Finite and Non-finite *how come*: The Michael Montgomery Collection

Interesting coincident, that.

I had just ordered, and was the first to check out from the university library, a new book by one of my favorite linguists, Andrew Radford. *Colloquial English: Structure and Variation* includes an entire chapter on *how come*, reviewing previous analyses by Arnold Zwicky and Ann Zwicky (1973), Christopher Collins (1991), Masao Ochi (2004), Ur Shlonsky and Gabriela Soare (2011), and Yoshio Endo (2017) before adding his own. Right then, in a Zoom call, Michael Montgomery mentioned that he would like for me to look at his collection of *how come* sentences, many but not all of them published in Montgomery and Hall (2004:141) and Montgomery and Heinmiller (forthcoming).

The Word file he sent me contained sentences for which Radford’s chapter does not provide a unified solution. Michael’s examples from Appalachian informants and sources group into three types:

1. How come it was this: he done me dirt. (Kephart 1922:371, cited in Montgomery and Hall)
2. …she ran a boarding house there with her girls for years and that's how come her to be in Matewan. (Accord 1989, cited in Montgomery & Heinmiller)
3. …we knew them people was in town and was lookin' for trouble. That’s how come, us in thair,... (Adkins 1989, cited here as transcribed in the original and also included in Montgomery & Heinmiller)

Those three types have patently different structures, so a Unified Theory of How Come seems a priori out of the question.

In the Zoom call, Michael mentioned that sometimes *how come* feels like, but is not equivalent to, *why*. They are structurally different in (1) and (2), and generally the two are not good synonyms, either. Sentence (4), for instance, can be understood as a suggestion, but that reading is unavailable in (5):

1. (4) Why don’t we go out tonight?
2. (5) How come we don’t go out tonight? (Conroy 2006:6)

The reason, Anastasia Conroy points out, is that *how come* occurs with factives: It asks for the reason why a presumed situation or event *has* come about. In (5), it is already a given to the speaker that there will be no outing that night, and the speaker inquires why that should have come to be so. Radford concurs that the natural habitat for *how come* is factive (2018:276).

I promised Michael a deeper analysis. Here it is – dedicated, alas, now to Michael’s memory.

1. There be Some History: Preserved Atavistic Morphology

*How come*, writes Claudia Claridge, ‘cannot be traced back beyond the 18th century, but has various Early Modern English precursors, which may have influenced it’ (2012:177). I assume that Claridge makes the distinction between precursors and modern forms because while the modern forms frequently have a formulaic flavor, the precursors still feel productive:

Type (1) precursors:

1. c. 1594 – Adriana: ‘How comes it now, my husband, O, how comes it, / That thou art thus estranged from thyself?’ (Shakespeare, *Comedy of Errors* II.ii:119-20)
2. c. 1595 – Titania: ‘Tell me how it came this night / That I sleeping here was found, / With these mortals on the ground’ (Shakespeare, *Midsummer* IV.i.:100-02)
(8) 1600 – Mes: ‘How comes it that I see the french King here?’ … ‘How comes it then that underneath his hand / My death is sought…?’ (Heywood, 2 King Edward IV, I.v.)

(9) 1607 or 1608 – Sicinius: ‘Sir, how comes’t that you / Have holp to make this rescue?’ (Shakespeare, Coriolanus III.i:273-74).

(10) 1642 – Or if that some or all of them awake,
     What is their miserie? what their delight?
     How come they that refined state forsake? (More, Psychathanasia, 20)
     [assuming underlying how come it that they that refined state forsake]

Type (2) precursors (?):

(11) 1600 – How come they to be so calme and quiet, but upon a privity and knowledge, both of our puissance and their owne weaknesse? (Livius 283)

(12) 1621 – Mistresse Arthur: O who can tell me where I am become.
     For in this darkenesse I haue lost my selfe.
     I am not dead, for I haue sense and life,
     How come I then in this Coffin buried? (Anonymous, Good Wife, H2)
     [assuming underlying how come I then to be in this Coffin buried]

Type (3) precursor:

(13) c. 1595 – Helena: ‘How came her eyes so bright?’ (Shakespeare, Midsummer Night’s Dream II.ii:92)

(14) c. 1596/97 – Prince: ‘Faith, tell me now in earnest, how came Falstaff’s sword so hack’d?’
     (Shakespeare, 1 Henry IV II.iv:303)

(15) c. 1597 – King: ‘Will you not dance? How come you thus estranged?’ (Shakespeare, Love’s Labor’s Lost V.ii:210)

It would seem that John Russell Bartlett’s Dictionary of Americanisms (1848) was spot on: how come was ‘doubtless an English phrase, brought over by the original settlers’ (182-83). The time frame is right.

Except for their agreement or tense inflections, sentences (6) – (9) look similar to (1) how come it [that]. I included (10) how come they that refined state forsake in this group on the possibility that it and that were omitted for the sake of meter. Alternatively, (10) might be using come as an auxiliary. Precursors to (2) how come her to be in Matewan are harder to find. Note that the pronouns in (11) and (12) are Case-marked for subject, not for object; they appear to be the subject of main verb come, controlling PRO in the infinitive’s subject position. Sentences (13), (14), and (15) look similar to (3) how come us in there, though one can’t be sure from these examples whether the subjects of the small clauses after come receive Dative Case.

The potential precursors to type (3) use come in the sense of become. That also occurs in example (12), which alternates become and come as synonyms (as do Anglo-Saxon (26) and (27) below). The similarity in meaning did not go unnoticed in Montgomery and Hall (141), who make a point of appending become-like examples to their ‘how come’ entry, such as (16):

(16) He come ninety-four last month.

The verb become could itself originally mean ‘to come about, come to’:

(17) c. 888 – ...swa hit hwilum gewyryþ þæt þæm godum becymþ anfeald yfel. (Boethius, De Consol. Philos., transl. Ælfred, xxxix §9)
     ‘...as it sometimes happens that flat-out [‘one-fold’] evil befalls [‘comes to’] the good.’
Examples (6) through (15) likely represent the time period during which *how come* started to form a template. Those early examples look productive and still inflect for tense – (7), (13), (14) – or agreement. They share a sense that the following noun phrase has the semantic role of EXPERIENCER – something has happened to someone without their initiative (like waking up in a coffin) – hence the similarity to *become*. The outlier is sentence (10), where *they* (subject case) is clearly an AGENT, not an EXPERIENCER.

I did not find *how-come* precursors farther back than the 16th century, but constructions in which something comes ‘to pass,’ where someone experiences having come into a changed state or condition, exist in Anglo-Saxon sources using the verb *weorðan*:

(18) Hu is þæt geworden on þysse werþeode
þæt ge swa monigfeald on gemynd witon?
‘How has that come [to be], among these people, that you may know such a range about history?’ (*Elena* II. 643/44)

(19) ‘Hu gewear þe þus, winedryhten min,
fieder, freonda hleo, fer gebysgad,
neawre geneged?...’ (*Guthlac* A:1011-12).
‘How came-it-for you [Dative] thus, my wine-lord, father, protector of friends – misfortune-troubled, nearly bent?’ (assuming *geneged* to be a participle of *nhægan* ‘to make bow, to humble’)

As a native speaker of German, I use the equivalents of both *how comes it* (+ clause) and *weorðan* + dative noun phrase that we see in (19):

(20) Sicinius. „Wie kommt’s, daß ihr / ihm halft, sich fort zu machen?“ (Dorothea Tieck’s translation of (9)).

(21) Mir wird schlecht.
‘I am getting sick’ (in the sense of ‘I experience oncoming sickness affecting me’)

Similar constructions exist in Dutch:

(22) Peter looked at him, and asked him, in Dutch, “Hoe wiet zij wie ik ben, en hoe komt zij mij te kennen?”
‘How do you know who I am, and how come you to know me?’ (Barrow 1839:119)

(23) Mij wordt onrecht aangedaan. (Engbers 2013)
‘I am being wronged’ (in the sense of ‘injustice is being done me’).

Experiencer constructions like *how come* appear to be larger than English, i.e. old, and thus we have license to consider older features of English that may have played a historical role in the formation of today’s *how come* templates: strong agreement, inherent case, and verb-second clauses. Those features may not necessarily be productive in modern English, but as I have shown in the case of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* (Thiede 2009), they were hot-swappable in the 16th century for stylistic choices. If that was about the time when *how come* became a template, then we can expect older morphological features to be preserved in that template like insects in amber (not precluding, of course, that some of those bugs may actually still be crawling around today). A similar premise informed the analysis of Gregory Johnson II (2014:117).

**Hypothesis 1:** *How-come* preserves strong agreement

Strong agreement draws the main verb up from its head position of VP to I, the head of the inflection phrase (and potentially again to the complementizer position C – see Figure 4 below). The only remaining verb to follow that pattern by default in modern English is *be*, though on occasion even *be* it is weakly inflected, thus fails to rise and needs to have a *do* inserted in I as host body to its inflectional features (as
in the lines from one of the success hits by the Supremes, 'You Keep me Hanging On': ‘Why don’t you be a man about it / And set me free’). Shakespeare used strong agreement with other verbs as a stylistic device, for lines of special import or to indicate a high level of status or formality, as in (24) from *Romeo and Juliet*:

(24) Why call you for a sword? (I.i.76)

Older grammatical forms and features can be preserved – not necessarily understood, but carried over. They survive in songs and sayings, or in memorized lines from the King James Bible. Just as Shakespeare switched between Middle and Early Modern English grammar for register, so, for example, did Mary Davis Brown in her diaries (1854-1901), transcribed faithfully and published by her descendants (Talley et al., 2010). Mary Brown went to church without fail and cited Bible quotes from memory (maybe not always verbatim); she also wrote invocations to a new year, prayers, and elegies for lost family members. When she switched to a liturgical register for such special entries, she aligned her grammar with that of the King James Bible, in sharp contrast to her everyday vernacular, which she spelled as she pronounced it. The liturgical register includes strong agreement, as in (25):

(25) … be shure that you deceive not youre self. (Jun. 4, 1858, p. 60)

Atavistic and modern morphological features (like strong and weak AGR) can thus coexist and even be used by the same speaker. That includes *come* as a strongly inflected verb.

Recognizing *come*, without agreement or tense, as strongly inflected requires a look back in history. Note, for example, how the Lord’s Prayer has *Thy Kingdom come* (not *comes*, not *cometh*, nor *may come*), as it did in Anglo-Saxon:

(26) to **becume** þin rice (Wessex Gospels – West Saxon)
(27) to-**emyð** ric ðin (Aldred’s gloss to the Lindisfarne Gospels – Northumbrian)

The full subjunctive inflection -eð, still present in the Northumbrian example (27) above (including stem vowel change), is beginning to be reduced in West Saxon to just -þ in (17) or to -e in (26). Later, of course, that -e gets silenced. We still have it in sayings like ‘come what may’ (still pronounced in German *komme, was da wolle*). So it is the mistaken *absence* (but really devoicing) of a mood ending that historically marks *come* in formulaic *how come* as strongly inflected. Those who do not feel comfortable with strong verbs other than *be* can always try to substitute weak-agreement *get* for *come*, and rephrase (13) as *how did her eyes get so bright* or (14) as *how did Falstaff’s sword get so hacked*.

One could speculate that a register of politeness caused us to hold on to *how come* (it) rather than replacing it with *how does it come*. After all, it is used in a request for information, and the indirectness afforded by the subjunctive mood (the gesture being ‘how do you think it might have come about’ rather than ‘tell me what happened’) leaves an escape hatch if the addressee might not know (or might prefer not to disclose) the reason.

The strong-verb hypothesis will be central to my syntactic analysis below.

**HYPOTHESIS 2:** *How-come* preserves inherent Case marking

Remember the dative. It used to go with verbs like *behove, befit, trust,* and *help*:

(28) to Caunterbury they wende,
    The hooly blissful martir for to seeke,
    that **hem** hath holpen whan that they were seeke. (Chaucer, *CT* Gen. Prologue 16-18)
As (28) shows, inherent Case is not assigned structurally, hence can move with the noun phrase, even to
the subject position of passives:

(29) Him was ful bore ond freondlaþu
wordum bewægned  (Beowulf 1192-93)
‘him was the [full] cup carried and friend[-ship]-laden words offered’
The cup was carried to him, kind words spoken in welcome’ (Heaney 2000:85)

Absent productive inherent case, (29) is now ‘he was offered’ instead of ‘him was offered,’ so the
grammar has obviously changed (Allen 1995:2). However, as examples like ‘the longer, the better’ or ‘he
speaks the most’ show, there are always atavistic bits retained and recast (here: as the article the) when a
grammar changes (i.e. no longer inflecting a demonstrative proform this as by, with instrumental Case).
We use those archaic remnants without necessarily understanding their grammar, just as we accept signs
like Ye olde Tabern without giving any thought to what that silly y is doing there. My proposal here is that
how come constructions like (2) and (3) work because they historically assigned inherent Case to the
following NP, licensing the formula we still use as a template today. That hypothesis frees me from trying
to construct some syntactic diagram in which ‘exceptional Case’ is assigned structurally under c-
command.

**HYPOTHESIS 3: How-come preserves verb-second syntax**

Modern English has residual verb-second constructions with the template α + finite verb + subject,
especially with the verb be, as in (30) from Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland:

(30) …tied around the neck of the bottle was a paper with the words “DRINK ME” beautifully
printed in large letters. (Carrol 30-31)

Verb-second word order is still productive in contemporary German, raising the content of I to the
complementizer position C and projecting the fronted element to the specifier of CP. In Modern English,
V-2 constructions are sometimes used with prepositional phrases denoting direction (‘into the room
came…’), and these days they tend to sound a bit affected. Since it is grammatical to make (30) the
complement of a complementizer (Alice noticed that [(30)]), one must conclude that modern English
imitates V-2 by topicalization (left-appending to IP). That is somewhat contrived, because it likely
involves leaving the subject in situ in [SPEC,VP] prior to phonetic SPELL-OUT. However, the original
construction (fronted matter in [SPEC,CP] and I-to-C raising) cannot generate V-2 after that because C is
no longer available for yet another I-to-C raising. In (28), the specifier of CP is filled with whan and C
with that. A Whan that sentences still can have topicalization (a constituent left-appended to IP), as with
the topicalized in Roome toun in (31):

(31) This thing was doon whan that in Roome toun
The striff was grettest tween Cesar & Pompeie (Bergen, Lydgate ll. 3214-15)

However, I have not seen V-2 after that in the older literature with V-2, and I don’t think a classical V-2
grammar could generate such a sentence.

Hypothesis (3) will likewise inform my syntactic analysis of how come below.

2. **Syntactic Functions**

Analyzing how come constructions as templates means (by definition of ‘template’) that some
constituents come to their non-canonic positions not by movement but by direct projection (Thiede 2007).
That, however, does not absolve the syntactician from associating those remapped constituents with the
positions of their original syntactic functions.
In (1) *how come it was this*, the underlying syntactic relations are as in (32):

\[(32) \quad [\text{IP this was } [\text{CP } \alpha \text{ come how}]]\]

There is an implied *that* clause here (e.g. *that I don’t talk to him anymore*) for which \(\alpha\) is a place holder, realized as the expletive *it* (German *wie kommt’s* as in (20) can similarly omit the *that*-clause). In sentence (1) as quoted, some reshuffling has occurred. In the actual sentence *How come it was this*, *this* may be extraposed, i.e. projected to the right periphery (*was this*), and *how come it* is topicalized, i.e. left-adjoined to IP. Extraposition and topicalization are non-movement projections (Culicover & Rochemont 1990), but the associated canonic positions of subject and subject complement should still be marked, preventing them from being filled with something else. In the syntactic analysis below, I will mark the canonic positions of remapped constituents with a trace; not a trace of movement, but a variable, an associated (co-indexed) position that can be reconstrued. I am aligning my analysis with Ur Shlonksy and Gabriela Soare’s analysis of *why*; they assumed that *why* is an operator associated with a ‘trace/copy that is interpreted as a semantic variable’ (2011:652).

In (2) *how come her to be in Matewan*, *how come* is not a main clause but a modifier, a verb phrase with adverbial function of *reason or cause* (Quirk et al. 752, similarly Zwicky & Zwicky), referring to the reason for being in Matewan:

\[(33) \quad [\text{IP to } [\text{VP her be in Matewan } [\text{wh- how come}]]]\]

Actually, (33) is already a derivation, because *her* is originally the subject of a small-clause (more on small clauses below) *[VP her in Matewan]*:

\[(34) \quad [\text{IP to } [\text{VP be } [\text{PP her in Matewan } [\text{wh- how come}]]]]\]

In (3) *how come us in there*, the *how-come* constituent is again an adverbial modifier inquiring the reason for why *us-in-there* is the case. It originates inside a prepositional phrase, the preposition *in* taking a proform, *there*, as its complement.

Any syntactic analysis must, to be worth its salt, indicate the canonic positions where fronted or extraposed constituents have their natural homes so that their original syntactic functions can be reconstrued. This is where I part company with previous approaches.

### 3. Units of Predication

I am going to work with three levels of clausal predication:

- Full clause (CP)
- Reduced full clause (non-finite IP)
- Small Clause (LP) – a lexical phrase (NP, VP, AP, or PP)

Each is a clause because it has a subject in a specifier position and a predicate that says something ‘about’ that subject (predication expressing an aboutness relation between a subject and a predicate).

The small clause is commonly associated with early language acquisition, in which a ‘sentoid’ like *daddy in bed* consists of a single prepositional phrase (cf. Radford 1990). However, language acquisition is not characterized by evaluating and correcting grammars and discarding bits that don’t work, but by adding new functional layers, a view that aligns with findings in developmental neurocognition (Thiede 2019).
Small clauses continue to be used in adult grammar; note that the subject of the small clause is Case marked by the preceding verb each time:

(35) a. We made [AP him angry] (‘we caused that [he is angry]’)
   b. We assumed [PP her in Paraguay] (‘we assumed that [she is in Paraguay]’)
   c. They made [VP him go away] (‘they caused that [he went away]’)
   d. They pronounced [NP him president] (‘they pronounced that [he is president]’)

Small clauses can of course also contain wh-modifiers, which would then be fronted by appending them onto the top of the phrase. This analysis was, to my knowledge, first introduced by Andrew Radford as an ‘impostor’ imitating syntactic movement during early stages of language acquisition (1990:134):

(36) [VP What [VP kitty doing e]]

On my premise that grammars do not discard what works but add functional layers, there is no reason to assume that fronting a wh-word by left-appending it to the top level of a lexical phrase should be something that only children know how to do. It will be one of the structural incarnations of how come below.

4. Syntactic Structures

We tend to think of reanalysis as exceptional, with exotic examples like the passivization of an object of a prepositional phrase (this was not properly looked at), where the preposition might be reanalyzed as a particle of a transitive phrasal verb look at (cf. Chomsky 1982:123). I think reanalysis is a common occurrence. If someone is exposed to a particular how come construction for the first time and decides to adopt it, the first step is not to consult the Southern Journal of Linguistics to see how that might be accomplished. There are creative options. Consequently, there are also regional variations, as Michael’s data illustrate. Using all the assumptions laid out above (the availability of atavistic features, the use of full/reduced/small clauses), there are three different ways of articulating how come.

4.1. Type (3) – Small-clause how come Appended to Lexical Phrase (Template)

The structurally simplest approach is to take come how as a verb phrase with a fronted wh-element as in (36) above, diagrammed in Figure 1:

Fig. 1: Small-clause how come. The wh-element is functionally a postverbal adverb, fronted by left-appending it to VP. That functional position is marked as t and co-indexed with AP, but here and below, t is not understood as a trace of movement so much as a variable or functionally associated node.
This stacked VP acts as a single wh-modifier within a lexical phrase (NP, VP, AP, PP).

Figure 4 must not necessarily be VP for all speakers. Some speakers may have decided that how come is really just a phrasal adjective – a ‘compound interrogative word’ (Huddleston & Pullum 909) with a single function comparable to wanna and stir fry. Bartlett’s Dictionary of Americanisms notes that how come is ‘rapidly pronounced huc-cum’ in Virginia (1848:182), suggesting that at least some speakers might have used the expression as a single word. Either way – as a single word or as a small clause – how come would be treated as a wh-element, hence fronted.

In sentence (3) how come us in there, the wh-element how come is logically an adjectival modifier within the prepositional small clause us in there but left-appended to PP, as in Figure 2.

The entire structure in Figure 2 is the complement of the linking verb be in (3), and that’s how come us in there. It is hard to see why Figure 2 should not also diagram the structure that generates Shakespeare’s (13), (14), (15) – unless Shakespeare still operated on a elided to be, as likely did the writer of the Good Wife (11), which would relegate his sentences to type (2).

Small clauses are straightforward, but template (3) cannot generate sentences of types (2) and (2)(1).

4.2. Type (2) – Small-clause how come Appended to Non-finite IP (Template)

In this scenario, how come is appended not to a lexical phrase but to non-finite IP (a.k.a. infinitive), with an associated modifier node inside IP. This is likewise a template, a lexically stored pattern rather than a structure produced by syntactic movement. In sentence (2) How come her to be in Matewan, with underlying syntactic functions as in (34), how come modifies (queries the reason for) be [\textit{her in Matewan}]. The wh-phrase is left-appended to IP as in Figure 3.
Fig. 3: Small-clause how come is left-appended to non-finite IP. It functions relationally as a modifier in the verb phrase. Her is the subject of PP, is inherited by VP, and rises to IP.

The structure of Figure 3 is by necessity non-finite, or else there would be a double assignment of Case – inherent Case from come (hypothesis 2) and then again structurally as the subject of IP. But we can’t have her and she at the same time, so infinitive it is.

To compare the template of Figure 3 to the productive 15\textsuperscript{th}/16\textsuperscript{th}-century precursors, reconsider the quote from Livius (11) how come they to be so calme. The how-come sequence of (11) is not functionally a modifier to a lower predication; instead, come is the main verb: They come [IP PRO to be so calme] how. To go from (11) to how come them to be so calm would involve reanalysis.

4.3. Type (1) – Full-clause [CP how come it + (CP)] or [CP how come CP] (Productive)

In this iteration of how come sentences, how come projects a full CP with come as the main verb, taking a subject.

In a sentence like they come to be so calme [how], a full-clause with come as a main verb takes they as subject (marked for subject Case). That position may be filled with an expletive it if there is an associated (real or elided) that-clause as in (7) how came it that I sleeping here was found / (1) how come it was this. Whether it is how comes it, how came it, or how come it, the verb is strongly inflected (for agreement, tense, or subjunctive mood) and available for raising from I to C (classic V-2 ordering). This version of the structure is rather more intricate than the simple VP version above, as Figure 4 shows.
Fig. 4: The full-clause version of how come/came/comes it. The expletive it is here co-indexed with an elided that-clause, an empty CP, as in (1). The lower VP could also be filled, as in (6) or (7).

Sentence (1), with the functional logic of (32), contains the structure of Figure 4 as the fronted α-complement of this was a, as in Figure 5.

Fig. 5: How come it was this, with Fig. 4 in [SPEC,CP] and verb-second word order. Alternatively, V-2 order could be imitated with was in I and this extraposed (right-appended to IP).

Following Eric Haeberli’s understanding of V-2 clauses (2002), Gregory Johnson assumes that in full how-come clauses without overt it, there must be a null expletive (2014:181). I am not sure why this is
necessary – an expletive marks an otherwise phonetically empty subject position by making it explicit, so a null-expletive seems to be self-defeating.

Since this is main-verb come with a CP complement (Figure 4) and not a template, we see creative variations. For example, the C head of the CP complement of come need not be filled with the lower verb for V-2 word ordering. It could instead draw the content of I for presenting the lower sentence as a question. Such data are reported in Radford (2018), who scoured the web for examples:

(37)  a. How come does iodine get into the human system of dwellers along the coasts from sea water? (Radford 2018:217)
    b. I mean, how come would I be crying? … You know I don’t cry (Daugharty, cited by Radford 2918:186)

Arguably, the authors of (37) might also use how come as a single-word synonym of why; this is most likely the case in (38):

(38)  How come is it that even ugly women my age can get a boyfriend but I am still single? (Radford 2018:217)

Whether how come is used as a compound adverb or as a lexical phrase, the clause structure is as in Figure 4, with I-to-C raising for question formation and the wh-element in [SPEC,CP]. Indications that come can head a productive finite clause even today come from examples that Radford collected on the web where come is (strongly) inflected for agreement or tense (Radford 2018:218):

(39)  a. How comes that you have so many singing parts in this new record?
    b. How came you never watched Sailor Moon?

A further indication that full-clause how come (with subject Case) is productive and not formulaic may be the existence of elaborations such as how the hell come, how exactly come, and even why come, for which DARE has a few examples such as in (40):

    b. why come i gotta leave frostburg to have that much fun? (DARE File, 2006)

The full-clause type of how come with come as a strongly inflected verb is still robustly productive today.

5. Conclusion

Gregory Johnson was right: We need to distinguish between non-finite and finite how come. In fact, I am arguing for two non-finite templates in which how come has adverbial function: in a lexical phrase, or in an infinitive. Neither template requires a complementizer phrase CP to accommodate how come, which I suggest is a bare VP with a fronted wh-, or else a compound adverb for some speakers. Instead, the phrase can simply be left-appended to the top of the lexical phrase (or the infinitive, IP). Such fronting is by direct mapping, not by syntactic movement, and come assigns inherent Dative Case to the noun phrase to its right.

In full-clause how come, the main verb is come and it takes a subject (marked with subject Case). This finite construction is not formulaic, but robustly productive in the sense that it can produce creative variations (though they may not always be acceptable to all speakers of English).

I hypothesize that both finite and non-finite how come (but especially the non-finite templates) retain grammatical features that were productive when it started becoming formulaic in the 16th century: strong agreement for come, inherent Case marking by come (Dative), and verb-second syntax (either in the
classical way, with *come* heading the complementizer position, or imitatively, by appending *how come* to a lexical phrase or IP). I conclude that there is no unified account of all instance of *how come*. Instead, we see the kind of reanalysis that necessarily needs to occur when expressions or forms are retained from an older grammar that is no longer operative today.

Whether this analysis would have convinced Michael, I do not know. But it does something that none of the previous approaches have done systematically: identify the canonic positions and functions of all constituents before they were scrambled, and allow for a mixed-grammar approach that can retain and/or reanalyze atavistic parts of our ever-changing language.

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HEYWOOD, THOMAS (?). 1600. The first and second partes of King Edward the Fourth Containing his mery pastime with the tanner of Tamworth, as also his loue to faire Mistrisse Shoare, her great promotion, fall and miserie, and lastly the lamentable death of both her and her husband. Likewise the besieging of London, by the bastard Falconbridge, and the valiant defence of the same by the Lord Maior and the citizens. As it hath dierers times beene publicly played by the Right Honorable the Earle of Derbie his seruants. London: By F[elix] K[ingston] for Humfrey Lownes and Iohn Oxenbridge.


MORE, HENRY. 1642. The argument of Psychathanasia. ΨΥΧΟΩΙΑ, or a Christiano-Platonicall display of life, Book I, Cant. 2, verse 50. Cambridge: Roger Daniel.


NOTES

1 Most of these articles are also capably reviewed by Gregory Johnson II (2014), in chapter 5 of his dissertation.

2 cf. ‘You can't come coming in here knocking over everything and acting a damn fool’ (Spears 1982:861).

3 Special thanks to the diary’s co-editor, former student Catherine Brown Michael, a great-great granddaughter of Mary Davis Brown, who was kind enough to share an electronic copy of the book with me for linguistic analysis.

4 Whan that is not the only possible content filling [SPEC,CP] and C in Middle English. Chaucer’s ‘The Knight’s Tale’ has how that in the lines ‘Hym thoughte how that the wynged god Mercurie / Biforn hym stood and bad hym to be murie’ (CT ‘The Knight’s Tale’ second part ll. 1385-86).

5 Masao Ochi (2004) argues that in contrast to why, how come does not bind trace. If that means trace of movement, I agree. However, Ochi’s evidence seems contrived, resting on the supposed ungrammaticality of *How come John ate what? compared to Why did John eat what? (similarly Collins 1991). The how come question here sounds perfectly acceptable in a context where B asks A to explain how come John ate kimchi. A has never heard of kimchi before and asks: ‘How come John ate what?’ Both are echo questions, and in both the wh-element is associated with a modifier position; the object of ate is a distractor.

6 I am sidestepping other ways of predicating. Heymann Steinthal, for example, pointed out that the relationship between adjective and noun is also an aboutness relation: a good father entails the predication that a father is good (1860:101; cf. Otto Jespersen 1924:149). I am aware of other modes of predication, but they do not affect my analysis of how come.

7 Mary Davis Brown of York County, South Carolina, for comparison, did not use how come a single time in her near-fifty years of journaling. In a passage where she might have had an opportunity to do so, she uses why it is: ‘I have a verry heavey heart within this bosom of mine this new year night. Why it is, I cant tell’ (p. 211, first entry of 1873 and an invocation to the new year in the liturgical register).