Caught in the act: Loss and recovery of compositionality in English -ly-adverbs

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While it is undoubtedly true that historical data do not lend themselves well to experimentation, the availability of increasingly extensive data sets has brought some experimenting within practical reach. This means that at least some predictions based on a combination of synchronic observations and uniformitarian thinking are testable.

Synchronic evidence shows a negative correlation between compositionality in morphologically complex words and frequency – be it absolute frequency or relative frequency (Hay 2003). It is therefore expected that when the frequency of morphologically complex items changes, their compositionality will change along. If compositionality decreases, this should be reflected in decreasing sensitivity to priming by items with analogous composition. The latter prediction is in principle testable on diachronic data (Torres Cacoullos 2015).

The present paper examines the relation between changing frequency and priming sensitivity, as a proxy to compositionality. This is done for English -ly-adverbs, such as roughly, blindly, publicly, etc. in the Hansard Corpus, containing the transcripts from debates in British Parliament from 1803 to 2005. Based on a sample of 250 -ly-adverbs, the expected relation between frequency and compositionality is shown to hold, albeit with great variation across lexical items. Both absolute and relative frequency have predictive value. It is further shown that decreasing frequency is linked to increasing compositionality. As such, the results cast some modest doubt on the irreversibility of grammaticalization processes (Haspelmath 1999) – or more precisely, on one of the sub-processes constituting grammaticalization.