

## Using synchronic corpus data to infer the diachronic development of a construction

Establishing past linguistic change is important both in itself as well as in explaining synchronic linguistic phenomena. However, the study of diachronic change in languages with scarce historical records often has to rely on indirect evidence (e.g. analogy with attested changes) and synchronic data. It is therefore necessary to develop methods for making use of these indirect data. The present paper proposes a way of inferring diachronic development from synchronic corpus data, assuming a view of language change based on a construction-based approach to language.

We will propose that the semantic structure of the class of words occurring in an empty slot of a construction, together with measures showing the productivity of the construction and the association strength between the words and the construction, can be interpreted as reflecting the course of the rise and extension of the construction. The proposal will be based on a synchronic corpus study of an Estonian complex predicate construction and on previous findings on how complex constructions originate and extend (Barðdal 2008, Bybee 2010, Israel 1996).

The examined construction consists of the finite verb *minema* ‘go’ and an event noun in the translative<sup>1</sup> case form, and denotes the beginning of the nominalised event. It occurs primarily in the colloquial register and is expressively marked. The construction occurs in a rare subjectless clause pattern, but the agent of the nominalised event may be optionally expressed as an adjunct-like NP in adessive case form (1):

- (1) (Nei-l)            lāk-s            kakluse-ks  
      3PL-ADESS    go-3SG.PST    fight-TRANSL  
      “They started to fight”

Our data consists of the instances of the construction extracted from the Balanced Corpus of Estonian<sup>2</sup> and ordered by association strength using the t-score association measure.

The class of event nouns occurring in the construction is semantically open but it has a remarkably coherent radial family resemblance structure. We will propose that this structure

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<sup>1</sup> Translative is primarily the case of the end-state complement of change-of-state verbs, but it is also one of the cases of purposive adjuncts and predicative complements.

<sup>2</sup> A morphologically tagged 15 million word corpus consisting in equal parts of newspaper, fiction and scientific texts from the period 1995-2007.

and the association strength between the construction and the different semantic classes of words occurring in it reflect the rise and development of the construction, according to a scenario whereby a construction originates as a particular entrenched exemplar of another construction and starts to extend by analogy, as a function of the inverse relation between the type frequency and the semantic coherence of the class(es) of words occurring in the empty slot(s) of the construction (Barðdal 2008, Bybee 2010).

In addition, the talk will refine the scenario of constructional development by pointing out the need to distinguish between the preconditions and the motivations of the extension of a construction, and by proposing further possible factors of the extension of constructions. This will be done on the basis of a comparison between the examined construction and another complex predicate construction which seems to fulfill the same preconditions of extension but has not become productive to the same extent.

#### References

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Israel, Michael (1996). The *Way* Construction Grow. In A. Goldberg (ed.) *Discourse and Language*. Stanford: CSLI, 217-230.