

**British heads and American asses:  
Regional, register and recent variation in the Body Part Off/Out Construction**

Bert Cappelle & Annelien Dewinter  
*Université Lille Nord de France & University of Antwerp*

The Body Part Off/Out Construction (or 'BPOC', e.g. *work/dance/... one's ass/head off*) has attracted a fair amount of attention in the linguistic literature (e.g., Cappelle 2007, Culicover and Jackendoff 2005; Espinal and Mateu 2010; Glasbey 2003; Jackendoff 1997; Kudo 2011; Sawada 2000), where it has generally been discussed as an example of how verbs can productively be plugged in an argument-structure pattern which directly licenses object and path complements. However, the BPOC exhibits not only productivity but also conventionalization in the way it preferentially combines particular verbs and body part nouns. While the constraining role of conventional combinations to full productivity has thus been acknowledged within Construction Grammar, as well as the role of so-called 'lectal' factors in the choice of competing constructions (e.g. Coleman 2010), there is still great progress to be made in Construction Grammar in relating such lectal factors to *intra*-constructional lexical variation.

In light of this state of affairs, this paper looks beyond a single broad language variety to explore how different regional varieties (British and American English) and register varieties (spoken versus written languages, and different subregisters within these) may make different use of the BPOC. Searches based on previously established highly frequent BPOC constructs (e.g. *cry one's eyes out, work one's butt off, laugh one's head off, ...*) were carried out in the British National Corpus (BNC) and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). Search results were entered in a database and subjected to Chi-square tests for statistical significance. Given that the BNC contains somewhat older language material than COCA, we also conducted time-controlled web searches to investigate whether this recency difference may in part account for any observed regional differences.

Our corpus data reveal that BrE uses *head* more often than *ass* (or BrE *arse*) and *butt*, while *ass/butt* is used more often than *head* in AmE. This may be due to a higher salience of *ass*-related idioms more generally in American English. As for register, one might have expected the highest number of BPOC occurrences to be found in spoken discourse but it is in fictional writing that the construction is most frequent, both in BrE and in AmE. Furthermore, while in written language the BPOC seems to have a lower *ass/butt*-to-*head* ratio than in spoken language, this register effect is not significant. This suggests that even in writing, language users may prefer a conspicuously informal word in the BPOC rather than tone it down to something less laden with emotion. Subsequent web-based findings indicate that contemporary British and American English have in fact become more similar in their use of the BPOC than corpus research based on COCA and BNC alone would lead us to conclude.

Our findings are in line with a conception of language use as conforming to tendencies of area and era, as well as involving more than a syntactic and (narrowly-defined) semantic/pragmatic dimension but crucially also an attitudinal one.

## References

- Cappelle, Bert. 2007. When "wee wretched words" wield weight: The impact of verbal particles on transitivity. In: M. Nenonen and S. Niemi (eds.), *Collocations and Idioms 1: Papers from the first Nordic Conference on Syntactic Freezes, Joensuu, May 19-20, 2006*, 41-54. Joensuu: Joensuu University Press.
- Coleman, Timothy. 2010. Lectal variation in constructional semantics: 'Benefactive' ditransitives in Dutch. In Dirk Geeraerts, Gitte Kristiansen & Yves Peirsman (eds.), *Advances in Cognitive Sociolinguistics* 191-221. Berlin / New York: Mouton De Gruyter.
- Culicover, Peter W. and Ray Jackendoff. 2005. *Simpler Syntax*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Espinal, M. Teresa and Jaime Mateu. 2010. On classes of idioms and their interpretation. *Journal of Pragmatics* 42(5): 1397-1411.
- Glasbey, Sheila R. 2003. Let's paint the town red for a few hours: composition of aspect in idioms. In: Wellington, A.M. (Ed.), *Proceedings of the ACL Workshop: The Lexicon and Figurative Language*, Sapporo, 42-48.
- Jackendoff, Ray. 1997. Twisting the night away. *Language* 73(3), 534-559.
- Kudo, Shun. 2011. A comparative study between Resultative Constructions and Body Part Off Constructions. *Tsukuba English Studies* 29, 169-185.
- Sawada, Shigeyasu. 2000. The semantics of the 'Body Part Off' Construction. *English Linguistics* 17(2), 361-385.