

Review of Bouso, Tamara. 2021. *Changes in Argument Structure: The Transitivity Reaction Object Construction*. Bern: Peter Lang. ISBN: 978-3-034-34095-3. <https://doi.org/10.3726/b17960>

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1. INTRODUCTION

Tamara Bouso's *Changes in Argument Structure* is a book-length study of an intriguing phenomenon in English, the so-called Reaction Object Construction (ROC). An example of this construction is given in (1), the first of many examples discussed in this book:

(1) She mumbled her adoration.

In this and other examples of the ROC, a prototypically intransitive verb (in this case *mumble*) is used with a direct object (*her adoration*) expressing “a reaction or an attitude of some kind” (p. 15). In her book, Bouso sets out to provide a comprehensive account of this construction from the perspective of Construction Grammar, and to investigate its historical development with a particular focus on the Late Modern English period.

The book consists of eight chapters. After the introductory Chapter 1, these are grouped into two main parts. Part I, “Transitivity, Reaction Objects, and Construction Grammar” (Chapters 2–4), provides a comprehensive treatment of earlier literature on the subject and lays the theoretical foundation for Bouso's investigation. Part II is titled “Hands-on with data: A usage-based approach to the history of the ROC” (Chapters 5–8) and presents the empirical study of the ROC, focusing on its development and its relation to other constructions.



2. SUMMARY

Chapter 1 provides a first overview of the ROC and its place among other valency-changing constructions in English. Bouso defines the ROC as a type of argument augmentation (or valency-increasing) construction where an extra argument is added to the argument structure of the verb; other examples of such constructions include the cognate object construction (*She smiled an enigmatic smile*) and the *way*-construction (*She worked her way to the top*). After this overview, the main goals and research questions of the book are presented. These concern the analysis of the construction from a Construction Grammar perspective and the timing and causes of its development. Bouso formulates two diachronic hypotheses which are to be tested by the empirical study. The first is that the “formal restriction of coreferentiality of ROCs” (p. 27) goes back to the Early Modern English period. (I return to Bouso’s term ‘coreferentiality’ below). The second is that the ROC follows a diachronic trajectory similar to the cognate object and *way*-constructions, “occurring first with more transitive-like verbs and then expanding to intransitives” (p. 27).

In Chapter 2, “The process of transitivization in the history of English,” Bouso presents a brief survey of earlier scholarship on valency increase in the history of English. The point of departure is Visser (1963–73), whose observations on the matter are compared to those of some more recent scholars. Bouso points to a general consensus in the literature that English has developed an increasing number of ‘amphibious’ verbs (Visser’s term), that is, verbs which may be used both transitively and intransitively. In contrast, Old English had a larger number of verbs which were exclusively used intransitively (as far as we can tell from the sources, one might add). Some of the possible factors leading to this general development are then discussed, including morphological losses, ambiguity between *be*-perfects and *be*-passives in earlier English, and the creative use of novel reported speech verbs among some writers beginning in Late Modern English.

Chapter 3 is titled “Reaction objects: Review of the literature.” It begins with an overview of some earlier literature on types of objects in English —particular attention is paid to Jespersen (1909–49)— before moving on to the ROC and the two allegedly related constructions mentioned above, the cognate object construction and the *way*-construction. The similarities and differences between these constructions are examined at some length, though Bouso takes the position that the ROC is actually more closely

related to another phenomenon, effected objects, that is, objects whose referents come into being through the verbal activity, as in (2) and (3):

(2) She wrote a story.

(3) They dug a grave.

The similarities between effected objects and reaction objects are said to include their non-occurrence in resultative constructions (**They dug a grave rough*, **He smiled his welcome noticeable*), the impossibility of converting them to middle subjects (**The story wrote easily*, **The adoration mumbled easily*, etc.), and their non-occurrence with the definite article (I will return to this point below). The states of affairs expressed also tend to be inherently telic in both constructions, so an example like *She sang her thanks in an hour* is judged to be correct, while **She sang her thanks for an hour* is not (p. 94).

In Chapter 4, we get an overview of “Construction Grammar: Synchronic and diachronic perspectives.” First the central tenets of Construction Grammar are introduced with brief discussions of some well-known examples from the literature, such as *let alone* and the Preposition + Noun construction (i.e. *at work*, *in prison*, etc.) discussed by Goldberg (2013). After this some recent diachronic works from a Construction Grammar perspective are discussed. Some of the most important notions here include the distinction between ‘constructionalization’ and ‘constructional change’ proposed by Traugott and Trousdale (2013), the concept of a constructional network linking the constructions of a language to each other, and the idea that a given construction may ‘inherit’ features from several more schematic or abstract constructions (multiple inheritance).

Chapter 5, “The formation of ROCs,” begins the empirical part of the book. This chapter consists of two more or less independent sections: Section 5.1, “Characterization of the ROC,” and Section 5.2, “On the emergence of the ROC.” Section 5.1 concerns the analysis of the Present-day English ROC in Construction Grammar terms. Bouso first argues, I think convincingly, that the ROC should be treated as a construction in its own right, and then discusses its grammatical characteristics and a number of subtypes. A three-way typology proposed by Martínez-Vázquez (2015) appears to be particularly useful. Martínez-Vázquez distinguishes between ROCs with ‘delocutive’, ‘deverbal illocutionary’, and ‘predicative expressive’ objects. I illustrate these with three of Bouso’s examples in (4)–(6), respectively:

- (4) She waved him an adieu. (Thackery, *Vanity Fair*, cited p. 132) – DELOCUTIVE
- (5) The Chief Justice smiled acquiescence. (Darwin, *The Voyage of the Beagle*, cited p. 134) – DEVERBAL ILLOCUTIONARY
- (6) Mistress Grofe sat at her end of the table and glared her anger at all of us. (Taken from COCA, cited p. 136) – PREDICATIVE EXPRESSIVE

In the first of these, the reaction object refers to a greeting or other conversational routine, such as *an adieu* in (4). In the second, the reaction object is derived from a speech-act verb and may often be paraphrased as a verbal expression instead (*The Chief Justice acquiesced by smiling*). In the third type, the reaction object refers to the mental state of the subject and often has “adjectival features” (p. 136), though it is not necessarily deadjectival (compare Bouso’s examples *delight* and *joy*). In addition to this three-way typology, which makes reference to the type of reaction object, Bouso argues for a distinction between ROCs with and without an overt or implied recipient. ROCs without a recipient are monotransitive, whereas ROCs with a recipient have an additional participant and are similar in structure to a prototypical ditransitive construction. This is most obvious in cases like (4), but the recipient may also be implied in the context; according to Bouso, (5) is an example of this (see pp. 134, 141). Section 5.1 ends with a list of the most important grammatical properties of the ROC and a discussion of its relation to other constructions in the Present-day English ‘constructional network’: ditransitives, resultatives, and the monotransitive experiencer construction. Bouso argues that the ROC is a hybrid construction which inherits features from all of these.

Section 5.2 then traces the origin of the ROC in historical sources. Taking the works of Visser (1963–73), Jespersen (1909–49), and Levin (1993) as her point of departure, Bouso compiles an overview of all verbs mentioned in these sources which occur in the ROC. In very comprehensive tables (often running across several pages), she gives information on the earliest attestation and examples of all these verbs. In total, 69 verbs occurring in the ROC were identified in Visser, Jespersen, and Levin, to which 12 verbs were added from the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED). A few of these verbs are attested in the ROC already in Middle English (namely *moan*, *bray*, *yelp*, and *roar*), but the vast majority are first attested in the construction in Late Modern English. Bouso compares the emergence of the ROC to the development of the cognate object

construction, the *way*-construction, and (very briefly) the ‘dummy *it*’ object construction (*snake legs it to freedom*; Mondorf 2016). She argues that these constructions have all followed a similar trajectory, expanding to an increasing number of intransitive verbs in Modern English.

After this follow two chapters devoted to the “Development of the ROC in British English” (Chapter 6) and the “Development of the ROC in American English” (Chapter 7). The two chapters not only investigate the ROC in two different written varieties, but also tackle rather different questions about the construction. Chapter 6 focuses on British English in the Late Modern English period (1710–1920) and takes as its point of departure 40 of the verbs which, in Chapter 5, were found to occur in the ROC. Bouso investigates which of these are attested in the ROC in *The Corpus of Late Modern English Texts* (CLMET3.0; De Smet *et al.* 2011), which reaction objects they occur with, and how strongly they are associated with the construction. A collexeme analysis reveals that a number of verbs are particularly often found in the construction, including *mutter*, *murmur*, and *smile*. An overview is also provided of all examples of non-human (i.e. animal or inanimate) subjects found among Bouso’s corpus results, and a number of individual verbs are discussed at greater length, such as *smile* and *nod*. Finally, Bouso considers the role of text type in the development of the construction. She notes that it is particularly frequent in narrative texts and that its peak in frequency in the middle of the investigated period (c. 1780–1850) coincides with the flourishing of the sentimental novel, where it seems to have been a favoured stylistic device.

Chapter 7 uses the *Corpus of Historical American English* (COHA; Davis 2010–), to investigate the development of the ROC in American English in the period 1810–2009, with particular attention to the productivity of the construction. Here a number of common reaction objects serve as the starting point rather than the verbs found in the construction. Bouso searches the corpus for a number of delocutive nouns which often occur in the construction (*hello(s)*, *goodbye(s)*, *thank you*, and a few variants) and manually identifies all instances of the ROC. 80 different verbs are attested with these reaction objects, which Bouso groups into six types: sound emission (*bark*), gesture (*nod*), bodily processes (*snuffle*), instrument of communication (*phone*), activity (*dance*), and light emission (*flare*). The findings suggest that the ROC has become increasingly productive in American English throughout the period, only peaking in the second half of the twentieth century. Bouso cautiously suggests that the ROC may

initially have been a predominantly British phenomenon, which was only imported into American English in the nineteenth century. The changing productivity of the ROC is then compared to observations made in earlier investigations of the more well-known *way*-construction.

Finally, Chapter 8 offers a “Summary and conclusion.” The summary first reiterates the main points of the individual chapters and then presents a brief sketch of the history of the ROC, distilling the many empirical observations into a condensed narrative. Bouso concludes that the ROC became a construction in its own right in Early Modern English after a number of ‘pre-constructionalization’ developments. After its constructionalization, the ROC increased its frequency considerably in Late Modern English. Bouso attributes this to language-internal factors, such as an alleged general increase in transitive verbs, and to language-external factors like the aforementioned development of the sentimental novel. The chapter ends with some suggestions for further research. The backmatter of the book contains lists of tables, figures, and references, as well as a short abstract.

3. DISCUSSION

This is a thought-provoking and empirically rich study, which sheds new light on an overlooked construction and its history. One gets the sense that few stones have been left unturned in Bouso’s work on the ROC. The review of the existing literature on the construction is very comprehensive, and the book contains more than 450 numbered examples in total, so it may be used both as a bibliography of earlier work and a handy data source for other scholars interested in the ROC. In addition, the empirical part of the book (Chapters 5–7) showcases how the same construction may be explored from various angles and with different methods, most of which may readily be applied to other corpora (e.g. covering other historical periods or other languages/varieties). While a number of remarks in the following will be of a more critical nature, in particular concerning some of Bouso’s analytical choices, it should be clear from the outset that the book is a useful addition to the literature in several respects.

This being said, I think there are a number of problems with Bouso’s characterization of the ROC and its place within the grammar of English. It is worth discussing this point at some length, as one of the stated goals of the book (pp. 25–26) is

to characterize the construction and its place within the English constructional network. While some of the potential issues may mainly be due to unclear or nonstandard terminology, I believe others are more fundamental. In some respects, in fact, I think Bouso's account of the ROC is contradicted by her corpus data. I begin the discussion by quoting Bouso's schematic representation of the ROC in (7) and her prose description of the construction in (8), both from p. 146:

(7) Syntax: $SUBJ_i [V_{INTR} \text{manner/means} (OBJ1) OBJ2_i]$. Where $OBJ2 = (POSS)_i NP$
 Semantics: 'Sentient agent_i cause Y_i become expressed while/by_{manner/means} doing V'.

(8) the subject is an experiencer or sentient agent, as derived from the expressive meaning of the ROC as a whole; OBJ2, the reaction object proper, is an object of result which is coreferential with the subject; OBJ1 represents the recipient, which does not need to be always explicit, hence the notation in parentheses. Finally, V is an intransitive verb coding means or manner.

This characterization of the construction is referred to at several points in the book, and the formalization in (7) is repeated at least three times (see pp. 272, 316, 321). However, I believe a number of aspects of the description call for critical remarks. Firstly, note the slippery use of the referentiality index 'i' and the term 'coreferential'. In (7), the index is first added to the reaction object as a whole ($OBJ2_i$), then only to the optional possessive pronoun in the object NP $[(POSS)_i]$. In the description in (8), it is explicitly stated that the reaction object "is coreferential with the subject." This use of the term 'coreferential(ity)', which is repeated several times throughout the book (e.g. pp. 144, 159, 253–254), is highly unorthodox. In its received sense (see e.g. Trask 1993: 64–65 or Crystal 2008: 116–117), this term is used to refer to linguistic expressions which have the same extralinguistic referent, such as the pronouns *she* and *her* in (9):

(9) She_i mumbled her_i adoration.

In such examples, Bouso uses the referentiality index in accordance with the tradition. However, the book also contains numerous examples like (10):

(10) Pigs_i squeal emphatic disapproval_i. (p. 27)

Here the subject and the reaction object as a whole are said to be coreferential, in line with Bouso's description in (8). But there is no coreferentiality here in any received sense of the term, as the NPs *Pigs* and *emphatic disapproval* do not have the same extralinguistic referent. What Bouso seems to mean is that there is a close connection

between the subject and the reaction object, but the nature of this connection is never explored, and it is not discussed how (or even acknowledged that) Bouso's use of 'coreferential(ity)' differs from the linguistic tradition. This is more than just a minor terminological issue, since coreferentiality is taken to be a defining feature of the ROC. In addition, this terminological inaccuracy means that an opportunity is missed to provide a more exact characterization of the relation between the subject and the reaction object. To me, it would seem to be much better described as a type of possession (in a rather broad sense), as suggested by the frequent appearance of a possessive pronoun in the object NP, though this description may not apply equally well in all instances. In the delocutive type in particular, another label might be more appropriate.¹

Secondly, it is worth noting that the description of the subject as "an experiencer or sentient agent" is not entirely accurate, as Bouso herself points out later in the book. Inanimate subjects do in fact occur in the material (p. 231), although Bouso is of course correct that many of these are instances of metonymy, metaphor, or personification (as in *the Earth has just whispered a warning* from Shelley). This is not always obvious, however. In the example *The door jingled a welcome*, which is repeated at several points, I fail to see how the verb is used "metaphorically" (p. 130). Hence, even if clear examples of inanimate subjects may be rare in the ROC, it seems to me somewhat beside the mark to include animacy as a defining feature and formulate a separate "animacy constraint" on the construction, as Bouso does on p. 144.

Thirdly, a rather surprising aspect of Bouso's account is her characterization of the reaction object as an "object of result" (as in (8) above) or an "*effectum* object" (p. 92), that is, an object whose referent comes into being because of the verbal activity. This is surprising because so many of Bouso's own examples seem at odds with the description, in particular those belonging to the subtype of 'predicative expressive' ROCs, such as (11)–(12):

(11) She smiled disbelief. (p. 165)

(12) He only grunted his gratitude. (p. 166)

¹ For instance, in examples like *The door jingled a welcome* (p. 15 and elsewhere) or *The girls wave a farewell to the men* (p. 259), where it is not obvious that the reaction objects *a welcome* and *a farewell* are really possessed by the subject referents. Still, 'possession' would be a more apt term than 'coreferentiality' even in these cases.

In these examples, the disbelief and gratitude are surely not created by the verbal activities, but rather communicated (or “expressed,” as Bouso puts it in (7)). Similar considerations apply to many other examples given in the book, such as the ones quoted in (6), (9), and (10) above. The analysis of reaction objects as objects of result appears to be due mainly to Martínez-Vázquez (1998) and Kogusuri (2009), but I think the similarities between these two types of objects are overstated both by these authors and by Bouso (e.g. on pp. 93–95). It is certainly not the case that objects of result cannot contain a definite article, as Bouso claims. One of her own examples contains a definite article (*The dressmaker made the dress*, p. 58), and one may easily find additional examples like (13), from the OED (s.v. *write* v. 14b):

- (13) But the poems are harmless. Love poems. And diaries. You wrote the poems for your girls, isn't it? (2002 H. Habila *Waiting for Angel* (2003) 16)

In fact, the two starred examples given by Bouso to show that objects of result are incompatible with the definite article (**I dig the grave*, **She lights the fire*, p. 95) return numerous hits on Google and are attested verbatim in the COHA:

- (14) There I will bury him, if I dig the grave myself. (COHA, 1918 FIC)

- (15) She lights the fire and puts more coffee in the pot. (COHA, 1914 FIC)

A puzzle thus remains about the ROC, which indeed appears never to contain a definite article in the object NP. Even if some (but not all) reaction objects may be analyzed as objects of result, this cannot explain the constraint, as there is no general restriction on definite articles in objects of result. Here an open question thus remains for future research.²

Finally, I note that Bouso’s initial definition and description in (7)–(8) does not explicitly mention particle verbs, although examples with the particles *forth*, *off*, *out*, *over*, and *up* are later included in the analysis of the British English material. Indeed, a revised version of (7) which explicitly mentions these particles is provided later (p. 213). This is an important point because such particles are said to have played a role in

² Another open question is whether the ROC is regularly used in negative contexts in Present-day English. At one point, Bouso mentions in passing that reaction objects “can never occur in negative or interrogative sentences” (p. 92). But note examples like (i)–(ii), both retrieved from Google Books:

- (i) No bell jingled a welcome as she stepped into the dimly lit interior and peered around. (Cox, *Trouble in Store*, 2013)
 (ii) He didn't nod his thanks but gave her a thumbs up. (Campbell, *Catawba Point*, 2020)

the development of the construction. A number of examples like (16) are cited in the discussion of the history of the ROC:

(16) With eies which glistered forth beames of disdain. (Sir P. Sidney, *Arcadia* (1590), cited on p. 157)

Bouso finds that “14 of the 51 earliest attested instances of ROCs from Levin’s list feature the particles *forth*, *out*, and *up*, which in some way reassures the transitivizing power of these particles” (pp. 203–204). The exact nature of this ‘transitivizing power’ is not explored further, however, and it is unclear what role particle verbs play in the ROC in Present-day English.

One very attractive aspect of the book is that it paves the way for future studies in numerous respects. Bouso repeatedly acknowledges that her book is not the final word on the topic (see e.g. pp. 16, 147, 276) and makes several interesting suggestions for future research. Among many other topics, these include the role of genre in the development of the construction, where Bouso suggests that the popularity of the sentimental novel may have been especially important. A crucial question here is whether the ROC is primarily or even exclusively a literary phenomenon, or whether the construction was always productive in the colloquial language, but merely happens to have a higher frequency in specific literary genres. Bouso clearly prefers the former interpretation and even suggests that “to judge from the low frequency of occurrence of ROCs and their restriction to specific text types [...] most likely ROCs are not part of the construction or linguistic knowledge of a large set of [the] population” (p. 265).³ This is an interesting suggestion, but a more targeted investigation of more colloquial genres, both historical and contemporary, would be necessary to substantiate (or challenge) it.

Another topic which deserves more attention is the earliest history of the construction, as Bouso herself states in the conclusion (pp. 320–321). As mentioned above, the empirical part of the book mainly focusses on Late Modern English, which may seem somewhat surprising given Bouso’s conclusion that the ROC was constructionalized already in the Early Modern English period. I thus agree with Bouso

³ Presumably, “linguistic knowledge” in this quotation should be understood as *active* linguistic knowledge. Given the use of the ROC in many literary texts, one must assume that most if not all native speakers at least have *passive* knowledge of the construction. For future investigations of the creative use of the construction, I note in passing that the ‘syntactic blend’ approach of Hampe and Schönefeld (2003, 2007), which is not referred to by Bouso, might provide an interesting perspective.

that a more detailed investigation of the medieval and Early Modern English situation is necessary to get a fuller understanding of how the construction emerged. In addition, I think the criteria for constructionalization need to be made more explicit if this notion is to be of much value. Bouso argues that the ROC was constructionalized —i.e. became “a *new* form-meaning pairing” (p. 26)— in Early Modern English. The main arguments for this appear to be that the constraint of ‘coreferentiality’ (or rather ‘possession’, as I argued above) developed in Early Modern English, and that the construction became productive with an increasing number of intransitive verbs in this period (see pp. 317, 320). Bouso indeed finds only four Middle English examples of the ROC in the sources (all of them in verse texts), whereas there are numerous attestations in the Early Modern English material. However, without a more principled quantitative investigation, it is unclear just how much the productivity increased in Early Modern English. Note also that the four alleged Middle English examples all have a possessed object, as shown in (17)–(20):

- (17) And don h[i]m monen his sinfulhed
 ‘and make him bemoan his sinfulness’ (c1250 *Genesis and Exodus* l. 180)
- (18) Braundysch & bray by braþez breme
 ‘[though you] struggle and cry out your violent rage’ (c1400 *Pearl* l. 346)
- (19) His sorwe coude he to no man ȝelpe
 ‘His sorrow he could call out to no one’ (c1400 *Laud Troy Book* 13520)
- (20) Mi bollid hert doth so his sikis rore /
 that mawgre me hit doth my wele biwray
 ‘My swollen heart cries out its sighs so /
 that in spite of myself it betrays my will’
 (c1450 *Charles d’Orleans Poems* 219)⁴

In other words, the Middle English examples identified by Bouso all appear to satisfy her constraint of ‘coreferentiality’. It is thus not clear to me why this constraint is only said to have developed in the Early Modern English period.⁵ On this point, future work will hopefully provide some clarification as well.

⁴ Note that (20) might also be analyzed as a causative (i.e. ‘My swollen heart so makes its sighs cry out’), but that the expression *sikis rore* occurs elsewhere in the same text (cf. Steele 1941: 191). It is not clear to me, though, why either (17) or (20) count as ROCs. In (17) *monen* means ‘bemoan, regret’, not ‘communicate by moaning’; *his sikis* ‘its sighs’ (see OED, s.v. *sike* n.²) in (20) is at least marginal and does not seem to fit comfortably in any of Bouso’s subcategories (see (4)–(6) above).

⁵ Another question is why the feature of ‘coreferentiality’ in particular should be taken as a diagnostic of constructionalization rather than, say, the semantics of the object noun. On the problem of diagnosing

Stylistic infelicities and typographical errors are few and far between in the book, and the writing is generally transparent and easy to follow. In several places, however, the presentation of the material could have been more reader-friendly. Numbered examples are occasionally presented *en bloc* rather than one by one when they are discussed in the text, meaning that one has to go back and forth between the examples and Bouso's discussion of them (see e.g. pp. 87–89, 240–242, 297–302). On a related note, the linguistic data are sometimes presented in rather unwieldy tables running across several pages (e.g. pp. 160–169, 171–185). These are minor nuisances, however, in an interesting study touching on some crucial issues in English grammar. Although I have questioned some of Bouso's analytical choices in the above discussion, it should be clear enough that her book is essential reading for anyone interested in the English reaction object construction. It will hopefully inspire more work on this particular construction in Middle and Early Modern English or from a stylistic or sociolinguistic perspective, and on related phenomena in other languages of the world.

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