

## On verbal elasticity: the view from the way-construction in English

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**Introduction.** The interpretation of the *way*-construction in English (Jackendoff 1992; Marantz 1992; Goldberg 1996) entails that the subject referent moves along a path usually described by a PP following a specific manner or employing specific means, the ones expressed by the verb.

(1) John kicked/elbowed/joked/belched his way into the concert.

This construction has been argued to permit only unergative verbs (Marantz 1992; Levin and Rappaport Hovav 1995). In this respect, Levin and Rappaport Hovav (1995: 137) argue that this construction is not compatible with unaccusative verbs “presumably because they lack the ability to assign Case to a postverbal NP.” However, as Kuno and Takami (2004: §3) note, many unaccusative verbs do appear in the *way*-construction. Some examples are offered in (2).

(2) a. The coin **rolled its way down** the sloping floor of the sanctuary. [Google]

b. He noticed a single tear appear as it slowly **slid its way down** his cheek. [Google]

**Proposal.** In this talk, I will argue that more than whether a verb is unaccusative or not, the *way*-construction is sensitive to whether the verb denotes a scalar change (Rappaport Hovav and Levin 2010) affecting the entity denoted by the subject. Only verbs that do not entail that the external argument undergoes any scalar change (i.e. a change of state/location) are permitted. This is a consequence of the fact that this construction already entails that the subject referent undergoes a scalar change (the PP describes a change of location). Thus, with the additional denotation of a scalar change by the verb, we would have an interpretation where the same entity is undergoing two simultaneous scalar changes, which does not seem to be possible. This restriction has already been observed outside this construction (Goldberg 1991; Tenny 1994; Matsumoto 2006), i.e. a single theme cannot undergo a change of state and location at once or more than one change of state or location also at once. This is supported by the fact that verbs encoding result states (e.g. *break*) combined with result XPs (3) or two result XPs (4) describing different scalar changes along different dimensions of the same theme are not permitted. However, two scalar changes can be predicated of the same theme but only on the same dimension, see the contrast in (4). (adapted from Beavers and Koontz-Garboden 2017: 868)

(3) a. \*She carried John giddy. (Simpson 1983: 147).

b. \*The box arrived open. (on the reading arrival caused it to open. Goldberg 1991:371)

(4) a. \*I kicked him out of the room black and blue. (Matsumoto 2006: 2)

b. \*He wiped the table dry clean. (Goldberg 1991: 370)

(5) a. John broke the vase into ten pieces. *vs.* \*John broke the vase off the table/valueless.

b. John froze the soup solid. *vs.* \*John froze the soup off the table/valueless.

I will argue that this is in fact what is observed in the *way*-construction: this construction permits verbs which do not encode scalar change (nonscalar verbs in Rappaport Hovav and Levin 2010), since in this case the only scalar change being denoted is the one described by the construction itself, i.e. a change of location, as the denial of this results in a contradiction.

(6) #John kicked/elbowed/joked his way out of the room but didn't make it outside.

With scalar verbs, i.e. verbs encoding scalar change (Rappaport Hovav and Levin 2010; Rappaport Hovav 2014), the scalar change encoded by the verb must be predicated of the unexpressed object since if it is predicated of the subject, the construction is not possible, as this argument would then undergo two scalar changes along different dimensions, i.e. the one encoded by the verb and the one entailed by the construction. This explains why most unaccusative verbs were initially claimed to not permit this construction, since most of them already denote a scalar change predicated of their subject referent, as in (8). (in **bold** the predicates denoting the scalar changes)

(7) a. John slept his way **to** the top.

b. John read his way **across** the United States.

- (8) a. \*John **died** his way **out** of prison.  
 b. \*The wood **burns** its way **to** the ground. (Goldberg 1996: 45)
- (9) a. We cannot **kill** our way **out** of this war. [COCA]  
 b. The demon's blood **burned** its way **through** her mortal clothes. [Google]

In (8a), two scalar changes are predicated of the same theme, i.e. the change of location entailed by the construction and the change of state entailed by the verb *die*. The same occurs in (8b). However, in (9), despite being scalar verbs (they denote scalar change, i.e. a change of state) they permit the *way*-construction since in this case the scalar changes are predicated of different themes: in (9a) the unexpressed object referent undergoes the scalar change encoded in *kill* (*#John killed his way out of prison, but nobody died*) whereas the subject referent is what undergoes the scalar change entailed by the *way*-construction (*#John killed his way out of prison, but didn't make it outside*). The same occurs in (9b). Thus, the *way*-construction permits nonscalar verbs, whereas scalar verbs are more restricted since the scalar changes encoded by them and the *way*-construction must not be predicated of the same theme. This scalar approach then seems to correctly predict that some unaccusative verbs such as *roll*, *slide* or *whirl* (2) will be allowed in this construction, since these verbs do not encode any scalar change, as Rappaport Hovav (2014: 274) argues. An analysis based on the unaccusative-unergative distinction misses this as *roll* and several other unaccusative verbs (2) can and do occur in the *way*-construction (Kuno and Takami 2004: §3), contra Marantz (1992) and Levin and Rappaport Hovav (1995).

Concomitantly, this scalar approach is crucially related to Manner/Result Complementarity (Rappaport Hovav and Levin 2010) since RHL equate manner verbs with nonscalar change and result verbs with scalar change, and, it is claimed that result verbs do not generally permit the *way*-construction (Rappaport Hovav 2017; Levin 2017), since it is a case of a nonselected object, and RHL argue that result verbs do not permit them (Rappaport Hovav 2008; Rappaport Hovav and Levin 2010; Levin 2017). However, I will argue that result verbs are allowed in the *way*-construction if the scalar changes encoded by the result verbs are predicated of the unexpressed object, as in (9), since in this case the scalar changes by the result verbs and the construction are not predicated of the same theme. Thus, this calls into question the claim by RHL that result verbs do not permit nonselected objects, since, as I will show, many result verbs do frequently appear in the *way*-construction in this setting, as illustrated by the next examples. Consequently, it appears that result verbs seem to be more flexible with regards to their argument realization options than previously claimed, as they permit nonselected objects.

- (11) a. \*The window **broke** its way **into** the room. (Jackendoff 1992: 213)  
 b. It took me another ten minutes to **break** my way **in**. [COCA]
- (12) a. \*The butter **melted** its way **off** the turkey. (Goldberg 1996: 45)  
 b. [...] Generating heat enough to **melt** their way **into** the sunlight. [COCA]

In (11a) the referent of *the window* is what breaks and also what undergoes the change of location entailed by the construction. The same occurs in (12a). In (11b) and (12b), however, what undergoes the changes of state and location is not the same theme, since it is the unexpressed object referents that break, melt and shatter, but the subject referents that undergo the changes of location (*It took me another ten minutes to break my way in, #but nothing broke/but I didn't get in*).

**Conclusion.** The scalar analysis developed here predicts that any verb (either unaccusative or result) can appear in the *way*-construction so long as it does not denote a scalar change predicated of its subject. This prediction thus seems to hold, since unaccusative and result verbs do permit the *way*-construction as long as this restriction is respected.

**Selected references.** Goldberg, Adele E. 1991. It can't go down the chimney up: Paths and the English resultative. *Proceedings of the Berkeley Linguistics Society* 17, 368-378. | Kuno, Susumu, and Ken-ichi Takami. 2004. *Functional constraints in grammar: On the unergative-unaccusative distinction*. John Benjamins Publishing. | Levin, Beth. 2017. The elasticity of verb meaning re-visited. *Proceedings of Semantics and Linguistic Theory* 27, 571-599. | Rappaport Hovav, Malka, and Beth Levin. 2010. Reflections on manner/result complementarity. In *Syntax, lexical semantics, and event structure*, ed. By Edit Doron, Malka Rappaport Hovav, and Ivy Sichel, 21-38. Oxford: Oxford University Press.