
Why *bring* is doing the splits
Exploring transitivity as an explanatory factor for coding asymmetries.

Donnerstag
 09.03.2017
 12:15 – 12:45
 B4 1, 0.26

Ulrike Schneider
 Universität Mainz

ulrike.schneider@uni-mainz.de

Britta Mondorf
 Universität Mainz

mondorf@uni-mainz.de

This paper explores the constructional split between causative and non-causative *bring*. In English, the possibilities of morphosyntactic modification of the causative *bring* construction have become rather limited. This is best illustrated by a comparison between English and German. While the latter still permits uses such as (1), the English equivalent (2) has become impossible. The modal, negated, reflexive use in (3), on the other hand, is alive and kicking.

- (1) Er brachte Deutschland zum Lachen: [...] (Nordwest-Zeitung Online 6 Oct 2014)
- (2) *He brought Germany to laugh.
- (3) He couldn't bring himself to laugh.

We first present a diachronic analysis of the development this causative construction underwent in English. Employing a 76-million-word corpus of British English novels spanning six centuries, we show that the causative *bring* construction has started out as a morphosyntactically freely modifiable construction, accepting all options listed in (4). But by the 20th century, the construction has come to be almost exclusively restricted to modal, negated reflexive uses.

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|----------------------|--------------|
| Animate/inanimate | agent |
| Full NP/reflexive as | patient |
| (4) Realis/modal | verb phrase |
| Affirmative/negative | verb phrase |
| Finite/non-finite | verb phrase |
| Active/passive | construction |

Secondly, we explore the reasons for this enormous restriction of the construc-

tion and particularly for the direction the development has taken. Our primary explanatory factor is transitivity as defined by Hopper and Thompson (1980), who advocate a gradual, semantic concept of transitivity – the more effectively an action is transferred to a patient, the more transitive is the clause. Among the six factors we investigated (see (4)), it is always the former which makes a clause more transitive and the latter which ‘detransitivises’. Thus our results show that the transitivity of the construction has been systematically declining.

For this presentation, we also analyse causative *bring*’s ‘huge neighbours’ – non-causative *bring* as well as causative *make* and *get* – in order to explore the reasons for this detransitivation process. We hypothesise that, firstly, in order to avoid ambiguous *bring*-constructions which can have both a causative and a locative reading, English simply split the constructional territory between the two constructional variants. Secondly, we hypothesise that processing-related factors can explain why it was causative *bring* which took the beating: Firstly, in detransitivised constructions, we have an asymmetry between more coding material and less action, i.e. a lower semantic load. This discrepancy between greater formal complexity, or explicitness, and less informativeness, or semantic load, heightens hidden/cognitive complexity. Secondly, usage frequency explains that if one construction had to shoulder this burden, it had to be causative *bring*, leaving the less demanding and more efficient options to its much more frequent brother.

References: • Hopper, Paul J. and Sandra A. Thompson (1980): “Transitivity in Grammar and Discourse.” *Language* 56 (2). 251-99.