go to church or *die in prison*: tracing V-PP combinations with bare institutional nouns in the history of English

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In this paper, we trace the development of V-PP combinations with bare institutional/location nouns over time. Specifically, we focus on PP-patterns with singular nouns in which the determiner is omitted, as the noun has lost some of its referentiality and instead typically expresses an activity, as in *at school* ('studying'), *in prison* ('serving time'), *to church* ('attending mass'). Payne and Huddleston (2002: 409-410) discuss these constructions as "restricted non-referential interpretations of bare NPs", while Quirk et al. (1985: 277-281) list the patterns as special cases of "quasi-locative" phrases with zero-article use. The constructions have received considerable attention primarily in formalist literature, typically drawing on evidence from Present Day English(es) (e.g. Bolinger 1996; Baldwin et al 2006; Stvan 2007, 2009; Berezowski 2009; De Swart & Zwarts 2009; Hundt 2018). However, no corpus-based investigation into the diachrony of the expressions exists so far. In this paper, we aim to fill this gap by analyzing their historical development from Middle English to Late Modern English.

Our empirical data come from a larger dataset of verb-attached PPs extracted from the *Penn-Helsinki Corpora* (PPCME2, PPCEME, PPCMBE2). This set was filtered to retain combinations of any verb and preposition followed by a bare singular institutional noun, including, for example, *board, church, college, court, deck, hospital, prison, school, sea, stage, theatre,* or *town,* in either of the three periods. Examples (1-2) illustrate the phenomenon for two of these nouns in Middle and Early Modern English.

(1) an angel **entryngge into prysoun** turnede derknesse into liȝt (ME23, 1400; cmaelr3)

(2) many on **goth to churche** as moche for other thyngys as for deuocyon (EME1, 1526; merrytal-e1-p1)

We first investigate the patterns' distribution over time in terms of both token and type frequency. Furthermore, we use collostructional analyses (Stefanowitsch & Gries 2003; Schmid & Küchenhoff 2013) to assess (changes in) differences in association strength between specific verb-preposition-noun combinations, to identify combinations of greater or lower compositionality (e.g. *go to school* vs *read in school*). In a next step, we code all instances for semantic type, most importantly 'definite' contexts versus 'prototypical activity' readings, and test the impact of various factors (such as collocational attraction, but also syntactic features like modification potential) on the choice between semantic types, by means of mixed-effects logistic regression modelling (e.g. Winter 2019).

With regard to theoretical framework, the paper subscribes to a usage-based, cognitive constructional perspective of language change (e.g. Barðdal et al. 2015; Hilpert 2021, Sommerer & Smirnova 2020; Traugott & Trousdale 2013). We argue that the constructions at hand force us to revisit traditional notions of phrase boundaries and compositionality (cf. a similar debate with light verb constructions, e.g. *take a break, get support*). That is, it needs to be discussed whether a classic $[V + [P+ [N]_{NP}]_{PP}]_{VP}$ analysis is warranted here, or if other, 'flatter' template(s) might license these constructs (e.g. $[Prep + N_{sg,location, institution}]_{cxg}$.

Ultimately, we show that the construction has indeed become more type frequent over time, with the number of institutional nouns as well as verbs used in these bare constructions growing in the investigated timeframe. We interpret this as a clear example of increased slot productivity and host-class expansion. At the same time, we demonstrate that there are striking differences in the frequency distribution and level of compositionality of different semantic types, suggesting that we are here dealing with a network of sub-constructions with distinct degrees of schematicity and entrenchment.

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