Être or not: Auxiliary Switch in the diachrony of French

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In Modern French, a language with binary auxiliary selection, the choice of the auxiliary depends on the verb it forms the periphrasis with. For instance, the modal *pouvoir* 'can' selects HAVE (1).

(1) il n' **avait**   pas pu   venir
     he NEG have-PST NEG can-PTCP come-INF
     'he had not been able to come'

Auxiliary Switch (AS) refers to a phenomenon found in Restructuring clauses where there is a change in the choice of auxiliary in periphrastic tenses: in (2), the auxiliary is selected by the embedded lexical infinitive, instead of the matrix verb. *Pouvoir* normally selects HAVE, whereas *venir* 'come' selects BE: here, the auxiliary switched from HAVE to BE.

(2) il ne **fust**   peu   venir   (Middle French, 1494)
     he NEG be-PST can-PTCP come-INF
     'he had not been able to come'

The aims of this paper are twofold: (i) to provide the first empirical documentation of AS in the diachrony of French, and (ii) to offer a formal analysis for it.

The data analysed in this paper come from four corpora (Guillot et al. 2018, Larrivée & Goux 2021, Larrivée 2023, Larrivée & Poletto 2023). As such, the database is vast (12,421,593 words) and covers about a millennium (842-1862). All occurrences of [VAUX + VMODAL + VINF], where the infinitive normally selects BE, were collected. AS is found 42 times, and there are 24 sentences where the auxiliary remains HAVE despite featuring an embedded verb that could trigger BE. In the dataset, AS is optional with unaccusative verbs, and obligatory with reflexive verbs. The construction is attested from the early 13th century until the late 18th century.

Period	HAVE (no AS)	BE (AS)
1200-1250		3
1250-1300		
1300-1350		3
1350-1400	3	2
1400-1450	4	3
1450-1500	8	18
1500-1550		
1550-1600	2	4
1600-1650		1
1650-1700	2	6
1700-1750	1	1
1750-1800	4	1
Total	**24**	**42**

There is a growing consensus in the formal literature that binary auxiliary selection connects to features present in the T/v-field (D'Alessandro & Ledgeway 2010, D'Alessandro & Roberts 2010, D'Alessandro 2017, Amato 2022), a view that I adopt and build on. I argue that HAVE is the default auxiliary in French, and that BE is necessarily triggered by person-features in the T-domain.

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