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I was away in another field [...] got
A diachronic study of the *be*-perfect in Irish English¹

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ABSTRACT

Retention of the *be*-perfect with intransitive mutative and motion verbs is said to distinguish Irish English (IrE) from most other varieties. The *be*-perfect has been investigated in present-day IrE, but there has been little diachronic study. This study uses the *Corpus of Irish English Correspondence* to investigate this construction, showing that IrE broadly followed the general development in English: the *be*-perfect declined in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and became lexically restricted. Compared to BrE and AmE, the decline in IrE occurred at a delay of some 50 years. However, IrE retains auxiliary *be* with a wider range of verbs than other varieties, and the types found most frequently with *be* change over time. *Be* with motion verbs declined sharply, with the exception of *go* (as in other varieties), while the change proceeded more slowly with mutative verbs. Also, use of *be* increased with certain transitive verbs. This change may have been facilitated by the fact that many intransitive verbs take an object-like complement, but substrate influence from Irish, where the equivalent of the *be*-perfect is found with transitive verbs, may also have affected this development.

1. Retention, substrate influence, or convergence?

Irish English (IrE) differs from other Englishes in possessing a range of aspectual distinctions that are either transfers from Irish or cases of convergence between Irish and English contributing to retention of forms now rare or obsolete in most other Englishes. Among the IrE perfective

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constructions, the *be*-perfect (*I'm done my work*) ranks among the least widespread morphosyntactic features of English worldwide (Kortmann – Lunkenheimer 2011)². This study uses CORIECOR (McCafferty – Amador-Moreno in preparation), which contains approximately 2.5 million words of personal letters dating from the late seventeenth century to the early twentieth, to examine the *be*-perfect illustrated in the title quotation³.

CORIECOR permits study of IrE throughout the period of shift from Irish to English (roughly 1750-1900). Modern IrE thus largely evolved during the LModE period when auxiliary *be* with intransitive mutative and motion verbs gave way to *have* in mainstream Englishes (Rydén – Brorström 1987; Kytö 1994, 1997). Thus, the *be*-perfect was recessive in English generally by the beginning of language shift in Ireland. It might, therefore, be tempting to regard the IrE *be*-perfect as a retention or colonial lag, with the colonial variety taking longer to adopt the change than metropolitan British English (BrE) and other mainstream varieties.

If a retention, we might expect the IrE *be*-perfect to be subject to the constraints affecting its use in EModE and LModE in general. However, most dialects of the Irish language use a parallel construction that might have contributed to survival of the *be*-perfect due to convergence between the source and target languages involved in the shift. The languages' *be*-perfects are not totally analogous, however: a major difference is that the Irish *be*-perfect, unlike its English counterpart, is also used with transitive verbs. It is therefore possible that the extension of the *be*-perfect to more transitive contexts in IrE during the nineteenth century might have been influenced by this Irish pattern. Irish substrate influence might also have slowed generalisation of the *have*-construction relative to other Englishes and altered the constraints on the construction, allowing auxiliary *be* with transitive verbs.

This study focuses on 18 verbs, selected either because of their high frequency rates in previous corpus-based studies of the *be*-perfect (Rydén – Brorström 1987; Kytö 1994, 1997), or because they are the verbs most often cited with auxiliary *be* in accounts of IrE (see Harris 1984: 308; Filppula 1999: 118; Ronan 2005: 254, 256; Hickey 2007: 178, 196; Kallen 2013: 102-103). The

² The full range of IrE perfectives is treated in general surveys (Filppula 1999; Hickey 2007; Amador-Moreno 2010; Corrigan 2010; Kallen 2013). But there has been little diachronic work on these perfects; exceptions are McCafferty (2004), Hickey (2003) and Pietsch (2007) on *be* after *Ving*, and Pietsch (2009) on the resultative.

³ Full context: *He was suddenly called home to Wagga While I was away in another field in paddock as they say here got*, meaning "... had reached..." (1880s). This *be*-perfect occurs with the medial object word order of the resultative.

findings show IrE broadly following the general development in English since the late eighteenth century: the *be*-perfect declined in IrE too, though more slowly than in mainstream Englishes. It was maintained most strongly with the verbs most often cited as being used with auxiliary *be* in other varieties, *go* in particular. But IrE also retained auxiliary *be* with a range of other verbs, and across the nineteenth century extended the use of *be* to the transitive verbs *finish* and *do* “finish”. It therefore looks as if the IrE *be*-perfect is not a straightforward retention from older English, but another example of convergence between Irish and emergent IrE.

2. *Be*-perfect yesterday

2.1 Mainstream Englishes

Though it dates back to Old English (Visser 1973: 2054-2084; Denison 1993: 359), the *be*-perfect with intransitive verbs of motion and mutation was essentially obsolete in mainstream Englishes by 1900 (Rydén – Brorström 1987; Rydén 1991; Denison 1993: 344; Kytö 1994, 1997; Görlach 2001: 120-121). Today, it is highly circumscribed in such varieties, where it seems to be lexicalised in “archaic constructions with specialized, largely adjectival meaning such as *He is gone, She is finished [...]*” (Brinton – Traugott 2005: 78). The *be*-perfect was stigmatised in prescriptive grammars, and it has been suggested that the influence of normative grammarians – who condemned use of *be* without criticising the innovation with *have* – tipped the balance in the late eighteenth century (McFadden 2007; cited in Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2009: 97). While there was some dissent, most grammarians recommended *have* (see Sundby – Bjørge – Haugland 1991: 180-181; Anderwald 2014). However, Kytö (1997) has shown that the *be*-perfect was robust from the mid-sixteenth to the early eighteenth century. Since this was the period of major British settlement in Ireland (Fitzgerald – Lambkin 2008; Bardon 2011), we can be confident that this English/Scots form went into the feature pool from which IrE emerged.

With intransitive verbs, *be* and *have* were already in competition in OE (Traugott 1992: 191; Hogg 2002: 79), and this persisted into LModE. The OE *be*-perfect “was mainly restricted to intransitive verbs of the type involving change of place or state, cf. *faran* ‘go’, *cuman* ‘come’, *weaxan* ‘grow’, *oðfeallan* ‘fall into decay’” (Traugott 1992: 192). Auxiliary *have* gained ground with these mutative and motion verbs from the early fourteenth century,

though *be* still dominated into LModE (Kytö 1994; Rydén – Brorström 1987). The most detailed study to date (Kytö 1997), based on the *Helsinki Corpus* and ARCHER, shows *have* became the majority form in the late eighteenth century and was categorical (minimum 86% use) a century later (Fig. 1)⁴.

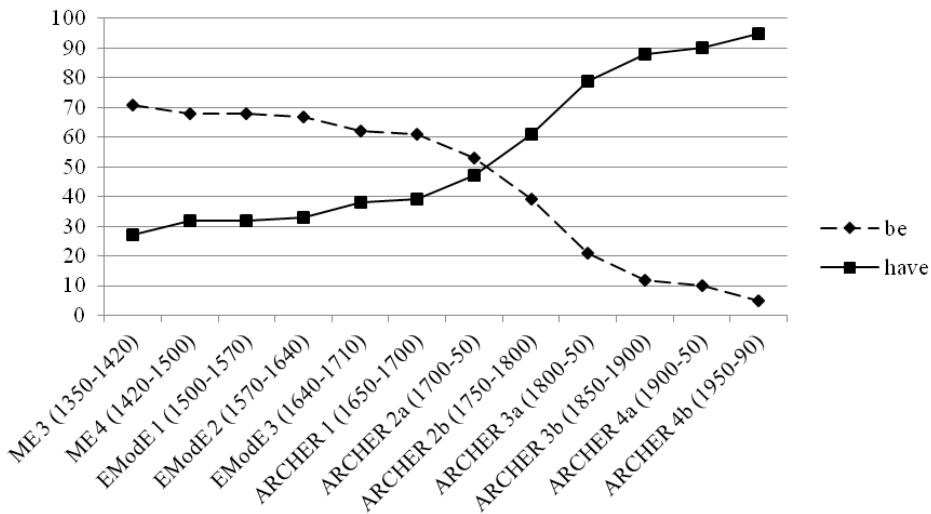


Figure 1. *Be/have* variation with intransitives for subperiods, 1350-1990 (after Kytö 1997: 33, Table 3; n=2868). ARCHER includes BrE and AmE from subperiod 2a (1700-50) onwards. Results from the *Century of Prose Corpus* (67% *have* from 1680 to 1780), are excluded since they obscure the diachronic pattern; also, COPC overlaps with the HC's EModE 3 and ARCHER subperiods 1, 2a and 2b

The *be*-perfect would have been the dominant form with intransitives in English (and perhaps also Scots) varieties imported during the Plantation era when British settlers streamed into Ireland (c. 1550-1700). By 1900, *have* was categorical with such verbs. The rapid decline coincided with the rise of prescriptivism as the dominant linguistic ideology (cf. Anderwald 2014). Crucially, this was also the period when Irish-speakers increasingly shifted to English, accepting the fact of Ireland's political and economic domination by English-speakers and that speaking English made it easier to escape the dominance of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy via emigration to North America, Australia, New Zealand and Great Britain; command of English was regarded as essential by intending emigrants.

⁴ Rydén – Brorström (1987: 200) showed *have* became the majority form in the early nineteenth century and was near-categorical in the latter half of the century (cf. also Rydén 1991).

Kytö also highlights an “innovative tendency” in late eighteenth-century American English (AmE) (1997: 39), which led BrE in replacing *be* with *have*. However, the trend towards *have* was already established by then; AmE did not initiate the change, but had merely gone further than BrE in adopting it (Hundt 2009: 17-18, 32). In any case, BrE caught up in the nineteenth century, and both mainstream varieties show categorical *have*-use with intransitives after 1850.

For 150 years, then, mainstream Englishes either side of the Atlantic have had only a residual *be*-perfect. Auxiliary *be* is often observed to be restricted in Present-Day English (PDE) to certain verbs, especially *go*, whereas a range of other verbs are also still widely reported with auxiliary *be* in IrE. Retention of the *be*-perfect after 1750 shows IrE remained conservative relative to BrE and AmE on this as on many other points of grammar.

2.2 History of the *be*-perfect in Irish English

There has hitherto been little diachronic study of the *be*-perfect in IrE, but its existence is documented at various times, and there is incidental historical evidence for IrE usage in studies concerned with general English or other aspects of perfectives. This section surveys these references.

The earliest IrE evidence comes from analyses of the anthology compiled by Bliss (1979), which provides examples of the *be*-perfect with motion verbs: *run*, *come* and *turn*⁵. Bliss’s texts span the period from the onset of British settlement to the mid-eighteenth century, when the flood of British settlers had dried to a trickle. The *be*-perfect continued in use throughout in Ireland, but was used in BrE too in this period. Hickey’s (2005) survey of Dublin English extends the trail, citing examples from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century letters with *come*, *go*, *arrive* and *begin* (2005: 161-166).

Texts by Irish writers in the database for Rydén – Brorström’s (1987) diachronic survey of the *be*-perfect show usage broadly reflecting the general development in English, though at some delay (Fig. 2). Jonathan Swift (1667-1745) almost categorically preferred *be* with intransitives, using it in 85% of tokens in his letters (Rydén – Brorström 1987: 201, 232, Table I), well beyond rates reported by Kytö (1997) for this period. Later eighteenth-century Irish playwrights continued to use more *be*-perfects than British and American contemporaries, but less than Swift: Sheridan, Goldsmith and Kelly likewise

⁵ Bliss also, wrongly in the view of the present author, cites “*he’s dead and buried these ten years*” (xxvii 115 [Thomas Sheridan, 1740]) as a *be*-perfect; in my view, *dead* is an adjective here.

exceeded eighteenth-century rates reported by Kytö (1997), scoring 60-65% *be* (Rydén – Brorström 1987: 21-22, 232, Table I). Still, like Swift, they remain more conservative than mainstream BrE and AmE writers. A century later, Boucicault, Wilde and Shaw all conformed to mainstream use of categorical *have* (89-92%) (Rydén – Brorström 1987: 233, Table II)⁶. However, note that these three also spent their careers largely in the United States and England, which might have influenced their usage.

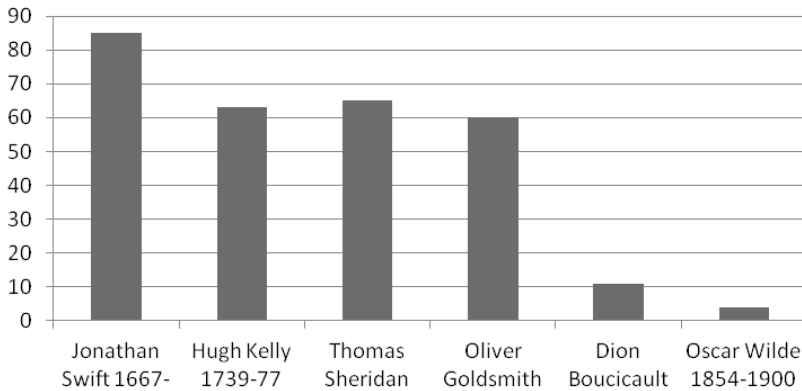


Figure 2. *Be*-perfect in writings of Irish authors, seventeenth to twentieth century (after Rydén – Brorström 1987: 232-233, Tables I, II)

Evidence of *be/have* variation in twentieth-century Irish authors, films and television sitcoms also suggests decline and lexical restriction. In works by Patrick MacGill (1889-1963), Amador-Moreno found just three *be*-perfects: one each with *go*, *come* and *change* (2006: 106-108). Amador-Moreno notes that the existence of this perfect in Ulster, where the Irish substrate lacks the potential Irish source construction, might suggest retention from English rather than substrate influence. Walshe (2009: 54-55) found *be*-perfects in only 7 of 50 films investigated, citing just 7 tokens: 5 with *go*, one each with *change* and *finish* (Walshe 2009: Appendix 3, Table 6). The same author's study of the sitcom *Father Ted*, found just 2 *be*-perfects; the only example cited uses *finish* (Walshe 2011: 132, 136). Apart from the use of *finish* with auxiliary *be*, this too suggests lexical restriction and decline.

⁶ Hickey (2005: 167-177) does not attest auxiliary *be* in plays by Boucicault and Seán O'Casey (also Hickey 2007: 197). A sampling difference may explain the different result obtained by Rydén – Brorström (1987): Hickey's *Corpus of Irish English* contains only Boucicault's *The Colleen Bawn*, whereas Rydén and Brorström also included *London Assurance*.

IrE apparently participated in the general decline of the *be*-perfect since the eighteenth century. The historical curve suggested here broadly follows a path similar to that found by Rydén – Brorström (1987) and Kytö (1994, 1997), though IrE seems to have adopted *have* more slowly than mainstream varieties. The use of the *be*-perfect after 1900 also appears, on the evidence collated, to have become circumscribed to a small number of fairly frequent intransitive mutative and motion verbs: *arrive*, *begin*, *change*, *come*, *go*, *run*, and *turn*. But the transitive verb *finish* also appears with auxiliary *be* in these accounts.

3. *Be*-perfect today

3.1 Regional Englishes

Auxiliary *be* is usually said to be retained in PDE only with certain verbs, *go* in particular, though Rydén – Brorström (1987: 211) list others used at least variably with *have* or *be*: *change*, *recover*, *turn* (e.g., *turn fifty*), *set* (of the Sun), *fly*, *do*, and *finish*. Regional differences are noted by Kortmann (2008: 491, Table 1), whose survey of English in Britain and Ireland reports a “pervasive” *be*-perfect in IrE and Orkney/Shetland English; it is also “attested, but not frequently used” in southwest England, the north of England and Scotland. Shetland and Orkney have generalised auxiliary *be* to *all* verbs, transitives included (Melchers 2008: 291); this may be due to Norn (Scandinavian) substrate influence (Pavlenko 1997)⁷. Surveys consistently report the *be*-perfect in IrE, north and south (e.g., Filppula 1999; Hickey 2007; Amador-Moreno 2010; Kallen 2013). And a comparison of twentieth-century IrE with dialects from southwest England, Yorkshire and the West Midlands reported the *be*-perfect as present, but infrequent, in conservative BrE dialects, where it was exclusively restricted to *go* (Filppula 1999: 49-50, 118). Regional Englishes in England appear to show as much lexicalisation as mainstream standard varieties (Brinton – Traugott 2005: 78). Leaving aside the extreme case of the Northern Isles, the *be*-perfect appears more robust in IrE than other varieties, and we would expect it to have been at least as robust in previous centuries.

⁷ On the *be*-perfect in Shetland, see Melchers (1992, 2008). A recent quantitative sociolinguistic study shows the *be*-perfect declining among younger Shetlanders (Smith – Durham 2012: 62-63).

3.2 Present-day Irish English

The *be*-perfect is one of six constructions used to express perfective aspect in Irish English (cf. Harris 1984, 1993; Kallen 1989, 2013; Hickey 2007; Amador-Moreno 2010; Corrigan 2010). The *be*-perfect (1) is said to typically convey resultative meanings with mutative and motion verbs.

- (1) all our ships **are arrivd**, the newham was the last who came in 5 days ago. (18th c.)

Research suggests that some of the IrE perfectives either emerged or underwent significant change in the nineteenth century. *Be after V-ing* became focused on its prototypical modern IrE hot-news functions (McCafferty 2004), and specifically IrE uses of the progressive, including its use as a perfective, seem to have emerged at this time (McCafferty – Amador-Moreno 2012). However, only the hot-news perfect has been studied diachronically (e.g., McCafferty 2004, 2006), while the progressive has been the subject of a CORIECOR pilot study (McCafferty – Amador-Moreno 2012); other aspectual features have been examined only in narrower datasets.

The latest version of the global survey of nonstandard morphosyntactic features in Englishes (Kortmann – Lunkenheimer 2011) found *be* as a perfect auxiliary in just 5/10 traditional L1 varieties, 10/21 high-contact L1s and 3/17 indigenised L2 varieties, making 18/48 varieties in these three categories. However, it is “rare” in 9 of the 18 varieties where it is attested, making it one of the least widespread features in the survey. It may have been more common in earlier nonstandard varieties, though: Hundt (2015: 88-89) reports its use in nineteenth-century New Zealand correspondence. Unfortunately, there are no detailed studies of the *be*-perfect in regional as opposed to mainstream Englishes

Examples of auxiliary *be* with intransitives are included in surveys of both Northern and Southern IrE (e.g., Harris 1984, 1993; Filppula 1999; Hickey 2007; Amador-Moreno 2010; Kallen 2013). There has, however, been little empirical study of this construction in IrE and no diachronic survey until recently (McCafferty 2014). Yet the literature raises issues that might usefully be addressed diachronically using CORIECOR⁸.

⁸ CORIECOR is under development. The version used here has approximately 4800 letters (2.5m words) written to and by Irish emigrants from the 1670s onwards. Coverage is good from the 1760s to the 1940s (minimum 55,000 words per twenty-year subperiod). Most texts come from the *Irish Emigration Database*, hosted by Queen’s

Filppula (2008: 331) remarks that, of all IrE perfectives, the *be*-perfect in particular is recessive. Yet empirical studies of the perfectives (Harris 1984; Filppula 1999; Ronan 2005) show it remains one of a set of roughly equally robust alternatives to the *have*-perfect, which is a minority construction overall in Ireland. When did the *be*-perfect begin to recede in IrE, and to what extent did this parallel and keep pace with developments in other varieties? Second, as in other Englishes, the *be*-perfect is reportedly restricted in IrE to a limited number of verbs (Kallen 2013: 103), *go* in particular (Filppula 1999: 117; Ronan 2005: 254). Might an impression of survival in IrE be due mainly to retention with certain frequent verbs? Third, there is the issue of Irish substrate influence. Filppula suggests the *be*-perfect survived in IrE as a result of convergence during prolonged contact and shift (1999: 122). While acknowledging that the substrate may have supported retention, Hickey attributes use of auxiliary *be* to English input only (2007: 177, 196, 282, Table 4.39). However, the fact that there is no verb *have* in Irish, which uses a construction formed with the substantive verb *tá* “be” + a form of *ag* “at” (see 4.2, below) to express possession and in its closest equivalent of the *be*-perfect, may have contributed to retention. The fact that intransitives in English can occur with an object-like complement may have contributed further to convergence and retention of the *be*-perfect, facilitating extension to transitive uses of verbs like *finish*, with which the Irish construction is also used.

Diachronic study of regional differentiation in CORIECOR may help clarify this issue further: we might expect auxiliary *be* to be more robust where IrE spread through language shift and remained in contact with Irish longer, as opposed to the northeastern and southeastern regions centred on Belfast and Dublin that became English-speaking early, largely through settlement from Britain. In the meantime, given the presence of transitive verbs with auxiliary *be* cited in the IrE literature, we might suggest that this is due to a transfer effect in emergent IrE.

3.3 Surveys of the IrE *be*-perfect

Surveys of IrE usually list the *be*-perfect as a resultative perfective found with intransitive verbs, noting that it is more frequent in IrE than other

University Belfast’s Mellon Centre for Migration Studies, in Omagh, Co. Tyrone. The northern and eastern provinces of Ulster and Leinster are over-represented in this database, especially in the earlier subperiods, though this bias partly reflects the fact that these were the regions of heaviest emigration in the eighteenth century and also where English was widely spoken before 1800.

varieties (e.g., Harris 1984: 322-323, 1993: 160; Kallen 1989: 19, 2013: 102-103; Filppula 1999: 116-122, 2003: 166-167). To date, three empirical studies have investigated the full range of IrE perfective constructions (Harris 1984; Filppula 1999; Ronan 2005). All show the *be*-perfect as a robust alternative to the *have*-perfect in present-day IrE, but they also report it as largely restricted to *go*, as in other Englishes, standard varieties included.

Harris for Northern IrE (1984: 317, Table 2) and Filppula for Southern IrE (1999: 95-126) found the *have*-perfect in a minority overall, while the *be*-perfect accounted for 11% of all perfectives in the north and 9% in the south. Ronan's (2005) Dublin data showed a majority of *have*-perfects, but here too, the *be*-perfect occurs at 9%. These studies suggest the *be*-perfect is used at similar levels in Northern and Southern IrE, offering little support to the hypothesis that the presence or absence of a parallel in different substrate dialects of Irish might have affected regional distribution in IrE, although there may be urban-rural differences⁹. The lack of regional differentiation is also indicated by the *Survey of Irish English Usage*: acceptance rates for the test sentence *They're finished the work now* exceeded 85% in counties stretching from Derry in the far north, through Monaghan in south Ulster and Offaly in the Midlands, to Kerry in the southwest (Hickey 2007: 178). Elsewhere, Hickey reports 80% of Dublin respondents found this test sentence unproblematical (2005: 130).

The *be*-perfect appears fairly robust in IrE, where a minority of all perfectives are of the standard English *have*-perfect type, while the remainder are divided among five other constructions (cf. Harris 1984; Kallen 1989; Filppula 1999, 2008; Ronan 2005). Its use contributes to substantial IrE deviation from other Englishes in this area of grammar. A recent study using various components of the *International Corpus of English* (Seoane – Gómez-López 2013: 9, Table 1) reports that *be*-perfects account for a mean of only 1.6% of all perfects in Hong Kong, Singapore, Indian and Philippines English and 1.4% in BrE. In contrast, the IrE studies summarised above consistently show considerably higher rates of around 10%. For speakers of IrE, the *be*-perfect remains a robust minority variant into the early twenty-first century. However, this is a qualified robustness, as it appears to be lexically restricted in IrE, too.

⁹ Harris's (1984) results suggest urban-rural differentiation: standard *have*-perfects were nearly twice as frequent among urban speakers (65% vs. 35%), while the *be*-perfect was 3.5 times more common in rural areas (14% vs. 4%). The question of regional differences is worth investigating.

3.4 Verbs used with *be*-perfect in IrE

Note that Hickey's test sentence contained the transitive verb *finish* and an object *the work*; as we will see, in our period, this verb actually reversed the general trend towards *have*. Hickey also cites further examples with *finish*, *go* and *change* from various datasets (2007: 178, 196). Harris lists the motion and mutative verbs *leave*, *change*, *die* and *go* as occurring with auxiliary *be*; his example is *I'm not too long left* (1984: 308). Ronan (2005: 254) notes *be*-perfects occur particularly with *go* and cites examples with *this* and *finish* (2005: 256). The most detailed IrE study of the *be*-perfect to date (Filppula 1999: 118) mentions the following: *go*, *leave*, *finish*, *change*, *come*, *vanish*, *wear*, *wither*, *fade*, *dry*, *break up*, *die*, *happen*, and *belong*. And Kallen (2013: 103) adds *pass*, *build*, *break down* and *promise*. This amounts to quite a number of fairly frequent everyday verbs, but we should also recall Filppula's remark that the majority of *be*-perfects in late twentieth-century IrE involved *go* (1999: 120).

3.5 Summary

The *be*-perfect is retained in IrE today and is widely regarded as acceptable, but it is largely restricted to a small number of intransitive mutative and motion verbs, especially *go*. It is also used with some transitive verbs, of which *finish* and *do* (=“finish”) might be the most frequent. As Kirk – Kallen (2006: 103) remark in their discussion of the perfect in standard IrE, while the distinctively Irish perfectives may each be relatively infrequent compared to the *have*-perfect, even small proportions of the alternative constructions distinguish IrE from other Englishes. That the alternatives to the *have*-perfect may combine to constitute a majority of perfectives underscores IrE's distinctiveness relative to other varieties.

4. The *be*-perfect in Scots and Irish

4.1 *Be*-perfect in Scots

The other two main inputs into the contact situation in Ireland were Scots and the Irish language. Since most British settlers in Ireland originated in Scotland (though some brought Scottish Gaelic rather than Scots/English), it is unfortunate that there is little work on the *be*-perfect in Scots/Scottish English. Kortmann – Lunkenheimer's (2011) survey notes its presence in Scotland generally, but apart from Shetland and Orkney, it receives only

brief mentions in surveys. Trudgill – Hannah list transitive *I'm finished* it as “specifically Scottish” (2008: 101), with no further discussion, and many surveys make no mention of the *be*-perfect¹⁰. When included, little detail is offered, as in Macafee’s survey of Scots grammar, which notes generalised *be*-perfect in the Northern Isles and then adds: “*Be* is also the regular auxiliary in Scots generally with a small group of verbs including *start* and *come*”, and cites examples with these verbs (Macafee 2011: np.). Commenting on the paucity of documentation and interest, Melchers observes that “[...] there is hardly any evidence of the construction being a general feature of Scots” (Melchers 1992: 603). Apart from the Northern Isles¹¹, little is known about how widespread the *be*-perfect might currently be in Scotland.

Documentation in earlier Scots is equally poor. There are no empirical diachronic studies, though Moessner notes auxiliary *be* was used variably with verbs of motion in Older Scots (1997: 113), and Görlach (2002: 105) repeats this. Apart from the recent work on Shetland, then, the *be*-perfect appears not to have been studied empirically in Scots/Scottish English at any stage. While we would ideally like to know more about the situation in Scots, especially historically, for a study of IrE, at the minute we can only note that the *be*-perfect was used in Older Scots and is still found in Scots/Scottish English with some verbs at least¹².

4.2 *Be*-perfect in Irish

In treating tense and aspect in IrE, it is always necessary to consider possible Irish substrate influence. The potential input construction uses the Irish substantive verb *tá* “be” with what is variously termed the “verbal adjective” or “past participle” (Bliss 1979: 294; Stenson 1981: 148-50; Ó Siadhail 1989: 299-300; Ó Sé 1992: 39; Hickey 2012). Some view this as a passive (e.g., Hickey 2012), others as a passive perfective (e.g., Ó Siadhail 1989), but Irish examples are usually translated by the *have*-perfect or IrE alternatives. For Ó Siadhail (1989: 299), the Irish construction is closely related to the IrE resultative perfect. The Irish structure uses the substantive verb with the

¹⁰ Note that Trudgill – Hannah’s example uses transitive *finish*.

¹¹ Most Scots in Ireland originated in southwest and central Scotland. There is little evidence of migration from Shetland/Orkney to Ulster or any other part of Ireland (Fitzgerald – Lambkin 2008; Bardon 2011). Generalised *be* with all verbs has never been claimed to be present in IrE; Northern Isles influence can be discounted.

¹² Enquiries of experts on Scots drew a blank: there appear to be no further studies of the *be*-perfect in Scots (Jennifer Smith, Mercedes Durham, Robert McColl Millar, personal communication, August 2012; Jim Miller, personal communication, February 2014).

“verbal adjective” (equivalent to the English past participle) and a form of the preposition *ag* “at”, but the immediate substrate influence on the IrE *be*-perfect is the “agent-free passive perfective” (2), lacking the prepositional element. Significantly, this has a wider scope than that usually attributed to the English *be*-perfect, being used with both intransitive (2) and transitive verbs (3) (Ó Siadhail 1989: 299-300); the latter provide an obvious overlap with the passive.

(2) Tá sé imithe
[Is he gone]
“He is gone off”

(3) Tá an leabhar léite
[Is the book read]
“The book is/has been read” (after Ó Siadhail 1989: 299-300)

A further option in Irish is to use certain transitive verbs, like “eat” and “cast (a vote)”, without the object in the agent-free construction, as in (4)-(5), where the logical objects (e.g., *a chuid* “his share”, *vót* “vote”) are not realised.

(4) Tá sé ite
[Is he eaten]
“He has eaten”

(5) Tá sé caite
[Is he voted, lit. “spent, thrown, cast”]
“He has voted” (after Ó Siadhail 1989: 300)

This latter possibility appears not to have transferred into IrE and is seldom remarked in the literature (but see Filppula 1999: 121); there are no tokens in CORIECOR.

Hickey suggests a possible role for Irish in the retention of the *be*-perfect, noting that: “[...] the use of *tá* ‘is’ in Irish to form compound tenses may have also provided support (the Irish translation of [Hickey’s survey test] sentence would be approximately: *Tá siad críochnaithe leis na deisithe anois* [is they finished with the repairs now])” (Hickey 2007: 177). The fact that IrE permits the *be*-perfect with transitive uses of verbs like *finish* may be attributable to Irish influence, as Irish has this option¹³. Finally, it might

¹³ Mustanoja (1960: 500-501) points to the *be*-perfect with transitive verbs in ME. If this continued into EModE, it would weaken the case for Irish influence and strengthen

be important to take account of dialect differences in Irish. Ó Sé (1992: 41) reports that the Irish equivalent of the *be*-perfect is a feature of Connacht and Munster but not Ulster dialects. We might, therefore, expect the converging influence of Irish to be stronger in Southern than in Northern IrE, where the *be*-perfect might be less likely to be affected by Irish substrate influence (Amador-Moreno 2006: 110). It would be useful, therefore, to investigate the geographical distribution of the *be*-perfect in IrE, although this is beyond the scope of the present study.

5. *Be*-perfect in CORIECOR

5.1 Method

Data was extracted from CORIECOR for the entire period from 1701 to 1940, covering the era when Ireland changed from a predominantly Irish-speaking country to a virtually monolingual English-speaking territory. Following Kytö (1997), I searched lexically for past participles of verbs known from the literature to occur with the *be*-perfect. The search items are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Verbs included in CORIECOR searches for *be*-perfects

From Rydén – Brorström (1987)		From literature on Irish English	
<i>arrive</i>	<i>go</i>	<i>do</i> “finish”	<i>happen</i>
<i>become</i>	<i>grow</i>	<i>finish</i>	<i>leave</i>
<i>change</i>	<i>improve</i>		
<i>come</i>	<i>pass</i>		
<i>fall</i>	<i>recover</i>		
<i>get</i> “motion”	<i>return</i>		
<i>get</i> “change”	<i>turn</i> “change”		

These comprised: (a) 14 of the 15 verbs that together accounted for 87% of the data in Rydén – Brorström (1987: 31); and (b) 4 verbs that, while not frequent in that study, are often mentioned in the literature on IrE as occurring with auxiliary *be*¹⁴. Several of the verbs are used in both process

convergence explanations. Auxiliary *be* with transitive *finish* in Scots might also further a convergence explanation, if it could be documented historically.

¹⁴ McCafferty (2014) started with 33 verbs, 15 of which are excluded here. Five – *belong*, *build*, *fade*, *promise*, and *wither* – did not occur in the subperiods sampled for

and motion senses. Of these, *go* occurs in CORIECOR only as a motion verb, while *turn* is used both as a mutative (“change”) and as a motion verb; *get*, too, occurs with both mutative (“change”) and motion (“reach, arrive”) meanings. The set of verbs studied ensured that, if the *be*-perfect has indeed been used across a broad range of verbs and verb types, then the full range would be revealed, and IrE peculiarities might also be captured by inclusion of the verbs most often cited with the *be*-perfect in this variety. Searches were conducted using *Wordsmith 5* (Scott 2009) to retrieve past participles of individual verbs, including all variant participle forms, e.g., *got/gotten, fallen/fell, gone/went*. Only unambiguous instances of *be* or *have* are included as data; a number of inherently ambiguous tokens are excluded:

- (6) with respect to what I wrote you I do not know **whats become** of Taylors Daughter (late 18th c.)
- (7) I was fully determined to **agone** home this fall (late 18th c.)
- (8) I expect he **Ø gone** to Alabama (1840s)
- (9) The Minerva Capt Eccles should **have been arrived** when you wrote (late 18th c.)

Among those excluded were cases where it is impossible to determine whether an elided form (*'s* in present-day orthography) represents *is* or *has* (6). The form *agone* in (7) might be either *have gone* or *a-going*, i.e., a present rather than a past participle¹⁵. In (8), the auxiliary is deleted, and in (9), both auxiliaries appear in a “double perfect” construction.

The verbs studied here all occur variably with *be* or *have* in CORIECOR, as (10)-(19) illustrate, even varying sometimes in the same letter, e.g., (10)-(11) with the motion verb *go*. Examples (12)-(13) show other motion verbs also vary in this respect. The same kind of variation is seen in the mutative

McCafferty (2014); they were originally included because they are listed in literature on IrE as occurring with *be*. Another 5 of the verbs that produced the bulk of the data for Rydén – Brorström (1989) and Kytö (1997) – (*a*)*rise, run, and turn* “motion” (Rydén – Brorström 1989); *depart* and *enter* (Kytö 1997) – are also excluded because they gave fewer than 10 tokens across the subperiods studied in McCafferty (2014). For the same reason, five verbs often mentioned in the IrE literature were excluded: *break up/down, die, dry, wear* and *vanish*.

¹⁵ Alternatively, *agone* might represent *a-going* in a context where auxiliary *be* is deleted, a phenomenon that has recently proven to be variably present in the usage of CORIECOR letterwriters of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

verbs, as in (14)-(15) with *change*, and with transitive *finish* in (16)-(17) and *do* “finish” in (18)-(19).

- (10) Dr. Boyd **has gone** to Kirkcubbin to live. (1830s)
- (11) Hugh Boyd has been put out of his house, he **is gone** to Ann St. to live. (1830s)
- (12) Reginald his other brother was in the Custom House at Winnipeg for some years and **is now moved** to Vancouver I think. (1880s)
- (13) Johnny Stewart and family and Aunt **has moved** up to James Lavers old house, as monthly tenants. (1880s)
- (14) Florence **has greatly changed** since you were here (1880s)
- (15) Your old friend Mrs John Moore’s family, **is of course very much changed**. (1880s)
- (16) I **am just finished** Whitewashing and Chimney-cleaning. (1880s)
- (17) and by the time it reaches you you will I hope **have finished** your harvest (1880s)
- (18) the neighbours **are nearly all done** ploughing now But we have ploughed none yet neither has Uncle John (1880s)
- (19) He **has done** with the cares of this life now (1880s)

As we will see, the verb types exemplified here behave in slightly different ways with regard to auxiliary *be* across our period, in particular the transitives, which increase use with *be*, and *go*, which maintains *be* to a greater extent than other motion or mutative verbs.

5.2 General results and comparison with ARCHER letters

The conservatism of IrE is apparent from comparison of Fig. 3¹⁶, which traces the development of the *be*-perfect in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century IrE, with Fig. 1, which shows the development in BrE and AmE. From a slight

¹⁶ The CORIECOR data underlying Figs. 3-6 is summarised in the Appendix, which includes statistics for individual verbs and verb types.

majority (56%) of *be*-forms in eighteenth-century IrE, *have* increases steadily to 1861-80, then levels off and hovers between 25-30% for the next 80 years. The change is a gradual one, not the rapid swing reported by Kytö (1994, 1997) and Rydén – Brorström (1987), which was also suggested by the usage of Irish writers extracted from the latter (see above). IrE shifts from 44% *have* to 75% across the period, while Kytö's data showed levels of *have*-use hitting 90% by the early twentieth century. IrE, then, appears to have followed the general development in English, but at a delay of about 50-100 years. As we will see, the treatment of certain transitive verbs in IrE, which actually increased with auxiliary *be* across the period, may explain some of the apparent delay in adopting *have*¹⁷.

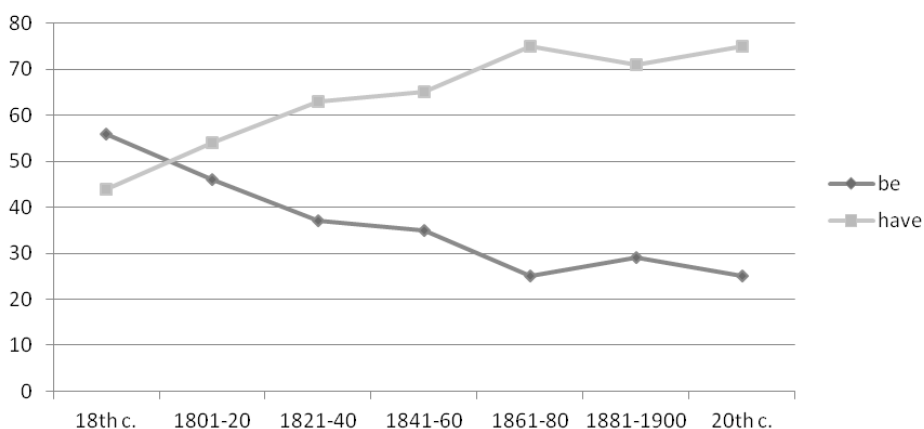


Figure 3. *Be/have* perfect with intransitive verbs in IrE (CORIECOR), 1701-1940s (n=3740)

Kytö's general results are, of course, based on multi-genre corpora. However, she also reports results from a small subset of correspondence data (Kytö 1997: 42-44), which is more directly comparable to my IrE data. Fig. 4 compares Kytö's findings for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with CORIECOR from the same period¹⁸.

¹⁷ Note that, e.g., *finish* was not studied by Kytö. This discrepancy between studies of IrE and the varieties treated by Kytö is unavoidable; *finish* is so often cited with the *be*-perfect in IrE that it must be included here, even though it is not an intransitive verb of motion or mutation.

¹⁸ Note that Kytö's analysis by 50-year periods (1997: 44) actually shows a pendulum movement between *be* and *have*.

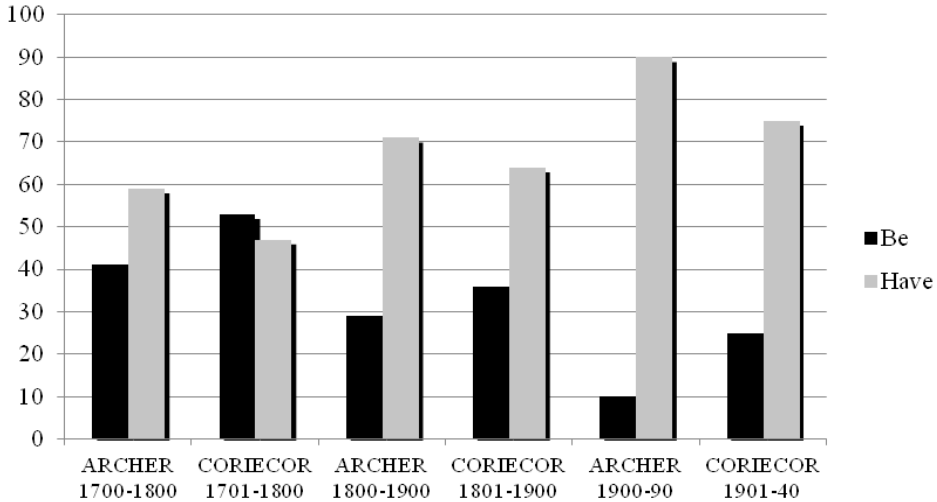


Figure 4. *Be/have* with intransitives in letters only, ARCHER and CORIECOR compared (ARCHER data after Kytö 1997: 42, Table 11; ARCHER n=112, CORIECOR n=3740)

IrE lagged behind in the late eighteenth century, still using *be* as the majority auxiliary with these verbs, but made up considerable ground in the nineteenth century and again in the early twentieth. The development seems broadly parallel, with IrE trending in the same direction as ARCHER, using increasing proportions of *have*, but at a slower pace, so that CORIECOR still shows 25% *be* after 1901 compared to 10% in ARCHER.

5.3 Results by verb type

The general downward trend in the use of the *be*-perfect in IrE revealed in Fig. 3 conceals differences in the treatment of different verb types. Fig. 5 summarises the findings for the 18 verbs categorised by type. For this exercise, *go* was treated separately, since virtually all accounts of the *be*-perfect remark on its survival with this verb. In line with claims regarding the verb types that retain the *be*-perfect, the two main categories are mutative and “other motion” verbs, and finally, the two transitive verbs included because they are frequently mentioned in the literature on IrE form a separate category.

Here we see that mutative verbs, *go* and other motion verbs all showed majority auxiliary *be*-use in the eighteenth century, but *be* was in decline across these three categories by the early twentieth century. However, the

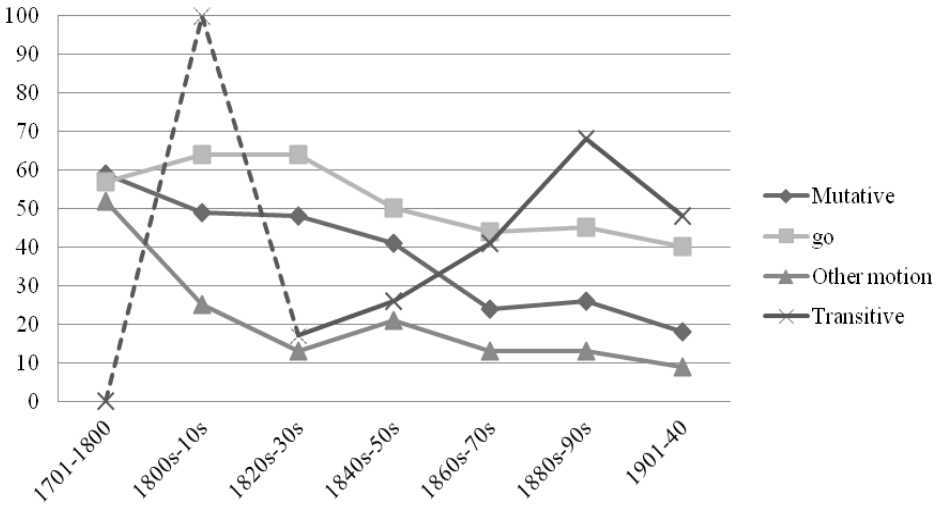


Figure 5. *Be/have* perfect in IrE (CORIECOR) by verb type, 1701-1940s (n=3740)

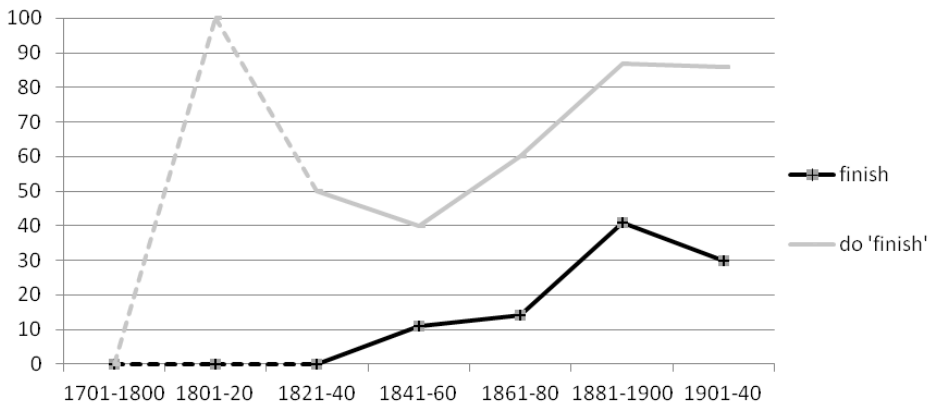


Figure 6. Percentage use of *be*-perfect in IrE, 1701-1940: use of *be* increases to categorical/variable *be* (n=177)

drop in *be*-use with *go* was quite gradual throughout the period; it retained *be* in over 40% of tokens even at the end of the period, while mutative and other motion verbs show a sharper downward cline, being found with only 18% and 9% *be* in the twentieth century. Throughout the period, mutative verbs are consistently more frequent with *be* than other motion verbs. With the exception of *go*, then, the *be*-perfect is preserved more with mutative verbs than verbs of motion in IrE.

It seems clear from this analysis that the retention of the *be*-perfect in IrE is largely attributable to three verbs: *go*, *finish* and *do "finish"*, which

are found with rates of *be*-use from 30-86% into the early twentieth century. However, continued use of *be* with other mutative verbs – *grow*, *improve*, *recover* and *change* – at rates ranging from 29-42%, and with other motion verbs – *return*, *pass* and *leave* – at rates between 11-19% also contribute to the retention of the *be*-perfect until the end of our period. Thus, while lexical restriction has occurred, the *be*-perfect is not as restricted as in other Englishes.

6. Discussion and conclusions

This survey of the use of the *be*-perfect in IrE with a set of 18 verbs shows users of this variety participated in the general shift in English away from auxiliary *be* with intransitive verbs of motion and mutative verbs. In IrE these verb types still occurred with a slight preponderance of auxiliary *be* in the late eighteenth century. By the early nineteenth century, *have* was already preferred with these verbs overall, and its position strengthened further as the century progressed. However, auxiliary *be* stabilised at around 25% usage in the late nineteenth and into the twentieth century. In this development, IrE appears to have been largely following the general trend mapped by Kytö (1997) for BrE and AmE, but more gradually, and the development apparently stalled at a higher retention rate for the *be*-perfect than in mainstream standard Englishes.

IrE also appears to have increasingly restricted the use of auxiliary *be* to a smallish number of verbs, though previous research shows it still retains the *be*-perfect today with a wider range of verbs than mainstream Englishes and regional Englishes in England, where only *go* is reportedly still used with auxiliary *be*. Restriction is reflected also in the CORIECOR data across the period studied. The verb *go* is indeed the most frequent of the 18 verbs studied, and it is 2-4 times more likely to occur with auxiliary *be* than mutative verbs and other motion verbs. But a number of other, especially mutative, verbs are also found variably with *be* into the twentieth century. This contrasts with mainstream Englishes and regional English, where auxiliary *be* is found exclusively with *go* (Filppula 1999). The IrE delay in adopting *have* with all the verbs included here is due in part to retention of *be* into the twentieth century with a broader set of verbs than in other varieties.

The fact that transitive uses of verbs like *finish* and *do* “finish” with auxiliary *be* seem to emerge in IrE across the period also contributes to

retention. Rates of *be*-use with these verbs are highest in the late nineteenth century and continue high into the twentieth. We might speculate that this latter development, though not entirely unknown in earlier stages of the language and other present-day Englishes, was distinctive of IrE by the late nineteenth century, but firm conclusions on this issue must await empirical diachronic comparisons with other, especially regional, varieties. Similarly, the possibility that the use of *be* with transitive verbs might either have arisen or been strengthened as a result of Irish substrate influence must remain (informed) speculation until we are in a position to examine the regional distribution of *be*-perfect use in Ireland during the period of language shift. This study represents but a first step in these directions.

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APPENDIX

Verb	1701-1800		1800s-10s		1820s-30s		1840s-50s	
	<i>be</i> /Total (n)	<i>be</i> %	<i>be</i> /Total (n)	<i>be</i> %	<i>be</i> /Total (n)	<i>be</i> %	<i>be</i> /Total (n)	<i>be</i> %
MUTATIVE								
<i>happen</i>	0/9	0	1/9	11	0/8	0	1/12	8
<i>become</i>	8/15	53	4/10	40	5/19	26	5/43	12
<i>turn "change"</i>	3/10	30	–	–	(2/4)	–	7/23	30
<i>get "change"</i>	3/5	60	7/15	47	13/32	41	26/76	34
<i>grow</i>	7/7	100	6/7	86	14/19	74	9/25	36
<i>improve</i>	6/7	86	(3/3)	–	9/13	69	28/42	67
<i>recover</i>	19/24	79	9/14	64	15/21	71	31/58	53
<i>change</i>	(2/4)	–	3/10	30	4/14	29	24/37	65
TOTAL	48/81	59	33/68	49	62/130	48	131/316	41

MOTION								
<i>fall</i>	1/11	9	–	–	0/8	0	3/21	14
<i>arrive</i>	30/36	83	3/10	30	3/21	14	12/49	24
<i>return</i>	6/8	75	5/9	56	5/12	42	10/40	25
<i>come</i>	20/41	49	5/27	19	6/42	14	22/109	20
<i>pass</i>	(1/3)	–	–	–	1/24	4	6/18	33
<i>get "motion"</i>	6/17	35	1/6	17	1/20	5	4/32	13
<i>go</i>	34/60	57	41/64	64	54/85	64	93/186	50
<i>leave</i>	5/16	31	5/20	25	3/18	17	13/62	21
TOTAL	103/192	54	60/136	44	73/230	32	163/519	31
TOTAL excl. go	69/132	52	19/75	25	19/145	13	70/333	21

TRANSITIVE								
<i>finish</i>	(0/3)	–	–	–	0/8	0	1/9	11
<i>do "finish"</i>	(0/1)	–	(1/1)	–	(2/4)	–	4/10	40
TOTAL	(0/4)	–	(1/1)	–	2/12	17	5/19	26
TOTAL	151/277	54	94/205	46	137/372	37	299/852	35

Verb	1860s-70s		1880s-90s		1901-40		TOTAL	
	be/Total (n)	be %	be/Total (n)	be %	be/Total (n)	be %	be/Total (n)	be %
MUTATIVE								
<i>happen</i>	1/10	10	2/16	13	1/12	8	6/76	8
<i>become</i>	2/27	7	0/25	0	0/7	0	24/146	16
<i>turn "change"</i>	2/17	12	0/13	0	0/10	0	14/77	18
<i>get "change"</i>	14/54	26	19/89	21	0/35	0	82/306	27
<i>grow</i>	5/18	28	2/14	14	5/14	36	48/104	46
<i>improve</i>	6/14	43	16/30	53	5/13	34	73/122	60
<i>recover</i>	5/20	25	7/24	29	(0/2)	(0)	86/163	53
<i>change</i>	8/21	38	23/61	38	10/24	42	74/171	43
TOTAL	43/181	24	69/272	25	21/117	18	407/1165	35

MOTION								
<i>fall</i>	1/14	7	0/11	0	–	–	5/65	8
<i>arrive</i>	4/28	14	0/19	0	0/10	0	52/173	30
<i>return</i>	2/28	7	4/24	17	1/9	11	33/130	25
<i>come</i>	5/76	7	19/122	16	6/74	8	83/491	17
<i>pass</i>	5/30	17	3/58	5	2/19	11	18/152	12
<i>get "motion"</i>	7/26	27	6/60	10	3/43	7	28/204	14
<i>go</i>	63/144	44	111/245	45	71/177	40	467/961	49
<i>leave</i>	4/24	17	15/66	23	3/16	19	48/222	22
TOTAL	91/370	25	157/605	26	86/348	25	733/2400	31
TOTAL excl. go	28/223	13	46/360	13	15/171	9	266/1439	18

TRANSITIVE								
<i>finish</i>	1/7	14	14/34	41	9/30	30	25/91	27
<i>do "finish"</i>	6/10	60	40/46	87	12/14	86	65/86	76
TOTAL	7/17	41	54/80	68	21/44	48	90/177	51
TOTAL	141/568	25	281/957	29	128/509	25	1231/3740	33