

A lexicogrammatical approach to participant role alternations in the French Spending frame

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This study presents a diachronic corpus analysis of a semantic role alternation observed in the valence patterns of 28 French lexical items related to spending (e.g. *coût* 'cost', *dépenser* 'spend'). The analysis is grounded in Construction Grammar, which views grammar and lexicon as a continuum of form-meaning pairings of varying specificity known as constructions (Fillmore 1988). The constructional alternation observed in the Spending frame allows the participant role of Goods (e.g. *the cost of materials*) to be replaced by other roles: the Purpose (e.g. *the cost of the operation*), the Seller (e.g. *the cost of suppliers*), or the Cause of Expense (e.g. *the cost of the delays*). These roles index each other and their alternation often reflects a difference of focus rather than a difference of denotation.

In Halliday's (1961) view of a lexicogrammatical continuum, we would expect this alternation to be affected or constrained by traits specific to the lexical items heading the construction. For example, we find more frequent realization of the Purpose in constructions involving *déboursier* 'spend' than *coûter* 'cost' because these words provide different perspectives on the Spending scenario and usually take different types of complements. We might also expect shifts in these patterns over time, as usage impacts constructional probabilities (Halliday 1991).

From the Frantext and MCVF diachronic corpora (ATILF - CNRS & Université de Lorraine, Martineau 2008), I draw a balanced data set of 1,629 tokens representing 28 French lexical items of the Spending frame from the 12th-20th centuries. Annotation of participant roles and statistical analysis using multinomial logistic regression reveals that replacement of Goods in constructional slots by Purpose declined over time while replacement by Cause of Expense increased. Replacement by Seller is consistently rare across the data set.

The decline in Purpose realization is tied to a number of lexical factors, including a decline among the nouns in prepositional support constructions such as *à grand coût* 'at great cost' and a corresponding increase in the frequency of genitive constructions such as *le coût de* 'the cost of'. The former allow nouns to modify a VP representing the Purpose, while the latter take as their complement an NP more frequently representing the Goods. The rise in Cause of Expense realization is related to lexical items that indicate negative sentiment towards the spending scenario, such as *onéreux* 'pricey', affecting other lexical items of the frame. Both shifts are also related to higher levels of Goods replacement in the valence patterns of low-frequency items. Text genre likewise impacts the use of this alternation. For example, replacement of the Goods by the Cause of Expense occurs more frequently in narrative genres where the sentiment of characters is especially relevant.

This case study describes an under-documented type of grammatical alternation that is relevant to other semantic domains and languages. The narrow focus on the French Spending frame demonstrates the degree to which usage of this alternation is lexically variable. Such constructions are thus best analysed under a lexicogrammatical perspective where a number of semantic, textual, lexical, and grammatical features are considered together.

References

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