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Most borrowable construction ever! A large-scale approach to contact-induced pragmatic change

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ABSTRACT

The construction *Beste boek ooit* ('Best book ever!') comes in different forms in Dutch. Variation is not only attested in the absence or presence of determiners and postmodifiers, but also in code choice: English, Dutch and hybrid (*Beste boek ever!*) variants occur.

This article investigates differentiation between instances with *ooit* and instances with *ever*. To ensure sufficient signal, we adopt a bird's eye perspective, analyzing over 100,000 observations from a Twitter corpus from the Low Countries (period 2011–2016). Our results reveal that (1) the two constructional variants increase in frequency in the time period under study, (2) this increase is more pronounced for the *ooit*-variant; (3) the *ever*-variant undergoes specialization towards a pragmatically marked form.

Overall, our account complements anglicism research (Andersen 2014) in four ways. First, we foreground constructional borrowing instead of single-word borrowing. Second, in working with Twitter data, we break with the tradition of print media corpora. Third, we explore NLP based methods for large datasets sampled from big data collections in a field of research that has mainly relied on manual coding of small-scale datasets. Finally, we illustrate how matter and pattern replication can go hand in hand in contact-induced change.

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1. Introduction: the socio-pragmatic turn in anglicism research

Apart from some early exceptions (e.g. Prince, 1988; Poplack et al., 1988; Meeuwis, 1991), anglicism research has long disregarded the social meaning of loanwords and the pragmatic effects at play in lexical borrowing. The main research goals were instead to provide inventories and taxonomies of loanwords, to demarcate lexical borrowing from codeswitching and to describe processes of morpho-phonological adaptation of source language elements to the receptor language structure (see e.g. Franco et al., 2018 for an overview of research on gender assignment). Although these approaches have provided great insight into the more structural side of the borrowing process, several questions remained unaddressed. To name just a few: why do language users borrow items? When is a loanword preferred over an existing and well-established receptor language alternative? What social meanings are evoked through loanwords? How does contact-induced pragmatic change come about? Which pragmatic differences exist (or come about) between source and receptor language forms? This final question lies at the core of our contribution.

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Through the rise of English as a global language, the lexical stock of many European languages has over the past decades been enriched with anglicisms, which has led to renewed scholarly attention for lexical borrowing in general and for English loanwords in particular. Typically, new studies on the topic focus on the unresolved questions of the past (see Andersen, 2014; Onysko and Winter-Froemel, 2011; Zenner and Kristiansen, 2013), together resulting in what we could call the “socio-pragmatic turn” in anglicism research. This socio-pragmatic turn is also leaving traces in the methods used to study the more traditional questions of loanword adaptation and integration.

Our paper aims to contribute to this new wave of research, focusing particularly on the pragmatics of borrowing: relying on insights from Construction Grammar, we analyze the interplay between matter and pattern replication (Matras and Sakel, 2007) in pragmatic borrowing from English in Dutch. Where the former relates to what is traditionally known as direct borrowing (integrating foreign forms in a given receptor language), the latter concerns indirect borrowing, replicating meanings and constructions found in a source language with receptor language material (see e.g. Doğruöz and Backus, 2009). Specifically, we focus on recent evolutions in the Dutch construction [(DET) AD]_{superlative} N *ooit* (Ptcp)] (e.g. *de droogste zomer ooit* (*gemeten*) ‘the driest summer ever (measured)’), and link these to the English counterpart [(DET) AD]_{superlative} N *ever* (Ptcp)] (*Driest summer ever (measured)*), which also occurs in the discourse of Dutch speakers, as a well-entrenched insertion that accounts as an instance of “constructional borrowing” (Coleman, 2016, see below). Additionally, English-Dutch hybrid forms such as *beste boek ever* (‘best book ever’) are also attested, suggesting that there is no clear watershed between the Dutch construction and the English construction used by speakers of Dutch, and that we may merge them in one template [(DET) AD]_{superlative} N *ooit/ever* (Ptcp)]. As will be discussed below, this paper focuses on alternations between *ooit* and *ever* in the construction in a Dutch corpus.

Our study of the constructions is guided by four principles, which each complement the current practices of socio-pragmatic anglicism research. Our first principle ties in with calls made by Onysko (2007), Andersen (2014), Fiedler (2017), Van de Velde and Zenner (2010) and Zenner and Geeraerts (2015) to expand the focus of anglicism research from attention to single words to a broader analysis of contact-induced change: contact-induced pragmatic change not only happens at the level of words (see Peterson and Vaattovaara, 2014’s exemplary analysis of the English loanword *pliiis* ‘please’ in Finnish), but also occurs at the level of constructions and phrases, at the suprasegmental level and at the level of gesture. Our paper provides a case in point, studying pragmatic change and its potential formal markers in the multi-word construction [(DET) AD]_{superlative} N *ooit/ever* (Ptcp)], henceforth referred to as the ‘*ooit/ever* construction’. In part resulting from the strong focus on single lexical units, traditional anglicism research also typically distinguishes quite strictly between direct borrowing (‘matter replication’; loanwords introducing new form and meaning, such as English *computer* in Dutch) and indirect borrowing (‘pattern replication’ such as loan translation and loan rendition, e.g. Dutch *wolkenkrabber* based on English *skyscraper*), whereas both can simultaneously drive contact-induced variation and change. As a second principle, we insist on studying pattern replication and matter replication simultaneously (Matras, 2009; Matras and Sakel, 2007). Our third principle concerns the type of data needed to study such pragmatic change in contact. Where traditionally, studies on English loans rely on print media corpora (Viereck, 1980; Yang, 1990) or lexicographical reference works, we work with Twitter data, as it allows us to study language contact in a much more volatile environment that is caught between written and spoken, distance and proximity, and is hence specifically relevant for the observation of pragmatic change (see Beers Fägersten and Stapleton, 2017). At the same time, as Twitter constitutes a genre in its own right, the analyses presented in this paper cannot be straightforwardly generalized to other usage contexts. Fourth, we are convinced that a pragmatic analysis of one single construction can only be relevant when sufficient signal is ensured to transcend the level of anecdotal evidence. To this end, we here explore the possibilities of a large-scale approach to anglicism research. As will become obvious in the conclusion, such approaches come with both benefits and drawbacks, but at the very least they offer a broader perspective on the construction under scrutiny than would be possible following the traditional approach in anglicism research, which hitherto mainly involves intensive manual coding of small-scale datasets.

The precise way in which these principles are translated into our research design is explained below. Section 2 starts off with a brief presentation of the construction under scrutiny, also providing the readers with the key notions of Construction Grammar needed for a full understanding of the pragmatic change discussed. Additionally, the main hypothesis of this paper is presented. Next, we turn to a description of our large-scale approach: Section 3 presents our data in more detail, and discusses the variables that we have worked with. The results of our analyses are presented in Section 4, followed by a discussion and conclusion in Section 5.

2. A Construction Grammar view on the *ooit/ever* construction

To describe the hypothesized changes in the *ooit/ever* construction, we follow the growing field of Construction Grammar. This approach provides us with an insightful framework to study contact-induced variation and change (see Höder, 2012; Coleman, 2016; Doğruöz and Backus, 2009; Boas & Höder forthcoming; Zenner et al. forthcoming). The basic tenets of Construction Grammar are well known (see Goldberg, 1995, 2006; Croft and Cruse, 2004; Hoffmann and Trousdale, 2013): language is seen as a network of constructions. Constructions are form-meaning pairings of various degrees of complexity (from atomic to multi-word) and various degrees of schematicity (from lexically specific, over partially instantiated, to fully schematic). Goldberg (2006: 5) argues that even patterns that are fully compositional – that is, whose meaning can be computed on the basis of the constituting sub-constructions – are separate constructions themselves, provided they have a frequency that is high enough to make them entrenched in the mind of the language user. So, English has a construction [Stop

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