

A Study on the Semantic Preference of English Near-synonymous Suffixes through Linguistic Motion Chart

— taking “-proof” vs. “-resistant” as an example

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Abstract:

Previous studies on constructional alternations mainly focus on lexical, syntactic or discoursal levels. According to Goldberg's (1995) classical claim that “it's constructions all the way down”, this phenomenon should apply to lower levels (e.g.: affixes) as well. On this account, this study explores the variation and changes in frequency distribution and the semantic preference of the nominal stems of two near-synonymous suffixes *-proof* and *-resistant* both diachronically and synchronically based on COHA (1820-2019) and GloWbE corpora. The results are visualized by static linguistic motion chart, through {ggplot2} package in R, following Primahadi-Wijaya-Rajeg and Rajeg's (2018) tradition.

It is shown that in all English varieties, these two suffixes display a distinct division of labor: *bullet-proof* is the most frequently used adjectival compound, followed by nouns related to costumes or means of transportation, whereas *-resistant* mainly collocates with medical and biochemical nominal stems such as *drug*, *antibiotic* and *methicillin*. In American English, the frequency of N-*resistant* increases sharply during the past 20 to 30 years, and it may well become a substitute for N-*proof* compounds in the near future. In other English varieties, due to geographical and sociocultural factors, the nominal stems collocating with these two suffixes boast some unique regional features. For instance, *rabbit-proof* is predominantly used in Australian English, so it is with *earthquake-proof/resistant* in New Zealand English, *fool-proof* in Indian, Kenyan and Singapore English, and *moisture-proof* in Hong Kong English. Apart from American English, in the other 19 English varieties, the type and token frequencies of N-*resistant* are still both relatively low, which displays their conservativeness in language use. Whether they may undergo “Americanization” in the near future remains to be further observed.

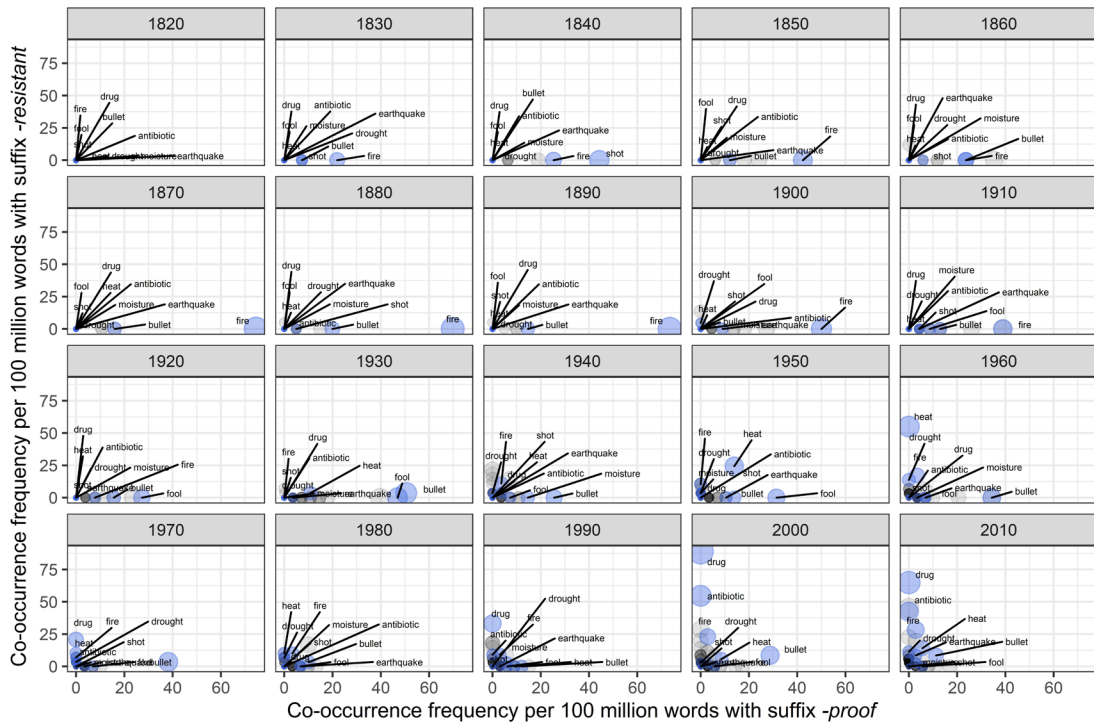


Figure 1 Frequency distribution of nominal stems cooccurring with “-proof” and “-resistant” in COHA (1820-2019) (excluding two outliers “water” and “methicillin”)

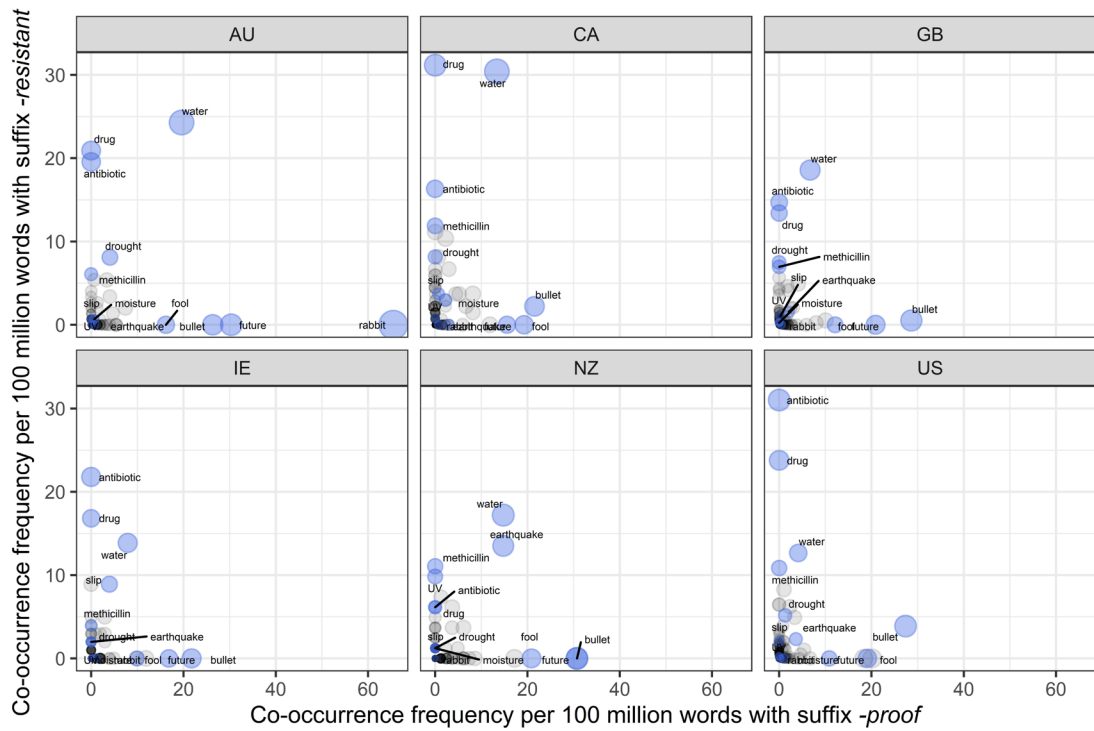


Figure 2 Frequency distribution of nominal stems cooccurring with “-proof” and “-resistant” in six inner circle countries based on GloWbE corpus

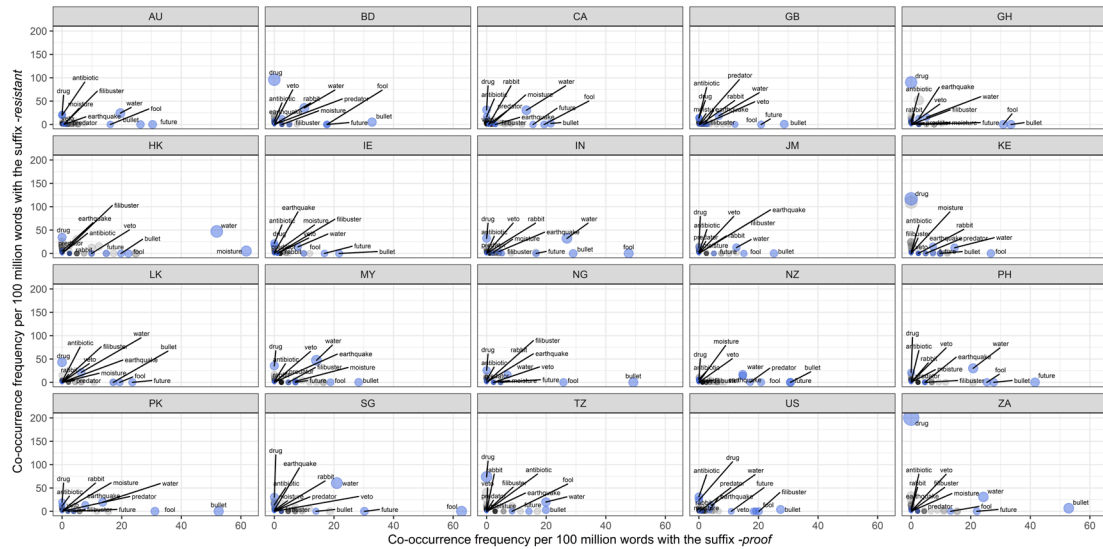


Figure 3 Frequency distribution of nominal stems cooccurring with “-proof” and “-resistant” in 20 English varieties based on GloWbE corpus

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