

Wiping the slate: a corpus study of an English argument structure alternation

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Abstract: Levin (1993) delineates a series of verb classes in English based upon the syntactic alternations which each class may undergo. In her study, she distinguishes between a *clear*-class and a *wipe*-class. The former can freely undergo a version of the so-called “locative alternation” involving removal of an object (or locatum) from a location.

- (1) Levin (1993:52)
 - a. Henry cleared dishes from the table. (locative variant)
 - b. Henry cleared the table of dishes. (*of* variant)

In the (1a) variant, the object being removed (*dishes*) is expressed as the complement of the verb *cleared*, while in (1b), the location itself (*the table*) acts as the complement.

Wipe, however, does not show this same flexibility in its syntactic frames.

- (2) Levin (1993:53)
 - a. Helen wiped the fingerprints off the wall. (locative PP variant)
 - b. Helen wiped the wall (*of fingerprints). (locative object variant).

Levin goes on to identify another 55 verbs which pattern with *wipe* in this respect according to her judgment. In the present study, I intend to subject these verbs to a quantitative, corpus-based test, in order to determine if they do in fact pattern together as a coherent lexical class.

The utility of corpus studies in the investigation of argument structure alternations has been demonstrated by McKoon and Macfarland (2000) and Wright (2001, 2002). These authors utilized large corpora in order to examine a proposed distinction between an internally and externally caused class of change-of-state verbs. It had been claimed that only the latter class may participate in the causative alternation (Levin and Rappaport Hovav, 1995).

- (3) externally caused
 - a. The cup broke.
 - b. John broke the cup.
- (4) internally caused
 - a. The tree blossomed.
 - b. *The gardener blossomed the tree.

In these corpus studies, however, it was shown that this distinction actually

does not completely capture which verbs will undergo the alternation, as the internally caused class may still appear with abstract causers as subjects.

- (5) Wright (2002:341)
Early summer heat blossomed fruit trees across the valley.

Taking such studies as inspiration, I plan to utilize the spaCy parser to extract all tokens of the [V [NP [*of* NP]]] construction from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) for the 56 *wipe*-class verbs listed in Levin (1993). This data will then be compared to all tokens of the locative variant [V [NP [*from* NP]]] for the same set, in order to investigate any statistical regularities exhibited by these verbs. Based on the results of this study, it may be possible to reach a more empirically grounded understanding of the lexical restrictions associated with this instantiation of the locative alternation in English.

References

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