

'it semed to be sumthing': Constructing Salem's Witnesses' Seem-Construct-i-con

Sarah Moar¹ & Elise Stickles²

^{1,2} University of British Columbia, ¹smoar14@student.ubc.ca, ²elise.stickles@ubc.ca

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The Salem witch-trials of 1692 were conducted to ferret out persons accused of a crime whose purported existence was "based on the belief that the words of certain people in certain circumstances ha[ve] the power to harm others" (Culpeper and Semino 100). Even witnesses could be subsequently accused of this essentially linguistic crime. The trials often centered around "spectral evidence" (*Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt, or RSWH*, 23), a type of "evidence" based on the idea that a person's spirit could be "willingly sent out...to harm people through the agency of the Devil" (*RSWH* 23). As a result, witness testimony sometimes relied upon constructions that included verbs of perception and appearance, especially the verb *seem*, which can "hedge probability or indicate hearsay depending on the construction it appears in" (Aijmer 2009: 64). Unusually, and in contrast to perception verbs whose meanings rely solely on sensory data such as *sound* or *look*, *seem* "can occur with both observational and knowledge-based evidence" (Aijmer 2009: 68), categories of evidence whose boundaries were heavily contested during the Salem witch-trials. Since "spectral evidence" draws upon a phenomenon whose existence, even in 1692, was controversial (*RSWH* 23), it is plausible that witnesses FOR and AGAINST the accused were employing *seem* constructions in differing ways, as either a verb of perception and appearance, or inference (Grund 2012: 10-11).

This paper presents a Construction Grammar analysis of the various constructions involving *seem* recorded in the testimonies of the Salem witch-trial witnesses. Our ultimate goal is to inform the general, diachronic understanding of how English-speakers employ this unusual verb of perception *seem*. To achieve this goal, we analyse both the classes of constructions and the links that connect them (Goldberg 1995) in the localized *seem* network of the Salem villagers' construct-i-con (Hilpert 2019: 50-74). We predict that, given their antithetical stances on the validity of the spectral evidence, witnesses speaking FOR the accused will employ *seem* in different types of constructions than those speaking AGAINST.

The *Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt* contains approximately 377 witness depositions, statements, and testimonies. The 34 testimonials from FOR witnesses include four instances of constructs using the verb *seem* from two types of *seem*-constructions, both of which involve a *TO*-construction, as seen in (1) and (2). There is a much wider variety of *seem* constructions in the 269 AGAINST documents examined thus far, in which appear twenty-four instances of a construct using the verb *seem*, with eight construction types represented. There are many instances of the two types of *seem* + infinitive, as seen in (3) with copular verb and (4) with a non-copular verb. However, there are also instances of: parenthetical *seem*, as seen in (5); *seem* + adjective, as seen in (6); *seem* + *as if* clause, as seen in (7); nominal *seem*, as seen in (8); present participle *seeming*, as seen in (9); and adverbial *seemingly*, as seen in (10). The latter three constructions are rare or extinct in Present-Day English.

This study builds on Grund's (2012) analysis of Salem testimonial evidentials and on Gisborne & Holmes's (2007) diachronic corpus study on the semantic development and grammatical change of English verbs of appearance in the Middle English and Early Modern English periods. Here, we juxtapose Gisborne & Holmes's seven categories with those discussed in Whitt, Aijmer, and López-Couso & Méndez-Naya, who studied *seem* constructions: in comparison to those of the German verb *scheinen* (Whitt 2009: 241-45, 250-51); in their translations into Swedish (Aijmer 2009: 72-85); and as parentheticals (López-Couso and Méndez-Naya 2014: 296-304). As Smirnova & Sommerer (2020: 20) recently pointed out, "the general organization of the constructicon is clearly an under-researched area". This paper will contribute to the elucidation of the *seem* construct-i-con's development through a localised analysis of the Salem witch-trial written testimonies.

Data

- (1) *Seem* + infinitive (copular verb)
Goody Nurse has been troubled with an infirmity of body for many years which **the jury of women seem to be afraid it should be something else**. [RSWH, no. 294]
- (2) *Seem* + infinitive (non copular verb)
when she met with any affliction **she seemed to justify God** and say that it was all better than she deserved though it were by false accusations from men. [RSWH, no. 317]
- (3) *Seem* + infinitive (copular verb)
That night after I been with the select men, I saw something appear at French's Cove before me, like a cat, as I apprehended. And then I looked wishfully upon it, and **it seemed to be something like a little dog**. [RSWH, no. 40]
- (4) *Seem* + infinitive (non copular verb)
did then see a woman standing between the cradle [...] room, and the bedside and **seemed to look upon him** so he [RSWH, no. 230]
- (5) Parenthetical *seem*
and he laid on his back on the ground and was sliding into a deep place (**as to him seemed**) but taking hold of some brush or bushes and so recovered [RSWH, no. 141]
- (6) *Seem* + adjective
and they all came up together such a breath **that it seemed impossible to escape being trod down by them** but they went all past and then appeared no more [RSWH, no. 149]
- (7) *Seem* + *as if* clause
the said Bishop got him to do some work for her, for which she gave him three pence, **which seemed to this deponent as if it had been good money**, but he had not gone [RSWH, no. 231]
- (8) Nominal *seem*
he, at the same time, seeing the said Bridget Bishop sitting at the foot of his bed. **Being to his seeming**, it was then as light as if it had been day [RSWH, no. 231]
- (9) Present participle *seeming*
This deponent among other things told her he believed she was a witch by what was said or witnessed against her **at which she seeming not well affected** said that [RSWH, no. 374]
- (10) Adverbial *seemingly*
and her mouth **seemingly to my apprehension** much abused and hurt with the bridle bits [RSWH, no. 321a]

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