

V + P~Ø

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0. 2008 SemFest paper: What to blame it on: Diathesis alternations, usage advice, “confusion”, and pattern extension

blame SOURCE (for CONSEQUENCE) (*blame Kim (for the disaster)*)

blame CONSEQUENCE on SOURCE (*blame the disaster on Kim*)

[mostly 2-object verbs]

Meanwhile, light entertainment for tea time

1. Verbs abound in English that can occur, with very similar meanings, either with direct objects (the Ø option; transitive) or with oblique objects (the P option; intransitive), and new ones are being added all the time

[so, mostly 1-object verbs]

1.1. “Transitivizing P-drop”

Variety-speak (“Hollywoodism”) *ankle* ‘depart, leave (by quitting or being fired)’:

Alan Smithee has *ankled* his post as production prexy

[i.e. ‘ankled from, walked from’]

Ben Zimmer, Rankled by “ankle”:

<http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/004210.html>

[cf. *depart*, *flee*, *escape*, etc. “verbs of inherently directed motion” (B. Levin), with *from* or Ø]

(primarily) British transitive *agree* ‘agree on/to’ [but not ‘agree with’](esp. in journalistic, administrative, business contexts. as in the *Economist*):

report by Alison Murie on ADS-L 1/29/08

Iraqi leaders finally agree a draft constitution ... Aug 22, 2005 ... A draft of Iraq's constitution has been agreed and includes the key word.

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,7374-1745604,00.html>

[note: the passive might be the source of the active structure, rather than its being “telegraphic” or business-speak or whatever]

1.2. “Intransitivizing P-addition”

U.S. Southern rural *love on*:

Charles Doyle, ADS-L 5/25/06:

the venerable Southern “love on,” as when a mother says to a fussy infant, “Do you need me to love on you?” (meaning ‘cuddle, caress, show affection for’)

[similarly, AAVE *hate on* ‘derogate, diss’, ‘be jealous of someone’s success’ (uses outside of AAVE)]

2.0. A sense of the variety: Doyle, AmSp 52:88 (1977):

think (about) snow [bumper sticker], think (about) safety [road sign], fight (against) the people of Vietnam, exit (from) a building, study (on, about) a matter, beware (of) the Ides of March, baby sit (for, with) little Mary, strike (against) General Motors, deliberate (on) a matter, beat up (on) a person, play (on) the piano, beg (of) you, pray (of) you, pray (to) God that, work (at) registration, shit [or piss] (in) one's pants, depart (from) the city, fuss (at) a child

2.1. Some of these pairs have been around for a considerable time:

beware (of): OED *beware* + NP and *beware of* NP, both roughly 13th century

flee (from): OED transitive from about 1000; a later, easily comprehensible, example: 1548 HALL *Chron., Hen. VI, 95* Straungers in great nombre fled the land.
intransitive from about 1000 as well

[note: it’s not necessary to say that one of these is derived from the other]

2.2. Many of the transitives have been the object of proscriptivist scorn:

Transitive *abscond* ‘take, steal’: Garner (*GMAU*)

(1) the intransitive verb. OED2: ‘To hide oneself; to retire from the public view: generally used of persons in debt, or criminals eluding the law.’; to go away hurriedly and secretly

(2) an intransitive verb with *with* + NP: “While *abscond* is often followed by *with* to indicate a taking, and especially a stealing, the word itself has no such meaning.” (Garner) [well, so Garner says, but the incorporation of the ‘take, steal’ sense into the verb – reinterpretation -- is what must have led to the next version]

(3) a transitive verb with the meaning of #2 (“... the Chinese government is going to *abscond* [read ‘take’] about 97 percent of his paycheck...”); this Garner labels a misuse

in real life: EDZ at breakfast, June 2008: “Can you *abscond* a napkin from the next table?”

Transitive *depart*:

Garner, *GMAU* (237): depart [from]: traditional idiom has *depart from*; writers (possibly starting with headlines [note: headlines are often cited as sources for transitivizing P-drop, but probably just because they’re obvious targets]) “ill-advisedly” drop the *from*, making an intransitive verb transitive [often attributed to railroad timetables, but the usage predates these, and now occurs in other contexts, sometimes elevated:]

Did these canvases show an artist at least trying, as he neared his mid-thirties, to make a serious impression in Paris? If there was such a strategy, it had to be discontinued: in 1719 Watteau departed the city, to spend a year in London seeking the services of a famous English medic. (Julian Bell, “The Pleasure of Watteau”, *NYRB* 2/12/09, p. 12)

3. Each pair has its own history, its own syntactic peculiarities, its own semantic/pragmatic profile, and its own sociolinguistic profile

Transitive *protest* is (mostly) American, and is objected to by many British speakers and usage critics, who insist on *protest against*; the situation is reversed for transitive *agree*

Paraphrasing *GMAU*: *protest against*: *against* may be omitted in AmE, but not in BrE (649)

and Burchfield's *New Fowler's* (1998): *protest*: transitive use accepted in AmE, but “far from natural” in BrE (635)

and *MWDEU* (1989): *protest* [*against*]: transitive as common in U.S. as intransitive use; BrE still normally uses *against*; commentators warn that omission will cause confusion (with things like *protest their innocence*), but this is not the case (784)

and quoting OED (draft revision Dec. 2007) for the relevant sense:
"Chiefly U.S. To object to (an action or event); to challenge or contest; (also) to make the subject of a public protest or demonstration."

[This is for *protest* in things like "protest the war" 'protest against the war'. Other transitive uses of *protest* -- with *that*-clause complements and quotations as objects -- are fine in both BrE and AmE]

4. So far as I can tell, the variants in each pair almost always differ semantically or pragmatically or both, though this difference is often subtle (cf. *piss (on) oneself* [Larry Horn noted on ADS-L that if a man dribbles some urine on his shoe, he's pissed on himself, but he hasn't pissed himself]), so that in many contexts the difference is not especially salient.

5. The virtue of the Ø option is brevity, plus an implicature of close relationship between the denotation of the verb and the denotation of the object (affectedness, directness) [iconicity]. When usage critics prefer this option in a particular case, they generally appeal to brevity (Omit Needless Words) and disregard possible meaning differences.

6. The virtue of the P option is (relative) explicitness, plus an implicature of more distant relationship between the denotation of the verb and the denotation of the object [iconicity]. Compare “I played the piano for hours” (direct) and “I played on the piano for hours” (oblique). When usage critics prefer this option in a particular case, they generally appeal to explicitness (Include All Necessary Words) and disregard possible meaning differences.

[on 5 and 6: usage critics employ opposed general principles – ONW, IANW -- against disputed usages, so that they can slam whichever variant they personally dislike. Notably, they tend to

view alternatives as mere free variants, looking at them formally rather than semantically or pragmatically. For them, the issue is merely the words that people choose.]

On points 4-6, consider the discussion of *approve (of)* on Language Log (<http://languageblog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=156>), prompted by William Safire's recommendation of "I approve this message" rather than "I approve of this message" (in line with U.S. legal requirements on the labeling of political messages by candidates). Safire supported his recommendation with appeals to historical precedence [transitive *approve* is somewhat older than intransitive *approve of*; Originalism and a distaste for innovations are powerful], a judgment on his part that the oblique variant sounds "elitist" (perhaps because, as I suggested on ADS-L, because of the distancing effect), and Omit Needless Words, but neglected the considerable meaning difference between the two variants (strikingly, in 1sg pres, performative *approve* vs. reportive *approve of*)

7. There is considerable pressure towards transitivization, especially when the P is selected by the V, as in *depend on* (which has developed a transitive variant, in "We depended them for support" and the like); cf. *abscond*. In such cases the P is dispensable, because it contributes little to the meaning of V+P (cf. *depart* and some other transitivization examples):

I hope Angie slows down and gets the help she needs. Even with all her money she wants to be mommy and not depend other people and if any of you are mothers you can understand that (http://www.starmagazine.com/news/14670?comment_page=11)

(cf. "I'm done my homework" 'I'm done with my homework", on ADS-L Oct.-Dec. 2004, attested in (at least) Middle Atlantic states and in western Canada; who knows what its geographical distribution is)

Further development to *depend PERSON on SITUATION*, a diathesis alternation with *depend on PERSON for SITUATION*:

AMZ to ADS-L 12/8/08: caught on *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* ("Ending Happy", first aired 4/26/07).

From the transcript at <http://www.twiztv.com/scripts/csi/season7/csi-721.txt>:

(Brass interviews Connor Foster.)

BRASS: Self-defense, really? How?

CONNOR FOSTER: I myself was trying to defend the girls. They needed me to protect them. They depended me on that. So that's what I done. (whispers) This guy was a monster!

The character Connor Foster is drunk in this scene, so I thought that maybe that was all that was going on. But I did find a few further *depend NP on* examples (from people who seem to be native speakers of English): for example,

I NEVER DEPENDED HIM ON ANYTHING but being there for me. I was always doing

things on my own and never wanted or asked him for a dime.
(<http://www.makeuptalk.com/forums/52044-post8.html>)

[that is: *depend on NP for* > *depend NP for* > *depend NP on*, presumably from people who recollected the association between *depend* and *on*; the final construction has elements of two others, but isn't literally a combination of them – cf. *blame CONSEQUENCE on SOURCE*, which has elements of *blame SOURCE for CONSEQUENCE* and of *lay/put/place/fix (the) blame on* (Zwicky 2007)]

8. I have many more cases, but I'm always open for new examples. I'll depend my listeners and readers for them.

References

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