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Leg it, floor it, snuff it: A synchronic and diachronic analysis of dummy *it*.

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Dummy *it*

(1) (...) when six or seven groups would **bus it** from city, (...).
[Detroit Free Press 1995]

but also diachronically ...

(1) Let vs **legge it** a little. [OED 1601]

(2) I have the pleasure to inform you that your mother-in-law
snuffed it. [OED 1896]

and in Boston ...

Hungry?

CORNER it!

Advertisement: The Corner Mall, Boston

Dummy *it*

When considering *to leg it*, *to snuff it*, ... we are faced with the question of:

“What motivates the occurrence of *it* ?”

Structure

- I. Introduction
- II. Status of dummy *it*
- III. Dummy *it* in previous research
- IV. Imperatives and dummy *it*
- V. Does dummy *it* enhance the verbal territory of a V?
- VI. The role of pseudo-objects in (de)transitivization
- VII. Conclusion

Dummy *it* violates Argument Structure Constraints

frog is generally assumed to be a V_{intr} (if a V at all ...)

OED: “*intr.*, and *trans.* with *it*. *slang* (chiefly U.S.). To move quickly, to hurry; to leap or move like a frog.”

- (1) He appeared in the evening **frogging** \emptyset up the steps of the dwelling opposite. [Cox, P. *Squibs of California*, 1874] *intransitive use*
- (2) The four of us **frogged** **it** along the dark lane. [Kitchen, F. *Brother to the Ox*, 1945] *semi-transitive use*

But not with a fully-fledged O:

- (3) ***frogging** **the steps** of the dwelling opposite *transitive use*

⇒ pseudo-object *it* appears to be licensed by V_{intr}

What is the status of *it*?

Standard tests for direct objecthood:

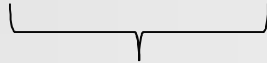
- a. Insertion test
- b. Passivization test
- c. Extraction test

Standard tests for direct objecthood:

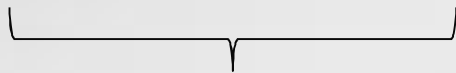
a. Insertion test

Principle: V and Od tend to be adjacent [Kozinsky 1979: 158]

(1) Everybody out! Move it! [COCA 1991]



(2) *... move quickly it out!



⇒ dummy *it* behaves just like Ods by not allowing insertions between V and NP.

b. Passivization Test

- (1) I have the pleasure to inform you that your mother-in-law
snuffed it. [OED 1896] active
- (2) *(...) that **it** was **snuffed** by your mother-in-law. passive

⇒ unlike canonical Ods dummy *it* does not allow passivization

c. Extraction Test

- (1) Every year, your mother-in-law **insists on planning** the entire Thanksgiving meal (...). [COCA 2009]
- (2) It is the entire Thanksgiving meal that your mother-in-law **insists on planning**. Od extractable
- (3) ... your mother-in-law snuffed **it**.
- (4) *it was **it** that your mother-in-law snuffed. Od non-extractable

⇒ unlike canonical Ods dummy *it* does not allow extraction

Tab. 1. Tests for direct objecthood

	Insertion	Passivization	Extraction
Direct objects	-	+	+
Dummy <i>it</i>	-	-	-

$\Rightarrow it \sim$ pseudo-object

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Dummy *it* in previous research

- a. Listed as an idiomatic use that causes pitfalls in automatic POS tagging. [cf. Boyd et al. 2005: 40]
- b. Cited as part of a set of resultative constructions [cf. Salkoff 1988: 55]
- c. Mentioned as a structure that extends from OE to EModE associated with a change from Synthetic > Analytic [cf. Rissanen 1999: 261]

Extending Salkoff's [1988: 45] list of resultatives in the "way-construction paradigm"

Possessive + *way*
Reflexive *self*
dummy *it*
Ø

7 pseudo-objects that share some degree of functional overlap illustrated for the V *MOVE*:

- (1) They run in laughing (...) as Virgil moves **his way** into the center (...). [COCA 1999]
- (2) Move **yourself**, Porter, said the uniformed figure brusquely. [BNC wrldom1]
- (3) Hurry up! Tom yelled from the living room a couple of days later. Move **it**, Judy.
- (4) He shouted at Mariana, grabbing at her arms and dragging her upright. Move **Ø**! he yelled. Quick-! [BNC wrldom1]

7 Pseudo-objects illustrated for the V *MOVE*

POSS *way*
Reflexive *self*
dummy *it*
Ø
Cognate objects

Particle
Particle + Reflexive *self*

- (1) Steven moves a sudden **move** toward the Police Officer.
[COCA]
- (2) We'll have to move **on**! she sobbed. [BNC wridom1]
- (3) We do deep breathing exercises instead, said Otley, (...), his paunch moving **itself up** a notch. [BNC wridom1]

All these pseudo-objects are semantically light, ie they do not carry a significant semantic load.

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Imperatives and dummy *it*

Dummy *it* occurs strikingly often with imperatives.

- Rissanen [1999:256]: originally intr. motion Vs can take a coreferential O in the imperative:

(1) Good Margaret **runne thee** to the parlour [Shakespeare. *Much Ado about Nothing*, c. 1598]

“They seem to be retained longest in imperatives” [Rissanen 1999:256]. Explanation in terms of transitivization to express “involvement” or “emphasis”

- Henry [1995:50]: imperatives in Belfast often involve a coreferential O.

(2) Run **youse** to the telephone!

- Similar uses appear to be found in German:

(3) Geh **du** ans Telefon! (contrastive stress) ‘answer the phone’
Geh **Ø** ans Telefon!

Strikingly, other pseudo-objects also tend to occur with imperatives ...

particles:

(1) Geh **mal**! Nimm **nur**! Schau **doch**!

- Are **move it!** **shove it!** somehow related to these strategies? Do they reinforce the imperative?
- Is a monosyllabic V not sufficient to express an illocutionary act as forceful as the imperative?

But: This cannot be the whole story because dummy *it* is not restricted to imperatives.

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It-support?

Rissanen [1999: 26]: “*It* can often be found with verbs recently converted from adjectives or nouns. The dummy object probably made it easier to analyse the new derivative as a verb”:

(1) The Turks could not **French** **it** so handsomely. [OED, cited in Rissanen 1999: 261]

⇒ Dummy *it* highlights the verbiness of weakly established Vs

Are the Vs listed in the OED or Merriam-Webster's?

leg	Merriam-Webster	OED
	yes	Yes, explicitly mentions the phrase leg it
	Intr. V "to use the legs in walking; <i>especially</i> : run"	" intr. to leg it : To use the legs, to walk fast or run; also simply <i>to leg (Sc. and dial.)</i> "

rough	Merriam-Webster	OED
	Yes, explicitly mentions the phrase <i>rough it</i>	Yes, explicitly mentions the phrase <i>rough it</i>
	"rought it : to live under harsh or primitive conditions"	" trans. to rough it : to face or submit to hardships, rough or basic accommodation, etc.; to do without ordinary conveniences or luxuries; to live in a rough way."

⇒ Vs taking dummy *it* are inconsistently treated as trans. or intr.

Does *it* enhance the verbal territory of already existing Vs?

floor is well-established in the sense: ‘to cover with a floor’ or “to bring to the floor, knock down (boxing), have a fall. [OED]

(40) Eke pave or **floore** **it** wele in somer tyde. [OED: *Palladius’ De Re Rustica*, c. 1420] **well-established sense**

(41) He commanded them all to shoote at once, and **flore** **the** **enemie**, if possible they could. [OED: *Lancashire Tracts* 1642] **well-established sense**

But no OED entry for:

(42) "Mansell said: “I got a good start and I just **floored** **it**.” [The Guardian 1997] **new sense ‘accelerate’**

⇒ in assuming new V senses *floor* is equipped with the pseudo-object *it* thereby modulating its transitivity.

Metaphorical extension

(1) "I was going about 55kph [34mph] on a slight descent and he [the motorbike rider] just **floored it** to get through a gap from behind (...) [The Guardian 2003]

no gas pedal involved that might be floored, but a handle bar

(2) Highway panic as snake **legs it** to freedom. [The Guardian 2000 Headline]

Dummy *it* as an instance of grammaticalization

1. Loss of number opposition

(1) The man legged *it*.

(2) *The men legged *them*.

2. Transition of meaning

Concrete		Abstract
Primary	>	Secondary
Literal		Figurative

OED: earliest sense of *snuff* (14. cent.): "That portion of a wick, etc., which is partly consumed in the course of burning (...)"

to snuff *a candle*

>

person snuffs *it*

3. Semantic bleaching of *it*: non-referential

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Theoretical Prerequisites: Transitivity

Hopper/Thompson's theory of transitivity: moves beyond the single criterion of the presence or absence of a Od

10 criteria:

measure the extent to which a clause is transitive

Transitivity₁ = “the effectiveness with which an action takes place (...)” [Hopper/Thompson 1980: 251]

Transitivity₂ = effectiveness with which an action is transferred to a patient

10 Criteria for measuring transitivity [Hopper/Thompson 1980]

		High Transitivity	Low Transitivity
A	Participant	2 or more participants	1 participant
B	Kinesis	action	non-action
C	Aspect	telic (completed)	atelic (in progress)
D	Punctuality	punctual	non-punctual
E	Volitionality	volitional	non-volitional
F	Affirmation	affirmative	negative
G	Mode	realis	irrealis
H	Agency	agent high in potency	agent low in potency
I	Affectedness of the object	object totally affected	object not affected
J	Individuation of the object	object highly individuated	object non-individuated

Criterion A: Participants

A high degree of transitivity implies 2 or more participants:

(1) A moved B. highly transitive

Verbal action *move* is 'effectively transferred to a patient'

Reflexives, however, are co-referential with the subject \Rightarrow 1 participant:

(2) A moved himself.

A moved it. semi-transitive

Why can we argue that "effectiveness with which an action takes place" is lower with reflexives? After all A is also moved.

- patient is semantically the agent, can stop the movement (control).
- With dummy *it*, there is no semantic patient.

(3) A moved \emptyset . intransitive

No patient. 'Effectiveness with which an action is transferred to a patient' cannot even be assessed.

Criterion B: Kinesis

- Actions are more strongly associated with transitivity than non-actions.
- A high degree of kinesis also seems to be required if Vs take the pseudo-object *it*:

bike it, bus it, floor it, frog it, hike it, hoove it, leg it, move it, shift it, shove it, walk it, wing it

... are highly dynamic

But: **stay it*, **wait it*

⇒ dummy *it* occurs with dynamic Vs.

Transitivity and pseudo-objects

Pseudo-objects are semantically light, i.e. they do not carry a significant semantic load. The effect the V can have on the object is thus restricted.

she legged it/snuffed it/moved it S is affected, not the Od

⇒ Semantically this is a reflexive structure

Hopper/Thompson [1980: 277]:

“reflexives in many languages have properties which can be explained by appealing to their intermediate status between one-argument and two-argument clauses”.

The same goes for other pseudo-objects, such as dummy *it*.

Typological considerations: ambitransitivity in English and German

Ambitransitive = V that can be used transitively or intransitively without having to undergo a formal change.

(43) John **walks** ~~Ø~~ home. intransitive

(44) John **walks** **Mary** home. transitive

Contrastive data

(45) John **geht** ~~Ø~~ nach Hause.

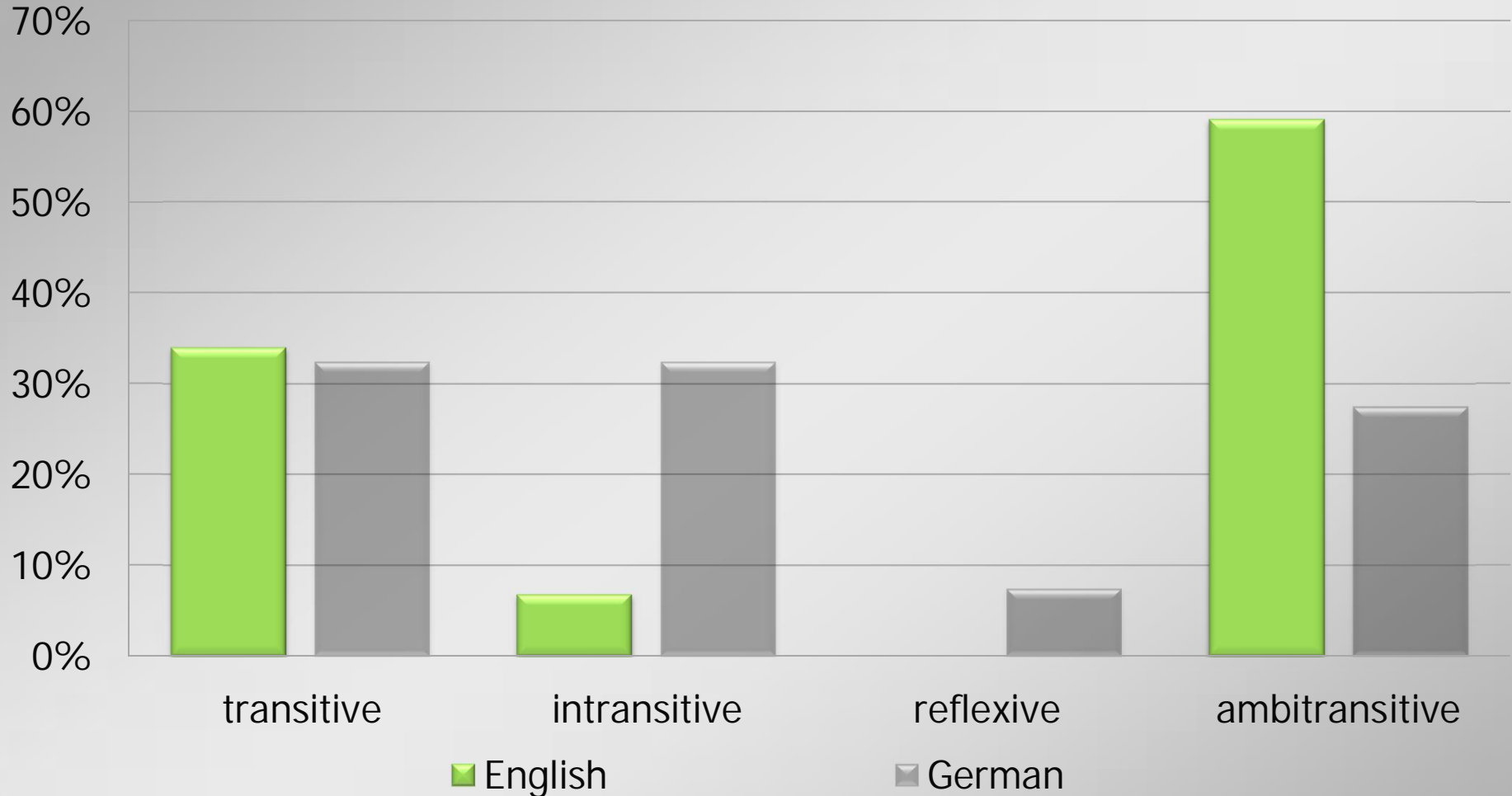
(46) *John **geht** **Mary** nach Hause. no transitive counterpart

German:

herrschen (intr.) ‘rule over’ – **beherrschen** (trans.) ‘master sth.’

wachen (intr.) ‘be awake’ – **bewachen** (trans.) ‘guard sth.’

German and English Vs according to valency for a randomly selected sample of 84 V [based on Schiefke 2009: 16]



⇒ Engl: remarkably few intr. Vs

⇒ Engl: few reflexive Vs

⇒ Engl: many ambitransitive Vs

More ambitransitive Vs in English than in German

Kilby [1984: 37]: categorization between *trans.* and *intr.* Vs is less clear-cut in English.

Dixon/Aikhenvald [2000: 4]: languages that have many ambitransitive V also have few valency changing morphemes.

⇒ with the erosion of morphological marking (*be-*), markers of transitivity might have been lost

Reflexives are on the decline in English

- Reflexives become obsolete in a wide range of environments [cf. Kirchner 1951:158; Jespersen 1961: 325-331; Strang 1970:153, Peitsara 1997: 321; Rissanen 1999: 256; König & Siemund 2000: 48; Rohdenburg 2009, Mondorf 2011: 406]

OE

ME

LModE

<i>I washed me</i>	>	<i>I washed myself</i>	>	<i>I washed Ø</i>
		<i>I overslept myself</i>	>	<i>I overslept Ø</i>

Rohdenburg [2009]: shows that reflexive *self* is contracting its range of application in terms of V types and frequency. Spearheaded by AmE.

⇒ Indicative of a more general decline of reflexive *self* in English

Contrastive Data

German

reflexive structures of the following type are still fairly common:

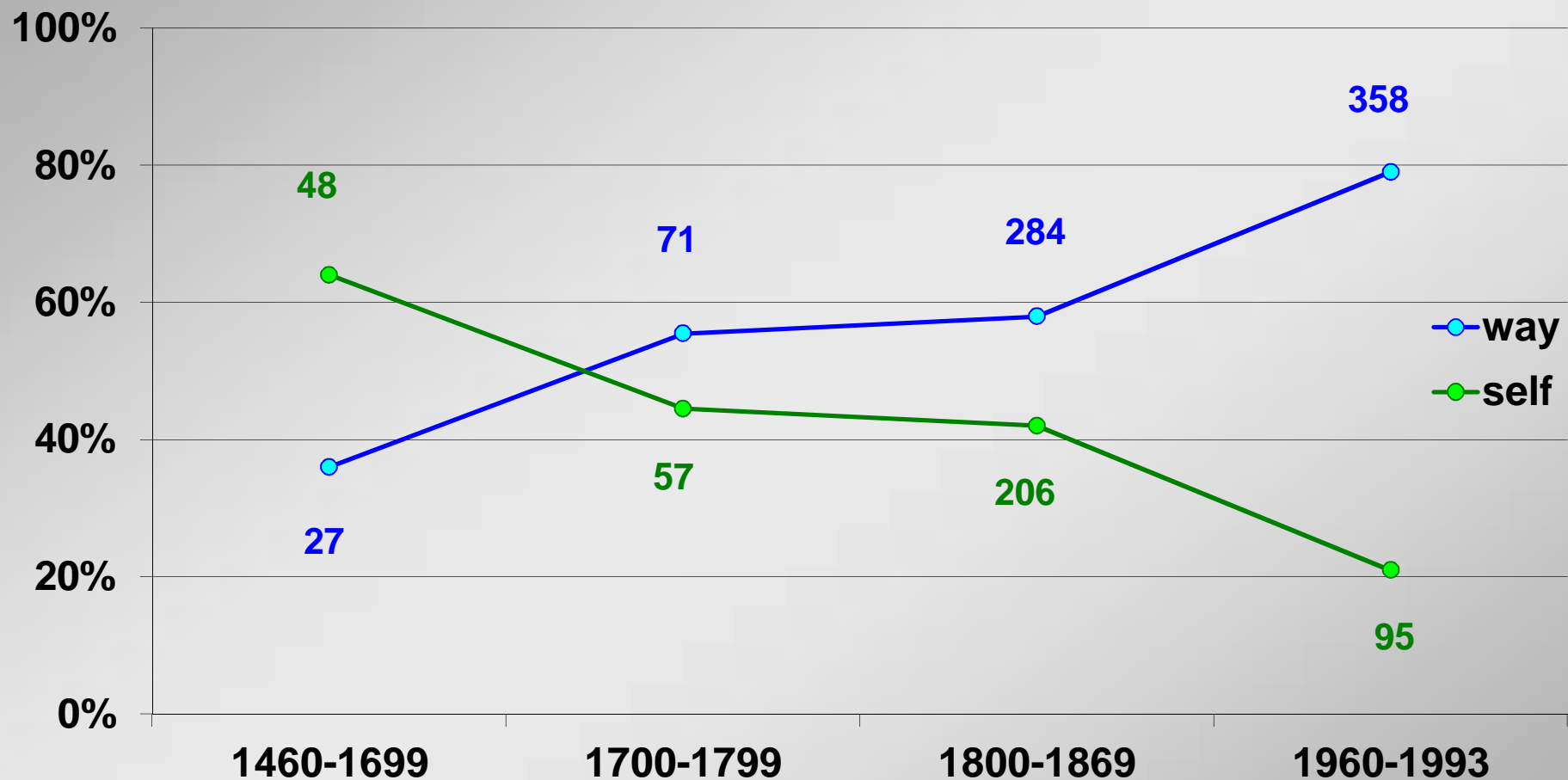
- (1) Er hat **sich** hochgearbeitet.
'He has worked **himself** to the top'.

English

highly productive competitor in the form of the *way*-construction:

- (2) a. (...) he worked **his way** down the steep bank toward the stream [FROWN]
b. Worked **himself** into a frenzy and gave himself indigestion. [BNC wridom1]

Fig. 1. Diachronic Development of *One's Way* vs. *Oneself* (N = 1146) [based on Mondorf 2011: 405]



10 Verbs: *cut, drink, eat, fight, grope, hit, wind, work, worm, wriggle*

Erosion of causative *BRING*

Early Modern English:

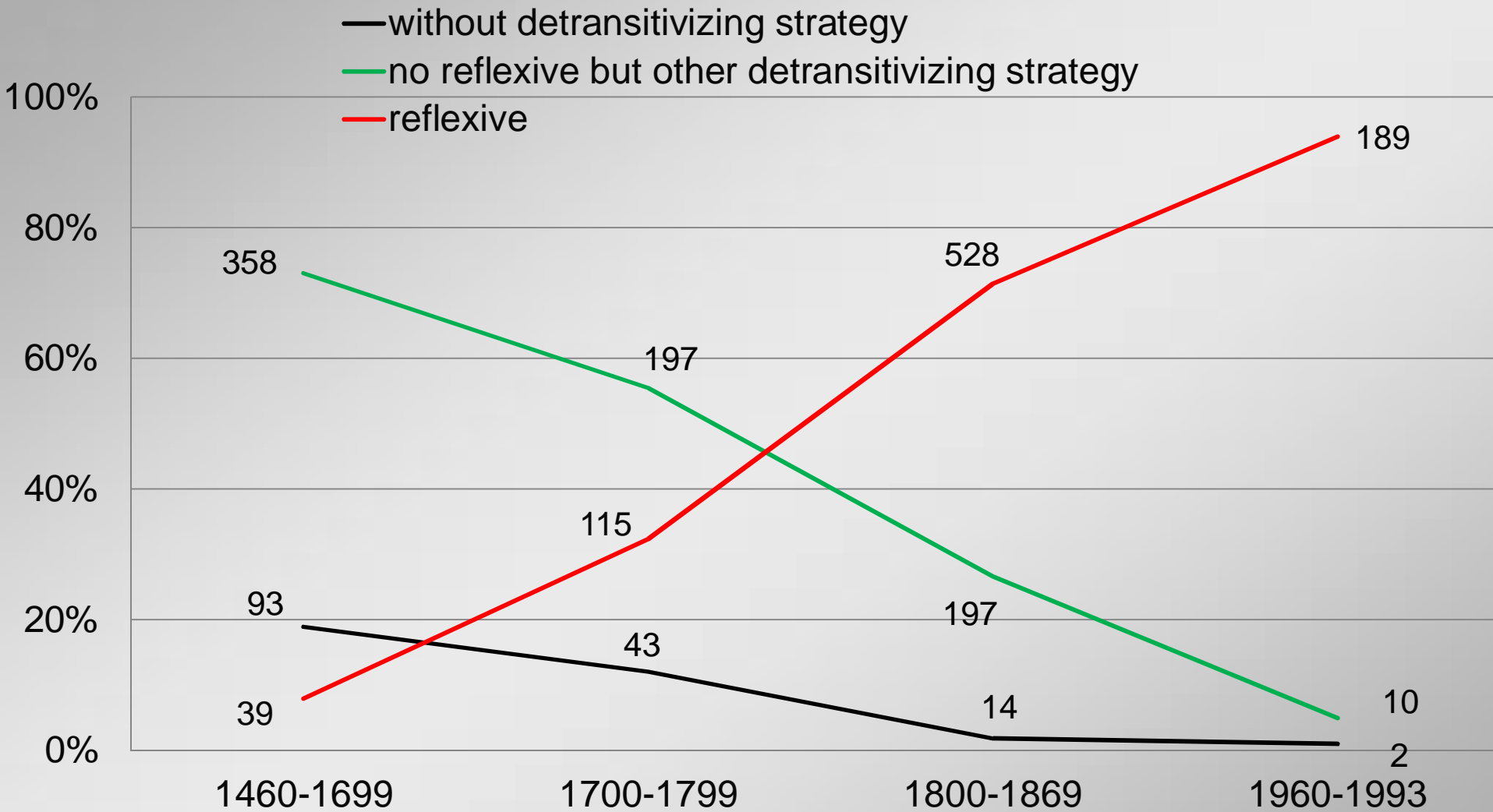
(1) She **brought** him to laugh.

Present-day English:

(3) ?She **brought** him to laugh.

Causative *BRING* +/- detransitivizing strategy (BrE) (N=1785)

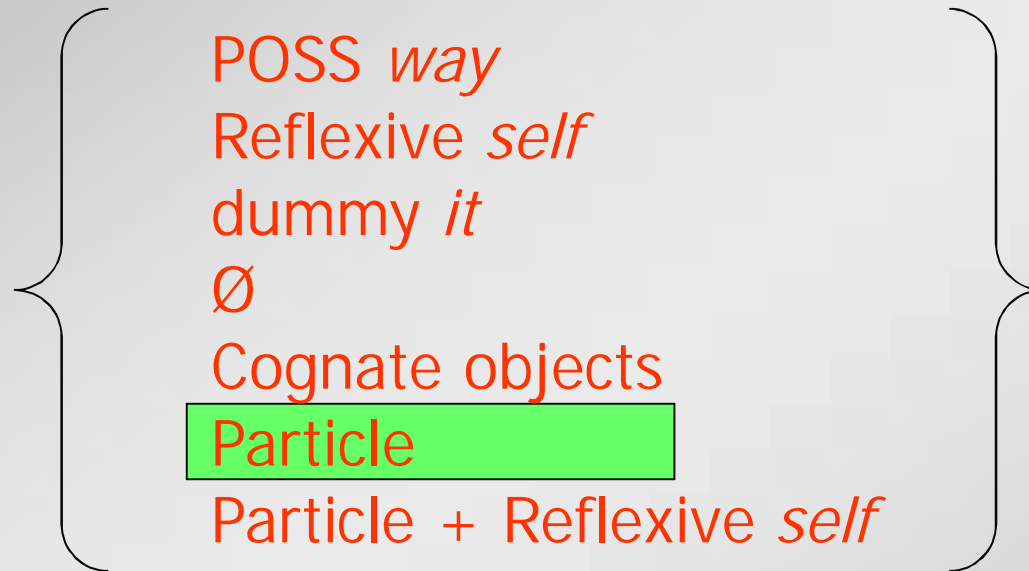
[Mondorf 2010b]



⇒ Causative *BRING* is generally on the decline. If used at all, it is almost exclusively used with the reflexive.

⇒ The decline is delayed when reflexives are present

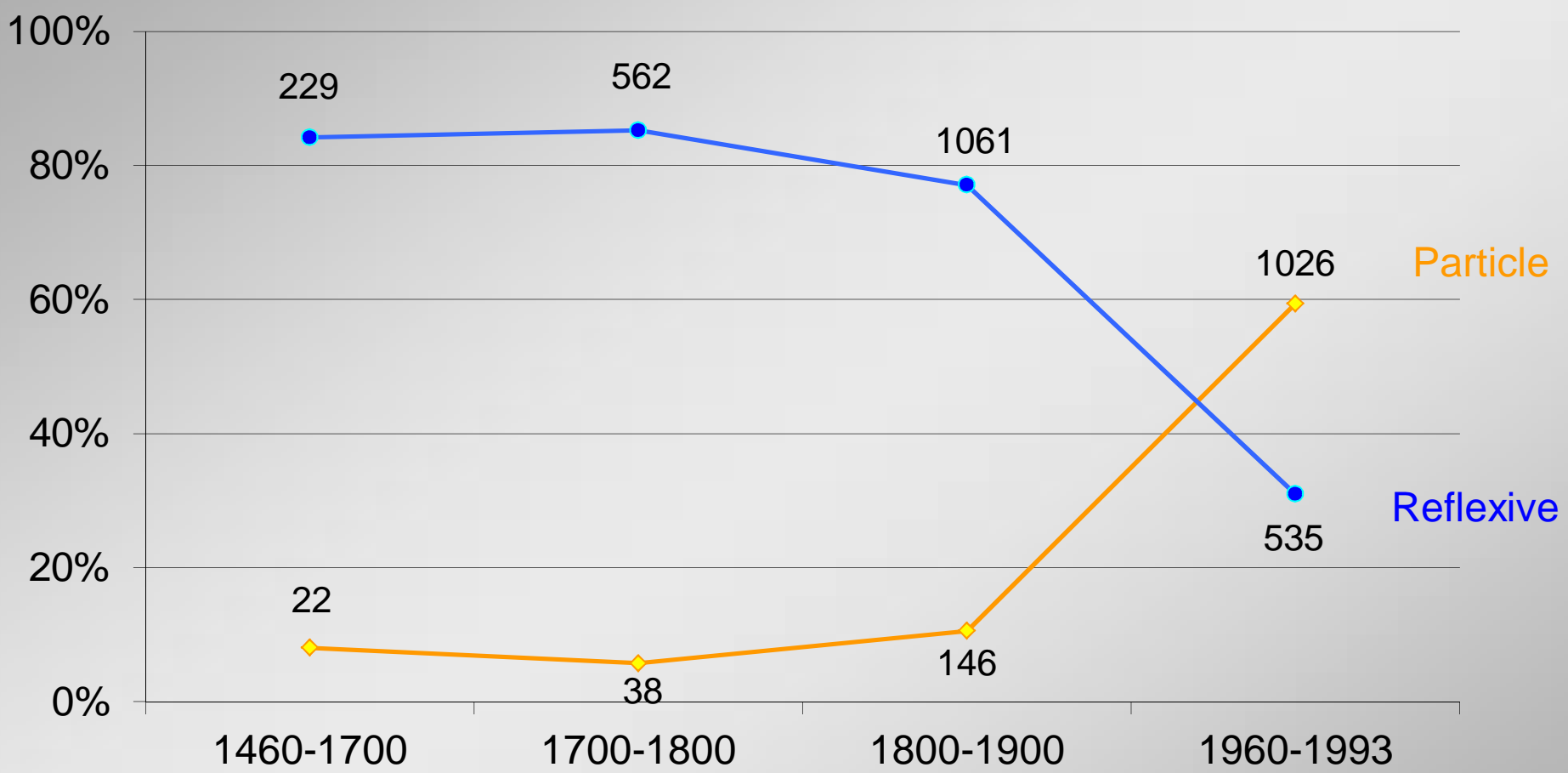
Revisiting the 7 pseudo-objects illustrated for the *V MOVE*



Another reason for the decline of the reflexive: The competition between reflexives vs. particles

- (1) Brace yourself for the impact. Reflexive
- (2) (...) he said, in tones of mock-comfort,
Brace up, Merrill. [BNC wridom1] Particle

Diachronic Development of the Competition between Reflexives and Particles (*out*, *up*) (N = 3619) [based on Mondorf 2010: 229]



27 Verbs: *boost, bow, brace, burn, coil, curl, dress, ease, empty, fit, freshen, gear, heave, hire, jerk, launch, lock, open, prop, psyche, raise, rouse, smarten, straighten,*

⇒ The particle is replacing reflexive *self*



Let' speculate ...

Thinking out aloud: The role of pseudo objects in (de)transitivization or “How does *it* fit into the larger picture”?

before PDE: <i>snore</i> (V _{intr}) ∅ <i>snuff</i> (primary sense) <i>move it!</i> (primary) <i>leg it</i> 'walk on foot'	PDE: <i>snore one's way</i> through a meeting <i>George W. Bush one's way</i> to ... New V senses: <i>snuff it</i> (secondary 'die') <i>move it!</i> 'hurry' <i>leg it</i> 'run away' (snake)	Future:
	Transitivization	
INTRANSITIVE	SEMI-TRANSITIVE	TRANSITIVE
	Detransitivization	
Future: <i>brace up</i>	PDE: <i>I brought myself</i> to believe <i>brace oneself</i> for the impact	Before PDE: <i>I brought Pat</i> to laugh

Pseudo objects might be the incipient stages of (de-)transitivization processes. They seem to usher out V_{trans} which decrease their verbal territory and usher in V_{intr} which enhance their verbal territory.



Thank you for your attention!

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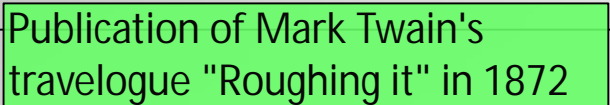
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Conclusion

1. Dummy *it* can be related to a series of (de-)transitivization processes
2. 7 pseudo-objects occur in semi-transitive environments with some degree of functional overlap
 - *way*-constructions
 - Reflexives
 - particles
 - dummy *it*
3. Is the function of dummy *it* to modulate transitivity in accordance with the changing entrenchment of the V (or V sense) with which it is used?
4. *it*-support to increase the transitivity of weakly established Vs or V senses?

AmE (COHA, N = 697)



51

A New Book by a Well Known Author.

ROUGHING IT

BY

MARK

SHOWING HOW
A THREE MONTHS
PLEASURE TRIP
WAS EXTENDED TO
A TERM OF
SEVEN YEARS,
AND THE
CAUSES THEREFOR;
WITH A
RELATION OF MANY
BOTH
INTERESTING
AND INSTRUCTIVE
INCIDENTS
CONNECTED WITH
THE EDUCATION
OF AN
INNOCENT.



TWAIN.

A RECORD
OF VARIOUS
EXPERIENCES
OF THE
AUTHOR
IN
VARIOUS POSITIONS
OF LIFE,
WHILE EN-SOULE
FROM THAT
OF A
PENLESS
ARTISAN CITIZEN,
TO THAT OF
A MILLIONAIRE
AND
BACK TO HIS
ORIGINAL CONDITION

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Between 600 and 700 Octavo Pages.

AND WILL BE FOUND TO CONTAIN NOT ONLY MATTER OF AN AMUSING CHARACTER, BUT
TO BE A VALUABLE AND CORRECT HISTORY OF AN INTERESTING PERSON,
WITH ADEQUATE DESCRIPTIONS OF SCENES NEVER BEFORE WRITTEN UP.



Vs found with dummy *it*

bike, blow, brave, bus

cocquet

floor, French, frog, fuck

hike, hoof

Leg, lose

move

rough

shift, shove, snuff

tongue

walk, wing

Verb-formations on crutches of transitivity

1. Rohdenburg [1996]: expressions which enhance a lexeme's transitivity can reinforce its V status.
2. Salkoff [1988]: support Vs are occasionally required to turn Ns into Vs.
3. Similarly, the *way*-construction equips novel Vs with transitivity by providing them with a pseudo-object (*one's way*).

The Data

British Corpora	Period	Mio Words
Early English Prose Fiction	*1460 – 1682	10
Eighteenth Century Fiction	*1660 – 1752	10
Nineteenth Century Fiction	*1728 – 1869	39
British National Corpus (wridom1)	^p 1960 – 1993	19
Total		78

American Corpora	Period	Mio Words
Early American Fiction 1	*1744 – 1799	16
Early American Fiction 2	*1800 – 1827	19
American National Corpus (2. release)	^p 1728 – 1869	22
Total		57

* birth dates, ^p publication dates

Reflexive object as 'pseudo-object'

Spanish

- (33) a. Juan \emptyset durmió (toda la noche). 'slept'
intransitive
- b. Juan **se** durmió *(toda la noche). 'fell asleep'
semi-transitive (pseudo-object **se**)

French

- (34) a. *ouvrir* 'open', *terminer* 'end' transitive
- b. **s'***ouvrir* 'open', **se** *terminer* 'end' semi-transitive

Russian

- (35) a. *načínát'* 'begin', *končat'* 'end' transitive
- b. *načínát'* **sja** 'begin', *končat'* **sja** 'end' semi-transitive
- [Hopper/Thompson 1980]

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1. This is the '90s equivalent of one of those '60s shows when six or seven groups would **bus it** from city, doing their three or four hits and heading on.
[Detroit Free Press 1995]

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- While dummy *it* in subject position has received much scholarly attention

(6) *It* is raining

its use in object position has rarely been investigated.