Constructionalization and the loss of collocational constraints:
a case study of Dutch binominal constructions.
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In Traugott and Trousdale (2013), the development of the English binominal quantifier construction ‘a lot of N’ is discussed in great detail as a prime example of constructionalization, i.e. the formation of a new form/meaning-pairing via a series of successive neo-analyses. A crucial part of this development is the loss of collocational constraints: the fact that a lot of, originally a partitive, now co-occurs with abstract nouns such as hope, truth, etc. is indicative of its constructionalization. This paper focuses on two sub-types of binominal constructions in Dutch, in order to further explore the relation between constructionalization as a specific type of constructional change and the loss of collocational constraints that often seems to coincide with it.

The first part of the paper deals with the “N1-van-een-N2”, sometimes referred to as the ‘schat van een kind-cx’ (lit. a treasure of a child ‘a sweet child’), in which N1 modifies the semantic head N2 (Paardekooper 1956; Broekhuis & Den Dikken 2012: 642-652). The following examples from Present-day Dutch show that this construction exhibits a high degree of productivity.

(1) Een duts van een trainer. ‘a loser of a trainer’ (Twitter, 2012)
(2) Die damesflikvlooier van een Pieter. ‘that womanizer of a Peter’ (De kop van Jut, 2013)
(3) Een klepper van een voorgerecht. ‘that topper of a starter’ (Google, 2011)

However, preliminary corpus research of 19th Century Dutch only provides examples with an animate N2, indicating that the construction has become less constrained over time. More extensive research is needed to confirm whether the construction was in fact limited to animate N2’s in 19th Century language and to document how it has gradually expanded its collocational range.

(1) Die rakker van een jongen. ‘that rascal of a boy’ (Het nieuws van den dag, 1875)
(2) Dat mormel van een hondje. ‘that monster of a dog’ (Soerabaijasch Handelsblad, 1882)
(3) Zoo’n pracht van een meisje. ‘such a beauty of a girl’ (Leeuwarder courant, 1890)

We will present the results from an investigation of the collocational scatter of a set of frequently occurring N1:s (schat ‘treasure’, draak ‘dragon’, pracht ‘beauty’) in a corpus consisting of 19th and early 20th Century Dutch newspapers from the archive at www.delpher.nl.

The second part of the paper turns to Dutch binominal quantifier constructions such as een hoop N ‘a heap of N’ which have received far less attention in Diachronic Construction Grammar than their English counterparts (but see De Clerck & Colleman 2013 on een massa N ‘a mass of N’). Again, we will use the Delpher corpus to track shifts in the productivity of such patterns over the last 150 to 200 years. A curious case in this regard is for instance the Dutch binominal quantifier construction “een-menigte-N” (‘a crowd of N’), the use of which appears to have become more, rather than less, constrained over time. Whereas, in Present-day Dutch menigte can only modify nouns that have a human referent, 19th Century Dutch allowed for a much wider variety of nouns, as is attested by the examples below.

(1) Een menigte verzoekschriften ‘a crowd of appeals’ (Leydsche courant, 1851)
(2) Een menigte boomen ‘a crowd of trees’ (Soerabaijasch Handelsblad, 1898)

These examples provide evidence of an increase, rather than a loss, of collocational constraints. We will discuss the implications of these and other findings for the theory of constructionalization as presented in Traugott & Trousdale (2013).

References: