

Modelling the SOC in Contemporary American English

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Little attention has been paid to the English Superlative Objoide Construction (SOC). The historical grammarians Jespersen (1909–1949) and Poutsma (1904–1926) are the only ones who do touch on the SOC, and they do so in passing, relying on what seem to be the prototypical examples of the construction (see 1-3). This empirical evidence, though valuable for a first characterization of the pattern, is insufficient to provide a detailed analysis of the form, function, frequency, and distribution of the SOC in Present Day English. This is the aim of this presentation.

- (1) She **worked** *her hardest*.
- (2) She **smiled** *her prettiest*.
- (3) The Beaconfire **blazed** *its brightest*.

(Jespersen 1909-1949: III, § 12.2: 234; with slight modifications)

Based on usage-based data from the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA, Davies 2008), it will be argued that the SOC qualifies as a form-meaning pairing in the traditional Goldbergian (1995) sense. The SOC has unusual syntax [Sub_i V_{TRANS/INTRANS} Obj_j] and lacks compositionality. It involves transitive verbs such as *do* and *try*, but also originally intransitive verbs of manner of action (e.g. *work*, *smile*, *blaze*, etc.), followed by an inflectional superlative (*her hardest*, *her prettiest*, *its brightest*, etc.) that, despite taking the form of a nominalized adjective and occupying the object slot, lacks an overt, formally expressed nominal head, and conveys the pragmatic meaning of intensification; contrary to analytical superlatives with *most* in superficially comparative constructions of the type *Kim is a most enthusiastic supporter*, inflectional superlatives are only exceptionally used to express intensification rather than set comparison (Huddleston 2002).

The more than 10,000 SOC's attested and manually analysed reveal that the SOC is a low-frequency phenomenon endowed with a set of highly entrenched, lexicalized units involving the inflectional superlative *best*, as in *do [X] best*, *try [X] best*, *look [X] best*, etc. To judge from their frequency, besides *do*, the prototypical verbs of the SOC are the transitive verb of effort *try*, and the intransitive (copular) stative verb *look*. These verbs account for 90% of the overall data and simple collexeme analysis (Gries 2022) places them at the top in the rank of distinctive collocates of the construction. The SOC counts in this way as a polysemous construction structured around two core meanings: (i) "to be in one's best state or condition" featuring copular verbs such as *look* or *feel*, and (ii) "to do X at one's highest standard or level" involving action verbs like *do* or *try*. This second sense is the most productive in terms of both type and token frequencies. The verb-objoide combinations *work [X] hardest*, *try [X] hardest*, *hit [X] lowest*, *try [X] damnedest*, *give [X] best*, and *smile [X] sweetest* are, in fact, among the most strongly attracted co-varying collexemes of the construction. Finally, the SOC also qualifies as a polyfunctional construction (Fernández, Gras, and Brisard 2021). It is characteristic of informal registers, most particularly blogs and magazines, where the construction, similarly to other analogous valency-changing constructions like the Reaction Object Construction (ROC; Bouso 2021), can be easily accommodated to serve emotive, conative, phatic, and even reporting functions.

Keywords: Superlative Objoide Construction, intensifying comparative construction, polysemous construction, polyfunctional construction

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