

Constructional Death by Coercion

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Abstract: This study investigates the disappearance of the English Double Object Construction (DOC) expressing ‘dispossession’ in Middle and Early Modern English from the perspective of coercion. While coercion has traditionally been discussed as a mechanism facilitating the emergence of novel or non-conventionalized constructions, this paper argues that it can also function as a factor in constructional death—the gradual obsolescence and eventual loss of a construction from the grammar. Focusing on verbs of dispossession, especially *steal*, the study demonstrates how the ‘dispossession’-DOC is and may historically have been coerced into a ‘transfer-of-possession-like’ interpretation, drawing on Boas’s (2011) framework of “leakage.” The findings offer a new theoretical perspective on language change and on the dynamics of constructional networks within Diachronic Construction Grammar.

Keywords: verbs of dispossession, the English Double Object Construction, constructional death, coercion, Diachronic Construction Grammar

1. Introduction

This study investigates the factors that led to the disappearance of the English Double Object Construction (DOC) expressing ‘dispossession’ in Middle English and Early Modern English, from the perspective of **coercion**. Furthermore, it suggests that coercion may play a role in **constructional death** (also referred to as “constructional attrition”), a phenomenon in which existing constructions gradually become obsolete and eventually disappear from the grammar (Noël and Coleman 2021).

First, in Present-day English, the DOC is generally assumed to encode ‘transfer of possession’ and related situations, as illustrated in (1).

- (1) A. 'X CAUSES Y to RECEIVE Z' (central sense)
 (Example: Joe gave Sally the ball.)
 B. Conditions of satisfaction imply 'X CAUSES Y to RECEIVE Z'
 (Example: Joe promised Bob a car.)
 C. 'X ENABLES Y to RECEIVE Z'
 (Example: Joe permitted Chris an apple.)
 D. 'X CAUSES Y not to RECEIVE Z'
 (Example: Joe refused Bob a cookie.)
 E. 'X INTENDS to CAUSE Y to RECEIVE Z'
 (Example: Joe baked Bob a cake.)
 F. 'X ACTS to CAUSE Y to RECEIVE Z at some future point in time'
 (Example: Joe bequeathed Bob a fortune.)

(Goldberg 1995: 38, 75)

By contrast, in Late Middle English and Early Modern English, the DOC expressing 'dispossession' (henceforth, 'disp'-DOC)—as exemplified in (2)—was still attested (Visser 1970; Matsumoto 2003; Coleman and De Clerck 2011; Zehentner 2018, 2021, among others).¹

- (2) a. ... if traitorous enuy had nat in his flourysshynge youth bireft hym his life.
 (T. Elyot, *The Book Named the Governor*, 52)
 (cited in Matsumoto 2003: 46, emphasis added)
 b. Ceres nor Ioue, nor all the Gods about shall rob me this rich purchase.
 (Heywood 1613, *Silver Age*)
 (cited in Visser 1970: 635, emphasis added)

In Present-day English, however, the same dispossession events are not expressed by the DOC, but rather by either the Prepositional Theme Construction (PTC), in which the theme is marked by a preposition, as in (3a), or the Prepositional Deprivee Construction (PDC), in which the deprivee is marked by a preposition, as in (3b). Paratheses indicate participant roles that are not obligatorily expressed—namely, roles that are not profiled within the corresponding event (Goldberg 1995: 44-48).

¹ In this paper, 'dispossession' is understood as the event in which a perpetrator wrongs a victim by taking something (Goods) from them, or a perpetrator takes Goods from a victim or a source (FrameNet: <https://framenet.icsi.berkeley.edu>).

- (3) a. Jesse robbed the rich (of all their money).
 b. Jesse stole money (from the rich).

(Goldberg 1995: 45)

Thus, the ‘disp’-DOC appears to have completely disappeared in Present-day English.² Within Diachronic Construction Grammar, much attention has been devoted to the emergence of new constructions, whereas comparatively little has been said about the loss of constructions (Sommerer 2020; Noël and Coleman 2021). The present study therefore aims to explore, from the perspective of coercion, why the ‘disp’-DOC disappeared, thereby shedding new light on the mechanisms underlying constructional death.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides an overview of the diachronic development of the ‘disp’-DOC. Section 3 reviews previous studies on the loss of this construction. Section 4 outlines the concept of coercion as adopted in this paper. Section 5 presents a discussion of the disappearance of the ‘disp’-DOC in terms of coercion. Finally, Section 6 offers concluding remarks and directions for future research.

2. The diachronic development of ‘trans’-DOC and ‘disp’-DOC

In this section, we provide an overview of the development trajectories of the ‘disp’-DOC, alongside the DOC expressing ‘transfer of possession’ (henceforth, ‘trans’-DOC).

2.1 The diachronic development of ‘trans’-DOC

First, we provide a broad overview of the diachronic development of the ‘trans’-DOC, from Old English to Present-day English. In Old English, grammatical functions were explicitly marked through inflectional cases, which allowed for a relatively free word order compared to Present-day English. Consequently, a variety of variants could be observed even within ‘trans’-DOC. Focusing on the order of the objects, both the [NP-dat NP-acc] pattern illustrated in (4) and the [NP-acc NP-dat] pattern illustrated in (5) were attested (Koopman 1990; De Cuypere 2015a).

² As will be discussed in Section 5, it is necessary to distinguish between the DOC that expresses (pure) ‘dispossession’ (i.e. ‘disp’-DOC in this study) and the DOC with verbs of dispossession. For example, the following examples are instances of the DOC with verbs of dispossession such as *steal* or *rob* that are acceptable in Present-day English, but do not express (pure) ‘dispossession.’

- i. Go steal me some cake. [= Go steal some cake for me] (Zehentner 2021: 529)
- ii. Rob me a bank. (Goldberg 1995: 36)

- (4) for ðan ðe he forgeaf [his geleaffullum]_{DAT} [þa gastlican gife]_{ACC};
 for that he gave his faithful the spiritual grace
 ‘because he gave his faithful the spiritual grace;’
 (cocathom2, ÆCHom_II, 43:319.44.7210)

(cited in De Cuypere 2015a: 231)

- (5) dældon [heora æhta]_{ACC} [ealle þearfum]_{DAT},
 distributed their belongings all poor
 ‘distributed their belongings to all the poor’
 (coaelive, ÆLS_[Basil]:54.479)

(cited in De Cuypere 2015a: 231)

With the transition to Middle English, the case-marking system began to erode, and the language gradually shifted toward a more analytic system in which grammatical functions were indicated by word order and prepositions. Correspondingly, the Old English [NP-nom V NP-dat NP-acc] pattern developed into the [NP (agent) V NP (recipient) NP (theme)] construction (that is, ‘trans’-DOC), while the [NP-nom V NP-acc NP-dat] pattern developed into the [NP (agent) V NP (theme) NP (recipient)] construction³. Examples in (6) illustrates the instantiations of these constructions in Middle English. Both the glosses and the Present-day English translations are provided by the author.

- (6) a. Euery brother and sister shal yeuen ye pouer brother or sister
 Every brother and sister shall give the poor brother or sister
 a ferthyng in ye woke.
 a farthing in the week
 ‘Every brother and sister shall give the poor brother or sister a farthing in the week.’

(1389: J. T. Smith & L. T. Smith, *English Gilds*, from OED)

³ As noted above, word order in Old English was relatively free, and therefore patterns other than the [NP-nom V NP-dat NP-acc] and [NP-nom V NP-acc NP-dat] patterns are also attested (e.g., the [NP-acc NP-nom NP-dat V] pattern and the [NP-dat NP-nom V NP-acc] pattern; see De Cuypere (2015a: 234) for attested examples). For the purposes of the present study, however, the discussion is restricted to the [NP-nom V NP-dat NP-acc] and [NP-nom V NP-acc NP-dat] patterns, in order to provide a clearer link to the word-order patterns attested in later periods, when word order had become fully fixed.

b. ... And gafe it him wel sikerlike.

... and gave it him very surely

‘...and gave it to him surely.’

(a1325 (c1250): The Middle English Genesis and Exodus, from OED)

The construction illustrated in (6a) directly gave rise to the Present-Day English DOC, whereas the construction in (6b) largely disappeared, except in certain dialects (Gerwin 2013). Taken together, the diachronic development of ‘trans’-DOC is summarized in Figure 1.⁴ Constructions of the form [NPx V NPY NPz] are marked with an underline, and the gradient arrows indicate the degree of decline of each construction.

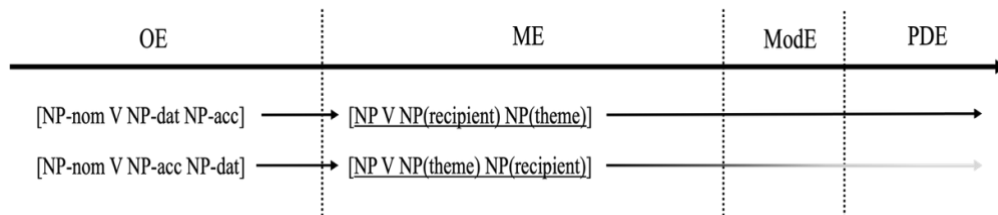


Figure 1. The diachronic development of the ‘trans’-DOC

2.2 The diachronic development of ‘disp’-DOC

Next, we turn to the diachronic development of the ‘disp’-DOC. As noted above, until Late Middle English and Early Modern English, the DOC was still employed to express ‘dispossession,’ as illustrated in (7).

(7) For dronkenesse bireveth hym the discrecioun of his wit.

For drunkenness bereaves him the discretion of his wit

‘for drunkenness robs him of the discretion of his wit’

(ME; CMCTPARS, 316.C2.1212)

(cited in Zehentner 2021: 542, gloss added by the author)

⁴ For a more detailed discussion of the DOC (and the *to*-dative construction) in the transition from Old English to Middle English, see also McFadden (2002), De Cuypere (2015b), Zehentner (2022), Ingham (2023).

In Old English, where the case-marking system was still largely intact, constructions expressing ‘dispossession’—unlike the constructions expressing ‘transfer of possession’—were primarily realized in the [V NP-acc NP-gen] pattern, as illustrated in (8) (Visser 1970; Allen 1995; De Cuypere 2015a).⁵

- (8) & bereafode [Godes templ]_{ACC} [goldes and seolfres]_{GEN}
 & robbed God’s temple of gold and of silver
 ‘& stole gold and silver from God’s temple’
 (coaelive, *ÆLS*_[Maccabees]:6.4838)

(cited in De Cuypere 2015a: 231)

The emergence of the [NP V NP NP] pattern in constructions expressing ‘dispossession’ is also closely related to the loss of the case-marking system during Middle English. Matsumoto (2003) provides the following explanation:

From the Old English period onwards, as case distinctions leveled, the dative and the genitive became morphologically indistinguishable from each other and from the accusative. Consequently, the construction came to appear as if it had two objects, forming a double object construction. However, as prepositions were increasingly used to disambiguate the grammatical relations of objects, genitive-marked objects were gradually replaced by objects marked with *of*, and by the Middle English period, prepositional constructions developed incrementally, coexisting alongside the Double Object Construction. (Matsumoto 2003: 4, translated by the author).

More precisely, prepositions other than *of* were also attested in Middle English prepositional constructions expressing ‘dispossession,’ albeit infrequently, as in (9b) (Zehentner 2021).

⁵ According to Allen (1995: 28) and De Cuypere (2015a), the [V NP-dat NP-gen] pattern was also sometimes used as in (i).

- i. and wolde [his agenum fæder]_{DAT} [feores]_{GEN} benæman
 and wanted his own father of fire take from
 ‘and wanted to rob his own father of fire’
 (coaelive, *ÆLS*_[Alban]:215.4122)

(cited in De Cuypere 2015a: 232)

- (9) a. þus wes þas kineriche of heora kinge bi-ræued
 thus was this kingdom of their king bereaved
 ‘thus was this kingdom robbed of its king’
 (*Lazamon Brut* (Calig.) (1963) l. 1,447; OED, s.v. bereave)
- b. Gif hwylc man reafige oðerne æt his dehter
 if any man robs other at his daughter
 ‘If any man robs another of his daughter’
 (Poenitentiale Pseudo-Egberti (Laud) iv. ix. 51; OED, s.v. reave)
 (cited in Zehentner 2021: 531, with slight modifications by the author)

Furthermore, at least during the Middle English period, constructions other than the DOC and the PTC also existed, such as the PDC illustrated in (10).

- (10) a. Ðu afyrdest of Jacobe ða graman hæft-ned
 you took away of Jacob the troublesome captivity
 ‘you took the troublesome captivity away from Jacob’
 (Ps. Th. 84, 1.; Bosworth-Toller, s.v. a-fyrran)
- b. him ageafe þæt he ær on him bereafode
 him restored what he before on him bereaved
 ‘restored to him what he had earlier stolen from him’
 (Ors. 3, 11; S. 146, 30.; Bosworth-Toller, s.v. be-reafian)
 (cited in Zehentner 2021: 530, with slight modifications by the author)

Although the relationship with Old English constructions remains unclear, based on the survey results reported in Zehentner (2021; Table 1 below), the PDC was the most frequently used construction in Middle English. This suggests that the PDC likely existed already in Old English.

Table 1: Raw and proportional frequency of CxG per PERIOD (Zehentner 2021: 536)⁶

	Middle English		Early Modern English		Late Modern English	
		%		%		%
DOC	95	34.3	25	13.81	5	5.43
PDC	163	58.84	133	73.48	55	59.78
PTC	19	6.86	23	12.7	32	34.78
TOTAL	277	100	181	100	92	100

In fact, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) attests several examples, such as those in (11), which can be considered instances of the PDC in Old English.

- (11) a. Maria hire geceas þone betstan dæl, se ne bið næfre
 Maria has chosen the best part, which not be never
 fram hire afyrred
 from her taken-away
 ‘Mary has chosen the best part, which shall never be taken away from her.’

(OE: Blickling Homilies 67, from OED)

- b. Anymað ðæt pund æt hym.
 Take away the pound at him
 ‘Take away the pound from him.’

(OE: West Saxon Gospels: Matthew xxv. 28, from OED)

As can be seen from (9) and (10), individual prepositions and verbs were not restricted to a single construction in Middle English, but could appear relatively freely in both constructions. For instance, verbs corresponding to the Present-day English *bereave* and *steal* could occur in the DOC, the PDC, or the PTC (Zehentner 2021: 542). From this, it follows that by the Late Middle English to Early Modern English, the ‘disp’-DOC disappeared, while the PDC became increasingly associated with the preposition *from* and the PTC with *of*. Furthermore, verbs emerging during the same period began to show a more restricted association with a particular construction. Specifically, the “Steal Verbs” (e.g., *steal*, *snatch*, *thieve*, *withdraw*) in Levin’s (1993: 128-130) classification became closely associated with the PDC, whereas the “Cheat Verbs” (e.g., *bereave*, *cheat*, *deprive*, *dispossess*, *rob*) became more strongly associated with the

⁶ Although the reference of CxG in the caption of Table 1 is not explicitly specified in Zehentner (2021), it presumably refers to the construction types, exemplified by DOC, PDC and PTC in the table.

PTC. In Present-day English, verbs are generally restricted to a single construction. Taken together, the diachronic development of the ‘disp’-DOC is summarized in Figure 2.

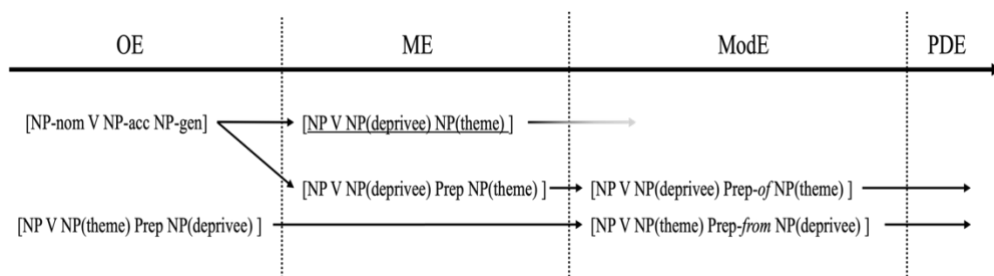


Figure 2. The diachronic development of the ‘disp’-DOC

3. Previous studies on the disappearance of the ‘disp’-DOC

As shown above, the ‘disp’-DOC had disappeared by the Early Modern English period. Indeed, according to Matsumoto (2003), who examined 100 literary works from the period, and Coleman and De Clerck (2011), who conducted corpus-based research, the ‘disp’-DOC was rarely attested and had largely been replaced by prepositional constructions such as the PTC and the PDC. Furthermore, Zehentner (2018), who investigated the ‘disp’-DOC in Middle English, shows that this construction was already in decline by that period (see Table 2).

Table 2. Observed frequencies of individual verb class in DOC/POC (Zehentner 2018: 175, with slight modifications by the author)⁷

<i>DISP</i>	M1	%	M2	%	M3	%	M4	%
	(1150-1250)		(1250-1350)		(1350-1420)		(1420-1500)	
DOC	45	73	15	46	32	32	8	13
PP	16	26	17	53	68	68	50	86
TOTAL	61	100	32	100	100	100	58	100

At this point, the question arises as to why the ‘disp’-DOC disappeared. Matsumoto (2003), Coleman and De Clerck (2011), Zehentner (2018, 2021) have all attempted to address this issue. These diachronic studies, despite minor differences, generally attribute the disappearance to a semantic clash—that is, to

⁷ The abbreviation POC in the caption of Table 2 stands for ‘prepositional object constructions’, and PP in the table represents ‘prepositional phrase’ (the latter, however, is not explicitly defined in the text).

semantic incompatibility—with the prototypical sense of the DOC (i.e., ‘transfer of possession’) as one factor.⁸ However, they do not provide a detailed account of how this semantic clash actually arose in practice, nor why it led to the disappearance of the ‘disp’-DOC in the first place. The explanations offered by these previous studies can be seen as parallel to the phenomenon of **homonymic clash** (also referred to as the conflict of homonyms), which has often been discussed at the lexical level.⁹ Yet, homonyms are typically distinguishable in actual discourse by means of contextual and grammatical information, making true homonymic clash relatively rare (cf. Samuels 1972; De La Cruz Cabanillas 1999). By analogy, one might argue that the ‘trans’-DOC and the ‘disp’-DOC could also have been disambiguated in context. To address these questions, this paper attempts to examine the semantic clash from the perspective of coercion. Before the analysis, the next section provides an overview of the concept of coercion.

4. The concept of coercion

The phenomenon of coercion has been extensively discussed in the linguistic literature. As Lauwers and Willems (2011) point out, the notion of coercion has gradually expanded to new domains, and has become increasingly ambiguous, making it difficult to define precisely. In broad terms, coercion refers to the process by which a semantic mismatch between a particular morphosyntactic context and a lexical item occurring within it is resolved, and, occasionally, to the resulting semantic effect (the coercion effect). Within the framework of Construction Grammar adopted in this paper, Michaelis (2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, and others) proposed the **Override Principle** to explain the mechanisms underlying coercion.

- (12) *The override principle.* If a lexical item is semantically incompatible with its morphosyntactic context, the meaning of the lexical item conforms to the meaning of the structure in which it is embedded.

(Michaelis 2004: 25)

For example, consider (13), which is a prototypical case of coercion. Example (13) illustrates coercion induced by the Indefinite Determination Construction, in which a mass noun is interpreted as countable.

⁸ Matsumoto (2003) and Zehentner (2021) also cite competition with prepositional constructions as in (3) as another factor. However, the mere existence of competition between constructions does not necessarily mean that one of them will disappear from the grammar (cf. De Smet et al. 2018). For the sake of conciseness, the present study focuses solely on the semantic clash.

⁹ Homonymic clash (or the conflict of homonyms) is described in Menner (1936: 229) as follows:
 “[T]wo words of different origin which become homonyms by regular sound-changes may interfere with one another to such an extent that one is ultimately excluded from the vocabulary of a given dialect.”

(13) Did you eat a pudding?

(Michaelis 2002: 270)

The indefinite article *a* normally selects for a count noun. However, the noun *pudding* in (13) typically denotes a mass entity. As a result, the semantic value of the input lexical item does not match the semantic value required by the construction. In such cases, mass nouns like *pudding* receive a [count+] value within the Indefinite Determiner Construction, resulting in a countable interpretation and resolving the semantic mismatch (For a detailed discussion, see Michaelis's works on coercion).

With respect to elements that induce coercion, there are broadly two main perspectives within Construction Grammar. One view holds that constructions with abstract, independent meanings, as assumed by Goldberg (1995, 2006), are responsible for coercion. The other is a usage-based perspective, exemplified by Boas and others. Boas (2011) rejects the former view, arguing that it fails to adequately account for differences in acceptability observed in utterances such as (14).

(14) a. Ed hammered the metal flat.

b. ??Ed hammered the metal safe.

(Boas 2011: 1271)

Furthermore, Boas (2011) argues that the acceptability of (14b) improves when it is embedded in a specific context, as in (15).

(15) The door of Ed's old Dodge has a piece of metal sticking out. When getting out of the car, Ed had cut himself on the metal and had to go to the hospital to get stitches. The next day, Ed hammered the metal safe.

(Boas 2011: 1272)

Boas (2011) investigates the factors that lead language users to produce and interpret such sentences—normally judged unacceptable—as acceptable (referred to as “leakage” in his work). Boas relates the former view to the problem of overgeneration and places greater emphasis on more specific, lower-level constructions and contextual background information. Specifically, he treats the lexical entry of a verb as a conventionalized bundle of meanings, each of which constitutes a “mini-construction” (i.e., event frame).¹⁰ This approach eliminates the need to posit abstract constructions that could lead to

¹⁰ The term “event frame” in Boas (2011) is short for “event-based frame semantic representation,” as illustrated in Figure 3 in Section 5 below.

overgeneration and allows for a more precise description and prediction of the range of arguments that co-occur with a particular verb. Boas (2011) presents the conditions under which “leakage” occurs, as illustrated in (16).

(16) Conditions on leakage

The conventionalized specifications of an event frame E_1 may leak to yield a new nonconventionalized utterance (U_N) iff

- a. There exists another conventionalized event frame E_2 ,
 - (i) that licenses conventionalized utterance (U_C) expressing part of the form-meaning pairing of U_N , and
 - (ii) that is more abstract at some level than E_1 .
- b. By means of analogical association, those parts of the event-frame specifications of E_1 are overridden or augmented by the event-frame specifications of E_2 , which are necessary to license U_N . Association of E_1 with E_2 in order to license U_N is only possible if
 - (i) there is a semantic overlap between E_1 and E_2 such that those specifications of E_1 which are not overridden or augmented by E_2 can be construed as an instance of E_2 , and
 - (ii) each form-meaning specification associated with E_2 that overrides or augments any of E_1 ’s specifications is construed the same way in U_N as it is according to its specifications encoded (expressed) by E_2 as a result of the information provided by E_1 , E_2 , and contextual background information.

(Boas 2011: 1291)

For present purposes, a detailed discussion of the non-conventionalized utterance *Ed hammered the metal safe* cannot be provided in this paper; however, Boas (2011) argues that the utterances in (14b) are licensed—and rendered acceptable—by satisfying all of the conditions in (16), based on analogy with the mini-construction [NP *make* NP *safe*] instantiated by *Ed made the metal safe*.¹¹

In this paper, Boas’s usage-based approach to coercion is adopted. Section 5 explores the relationship between coercion and ‘disp’-DOC in Present-day English, focusing particularly on the DOC with the verb *steal*. Building on this analysis, the study then offers an indirect consideration of possible factors contributing to the disappearance of the ‘disp’-DOC in Middle English or Early Modern English.

¹¹ For a detailed discussion, see Boas (2011: 1290-1295).

5. Coercion in ‘disp’-DOC

In this section, the present study examines cases in which the DOC with verbs of dispossession in Present-day English are coerced into a ‘transfer-of-possession’ interpretation, based on Boas’s conditions.¹² By investigating these cases, it is possible—albeit indirectly—to argue, based on the **Uniformitarian Principle** defined below, that the DOC with verbs of dispossession in Middle English was likewise gradually coerced into expressing ‘transfer-of-possession’ events.

Uniformitarian Principle (or uniformitarianism): A fundamental principle of biological, geological and linguistic sciences, which holds for linguistics that things about language that are possible today were not impossible in the past and that things that are impossible today were not possible in the past. This means that whatever is known to occur in languages today would also have been possible in earlier human languages and anything not possible in contemporary languages was equally impossible in the past, in the earlier history of any language. (Campbell and Mixco 2007: 213)

This argument supports the claim made in previous studies that a semantic clash arose between ‘dispossession’ and the newly acquired sense of ‘transfer,’ ultimately leading to the disappearance of the atypical ‘dispossession’ reading in the DOC. This paper focuses on lower-level DOCs in which the verb *steal* occurs.

As shown in (17)–(19), the verb *steal* primarily occurs in three syntactic frames. These examples were taken from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA).

(17) Prepositional Intransitive frame

- a. This is just another way for them to steal from their citizens.
- b. He stole from the people, lived in opulence while the poor starved, treated slaves horribly (worse than anything you’ll see in “Spartacus”).
- c. He stole from a child and never paid for his crime.

(All from COCA)

¹² Ideally, it would be necessary to examine examples from Middle English and Early Modern English when these constructions were in use. However, at the present stage, it is difficult to locate examples that would provide direct evidence of coercion in those periods (further studies on this are needed). Therefore, the present study investigates Present-day English examples in which coercion is clearly attested, as a means of indirectly exploring the situation in Middle and Early Modern English.

(18) **Transitive frame**

- a. They are afraid of nothing, and people, they will steal your car!
- b. I don't care if you stole my cake or not, you are funny and I enjoyed your posting!
- c. We stole their money and gave them AIDS.

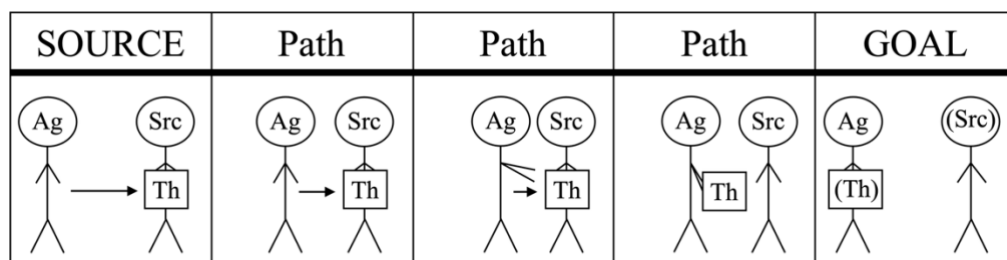
(All from COCA)

(19) **Prepositional Transitive frame**

- a. If by smarter you meant he knows how to steal a kidney from another person so he lives and they die then yes you are right...
- b. They stole food from the vendors and splattered blood and urine on the carts.
- c. The other reason cited for anti-immigrant policies when they were established was that immigrants stole jobs from natives.

(All from COCA)

Although there are slight differences among these examples, all of them realize the event frame associated with *steal*, as illustrated in Figure 3 (which largely follows Boas's model). For clarity in depicting each stage, the figure employs stick figures and adopts a more cartoon-like, unlike Boas's original figures; nevertheless, the representation remains essentially consistent with Boas's model.



Ag: Entity unlawfully or unjustly taking possession of something belonging to another

Th: Entity unlawfully or unjustly taken

Src: Entity from whom the object is taken

Figure 3. Event-based frame semantic representation of the prototypical sense of *steal*¹³

It encodes various types of information about the prototypical sense of the verb *steal*. First, it represents the temporal sequence of the event, indicated from SOURCE to GOAL. Second, it specifies the participants of the event: Agent (Ag), Theme (Th), and Source (Src). The presence of Ag, Th, and Src in

¹³ For the sake of clarity in the figure, stick figures are used; of course, these are not necessarily human beings in the event.

all five temporal stages indicates that these participants are involved from the beginning to the end of the event. Third, the parentheses around Th and Src at the GOAL indicate that this information is optional, whereas the Agent is obligatory. Lastly, it captures the dynamic interactions among the participants. The arrows indicate that from the onset of a prototypical stealing event, the Agent exerts influence on the Theme located in Source's possession. In a prototypical stealing event, ultimately the Theme moves into Agent's possession (For a detailed description of the figure, see Boas (2011)). While this event frame is realized in the syntactic frames illustrated in (17)-(19), Levin (1993: 128) argues that in Present-day English, verbs of dispossession generally cannot occur in the DOC.¹⁴

(20) *The thief stole Mr. Smith the painting.

(Levin 1993: 128)

However, as noted by Dux (2018), corpus-based research shows that instances of the DOC with the verb *steal* (steal-DOC) do occasionally occur, as in (21).

(21) **Double Object frame**

- a. Change the subject. Better yet, steal me another drink.
- b. Because if they don't steal me that huge diamond... I will literally die.
- c. You want me to steal you some clothes from Dad's closet?
- d. Trace went to steal us another bottle of something.
- e. All these men deputies too? Sure. Soon as I steal them some badges.

(All from COCA)

However, these expressions do not instantiate the event frame in the figure above; rather, they instantiate of the steal-DOC, which conveys the meaning 'X steals Z somewhere in order to give it to Y.' Although the expressions in (21) are generally considered unacceptable, what factors make them acceptable? Boas (2011) argues that more general verbs, such as high-frequency light verbs (e.g., *get*, *take*, *give*, *make*), have a privileged status in the grammar, which serves as the basis for analogical association and leads to novel utterances. Indeed, the expressions in (21) convey a meaning similar to that represented by the event frame of the DOC with verbs of obtaining (Goldberg classifies the DOC with verbs of obtaining as expressing 'X INTENDS to CAUSE Y to RECEIVE Z'). For instance, (22) exemplifies the DOC with the prototypical

¹⁴ Strictly speaking, Levin (1993: 128-130) discusses only the DOC with "*Steal Verbs*" in terms of its usage, while the DOC with "*Cheat Verbs*" is not addressed.

obtaining verb *get* (get-DOC), and the figure below represents the associated event frame. In Figure 4, RB stands for Recipient Beneficiary (i.e., “intended recipient”).

- (22) a. Now get me another drink. Tomorrow’s my birthday.
 b. You’re going to get me that diamond.
 c. You want me to get you some help?
 d. Could somebody please get us another bottle of champagne?
 e. I’d run out of my car and get them some food.

(All from COCA)

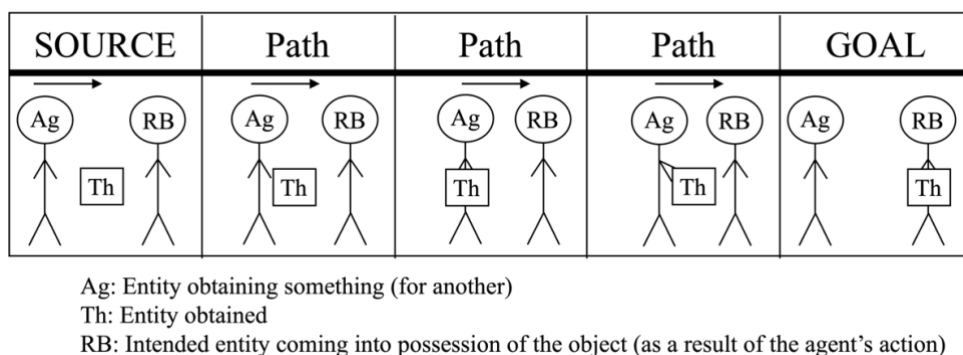


Figure 4. Event-based frame semantic representation of get-DOC¹⁵

This event frame represents a situation in which the Agent obtains the Theme in order to give it to the Recipient Beneficiary. The unacceptability of the steal-DOC arises from the fact that the meaning of *them* does not match the semantic specification of the event frame of *steal*, namely the Source role. More precisely, the requirement *Entity from whom the object is taken* cannot be met by the immediate postverbal NP in (21). However, the fact that the instances in (21) are rendered acceptable can be accounted for by assuming that the event frame of *steal* is analogically associated with that of the get-DOC. Through this

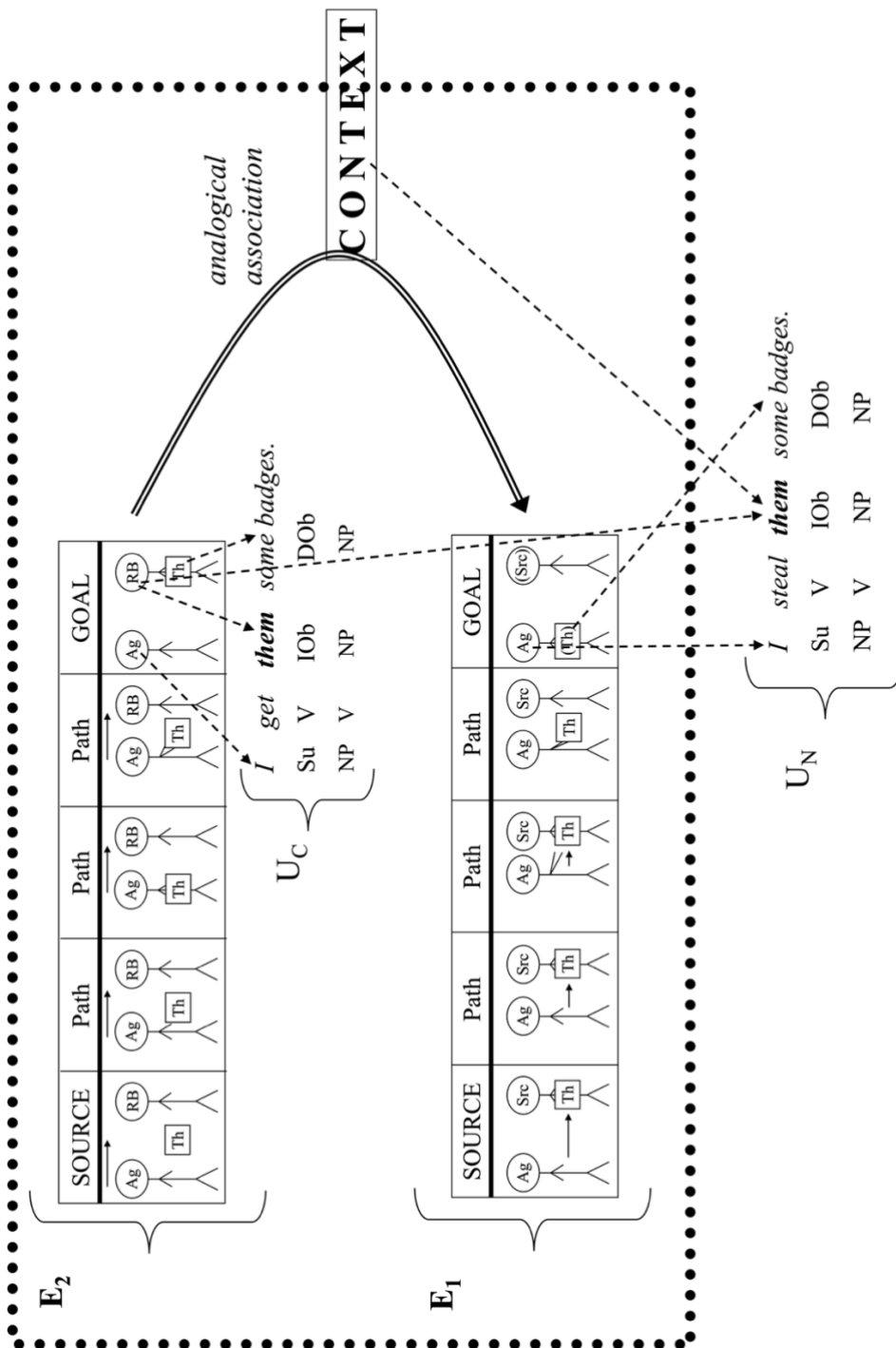
¹⁵ An anonymous reviewer questioned whether the event frame of the get-DOC in Figure 4 should include the stage where the recipient beneficiary actually receives the theme. This is because, as frequently noted in Goldberg (1995:32) and other literature, the DOC with verbs of obtaining, including *get*, does “[n]ot strictly imply that the agent causes the potential recipient to actually receive the patient argument.” This criticism is well-taken and should ideally be addressed. However, due to the complexity of the event structure, this issue has been set aside in the present paper. How to integrate this point concisely into Boas’s model is a matter for future research.

association, the semantic specification of the Source in the prototypical sense of *steal* is overridden, which results in coercion.

The following section examines whether the steal-DOC truly qualifies as a case of coercion, based on the conditions of “leakage” proposed by Boas (2011), using the utterance *I steal them some badges* in (21e) as a concrete example. However, the ‘disp’-DOC discussed here is more complex than *Ed hammered the metal safe* examined by Boas. As noted in Section 2, historically, the ‘disp’-DOC emerged as a result of the loss of case marking. Therefore, it did not originally arise from a motivation to express a non-conventionalized meaning. Moreover, the utterance *Ed hammered the metal safe* was considered a non-conventionalized utterance (U_N) because it involved a non-conventionalized structure—for example, the unusual use of the lexical item *safe* in the hammering frame. In contrast, ‘disp’-DOC did not involve a newly created or rarely used structure. As is evident from Zehentner’s table shown in Section 3, its form was rather conventional, while what was non-conventionalized was only its meaning. This is because, as a result of the loss of case marking, the ‘disp’-DOC become formally identical to the ‘trans’-DOC, and consequently coercion likely occurred particularly on the interpreter side (i.e. among later generations of language-users). That is, the ‘disp’-DOC survived as a formal residue of Old English, but since the DOC is typically associated with verbs of giving (Zehentner 2018, 2021), the ‘disp’-DOC was interpreted in line with the ‘giving’ sense. From this perspective, the present study treats utterances instantiating the ‘trans’-DOC with verbs of dispossession as non-conventionalized utterances (U_N).

The following figure illustrates how the non-conventionalized utterance (U_N) *I steal them some badges* ‘I steal some badges for them’ can be licensed in context under the conditions in (16), by augmenting the specification of a conventionalized event frame E_1 with information from another conventionalized event frame E_2 .¹⁶ Here, E_1 represents the prototypical sense of *steal* (i.e., Figure 3), and E_2 represents the event frame of the get-DOC. The arrow from E_2 to E_1 indicates that, given appropriate contextual background information, information associated with E_2 can flow into E_1 , triggering an analogical association between the two. The dotted line surrounding E_1 and E_2 indicates that this analogical association is always influenced by contextual background information—specifically, speaker’s knowledge about how E_1 and E_2 are typically used. In the non-conventionalized utterance *I steal them some badges* ‘I steal some badges for them’ shown in Figure 5, *I* and *some badges* are directly licensed by E_1 . What remains unresolved here, however, is how *them* as a Beneficial Recipient is licensed within this sentence.

¹⁶ Strictly speaking, a more precise description of the meaning of *I steal them some badges* would be ‘I steal some badges in order to give the badges to them’; however, for the sake of conciseness, it is rendered as ‘I steal some badges for them’ in the text.

Figure 5. Licensing of non-conventionalized utterance *I steal them some badges* ‘I steal some badges for them’

To determine whether the event frame of *steal* can “leak” so as to license the non-conventionalized utterance *I steal them some badges* ‘I steal some badges for them,’ each condition in (16) must be examined in turn.

First, condition (16a) requires that there exists another conventionalized event frame E_2 , which (i) licenses conventionalized utterance (U_C) expressing part of the form-meaning pairing of non-conventionalized utterance (U_N), and (ii) is more abstract at some level than E_1 . Regarding (16a.i), our discussion above has shown that the event frame of the get-DOC is regarded as another conventionalized event frame, which may be represented by an event frame as in E_2 in Figure 5 (see also Figure 4). Based on its event-frame specifications, E_2 licenses U_C s, for example, *I get them some badges* (as the upper part of Figure 5 illustrates). Moreover, such U_C s express part of the form-meaning pairing of U_N since they share the same syntactic frame—the double object frame—and encode meaning ‘Agent obtains Theme for Recipient Beneficiary.’ As for (16a.ii), the event frame associated with the get-DOC can be regarded as a more abstract ‘obtaining’ frame than the event frame of *steal* since the former does not specify moral evaluation or manner of the action whereas the latter does. This means that the get-DOC fulfills all of the conditions of (16a) and can thus serve as the basis of an analogical association for E_1 .

Condition (16b.i) calls for semantic compatibility between E_1 and E_2 to the extent that the specifications of E_1 which are not overridden by E_2 can be construed as an instance of E_2 . As mentioned above, agent (*I*) and theme (*some badges*) in U_N are directly licensed by E_1 . Therefore, for coercion to occur, these two elements must be semantically compatible with the specifications of E_2 . Table 3 below lists the semantic specifications for the event participants of E_1 and E_2 .

Table 3. Compatibility of event-frame specifications of E_1 and E_2 to trigger analogical association in context and to allow for coercion

	E_1	E_2	Semantic overlap/compatibility
Ag	Entity unlawfully or unjustly taking possession of something belonging to another	Entity obtaining something (for another)	YES
Th	Entity unlawfully or unjustly taken	Entity obtained	YES
	Beneficial Recipient: Entity coming into possession of the object (as a result of the agent's action)	Source: Entity from whom the object is taken	NO

The semantic specifications for agent (Ag) and theme (Th) in E_1 are compatible with those of E_2 because the agent *I* and the theme *some badges*, which are licensed by E_1 , can be construed respectively as an agent and theme of E_2 : ‘the person who steals something’ can be construed as ‘the person who obtains something,’ and ‘the thing stolen’ can be understood as ‘the thing obtained.’ Therefore, since both agent and theme participants of E_1 can be construed as instances of E_2 , condition (16b.i) is fulfilled.

Finally, condition (16b.ii) requires that if any of the form-meaning specifications associated with E_2 override or augment those of E_1 , they must be interpreted in U_N in the same way as they would be according to the specifications encoded by E_2 , based on the information provided by E_1 , E_2 , and contextual background information. In U_N , *them* must be therefore interpreted as a recipient beneficiary (RB) in accordance with the specification of E_2 , based on contextual background information. However, as shown in Table 3, the Source specification of E_1 may not at first appear compatible with the RB specification of E_2 and cannot be coerced into it. Thus, it is necessary to examine the contextual background information that allows *them* in the U_N *I steal them some badges* to be interpreted as a recipient beneficiary, as required by E_2 . This utterance appears in an episode of *The Magnificent Seven*, a TV series broadcast between 1998 and 2000. In this scene, Yates, who poses as a US federal marshal, escorts Vin—who has been falsely accused of murder—to a certain place while keeping him blindfolded. When they arrive, it turns out that the real murderer, Eli Joe, is present. Parentheses indicate non-verbal actions and situational context.

(23) (The horses they're riding come to a stop.)

(Yates gets off his horse.)

Vin: All these men deputies, too?

Yates: Sure, soon as I steal them some badges. (Forcing Vin off his horse.)

(Yates removes the blindfold from Vin's eyes.)

(Standing before Vin is Eli Joe.)

Vin (to Eli Joe): Well, well. You're a long way from home, Eli Joe.

Eli Joe (to Vin): Well, I figured I'd see some more of this beautiful country... look up old friends.

Eli Joe (to Yates): Hang him.

(*The Magnificent Seven*. Season 2, Episode 2 *Sins of the Past*. CBS. 1999)

The contextual background information here enables *them* to be interpreted not as the source in the event frame of *steal*, but as a (potential) recipient beneficiary—the one who would benefit from receiving *some badges*. More concretely, Eli Joe and his men are not actual deputies and thus do not possess badges (which serve as tokens of being a deputy). Therefore, interpreting *them* as the source is implausible in this situation. Although Yates's remark is somewhat humorous, it implies that by stealing badges (somewhere) and giving them to Eli Joe and his men, he would enable the men referred to by *them* (i.e. Eli Joe and his group) to become deputies. This provides contextual reasons to interpret *them* as RB. Accordingly, the contextual background information in (23), combined with the information provided by the event frame of the get-DOC (E_2), allows the source in E_1 to be overridden by the recipient beneficiary in E_2 . As a result, the U_N is coerced into the interpretation 'I steal some badges for them.' In other words, the contextual background information ensures that the semantic specification of the immediate postverbal NP in E_2 is likewise applied to that in the U_N , thereby fulfilling the condition (16b.ii).

Thus, since all the conditions in (16) are satisfied, it becomes possible for the specifications of the prototypical sense of *steal* (E_1) to "leak," thereby licensing U_N *I steal them some badges* 'I steal some badges for them.' As noted earlier, this fact suggests that a similar process may have occurred in Middle English, when the 'disp'-DOC were still in use. The possible historical scenario can be described as follows:

In Old English, the constructions expressing ‘transfer of possession’ and ‘dispossession’ were distinct. However, due to the loss of overt case marking in Middle English, these two constructions converged into a single surface form—the Double Object Construction in Present-day English—that is, they became “homonstructions” (Percillier 2020). As a result of sharing the same form, the construction that had prototypically expressed ‘dispossession’ (i.e., ‘disp’-DOC) became analogically associated with the ‘trans’-DOC, especially the DOC with verbs of obtaining. This association allowed the semantic specifications of the former to leak, thereby coercing that construction into a ‘transfer-of-possession-like’ interpretation. Consequently, in the DOC with verbs of dispossession, this coerced meaning became entrenched and conventionalized, which led to a semantic clash with the original ‘dispossession’ meaning. This suggests that there may have been a communicative mismatch between the intended meanings of speakers who still associated the DOC with verbs of dispossession with a ‘dispossession’ meaning and the interpretations of speakers who associated it with a ‘transfer-of-possession-like’ meaning, and vice versa. Ultimately, this chain of events culminated in the “death” (i.e., disappearance) of the ‘disp’-DOC.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, the disappearance of the ‘disp’-DOC has been examined through the lens of coercion, focusing on how the specifications of the event frame of *steal* can be coerced into an “intended reception” (i.e. recipient-benefactive) interpretation based in certain contexts. This has been investigated by applying Boas’s (2011) conditions of “leakage” to historical and contemporary instances of the DOC, showing how the semantic specifications of *steal* could be overridden to yield a meaning aligned with verbs of obtaining.

If the present argument is correct, two theoretical implications arise. First, coercion has traditionally been discussed in relation to the emergence of new constructions or non-conventionalized novel utterances. However, the present analysis demonstrates that coercion can also function as a factor leading to the disappearance of existing constructions (i.e., constructional death). Second, as noted by Sommerer (2020), Noël and Coleman (2021), among others, research within Diachronic Construction Grammar has primarily focused on how and why new constructions emerge. In contrast, relatively little attention has been paid to how and why constructional nodes disappear from the network or grammar—the phenomenon referred to as “constructional death,” “constructional attrition” or similar terms. Nevertheless, for a comprehensive constructional model of language change, investigating such phenomena is as crucial as examining the emergence of new constructions. The present study has identified one possible mechanism

or factor contributing to constructional death. In these respects, it offers a new theoretical perspective on the relationship between coercion and language change.

Moreover, the argument presented here also sheds light on why, as Coleman and De Clerck (2011) observe, languages that have undergone deflection (i.e. the loss of case marking) tend to exhibit a narrowing of the semantic range of the DOC. However, further research is needed to take a closer look at language change in the chaotic linguistic context of Middle English, characterized by fixed word order, the loss of case marking and related developments.

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強制による構文の死

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本稿は、中英語から初期近代英語にかけて見られた「奪取」を表す二重目的語構文がなぜ消失したのかを、強制 (coercion) の観点から考察する。従来、強制は新しい構文の出現や非慣習的な新奇の発話の生成に関わる現象として論じられてきたが、本研究は、既存の構文が文法からその姿を消す「構文の死 (constructional death)」という現象にも関与し得ることを示す。具体的には、Boas (2011) の枠組みに基づいて、奪取動詞 *steal* を伴う二重目的語構文の意味が「奪取」から「授与」的解釈へと強制される過程を分析する。以上より、強制は新たな構文の創造のみならず、消失にも寄与し得ることを明らかにし、通時的構文文法における言語変化研究に新たな視座を提供する。