

# A Development of *All One Wants* in the Early Modern Period

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## Abstract

Had object ellipsis been involved in the emergence of *all one wants* as an adverbial phrase, this phrase would have played a somewhat altruistic role in the process. The phrase *all one can* seems to be closely related to *all one wants*. *All one wants* and *all one can* seem to occur in specific contexts, the general pattern of which can be construed as reflections of the meaning of these two phrases. The status of *all one wants* as a latecomer may be ascribed to the diachronic facts of *want* and other related predicates.\*\*

## 1. Object Ellipsis

Ohashi (2014: 180) suggests that such an example of the phrase *all one wants* as is shown in (1a) was derived from such examples of it as are shown in (1b, c) (emphases, glosses and ellipses in the examples hereafter are my own, unless otherwise specified):

- (1) a. Mr. Stern, you can laugh at me *all you want*.  
                    (“More On The Battle Over Anna Nicole Smith,” *LKL*, 1/21/2007)
- b. When the description was read to her, Hagge-Vossler laughed and said: “That is all accurate, except I didn’t diet. I just ate healthy. You can eat *all you want* when you’re eating celery and carrots.”  
                    (“History Lays a Course for the Next Breakthrough,” *NYT*, 8/25/2012)
- c. In a pilot study, he tested this on 14 overweight adolescents. They were put on two different regimens—a standard low-cal, low-fat, high-carb diet and a low-GI [glycemic index] plan that let them eat *all they wanted*. After one year, the low-GI volunteers had dropped seven pounds of pure fat. The others had put on four.

                    (“Dietary Experts Debate Carbohydrates,” *WP*, 8/31/2003)

In (1b), as the speaker states that she limited herself to specific kinds of foods, it appears that the object of *eat*—probably *something*—is elided and *all you want* works as an adverbial phrase. In (1c), as it is stated that the cohort in question was free from any conditions on the kinds of foods that its members could eat, as long as the food had a low GI, *all they wanted* appears to be an object phrase of *eat*.

Had object ellipsis been involved in the emergence of *all one wants* as an adverbial phrase, this phrase would have played a somewhat altruistic role in the process: it would have transferred its original status

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as an argument to another independent referent, albeit unpronounced, and been relegated to an adjunct itself. Thus, assuming the involvement of object ellipsis would suggest that some kind of “extraposition” had taken place. Genuine extraposition retains an original set of referents, while merely changing the form of an argument. Of course, the validity of this hypothesis is contingent upon ascertaining certain relevant facts.

## 2. Quantified Phrases

Another possible cause of the emergence of *all one wants* is suggested by the attributes of *all*. Quantified phrases, such as *all day*, *all the while*, and *all the way*, tend to function without any explicit marker of their grammatical roles. Be that as it may, the phrase *all one can* seems to be even more closely related to *all one wants*.<sup>1</sup>

The phrase *all one can* dates back to before the year 1300, as in (2), where *a* before a year stands for ‘before’:

- (2) a. **1300** *Cursor M.* 4647 (Cott.) Pe seuen craftes [i.e. the seven arts] *all he can*. (OED: s.v. *craft*, n.<sup>1</sup>)  
 b. **1597** DANIEL *Civ. Wars* III. lxxii, This bravo [i.e. desperado] cheers these dastards [i.e. cowards] *all he can*. (OED: s.v. *bravo*, n.<sup>1</sup>)  
 c. **1971** in A. Dundes *Mother Wit* (1973) 319/2 You ain’ so bad yourself, girl... I want to help a sweet thang [i.e. thing] like you *all I can*. (OED: s.v. *thang*)

When *all one can* denotes a maximal degree, it is not introduced by any preposition, its pronominal subject is referentially dependent on the subject of its matrix clause, and its predicate phrase is truncated. Thus, the emphasized phrase in (3a), for example, can be primarily construed as indicating a duration, and those in (3b, c) can be construed as indicating a concession and a range, respectively, rather than as degrees.

- (3) a. **1910** *Sat. Even. Post* 30 July 13/1 Stick [to] him *for all you can*. You’re a hard worker, and you mustn’t let some~body [i.e. presumed *some-body*] else git [i.e. get] the gravy. (OED: s.v. *gravy*)  
 b. But her hair won’t curl, *all I can do with it*. O. ELIOT, *Mill*, I. Ch. II, 7. (= do all I can with it.) (Poutsma 1929: 714; the gloss is his own)  
 c. *For all I can tell*, the charred mass of wreckage could be a train wreck.

(“Medevac crews ‘only fly the living,’” *WT*, 11/3/2003)

One might speculate on why this is so. Let us assume that the absence of any explicit marker of grammatical relation in a phrase, be it word order or preposition, induces an unmarked reading assigned to that phrase. In such a context, for example, *November 13, 2014* signifies a point in time, *two hours* signifies a duration, and *Monongahela General Hospital* signifies a place. In the case of quantified phrases, they signify a quantity, though the particular meaning of such phrases is determined on the basis of the composition of their internal constituents; for example, *every day* signifies a frequency and *all day* signifies a duration.

The coreference of the subjects of a matrix clause and its subordinate clause, along with the identity in kind of the predicates of those two clauses, induces a reading in which the referent’s act or motion is quantified. The unmarked reading of a quantified act or motion might be a degree.

The phrase *all one wants* seems to be more recent than the expression *all one can*, as shown in (4):

- (4) a. **1902** H. L. WILSON *Spenders* xxx. 353 People can talk *all they want to* about your bein’ just a dub—I won’t believe ‘em. (OED: s.v. *dub*, n.<sup>6</sup>)  
 b. **1978** W. F. BUCKLEY *Stained Glass* xxi. 206 They can peer into the bowels of the scope *all they want to*. (OED: s.v. *scope*, n.<sup>3</sup>)

If *all one wants* had followed a pattern of emergence similar to that of *all one can*, it might have inherited the attributes of the phrase *all one can* that denotes a degree. This speculation is supported by the fact that *all one wants* lacks a preceding preposition, that *one* is coreferential with the matrix subject, and that *wants* is not followed by a full-fledged predicate phrase. Rare exceptions are cited in (5):

- (5) a. Since it [i.e. climbing the stairs] is inside your house, you can have the privacy *for all you want*. (“The Best and The Simplest Exercises for Weight Loss”)  
 b. Morrell said earlier that the decision to issue a personal appeal was not easy because it could

provoke other extremists “who, *all they want*, is a call from so-and-so.”

(“Florida pastor won’t rule out Koran-burning,” *WT*, 9/9/2010)

In (5b), the predicate that is elided after *all they want* appears to be different from that of the matrix clause of *all they want*. An adequate glossing as in (5b’) would resolve such a discrepancy.

- (5) b’. Morrell said earlier that the decision to issue a personal appeal was not easy because it could provoke other extremists “who [*say*], *all they want*, [it] is a call from so-and-so.”

### 3. Contextual Restrictions

Naturally, one may ask why, with respect to the order of their emergence, *all one can* preceded *all one wants*, rather than the other way around. It is true *all one wants* tends to occur in contexts of a specific kind, as shown in (6):

- (6) a. They *can* criticize us *all they want*. (“Willing to Die to Save Whales,” *LKL*, 7/1/2010)  
 b. “There’s nothing going to come out of it,” Mr. Coburn said of the current talks. “But they are the deal makers and *let* them work it *all they want*.”  
 (“Deadlock on judicial picks spurs ‘nuclear option’ vote on Tuesday,” *WT*, 5/20/2005)  
 c. “They had the *opportunity* to gripe *all they wanted* and they didn’t,” Mr. Warner said.  
 (“Murtha assesses Army as ‘broken,’” *WT*, 12/2/2005)

In (6), the matrix clauses of *all one wants* describe some sort of permission: *opportunity* in (6c) means permission granted within a particular situation. However, *all one can* also tends to occur in contexts of a specific kind, as shown in (7):

- (7) a. You *must* sit still *all you can* and keep your back out of sight; the front is all right. (Alcott: 24)  
 b. *Live all you can*; it’s a mistake not to. (James: Book Fifth, Ch. II)  
 c. I *will* help you *all I can*. (Stratton-Porter: Ch. IX)

In (7), the matrix clauses of *all one can* describe obligation in some way, i.e. by deontic modals (7a, c) and an imperative (7b). Thus, *all one wants* and *all one can* seem to occur in specific contexts, the general pattern of which can be construed as reflections of the meaning of these two phrases: *all one wants* describes a maximal degree of emotional obligation, while *all one can* describes a maximal degree of ability, i.e. permission by qualities. It is probable that the permission of a maximal degree of obligation on the one hand, and the obligation of a maximal degree of permission on the other, both make natural semantic structures.

### 4. Adverbial Phrases

The status of *all one wants* as a latecomer may be ascribed to the diachronic facts of *want* and other related predicates. For instance, consider the development of *as long as one V*, which is approximate in meaning to *all one V*. Predicates of ability appeared as the main predicates of clauses following *as long as* between the 15th and 17th centuries, whereas predicates of emotional obligation did not appear until between the end of the 16th century and the 19th century. Some examples are given in (8) and (9):

- (8) a. (a) 1469 *Paston Lett.* II. 392, I wyle [i.e. will] rubbe on [i.e. get along] *as long as I maye..tyll better pese* [i.e. peace] be. (*OED*: s.v. *rub*, v.<sup>1</sup>)  
 b. 1580 BARET *Alvearie*, [... ..] For when the Dere [i.e. deer] is utterly wearied and out of breath, then is he faine [i.e. glad] (setting himselfe to some hedge, tree, etc.) to stande at defiance against all the houndes barking rounde about him, and to defende himselfe with his hornes, as it were at the sworde poynt, *as long as he is able*. [...] (*OED*: s.v. † *abay*)  
 c. 1658–9 *Burton’s Diary* (1828) IV. 67 They doffed [i.e. put] us off *as long as they could*, and then locked up their doors. (*OED*: s.v. *doff*, v.)  
 d. 1674 BUNYAN *Light in Darkness* II. Wks. (ed. Offor) I. 435 Believing is now sweating work; for Satan will hold *as long as possible*, and only steadfast faith can make him fly.  
 (*OED*: s.v. ‘sweating, ppl. a.)

- (9) a. 1599 A. M. tr. *Gabelhouer's Bk Physicke* 206/1 Put then this oyle in a glasses. Close the glasse verye well, and let it ther [i.e. there] digeste [i.e. dissolve], *as long as pleaseth you*.

(*OED*: s.v. *digest*, v.)

- b. 1819 J. H. NEWMAN *Lett. & Corr.* (1891) I. 42 [At the end of the term he writes] The Fellows have been very kind, have said we might stop up *as long as we like*.

(*OED*: s.v. *stop*, v.; the gloss is from *OED*)

The same applies for the synonymous phrase *as much as one V*. In *OED*, the earliest example involving *as much as* in which the main predicate of the clause introduced by *as much as* is a predicate of ability predates those in which the main predicate is a predicate of emotional obligation by one to three centuries. This is shown in (10) and (11):

- (10) b. 1549 *Ibid.* [i.e. 1549 LATIMER *Serm. bef. Edw. VI* (Arb.)] 113 [The deuyll] goeth about *as much as he can* to corrupt the men of lawe, to make them fal to bribery.

(*OED*: s.v. *bribery*; "[The deuyll]" is from *OED*)

- (11) a. 1641 FRENCH *Distill.* iv. (1651) 95 Take of Honey well despumated [i.e. purified] *as much as you please*.

(*OED*: s.v. *despumate*, v.)

- b. 1848 THACKERAY *Van. Fair* li, We may abuse a man *as much as we like*, and call him the greatest rascal unhanged—but do we wish to hang him therefore?

(*OED*: s.v. *un'hanged*, ppl. a.)

The relevant examples registered in *OED* of *the best one V* are limited to those with a predicate of ability or permission as *V*, as in (12):

- (12) a. 1528 in Strype *Eccl. Mem.* I. App. xxiv. 64, He was very sorry, that he could not cumme soner. and now cummen he wold not faile to do *the best he could*

(*OED*: s.v. *come*, v.)

- b. *Ibid.* [i.e. 1784 COWER *Task*] iv. 768 Compensating his loss By supplemental shifts, *the best he may*.

(*OED*: s.v. *compensate*, v.)

This may have come from the incompatibility of meaning between *want* and other related predicates on the one hand, and *well* on the other.

Why had expressions that described the ultimate degree of emotional obligation not appeared until some time between the 17th and 19th centuries? It is suggestive that this period roughly coincides with the Age of Enlightenment, which placed a greater focus on the individual and on the fulfillment of desires. Consequently, one can speculate that it is as a result of the prevailing currents of this period that the ultimate degree of emotional obligation began to be expressed in writing at this time.

## 5. Conclusion

There appears to have been no object ellipsis involved in the emergence of the adverbial phrase *all one wants*, because it is less likely that an argument would abdicate to become an adjunct. This expression appears to have been derived from *all one can*, as the two share some attributes in common. The different contextual restrictions on these two expressions reflect their different meanings. The order in which these two expressions emerged can be seen reflected in the origins of some adverbial phrases whose subordinate clauses have the main predicates that belong to the same semantic classes as do *want* and *can*.

## A Note

<sup>1</sup> Tani (1996) offers an extensive survey of "adverbial noun phrases." Examples involving *all one wants* and *all one can* are also recorded in this survey (p. 170).

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