Towards a usage-based characterisation of the English Superlative Object Construction

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Little attention has been paid to the English Superlative Object Construction (SOC), as in *She worked her hardest*. The historical grammarians Jespersen (1909–1949) and Poutsma (1904–1929) are the only ones who do touch on the SOC, and they do so in passing relying on what seem to be the prototypical examples of the construction. This empirical evidence, though valuable for a first characterisation of the pattern, is insufficient to provide a detailed analysis of the form, function, frequency, and distribution of the SOC in Present Day English from the perspective of Construction Grammar. Based on usage-based data from COCA, this paper argues that the SOC qualifies as an intensifying comparative construction. Despite being low frequent and showing a set of highly entrenched, lexicalised units (e.g., *smile* [X] *prettiest, work* [X] *hardest*), the SOC is relatively productive, especially in informal registers where the construction can be easily accommodated to serve emotive, phatic, and conative functions.

Keywords: Superlative Object Construction, intensifying comparative construction, frequency, productivity, distribution

1. Introduction

Little attention has been paid to the English Superlative Object Construction (SOC; Bouso 2021),[1] as in (1a–b) below.

(1) a. She **worked** *her hardest*.
b. She **smiled** *her prettiest*.
(Jespersen 1909–1949: III, §12.2: 234; with slight modifications)

1. The label was proposed to the author by Prof. Britta Mondorf (p.c., Mainz 2018). The author used to refer to the SOC as the "*one's hardest* object construction" (Bouso 2021).

https://doi.org/10.1075/cf.22020.bou | Published online: 6 February 2024
Constructions and Frames ISSN 1876-1933 | E-ISSN 1876-1941

The SOC has been characterised by the historical grammarians Jespersen (1909–1949) and Poutsma (1904–1929) as a syntactic pattern consisting of an intransitive verb of manner of action (*work, smile*, etc.) followed by a non-prototypical type of object that takes the form of a nominalised adjective, which is preceded by a possessive and inflected for the superlative degree (*hardest, prettiest*, etc.). Its overall constructional meaning is one of intensification, namely, to "express the highest effort in the matter of an action" (Poutsma 1904–1929: II, §37: 498).

To the best of my knowledge, these historical grammarians are the only ones who do touch on the SOC, and they do so in passing, relying also on what seem to be the prototypical examples of the construction (e.g., (1a–b)). Such empirical evidence, though extremely valuable for an initial characterisation of the pattern (see Section 2), is not sufficient to provide a detailed analysis of the form, function, frequency, and distribution of the SOC in Present Day English (PDE). This is the aim of this paper: to fill this gap in the literature by offering a characterisation of the modern SOC, based on naturally occurring data from the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA; Davies 2008) and using as a heuristic tool the theoretical framework of Construction Grammar (Goldberg 1995, 2006, 2019; Hilpert 2014/2019; Traugott & Trousdale 2013, etc.).

2. Characteristic features of the modern SOC

Jespersen (1909–1949: II, §11.38 & III, §12.2) briefly discusses Superlative Objects (SOs) in a section where he deals with different types of non-ordinary objects. There he includes special cases of the object of result such as: (i) the *way*-object in (2a), which occurs in the now well-known *way*-construction, where the subject referent moves along a path towards a specified goal, (ii) the Cognate Object (CO), which, as shown in (2b), is characteristic of Cognate Object Constructions (COCs), where the object is etymologically and semantically related to the verb that it co-occurs with, and finally, (iii) the Reaction Object (RO); this object type is involved in the so-called Reaction Object Construction (ROC; Levin 1993: 98) whose overall meaning is "to express X by V-*ing*", as in "She expressed her thanks by laughing" in the ROC exemplified in (2c).

(2) a. I **scrambled** *my way* through the evergreens.
b. I never saw a man **die** *a violent death.*
c. She **laughed** *her thanks.* (Jespersen 1909–1949: III, §12.2: 232–235)

From a structural point of view, the most important feature of these non-prototypical object types, which is also common with the SO, is that all of them

are "frequent with verbs which are otherwise intransitive [e.g., *scramble, die* and *laugh*]" (Jespersen 1909–1949: III, § 12.2: 234).

The historical grammarian Poutsma (1904–1929) expands on this first brief characterisation of the SO. He mentions that this object type is part of a comparative structure that is used to "express the highest effort in the matter of an action" (Poutsma 1904–1929: II, § 37: 498). At the formal level, he also clarifies that the superlative in such a structure is accompanied by a possessive pronoun and that it "is sometimes preceded by the adverb *very* for greater emphasis" (see (3a–b)). Moreover, Poutsma mentions that the preposition *at* may also be present (see (4a–b)) and that the superlative is best treated as "an adjective *partially* converted into a noun" (1914–1929: II, § 37: 498; emphasis mine).

(3) a. Other stars – even the smallest – **scintillated** and **sparkled** *their very best.*
b. Admiral Bowster **stared** *his very hardest.* (Poutsma 1904–1929: II, § 37: 498)

(4) a. He led me, in a courtly manner, **stepping** at *his tallest*, to an open place…
b. From six that morning till past noon the huge wood fire in the kitchen **roared** and **sparkled** at *its highest.* (Poutsma 1904–1929: II, § 37: 498)

Other examples he provides to illustrate the features of SOs are those included in (5), which quite crucially, similarly to those examples just mentioned and the ones provided by Jespersen (see (1a–b)), feature "descriptive verbs" (Snell-Hornby 1983), and more specifically, intransitive verbs of manner of action (e.g., *shriek, sing, work*).

(5) a. The two women **shrieked** *their loudest.*
b. The birds were **singing** *their loudest.*
c. The emissaries from Ulster … **worked** *their hardest* to alarm the electors.
(Poutsma 1904–1929: II, § 37: 498)

Poutsma's characterisation of the SO is not restricted to its morphosyntactic features in PDE, but he also includes a diachronic dimension. In a chapter devoted to the role of COs (see (2b)) in the large-scale process of transitivisation that has affected the English language since Old English times (Visser 1963–1973: I, § 132: 99–100; for details see Bouso 2021), Poutsma (1904–1929: II, §§ 44–45: 76–79) treats the SO as a variant of the CO where the CO is not overtly expressed,

> The cognate object may be assumed to be understood after superlatives preceded by a possessive pronoun in constructions like the following: The birds were **singing** *their loudest* (sc. *singing*), he was **trying** *his hardest* (sc. *trying*).
> (Poutsma 1904–1929: II, §§ 44–45: 78–79)

What Poutsma seems to be suggesting is that the roots of the SOC are to be found in the COC. That being the case, the type of process that would be at work

here would have been one of detransitivisation (Jespersen 1909–1949: III, § 16.1: 321–324; Möhlig & Klages 2002; Mondorf & Schneider 2016) rather than one of transitivisation (Bouso 2021) – the latter is clearly the type of process that is at work in the emergence and development of the other analogous special cases of the object of result (see (2)).

3. The SO and other analogous object types and structures

Contemporary descriptive grammars of English like Quirk et al. (1985), Huddleston and Pullum (2002), and Biber et al. (1999/2021), as well as more specialised literature in the field, ignore the existence of SOs despite discussing, in some level of detail, other closely related object types (Allerton 1982; Bouso 2014, 2017, 2021; Jackendoff 1990; Kogusuri 2009, 2011; Martínez Vázquez 1998, 2015; Massam 1990; Mondorf 2016), and other similar idiosyncratic comparative structures (Beland 2022; González Díaz 2008; Gu 2017; Hilpert 2008; Hoffmann 2019a; Huddleston 2002: 1097–1170; Ivorra Ordines 2021a, 2021b; Mondorf 2003; Quirk et al. 1985: 458–468; Watanabe & Iyeiri 2020).

Based on previous literature in the field, Bouso (2014, 2021) summarises the morphosyntactic features of the various special cases of the object of result identified by Jespersen (1909–1949; see examples in (2)). As shown in Table 1 no clause-level modifier in between verb and object is possible. Also, like prototypical objects, cognate, reaction, and *way*-objects cannot co-occur with a Direct Object (DO). Contrary to prototypical object types, however, these special cases of objects of result are incompatible with passivisation, topicalisation, pronominalisation or questioning, and they all show some formal restrictions. For instance, they cannot be preceded by a definite article,[2] and they have some formal marking that distinguishes them from structures featuring prototypical object types. More specifically, true COs require modification, and they must be morphologically related to the verb, modern *way*-objects must be accompanied by a directional complement, and crucially, as is also the case with ROs, *way*-objects must be coreferential with the subject.

2. Note that true COs and ROs can be preceded by a definite article if they are postmodified by means of a prepositional phrase or a relative clause, as in *She smiled the biggest dumbest grin you ever saw* (Massam 1990: 169), and *The old lady nodded the satisfaction which this proof of the surly man's foresight imparted to her feelings* (Bouso 2022a, 2022b). *Way*-objects are more constrained in this regard; as is well known from the literature, the possessive in this construction started to become fixed in the Early Modern English period (see Fanego 2019; Traugott & Trousdale 2013: 84; among others). Something similar could have occurred with SOs; however, as a hypothesis this should be tested against historical data. As specified in Section 5, the focus here is on PDE SOCs with a possessive.

Table 1. Morphosyntactic features of special cases of object of result (based on Bouso 2021: 81–98 and references therein)

	True COs	***Way*-objects**	**ROs**
Adjacency condition	*He **sighed** wearily *a heavy sigh*	*Bill **belched** noisily *his way* out of the restaurant	*She **nodded** gracefully *her approval*
Can co-occur with a DO	*Ethel **moved** her lips *a slight movement*	*Sue **whistled** a tune *her way* through the tunnel	*She **nodded** her head *approval*
Passivisation	**A silly smile* was **smiled** by Maggie	**His way* was **belched** out of the restaurant by Bill	**Her adoration* was **mumbled** by Sarah
Topicalisation	**A silly smile*, nobody **smiled**	**His way* out of the restaurant, Bill **belched**	**Agreement*, John **nodded**
Pronominalisation	*Maggie **smiled** *a silly smile*, then her brother smiled it	*He **belched** it out of the restaurant	*George **nodded** *agreement*, so I nodded it, too
Questioning	**What* did he **die**?	**What* did he **belch**?	**What* did she **smile**?
Formal restrictions	*She **smiled** *the happy smile* *He **died** *a ∅ death* *He **died** *a suicide*	*He **belched** *the way* out of the restaurant Bill **belched** *his way* out of the restaurant Bill$_i$ **belched** *his$_i$ way* out of the restaurant	*Pauline **smiled** *the thanks* *He **nodded** *his belief* in the witness' story **Tom* **frowned** *Ann's/ my displeasure*

The object type under analysis here also shares these features. Taking the examples provided above by Jespersen (1909–1949) and Poutsma (1904–1929) as prototypical of the construction, we notice that SOs comply with the array of morphosyntactic properties given in Table 1. As shown in Table 2, SOs do not allow the insertion of a DO nor a clause-level modifier between the verb and the SO itself.[3] Moreover, they cannot undergo passivisation, topicalisation, pronominalisation or questioning and they also reveal various formal constraints; as first mentioned by Poutsma (1904–1929: II, § 37: 498), they take the form of a nominalised adjective which is always headed by a possessive and inflected for the superlative degree.

3. One example where the SO is separated from the verb can be found in phrases such as *She gave it her best …* (COCA, 1996, SPOK, ABC_GMA). Though connected to the SOC, examples like these have been excluded from the analysis. They have been treated as a variant of the fully lexicalised patterns *to give something one's best shot* and *to give it one's best shot* (OED, s.v. *best*, adj., n.[1], and adv., PHRASES, f.).

Table 2. Morphosyntactic features of SOs (my own examples)

	SOs
Adjacency condition	* I **worked** wearily *my hardest*
Can co-occur with a DO	* I **worked** it *my hardest*
Passivisation	* *My hardest* was **worked**
Topicalisation	* *My hardest* is what I **worked**
Pronominalisation	* I **worked** *my hardest*, so she worked it, too
Questioning	* *What* did she **work**?
Formal restrictions	* I **worked** *the hardest*
	* I **worked** *my hard*
	I_i **worked** *my_i hardest*

At the level of semantics, Jespersen (1909–1949), Fillmore (1968), Martínez Vázquez (1998, 2015), and Kogusuri (2009) claim that the object types included in Table 1 are special cases of the object of result. Mondorf (2016) further specifies that the objects belonging to the paradigm of English resultatives "do not carry a significant semantic load" (2016: 83); in her own words, they are "semantically light" as "their function is primarily syntactic rather than semantic" (2016: 83). The argument that Mondorf puts forward is that the function of objects of result of this kind is to enhance "a verb's transitivity" (2016: 73). Finally, an interesting point raised by Jespersen (1909–1949: III, §12.2: 233–235) and Poutsma (1904–1929: II, Chapter XLV: 27–28, Chapter XLVI: 47–48, and 76–81, Chapter LIX: 688) is that COs, and ROs indicate manner. This is shown in the correspondences included in (6–7) where these objects are easily replaced by an adjunct of quality (i.e., *as simple as possible, approvingly*). Interestingly, this semantic feature is also shared by the SO. In (8), for instance, the role of the SO can be taken by the degree phrase *extremely hard*.

(6) a. To **live** *a life of the utmost simplicity*.
b. To **live** *as simple as possible*. (Poustma 1904–1929: II, Chapter XLV: 27–28)

(7) a. She **smiled** *approbation*.
b. She **smiled** *approvingly*. (Poustma 1904–1929: II, Chapter LIX: 688)

(8) a. She **worked** *her hardest*.
b. She **worked** *extremely hard*.

To sum up, the SO can be defined as another "special case of the object of result" (Jespersen 1909–1949: III, §12.2: 233), a "semantically light" object (Mondorf 2016: 83) that, to judge from the scarce evidence given by the literature on the topic, most frequently occurs with verbs which are otherwise intransitive. Like other related object types such as the CO or the RO, the SO is best characterised as a non-prototypical type of object that differs syntactically and semantically from more ordinary object types. The object is subject to formal constraints, and, at the level of semantics, it indicates manner, which explains why it can be easily replaced by degree adjuncts such as *extremely hard*. Finally, as pointed out by Poutsma, the SO is part of a comparative structure whose overall meaning is to "express the highest effort in the matter of an action" (1904–1929, II, §37: 498). This idea sets the ground for the following section which deals with the place of the SO within the system of English comparatives and its parallels with other similar idiosyncratic comparative structures

3.1 The SO within the system of English comparatives

The English language is equipped with a rich system of specialised syntax and morphology to express comparisons of various types. Huddleston (2002: 1099–1100) distinguishes between scalar (*Sue and Ed are equally good*) and non-scalar comparisons (*Sue and Ed are in the same class*), between comparisons of equality (*Sue and Ed are equally good*) and of inequality, and within this last category between comparisons of superiority (*Sue is the best of the three*) and of inferiority (*Sue is the worst of the three*).

As shown in Table 3, a fourth overarching distinction involves (i) those constructions that express comparison between the members of some set (set comparisons), and (ii) those comparative structures that express comparison between a primary term and a secondary term (term comparisons). Interestingly, set comparisons can be reformulated as term comparisons; for instance, the set comparison *Sue is the best of the three* can be paraphrased as *Sue is better than the other two*, where *Sue* is the primary term and *the other two* is the secondary one. Another common feature that can be inferred from Table 3 is that term and set comparisons can be grouped into the three subtypes of comparative structures mentioned above (i.e., scalar / non-scalar, equality / inequality, and superiority / inferiority).

Table 3. Huddleston's (2002: 1099–1100) classification of comparative structures

Set comparison		
	Equality	**Inequality**
Scalar	Sue and Ed are equally good	Sue is the best of the three
Non-scalar	Sue and Ed are in the same class	Sue and Ed go to different schools
Term comparison		
	Equality	**Inequality**
Scalar	Sue is as good as Ed	Sue is better than the other two
Non-scalar	Sue is in the same class as Ed	Sue goes to a different school from Ed

Despite all these commonalities, set and term comparisons reveal two important syntactic differences. The first one is that comparative clauses (e.g., *We performed better than we did last year*) can only occur in term comparisons (Huddleston 2002: 1103). The second has to do with the two different ways of expressing scalar comparison of inequality, and more specifically with the well-known distinction between the superlative (e.g., *best*) and the comparative grade (e.g., *better*). While the superlative grade is restricted to set comparisons, the comparative grade is predominantly used in term comparisons. The use of the comparative grade in set comparisons is only possible "where the set has just two members" (Huddleston 2002: 1103; see also 1162), as in *Sue is the better of the two.*

Zooming in on the superlative grade, this can be marked analytically with the adverbs *most*, or *least* (e.g., *most / least difficult errors*), or inflectionally, with the suffix *-est* (e.g., *loudest*). Superlatives can also be (i) incorporated, as in the examples included in (9), where the superlative is part of a Noun Phrase (NP), or (ii) free, as shown in examples in (10), where the superlative is in post-head position. In free superlatives, the definite article *the* is usually permitted but optional; by contrast, for incorporated superlatives, which confer definiteness on the NP containing them, the definite article *the* – or some other determiners – are "strongly preferred, and often obligatory" (Huddleston 2002: 1168).

(9) a. They rejected [the two best novels she has written].
b. Pat made [the most mistakes].
c. He offered me [the least valuable of the paintings].
d. [The most we can hope for] is a 2 % rise. (Huddleston 2002: 1167)

(10) a. She's the candidate most likely to be elected.
b. These were the ones that the grown-ups laughed at loudest.
c. It was Jill who presented her case the most effectively.
(Huddleston 2002: 1167)

Besides functioning as a superlative marker, the adverb *most* may have an intensifying function; in examples like the one in (11a), for instance, *most* is "a degree adverb" meaning 'highly, very, extremely' (Huddleston 2002: 1165). The difference between (11a) and (11b) relies on the article; in (11a), the indefinite article imposes an intensifying reading – in Huddleston's words, "it [*most* in (11a)] doesn't belong to the superlative category at all" (Huddleston 2002: 1165–1166fn41) –, whereas in (11b) the definite article "coerces" (Michaelis 2004) a superlative interpretation. When the article is missing, as in (11c), the meaning of the construction is ambiguous between a comparative reading (e.g., "This one is more useful than the others"), and an intensifying one (e.g., "This one is *extremely* useful").

(11) a. Kim is *a* most enthusiastic supporter. (intensifying)
b. Kim is *the* most enthusiastic supporter I've come across. (superlative)
c. This one is most useful. (superlative / intensifying)
(Huddleston 2002: 1165)

As opposed to "superficial" analytical superlatives with *most* (e.g., (11a)), inflectional superlatives have been claimed not to be "used in the intensifying sense" (Huddleston 2002: 1165). Thus, *most enthusiastic* in (11a) cannot be replaced by *keenest* (see (12a)). Other illustrative examples are *cheapest* and *kindest* in (12b) and (12c), which have clear comparative meanings, and *most kind* in (12d) which, despite being bare in this context, is *unambiguously* interpreted with an intensifying meaning. This is so because the monosyllabic adjective *kind*, most naturally, "allows inflectional marking of grade" (Huddleston 2002: 1165).

(12) a. *Kim is a keenest supporter.
b. This one is cheapest.
c. You are kindest.
d. You are most kind. (Huddleston 2002: 1165)

Exceptions to this constraint on inflectional superlatives are terms of endearment such as *dearest* in *my dearest Anna* ("my very dear Anna") where the synthetic superlative *dearest*, being preceded by a possessive, "expresses intensification rather than set comparison" (Huddleston 2002: 1165fn41). Crucially, another exception seems to be the structure under analysis here.[4] The SO is prototypically

4. A reviewer points out another exception in the pattern *She smiled the loveliest of smiles*. This is, however, a different kind of construction from the SOC. Following the taxonomy provided by Huddleston (2002), structures of this kind resemble examples such as *Sue is the best of the three*, which fits into the category of scalar set comparisons of inequality (see Table 3, Section 3.1).

marked inflectionally,[5] and it counts as an incorporated type of superlative: as argued later on in Section 6.1, it is part of an NP that always requires the presence of a possessive (see Table 2). However, like the adverb *most* in its intensifying function (11a), the inflectional ending of SOs can be easily replaced by a plain adjective and a degree adverb such as *very* or *extremely* (see (8b)). Also, as already noted by Poutsma (1904–1929), SOs can be accompanied by the adverb *very* for greater emphasis (see example (3) in Section 2).

Finally, it should be noted here that recent investigations have pointed to the existence of other superficially comparative structures similar to the SOC, such as the Spanish [*más feo que* X] ('very ugly') construction exemplified here in (13).

(13) Se le recuerda como el mejor científico del siglo XX por haber ganado dos veces el Premio Nobel al hombre más sexy del mundo, a pesar de ser **más feo que <inserta tu nombre aquí>**. (esTenTen18, 16012132830)
'He is mainly remembered as the best scientist of the 20th century for having won twice the Nobel Prize for the sexiest man in the world, despite being **uglier than <insert your name here>**.' (Ivorra Ordines 2021a: 36)

Using Huddleston's (2002) classification of comparative structures included in Table 3, the example in (13) would "superficially" fit into the subtype of scalar term comparisons of inequality (*Sue is better than the other two*); however, as rightly pointed out by Ivorra Ordines (2021b), its overall meaning is not that of "comparing two entities [i.e., a primary term and a secondary one] with respect to a magnitude" (360). More specifically, example (13) differs from the prototypical grammatical comparative constructions given in Table 3 in its pragmatic (intensifying) meaning and in the standard of comparison: in term comparisons "an extralinguistic referent is alluded" whereas in intensifying comparative constructions the standard of comparison is "the result of a linguistic convention" (Ivorra Ordines 2021a: 35–36).

4. Looking our finest: The view from construction grammar

The non-prototypical features of the SO discussed in Sections 2 and 3 suggest that, like other similar special cases of the object of result and other intensifying comparative structures analysed in the literature (Bouso 2021; Höche 2009; Israel

5. Though rare, analytical superlatives are also sometimes possible in the SOC, mostly in coordination or juxtaposition with a preceding synthetic superlative introduced by at, as in *She is at her sharpest, most dangerous* (COCA, 2010, FIC, FantasySciFi). As specified in Section 5, the focus of this paper is restricted to (bare) inflectional superlatives.

1996; Ivorra Ordines 2021a, 2021b; Ivorra Ordines & Mellado Blanco 2021; Perek 2018; Traugott & Trousdale 2013), the SO can also be treated as a form-meaning pairing, that is, as a construction in the traditional Goldbergian sense (Goldberg 1995, 2006; Hilpert 2013, 2014/2019),

> C is a CONSTRUCTION iff$_{def}$ C is a form-meaning <F_i, S_i > such that some aspect of F_i or some aspect of S_i is not strictly predictable from C's component parts or from other previously established constructions. (Goldberg 1995: 4)

Syntactically odd structures like the ones described in Sections 2 (see Table 1) and 3 are best approached from the perspective of Construction Grammar (e.g., Goldberg 1995, 2006, 2019), the theoretical framework that will be used here to provide a descriptive account of the SOC using naturally occurring data from the largest corpus of contemporary American English. As we have just seen, the data provided by Jespersen (1909–1949) and Poutsma (1904–1929), though extremely valuable for a first approach to the SOC (Section 2), is insufficient for a usage-based characterisation (Barlow & Kemmer 2000; Bybee 2010; Diessel 2019) of the construction in Modern English from a Construction Grammar perspective. More specifically, from the scant literature on the topic, it becomes clear that more research needs to be done on (i) the frequency and productivity of the SOC in PDE, (ii) the different senses the construction can adopt, including the verb classes that motivate these senses, and (iii) the levels of abstraction at which the construction may exist. Finally, another question that arises here is whether register may have played a role in the diverse configuration of the modern SOC. Recent investigations have unveiled the existence of "genre-based (sensitive) constructions" (Nikiforidou 2018). For instance, it has been shown that the nineteenth-century British sentimental novel was key in the consolidation of the ROC (Bouso 2020, 2021, 2022a, 2022b; Bouso & Ruano San Segundo 2021a, 2021b). Results along these lines for the SOC would contribute to the observation that genre is an important factor to consider in the analysis of constructions (Fillmore, Kay & O'Connor 1988; Goldberg 2019: 7; Hoffmann & Bergs 2018; Nikiforidou 2018; Östman 2005). Thus, it is relevant to also explore in this paper (iv) the contexts the SOC is most likely to occur in, and (v) the main functions it fulfills. All in all, the research questions that this paper seeks to address are summarised as follows:

RQ1: Does the SOC qualify as a traditional Goldbergian construction? What constructional links (horizontal and vertical) can be posed there, between the SOC and its (potential) relative constructions? Can we treat the SOC as yet another case of multiple inheritance construction?

RQ2: How frequent and productive is the SOC in PDE? Does it count as a polysemous construction? If so, what are the different senses of the construction and what verb classes are there motivating these senses? How productive are the verb and object slots of the SOC? At what levels of abstraction does the SOC manifest itself in the data?

RQ3: Does register play a role in the use of the construction? If so, how?

5. Data sources and methodology

For the present study, a usage-based methodology was adopted. More than 12,000 potential examples of the construction were retrieved from the largest corpus of contemporary American English (more than one billion words) using the online interface of the corpus and the string V my|your|her|his|their *est. Restricting the query to 1,000 hits (i.e., different V + *-est* combinations) the search string conducted yielded 34,267 tokens. Only 139 hits (12,963 tokens) were selected for further analysis, namely those that resembled potential instances of the construction were kept in the database, whereas false positives such as *lost my best, be my guest*, etc. were excluded from the analysis.

After lemmatising all inflected verb forms together into one single template (e.g., *do my best, did my best*, and *doing my best* under *do best*), I came up with a total of 19 SOC verb + *-est* combinations. As shown in Table 4, the most frequent pattern of them all was *do best* which resulted in more than 8,000 tokens, though only 4,000 of these were eventually manually analysed (see fourth column in Table 4).

This first sample data was supplemented with the search string VERB_v my|your|her|his|their|its *est,[6] and Poutsma's (1904–1929) and Jespersen's (1909–1949) lists of verbs typical of the construction (see Table 5). Note, however, that not all the verbs mentioned by Poutsma and Jespersen were attested in the SOC (only *fight, look, reach, roar, sing, smile, work*, and *try*). The searches amounted up to 7,139 tokens, 3,671 of which were instances of the SOC (see Table 6 in Section 6.2). After removing the duplicates (95 / 7,139 tokens), the remaining tokens were coded for the following variables: filler types (verb types), year of attestation, genre, and presence or absence of a superlative, and a CO that is morphologically and semantically related to the verb.

This last variable was added with the aim of testing the frequency of COs in combination with superlatives. As mentioned in Section 2, "the cognate object may be assumed to be understood after superlatives" (Poutsma 1904–1929, II,

6. VERB here stands for each of the (in)transitive verbs included in Table 4 and Table 5.

Table 4. V + *-est* combinations attested in the SOC in COCA ($n = 19$)

Verbs	Frequency*	SOC	Analysed	% SOCs	% total
do best	8,792	3,735	4,000	93.38	54.42
try best	1,980	1,975	1,980	99.75	28.78
look best	415	413	415	99.52	6.02
try hardest	343	343	343	100	5.00
play best	372	158	372	42.47	2.30
give best	165	59	165	35.76	0.86
do damnedest	51	51	51	100	0.74
feel best	36	34	36	94.44	0.50
try damnedest	33	33	33	100	0.48
work hardest	26	26	26	100	0.38
do damndest	10	10	10	100	0.15
show best	19	9	19	47.37	0.13
try damndest	7	7	7	100	0.10
make best	145	4	145	2.76	0.06
put best	30	2	30	6.67	0.03
hit highest	9	1	9	11.11	0.01
look best / brightest	1	1	1	100	0.01
wear best	18	1	18	5.56	0.01
write best	12	1	12	8.33	0.01
Total	**12,464**	**6,863**	**7,672**	**NA**	**100**

* This frequency count refers to V + *-est* combinations rather than to the overall frequency of these verbs in the corpus.

§§ 44–45: 76–78), and if that close connection between these two constructions exists, then it would not be surprising to find COs preceded by superlatives in PDE data. Whether the SO historically derives from the COC is a question that can only be answered in the light of diachronic data. It will suffice to mention here that in the analysed data, the evidence points out that this is quite unlikely as only the verbs *smile* and *sing* revealed COs in combination with inflectional superlatives (e.g., *sing its sweetest songs, sing my best songs, smile my sweetest smile, smile her best smile*, etc.).[7]

7. These findings align with Höche's (2009) results on the PDE COC. Her database involves 109 verbs belonging to 31 semantic classes. 29 of these 109 verbs are attracted to a great extent

Table 5. Poutsma's (1904–1929), and Jespersen's (1909–1949) lists of verbs ($n = 17$)*

do (eOE, OED, v. trans.), *blaze* (?c1225, OED, v. intrans.), *breathe* (c1300, OED, v. intrans.), *fight* (c900, OED, v. intrans.), *look* (eOE, OED, v. intrans.), *reach* (eOE, OED, v.[1] trans.), *roar* (OE, OED, v.[1] intrans.), *scintillate* (1623, OED, v. intrans.), *shriek* (1567, OED, v. intrans.), *sing* (c825, OED, v.[1] intrans.), *sleep* (c825, OED, v. intrans.), *smile* (a1300, OED, v. intrans.), *sparkle* (a1200, OED, v.[1] intrans.), *stare* (OE, OED, v. intrans.), *step* (897, OED, v. intrans.), *try* (13…, OED, v. trans.), and *work* (eOE, OED, v. intrans.)

* The table includes the date of first attestation of the verb in the English language and, also, whether this first attestation was as a transitive or as an intransitive verb. *Do* was left out from the supplementary sample because it was clear that its use in the construction was lexicalised. Table 4, for instance, shows that almost 94 % of the 4,000 tokens analysed are instances of SOCs; as also shown in this table, *do* accounts for more than 50 % of the SOCs attested, as opposed to *try*, and *look* (around 28 % and 6 %, respectively).

Finally, to determine the productivity and the levels of abstraction of the SOC, I have relied on type and token frequencies. Token frequencies were also used to identify the prototypes of the construction. The results obtained were further tested with simple and co-varying collexeme analyses (Gries 2014/2022; Hilpert 2014; Stefanowitsch & Gries 2003; Stefanowitsch & Gries 2005). These are two of a family of statistical methods used to investigate "which lexical items typically occupy a given slot in a single grammatical construction", as well as the "dependencies between lexical items that occupy two different slots within the same construction" (Hilpert 2014: 392).

6. Results and discussion

6.1 The SOC as a traditional Goldbergian construction

The SOC involves transitive verbs such as *do* and *try* (see Table 4, Section 5), but also copular verbs (e.g., *look*), and originally intransitive verbs of manner of action (*work, smile, blaze*, etc.), followed by a "partially" nominalised adjective that most prototypically is inflected for the superlative degree (*her hardest, her prettiest, its brightest*, etc.). Apart from its odd syntax, i.e., [Sub_i V $_{\text{TRANS}/\text{INTRANS}}$ Obj_i], the SOC also lacks compositionality; as discussed in Section 3.1, contrary to analytical superlatives with *most*, inflectional superlatives are only exceptionally

to the construction and among the most distinctive verbs of the construction are precisely the verbs expressing some notion of verbal utterance / communication *smile* and *sing* (134–135). Also, of the verbs analysed in the present study (cf. Table 4 and Table 5), only the verbs *sing, smile, give, do, feel, fight, sleep, breathe*, and *work* are included in Höche's database (298–300).

used to express intensification rather than set comparison (i.e., the default function of inflectional superlatives).

Following the formalisms commonly adopted in constructionist approaches (see Bouso 2021; Israel 1996; Traugott & Trousdale 2013, etc.), for the SOC, I propose the schematic representation given in (15). Here Subj is an agent who expresses the highest effort in the matter of the action denoted by the verb; V is a transitive verb, or an intransitive verb (as will be shown in Section 6.2, intransitives can be either copular, or manner of action verbs); and Obj_i is the SO proper, a non-prototypical type of object that takes the form of an "adjective *partially* converted into a nominal" (Poutsma 1904–1929: II, § 37: 498; emphasis mine), that is, the possessive determiner that accompanies the superlative is coreferential with the subject of the construction, and the $POSS_i$ A-*est* ∅ combination, despite taking the form of an NP and occupying the object slot of the construction, lacks an overt, formally expressed nominal head,[8] and conveys the pragmatic meaning of intensification.

(15) FORM: Sub_i [$V_{TRANS/INTRANS}$ Obj_i]. Where Obj_i = ($POSS_i$ A-*est* ∅)$_{NP}$ ↔
MEANING:
'Agent performs the action denoted by the verb in its highest degree' {intensification}

6.2 The SOC as a low-frequency construction

Just like other intensifying comparative constructions like the [*más feo que* X] ('very ugly') construction (Ivorra Ordines 2021a), the corpus findings included in Table 4 (Section 5) reveal that the SOC is a low-frequency phenomenon with a set of highly entrenched, lexicalised units involving the inflectional superlative *best*, e.g., *do* [X] *best, try* [X] *best, look* [X] *best*, etc. To judge from their frequency, besides *do*, the prototypical verbs of the SOC seem to be the transitive verb of

8. The $POSS_i$ A-*est* ∅ combination is treated here as another instance of an NP containing a silent / ellipted noun similar to the so-called human and abstract constructions (Kester 1996), as in *the innocent*, and *the guilty* in *Just as the innocent should not be punished, so the guilty should be made to pay*, and *the impossible* in *He is trying to do the virtually impossible*. As repeatedly noted here, and also as argued in Günther (2018), nounless NPs like these ones do not involve a nominalisation process because the adjectives in question are only *partially* converted into nouns: they are all preceded by a determiner (e.g., *the innocent, her hardest*); however, unlike nouns, they do not allow the use of a plural marker (**the innocents*, **her hardests*), they are able to occur in comparative and superlative forms (*the guiltiest, her hardest*), and they can take adverbial modifiers (*the virtually impossible*, and *her very hardest*, see examples in (3) in Section 2).

effort *try* (Duffley & Tremblay 1994; Fanego 1997), and the intransitive (copular) stative verb *look*. As shown in Table 6, these two verbs account for approximately 90 % of the overall data and simple collexeme analysis (see Figure 1) points towards roughly the same results with the verbs *try* and *look* placed at the top in the rank of distinctive collexemes of the construction, and the verbs *make, write*, and *put* placed at the very bottom, showing repulsion rather than attraction to the SOC (repelled collexemes are shaded in grey in Table 6).

Table 6. Verbs attested in the SOC using the string V_v my|your|her|his|their|its *est

Verbs	Frequency[a]	SOC	% SOCs	% total
try	795,248	2,640	0.33	71.92
play	478,740	202	0.04	5.50
look	1,338,475	498	0.04	13.57
feel	722,826	99	0.01	2.70
roar	8,594	1	0.01	0.03
give	1,048,188	114	0.01	3.11
smile	73,137	5	0.01	0.14
work	854,095	55	0.01	1.50
sing	91,395	5	0.01	0.14
hit	192,969	9	0.00	0.25
reach	193,684	8	0.00	0.22
fight	154,643	6	0.00	0.16
wear	177,785	6	0.00	0.16
show	536,889	13	0.00	0.35
put	616,951	3	0.00	0.08
make	2,290,830	6	0.00	0.16
write	439,865	1	0.00	0.03
	9,820,630	**3,671**	na	100

a. This is the frequency of the verbs as shown in COCA.

As stated by Goldberg (1995), and many others after her (Hilpert 2021; Perek 2014), constructions "are typically associated with a family of closely related senses rather than a single, fixed abstract sense" (31). In Hilpert's words, "[p]olysemy is rampant" (2021: 149). The SOC seems to be no exception to this constructionist principle; indeed, the data suggests that the SOC can be treated as a polysemous construction structured around two core meanings. On the one hand, the sense "to be in one's best state or condition" (OED, s.v. *best*, adj., n.[1], and adv, P3 (b)), featuring intransitive copular (stative) verbs such as *look* (eOE, OED,

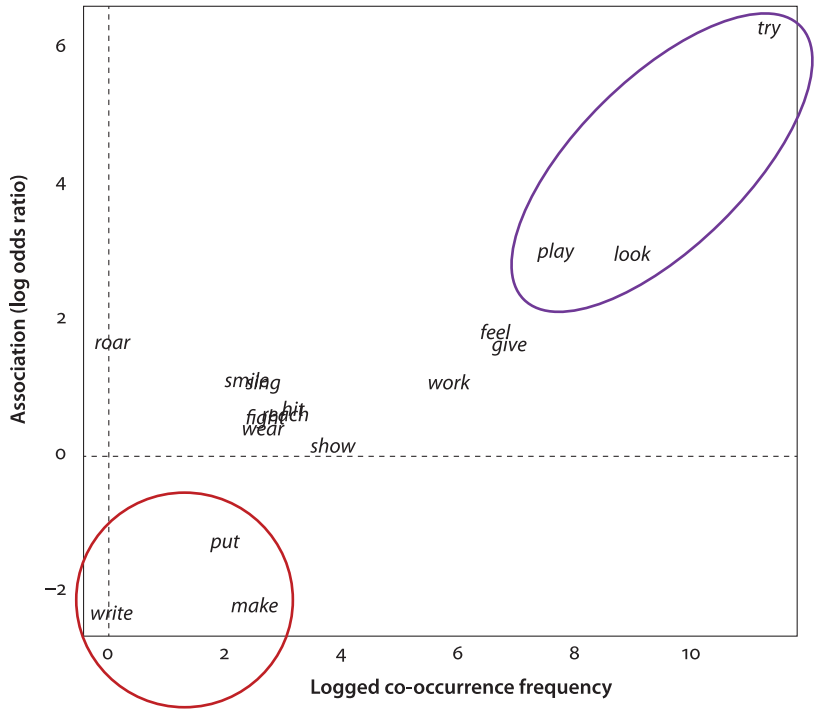


Figure 1. Distinctive (attracted) and repelled collexemes of the PDE SOC

v. intrans.) and *feel* (c1175, OED, v. I.1.b. intrans.), sometimes in combination (with *look* always preceding *feel*, as in (16a)), and much more frequently on their own, in examples like *look their best* (16b), and *feel your best* (16c).

(16) a. It's no secret that regular exercise is essential to **looking** and **feeling** *your best.* (2002, MAG, Shape)[9]

b. Groom and bathe your pet so that he/she **looks** *their best.* (2012, WEB, petfinder.com)

c. Following a flat stomach workout for women can help you to **feel** *your best* and look great. (2012, BLOG, flatstomach.net)

On the other hand, we have the sense "to do X at one's highest standard or level" (OED, s.v. *best*, adj., n.[1], and adv, P3 (b)). This meaning is the most productive sense of the construction in terms of both type and token frequencies, and it can therefore be treated as the most basic one of the SOC. This is, in fact, the underlying meaning of Poutsma's (1904–1926, II: § I: 498) original definition of the SOC

9. Unless stated otherwise, the examples provided henceforth come from COCA.

(i.e., "to express the highest effort in the matter of an action"). In such a definition, Poutsma reflects the semantics of one of its prototypes, namely the semantic nuance of "effort" implicit in the verb *try* (cf. OED, s.v. *try*, v. 16.a. intrans.; "To make an effort, endeavour, attempt"). Apart from the transitive verbs *do* (17a), *try* (17b), and *play* (17c), this second sense involves originally intransitive verbs of manner of action of various kinds such as *work, smile*, and *roar* in the examples given in (18a)–(18c).

(17) a. Today, on your birthday, I am going to **do** *my best* to smile and celebrate you. (2012, BLOG, …rsaremultiplying.com)
b. I like all three and **try** *my best* to play like them. (2012, BLOG, …ecruiting.rivals.com)
c. Every night, everyone is going out there to **play** *their best* and win. (2012, BLOG, uscho.com)

(18) a. So, I think adipocere and kavasa have established that strictly enforcing gender roles is bad parenting, and **working** *your damndest* to make sure your kids break all gender roles is also bad parenting. (2012, BLOG, metafilter.com)
b. She **smiled** *her sweetest* and said, "Bloody awful weather out there, huh?" (1997, FIC, LesbianNews)
c. As the crowd in the Superdome **roared** *its loudest* and the New Orleans Saints drove steadily down the field, the Washington … (2006, NEWS, WashPost)

6.3 The SOC as a relatively productive construction

Despite their relatively low frequency in the construction, the identification of these other intransitive verbs (e.g., *work, smile, roar*, etc.) in the SOC is indicative of the creative potential of the construction in PDE (Hoffmann 2018, 2019b; Zeschel 2012). Contrary to the verb of effort *try*, these verbs are not as semantically compatible with the constructional meaning of the SOC; they can be said to be "coerced" (Michaelis 2004) into the overall "effortful" semantics of the construction. In addition to this, these intransitive verbs of manner of action also allow for the occurrence in the SOC of one-off SOs other than the most prototypical SO of the construction *best* (Table 4). This leads us to the next research question concerning the productivity of the object slot of the SOC and the levels of abstraction at which the SOC manifests itself in the data.

The SOs identified in the data add up to 46 different types (see Table 7). These are distributed across the 17 verbs attested in the construction as shown in Figure 2, and in much greater detail in Figure 3, which displays the co-varying

collexemes that show attraction to the verb and object slots of the SOC. Following Hoffmann (2019a) here, and using Traugott's (2008) well-known terminology, in such figures we can distinguish different levels of schematicity within the network of the English SOC.

Table 7. SO types identified in the database ($n = 46$)

best, bestest, biggest, bleakest, bluest, brightest, coolest, cutest, damdest, damndest, damnedest, damnest, damn-est, darkest, darndest, darnedest, darnest, dingiest, fiercest, finest, fullest, greatest, happiest, hardest, healthiest, heaviest, highest, hottest, loudest, loveliest, lowest, mightiest, oldest, prettiest, sexiest, sharpest, sparkliest, spiffiest, studliest, sweetest, thinniest, ugliest, weakest, widest, yellowest, youngest

Figure 2. Distribution of SO types ($n = 46$) across verbs ($n = 17$)

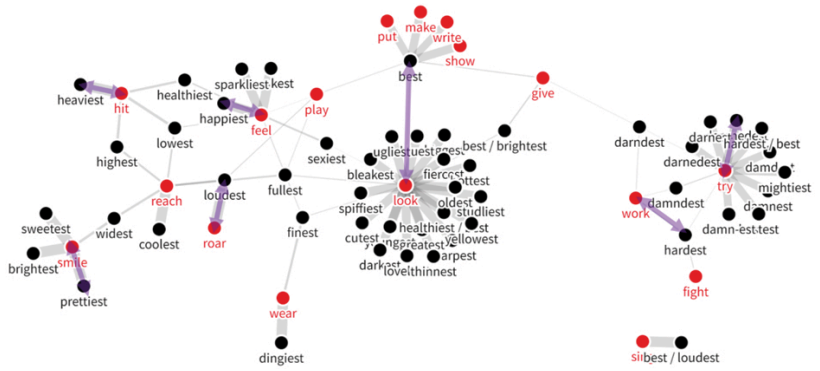


Figure 3. Attracted co-varying collexemes of the PDE SOC ($n = 3{,}671$ SOCs)[10]

10. The absence, presence, and thickness of the links represent the degree of entrenchment of the collocates (the thicker the line, the stronger the attraction between the co-varying collexemes).

At the first level we find the micro-constructions or highly entrenched patterns that show strong attraction to the SOC, such as *smile* [X] *prettiest, roar* [X] *loudest, hit* [X] *heaviest, feel* [X] *happiest, try* [X] *damnedest, look* [X] *best, work* [X] *hardest*, etc. Since these patterns allow for a great deal of variation as for the person and number of the possessive (*my, your, his, her, its, their*), this slot has been left unfilled here.

The second level is that of the meso-constructions *try* [X] *A-est, look* [X] *A-est*, and *feel* [X] *A-est*. This level involves the verbs *try, look*, and *feel*, which are among the prototypes in the configuration of the PDE SOC (Table 6), and are also the SOC sub-schemas that show the greatest variation in the object slot (Figure 3). Similarly, the array of subjects attested in these meso-constructions is also quite diverse, ranging from animates, such as humans, animals (19a), and plants (19b), to inanimates, including body parts (20a), entities (20b), natural phenomena (20c), places (20d), geographical boundaries (20e), and objects (20f), among many others. An interesting feature of these creative combinations is that in those cases where a non-animate entity does occur as the subject in a construction with an action verb (e.g., *try*), we are typically dealing with metaphorical uses (see (20c)).

(19) a. …legged spiders **trying** *their best* to envelop the house. (2000, MAG)
b. Mow the lawn a couple of days ahead so it **looks** *its fullest*. (1999, MAG)

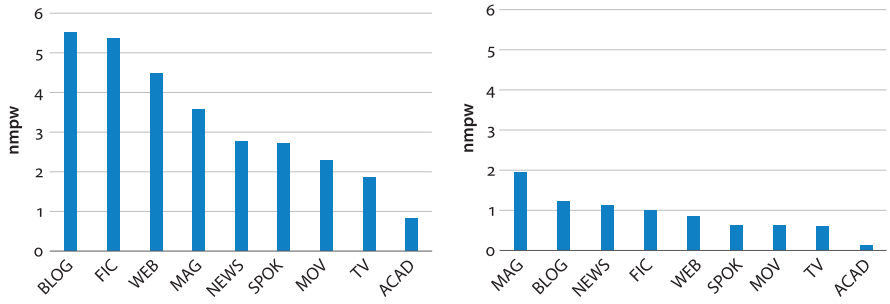
(20) a. … your lips will **look** *their fullest.* (2007, MAG)
b. The FDA has **tried** *its best* to… (1994, MAG)
c. … a big, clear river **tries** *its hardest* to offer stiff competition. (1997, MAG)
d. Savannah simply **looks** *its finest* in April and May. (2000, MAG)
e. … England would **look** *its best* on the screen. (1992, MAG)
f. To keep a stainless steel sink **looking** *its spiffiest*, … (2010, MAG)

Finally, the third level involves the macro-construction proposed in (15) (Section 6.1), i.e., Sub_i [$V_{TRANS\ /\ INTRANS}$ Obj_i], which stems from the attestation in the SOC schema of various inflectional SO types (see Table 7) and a diverse number of verb classes: from transitive (light) verbs (*do, try*, etc.) passing through transitive-converted intransitive verbs of activity (*play, hit*, etc.) to pure intransitives (*work, smile, roar*, etc.), including in this last set copular (stative) verbs such as *look*.[11]

11. The difference between pure intransitives and transitive-converted intransitive verbs of activity relies on their "degree of intransitivity" (Liu 2008: 298); for instance, pure intransitives do not take objects, and if they do, these are basically restricted to non-prototypical ones (see Table 1, Section 3); transitive-converted intransitive verbs of activity, by contrast, usually do take an object; this object, however, can be omitted (1) when the object is indefinite (*John is*

6.4 The SOC as a polyfunctional and genre-based (sensitive) construction

A look at the distribution of the construction across the different text types included in COCA (blogs, webs, tv/movies, fiction, magazines, newspapers, academic texts) suggests that like the ROC (Bouso 2021; see Section 4), the SOC is also a genre-based (sensitive) construction. Figure 4a, for instance, shows that the SOC occurs most frequently in blogs, fictional discourse, webs, magazines, and news. Leaving out here SOCs involving the verb *try* (this verb accounts for around 72 % of the data; see Table 6), a similar picture emerges, with magazines, blogs, news, and fiction (in that order) being still the text types where the SOC feels more at home (Figure 4b).



a. **b.**

Figure 4. Distribution of SOCs across text types

What Figure 4 brings to light is that SOCs are most characteristic of informal registers (blogs and magazines). This difference with respect to other transitivising structures like the ROC and COC (Höche 2009: 266) may be due to their most salient functions. As discussed in Bouso (2021; see also Bouso & Ruano San Segundo 2021b), ROCs are a newly developed strategy of discourse presentation whereas the primary function of the SOC, as argued here in Section 3, is more of a (pragmatic) intensifying one.[12] Compact, intensifying comparative structures like the SOC come in especially handy in journalist discourse in general where there is a "need to convey a lot of content in relatively little space" (Hilpert 2021: 179).

playing a football match right now), and (2) when there is a shift in meaning from the object to the activity (to the verb) (*John is playing*). For an interesting analysis of intransitive uses of verbs semantically similar to *play*, see Ebeling (2021).

12. This, of course, does not mean that ROCs are not used in journalistic discourse. As shown in Bouso (2021: 287; see Figure 7.4), with historical data from the *Corpus of Historical American English* (COHA; Davies 2010), ROCs, after fiction, are most commonly attested in magazines (for similar results, see also Martínez Vázquez 2015: 163).

To be more precise, given their space constraints, journalist writers need to rely on highly condensed structures to readily catch their readership's attention, sometimes with the aim of persuading them to act in a particular manner. An interesting example from COCA that serves to illustrate this point is the SOC in (21); here the SOC *look your best* is embedded in a title of a guide to smart shopping that calls for buyers that wish to "shop smart, spend less and look [their] best ever".

(21) "Never Pay Retail Again: Shop Smart, Spend Less and **Look** *Your Best* Ever" (2010, NEWS, Denver)

In effecting persuasion, presupposition becomes a key pragmatic strategy. Common lexical presupposition triggers identified in the literature are definite phrases involving possessives (*Your daily dose of sunshine … guaranteed*; seen in the *Better You* Dlux 1000 Vitamin D spray) and, quite importantly also, for the purposes of this study, structures that denote comparison and contrast (*Greater muscle gains than any other product guaranteed*; seen in the sports supplement *Sci-Mx*) (Bouso 2012). This certainly explains the occurrence in the database of SOCs with an eminent persuasive function. For instance, in the SOC included in (22a), the writer is assuming that their readership "don't look good" nor "play their best" with their current shoes, and in (22b) that they are aging, and that they soon may not look as young as they could if they do not acquire the simple guide *7 Years Younger*.

(22) a. Section: THE SHOP: THE BEST NEW GEARSHOES # WITH DRESSY STYLING AND LIGHTWEIGHT COMFORT, THE NEWEST SHOES WILL HELP YOU LOOK GOOD AND **PLAY** *YOUR BEST*. (2014, MAG, Golf Magazine)

b. With *7 Years Younger*, we've created a simple guide to the scientifically proven research that keeps you **looking** *your youngest*. (2012, MAG, Good Housekeeping)

The examples of SOCs just given aim at selling a particular product (*gearshoes* in (22a), and *a guide* in (22b)). Other SOC examples, rather than being used for marketing purposes, simply try to "influence" people's behavior in a particular way. These SOCs are usually masked in the form of tips (see examples in (16), and in (23a–b)), or strategies to prevent an undesirable situation (23c–d).

(23) a. Mars **looks** *its best* when the air is calm and seeing conditions are steady. Judge this by looking at the stars. Are they twinkling? If so, the poor seeing may hamper your observations. (1999, MAG, Astronomy)

b. It's a good idea to rub it in for 30 seconds or so. This helps stimulate **your** blood vessels, which ensures your lips will **look** *their fullest*. (2007, MAG, Cosmopolitan)

c. During the start-up phases of your business, if you are not **working** *your hardest*, you are not likely to succeed. When you are an employee, your compensation is often determined by the amount of hours that are worked. As a business owner, however, if your company is not generating regular and reliable profits, you do not get paid.
(2012, BLOG, http://blog.ideacafe.com)

d. # STRATEGY # **Hit** *Your Healthiest* # WHY IT WORKS: Body fat itself fuels inflammation. (2004, MAG, Prevention)

In line with the intensifying meaning of the construction, most examples attested serve a cathartic (emotive) function where the subject is describing how they feel about someone else's performance (see (18a)), and most particularly, about their own present, or future actions (see (24), and examples in (17)). This explains why the first-person possessive is the most frequently attested pronoun in the data (1,217 / 3,678 tokens; that is, in 33 % of the SOCs identified). This finding is particularly relevant, especially if we consider that in COCA third-person pronouns are more frequent than first/second-person pronouns.[13]

(24) After reading this post, I got a feeling as if this post was tailor made for me, considering my situation. I am having a lot of "wtf days" every now and then. I am **trying** *my best* to overcome that feeling, but nothing seems to be helping. This post provided me an unexplainable relief.
(2012, BLOG, releasingmetoday.com)

Last, it was interesting to see in the data that some SOCs also share with the ROC a reporting function. In examples (18b–c), for instance, the narrator is reporting on the characters' communicative acts of *smiling her sweetest* and *roaring their loudest*. The examples of ROCs in (25) attest to the commonalities between these two constructions. In (25a–b) the emotional object *Sweetness*, for "extravagant" (Haspelmath 1999: 1057) reasons, is being modified by adjectives of Latinate origin *celestial* (OED, s.v. *celestial*, adj. and noun, A. adj. 3.b. Divinely excellent or beautiful, divine, heavenly.) and *ineffable* (OED, s.v. *ineffable*, adj. and noun, A. adj. 1. **a**. "That cannot be expressed or described in language; too great for words; …"). A similar correspondence can be found in example (25c), where the ROC *roared applause* comes very close in meaning to the SOC *roared its loudest* (18c); as noted in the OED, the RO *applause* is a type of "approbation" which is "loudly expressed" (s.v. *applause*, n. 1.).

13. I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this to me.

(25) a. The Moor, hereat, **smiled** *celestial Sweetness*, and Joy beamed from his Eyes and throughout his dimpling Aspect. .
(CLMET3.0 1765–1770, Brooke; *The Fool of Quality*; cited in Bouso 2021)

b. She **smiled** *ineffable Sweetness and Blessedness* upon me. .
(CLMET3.0 1765–1770, Brooke; *The Fool of Quality*; cited in Bouso 2021)

c. Armagnac and Brun were waving their hats wildly, and even the Doctor's enemies **roared** *applause* at this unexpected defiance.
(CLMET3.0 1914, Chesterton; *The Wisdom of Father Brown*; cited in Bouso 2021)

All in all, this brief sketch on the functions of the SOC leads us to describe this pattern as a polyfunctional construction, that is, as "a single surface form associated with more than one meaning [function]" (Fernández, Gras & Brisard 2021: 82). Using here Jakobson's (1960) functions of language, the most salient use of the SOC is an intensifying, emotive one. Yet it can also occasionally fulfill a reporting function, and it seems to be also a common strategy used in the language of advertising present in magazines where the conative (appellative) and persuasive (phatic) functions of the SOC become most noticeable.

7. Final discussion and concluding remarks

The present article aimed to shed some light in the form, function, frequency, and distribution of the SOC in PDE. From a Construction Grammar perspective, the research questions that I have aimed to answer relate to the status of the SOC as a traditional Goldbergian construction, its connection with other related object types and structures, and more specifically, with the constructional links (horizontal and vertical) between the SOC and its (potential) relative constructions.

We have seen that, like other analogous patterns involving special cases of the object of result, the SOC qualifies as a traditional form-meaning pairing. The SOC, clearly, has unusual syntax involving (in)transitive verbs followed by a "partially" nominalised adjective inflected for the superlative degree; it also lacks compositionality, as the overall meaning of the SOC is a (pragmatic) intensifying one, and superlatives of the kind involved in this pattern, that is, inflectional superlatives, are only exceptionally used to express intensification. As for how the SOC is related to other analogous structures, the SOC shares with other special cases of the object of result its morphosyntactic properties as well as its semantics, i.e., superlative, cognate, and ROs indicate manner, which explains why they are easily replaced by adjuncts of quality. Considering their formal and semantic simi-

larities, these patterns seem to be connected via subpart (horizontal) links in the larger network of the English family of resultative constructions. They seem to form a new subtype not included yet in the original fine-grained taxonomy proposed by Goldberg and Jackendoff (2004).[14]

Other links that can be posed in the network of the English SOC relate to the complex and rich system of English comparative constructions, and to the different senses that the modern SOC manifests in American English data. The SOC not only shares formal and semantic features with other resultatives but also, as argued in Section 3, with other intensifying comparative constructions. The SOC can, in this way, be considered yet another instance of the many multiple inheritance constructions that "pervade" languages (Cappelle 2022; Hilpert 2014/2019), as it inherits features from various well-established constructions of the English network. Finally, the two senses identified for the modern SOC indicate that, as is natural of constructions (Goldberg 1995), some additional polysemy (vertical) links should also be posed in the network configuration of the modern English SOC.

As for the productivity of the construction as well as the levels of abstraction at which the SOC manifests itself in the data, the construction under analysis, despite being low frequent, is relatively productive allowing us to distinguish different levels of schematicity: (i) a micro-constructional level involving fixed constructs such as *smile* [X] *prettiest, roar* [X] *loudest, hit* [X] *heaviest, feel* [X] *happiest, try* [X] *damnedest, look* [X] *best, work* [X] *hardest*, etc.; (ii) a meso-constructional level dominated by the most prototypical verbs of the construction, namely the verbs *do, try, look*, and *feel* in the sub-schemas *do* [X] *A-est, try* [X] *A-est, look* [X] *A-est*, and *feel* [X] *A-est*; and (iii) a macro-constructional level, resulting from the array of verbs and SO types attested, especially for the most basic sense of the SOC, namely, the one with the meaning "to do X at one's highest standard or levels". The findings resulting from this investigation put forward several questions that beg to be answered and further developed in future investigations. These mostly have to do with the polyfunctionality of the SOC, its condition as a genre-based (sensitive) construction, the empirical testing of the connection between the SOC and its (potential) relative constructions (Perek 2012, 2015; Ungerer 2021), and the parallels and intertwining in the development of the SOC with other analogous resultative constructions.

14. For the lack of a better label and looking at the formal and semantic properties of these constructions, I propose to refer to this new subtype as the one involving "manner *fake object* resultative" constructions.

Funding

This research was supported by the Spanish State Research Agency (grant number PID2020-114604GB-100), the Consellería de Cultura, Educación e Universidades of the Regional Government of Galicia, Spain (grant number ED431B 2023/03), and the Universitat de les Illes Balears – Oficina de Suport a la Recerca (UIB-OSR) (grant number AAC73/2023).

Acknowledgements

The author is also grateful for the insightful feedback provided by two anonymous reviewers and the two editors of the journal. Of course, all remaining errors are the author's responsibility.

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Publication history

Date received: 11 June 2022
Date accepted: 19 June 2023
Published online: 6 February 2024