

English verb complementation over time: from NP to PP or vice versa

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This paper investigates changes in argument structure in the history of English, precisely between Middle and Late Modern English (ca. 1150 to 1900). The main focus is on competition between nominal and prepositional patterns for the expression of any verb-dependent clause argument, assessing the hypothesis that overall, PP-complementation increased in frequency over time as part of the general shift of English from a more synthetic to a more analytic language (e.g. Baugh & Cable 1993). Phenomena such as the emergence of prepositional ditransitives (1) or prepositional transitive patterns (2), younger as their nominal counterparts, as well as prepositional verbs as in (3), which are not attested in earlier English (e.g. Claridge 2000), seem to broadly support this claim. At the same time, the PP-pattern has not in fact ousted the NP-construction in the former cases, but they have come to stand in an alternation relationship, and many prepositional verbs seem to never have had an evident nominal valency (e.g. OED, s.v. *insist*). In yet other cases, NP-variants appear to have replaced earlier PP-options, rather than the other way round (4; OED, s.v. *congratulate*).

(1) They gave cake *to the students*. [They gave *the students* cake.]

(2) They hit *at the ball*. [They hit *the ball*.]

(3) They insisted *on the lemon cake*.

(4) They congratulated *us*. [*They congratulated *with us*.]

In this paper, I use a dataset of all verb-attached NPs and PPs tokens (N=approx. 406,000) extracted from the *Penn Parsed Corpora of Historical English* (PPCME2, PPCEME, PPCMBE2) to investigate these different pathways of development in a systematic way. I employ a multi-state Markov-model, which, as shown by Van de Velde & De Smet (2021), can adequately deal with a range of pertinent issues, including lexical death and back-and-forth trajectories. Following Van de Velde & De Smet's (2021) approach, individual verbs may then maintain their preferred constructional variant, transition from one to the other, or fall out of use entirely; these developments may furthermore be affected by covariate factors such as verb token frequency, semantic class, as well as variability in argument-head types (measured as normalised entropy; Gries 2018). The results demonstrate that while a straightforward NP>PP change – expected based on textbook accounts proposing a shift from syntheticity to analyticity – is indeed not clearly supported by the data, more subtle regularities in the development of verbal complementation over time can still be detected.

References

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