

Productivity and schematicity of the *way*-construction in Late Modern English

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In this talk, I present a quantitative corpus-based analysis of the recent productivity of the *way*-construction, e.g., *They hacked their way through the jungle* (Goldberg 1995, Israel 1996). In its most common interpretation, the construction conveys the idea that the subject referent creates a path in a way described by the verb, and moves along this path. Data from the Corpus of Historical American English (Davies, 2012) show that while the token frequency of the construction has been relatively stable over the past 180 years, its verb distribution has considerably expanded, as marked by an increase in type frequency. However, the sheer quantitative increase does not indicate whether the productivity of the construction remains in the same semantic domains, or whether the distribution becomes semantically more diverse.

To address this question, I characterize semantic changes in the distribution by means of a distributional semantic model, which captures semantic similarity between verbs through their co-occurrence frequency with other words (Lenci 2008). The pairwise distributional distance scores calculated from the model are used to place verbs in a visual representation, where it is possible to identify cluster of semantically similar verbs and areas of higher and lower semantic density. With this method, the semantic domain of the construction is plotted at different points in time and its diachronic development can be observed (cf. Perek 2014, to appear).

The analysis of the distributional semantic plots shows that while the distribution of the *way*-construction has been maintaining a number of semantic ‘cores’ in line with its origins, it also has significantly gained in semantic diversity. Notably, the construction has attracted verbs of a more abstract kind than the forceful actions it was originally centered on, such as verbs of ingestion (*eat, drink, chew*), verbs of performance (*dance, sing, play*), and verbs of commercial transaction (*buy, spend, pay*), which are less likely to encode actions that are conducive to the literal creation of a physical path. Indeed, the COHA data do indicate that these more abstract verbs tend to correspond to uses of the construction encoding metaphorical motion. These findings are interpreted in terms of a general increase in schematicity in the grammatical representation of the *way*-construction over time, both of the verb slot and of the motion component contributed by the construction (Traugott & Trousdale 2013). As such, the recent history of the *way*-construction perfectly illustrates the tight relation between the meaning of a construction (and in particular its degree of generality) and its lexical distribution in language use.

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