

# Using a constructicon to study constructional change: A case study of the “Verb + *at*” pattern

Florent Perek

University of Birmingham

In recent years, constructicography (Lyngfelt et al. 2018) has emerged as a new branch of construction grammar research that seeks to find and describe constructions in order to build constructicons, i.e. electronic inventories of constructions that capture the grammar of a given language in terms of form-meaning pairs, following the principle of construction grammar theory (Goldberg 1995). This talk reports on a case study that attempts to combine usage-based diachronic construction grammar with early research on the English Constructicon project (Perek & Patten 2019), aimed to be a comprehensive database of English argument structure constructions. The English Constructicon is based on exhaustive lists of verbs attested in *COBUILD Grammar Patterns* (Francis et al. 1996), which are used to posit constructions generalising over semantic groups of verbs at various level of granularity, related in an inheritance network.

This case study investigates recent change in the English “Verb + *at*” pattern, e.g. *She pulled at the rope*. More specifically, it examines how the network of “Verb + *at*” constructions as described in the English Constructicon is populated at different points in time, using data from the Corpus of Historical American English. This allows us to evaluate to what extent the possible generalisations described in the constructicon are likely to hold at different points in time, and in turn to trace changes in the levels of generalisation at which the construction may have existed.

A notable amount of variation is found in the distribution of the construction over the past two centuries. We find in particular that some sub-constructions are gaining in prominence over time, both in their frequency and verb distribution. This includes many verbs expressing body movement or facial expressions (*gesture, wave, nod, beam*), verbs of sound emission (*yell, scream, shout*), and verbs expressing repeated contact and/or non-affectedness in the construction (*dab, scratch, push, poke*), which were unattested or marginal until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century. These data are interpreted in terms of a diachronic shift from lexically specific constructions to more fully formed and productive intermediate-level constructions, which itself leads to a reinforcement of the more general “Directed action” Verb + *at* construction (cf. Barðdal 2008).

Barðdal, J. (2008). *Productivity: Evidence from case and argument structure in Icelandic*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Francis, G., Hunston, S. & Manning, E. (1996). *Collins COBUILD Grammar Patterns 1: Verbs*. London: HarperCollins.

Goldberg, A. (1995). *Constructions: A construction grammar approach to argument structure*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lyngfelt, B., Borin, L., Ohara, K. & Torrent, T. (eds.) (2018). *Constructicography: Constructicon development across languages*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.

Perek, F. & Patten, A. (2019). Towards an English Constructicon using patterns and frames. *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics*, 24(3), 354–384.