

Variation and change of prepositional phrase complements to English mental adjectives in the 20th century

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Variation occurs when a language provides multiple solutions to the same coding problem. Cases of variation have been synchronically approached with an inventory of principles and motivating factors proposed. What makes this issue even more complex is that the distribution of variation tends to change over time. In this paper, we argue that variation occurs simply because it can. That is, the linguistic system supports different ways of achieving the same communicative goal. When alternative means of expressing the same message are internally motivated, variation is likely to arise diachronically. We illustrate this with a case study on the prepositional phrase complements of English mental adjectives (e.g., *disappointed with the letter*) in the 20th century. Data from the Hansard Corpus are used to show how different types of prepositional phrase complements distribute over mental adjectives, and how this distribution changes with time. *About*-complements are seen to systematically extend their distribution, giving rise to variation. In contrast, *at*-complements occupy a far more stable distributional niche. Next, using additional corpus data from the Penn Corpora and BNC, it is shown that the distributional changes of *about*-complements and *at*-complements correlate with frequency changes in the semantic profile of *about* and *at*. In other words, the emergence of variation in the system of mental adjective complementation is a function of frequency changes in the semantic profile of the prepositions used to form complements.

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