

# A constructional analysis of the ‘*better off*’ construction’ in English

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This presentation aims to analyze the grammatical, semantic, and pragmatic characteristics of the so-called ‘*better off* construction’ (hereafter, the BO construction), which has rarely been the focus of previous studies of construction grammar (Fillmore et al. 1988; Goldberg 1995). *Better off* is derived from a comparative form of *well-off*, and is used predicatively as in ‘He is now *better off* (than before)’ and ‘She is *better off* {with/without} me.’ However, *better off* has a special use in which it can take a complement XP; the whole combination then means “to be in a better situation, if or after something happens.”

- (1) He is better off {*buying it/learning it*}. [XP = present participle]
- (2) You’d be better off {*left alone/gone from here*}. [XP = past participle]
- (3) I’d be better off {*dead/alone*}. [XP = adjective]
- (4) She’d be better off *out of work* [XP = prepositional phrase]

As in (1)–(4), *better off* XP (i.e. the BO construction) seems to have status as a construction; it shows both syntactic irregularity and semantic uncompositionality: Syntactically, the XPs do not fit into any traditional grammatical categories and, semantically, the situation illustrated by each XP is compared with a worse situation which is introduced in or inferred from the previous context.

To identify further characteristics of the BO construction, the present study carried out two case studies on the *British National Corpus (BNC)* and the *Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)*. The first study involved an extensive search for *better off* in the *BNC* as follows: First, I extracted all the examples of *better off* from the *BNC* (871 examples); second, I manually annotated six features of all examples (i.e. syntactic regularity, modal auxiliary, function of *better off*, grammatical subject, word class of XP, register); and third, I investigated the contexts in which the BO constructions are used, generating co-occurrence tables of these features and evaluating them.

The study investigated that (i) 96% of the uses of *better off* are predicative, 63% take a complement XP, and 20% take a syntactically irregular XP, (ii) compared to *better off* used without a XP, the BO construction (= *better off* with a XP) tends to co-occur with both first/second person pronouns and modal auxiliaries, and (iii) the BO construction has an illocutionary force and functions as an indirect speech act such as ‘advice’, ‘suggestion’, ‘pleading’, and ‘warning’.

- (5) (a) But you’d be much better off with someone else.  
(b) ... you may be better off working closer to home.

The second study investigated the productivity of the BO construction. To measure productivity, I counted the number of hapaxes (i.e. a word that occurs only once within a context) that appear as the head of the XP in *COCA*. As a result, the study found that 40% of adjectives, 29% of present participles, and 50% of past participles are hapaxes.

The results of the two case studies together suggest that the BO constructions (i) include both syntactic and semantic irregularities, (ii) are likely to be used as indirect speech acts having an illocutionary force, and (iii) are highly productive constructions in present-day English.

## References

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