

English prepositional verbs emerged through constructionalisation

Eva Zehentner, University of Zurich, eva.zehentner@es.uzh.ch

The present paper reports on a quantitative corpus study on the development of prepositional verbs such as *insist on*, *look at*, or *deal with* in the history of English, specifically from Middle to Late Modern English (1150-1900). The main focus is on issues relating to constructionalisation processes and the modelling of (loss of) phrase boundaries in construction grammar approaches.

Despite precursors of prepositional verbs being found in earlier texts, they only had their ‘breakthrough’ in early Middle English, as “on the whole the appearance of the prepositional verbs on the linguistic stage seems to have been rather sudden” (Claridge 2000: 89). Their development is typically connected to the loss of prefixed verbs as well as a tightening of constituent order restrictions and general increase in prepositional patterns around the same time. The innovative verb-PP combinations are typically analysed as tightly integrated in that the preposition is supposed to have a very close association with the verb, or is ‘part of’ the verb, suggesting that a re-analysis of phrase boundaries (or re-bracketing) from [V + PP[P + NP]] to [[V + P] + NP] took place (Denison 1981, 1985; Claridge 2000; Anthonissen 2021; also Inada 1981; Seoane 1999; Goh 2000). This is supported by evidence from the development of the prepositional passive, prepositional stranding, and prepositional ellipsis (Denison 1981, 1985, 1993; Dreschler 2015; Nykiel 2015; Anthonissen 2021). The prepositional verbs are furthermore typically less compositional than combinations of verbs and other PP-types (especially more adjunct-like elements). For these reasons, the emergence of prepositional verbs has often been discussed in terms of grammaticalisation and lexicalisation processes (e.g. Brinton & Traugott 2005).

Although phenomena such as the emergence of the prepositional passive have been studied in comparatively great detail, however, larger-scale empirical investigations of the diachrony of English prepositional verbs as such are mostly lacking to date. The present paper addresses this by drawing on a subset of a broader dataset of all verb-attached PPs (N=ca. 400,000) in the Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpora of Historical English (PPCME2; PPCEME; PPCMBE), restricted to prepositional verbs listed in Visser (1963) and Claridge (2000). These instances are then coded for a range of variables including association strength between verb and preposition, position of the PP relative to the verb (assuming that the more closely semantically connected to a verb a preposition is, the more adjacent to the verb it will be; e.g. Hawkins 2000, 2004), and others. Using collocation analyses (Stefanowitsch & Gries 2004; Flach 2021) and regression modelling (Winter 2019), among other things, it is shown that the emergence of prepositional verbs follows along well-established paths of constructionalisation (Traugott & Trousdale 2013), including a reduction in variability of prepositions used with specific verbs, and increasingly strong positional preferences (cf. also Hundt 2001; Rostila 2004, 2018 on prepositional verbs in German). Based on these results, the paper then also comments on open questions regarding how traditional structuralist notions of phrase structure and boundaries can be incorporated into constructionist accounts, and their implications for investigations of diachronic change.

References

- Anthonissen, Lynn. 2021. *Individuality in language change*. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110725841>.
- Brinton, Laurel & Elizabeth Traugott. 2005. *Lexicalization and language change*. Cambridge: CUP.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511615962>.
- Claridge, Claudia. 2000. *Multi-word verbs in Early Modern English. A corpus-based study*. Amsterdam: Rodopi. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004333840>.
- Denison, David. 1981. Aspects of the history of group-verbs: With particular attention to the syntax of the Ormulum. PhD diss., Oxford University.
- Denison, David. 1985. Why Old English had no prepositional passive. *English Studies* 66 (3). 189-204.
- Denison, David. 1993. *English historical syntax*. London: Longman.
- Dreschler, Gea. 2015. *Passives and the loss of verb second: A study of syntactic and information structural factors*. Utrecht: LOT.
- Flach, Susanne. 2021. Collostructions: An R implementation for the family of collostructional methods. Package version v.0.2.0, <https://sfla.ch/collostructions/>.
- Goh, Gwang-Yoon. 2000. The synchrony and diachrony of the English prepositional passive: Form, meaning and function. PhD diss. Ohio State University.
- Hundt, Markus. 2001. Grammatikalisierungsphänomene bei Präpositionalobjekten in der deutschen Sprache. *Zeitschrift für germanistische Linguistik* 29. 167-191.
- Inada, Toshiaki. 1981. Problems of reanalysis and preposition stranding. *Studies in English Linguistics* 9. 120-31.
- Nykiel, Joanna. 2015. Semantic dependencies and the history of ellipsis alternation. In Michael Adams, Laurel Brinton & Richard Fulk (eds.), *Studies in the history of the English language: Evidence and method in histories of English*, 51-70. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110345957.51>.
- PPCEME=Kroch, Anthony, Beatrice Santorini & Lauren Delfs. 2004. The Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Early Modern English. Department of Linguistics, University of Pennsylvania, first edition, release 3. <http://www.ling.upenn.edu/ppche/ppche-release-2016/PPCEME-RELEASE-3>.
- PPCMBE=Kroch, Anthony, Beatrice Santorini and Ariel Diertani (2016). The Penn Parsed Corpus of Modern British English. Department of Linguistics, University of Pennsylvania, second edition, release 1. <https://www.ling.upenn.edu/ppche/ppche-release-2016/PPCMBE2-RELEASE-1/>.
- PPCME2=Kroch, Anthony, Ann Taylor & Beatrice Santorini. 2000. The Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Middle English. Department of Linguistics, University of Pennsylvania, second edition, release 4. <https://www.ling.upenn.edu/ppche/ppche-release-2016/PPCME2-RELEASE-4/>.
- Rostila, Jouni. 2004. Towards a construction approach to grammaticalization in prepositional objects. In Marja Nenonen (ed.), *Papers from the 30th Finnish Conference of Linguistics*, 192-200. Joensuu: University of Joensuu.
- Rostila, Jouni. 2018. Argument structure constructions among German prepositional objects. In Hans Boas & Alexander Ziem (eds.), *Constructional approaches to syntactic structures in German*, 406-446. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110457155-011>.
- Seoane, Elena. 1999. The consolidation of the indirect and prepositional passive in Early Modern English: Evidence from the Helsinki Corpus. *Estudios Ingleses de la Universidad Complutense* 7. 119-139.
- Stefanowitsch, Anatol & Stefan Gries. 2003. Collostructions: Investigating the interaction of words and constructions. *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics* 8(2). 209-243.
<https://doi.org/10.1075/ijcl.8.2.03ste>.
- Traugott, Elizabeth C. & Graeme Trousdale. 2013. *Constructionalization and constructional changes*. Oxford: OUP. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199679898.001.0001>.
- Visser, Fredericus. 1963. *An historical syntax of the English language*. Leiden: Brill.
- Winter, Bodo. 2019. *Statistics for linguists: An introduction using R*. London: Routledge.