

Complex Adjectival Resultatives in French: A Diachronic Study

Maya Krol

University of Toronto Mississauga

Adjectival resultatives play an important role in the classification of languages as either satellite-framed or verb-framed. Talmy (2000) uses them as principle evidence of a satellite-framed language—along with several other syntactic possibilities involving resultative secondary predication—and generally, they serve as a reliable correlate. Old Romance varieties, however, challenge the correlation between the presence of complex adjectival resultative constructions and a satellite-framed grammar and present an opportunity to better understand grammars that do not fall neatly into Talmy’s two-way typology.

Old French had a rich and productive system of adjectival resultatives that are not found (and are not grammatical) in Modern French. They differ from the English variety, however, in that they are weak (Washio 1997). Complex adjectival resultatives involve two predicates that share an argument; the adjective denotes the resultant state of the object of the verb while the main verb denotes the manner by which the object comes to attain such a state, as shown in (1) for English.

(1) *John hammered the metal flat.*

English complex adjectival resultatives are said to be strong in that the meaning of the verb and the meaning of the adjective are independent of each other. This differs from the weak kind attested in Old French, where the meaning of the adjective is semantically tied to the verb, and where the properties of the verb itself bring about the resultative meaning.

(2) a. *Il l'abat mort* (Chanson de Roland, TFA)
 he him=slaughter dead
 ‘He slaughtered him dead’

b. *Et le despoillierent tout nu* (Roman de l'Estoire dou Graal, TFA)
 and him strip all naked
 ‘And they stripped him completely naked’

c. *Et tout plat a terre l'abatent* (Roman de l'Estoire dou Graal, TFA)
 and all flat at ground him=beat
 ‘And they beat him completely at to the ground’

Outside of Troberg & Burnett (2014)’s descriptive account, little fine-grained qualitative work has been undertaken to describe the range of verbs that allow adjectival resultatives. Further, detailed quantitative work is required in order to track the time course of their change and compare it to the loss of other resultative secondary predicates that are presumably tightly related at an abstract level. The present study contributes to the need for a careful description of complex adjectival resultative constructions in Old and Middle French by documenting the use and tracking the loss of three adjectives that are robustly attested in resultative constructions:

mort ‘dead’, *nu* ‘naked’, and *plat* ‘flat’ based on a systematic examination of its use in three major databases: the Databases: Textes de Français Ancien (ARTFL Project); ARTFL-FRANTEXT (ARTFL Project); FRANTEXT Moyen Français (ATILF).

In order to track their loss every instance of *mort* ‘dead’, *nu* ‘naked’, and *plat* ‘flat’, all orthographic variants were searched from the years 1100-1699. Each instance was then categorised based on its distribution: those used in adjectival resultative constructions were identified as opposed to those used in depictive secondary predicates, predicative, attributive, and other uses. With each token categorised, the frequency of adjectival resultatives for each century was then calculated. This methodology and the databases used follow those employed in Troberg & Wyslobocka (2016) analysing the frequency of the particle *jus* “down”, and Troberg, Ahmad, & Krol (2018) analysing the frequency of the particles *fors/hors* “out”, in order to allow a direct comparison of the time course of change of particles and adjectival resultatives.

The preliminary results of this study are exciting as they suggest that the time course of change of adjectival resultatives patterns closely with the loss of the well-known verb particle constructions. Specifically, adjectival resultatives present the same robust use in the texts during the 12th and 13th centuries after which point their frequency declines to the extent that they are rarely attested from the 17th century onward.

Tracking the time course of change is an important contribution to testing the hypothesis that the loss of adjectival resultatives is a consequence of an underlying change in the grammar of resultative secondary predication (a shift from a satellite-framed grammar to a verb-framed grammar), following Troberg & Burnett (2017) and Troberg (2018). Our study appears to support the claim that the loss of a satellite-framed grammar occurred during the Middle French period.

From a qualitative standpoint, our study has also identified a broader and more varied range of verbs that licence adjectival resultative constructions. These data raise interesting questions about the limits of weak secondary predication and why some of the verb-adjective combinations seem so odd when translated into English.

Selected References:

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