

The ‘step by slow step’ Construction

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The present study describes the [X by Adjective X] construction (e.g. *step by slow step*) and discusses its theoretical implications. A COCA¹ search for ‘[SINGULAR NOUN] by [ADJECTIVE] [SINGULAR NOUN]’ returned 5895 hits, from which I removed irrelevant instances, leaving 111 uses of the construction in question. A close examination of them has revealed that the construction has at least five important characteristics.

First, it sounds orotund and is felt to be a literary device. This intuition is confirmed by the COCA search results: of the 111 instances, eight are from the genre ACADEMIC, 63 from FICTION, 21 from MAGAZINE, 14 from NEWSPAPER and only five from SPOKEN.

Second, the construction departs from the canonical structures of English. Syntactically, the adjective only modifies the second *X*, but semantically, it describes the whole sequence of *X*'s. In *step by slow step*, for instance, what is slow is not only the second step but all the steps involved.

Third, the adjective is more meaningful, and is therefore more strongly pronounced, than the second *X*. This is because in the [X by Adjective X] construction the first two words (i.e. *X by*) prime the hearer for a second occurrence of *X*. This priming effect is caused by the knowledge of the [X by X] construction (e.g. *step by step*). In fact, a COCA search shows that nouns that tend to occur in the [X by Adjective X] construction also tend to be used in the [X by X] construction.

Fourth, the construction has its own semantics. In the COCA, the adjectives that occur more than once in the construction are *tiny* (6 uses), *bloody* (4), *careful* (4), *slow* (4), *painful* (3), *precious* (3), *cautious* (3), *delicious* (2), *measured* (2) and *small* (2), suggesting that it tends to be associated with the idea of ‘slowness,’ ‘gradualness’ of the designated process:

- (1) They peel bananas and feed them **bite by tiny bite** to [...]. (COCA)

Another frequent type of adjective that occurs in the construction seems to be associated with human emotion or feeling.²

¹ The Corpus of Contemporary American English.

² This might have something to do with the second characteristic I mentioned (deviance from canonical structures). As Pinker (2008:362) observed, “affect-laden words can sometimes escape the usual grammatical machinery that computes who

- (2) Savor **glass by [delicious/?full] glass!**³
- (3) He climbed down the mountains, **step by [sad/?normal] step.**
- (4) Taking the papers firmly in his hand, he flings them up to the ceiling and watches the pile break apart, scatter, and come fluttering to the ground, **page by miserable page.** (Paul Auster, *Ghosts*)

The usage in (5) and (6) can be seen as a bridge from the first type to the second, because the speaker in (5), for example, is mentioning the walker's inner state and the slowness of his walk simultaneously.

- (5) He started on down, **step by careful step.** (COCA)
- (6) [...] and then, **step by struggling step**, walking the length of the bridge [...] (Paul Auster, *The Locked Room*)

Other sorts of adjectives can be used, but they tend to border on the unnatural.

Fifth, the construction readily sanctions transferred epithets.⁴

- (7) a. He smoked, **cigarette by sad cigarette.**
 b. He threw them away, **cigarette by sad cigarette.**

Theoretically significant is the fact that almost all of these characteristics are shared by another much more frequent construction, the cognate object construction, exemplified below:

- (8) She rolls her eyes and **smiles an ironic smile.** (emily giffin, *something borrowed*)
- (9) His ambition was simple enough: to become a normal citizen in a normal American town, to marry the girl next door, to **live a quiet life.** (Paul Auster, *Ghosts*)

did what to whom from the arrangement of words in a parse tree.”

³ *Serve by the pitcher when friends drop in, or savor **glass by delicious glass** in those quiet moments of sunny solitude.* (<http://www.starbucks.com/5more/iced-coffee>)

⁴ This might have something to do with the predictability of the second *X* (the third characteristic), because the acceptability of a transferred epithet depends at least in part on predictability. This is confirmed by comparing *He smoked **sad cigarettes*** with **He threw away **sad cigarettes***.

First, it is used in orotund style (Quirk et al. 1985: 750). Second, an intransitive verb takes its object (or pseudo-object) in the construction. Third, the object noun bears almost no new information, and therefore the adjective that precedes it is more meaningful (Omuro 1990). Fourth, the construction sounds more natural with an adjective that has some evaluative or subjective meaning (Langendoen 1967). Fifth, it sanctions a transferred epithet in the [Adjective Noun] slot (Kihara 2004).

Seen in this light, it is not far-fetched to suppose that the extension from the [X by X] construction to the [X by Adjective X] construction is motivated by the cognate object construction. There is diachronic evidence for this observation. Even the most frequent patterns of the [X by Adjective X] construction in the COCA corpus (i.e. *step by Adjective step*, *piece by Adjective piece* and *bit by Adjective bit*) are not attested any later than the 1920s in the COHA corpus⁵, while much earlier examples of the cognate object construction are attested in the same corpus:

- (10) **Step by white step** she goes up the castle stairs, but the stair goes up into the sky and the sky keeps going up too, and none of them ever get there. (1920, COHA)
- (11) a. I have **lived a long life** [...] (1822, COHA)
- b. She **died a miserable death!** (1815, COHA)

This finding supports the view adopted in Goldberg and van der Auwera (2012) (i.e. that a construction can be motivated by another construction) in a rather interesting manner, in that the [X by Adjective X] construction is quite different from the cognate object construction in purely grammatical terms. The former construction has a noun or preposition as its head (depending on the researcher's theoretical orientation) and behaves as an adverbial phrase, while the latter construction has a verb as its head and behaves as a verb phrase. In spite of this grammatical or syntactic difference, they are related to each other in such a way that one motivates the other.

⁵ The Corpus of Historical American English.

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