

Swiping Constructions in English: A Corpus-based Perspective

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English allows the so-called ‘pied piping’ Sluicing like (1a) as well as the so-called Swiping as in (1b):

- (1) a. We are at war. We just don’t know [with whom].
b. We are at war. We just don’t know [whom with].

Sluicing examples like (1a) is often taken to involve the ellipsis of the clausal part (*we are at war*) (see Merchant 2004). Different from this, in the Swiping example (1b), the ordering of the *wh*-expression and the preposition is reversed (Ross 1969, Culicover 1999, Merchant 2004, Radford and Iwasaki 2015).

A corpus search also yields attested examples of Sluicing and Swiping (COCA: Corpus of Contemporary American English):

- (2) a. She’s in love! [...] You’ll never guess [with who]. (COCA 2012 FIC)
b. It doesn’t matter when that guy goes to bed, or [who with]. (COCA 2016 FIC)

(2a) is a typical sluicing example (P + *wh*) which could be expected from the assumption that it is derived from a putative source like *You’ll never guess with who she is in love*. This so-called clausal deletion analysis then requires additional movement operations to license swiping examples (see Radford and Iwasaki 2015).

We investigate this kind of Swiping construction in English, using the 560 million words of corpus, COCA. From the corpus, we have first identified a total of 911 tokens (four types: *who* + P (60 instances), *where* + P (152), and *what* + P (695), *how much/long* + P (4)) with the searches of simple *wh*-pronouns such as *who*, *what*, *when*, and *where*, as well as complex *wh*-expressions like *whose/what/which* + noun, + P + punctuation markers. We have also investigated its grammatical properties as well as discourse uses to understand its functional uses. We have also classified each token by the types of antecedent (linguistic or contextual) that the remnant is linked to. In addition, to understand the linkage with corresponding pied piping examples, we have consulted pied-piping sluicing tokens that match with swiping examples (see Hoffmann 2011).

The corpus findings indicate that the swiping construction and the pied piping sluicing construction exhibit similar behavior in that 1) the combination of *what* and *for* is most common in both the constructions, 2) the two have a strong preference in fiction genres, 3) the two are preferably used in the matrix environment than the embedded environment, and 4) their uses are strongly context-dependent. The corpus findings also show us that 1) overall the pied piping sluicing construction occurs far more frequently than the swiping construction, partially because the former can be licensed by much more diverse combinations of *wh*-expressions and Ps than the latter and that 2) the list of *wh*-expressions + P based on frequency is quite different in the two constructions except for the most frequent one. These findings seem to support a usage-based approach to the swiping construction (as well as the pied piping sluicing construction), rather than a movement-and-deletion account. This paper also offers a direction for a usage-based Construction-Grammar approach.

Selected References

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