewhat patchy and does not add up to any detailed picture of the behaviour of the construction through the centuries. The ideas that are available (but as a preposition that is transparent to complement selection; do as a potentially periphrastic verb; and but as an adversative conjunction) all have a certain plausibility but they are not fully compatible with each other and need to be revised, extended and integrated in order to come to an adequate analysis of the construction at its various historical stages. Moreover, what is also missing is an account of the reasons for the transition from one stage to another. The somewhat daunting task that the above review thus leads us to confront will be addressed in the next two sections.

3 Further explorations: characterising and describing the change

Since the firmest conclusion emerging from §2 was that there is a shortage of descriptive data on the construction, this is the issue that we turn to first. However, before pre-
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(21) a. deō ‘does’ – fardenō ‘condemn’ (OE ex. (3))
    b. did ‘did’ – tooke ‘took’ (ME ex. (4))
    c. dyd ‘did’ – admonished ‘admonished’ (ME ex. (13))
    d. (have) done – digged ‘dug’ (EModE ex. (16))
    e. to do – to find (EModE ex. (18))

To be added to this list is the sequence doing – V-ing, as in PDE (12) (doing– waving). Such examples are perhaps somewhat exceptional in being rather late instances of the parallel pattern. Otherwise, it appears that from ME onwards, the predominant pattern shows a bare infinitive on the second verb, leading to sequences such as those in (22).

(22) a. do’s ‘does’ – stabbe ‘stab’ (EModE ex. (15))
    b. (has) done – mocke (EModE ex. (17))
    c. to do – gnaw (19th c. ex. (19))
    d. did – enhance (PDE ex. (2))
    e. does – waste (PDE ex. (11))

While the sequences given in (21) and (22) are unambiguous examples of their respective patterns, there is also a host of examples that allow both interpretations, since they feature the verb do in its base form. In (14), repeated here as (23), this base form is the bare infinitive, while in (24), it is a (non-3rd person) present tense of do.

(23) Pou schalt... do no thing but occupie ple wib bours in pleieres.
    ‘You shall do nothing but occupy yourself with your prayers.’

(24) You do nothing but soak with the guests all day long, whereas... I never touch a drop.
    (1766 GOLDSM. Vit. W. xxi)

All sentences of this type have a base form on the second verb as well, which in principle could be an instance of parallelism (making them identical to the examples in (21)) or an instance of use of the bare infinitive (making them identical to the examples in (22)). In collecting and classifying the data, this category is obviously one to pay close attention to, since the ambiguous status of the relevant sentences means that they could have facilitated the transition from the older to the newer pattern. That is, adopting the idea that syntactic change initially often consists in a structural reanalysis of a particular sentence type, without any surface change taking place as yet, it could be hypothesised that a sentence such as (24) might have undergone syntactic reinterpretation. Its original structure would have been as in (25a) but it might later have been reanalyzed as in (25b).

(25) a. do-PRES – soak-PRES
    b. do-PRES – soak-INF

That this reanalysis could proceed without surface change is due to the formal identity of the (non-3rd person) present tense and the infinitive in English verbs: for both, the base form is used. Once this reanalysis had invisibly taken place, the new pattern would also come to express itself in sentences that did not originally have a base form, leading to surface innovations such as those in (22). Although such a scenario for the change is at this point entirely hypothetical, it is obviously a possibility that can be used to inform (and thus inject meaning into) the search for descriptive data. From a theoretical diachronic perspective, at any rate, it is striking to see how closely such a development would conform to the classic generative view of linguistic change, which has language acquirers re-interpret existing utterances –this would be the reanalysis shown in (25)—and then go on to play out the new interpretation also in utterances not existing before—this would be the generalisation or actualisation of the new pattern to yield examples like (22).²

To test this idea, as well as the ideas reviewed in §2, data have been collected for the entire period from OE to PDE. For OE, the online Old English Dictionary Corpus (Healey 2004) has been investigated.³ It was searched for any clauses containing the verb don ‘do’ (or its close synonym wpran ‘do, perform’), the form na þing ‘nothing’ or na wþht ‘nothing’ and the word but ‘but, except, without’ (all of them in any form or spelling imaginable). The result is therefore close to an exhaustive collection of all instances of the construction that can be found in the OE record. Surprisingly, this collection contains no more than one item, which is the sentence given in (5).

No similar exhaustive coverage could be achieved for ME. The material used for this period consisted of the online version of all the quotations used in the Middle English Dictionary (Lewis 2001). This is a respectably sized corpus, but of course much less than the total available for ME. Nevertheless, some thirty examples were identified; two of these were from the period 1100-1300, twenty-six from 1300-1500. The method used in the search was the same as that for the OE period, making allowance for changes in form of the relevant words (and excluding any verb but do).

For the period 1500-1900, the corpus investigated consisted of the quotations used for these centuries in the online OED. Figures given by Mair (2001: 607-608) suggest that this corpus contains ca. 17 million words. It yielded nearly 100 tokens, distributed fairly evenly over the centuries (with one exception, to be discussed below). For PDE, a search was made in the online Guardian-Observer Archive, which makes available the text of articles that have appeared in the Guardian since 1990 and the Observer since 1994.⁴

²For some further discussion of this view of change, first developed for sound change in Halle (1982) and applied to syntactic change by Langacker (1977) and Timberlake (1977), see van der Wurff (1990: 17-20) and references given there.
³The search of this and the other online materials described below was carried out in March 2004.
⁴Material is added to this corpus every single weekday and its total size can only be estimated. A comparison with the figures for the British National Corpus (100 million words, containing 145 tokens...
This corpus was found to contain a vast number of relevant sentences (798, to be precise). To prevent the figures from getting out of all proportion compared with those for earlier centuries, only one sixth (133 tokens) of all the examples in Guardian-Observer corpus was used for the analysis that follows. Selection was based on the date of publication of the relevant text: the 133 tokens are the most recent examples in the material. Care was taken to ensure that the relative frequency of the different types of the construction found among the 133 tokens should reflect their relative frequency in the corpus as a whole as closely as possible. This was achieved by making the number of hits examined for each type (i.e. forms like does nothing but, did nothing but, done nothing but, etc.) exactly one sixth of the total number of hits for that type.

In view of the obvious lack of comparability and representativeness of the various collections of text examined, the following data must be regarded as forming no more than a first approximation to an adequate descriptive picture of the history of the DO NOTHING BUT construction. Nevertheless, the relatively low absolute frequency of the construction means that it may be difficult to improve the picture, especially for the historical periods. In the OED quotations, for example, there are no more than six tokens of the construction per one million words. This means that only large corpora will yield a sufficient number of examples for analysis and interpretation to be feasible. For the present time, this is of course much less of an obstacle to progress, and further descriptive work on the construction in modern gigacorpora may be expected to yield more refined insight into its behaviour today.

A first classification of the data from OE to modern times is given in Table 1. The categories distinguished are ‘parallel form’, which stands for examples of the type given in (21); ‘bare infinitive’, containing all sentences of the type given in (22); and ‘base form after do’, covering examples such as (23) and (24), where the second verb of the construction cannot be unambiguously classified as being either a parallel form or a bare infinitive.

From the data in Table 1, it appears that the construction was rather infrequent before 1300, but then gained in prominence. A more precise idea of the increase may be derived from the fact that in OE there are 0.5 examples per 1 million words (the size of the OE corpus, excluding glosses, being roughly 2 million words) while the period 1500-1900 has about six examples per 1 million words. In PDE, however, the frequency of DO NOTHING BUT is lower again, at about 1.5 examples per million words (cf. footnote 4). From Table 1 it may look as if this decrease is already anticipated in the 18th century of DO NOTHING BUT) suggests that the Guardian-Observer corpus may contain half a billion words. This very tentative estimate receives some support from figures of lexical frequency for a subpart of the Guardian-Observer Archive. Takami (2004: 124) found that, in the Guardian material for the year 1995 (20 million words), the adverb desperately occurs 27.4 times per one million words. The 12,328 tokens of this word in the Guardian-Observer corpus as a whole yield an estimated size of 450 million words.

Table 1: DO NOTHING BUT: frequency of different forms of the second verb for each period.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency (N)</th>
<th>OE</th>
<th>EME</th>
<th>LME</th>
<th>16th C</th>
<th>17th C</th>
<th>18th C</th>
<th>19th C</th>
<th>PDE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>parallel form</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>133</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>base form after do</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>133</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bare infinitive</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>133</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Nothing, but, and nothing but: absolute frequencies of occurrence in OED quotations 1800-1900.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>17th C</th>
<th>18th C</th>
<th>19th C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>nothing</td>
<td>2610</td>
<td>1526</td>
<td>3134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>but</td>
<td>18901</td>
<td>5191</td>
<td>20295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nothing but</td>
<td>1711</td>
<td>297</td>
<td>444</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These figures show all three forms undergoing a major decrease in the 18th century. In the case of nothing and but, this is followed by a strong resurgence in the 19th century. The sequence nothing but also reasserts itself in the 19th century, but does not reach 17th-century levels any more by a long margin. Its very low frequency in the 18th-century quotations is accounted for well if we view it as the outcome of two independent factors: the comparatively small amount of 18th-century material included in the OED (this factor also causes the low frequencies of nothing and but in this century) and the general decline that nothing but itself was undergoing at the time, as it was becoming restricted to fewer and fewer contexts. As we have seen, one of these contexts was the DO NOTHING BUT construction.

When it comes to the relative frequencies of the three types of DO NOTHING BUT
across the centuries, Table 1 shows that use of parallel forms is the rule until 1500 but then drops steeply and disappears by 1700 (except for a number of present-day attestations, which we discuss later). Around 1500, use of the bare infinitive establishes itself, and then continues to account for some 50-60% of all cases in each of the following centuries (with the exception of the 18th century, for which the low total number of examples may act as a distorting factor). Ambiguous cases (with *do nothing but* followed by a base form for the second verb, which may either form a parallel to *do* or be the bare infinitive) are first found in late ME and from that point on account for about 30-40% of all cases in every century. Simplifying things somewhat, it could be said that the data thus show a rather neat picture of the change from parallel form to bare infinitive, with a period of overlap lasting some 200 years. It is also to be noted that the ambiguous cases arose well before the overlap set in, which supports the idea that they may have acted as a bridge between the other two patterns.

A more detailed representation of the data is given in Table 3, where the frequency of each individual combination of forms of *do* and the second verb is tabulated. In every case, the forms are paired, in such a way that the first combination instantiates the parallel pattern and the second one the bare infinitive pattern. The only exception is the combination *do + BASE*, which is the ambiguous pattern (the ‘base form after *do*’ of Table 1).

For the most part, the data in Table 3 show the development already observable in Table 1, now being played out on a smaller scale. But there are some points at which the higher resolution of the image enables us to see things not visible in Table 1. One of these is a gap in the data that may help us to identify more exactly the initial locus of the change from parallel to bare infinitive form. The gap lies in the absence of parallel forms after *does* in the 16th century. Thirty-eight per cent of all instances of the construction in this century (N=26) contain the sequence *does/doth nothing but*, and not a single one of them is followed by a second verb in the present tense—they are all like example (25) in having a bare infinitive.

(26) He doth nothing... but... quarrel like a dogbolt lawyer.

(1580 PULKE Answers (1848) 212)

The sequence *did nothing but* is somewhat less frequent (27% of all cases), but four of them are like (27) in being followed by a past tense.

(27) He dyd noughte but made his kyn rych.

‘He did nothing but made his family rich.’

(1529 Rastell, *Pastyme* (1811) 52)

Table 3 shows that there is an example of *does nothing but* followed by a finite (present tense) form in the 17th century again, but the clear discrepancy between *does nothing but*
and did nothing but in the 16th century suggests that the shift to use of the bare infinitive was initially somewhat more pronounced in sentences with the present tense does/doth rather than the past tense did. If this is correct, it forms one further piece of support for the idea that the ambiguous pattern played an instrumental role in the change. This is because this pattern contained examples not of past tense did but of present tense do followed by a base form. After such base forms had been reanalysed as bare infinitives, this structure might be expected to generalise first to other forms of the present tense (i.e. instances with does/doth nothing but) and only later to the past tense (i.e. instances with did nothing but).  

Table 3 also shows that the sequence (has/have) done nothing but is non-existent before 1600. However, once it has started being used, it behaves in the expected fashion, initially showing use of a parallel form but shifting to the use of a bare infinitive by 1700. An even later arrival is the sequence doing nothing but, which is first attested after 1700. For two centuries, the data then show exclusive use of the bare infinitive after this sequence, but in PDE, there are also examples that are followed by V-ing. The bare infinitive is still possible, and some present-day examples, such as (28), show alternation of the two forms in successive clauses.

(28) The mother who wants a year doing nothing but looking after her baby, and the next 17 doing nothing but work, is a beast that exists nowhere outside Labour’s women’s unit.

(The Guardian, 03 May 2001, 7)

The parallel pattern (doing -V-ing) is twice as frequent as the bare infinitive pattern in the contemporary material examined. This suggests that there is some specific factor at work that promotes its use, causing doing nothing but to (partly) resist the general diachronic trend described in (20). Whether this factor already existed in the 18th and 19th centuries is difficult to say, since there are very few instances of doing nothing but from these centuries (1 and 2 respectively, both followed by the bare infinitive).

Present-day parallel examples are also found after does/did nothing but, but there are no more than two of these. They are given in (29) and (30).

(29) 'Oh Lordy. You’re slower than Earl Spencer at a creative writing class today.

(30) I now suffer the minute by minute torture of life imprisonment knowing, as I accept only I could know, that I did not harm my little boys, and did nothing but loved them.

(15 July 2001, The Observer, 8).

For these cases, an analysis in terms of coordination seems most plausible, with does/did nothing being a run of the mill VP, which is followed by another VP (or reduced clause) introduced by the adversative conjunction but. These examples are therefore similar to cases like (31), which are not frequent but clearly have but as a clausal coordinator.

(31) The escape code... by itself... does nothing but it causes the code following it to be treated as a control code.

(1986 Your Computer Oct. 33/2)

This analysis makes (29) and (30) instances of a freely available coordination option, rather than of the DO NOTHING BUT construction (whose structure, though, we still need to establish). What is surprising about (29) and (30), and also (31), is not their existence as such, but the fact that they are so rare. It appears that the sequence do nothing but in PDE (and the two or three preceding centuries) strongly triggers activation of the DO NOTHING BUT construction, thus discouraging the use of this sequence in any other type of structure. Note that this implies that (most) cases with the sequence doing nothing but V-ing, which are much more frequent than does/did nothing but V-s/-ed, are indeed bona-fide examples of the DO NOTHING BUT construction rather than of any simple coordination structure.

The descriptive findings of this section can be summarised as follows:

- Instances of DO NOTHING BUT are rare in Old and early Middle English.
- After 1300, they gradually become more common: there are ca. 6 instances per 1 million words in the period 1500-1000.
- In PDE, the frequency has gone down again, to ca. 1.5 per million words.
- From OE until 1700, the second verb regularly appears in a form parallel to that of do (he does nothing but condemns himself).
- After 1500, the second verb also appears in the bare infinitive form, regardless of the form of do (he does nothing but condemn himself).
The introduction of such bare infinitives seems to affect instances with present tense does/doth first and then spread to past tense did.

From late ME onward, about one third of all instances have the base form for both do and the second verb (they (can) do nothing but condemn themselves).

With the exception of doing nothing but V-ing, use of parallel forms in PDE is quite rare.

Overall, in spite of the absence of any careful matching of styles, varieties or even amounts of material examined for the various periods, the data present a fairly neat picture. First, there is exclusive use of the older forms, then a 200-year period of variation between the old and the new, and this is followed by virtually exclusive use of the new form. However, there are some exceptions that need to be accounted for, and the causes of the change as well as the structure of the relevant sentences at the various periods still need to be established. These are the matters that we turn to now.

4 An analysis: DO NOTHING BUT as a grammaticalised construction

The data presented in the preceding section tend to support the idea that the diachronic development undergone by the DO NOTHING BUT construction conforms to a well-established scenario for syntactic change. It can be viewed as initially involving reanalysis of existing sentences, with generalisation to new utterances taking place later and in a gradual fashion. However, while this scenario may yield a description of the change, it does not in itself answer the question what exactly it was that triggered the crucial reanalysis of do nothing but sentences. In concrete terms, this question takes the following form: what was there about sentences like (32) that, from the beginning of the 16th century onwards, would lead language learners to assign them a structure in which hunte was an infinitive, rather than a present tense, as it had been for earlier generations?

(32) Yo do nought... but hunte after the hare thoughg the fields.
   ‘You do nothing but chase after hares through the fields.’
   (c1450 Martin 183)

Since the question concerns a specific construction, defined by the presence of the verb that undergoes recategorisation, and also by the presence of the verb do and the words nothing and but, an obvious strategy is to inquire more closely into any changes in form and/or status that any of these elements may have undergone in the relevant period. It then turns out that each of them has indeed undergone change. Examining

The history of these elements may therefore be expected to shed light on the structure of DO NOTHING BUT before and after 1500 and on the factors responsible for the change.

The historical shifts undergone by the word but are investigated by Nevalainen (1990). Since she includes data from OE up to Modern English, her findings allow us not only to determine the status of the word but in the DO NOTHING BUT construction around the year 1500, but also in earlier and later examples. From Nevalainen’s data and discussion, it becomes clear that the word but started out in OE as a locative adverb-cum-preposition, butan, with the meaning ‘outside’. From this relatively concrete source, it rather rapidly developed several more abstract senses and uses. In OE, butan is also used as a preposition with the meanings ‘without’, and ‘except’ and it functions as a subordinating conjunction with the meaning ‘unless’. Examples of all three of these meanings can actually be found in OE clauses which have don (or its synonym gewycan) as their verb and nan þing (or naht/nah) as their object, as shown in (33)-(35).

(33) For þan þe crist cwæð: ne mage ge nan þing don butan me.
   For that that Christ said: not can you no thing do without me.
   ‘Because Christ said: You can do nothing without (BUT) me.’
   (ÆChorn I, 21 B1.1.23)

(34) Seð ic eow nega, ne magse sumu nan þing don butan þæt he geysþb his
   Truth I you tell, not can the son no thing do except what he sees his
   Father do; the things that he does the son does in the same way.
   ‘I tell you truly: the son can do nothing except (BUT) what he sees his Father
   do; the things that he does, the son does in the same way.’
   (Jn (WSCP) B8.4.3.4)

(35) Forþon se mann ne mag naht gewyrcan, buton hit sy ær fram Gode
   Because the man not can nothing do, unless hit is first by God
   given.
   ‘Because man can do nothing unless (BUT) it is first given by God.’
   (GD 1 (C) B9.5.2)

These OE data can be usefully compared with the situation in PDE. There, the sequence do/does/did/done nothing but should in theory be freely available as a productive combination of separate lexical items (a verb, a direct object, and a conjunction introducing a following coordinate VP or clause). However, we have seen that in practice, it is instantiated overwhelmingly by examples of the DO NOTHING BUT construction, which accounts for some 99% of all tokens of the linear sequence do/does/did/done nothing but (see the discussion of examples (29) and (30) in §3). In OE, there is no sign of such specialisation yet.
There is one more function that the word buton can have in OE: it can be a conjunction with the meaning ‘except that’, as in (36). This use too can be found after a VP in which the verb is don and the object is nan þing. The example instantiating this is the single apparent instance of the DO NOTHING BUT construction attested in the OE record, which was given as (3) and repeated here (with some more context) as (37).

(36) He sæde þa þæt land si swæpe lang norþ þónan, ac hit is eal weaste, buton on feowum stowum stycceumelum wicca Finnas, on all waste except that in few places here and there camp Lapps, in humtöde on wintra & on sumera on fisçæte bo þære se. hunting in winter and in summer in fishing by the sea.

‘He said, however, that the country extends a very long way to the north from there but it is all wasteland, except that (BUT) in a few places here and there, some Lapps have their camps, hunting in winter and fishing by the seaside in summer.’

(Or 1 B9.2.2)

(37) Ac man mot on eornost motiow with his Drijtæn, se þe wyle but one must in earnest address oneself with one’s Lord, he who wants þæt we sprecon mid weorcum wið hine; for þæs se þe wel spræcð & þa that we speak with deeds with him; for that he who well speaks and the word na gelæst, he ne deð nan þinga buton fordorn hine sylfne. words not carries out, he not does no thing except that condemns him self.

‘But one must address oneself seriously to one’s Lord, who wants us to speak to him by means of deeds; because anyone that speaks well and does not carry out those words, he does nothing except that (BUT) he condemns himself.’

ÆLett 4 (SigewerD) B1.8.4.4)

What the OE data show is a complete absence of any sign of grammaticalization of the sequences dom/dest/doh/dyde/dydon/gedon nan þing/nauht/nahht/nahht. The verb don has the well attested meaning of ‘carry out/perform’ and its object nan þing/nauht/noht seems to have its ordinary quantifier meaning of ‘nothing’. The meaning/function of the word buton does not seem to be determined by the fact that it follows (or is part of) a VP containing don and nan þing (or nauht/noht). It can have any of the functions that it can also have in other clauses: it can be a preposition meaning ‘without’ or ‘except’, and a conjunction meaning ‘unless’ or ‘except that’. None of these uses has a particularly high frequency in this sequence, and none of the resulting combinations appears to have any semantic or syntactic characteristics that would not be predictable from the composition of the separate items in them. The only noticeable feature about the sentence in (37) is the presence of a non-overt subject in the clause following buton. It will of course be interpreted as being identical to the subject of the matrix clause he, due to the parallelism obtaining between the matrix and subordinate clauses in sentences of this type.

To explain the parallelism, we can make use of the analysis that Huddleston and Pulman (2002) propose to account for the syntax of PP headed by a preposition of exclusion in PDE. As discussed in §2, they derive the wide variety of complement types found after the preposition except and its synonyms from a process of matrix-licensing, whereby it is not the preposition but the matrix predicate that determines the category of the complement. In a formal analysis, this might be achieved by positing a PP containing zero elements which are interpreted as being identical to the relevant elements in the matrix clause. For an example such as (38a), in which it is the matrix verb intend that appears to be responsible for selection of the to-infinitival complement inside the except-PP, the fuller structure would then be (38b).

(38) a. I don’t intend to do anything [except to wait for news].

Here, the except-PP is in effect an elliptical construction, for concreteness sake taken to be a clause (though analysis as a VP would yield similar results).

This type of analysis can also be applied to prepositions of exclusion in OE. Thus, the relevant part of sentence (34), given here as (38a), would have the structure shown in (38b), where the NP þæt he gesyhp his Fæder don ‘what he sees his Father do’ is selected not by buton but by eð, a copy of the verb don.

(39) a. Ne maeg se suun nan þinge don buton þæt he gesyhp his Fæder don. Not can the son no thing do except what he sees his Father do.

‘The son can do nothing except (BUT) what he sees his Father do.’

b. Ne maeg se suun nan þinge don [buton eð, eð, þæt he gesyhp his Fæder don].

Applying the same analysis to the OE example (37), the only apparent instance of DO NOTHING BUT in OE, would give a representation as in (40b).

(40) a. He ne deð nan þinge buton fordorn hine sylfne. He not does no thing except that condemns him self.

‘He does nothing except that (BUT) he condemns himself.’

b. He ne deð nan þinge [buton eð, fordorn hine sylfne].

The ellipsis in this case affects only the subject. It could therefore be said that OE buton ‘except’ in all cases introduces a clause, which semantically parallels the matrix clause and serves to exclude part of its extension from whatever is being asserted. If the parallelism manifests itself also in identity of specific syntactic constituents in matrix clause and except-clause, they can be elided in the except-clause. In (36) there is no such parallelism of constituents, hence the except-clause is non-elliptical. In (39), there
is parallelism of subject, modal and main verb, and these are all ellipted. In (40), only
the subject is parallel and ellipted.

Note that this analysis makes (37)/(40a) into a sentence in which each element behaves
just as it does in other sentences. Beyond the normal interaction between subject, object,
verbs and other constituents that will be found in any clause, there is a special dependency
between elements of the except-constituent and elements of the matrix clause. To be
precise, there is a semantic relation of exclusion involving the assertion made in the
matrix clause and the elements contained in the except-constituent and there is a syntactic
relation of ellipsis involving the subjects of the matrix and except-constituent. However,
these relations do not depend in any way on the identity of the matrix verb (do\$d) or
object (\$an \$ing\$) – they are solely due to the properties of the element except. For OE,
therefore, it makes little sense to speak of a distinctive DO NOTHING BUT construction.
The relevant words could of course combine in individual sentences, but they do not do
so very often. When they do, there is no sign of any non-predictable interaction between
them, and they behave as they do also in other combinations. The word but(on), in
particular, can carry any of its various possible functions/senses: ‘without’, ‘unless’, and
‘except/except that’. In the last of these uses, it imposes a rather distinctive meaning on
the sentence as a whole, but it does so also in sentences lacking do and/or nothing.

A partial representation of the semantics of (40), loosely based on von Fintel’s (1997)
analysis of PDE only, is given in (41).

(41) Meaning of clauses with do, nothing, and a but-constituent with subject ellipsis
in OE

\[
\begin{align*}
R & \\
\cdot y
\end{align*}
\]

NP does nothing but y

‘NP does nothing except y’

where \( y \in R \)
\( S = R - \{y\} \)

Meaning of the sentence: for \( y \in R \), \( y \) is true & for all \( x \), \( x \in S \), \( x \) is not true

In simple terms, the sentence asserts that, among the set of relevant events (R) that
could conceivably be the case, there is one and only one (y) that is true. The parallelism
obtaining between the verb forms in (40) results from the fact that the sentence defines
a set of relevant events (‘NP INFL do something’, with INFL being fully specified), of
which y is one. Such a situation could not obtain if the except-clause differed in tense,
mood, or aspect, and this is what makes sentences like (42) weird.

(42) ??He does nothing except that he condemned/will condemn himself.

This type of analysis seems reasonable not only for OE but also for the early ME cases.
The combination of the three specific elements in one sentence remains rare, which is not
surprising since, in the account given, each is selected from the lexicon independently
of the others. The verbal forms continue to show parallelism, for the reasons just given.

As the ME period unfolds, however, the word but undergoes change, and this appears
to have had an effect also on the sentences that we are interested in. Nevalainen
(1990) describes how, in ME, but starts to acquire its modern function as an adversative
coordinating conjunction. The source probably lies in uses where it had the meaning
‘except that’, i.e., under the analysis proposed above, in uses where it was followed by a
clause without any ellipsis. An example could be sentence (36), where the word buton
is indeed also interpretable as adversative ‘but’, as shown by means of the modern English
renderings in (43).

(43) a. It is all wasteland EXCEPT THAT in a few places here and there, some Lapps
have their camps.

b. It is all wasteland BUT in a few places here and there, some Lapps have their
camps.

As the discussion in Nevalainen (1990) and the data in the OED (av. but C) make
clear, the change seems to have been a gradual one, with but first acquiring the specific
contradictory sense (‘on the contrary’, like Modern German sonder ‘but, on the
contrary’) and later the general contrastive sense (‘however/ yet’, like Modern German aber
‘but, however, yet’). The result was that by the 15th century, adversative but was well
established in the language. For the sentences we are focussing on, this would entail
the emergence of a possible alternative structure, such that the second verb was viewed
as being part of a coordinated adversative clause, rather than a subordinated exclusion
clause. What would remain the same was the elliptical nature of the subject of the second
clause; it would of course also still be interpreted as being coreferential with the overt
subject of the first clause. The semantics, however, would be subtly different, since it
would be not as in (41), but as in (44).
(44) Possible meaning of clauses with *do, nothing*, and a *but*-constituent with subject ellipsis in late ME

\[
\text{R} . y
\]

NP does nothing but \( y \)

'NP does nothing but \( y \)'  

where \( R \) is the set of possibly relevant events,  
\( y \notin R \)

Meaning of the sentence: for all \( x, x \in R, x \) is not true & for \( y, y \notin R, y \) is true

The crucial difference lies in the relation between the various events \( x \) that are asserted not to be true and event \( y \), which is true. Both (41) and (44) identify a set of relevant events, characterisable by the assertion that 'NP does/did/has done something'. In (41), \( y \) is one of these events, but in (44) it is not. Although the difference is subtle, the effect is that in (44), \( x \) and \( y \) are more clearly set apart from each other, not in their truth values, but in the types of events they are presented as being.

The effect would be that, by 1500, the relevant surface strings (*NP do nothing but Y...*) would have two possible structures, as in (45a)-(45b). The former would be a continuation of the OE/early ME pattern; its semantics would be that of (41). The latter was an innovation, due to the rise of *but* as an adversative conjunction; its semantics would be that of (44).

(45)  
\[  
\text{a. } \text{NP}_1 [\text{VP do nothing} [\text{VP but } e, \text{VP}]]  
\text{b. } [\text{VP NP}_1 [\text{VP do nothing}]] \text{ but } [\text{VP e, VP}]  
\]

In both cases, parallelism would be expected between the verb *do* and the second verb. In (45a), this would be for the reasons discussed in connection with the non-parallel example (42). In (45b), parallelism would be expected on the basis of the adversative meaning of *but*. Given that *but* signals a contrast in lexical meaning between *do (nothing)* and the second VP, a difference in tense and/or aspect would have the effect of distracting attention from that contrast, and result in incoherence or at least pragmatic implausibility (e.g. *??He did nothing but will talk to them tomorrow*). Even if such examples were somehow used, there seems to be no sense in which they could be said to promote use of the bare infinitive of the second verb. For this reason, the introduction of the option

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6 An exception might be where the second verb is also *do* (possible in principle, but without attestations in the material examined; an invented example might be *I may so far have done nothing but will do a lot from now on*).
emergent adverbial meaning of negative exclusive; and the actual forms of the verbs do and soak might still show they were both present tenses. In fact, the specific sentence in (47) —and similar ones—would be likely to have not you but then as a subject, and thus to feature not the verbal forms do(n) ... soak(n(s)) but dos ... soaks, in which case there would be no scope at all for reanalysis of the second verb as an infinitive.

An early Modern learner hearing (47) would assign it a completely different analysis. For her, it would be a sentence featuring periphrastic do, the exclusive adverb but, and infinitival soak. This is shown in (49).

(49) CATEGORY dummy aux dummy adverb \textit{V_{infinitive}}
\quad \textit{SEMANTICS}\begin{tabular}{c}
zero \\
zero \\
\textit{‘only’}
\end{tabular}

In (49), the semantic content of the clause is borne by the subject, the adverb but and the infinitival verb. Dummy do is devoid of lexical meaning and the word nothing makes no contribution either —it literally means nothing. Support for this aspect of the analysis comes from the fact, discussed by Nevalainen (1999), that during the late Middle and early Modern period, the sequence nothing but showed incipient signs of developing into a negative exclusive with the meaning ‘only’. As a result, nothing but and but would become synonymous, which implies that in this specific combination the word nothing had null semantics. Nevalainen finds that, in the end, nothing but failed to establish itself as a negative exclusive, but it appears that the DO NOTHING BUT construction was an exception. Here, nothing but became firmly entrenched, a development no doubt aided by the fact that during this period the whole construction was taking on a more or less idiomatic character and was becoming steadily more frequent.

A further factor that may have helped turn DO NOTHING BUT into a tightly bonded constitute is the fixing of the order of its elements after 1500. Earlier examples sometimes show perverbal positioning of nothing, as in (i):

(i) He can no thing do but flatters thee.
He can no thing do but flatters you.'
(c1450 Pilgr.LM (Cnbi F15.30 91))

This word order was common until ca. 1550 in various kinds of clauses with negative objects (Moerenhout and van der Wurff 2000, 2005). The loss of this option means increasing fixation of DO NOTHING BUT. Other types of word order variation also disappear: after ca. 1500, the data no longer contain instances of topicalisation of nothing, as in (ii):

(ii) Wolde god that non3 elles we had to do but only to praise our lorde.
would God that nothing else we had to do but only to praise our Lord.'
(a1500 Imit.Chr.(Drub 678) 38/9).

\footnote{
I would like to thank Anthony Warner for pointing out to me the relevance of this factor.}
The change from (48) to (49) fits in rather neatly with current conceptions of the process of grammaticalisation. As Postma (1995), Benth (1999), Roberts and Roussou (2002, 2003), and others have argued, grammaticalisation often involves what would be upward movement in the syntactic phrase marker. In the older structure, some element is generated inside a lexical projection, from where it may move to a higher functional slot. In the innovating structure, the element in question is generated directly in the functional domain. It thus loses its association with a lexical category, and typically sheds much of its earlier lexical meaning. In the case at hand, this development arguably affects all three of the elements do, nothing, and but, which change respectively from being generated as the head of a lexical VP to being generated as an otherwise empty carrier of tense/agreement information; from being a NP functioning as complement inside a lexical VP to being a semantically null element, possibly occupying a specifier position in a Focus Phrase; and from being the head of a prepositional phrase to being the head of a Focus Phrase.

But the development of the DO NOTHING BUT construction also differs from the cases described within this framework so far. This is because the change in the construction feeds on earlier independent changes affecting each of the three relevant elements—DO NOTHING BUT is not the locus where these changes find their origin but an arena where their effects are played out. Moreover, the elements to a certain extent get frozen in the process. Thus, the word do in DO NOTHING BUT retains the option of occurring in non-finite forms, a property lost by other instances of periphrastic do, and the sequence nothing but in this specific construction appears to be insulated from the general decline that it undergoes in other contexts (compare the data in Table 2).

After present tense–present tense sequences as in (48) had thus been reinterpreted as present tense–infinite sequences as in (49), the new structure also came to be instantiated in other sentences with DO NOTHING BUT, following the order in (50).

(50) do[prese(n)t] > does > did > done > doing

At a descriptive level, (50) makes visible the progress of the change through the data in Table 3. Accounting for this progress involves recognition of the conservativeness of language users: rather than simply adopt the bare infinitive across the board in the construction, they extended its use piecemeal, from non-3rd person present tense to 3rd person present tense to past tense to past participle to present participle. Each of these steps represents an increase in grammaticalisation of the construction, which is thus expressed here in quite precise structural terms.

It may be noted that the adoption of a new structure did not affect the basic meaning of the relevant sentences. The semantics expressed by (49) would be as in (41): out of several possibly relevant events or situations, one and only one is asserted to be true. Still, while earlier instances expressed that meaning through a biclausal structure, modern instances have a monoclaustral structure. Furthermore, while the semantics of (41) implies that the second verb must be agentive (since it is included in the set of possibly relevant events characterisable as ‘NP do something’), this is no longer the case in (49), where a set of possibly relevant situations is implied to exist but otherwise left completely unspecified. One of the consequences is that the subject of the construction is no longer thematically marked by the (agentive) verb do but by the second verb and this second verb itself need no longer be agentive. As a result, we might expect non-agentive subjects and verbs also to become licensed, and there are indeed examples like that among the instances of the construction after 1700. In (50), the subject is weather–it, an element that would be unacceptable if combined with a lexical predicate do nothing (cf. ?? It did nothing in the afternoon but it rained in the evening, with but as a straightforward coordinate), and in (51)–(55), we see a stative predicate (be honest), experiencer verbs (dream and impress), and unaccusatives (improve and deteriorate).

(51) It’s bone-crackingly cold in the winter, and it does nothing but rain for the rest of the year.
(British National Corpus, ABS 1060)

(52) We’ve done nothing but be honest about the dark and the light of it.
(The Observer, 27 July 2003, 5)

(53) I did nothing but dream I saw my late lady’s ghost.
(1794 Mrs. Radcliffe, Mss. Udolpho xxv)

(54) ‘I’m just delighted it’s done and dusted,’ said Fowler. ‘There were a few problems along the way but from the first moment I met Kevin Keegan he has done nothing but impress me.’
(The Guardian, 30 January 2003, 33)

(55) ‘I’ve had worse weeks,’ Meekan said. ‘This is a nice colt and we have more or less laid him out for this race. He has done nothing but improve all season and if he had been drawn high, he would have won very impressively.’
(The Guardian, 11 September 2003, 33)

(56) But the main reason why he needs time to improve his team is that it has done nothing but deteriorate since the cup treble of 2001.
(The Guardian, 20 October 2003, 14)

The appearance of these and other non-agentive predicates can be viewed as a further result of the adoption of the monoclausal structure in (49).

A final point arising from the data in Table 3 is the nature and causes of the use of a parallel form after doing, found in present-day sentences like (12), repeated here as (57).

(57) Indeed, I seem to be doing nothing but waving goodbye at the moment.
Use of the form *waving* goes counter to the general development, which should favour the bare infinitive *wave* (a form that is sometimes used, but not exclusively). A possible explanation for this might be based on the idea that in (57), it is the progressive auxiliary *be* that selects the form *waving*. This idea would take us back to the Huddleston-Pullum analysis, which views *but* as the head of a prepositional phrase, the complement of which is selected by an element in the matrix clause. It could then be said that the selecting element could be either *be*, yielding *waving*, or *doing*, yielding *wave*. This would appear to account well for the variation existing in PDE, where examples like (57) can be found side by side with examples like (58).

(58) Literary London, in its characteristically solipsistic way, is doing nothing but talk about me.

Although the Huddleston-Pullum analysis might explain these special cases, it cannot easily be extended to certain other data. Thus, Table 3 shows that, in the PDE material examined, the sequence *has/have* *done* *nothing* *but* is always followed by the bare infinitive and never by a past participle. But if the second verb can be selected by the progressive auxiliary *be*, yielding sentences like (57), the question arises why it couldn’t also be selected by the perfect auxiliary *have*, yielding unattested sentences like (59).

(59) He had done nothing but waved goodbye.

Besides this problem of overgeneration, application of the Huddleston-Pullum analysis to the modern data also faces a problem of undergeneration. This concerns sentences like (60).

(60) To cast Michael as a juvenile lead and leave him to do nothing but singing, as the past was on stage, would have been crazy.
   *(British National Corpus, HRP 620)*

Here, *nothing but* is followed by V-ing, but there is no preceding auxiliary *be*, and *do* itself is in the infinitival form. This pattern is not frequent, but sporadic instances do occur. If the use of V-ing in the general case is attributed to selection by the progressive auxiliary, as it would be under the Huddleston-Pullum analysis, (60) would not be expected to exist at all.\(^{18}\)

For these reasons, it may be concluded that the Huddleston-Pullum idea of ‘matrix-licensing’ cannot account adequately for the modern data. As an alternative, I propose that, besides the structure in (49), where *do* is the periphrastic auxiliary selecting an

\(^{18}\)A further problem in applying the Huddleston-Pullum analysis to the modern data is that it entails that only agentive subjects and verbs should be expected in the construction. But this expectation is not fulfilled: as shown in (51)-(56), Modern English also allows non-agentives.

infinitive, *do* in DO NOTHING BUT can also be a lexical verb selecting a nominal complement; the structure would be as in (61).

(61) CATEGORY lexical V dummy adverb NP
   SEMANTICS ‘perform’ zero ‘only’

This option is clearly needed to account for cases like (62) and (63), which are well represented in the data.

(62) This is a gross and needless waste of public funds which could have been used to make sick people better. What’s more, the bureaucratic stonewalling does nothing but damage to an institution meant to be in the business of caring.
   *(The Observer, 12 October 1997, 30)*

(63) You’ve got to sacrifice painting, sculpture, heads and everything else, and limit yourself to staying in a room, in front of the same table, the same cloth, the same chair and do nothing but that.
   *(The Guardian, 21 June 2003, 18)*

These sentences have quite simple NPs following *but*. However, just as in the case of NPs in other configurations, the nominal constituent can also be realised by a gerund phrase, and this would yield sentences like (57) and (60). Here, then, use of the ing-form is not a result of selection by any auxiliary, but a result of the fact that the whole phrase is nominal in nature, which itself is determined by it being a complement to the lexical verb *do*. The function of the sequence *nothing but* in this type of sentence is just as in sentences with peripheral *do*; *but* is a negative exclusive adverbial and the word *nothing* is a dummy attendant to it.

5 Conclusions

What I have argued in this paper is that the modern English DO NOTHING BUT construction derives from an unremarkable clause type in OE, in which each of the elements had its ordinary syntactic and semantic function and formed part of a transitive clause with an adjunct PP headed by *but* ‘except’. General properties of but ‘except’ meant that this PP could contain a predicate paralleling the predicate of the matrix clause in verbal form. This clause type persisted until ca. 1700. By the 16th century, however, an alternative analysis of some of the relevant surface forms had become available. In the new structure, *do* was no longer a transitive lexical verb but a periphrastic auxiliary, *nothing* was no longer a negative indefinite object but had zero semantics, and *but* functioned not as a preposition but as a negative exclusive adverb. This meant that the
second verb in the construction was no longer part of a PP but had become the main verb of the clause.

This new structure originated in those sentences that happened to be amenable to such analysis without any change in surface form, i.e. in sentences having the base form of do. Due to the parallelism imposed by the meaning of the construction, the second verb would also be in the base form. The number of such sentences had increased compared to earlier centuries, due to the reduction in inflectional marking. Moreover, independent changes affecting the words do, but, and the combination nothing but meant that learners of English in the period 1500-1700 could come to an analysis of DO NOTHING BUT in which the earlier biclausal structure was replaced by a monoclausal one. The difference between the two could be expressed as a shift towards a higher position in the hierarchical structure of each of the elements do (from lexical verb heading VP to periphrastic auxiliary in I), but (from head of a PP adjunct inside a VP to head of a Focus Phrase containing a VP) and nothing (from object of a lexical verb inside VP to specifier of the Focus Phrase headed by but). Each of these changes thus represents a case of grammaticalisation.

After the new structure had established itself in sentences already having a base form for the second verb (i.e. after the reanalysis proper) it also manifested itself in sentences that originally would have had not a base form but an unambiguously inflected verb form (i.e. the new analysis became generalised or actualised). This resulted in the emergence of novel instances of the construction, where do was not in the base form but the second verb was. This working out of the new structure took place in orderly fashion, affecting first present tense forms, then past tense forms, followed by past participles and finally present participles. This process of shift, characterised by orderly variability across and within these specific grammatical categories, lasted about 200 years. During and after this development, the elements making up the construction acquired a more or less frozen character and became immune to further changes affecting each of them separately, such as the restriction of periphrastic do to tensed forms in negative and interrogative clauses, and the gradual ousted of (nothing) but by the negative exclusives only and just. This could be captured by describing the whole construction as having grammaticalised. Due to the resultant increase in bondedness, the construction acquired an idiomatic flavour and became more frequent, something that would not be expected if it consisted of individual items joined together in a completely compositional manner.

Next to instances of the construction in which do is a periphrastic auxiliary, selecting a VP headed by a bare infinitive, there are also ones in which it is a full lexical verb, selecting a nominal complement. This nominal complement can take the form of a regular NP, but also of a gerund construction. For reasons still needing to be further explored, the latter option has become especially prominent in sentences where do itself also takes the ing-form, resulting in the sequence doing nothing but V-ing. However, the sequence doing nothing but can also be followed by a bare infinitive, suggesting that do in this construction indeed wavers between lexical and auxiliary status.

Finally, how do the data and analysis presented here fit into the larger scheme of things? As far as the history of English analysis is concerned, it may be noted that the DO NOTHING BUT construction goes counter to general developments, by virtue of the fact that it shows a bare infinitive emerging in contexts where previously it was not used. Since the OE period, the bare infinitive in other contexts has undergone a reduction in usage, being replaced by the to-infinitive and various other constructions (Fischer 1995, 1996; Los 2005). The end result of this development can be seen in PDE, where incidence of the bare infinitive outside modal verb groups is severely restricted.11 However, the analysis proposed in §4 implies that it may actually be misguided to attach too much importance to what can loosely be described as ‘general trends’ or ‘overall developments’. If the history of DO NOTHING BUT is anything to go by, a form appears to emerge (or recede) not on the basis of general trends but on the basis of specific structural factors present in the syntactic environment. If these factors are shared by a wide variety of configurations, the effect will be what looks like a general development; however, specific elements in specific environments may work in some other direction. The challenge is to identify these elements and to determine their implications, without relying on standard views of what is or is not significant. Thus, for the bare infinitive, the standard view is that its use is closely tied to the modals and a handful of perception and causation verbs. The story of DO NOTHING BUT may serve as a reminder of the importance also of periphrastic do as a selector of bare infinitives.

Another result obtained in this study has been the demonstration that the various elements of DO NOTHING BUT behave in a manner fully determined by their meanings and structural positions but that combining them results in a construction quite unlike any other in the language. In other words, the DO NOTHING BUT construction shows patterned individuality. This is true at the synchronous level of PDE, where the construction shows alternation between a following bare infinitive, ing-form and straightforward NP. It turns out that accounting for this variability does not necessitate the assumption of any ad-hoc differences between the various options. Instead, the simple observation that do can be either a periphrastic auxiliary or a transitive lexical verb leads directly to the expectation that this might also be the case in this construction, and to the postulation of two distinct analyses of the sequence doing nothing but. A further twist –but again one that follows from the existence of an obvious option in the language– is that DO NOTHING BUT has a pseudo-Doppelganger, in which do nothing is a regular verb-object constitute and but the ordinary adversative conjunction. Interestingly, this double appears to be much less frequent than the grammaticalized DO NOTHING BUT construction.

11An inventory and analysis of the main uses of the infinitive in PDE is provided by Duffay (1992); but he does not deal with the use of the bare infinitive after DO NOTHING BUT.
Further patterned individuality has been shown to exist in the development of the construction during the period 1500-1700. This result ties in well with the increasing interest in recent years in the (apparently) idiosyncratic properties of specific constructions. Much work along these lines is descriptive in orientation and has been driven by the growth in availability of large computer corpora of spoken and written texts (see publications like Kirk 2000; McEnery and Wilson 2001; Tognini-Bonelli 2001; Suito, Nakamura, and Yamazaki 2002; Aijmer and Altenberg 2004; Nakamura, Inoue, and Tabata 2004). However, awareness of the existence of patterned individuality in the behaviour of lexical items, phrases, and constructions has also led to more theoretically informed work, such as the development of Construction Grammar (Goldberg 1995; Croft 2001 and work cited there) and Pattern Grammar (Hunston and Francis 2000). With it has come a realisation that sweeping generalisations across a wide array of phenomena, whereby specific constructions are regarded as mere epiphenomena of the operation of deep-seated principles, may need to be supplemented (or even substituted) by more fine-grained work on specific properties of (groups of) individual lexical items and the phrases that they form. Adopting this general perspective on the nature of grammar, it seems worthwhile to also apply it to diachronic data, as has been done above. This makes all the more sense in the view of the inevitable dependence of diachronic work on the investigation of corpora of texts. Given the absence of historical intuitions (pace Lightfoot 1979: 6), there is an ever-present need in diachronic studies to guard against overgeneralisations based on data that reflect properties of particular collocations or constructions rather than characteristics of the grammatical system as a whole.

A third general issue that the present study bears upon lies in the relation between synchrony and diachrony. Since periphrastic *do* has become limited to occurring in finite forms in non-declarative clauses and since negative exclusive (*nothing*) but is now only a minor exponent of its category, study of the *DO NOTHING BUT construction in its modern guise does not immediately suggest that it contains these elements. Study of the historical data, however, makes clear that, at the genesis of the construction, these two elements had a wider range of occurrence and that their present restrictions are due to a gradual process by which they acquired a peculiar frozen character. In this way, diachronic study of the construction finds further justification in the better understanding that it yields of the nature of the present-day data. This case thus provides one more illustration of the well-known idea that synchrony recapitulates—or is even determined by—diachrony.12

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12For some other examples of synchronic data viewed from this perspective, see Hurford (1887); Mithun (1991); Bybee and Newman (1999); McMahon (1996). For general discussion, see McMahon (1994: 10-11); Lass (1997: 14-17) and van der Wurff (1999).

References


