Over and Over versus Again and Again: Similarities and Differences of two Instances of the x-and-x Construction in English

In this paper I compare the two instances of the x-and-x construction in English, over and over and again and again, based on data from the BNC.

The x-and-x construction consists of two identical constituents which are connected by the coordinating conjunction and (Lindström 2001; Linell 2003). This construction is not unique to English; it exists at least also in Swedish, e.g. modern å modern ‘modern and modern’ (Lindström 2001: 2) and German, e.g. weiter und weiter ‘further and further’ (DWDS corpus).

In English, however, the x-and-x construction has a specific, grammatical meaning: it marks an event as continuous (or durative) by pushing the endpoint of the event out of side, i.e. the construction adds an aspectual value to the denoted situation. Ordinary coordinations with and do not inherently carry this meaning (e.g. compare: They came down to the verge of the lake, and drank and drank (BNC) and He ate and drank with relish… (BNC)).

Conveying a continuous aspectual value, the use of the x-and-x construction should be restricted. A cursory investigation regarding the constituents of the construction reveals that only verbs (e.g. We ran and ran but it chased us. (BNC)), the comparative form of adjectives (e.g. It gets bigger and bigger every year. (BNC)), some temporal adverbs (e.g. …both told me to [stop], often and often, (BNC)), mostly spatial prepositions (about, across, around, by, down, in, on, out, over, through, up (based on the BNC), and verb particles (e.g. The pop tapes went on and on, (BNC) appear in the x-slots of the x-and-x construction. Nouns, naturally, don’t seem to occur in this construction but a more thorough investigation is needed to verify this claim.

Furthermore, the x-and-x construction is only compatible with situations that are bounded by an arbitrary endpoint, i.e. activities in Smith’ (Smith 1997) terminology.

In this paper, I focus on over and over (e.g. … he smiled broadly, revealing rows of black … teeth, repeating over and over, ‘Merci, merci’. (BNC)) and again and again (e.g. You must … take risks again and again. (BNC)) as instances of the x-and-x construction. Both constructions have been characterized as aspectual markers in previous research (Rice and Newman 2004), over and over as being iterative and again and again as ‘a kind of habitual aspect’ but ‘otherwise indistinguishable or virtually interchangeable’ (Rice and Newman 2004: 322).

This study shows how the two constructions differ in denoting slightly different situation types, i.e. over and over refers to a series of repetitions within one situation whereas again and again denotes a (potentially endless) series of identical situations. This difference in meaning is shown to result from the lexical semantics of the constituents, namely the covering sense of the preposition over, and the iterative meaning of the adverb again which are also responsible for the more restrictive usage of over and over. The choices that speakers make in discourse reveal pragmatic information of how they perceive a given situation.