

Let's talk *face to face* about N-P-N constructions in English

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This paper analyzes a specific type of binominal NP, namely N-P-N constructions in which both nouns are singular count, identical and conjoined by a preposition (e.g. *face to face*, *night after night*, *inch by inch*). It has been stated that these symmetric, semi-idiomatic constructions – depending on the chosen preposition and type of noun – can express various meanings like succession, juxtaposition or transition in time and space (Jackendoff 2008; Haik 2009; Zwarts 2013). The constructions' binominal nature, their apparent frozenness and their syntactic restrictions (e.g. determiners are not permitted) make them an interesting target for analysis. Especially their empirical analysis forces us to tackle several open questions in constructional modeling.

Empirically, this paper uses data from the COCA to investigate the frequency and productivity, as well as the modification and extension potential of one subtype only; namely the $[CN_{sg,time}^i P CN_{sg,time}^i]_{Cx}$ –construction in which the head noun is a temporal unit (e.g. *day by day*, *month to month*, *summer after summer*). Questions to be addressed include which preposition is most productive and in what ways the construction can be modified or extended (ex.1–4):

- (1) *One of the frustrations many Americans felt as they viewed **day after day of suffering** without any rescue was this: Where was the cavalry?* (COCA: 2006 MAG WashMonth)
- (2) *They use up vacation days, **hour by precious hour**.* (COCA: 1994 NEWS WashPost)
- (3) *[W]e had 20-knot winds on the nose for **hours after hours** and **days after days**.* (COCA: 2007 MAG MotorBoating)
- (4) *the federal government over the years has **year by year by year** decreased support for families* (COCA: 2012 SPOK Fox_Sunday)

In terms of theoretical modeling, the paper takes a Cognitive Construction Grammar approach (Goldberg 2006; Hilpert 2014; Diessel 2016; Ellis, Römer & O'Donnell 2016; Sommerer & Smirnova forth.) and will sketch the constructional network of $[CN_{sg,time}^i P CN_{sg,time}^i]_{Cx}$ –constructions, focusing on the meaning side of the respective subtypes. It will also make suggestions about how this construction is vertically and horizontally connected to other related constructions like $[CN_{sg,measurement}^i P CN_{sg,measurement}^i]_{Cx}$ (e.g. *inch by inch*, *step by step*) or $[CN_{sg,bodypart}^i P CN_{sg,bodypart}^i]_{Cx}$ (e.g. *face to face*, *shoulder to shoulder*).

In current network models, constructions like *day by day* or *night after night* are conceptualized as fully specified, fixed chunks which deserve their own node in the network and are positioned on the lowest level. What current models rarely focus on is how to account for potential modification and extension in the constructs in ex. (1) – (4). This paper attempts to offer a potential solution. Additionally, it will be argued that in a usage-based model which strives for cognitive plausibility it is not feasible to postulate the entrenchment of an abstract overarching schema (i.e. a mothernode) like $[N P N]_{Cx}$ high up in the network. It is unlikely that speakers abstract such a general schema in a bottom-up acquisition process. Ultimately, it will be suggested that “purely formal generalizations, that is constructions without meaning, have no natural place in the construct-i-con” (Hilpert 2014: 57).

References

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