

On the history of permissive *get*  
in American English:  
New quantitative evidence

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# English *get* – a linguistic Swiss Army knife

- lexical meaning of ‘receiving’
  - *Look what I got for my birthday!*
- the *get*-passive
  - *Nobody move, nobody get hurt.*
- the *get*-causative
  - *Can I get you to deliver a message?*
- inchoative *get*
  - *It gets worse and worse.*
- idiomatic uses
  - *I get up at seven, I don't get it.*

# Permissive *get*

- (1) In the movies the prisoners always get to make one phone call.
- (2) This is a big day for the guards. They get to remind us who's boss.
- (3) I want to be a Marine. They get to wear swords, right?

- modal use of *get* that expresses permission (*may, can*)
  - a permitted action
    - They get to make one phone call. = 'They are allowed to make one phone call.'
  - an opportunity
    - They get to remind us. = 'They have the opportunity to remind us.'
  - a privilege
    - They get to wear swords. = 'They have the privilege of wearing swords.'

# Questions

- When and how did permissive *get* emerge?
- What has been said about permissive *get* in earlier work?
- Can we use corpus data and distributional semantics to better understand how the construction developed?

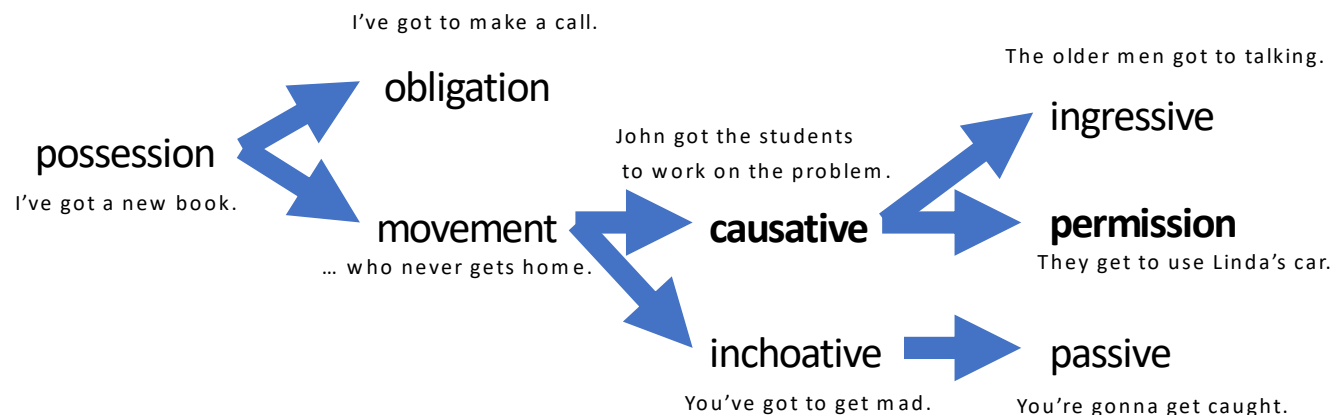
# Overview

- Two conflicting accounts of permissive *get*:
  - The causative-to-permissive pathway (Gronemeyer 1999)
  - The acquisitive-to-permissive pathway (Van der Auwera et al. 2009)
- An alternative hypothesis:
  - The inchoative-to-permissive pathway
- Data
  - Permissive *get* in the COHA
- Distributional evidence
  - Developments in the semantic spaces of inchoative *get* and permissive *get*
- Conclusions

Two conflicting accounts

# The causative-to-permissive pathway

- Gronemeyer (1999: 1):
  - «Using diachronic data, I show that possession leads to movement as well as stative uses (possession and obligation), movement develops into the causative and inchoative, from which the passive develops, and **the infinitival causative gives rise to permission** and ingressive aspect.»



# The causative-to-permissive pathway

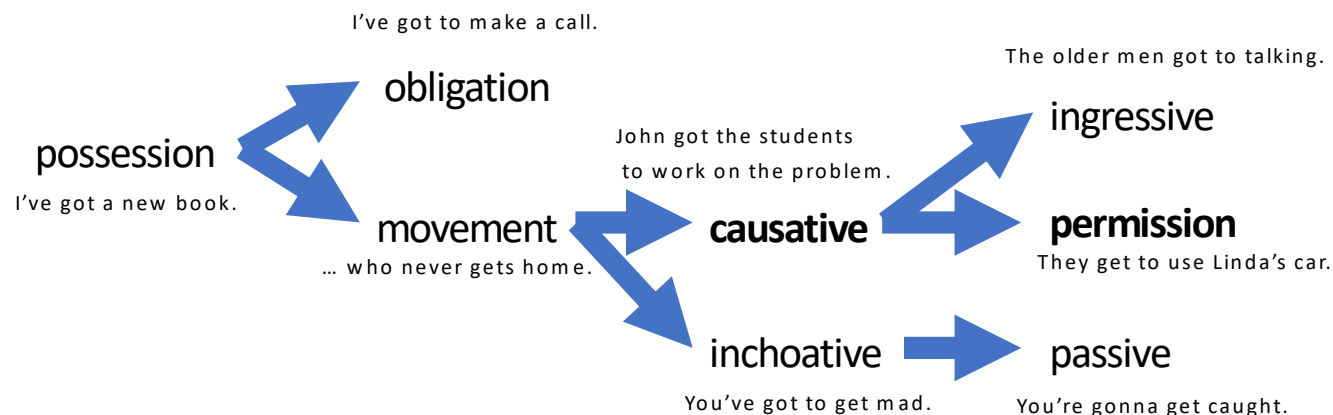
## 4.7.1 get to be

The precursor to both the permission and ingressive constructions is first found around 1600, as in (86) and (87):

- (86) By what means got's(t) thou to be releas'd. (Shakespeare, *Henry VI*. 1591. (*OED get* 32a))  
'by what means you got released'
- (87) He was once presented for perjury, but he got to be a chaplain in one of the king's ships (Burnet, *Burnet's History of my own Time. Part I: The reign of Charles the Second*. 1703)

Gronemeyer (1999: 30):

causative: *I got him to be a chaplain.*  
permissive: *He got to be a chaplain.*





# The acquisitive-to-permissive pathway

- Van der Auwera et al. (2009: 284):  
«Gronemeyer (1999: 30-32, 35) actually claims that what she calls ‘permissive’ *get* derives from ‘causative’ *get*, illustrated in (23), a use which definitely refers to a participant-internal, causative force.

(23) John got me to clean his car.

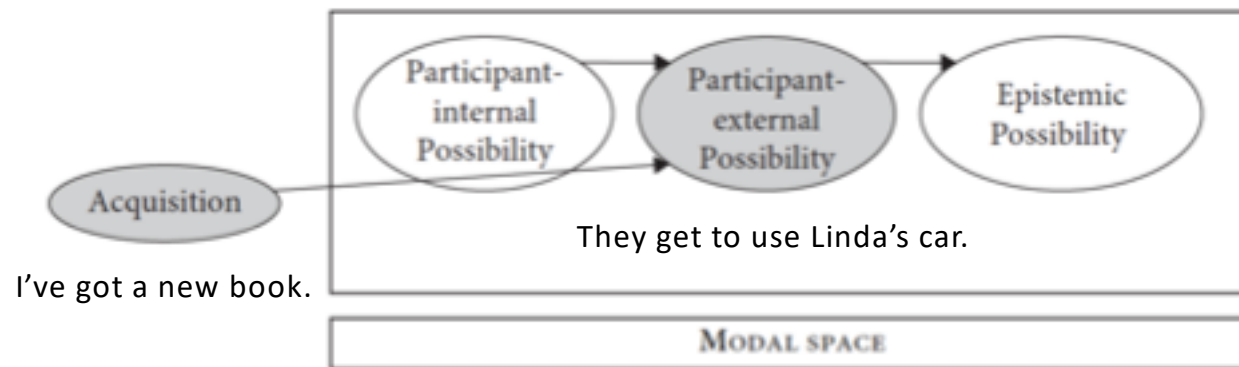
This is not very plausible though.»

# The acquisitive-to-permissive pathway

- Van der Auwera et al. (2009: 272):
  - «*get* lends itself easily to the expression of [...] permission, and [...] **it is plausible to relate this usage** diachronically **to** a lexical verb meaning ‘acquire’.»

\* I get to swim. ‘I can swim.’

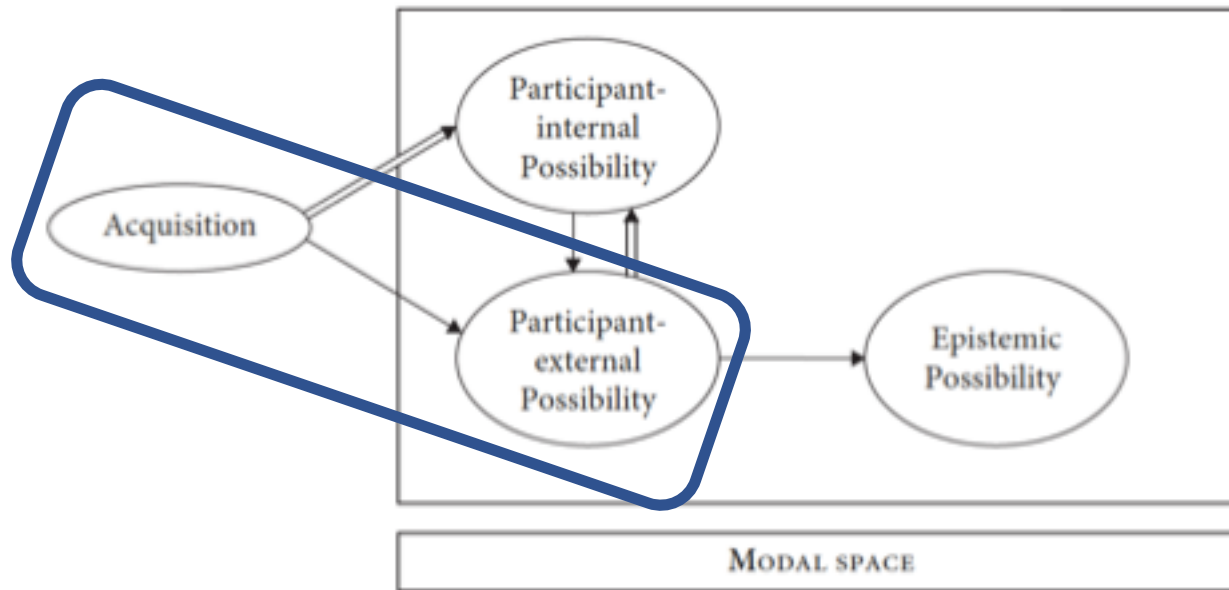
\* He gets to be the murderer. ‘He could be the murderer.’



Map 7. From acquisition to participant-external possibility

# The acquisitive-to-permissive pathway

Cross-linguistic data shows robust evidence for acquisition >> permission.



Map 10. The bidirectionality between participant-internal and participant-external possibility

An alternative hypothesis

# The inchoative-to-permissive pathway

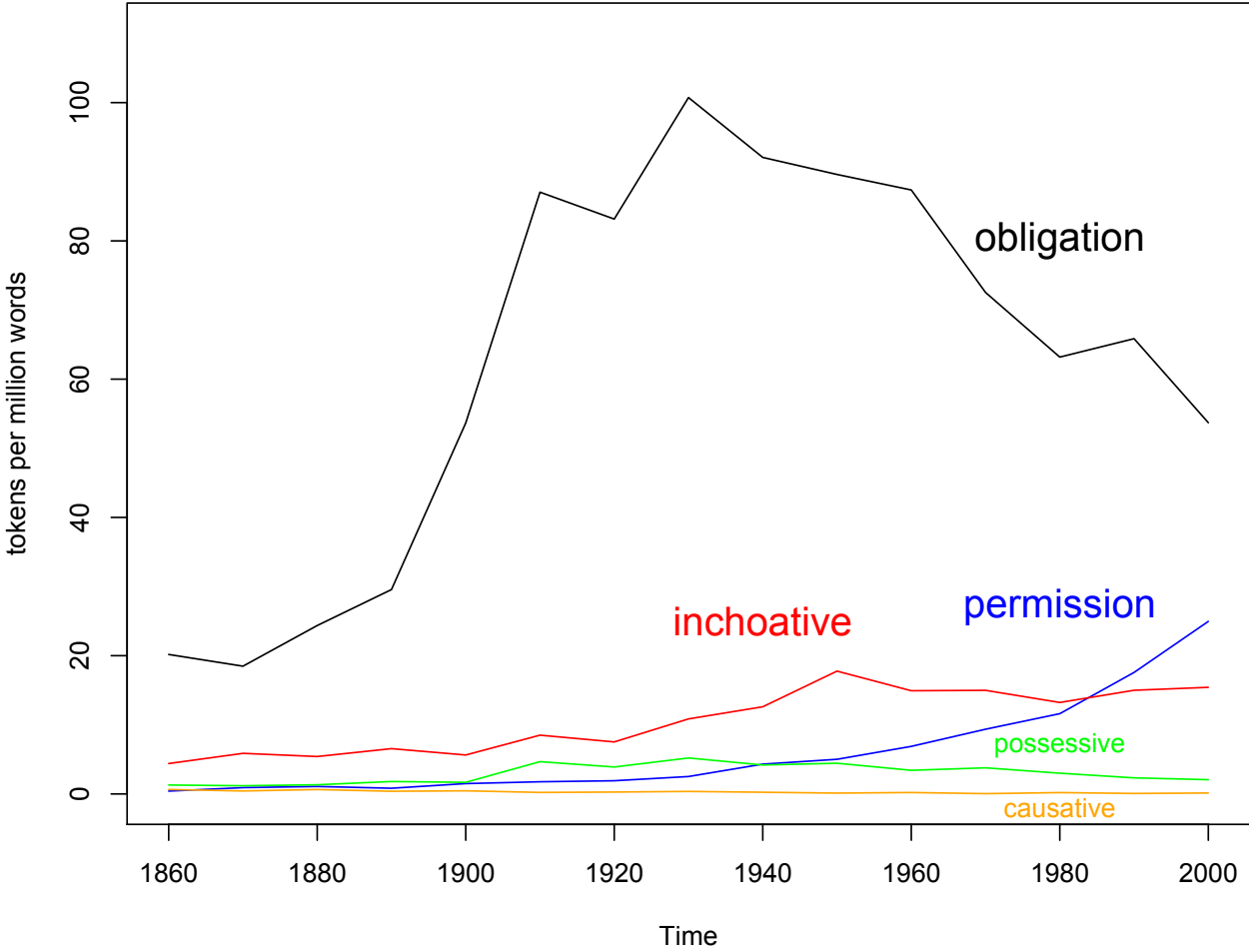
- A central meaning of *get*: change of state, onset of a new activity or state of affairs
  - *It gets worse and worse.*
  - *I got into the habit.*
  - *You're getting to be a big girl now.*
- «Privileged» inchoatives
  - *I guess we won't get to see Colonel Morrison after all. (1910s)*
  - *Some day she'd get to be an editor herself. (1930s)*
  - *Oh thank you and you'll get to meet our new minister then sure! (1900s)*
- Bridging contexts between change of state and permission:
  - verbalized message: a change of state occurs
  - implicature: the change of state was granted by some authority

Data from the COHA

# data

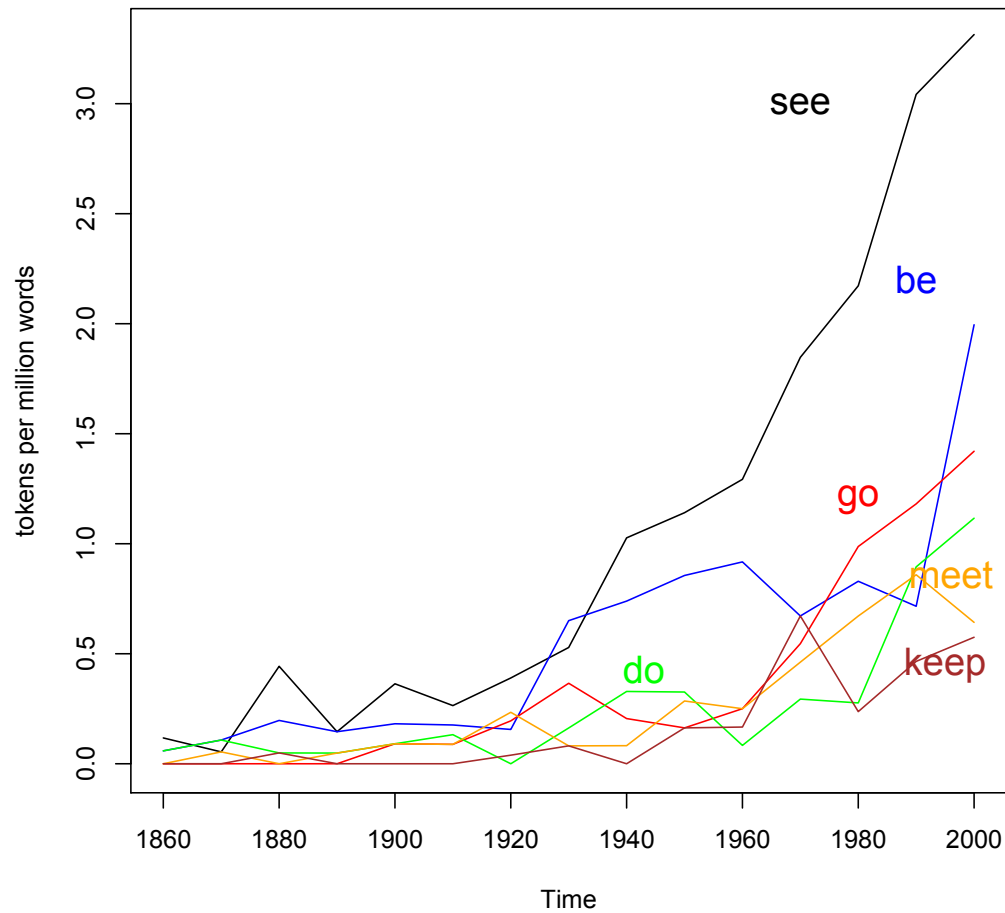
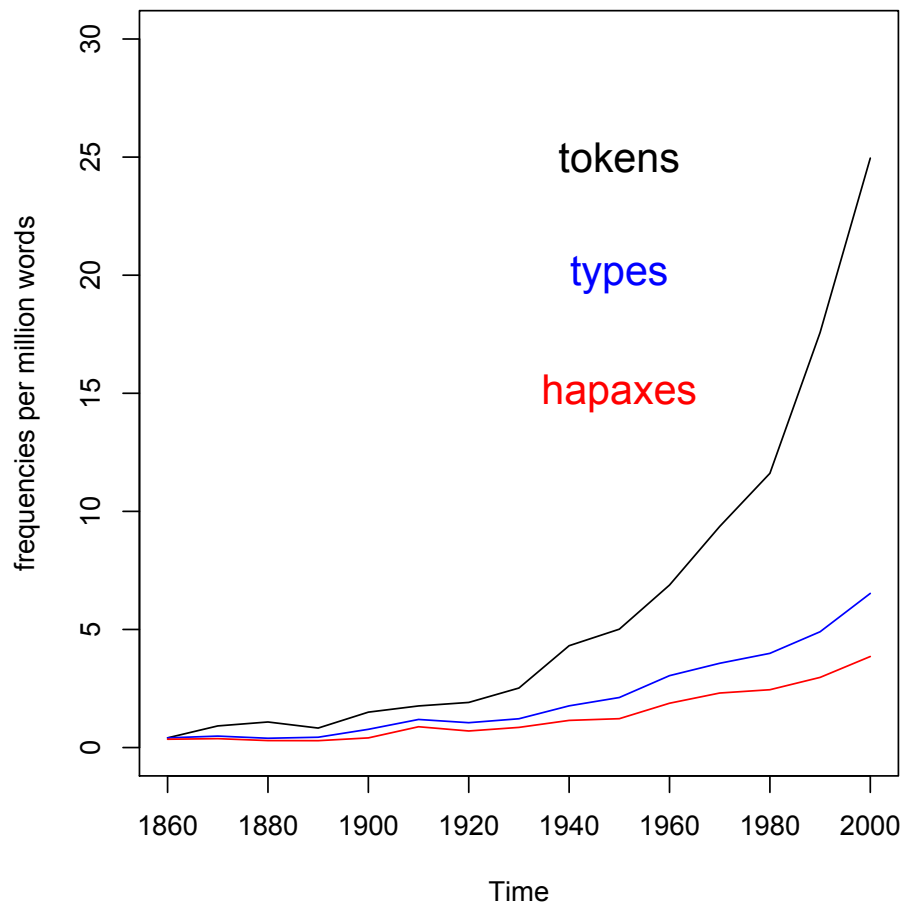
- Exhaustive retrieval of [*get*] + *to* + *Vinf* (n = 31'316)
- Annotation in terms of five semantic categories
  - permission
    - Prisoners get to make one phone call.
  - obligation
    - I got to leave.
  - causative
    - Who did you get to confess?
  - possession
    - What have I got to be ashamed of?
  - inchoative
    - You're getting to be a big girl now.
- Identification of the verb in the infinitive

# frequency developments





# permissive *get*



Distributional evidence

# Distributional evidence

- Hypothesis: permissive “*get to V*” derives from secondary grammaticalization of inchoative “*get to V*”
- Two predictions from the literature:
  - Lexical persistence (Hopper 1991): grammaticalized constructions retain traces of their lexical history (especially initially)
  - Host-class expansion (Himmelman 2004): grammaticalized constructions gradually expand the range of their lexical fillers
- Do the two constructions collocate with similar verb meanings?
- To what extent does permissive *get* emancipate itself from inchoative *get* (if ever)?

# Distributional semantic plots

- Can be examined with distributional semantic plots (Perek 2014; 2016; 2018, Hilpert & Perek 2015)
- Visual representation of the semantic areas occupied by the lexical distribution of a construction
- Based on distributional semantics to capture similarity between word meanings

# Distributional semantics

**“You shall know a word by the company it keeps” Firth (1957: 11)**

- Words that occur in similar contexts tend to have related meanings (Miller & Charles 1991)
- Therefore, a way to characterize the meaning of words is through their distribution in large corpora
- Semantic similarity is quantified by similarity in distribution
- In particular, the frequent collocates of words in a large corpus

# Example: *drink* and *sip*

Sentences from the COCA corpus:

the pizzeria for a while, drinking	a beer at a table
hell, I'd meet you, drink	a glass of beer or
books. She changed her dress, drank	a glass of cold water
Willie picks up his cup, drinks	some coffee, and leaves with
men picked up their beers, sipped	them, and put them back
to trust his intuition. She sipped	from the champagne glass and
food itself. Even when he sipped	his cold beer, it was
Emily was no different. Kate sipped	from her water bottle, then

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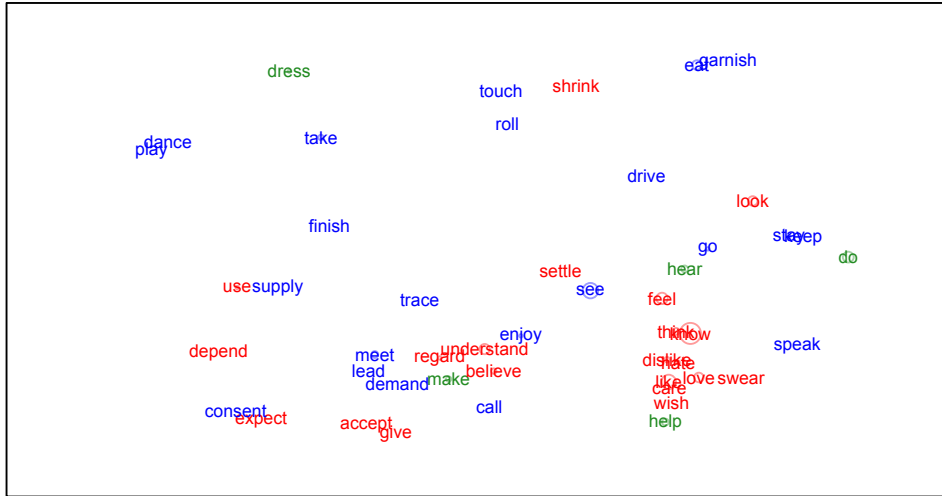
**Containers for beverages**

**Drinking and dining**

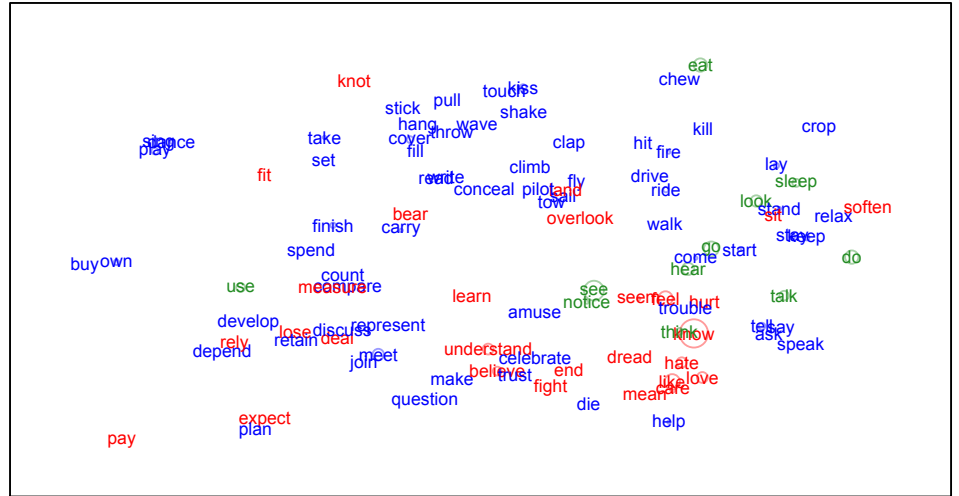
# Distributional semantics

- Co-occurrence data for all verbs extracted from COHA (+/-2 words window)
- Semantic distance between words is measured by the distance between their set of collocates (cosine distance)
- Pairwise distances between words are used to position them in a 2-dimensional plot (MDS, *t*-SNE)

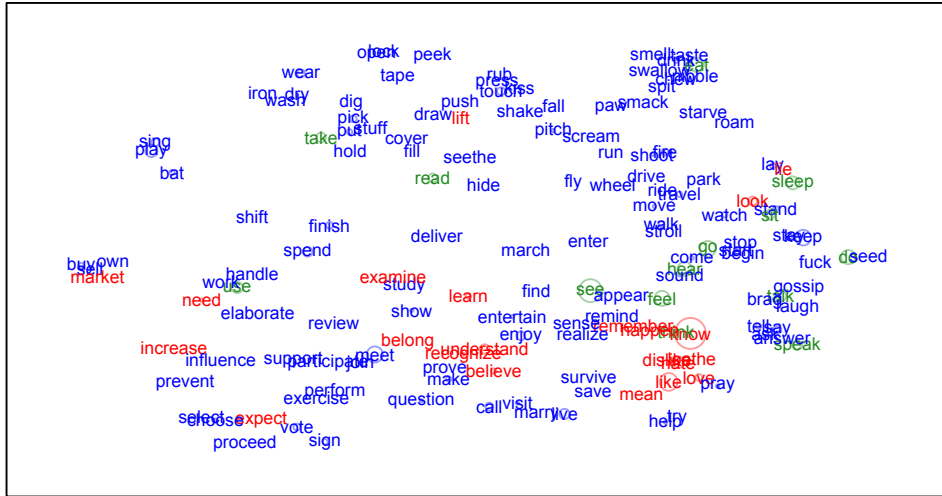
### 1860-1909



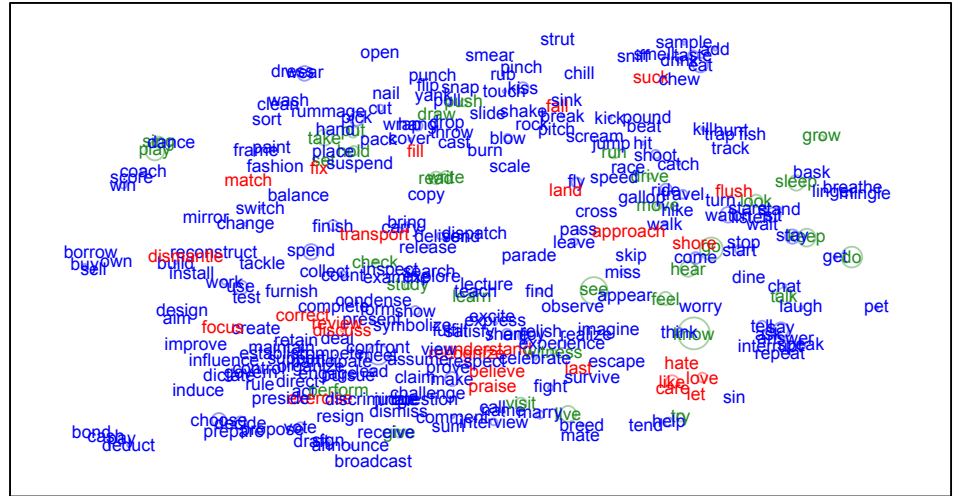
### 1910-1949



### 1950-1979



### 1980-2009



permissive-only    inchoative-only    both

# Distributional semantic plots

- The two uses occupy the same semantic areas in early periods  
=> Lexical persistence
- The semantic domain of permissive *get* expands into different areas over time  
=> Host-class expansion
- But: mere casual observation; how can we measure this?
- Idea: quantifying how similarly the same semantic areas are populated

# Partitioning the semantic space

- How to partition the distributional semantic space into areas?
- Hierarchical clustering: the 389 verbs found in inchoative and/or permissive *get* are sorted according to semantic similarity
- 12 clusters identified as the “best” clustering solution (elbow method); correspond to 12 semantic areas
- NB: similar results with different numbers of clusters around 12

# Examples of verb clusters

- Cluster 1: speech and sound  
say, tell, ask, hear, speak, play, answer, laugh, sing, sound, repeat, etc.
- Cluster 3: emotions and cognition  
know, think, love, remember, prove, enjoy, express, hate, hurt, trouble, entertain, excite, amuse, dread, dislike, sin, relish, loathe, etc.
- Cluster 5: food  
eat, drink, swallow, taste, suck, chew, sniff, nibble, sample, garnish, smell, etc.
- Cluster 9: manipulation and force  
turn, open, throw, wear, shake, pull, drop, pick, touch, lift, push, hit, beat, etc.

# Similarity between distributions

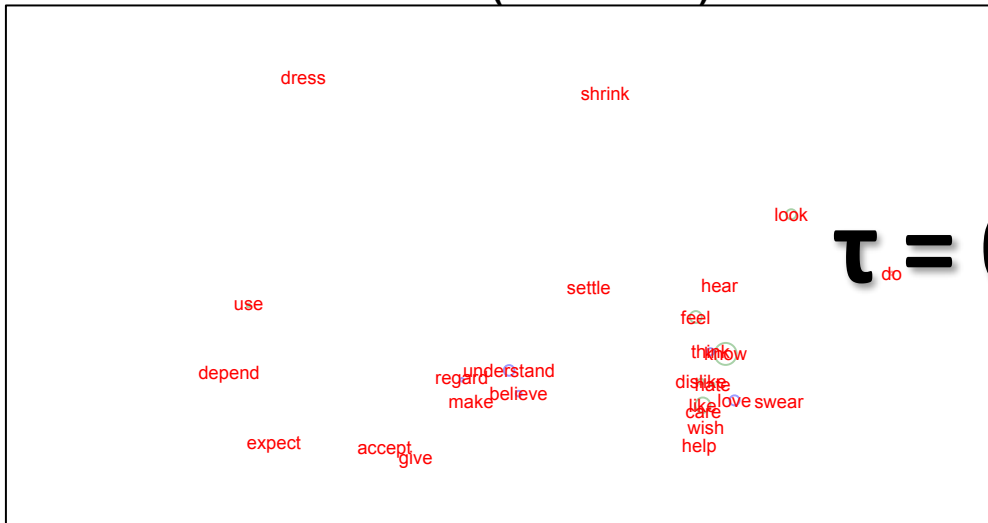
- Are the same areas populated in the same way by the two constructions?
- Verbs in each group are counted in each period and construction

E.g., permissive *get* in period 1 (1860-1909):

<b>Group 1</b>	<b>Group 2</b>	<b>Group 3</b>	<b>...</b>	<b>Group 12</b>
4	3	2		0

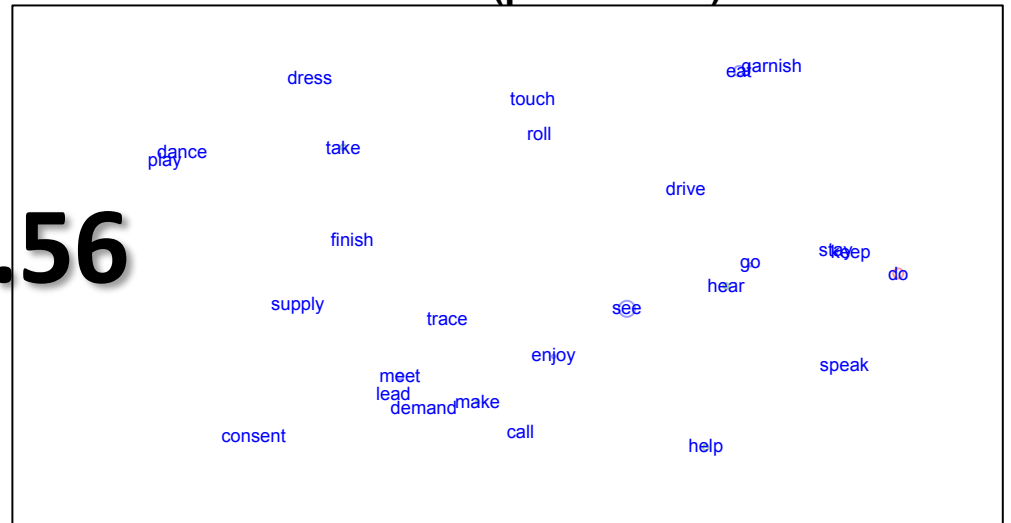
- Correlations (Kendall's tau) can be calculated between sets of counts
  - To measure similarity between the distribution of two constructions at different points in time
  - To quantify change in one construction at different points in time

1860-1909 (inchoative)



$\tau = 0.56$

1860-1909 (permissive)



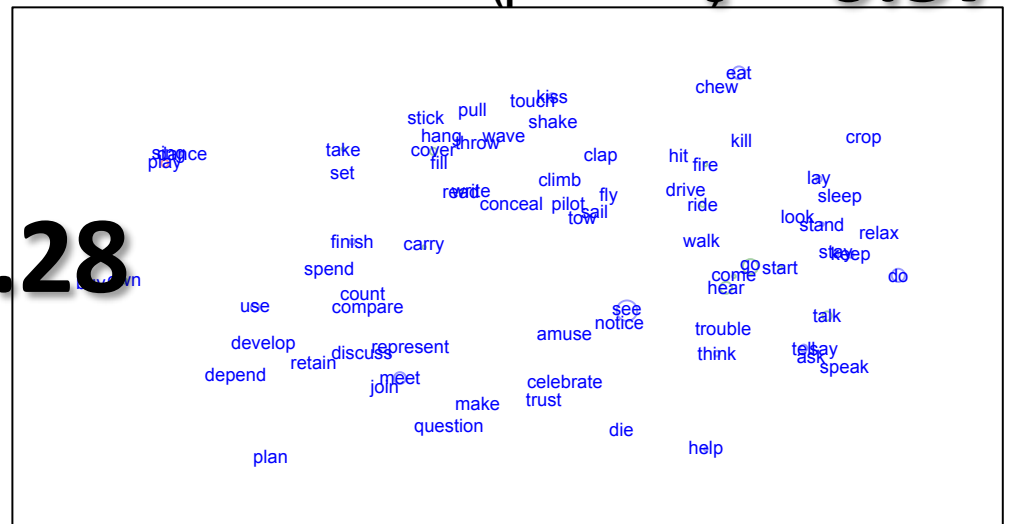
$\tau = 0.68$

1910-1949 (inchoative)



$\tau = 0.28$

1910-1949 (permissive)



$\tau = 0.57$



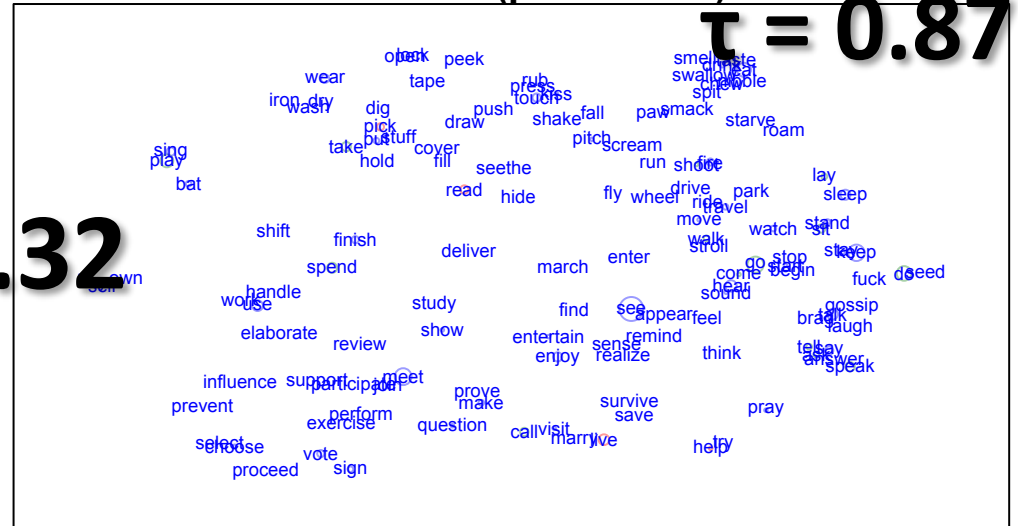
1950-1979 (inchoative)

$\tau = 0.86$



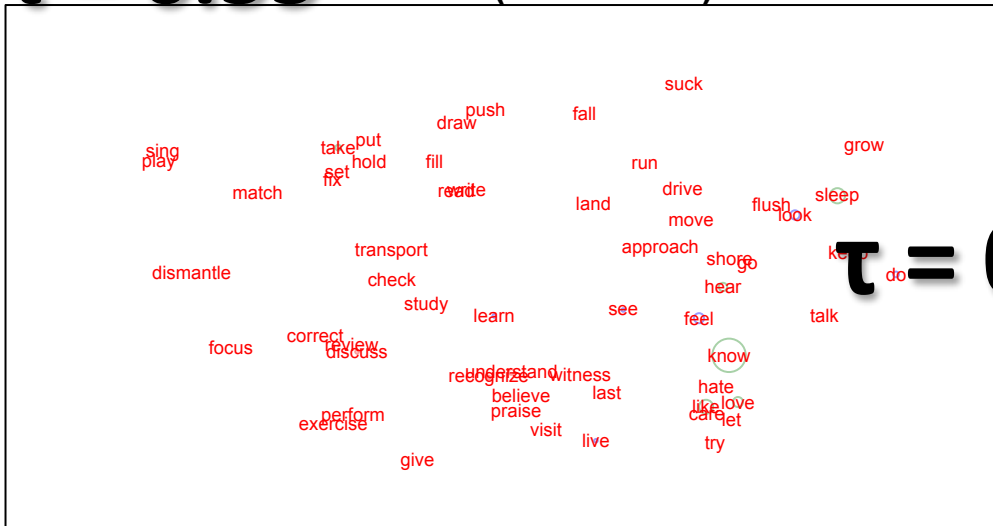
1950-1979 (permissive)

$\tau = 0.87$



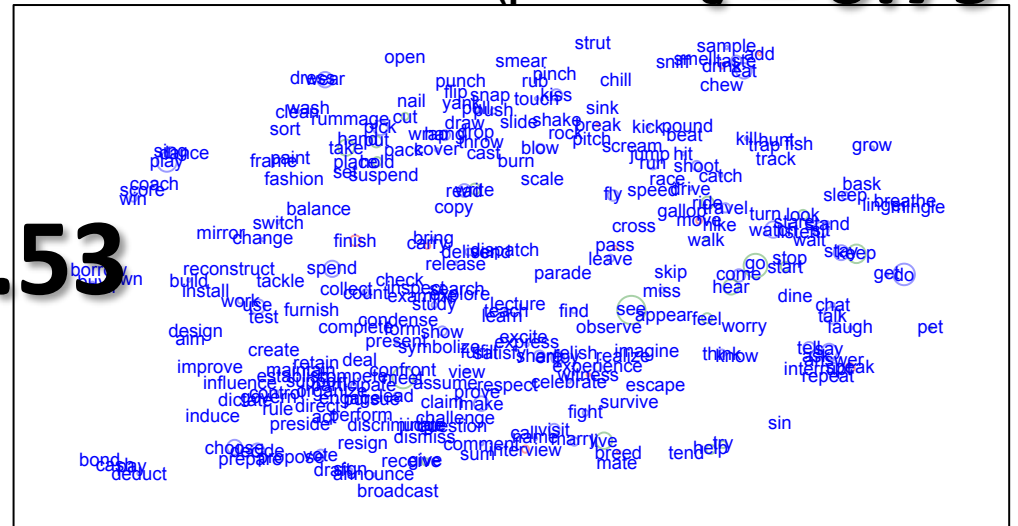
1980-2009 (inchoative)

$\tau = 0.55$



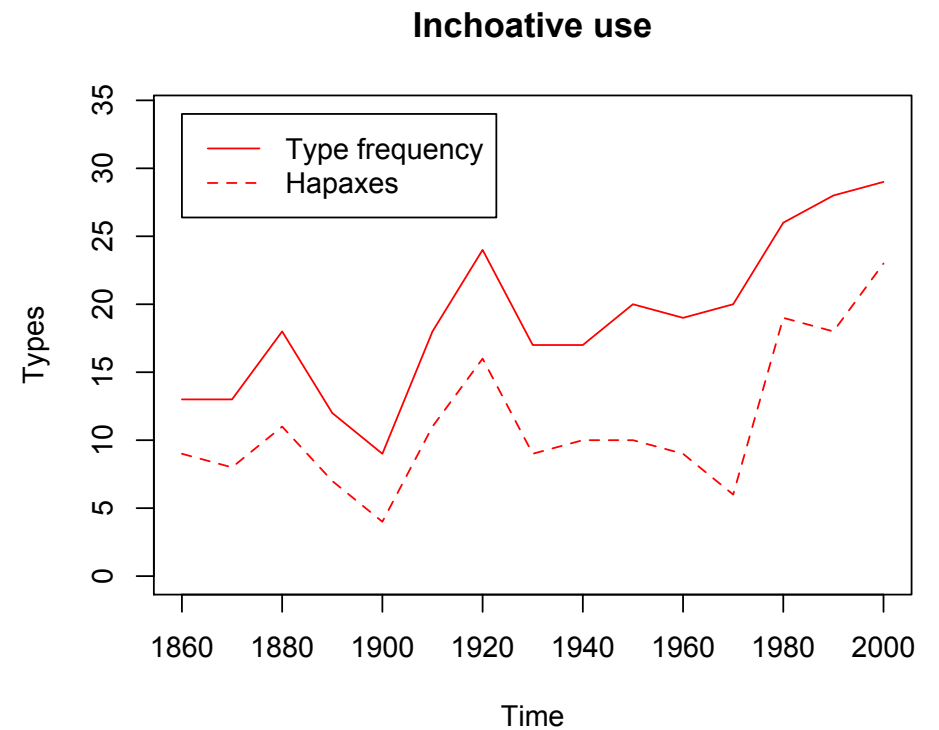
1980-2009 (permissive)

$\tau = 0.79$



# Summary

- Decrease in similarity between inchoative and permissive *get*
- Less change in inchoative *get* than permissive *get*
- Inchoative *get* regains more type in the last period and becomes more similar to permissive *get*



# Conclusions

# Conclusions

- Inchoative *get* is a plausible source for the grammaticalization of permissive *get*
- Bridging contexts are attested between the two uses
- Distributional evidence portrays a typical trajectory of grammaticalization
- New method to compare the semantic spread of constructions, both between constructions and in the same construction over time

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Many thanks!