

## Alternations Emerge and Disappear: The network of dispossession constructions in the history of English

Eva Zehentner

University of Zurich

[eva.zehentner@es.uzh.ch](mailto:eva.zehentner@es.uzh.ch)

This paper takes a diachronic construction grammar approach to changes in syntactic alternations in the history of English; specifically, it focusses on the question of how to model the disappearance of alternation relationships from a constructionist perspective. This is illustrated by zooming in on the history of a set of ditransitive verbs, viz. dispossession verbs like *steal* or *rob*, in comparison to the well-known English dative alternation.

In Present Day English, dispossession verbs are typically used in either of two prepositional constructions: in the ‘prepositional deprivee construction’ (PDC, 1a), the PP denotes the victim or source, while in (1b), a ‘prepositional theme construction’ (PTC), it is the theme that is marked by a preposition. Importantly, despite expressing similar events, the two constructions cannot be said to alternate in the strictest sense, as individual verbs do not vary between them (Levin 1993; Goldberg 1995). The constructions are furthermore associated with different prepositions (*from* vs *of*) and complementary object orders.

- (1) a. They stole cake **from the students**.
- b. They robbed **the students** of cake.

However, interchangeability between the two prepositional patterns seems to have still been given in earlier stages of English (Visser 1963). Moreover, dispossession verbs could also be used in a double-object nominal construction in earlier English (DOC, 2), linking this verb class’ history to the development of the English dative alternation. As shown in e.g. Coleman & De Clerck (2011), this nominal option has since been lost.

- (2) For dronkenesse bireveth **hym** the discrecioun of his wit.  
    ‘For drunkenness robs him [of] the discretion of his wit.’  
    (CMCTPARS,316.C2.1212)

The precise development of this verb class and particularly the PP-patterns associated with it is nevertheless to-date largely unaccounted for. The present paper aims to address this lack by means of a quantitative corpus analysis of tokens of a set of dispossession verbs in the *Penn-Parsed Corpora of Historical English* (PPCME2, PPCEME, PPCMBE), covering a time span from 1150 to 1914.

I first show that DOC uses of dispossession verbs greatly decrease in Middle English already; in a second step, I then use Multiple Correspondence Analysis (Greenacre 2017) to investigate the overlap between the three construction types in terms of a range of features such as verb lemma, order, or preposition type, as well as semantic-pragmatic variables of the arguments like animacy or definiteness, and changes therein. The results suggest that (a) the loss of the DOC may have been motivated by the great functional similarity between this pattern and the PTC, and (b) that from Early Modern English onwards, PDC and PTC increasingly differentiate from each other, to a point where each pattern comes to be exclusively associated with particular verbs, prepositions and other features, and there is no variation to speak of anymore. I model these developments as changes in the network of dispossession constructions over time, giving

particular attention to the emergence and loss of ‘allostructional’ relationships as outlined in Cappelle (2006) and Perek (2015), as well as the concept of ‘niche construction’ (Traugott & Trousdale 2013).

## References

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