

# Revisiting constructional gradience: V-PP patterns in the history of English

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This paper aims to contribute to debates on the nature of ‘constructions’ in usage-based construction grammar approaches – more specifically, it discusses the question of constructional gradience and/or fuzziness from such a perspective. Particular focus is given to the implications of gradient vs discrete definitions of constructions for diachronic investigations and the notion of gradualness, explored by means of a quantitative study of verb-preposition patterns in the history of English.

In usage-based, cognitive constructionist approaches, one basic assumption is that linguistic categorisation is inherently fuzzy and gradient rather than always adhering to clear-cut distinctions (Croft 2001, 2007; Denison 2001, 2006; Aarts 2004; Aarts et al. 2004; Rosenbach 2006; Keizer 2007; Bergs 2021). That is, from a usage-based perspective, grammatical indeterminacy, categorical fuzziness, and vagueness are considered pervasive in language. Such gradience then also plays a role in language change, where it is often discussed as both a prerequisite and a consequence of change: fuzziness makes change possible by providing a zone of flexibility and potential development (Desagulier 2008), but at the same time, synchronic gradience is typically seen as “the product of gradual diachronic change” (Traugott & Trousdale 2010b: 21).

The present paper now zooms in on one particular open question regarding constructional gradience and gradualness, viz. that of discreteness – on the one hand, we may assume that categories or constructions can simply be fuzzy without distinguishable boundaries, which (to some extent) also implies that gradual change can be continuous in the strictest sense. On the other hand, many constructionist discussions seem to rely on a definition of constructions as ultimately discrete, but differing in degrees of entrenchment and schematicity. Here, categories or constructions may give the appearance of fuzziness, but this gradient nature can be captured by more fine-grained, discrete representations on lower, more substantive levels, or by multiple inheritance (cf. e.g. Desagulier 2008). Gradual change here then is the accumulation of step-wise, discrete micro-changes rather than truly continuous (e.g. Traugott & Trousdale 2010a, 2010b).

The case study drawn on to address these questions is English verb-attached PPs and their history: As is well known, such PP-patterns are typically differentiated into adjuncts (1) versus complements (2), but this binary classification has often been challenged, with e.g. Hoffmann (2007) instead proposing a cline modelled as more fine-grained network of constructions (cf. also Bergs 2021). Furthermore, little larger-scale empirical investigation of the diachronic development of verb-preposition combinations and the adjunct-complement distinction is available to date.

- (1) They bought some cake **in Rome**.
- (2) They put the cake **on the table**.

Using a sample from a broader dataset of all verbs in sister-relation to PPs retrieved from the Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpora of Historical English (Middle English, Early Modern English, and Late Modern English; Kroch et al. 2000, 2004, 2016), I revisit these issues, and argue that the distinction between adjunct-PPs and complement-PPs is best represented as a ‘gradient’ range of discrete constructions in a multi-level network rather than as two (fuzzy) constructions. In terms of diachronic development, I show that this network has remained remarkably stable over time, with only slight, gradual changes being observed.

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