

We tried our best to do so: Modelling the Superlative Objoid Construction in Late Modern American English

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Since its inception, one focal area in Construction Grammar (CxG) has been the investigation of inheritance relations between different constructional schemata in the construct-i-con (Goldberg 1995; 2006, etc.). In this presentation, we extend previous research in the field to the pattern we refer to as the Superlative Objoid Construction (SOC), as in (1a-b).

- (1) a. I **tried** *my best to do so*, I assure you! (MAG, 1874)
b. Carrie had **worked** *her hardest to please Isabel*. (FIC, 1934)

The SOC combines a subject NP with a transitive/intransitive verb (*try*, *work*) followed by a possessive pronoun (*my*, *her*), and a superlative adjective (e.g. *best*, *hardest*). What sets the SOC apart from the related Cognate Object Construction (see 2b) is that the post-verbal NP of the construction is only object-like: it lacks the nominal head typical of regular object NPs, and it resembles manner adverbials, acting as a modifier of the process expressed by the verb.

- (2) a. Steve **smiled** *his sweetest* at Aunt Belle. (FIC, 1920)
b. She was **smiling** *her sweetest smile* at it! (FIC, 1876)

On the basis of 6,691 SOC examples from COHA (Davies 2010), the research questions that this study addresses concern: (i) the spread of the SOC from transitive verbs like *try* (1a) to intransitives such as *smile* (2a), (ii) its entrenchment during Late Modern English (LModE), (iv) its relation with the COC (2b), and the *at*-SOC (3), and (v) the trajectory of change of the SOC with respect to the animacy of its subjects, and the usage frequency of infinitival complement clauses (e.g. *to do so*, *to please Isabel* in 1a-b).

- (3) During the last one or two hours we **worked** *at our best* ... (MAG, 1938)

We apply variability-based neighbour clustering (Gries & Hilpert 2008) to determine the important stages in the development of the SOC, and collexeme analyses (Gries 2014) to identify the most distinctive verbs as well as the verb-Objoid combinations of the construction at the respective stages in its development. In addition, for the sub-sets of the SOC data that show variability between the COC (2a-b) and the *at*-SOC (3), we fit a generalised linear mixed-model tree (Fokkema & Zeileis 2019).

The results confirm the layered development of the SOC from transitive verbs in the bare SOC towards verbs that rank lower in transitivity. These also support the further entrenchment of the SOC during LModE, with analogical extension of the construction to low-frequency intransitives like *bloom* (see 4).

- (4) ... I've been wanting to see ... young love come up like a flower and be given its dew and sun and rain -- and bloom and **bloom** *its best*. (FIC, 1899)

On the basis of our collocational data, we argue that the COC is an unlikely bridging context for the emergence of the SOC. With respect to the variant *at*-SOC, there appears to be a clear division of labour between the two allostructions.

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