

Martin Hilpert (Freiburg, Germany)

What can collocational change tell us about grammatical change? The development of aspectual *keep V-ing*

Abstract

Recent years have seen the development of large diachronic corpora, which are divided into successive time-slices and thus allow the study of linguistic phenomena across multiple periods of time. Resources of this kind hold a great potential for corpus-based research into grammatical change, but as yet, relatively few analytical methods have been designed for this particular purpose. This paper presents one such approach and applies it to the English aspectual construction *keep V-ing*.

Hilpert (2006, 2008) proposes a method adapted from Gries and Stefanowitsch (2004) that uses diachronic corpora for the investigation of historical shifts in collocational patterns. This method tracks changes in the collocational profile of a grammatical construction over several periods of time. Shifting collocational profiles are taken to indicate changes in the meaning of the investigated construction.

While this method generates interesting results, it also suffers from several confounds that are common ailments of historical corpus-linguistic approaches: A fundamental issue is of course the reliability of the results, given that many historical corpora are relatively small in size and heterogeneous in genre and variety. A second problem associated specifically with diachronic corpora concerns not so much the data itself, but the partitioning of the data into time-slices. Arbitrary divisions into decades, half-centuries, or centuries may not reflect actual historical stages in the development of a linguistic form.

This paper addresses these issues in a case study of English *keep V-ing* on the basis of diachronic corpus data. After a basic investigation of the shifting collocates of *keep V-ing*, the reliability of the overall results is tested in the following ways. First, it is tested how arbitrary time-slices lead to different results than time-slices that are produced in a more data-driven way (Gries, Hilpert 2008). Second, the effect of data scarcity is tested by re-running the analysis with smaller, randomly selected subsets of the data. Third, the effect of genre is tested by comparing separate analyses for different text types.

In sum, this paper hopes to demonstrate that the diachronic study of collocates can be usefully applied in corpus-based grammar research and that, given the right resources, its limitations can be kept in check.

References

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