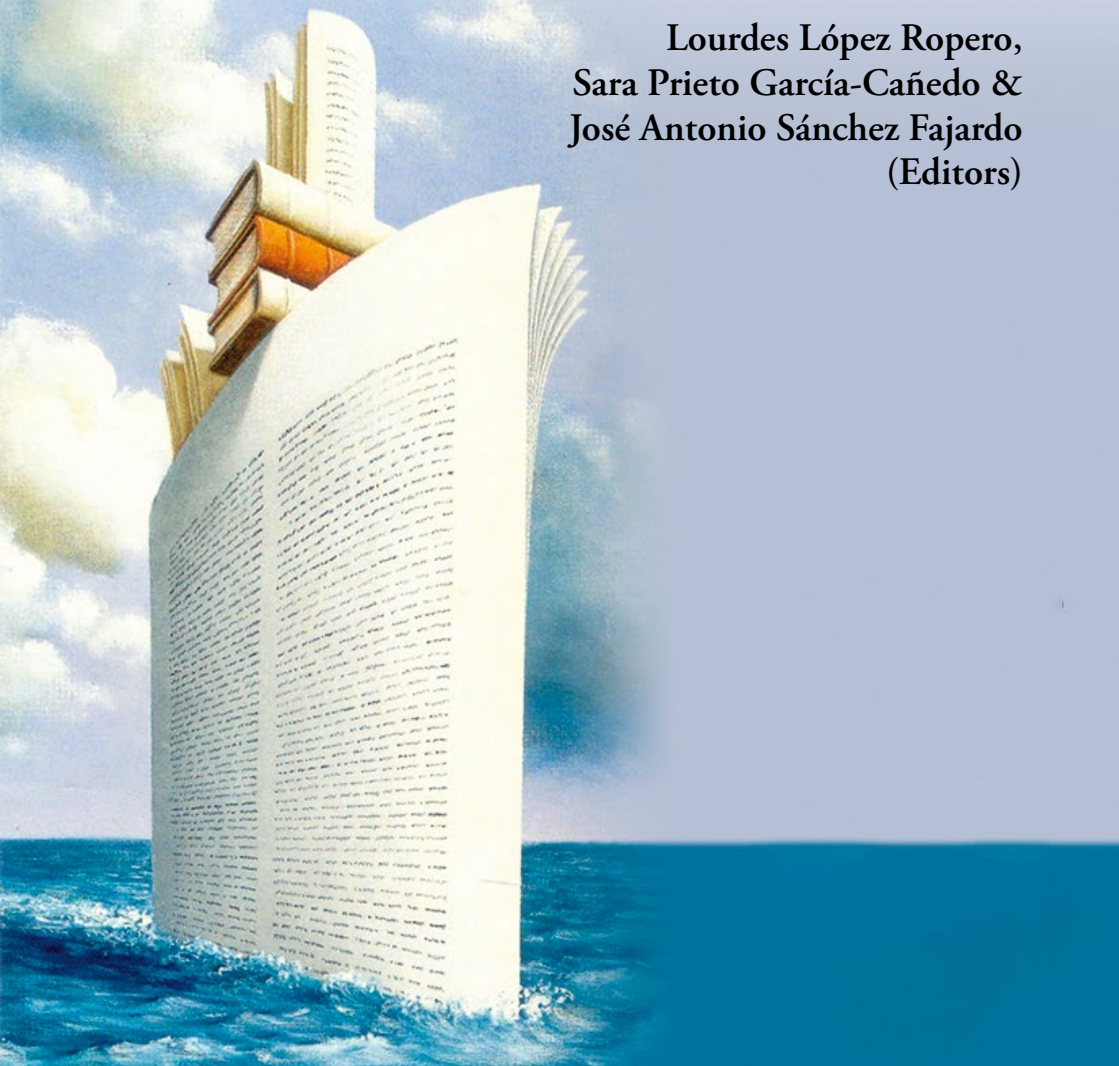


Thresholds and Ways Forward in English Studies

Lourdes López Ropero,
Sara Prieto García-Cañedo &
José Antonio Sánchez Fajardo
(Editors)



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THE SHAPING OF THE LATE MODERN ENGLISH REACTION OBJECT CONSTRUCTION

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Abstract

This paper provides a concise overview of my current research project on the characterisation and history of the English Reaction Object Construction (ROC) from the perspective of Diachronic Construction Grammar (Hilpert 2013; Traugott and Trousdale 2013). It shows that the English ROC, as in *Pauline smiled her thanks*, qualifies as a form-meaning pairing whose origins go back to Early Modern English (Bouso 2020). Its development, on the other hand, takes place in the transition from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century alongside other transitivity constructions. On the basis of a self-compiled corpus of nineteenth-century novels (Ruano San Segundo and Bouso 2019) and the visualisation tool of ‘animated’ motion charts (Hilpert 2011; Hilpert and Perek 2015), it is argued here that the sentimental novel and other innovative uses of reporting speech must have played a role in the shaping and modelling of the Late Modern English ROC.

Keywords: Reaction Object Construction, Diachronic Construction Grammar, motion chart, sentimental novel, reporting speech

1. Introduction

The focus of this paper is on the history of the English Reaction Object Construction (henceforth ROC) from the perspective of Construction

Grammar (Goldberg 1995; Hilpert 2013; Traugott and Trousdale 2013), the theoretical framework which has proven the most appropriate to provide a plausible account of the idiosyncratic nature and diachronic development of Reaction Objects (henceforth ROs), such as *her thanks* and *her adoration* in (1) and (2), respectively.¹

- (1) Pauline *smiled* her thanks.
- (2) She *mumbled* her adoration.

(Levin 1993, 98)

This study on the ROC is in line with other diachronic studies on argument structure which have dealt with three main different types of process. The first type concerns processes of argument remapping, where there is a reorganisation of the argument structure of a verb. This has been the case of the *psych*-verb *like*, which evolved from an object experiencer verb in the Middle English (ME) period into a subject experiencer verb in Modern English (ModE, 1500–) (ME *me liketh* ‘[it] pleases me’ > ModE *I like*) (van Gelderen 2018). The second type involves processes of argument reduction (or detransitivisation), which imply the demotion of one of the arguments of the verb, as, for instance, in verbs belonging to the lexical domain of body-care such as *wash*, *dress* and *shave* which in ModE do not take the *–self* reflexive pronoun (Jespersen 1909-1949: III, §16.2). And the third type relates to processes of argument augmentation (or transitivity), which involve the addition of an extra argument to the verb. As explained by Visser (1963-1973: I, §§130-32), in Old English (OE), amphibious verbs or verbs that could be used with and without an object with no morphological marking (e.g. OE *abrekan* ‘To break’) were considerably less numerous than verbs that were never construed with either a direct, an indirect, a prepositional or a causative object (e.g. OE *fordwīnan* ‘to dwindle away, vanish’). This situation, however, changes in Present Day English (PDE), where the former (i.e. amphibious verbs) are far more frequent than the latter (i.e. self-sufficient intransitive verbs). Van Gelderen (2018), for instance, mentions that self-sufficient intransitives have, in fact, been drastically reduced to little

1. I am grateful for the insightful comments of the members of the audience at the 43rd AEDEAN Conference held at the University of Alicante. Thanks are also due to the European Regional Development Fund and the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation, grant FFI2017-86884-P, for generous financial support.

more than twenty, out of the 223 which Visser (1963-1973) initially mentioned. Clear examples of originally intransitive verbs which serve as evidence of this large-scale process of transitivity are (i) the verb of motion *leap*, (ii) the unergative verb *work* and (iii) the verb of sound emission *squeal* when involved in structures such as the cognate object construction in (3), where the object is morphologically and semantically related to the verb, the *way*-construction in (4), which entails the movement of the subject referent along a path, and the main focus of this paper, the ROC, as represented in (5).

- (3) The herte *lepte a grete lepe*.
The hart leapt a great leap.

(Visser 1963-1973: I, §424 (b))

- (4) She encouraged him to *work his way* to the top of the railroad business.
(Mondorf 2011, 398)

- (5) Pigs...*squeal emphatic disapproval*.

(*OED*, s.v. *squeal*, v. 4)

In what follows, I will first provide a synopsis of the literature on ROs and introduce some of the research questions and hypotheses addressed by my ongoing research project on this particular phenomenon. Then, I will move on to a brief characterisation of the modern ROC, followed by an outline of its emergence and subsequent development in the English language. I will finish this sketch on the history of the ROC with some concluding remarks and suggestions for future research.

2. ROs: state of the art

The term ROC was coined by Levin in 1993. Since then, it has received considerable attention by a number of scholars who have focused on the frequency of the modern ROC in English (Martínez Vázquez 2015) and their possible existence in essentially verb-framed languages such as Bangla, Basque, Modern Greek, Spanish or French (for references, see Bouso 2020). Other linguists have paid attention to the non-prototypical features of ROs in relation to other non-prototypical objects such as true cognate objects and *way*-objects (cf. (3) and (4) above).² Like prototypical objects, these object types must be adjacent to

2. For a summary and specific examples, see Bouso (2014).

the verb and they cannot co-occur with a direct object. Contrary to prototypical objects, however, none of them is compatible with passivisation, topicalisation, pronominalisation or questioning, and they all show some formal marking that distinguishes them from structures featuring typical objects. More specifically, modern *way*-objects require the presence of a directional complement (*She giggled her way up the stairs*) and, crucially, as is the case with ROs, these must be co-referential with the subject, a constraint which is marked by means of a possessive determiner.

From a diachronic point of view, only monumental historical grammars mention ROs and this just in passing (Jespersen 1909-1949; Visser 1963-1973). In this light, my current research project aims to start filling up gaps in the history of the ROC by retrieving authentic data from historical corpora and positing a number of research questions and hypotheses from the perspective of Construction Grammar (Goldberg 1995, 2006; Hilpert 2013; Traugott and Trousdale 2013). This is a theory of linguistic knowledge which claims that the totality of our knowledge of a language consists of a large network of constructions, or form-meaning pairings at varying levels of complexity and abstraction (e.g. morphemes, words, idioms and larger phrasal units). One particular research question that my project aims to answer is when the ROC emerges as a new form-meaning pairing with those non-prototypical features previously identified in Bouso (2014). Yet a second major follow-up research question focuses on how and why the ROC develops. In particular, what changes in frequency and distribution can be identified over its history and what factors (intralinguistic and/or extralinguistic) have propelled its development. With regard to these two major research questions concerning the emergence and subsequent development of the ROC, the main hypothesis put forward is that the ROC followed the same path of development as other transitivity constructions (cf. (3) and (4)).

3. ROs as constructions: The modern ROC

Typical examples of modern ROs are those in (1), (2) and (5) above and those in (6)–(8) below.

- (6) Paul *kissed* her goodbye.

(Martínez Vázquez 2010, 559)

(7) Linda *winked* her agreement.

(Levin 1993, 220)

(8) The door *jingled* a welcome.

(Martínez Vázquez 2010, 555)

They exemplify three main categories of ROs which differ in terms of their derivational status and their morphosyntactic properties. These are:

- Delocutive nouns (*thanks*, *goodbye* and *welcome* in (1), (6) and (8)), which derive from locutions or “independent utterances associated with specific conventional situations” (Martínez Vázquez 2015, 153).
- Deverbal illocutionary nouns (*disapproval* and *agreement* in (5) and (7)), which derive from speech act verbs.
- Predicative expressive nouns (*adoration* in (2)), which are abstract nouns that describe a “state of mind or feeling of the subject” which “is perceived as a reaction to a contextual element” (Martínez Vázquez 2015, 160).

The examples of ROs provided so far are also characterised by the presence of an original intransitive verb (Bouso 2018, 2020) (e.g. *smile*, *mumble* and *jingle*) which, when accompanied by one of the three categories of ROs just described, undergoes a process of argument augmentation and acquires the extended sense ‘express/communicate/signal a reaction or an attitude by V-ing’, as in *Pauline expressed her thanks by smiling* in (1), *She communicated her adoration by mumbling* in (2) and *The door signalled a welcome by jingling* in (8). The modern RO therefore qualifies as a construction, or form-function pairing in the traditional sense (Goldberg 1995). It has an unusual syntax and lacks compositionality in that its overall meaning ‘express/communicate/signal a reaction or an attitude by V-ing’ is not strictly derivable from its component parts (Bouso 2017, 2020).

4. Emergence and development of the ROC

Moving now on to the first of my two key research questions concerning the diachronic development of the ROC (section 2), as a strategy to investigate when the ROC emerges as a form-meaning pairing, a list of 645 transitivised verbs was extracted from several historical data sources. Similarly to other diachronic studies on argument structure, I used the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* to check the earliest attestation of the ROC with these verbs. I only managed to

identify a total of sixty-nine different verb types co-occurring with the three different categories of ROs described in section 3. They start to occur in the construction in the fourteenth century and accumulate most prominently in the transition from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century. No instances of ROCs, however, were attested for the twentieth century, a finding which is particularly noticeable as this period is not underrepresented in the *OED* (Hilpert 2013, 121). This indicates that the ROC is an essentially Late Modern English (LModE) development, which lends support to the main hypothesis that the ROC developed alongside other valency-increasing constructions which also proliferated in the ModE period (Visser 1963-1973; Israel 1996; Mondorf 2011; Fanego 2019).

5. The shaping of the LModE ROC

In order to further delve into the LModE development of the ROC and provide an answer to the research question of how and why the ROC develops, I first conducted a corpus-based study using a heterogeneous sample of forty verbs attested in the ROC in the *OED* and the largest corpus of LModE available nowadays (*CLMET3.0*, De Smet et al. 2013, 34 million words, 1710-1920). The results only yielded 306 unambiguous ROCs for the forty verbs selected for analysis. As can be inferred from data already published in Bouso (2017), their distribution across time clearly confirms the parallel development of the ROC and the *way*-construction as both constructions became “fairly productive” (Israel 1996, 222) in British English by the early nineteenth century. In the case of the ROC, more than seventy per cent of the overall data stems from narrative fiction, which leads me to hypothesise here that the sentimental novel could have been an important extralinguistic factor in the development of the ROC. Like the ROC, the sentimental novel also proliferates in the middle of the eighteenth century. This novel subtype also shows an emphasis on “emotional response” (Rowland 2008, 193) and makes extensive use of a subtype of Direct Speech (DS) which Visser (1963-1973) suggested to be the source of the ROC. Examples of this DS subtype are here represented below in (9) and (10). They differ from ordinary examples of DS in that they involve manner of action verbs (e.g. *smile* and *grunt*) instead of the more neutral reporting verbs *say* and *tell*.

(9) She *smiled* “I don’t believe you.”

(10) He *grunted* “I thank you.”

(Visser 1963-1973, I: §142)

To test this hypothesis, a corpus of exclusively nineteenth century British novels was compiled. This is the *British Sentimental Novel Corpus* (*BSNC*, Ruano San Segundo and Bouso 2019, 21 million words, 1798-1900), which was used to replicate my previous LModE study based on *CLMET3.0*, but only using the most prototypical verbs of the ROC, i.e. the manner of action verbs *mutter*, *murmur*, *smile*, *nod*, *whisper*, *shout* and *wave* (Bouso 2017). Preliminary results point out that the ROC is closely related to the sentimental novel as more than 400 ROCs were attested, a figure which is clearly in stark contrast with the only 300 ROCs retrieved for the forty verbs analysed in *CLMET3.0*. Quite importantly, the ROC is not only very frequent in the *BSNC* but is also very diverse when it comes to the array of types identified for each of the three main categories of ROs described in section 3. This can be observed in figures 1-6 below: six diachronically ordered scatterplots, supplemented by a line chart which records the total amount of RO types (raw frequencies) for the first six subperiods (out of eight), into which the *BSNC* is subdivided.³ The blue band in this line chart highlights the time frame under inspection in each corresponding scatterplot to the left.

Created with the R package *googleVis* (R Core Team 2019), the scatterplots show on the *y*-axis the normalised frequencies per million words (pmw) of the RO types attested for the first six subperiods of the *BSNC*. The *x*-axis, on the other hand, organises alphabetically the types. Some identifying labels have also been included in the scatterplots to give the reader a taste of the rich diversity of the data. The bubbles correspond to the individual ROs, with colour indicating the category to which the RO type belongs. In figure 3 (1837-1850), for instance, blue is used for the delocutives *adieu*, *farewell*, *welcome*; green for the deverbal illocutionary nouns *acquiescence*, *approbation*, *assent*; and yellow for the predicative expressive nouns *Greatness*, *courage* and *satisfaction*. The final result is a motion chart (Hilpert 2011, 2013; Hilpert and Perek 2015; Levshina 2015) which visualises the semantic shifts of the ROC in the course of the nineteenth

3. Since the last two subperiods are underrepresented (1881-1900), they were excluded from figures 1-6.

century, namely from 1798 to 1880. Once again, as in my previous historical data (Bouso 2017, 2020), the period with the greatest variety of RO types is the early nineteenth century and, more specifically, the period corresponding to the time frame 1837-1850 (figure 3).

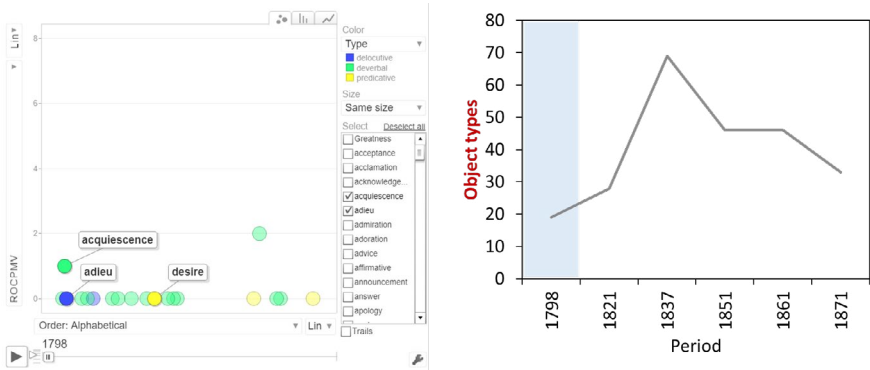


Figure 1: Period 1798-1820

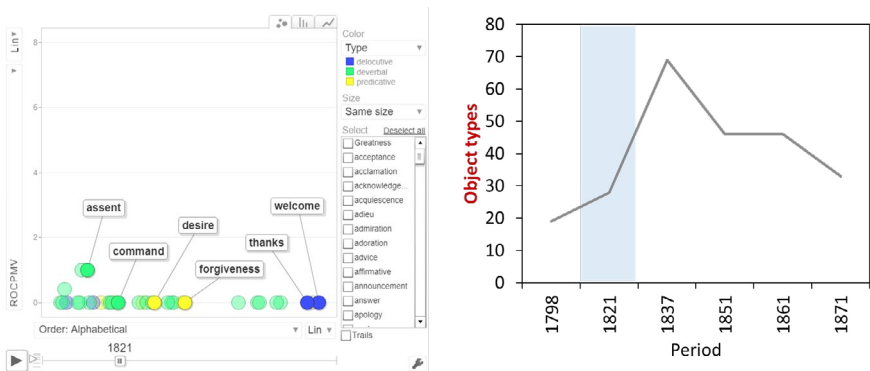


Figure 2: Period 1821-1836

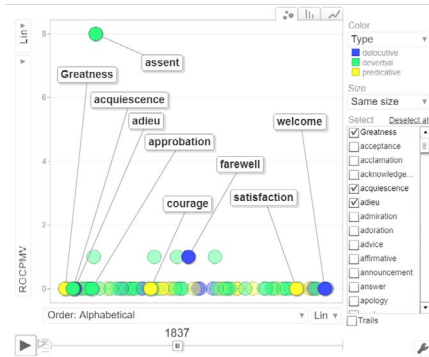


Figure 3: Period 1837-1850

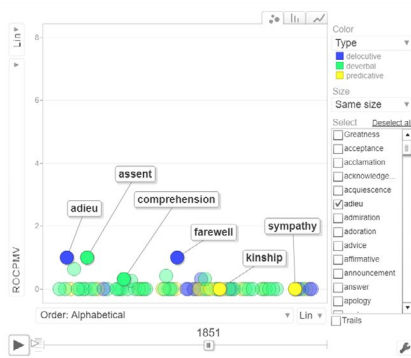


Figure 4: Period 1851-1860

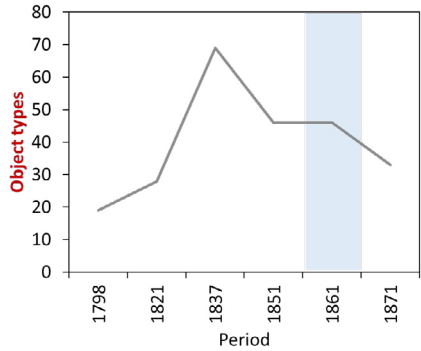
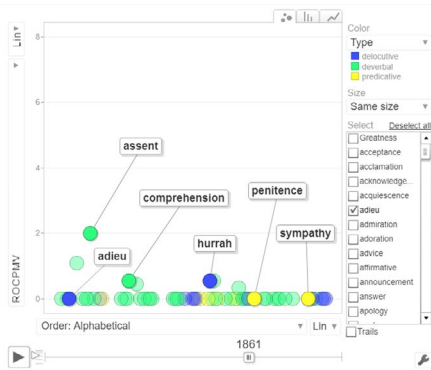


Figure 5: Period 1861-1870

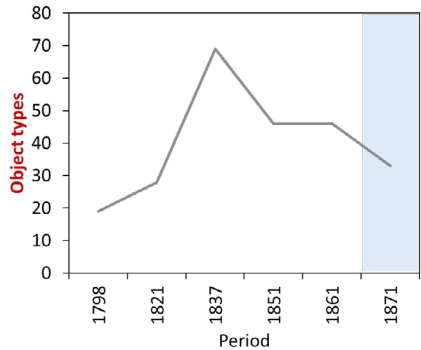
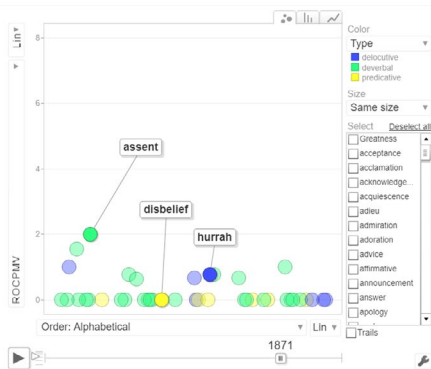


Figure 6: Period 1871-1880

It is worth noting here that additional historical data retrieved from the *BSNC* reveals a significant, strong positive correlation between the development of the ROC and that of DS, i.e. those structures Visser (1963-1973) claimed to be the source of the ROC (cf. (9) and (10)) (Pearson, Kendal's τ and Spearman's ρ , $p < .05$). This correlation is represented in the line chart included in figure 7 below. To the right of the line chart, the snapshot of the motion chart reinforces this point: on the x -axis the normalised frequencies (pmw) of the ROC and on

the *y*-axis the normalised frequencies (pmw) of DS constructions identified in the *BSNC* for the prototypical verbs of the ROC (the labels correspond to the individual verbs). Despite the preliminary nature of the results, these findings open avenues for future research in the exploration of the role of DS in both the growth and subsequent development of the ROC.

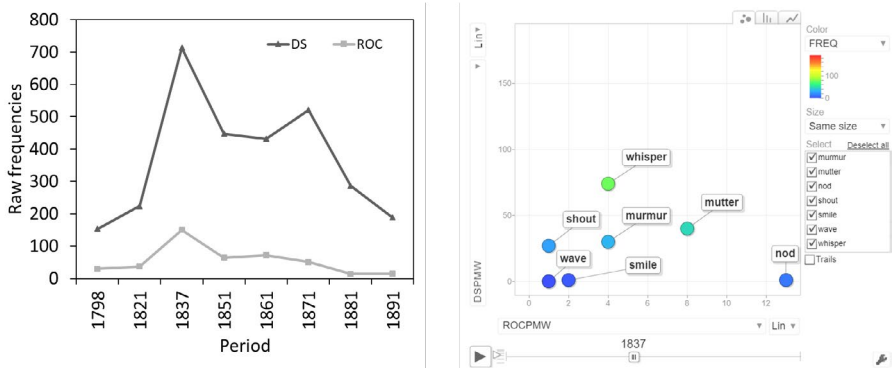


Figure 7: Time-frequency correlation between the ROC and DS constructions (1798-1900)

6. Concluding remarks and future research

This paper aimed to offer a concise overview of my current research project on the characterisation and history of the English ROC, advancing at the same time some new preliminary results. In sum, my historical data so far confirms the main hypothesis that the ROC developed alongside other transitivity constructions whose type frequency also increased in the course of the Modern English period. It also shows that the ROC unveils striking parallels with the history of the *way*-construction. Despite crystallising as new form-meaning pairings at different points in time, the ROC in EModE (Bouso 2020) and the *way*-construction in ME (Fanego 2019), both of them became “fairly productive” (Israel 1996, 222) by the early nineteenth century. Finally, preliminary data, retrieved from a self-compiled corpus and subsequently visualised here in a series of animated scatterplots, suggests that two factors propelled the consolidation of the ROC during the nineteenth century: the sentimental novel and the simultaneous development of those reporting speech constructions that Visser (1963-1973) suggested to be the source of the ROC. Future research should

explore further the tight relationship between the ROC and this particular genre subtype, as well as the precise role of reporting speech. In particular, whether DS constructions of the kind mentioned by Visser (1963-1973) could be treated as the source constructions of the ROC or, alternatively, as neighbouring structures that, like the sentimental novel, contributed to the shaping and modelling of the LModE ROC.

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