

What to blame it on: Diathesis alternations, usage advice, “confusion”, and pattern extension

The linking between syntactic arguments and participant roles is complex: some verbs allow alternative expressions for the same participant roles (*give me the book*, *give the book to me*; *spray paint on the wall*, *spray the wall with paint*), while other verbs will allow only one of the alternatives, and still others might allow only the other (Levin 1993).

When an alternative to some existing pattern arises, usage critics are quick to criticize it: they are antagonistic towards innovations (or what they perceive to be innovations) in general, but especially to innovations that introduce what they see as just new ways of saying old things. If we already have the (a) variants, why should we also have the (b) variants?

(1a) blame SOURCE (for CONSEQUENCE)

(1b) blame CONSEQUENCE on SOURCE

(2a) rid LOCATION of SOMETHING

(2b) rid SOMETHING from LOCATION

(3a) confuse ORIGINAL with REPLICA

(3b) confuse REPLICA for ORIGINAL

(4a) substitute NEW (for OLD)

(4b) substitute OLD (with/by NEW)

“Why do these things happen?”, the usage critics ask. And the critics answer: because people “confuse” the correct usage with other related usages – they combine, or blend, different constructions.

For *blame*, for example, the claim is (Funk & Wagnalls (1915)) that people combine the correct (1a) with the related

(1c) lay/put/place (the) blame on SOURCE (for CONSEQUENCE)

For *substitute*, the claim is that people combine the correct (4a) with the related

(4c) replace OLD (with/by NEW).

Now, there is certainly a sense in which the innovative variants have bits of stuff taken from two (or more) different places in English syntax. And it’s possible that occasionally such an innovation results from true syntactic blending, in which alternative formulations of the same content compete with one another in production, with the result that the actually produced expression has parts of both. But in general, if the innovation is to be seen as a combination of two things, the combination is at a higher level, the level of patterns – constructions – not specific utterances-in-planning

But I’m inclined to see even this pattern-combination account as gratuitously complex, given that EXTENSION OF PATTERNS to new items that have appropriate semantics is so common, as when *donate* is extended to the double-NP dative variant.

Why should people do this? Aren’t these just different ways of saying the same thing? Maybe yes, maybe no, but linguists are here to tell the usage critics that when you have two non-subject arguments for a V, it’s really useful to have alternative syntactic argument structures for them: whichever one serves as direct object is focussed on; whichever one comes first is more likely to be discourse-topical; and the different argument structures provide ways to put short before long (avoiding long things first, and, especially, short things last).

The details are different in each case, but in all of them we see speakers actively (though tacitly) re-shaping the materials of their language so as to increase the expressive capacity available to them – not just balling things up.