

English *How Come* Constructions: A Diachronic Perspective

Okgi Kim ^{*} [†]
Kyung Hee University

Jong-Bok Kim [‡]
Kyung Hee University

Okgi Kim and Jong-Bok Kim. 2017. English *How Come* Constructions: A Diachronic Perspective. *Language and Information* 21.1, 121-134. This squib discusses some diachronic aspects of the *how come* construction in English. Together with a comprehensive corpus search, we first review key grammatical properties of the construction and then examine the historical shifts of the construction. In particular, in accounting for its historical development, we adopt the analysis of Grammatical Constructionalization (Trousdale 2012; Traugott and Trousdale 2013). (Kyung Hee University)

Key words: *how come*, *why*, COHA, diachronic studies, grammatical constructionalization

1. Introduction

The English expressions *how come* and *why* are interchangeable in many embedded contexts, as illustrated by the following:

- (1) a. You never asked how come/why I knew so much about your personal background.
b. I wonder how come/why she didn't come to the party last night.

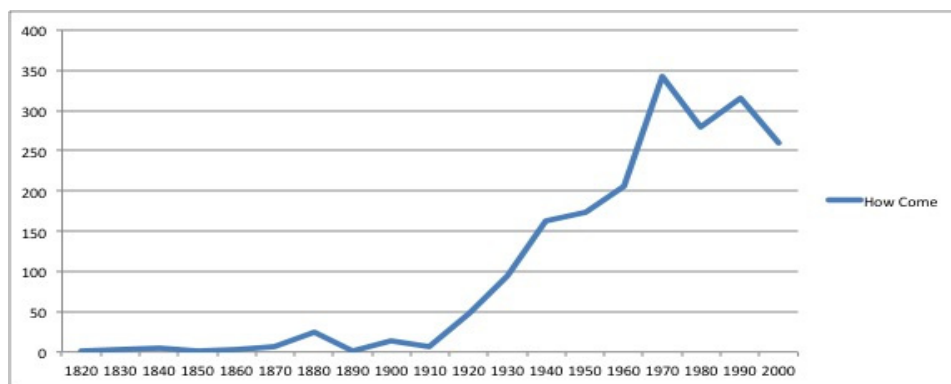
* An earlier version of this squib was presented in the joint conference of Korean Association for Corpus Linguistics (KACL) and Discourse and Cognitive Linguistics Society of Korea (DISCOG), held on October 17th, 2015. We thank two anonymous reviewers of this journal for the helpful comments. All remaining errors are our own.

† Department of English Language and Literature, Kyung Hee University, 26 Kyungheedaero, Dongdaemun-gu, Seoul 02447, South Korea. E-mail: okgi.kim@gmail.com

‡ Corresponding author. School of English, Kyung Hee University, 26 Kyungheedaero, Dongdaemun-gu, Seoul 02447, South Korea. E-mail: jongbok@khu.ac.kr

However, there are several impeccable differences between the two. For instance, *how come* cannot host a subject-aux inversion (SAI) as in *How come she was late?* and **How come/why was she late?* Synchronic aspects of the *how come* construction have been investigated in some degree (see, among others; Collins 1991; Fitzpatrick 2005; Kim and Kim 2011; Tsai 2008; Zwicky and Zwicky 1971). However, few have focused on its diachronic aspects, except for Claridge (2012). She has looked into historical developments of *how come*, focusing on the English data from the Early and Late Modern periods.¹

This study can be taken as a follow-up study of Claridge (2012), trying to understand the diachronic aspects of the construction further. As the research tool, we use the historical corpus, COHA (Corpus of Historical American English). It is the largest structured corpus of historical English, containing more than 400 million words of text from the 1810s-2000s and is balanced by genre decade by decade. One immediate advantage of using this historical corpus can be seen from the following web-interface:



[Figure 1] Frequency per million words (pmw) of *how come* in COHA

As shown from the figure, the use of *how come* has rapidly increased since around the 1910s while it is very uncommonly used in the early 19th century. The question that follows is then what aspects of grammar (syntax, semantics, or both) cause such frequency changes to happen. As an attempt to answer this, we first extract *how come* instances from the corpus COHA and look into the grammatical properties of each token. Based on these corpus data,

¹ Claridge (2012) also discusses the so-called *what...for* construction, which is also used interchangeably with *why* in many contexts, as illustrated in the following:

- (i) a. What (the hell) did you do that for?
- b. Why (the hell) did you do that?

For more information on historical developments of its form and function, see Claridge (2012).

we then try to account for how the expression *how come* has undergone the process of grammatical constructionalization.

2. Basic grammatical properties

2.1 Syntactic distributions

As our corpus data illustrate, the expression *how come* has quite flexible distributional possibilities. For instance, it can occur not only with a non-inverted finite S, but also with a CP headed by *that* (see Collins 1991; Kim and Kim 2011; among others):

- (2) a. How come [you got a Scottish name]? (COHA 2000 FIC)
 b. How come [that he hit Washington first]? (COHA 1932 FIC)

In addition, it is also possible to combine with a nonfinite S (henceforth, SC):²

- (3) a. How come [you **to sell** prayers]? (COHA 2009 FIC)
 b. Now, tell me the truth, how come [you **singing** songs for me]? (COHA 2000 FIC)
 c. How come [she **take** on a skinny little runt like you] if she so pretty? (COHA 1951 FIC)
 d. How come [your head **so hard**]? (COHA 1968 FIC)
 e. How come [you **in** my daughters' chamber]? (COHA 1934 FIC)

As seen here, *how come* combines with various predicative types of SCs, headed by nonfinite VPs, APs, and PPs. In case of this, its subject can be assigned either nominative or accusative Case like the following:

- (4) a. That's how come **I** to be onpunctual getting back. (COHA 1908 FIC)
 b. Well Lord, how come **me** here? (COHA 2001 FIC)

Another intriguing fact in syntactic distributions is that *how come* can also occur with an NP as in (5), or without any surface structure like sluicing as in (6).³

² We adopt a broader definition of SCs, including the nonfinite VP as the head of a small clause.

³ In sluicing-like cases, if *come* is omitted with the following XPs, the result sentence becomes ungrammatical:

- (i) a. She didn't know how come.
 b. *She didn't know how *(come). (if *how* is a canonical *wh*-word, it is OK.)

This implies that the idiomatic expression *how come* functions as a grammatical unit. This view is also

- (5) a. How come [no gold]? (COHA 2008 FIC)
 b. And we need a new refrigerator. How come [the bonus]? (COHA 1981 FIC)
- (6) a. "How come?" said Sam. (COHA 2005 FIC)
 b. I wonder how come. (COHA 1993 FIC)

In terms of external distributions, we can easily see that the *how come* construction functions as complement of interrogative as well as copular verbs and prepositions, as attested by the corpus examples in (7).

- (7) a. Do you mind me **asking** how come? (COHA 2001 FIC)
 b. Because the evidence disappeared, that's how come. (COHA 1988 FIC)
 c. ... we were talking **about** how come we didn't have anything, ... (COHA 2001 NEWS)

2.2 Basic semantic, discourse properties

As noted earlier, the grammatical element *how come* is nearly synonymous with *why*, and thus they are interchangeably used in many contexts:

- (8) a. Why did she get up early? / How come she got up early?
 b. I don't know why/how come she missed the class yesterday.

However, as pointed out by Fitzpatrick (2005), *how come* differs from *why* in the sense that it triggers the presupposed truth of its complement as in *How come* [_{FACT} *she got up early*]?. This factive constraint is captured by the following rhetorical questions and NPI licensing:

- (9) a. Why would John leave?
 b. *How come John would leave?
- (10) a. Why did John say **anything**?
 b. *How come John ever said **anything**?

As observed here, *how come* cannot introduce rhetorical questions or licence NPIs like *anything*: its presupposed truth conflicts with negatively biased meanings and its factive island blocks NPI's extraction (see Fitzpatrick 2005 for more details).

The factivity condition also disallows *how come* to be used as a suggestion (Collins 1991; Conroy 2006):

countenanced by the diachronic findings, which will be dealt with in the later section.

- (11) a. Why don't we sing together? (suggestion)
 b. *How come we don't sing together?

This contrast can be accounted for by the simple fact that a future event cannot evoke a factivity.

As for discourse aspects, *how come* P(roposition)? also presupposes a speaker's counter-expectation such that something caused P and P shouldn't happen, as noted in the following (cf. Tsai 2008):

- (12) How come you didn't leave when you had the chance?
 Presupposition: You didn't leave, and something caused you not to leave! You should have left.
 Speech Act: The speaker wants to know what caused you not to leave.

The counter-expectation triggered by *how come* can account for the following contrast (cf. Chou 2012):

- (13) I expected John to be crying, but
 a. why is he crying?
 b. *how come he is crying?

The ungrammaticality of (13b) is simply because *how come* questions cannot be used to ask for the cause or reason of some event that is consistent with the speaker's expectation.

3. Diachronic Studies of *How Come*

As we have noted from Figure 1, the *how come* construction has undergone a substantial shift in its frequency over time. To understand the diachronic development of the construction in more detail, we have set up the following research questions:

- ♦ **Q1:** Why have the uses of the construction rapidly increased since about 1910s? Is the historical shift related to syntax (form), semantics (function) or both?
- ♦ **Q2:** Why is the construction rarely used in the early 19th century? Are there any alternative forms or constructions with the same functions as *how come*?
- ♦ **Q3:** If there are historical changes in form-function pairings of *how come* from the Construction Grammar-based perspective (Goldberg 1995), How can we account for the

diachronic aspects of the construction?

In answering these, we have used the corpus COHA (Corpus of Historical American English) and, in what follows, discuss some key observations we have made from the corpus data.

The search method is a simple string search 'how come'. The number of total tokens for the construction we have obtained is 1,945, after manually ruling out unrelated examples like the following:

- (14) a. "How come on your studies, brother?" interrupted Mildred, without heeding Henry's interpretation of his duty. "Oh, rarely! (COHA 1835 FIC)
 b. But how come on the corn and potatoes which I helped to plant? (COHA 1915 MAG)

The expressions *come* in (14) are related not to *how* but to the prepositions *on*. This means that the given sentences are all canonical *how*-questions with manner readings, involving phrasal verbs such as *come on*.

3.1 Complementation patterns of *how come*

Based on the internal structures we have seen in Section 2.1, we divided complementation patterns of *how come* into 5 different syntactic classes, as exemplified in the following:

- (15) a. **Fin S**: How come that's making you nervous? (COHA 2000 FIC)
 b. **CP**: How come that he knows so much about the yacht? (COHA 1950 FIC)
 c. **SC**: How come you so difficult? (COHA 1994 FIC)
 d. **NP**: How come no hair? (COHA 1955 FIC)
 e. **Ellipsis**: You never married, Jack, but how come [e]. (COHA 1987 FIC)

With these syntactic classifications, we tried to further look into what kind of complement patterns are largely used in each decade. Let us look at the following table for more details:

[Table 1] Frequencies of the complementation patterns of *how come* in each decade

		Syntactic Class					Total
		SC	NP	S[fin]	How Come (ellipsis)?	CP	
year	1820	1					1 (0.05%)
	1830	3					3 (0.15%)
	1840	5					5 (0.25%)
	1850	2					2 (0.10%)
	1860	3					3 (0.15%)
	1870	6					6 (0.30%)
	1880	5	6	10	3		24 (1.23%)
	1890	1					11 (0.05%)
	1900	8	2	1	2		13 (0.66%)
	1910	3	1	2	1		7 (0.35%)
	1920	13	2	15	16	1	47 (2.41%)
	1930	16	5	46	27	1	95 (4.88%)
	1940	17	2	102	41		162 (8.32%)
	1950	10	9	117	36	1	173 (8.89%)
	1960	9	7	146	44		206 (10.59%)
	1970	11	10	238	84		343 (17.63%)
	1980	7	6	221	45		279 (14.34%)
1990	10	9	254	43		316 (16.24%)	
2000	12	4	205	38		259 (13.31%)	
Total		142 (7.30%)	63 (3.23%)	1357 (69.76%)	380 (19.53)	3 (0.15%)	

What we can observe from the Table is that the use of *how come* has become quite productive in its syntactic distribution after about 1880s. In particular, we can see that a finite sentence is the most frequently used complementation pattern and a CP seldom appears with *how come*.

3.2 Diachronic changes in the complementation patterns

The corpus data from 1820s to 1870s show us that the idiomatic unit *how come* occurred only with SCs headed by a VP[*to*], PP, AP, and AdvP:

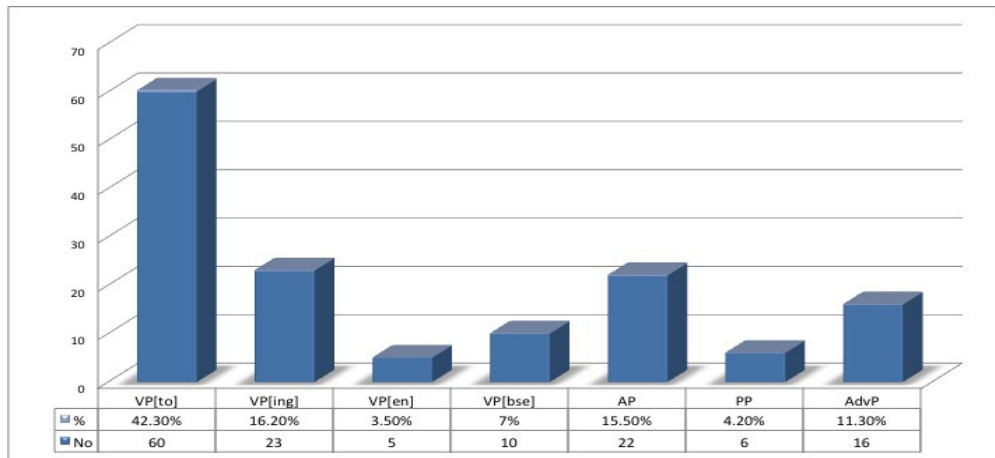
- (16) a. But how come [you to write about this man and them niggers]? (COHA 1841 FIC)
 b. But how come [you in her bed]? (COHA 1843 FIC)
 c. How come [they so destitute]? (COHA 1848 FIC)
 d. How come [you here]? (COHA 1861 FIC)

However, since 1880s, the predicative types of SCs have become rather diversified together with starting to have nonfinite VPs as the head of SCs, as illustrated in the following:

- (17) a. How come [you **letting** him out like that]? (COHA 2000 FIC)
 b. How come [you **been** staying awake]? (COHA 1981 FIC)

c. How come [he **look** just like them, then]? (COHA 1982 FIC)

One intriguing pattern we observed is that the VP[*to*] is the most frequent predicative type of SCs, as can be seen from the Figure 2:



[Figure 2] Frequencies of the predicative types of SCs from 1820s to 2000s

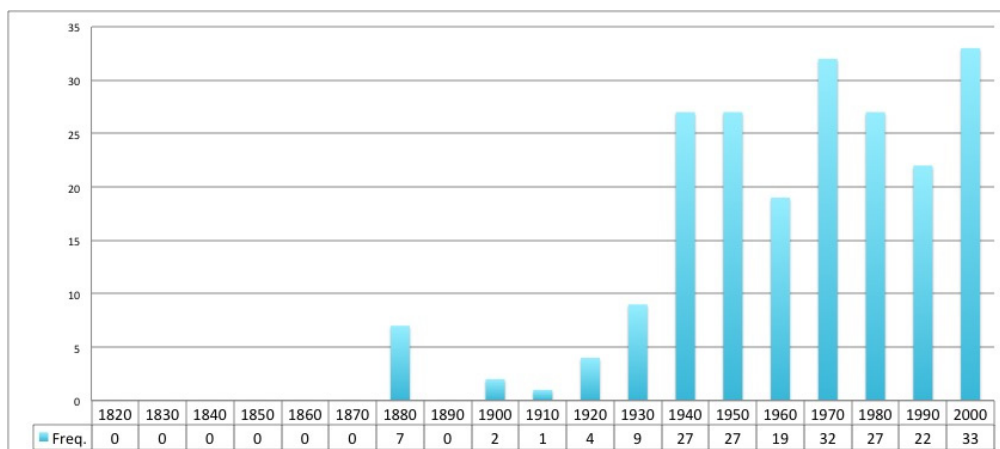
After 1880s, the finite S, NP, and elided XP started to emerge as the complementation pattern:

- (18) a. How come [he got a Puerto Rican name]? (COHA 2000 FIC)
 b. How come [no college]? I went to New York to model instead. (COHA 1993 FIC)
 c. How come [*e*] if it had been a lady? (COHA 1944 FIC)

When it comes to external distributions, *how come* has begun to occur in embedded environments since around 1880s. Consider the following embedded examples and its historical change (also see Figure 3):

- (19) [Complement of verbs]
 a. en see ef dey can't **fine out** how come he so lucky. (COHA 1881 FIC)
 b. That's how come he living with his grandma in the second place. (COHA 2000 FIC)
 c. Now **explain** how come you knew three thugs were going to jump me. (COHA 2005 FIC)

- (20) [Complement of prepositions]
- a. ... particularly the part **about** how come he survived when his family didn't. (COHA 2004 FIC)
 - b. It says my name and **about** how come the city is gonna do business with hoodlums. (COHA 1945 FIC)



[Figure 3] Frequencies of embedded *how come* in COHA

In sum, the syntactic productivity of the construction has noticeably increased from the end of the 19th century. One visible development includes its uses with various complement types such as a finite S, SCs, and NPs.

3.3 Variations of *how come*

The following corpus data could shed some light on the second research question (Q2) we posed at the start of this diachronic study:

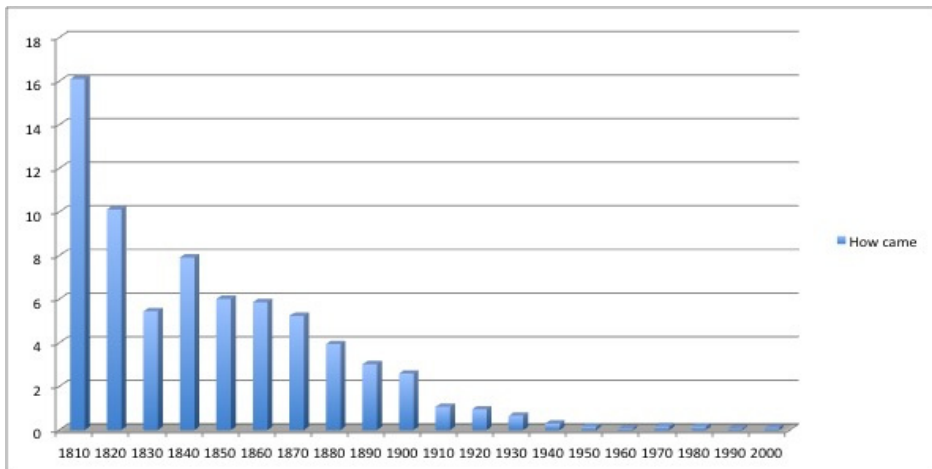
- (21) a. But how came [you so wet]? I've been in the river, answered John, ... (COHA 1864 FIC)
- b. How came [you here]? (COHA 1870 FIC)
- c. How came [he to get half the money]? (COHA 1873 FIC)
- d. How came [she standing there]? (COHA 1873 FIC)
- e. How came [it that your eyes were wet] ... (COHA 1880 FIC)
- (22) a. But how comes [Ned here]? (COHA 1887 FIC)
- b. How comes [this man to believe that Jesus was a prophet]? (COHA 1820 FIC)

- c. All the air around us is condensed. How comes [it condensed]? (COHA 1855 FIC)
- d. How comes [it that the fire divine exhausts itself so quickly]? (COHA 1890 FIC)⁴
- e. How comes [you are named after that horse, girl]? (COHA 1922 FIC)

What we can observe from the examples in (21) and (22) is that inflected forms such as *how came* and *how comes* have the same internal structures and causal meanings as *how come* (cf. Claridge 2012). These variational forms also behave just like *how come* in terms of embedded environments and accusative subjects:

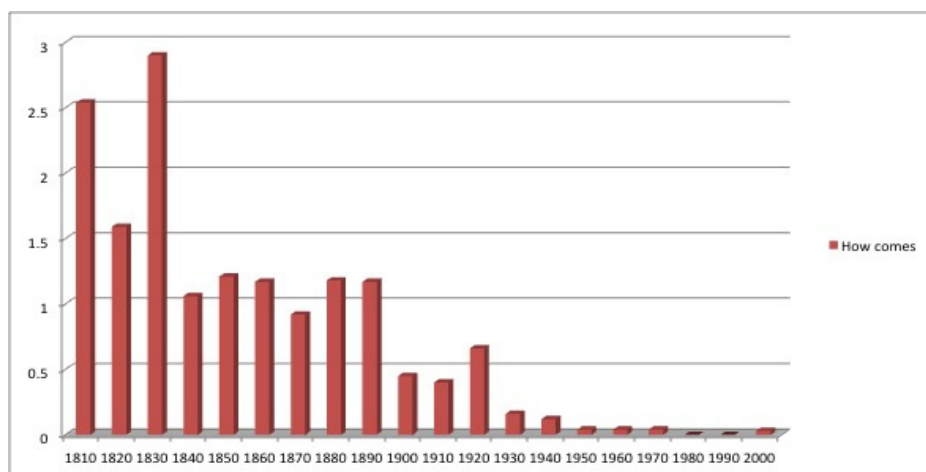
- (23) a. A lawyer, "Bob said," or a magistrate, would **ask** [how came a fellow like Mick Docherty into possession of a shotgun]. (COHA 1988 FIC)
- b. I wish to **know** [how comes it that you had in your possession private correspondence addressed to me]? (COHA 1906 FIC)
- c. Trading! How came **them** not to. (COHA 1931 FIC)

The corpus search also shows us that in earlier days, the variational forms were used a lot instead of *how come*, but in the 19th century these forms almost disappeared, as shown in Figure 4 and 5.



[Figure 4] Historical changes of *how came* in COHA

⁴ Unlike *how came/comes*, we could not find any instances of *how come* with expletive *it* and the following CP. This implies that the element *come* in the variational forms seems to behave like a verb taking a subject, while that in *how come* is taken to be not a verb but part of the idiomatic expression, not allowing any inflection and subject.



[Figure 5] Historical changes of *how comes* in COHA

Thus, it is assumed that while the variational forms *how came/comes* almost died out in the Present-Day English (PDE), *how come* could survive as it has been undergoing a constructionalization where its complementation pattern has been quite productive and its syntactic form has become more idiomatic, not allowing any verbal inflection on *come*.

4. A Grammatical Constructionalization perspective

Based upon the corpus findings we have examined so far, what we suggest is that the *how come* construction has undergone a ‘grammatical constructionalization’ where development of form-meaning pairings is characterized by changes pertinent to key parameters such as generality, productivity, and compositionality (see Trousdale 2012; Traugott and Trousdale 2013). In particular, our diachronic study presents two major types of change in the development of *how come* constructions: one is an increase in syntactic productivity and the other is a decrease in compositionality which also refers to increased idiomaticity.

- ♦ **An increase in the syntactic productivity (broadening):**

As we have seen before, the expression *how come* has become more productive syntactically in the sense that after 1880s, it can combine with various complement types such as finite Ss, SCs, NPs, etc. This is illustrated in the following:

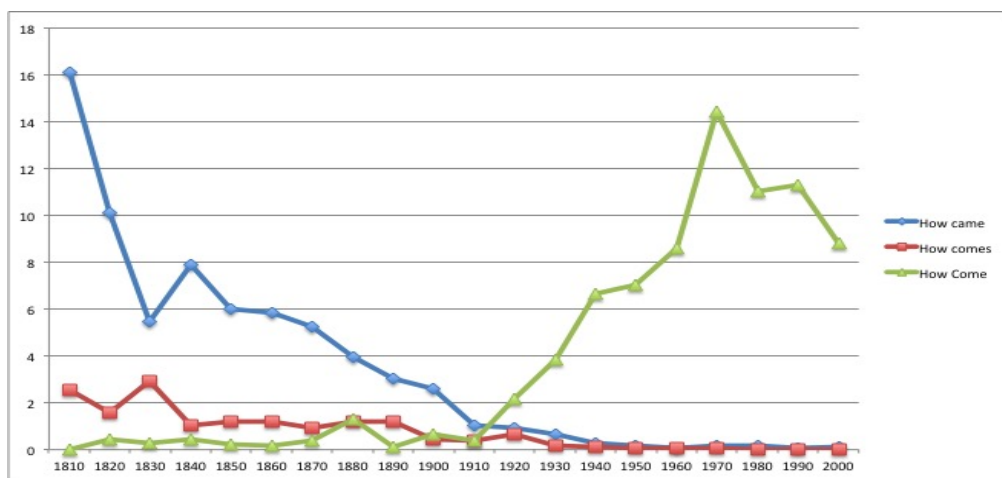


[Figure 6] Syntactic developments associated with *how come* constructions

This syntactic expansion in complementation patterns can be considered as a main reason for why the use of the construction has rapidly increased.

◆ **A decrease in compositionality (narrowing):**

The corpus search indicates the narrowing of *how come/come/comes* to the single form *how come* as a grammatical unit. This can be supported by the diachronic change in frequency:



[Figure 7] Diachronic changes of *how come/come/comes* in COHA

The variational forms almost disappeared early in the 20th century, while the constructionalized form *how come* has highly increased since that period. In addition, as we mentioned before, loss of the verbal inflections like *came* and *comes* also supports our suggestion that the *how come* construction has undergone a development of new form-meaning pairings with new grammatical potential (Traugott and Trousdale 2013).⁵

⁵ Claridge (2012) proposes a semantic development of *how come* from manner to causal reading like the

5. Conclusion

Using the historical corpus, COHA, we investigate how the form and function of the *how come* construction have been developed over time. What we observed from this diachronic study is that in syntactic distributions, the construction has become quite productive, combining with various types of complements including finite Ss, SCs, and NPs, though it was used only with the SC until 1870s. In addition, the construction has been flexible enough to occur in embedded environments such as complement of interrogative, copular verbs and of prepositions. In particular, as pointed out by Claridge (2012), our corpus investigation also supports the existence of two variational forms, *how came* and *how comes*, which syntactically and semantically behave like *how come* but almost disappeared.

This squib suggests that the historical changes of *how come* constructions can be considered as supporting evidence of an analysis of Grammatical Constructionalization, especially with respect to productivity and compositionality as its key parameters. That is, a syntactic expansion in complementation patterns provides evidence for the increase in syntactic productivity and the narrowing of *how + V(come/came/comes)* into the fixed form *how come* refers to the decrease in compositionality which also indicates the increase in idiomaticity. These historical aspects of *how come* enable us to posit that it has been developed as an independent construction with its own constructional form and meaning (reason or cause), while sharing some properties with its related construction like *why*.

<References>

- Chou, Chao-Ting Tim. 2012. Syntax-Pragmatics Interface: Mandarin Chinese Wh-the-hell and Point-of-View Operator. *Syntax* 15(1): 1-24.
- Claridge, Claudia. 2012. The origins of *how come* and *what...for*. *English Historical Linguistics 2010: Selected Papers from the Sixteenth International Conference on English Historical Linguistics* (ICEHL 16), Vol. 325. John Benjamins Publishing.
- Collins, Chris. 1991. *Why* and *How come*. *MIT Working Papers in Linguistics* 15: 1-45.
- Conroy, Anastasia. 2006. The Semantics of *How Come*: A Look at How Factivity Does It All. In

following:

- (i) [Q]: How came she to have some warm beer?
 [A]: She desired to have some; and the cook went and got it, ... (data from Claridge 2012)

In (i), there are two different answers to the same *how come* question. The first sentence *she desired to have some*; is taken to be the answer to *why*-questions (e.g., *why did she have some warm beer?*) and the other is the answer to *how*-questions (e.g., *how did she have some warm beer?*). But the manner reading almost disappeared.

- Kazanina N. et al. (eds). *University of Maryland Working Papers in Linguistics 14*: 1-24.
- Fitzpatrick, Justin. 2005. The *Whys* and *How comes* of Presupposition and NPI Licensing in Questions. In J. Alderete, C. Han and A. Kochetov (eds.), *Proceedings of the 24th West Coast Conference on Formal Linguistics*, 138-145. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Press.
- Goldberg, Adele. 1995. *Constructions: A construction grammar approach to argument structure*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kim, Jong-Bok and Okgi Kim. 2011. English *How Come* construction: A Double Life. *Studies in Generative Grammar* 21(4): 587-607.
- Traugott, Elizabeth and Graeme Trousdale. 2013. *Constructionalization and constructional changes*. Vol 6. Oxford University Press.
- Trousdale, Graeme. 2012. Theory and data in diachronic Construction Grammar. The case of the *what with* construction. *Studies in Language* 36(3): 576-602.
- Tsai, Wei-Tien Dylan. 2008. Left periphery and *how-why* alternations. *Journal of East Asian Linguistics* 17(2): 83-115.
- Zwicky, Arnold. and Ann Zwicky. 1971. *How Come* and *What For*. In Dale Eliot, Michael Geis, Alexander Grosu, Barry Nobel, Ann Zwicky, and Arnold Zwicky (eds.), *Working papers in Linguistics 8*, Ohio State University.

Submitted on: February 08, 2017

Revised on: February 21, 2017

Accepted on: February 21, 2017