

The Origin and Development of the Conative Alternation in English

Abstract

The conative alternation (“conative” from Latin *conor/conari*, “to try or attempt”) is a particular type of verb alternation (or argument structure alternation) which modifies the interpretation of the verb towards suggesting “an attempted action without specifying whether the action was actually carried out” (Levin 1993, 42). Contrariwise, the transitive variant indicates the completion of the action. This verb alternation is mainly represented with an *at*-construction, as in the following examples: (i) *John hit the door* vs. (ii) *John hit at the door*, where the former entails that the door was actually hit, while the latter does not necessarily imply that the action of the verb was completed. The conative construction also conveys a reduced degree of effectiveness (Riemer 2010, 354). Hence, (ii) above predicates that the event of hitting took place irrespective of success.

The set of verbs that allow the conative alternation is restricted to some semantic fields, e.g. verbs of contact by impact (*hit, kick*) and verbs of cutting (*cut, slash*), among others (Levin 1993, 41), being the unmarked variant the predominant in terms of frequency. Although the study of this type of alternation has received some attention (van der Leek [1996], Broccias [2003], Beavers [2010], and Perek and Lemmens [2010]), the question of its origin has not been addressed and further investigation is therefore needed, particularly from a diachronic point of view.

All this considered, the present study aims to explore the origin and development of the conative construction in English by looking at its occurrence in several diachronic and synchronic corpora. Furthermore, an attempt will be made to establish whether the construction accommodates to a particular collocation pattern (at subject or object level).

References:

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