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Exploring competing patterns of verb complementation: *Prevent* in the British National Corpus

The case of *prevent me from going* vs. *prevent me going*

The tight competition between the two nearly identical sentential complements of *prevent* in British English was first noted by Mair (2002) and shown to have emerged over the 20th century. Using the LOB, FLOB, Brown, and Frown corpora, Mair showed that the variant *prevent me going* (or NP-*ing*) was rare in BrE still in the 1960s, but in the 1990s it was being used at a 50:50 ratio with *prevent me from going* (or *from-ing*). NP-*ing* may remain in equal use, or eventually replace *from-ing*. In American English, only *from-ing* seems to be used. While this variation has been much researched (e.g. Van Ek (1966), Dixon (1995), Rohdenburg (1995), Mair (ibid.), Heyvaert et al. (2005), and Babovakova (2005)), no clear explanations have been found for the variation. In Sellgren (2007), the phenomenon was approached by running searches in the British National Corpus (BNC) by using a search facility called the Sketch Engine.

In a pilot study, the verb forms of *prevent* seemed to favour the different variants to different degrees. This phenomenon was attributed to the Complexity principle, formulated by Rohdenburg (e.g. 1996). The principle states that in competition, the structurally more explicit variant (here *from-ing*) will be favoured in cognitively complex environments, such as passivized sentences. The less explicit variant (here NP-*ing*) will accordingly be used more often in less complex environments.

The principle is seen at work in the case of passivized examples of *prevent*, when the more explicit *from-ing* is nearly always used.¹ Different verb forms, however, hardly represent cognitively complex environments. Nevertheless, in the light of the results, there seems to be a connection between the simpler verb forms *prevent* and *prevents* and their favouring the less explicit sentential variant, NP-*ing*.

Methods

The searches were done in the whole BNC, as well as divided into the written, spoken, written-to-be-spoken parts and according to time periods (1960-1974, 1975-1984, and 1984-1995). One drawback to using the BNC as a diachronic corpus is that the earliest period only contains works of fiction, whereas the latter periods include both imaginative and informative texts.

The results were filtered in the Sketch Engine, as a lemma search for *prevent* in the BNC gives as many as 10,439 hits. Each verb form was searched separately. The concordances were filtered with a Corpus Query Language (CQL) string in order to prune out all examples of nominal complementation (of the type *I prevented the accident*), as well as either of the sentential variants. Ideally, the filtered concordances would include all and only examples of either the NP-*ing* or *from-ing* variant.

¹ In the BNC, only one example of a passivized *prevent me going* was found with a tag sequence search.

The string for *from-ing* was [word="from"][tag="V.*G"].² In the case of NP-*ing*, the string was [tag="N.*|PN.|DT0"][tag="V.*G"].³ The search span was set as 1 to 7 after the key term, so that the items defined in the CQL string are found within 1 to 7 words after the key term. This span makes the manual checking of the results convenient. Searches with bigger spans did not produce a significantly higher number of additional examples.

In passive use, *from-ing* is the only choice (*I was prevented from going there* vs. **I was prevented going there*). When querying for examples of *from-ing* with *prevented*, the span of 2 to 8 was hence used to exclude passivized examples. *Prevented* in the passive is followed by *from* in position 1, except when there is a *by*-agent present. With NP-*ing*, passive examples should not occur, hence the span was set from 1 to 7 with all verb forms.

Results

In the tables below, the bottom row shows the total of examples of each variant, as well as their total percentages in relation to each other. The right-most column shows the total of examples by each verb form. Tables 1 and 2 present the distribution of the variants in the whole BNC and the written section respectively. Table 3 shows the distribution in the spoken section. Table 4 shows the distribution in the written-to-be-spoken corpus. Table 5 combines results from the subcorpora of different time periods.

In the whole BNC, the overall distribution of the variants in relation to each other is 58% for *from-ing*, and 42% for NP-*ing*. This is rather different from the 50:50 ratio found in Mair (2002). However, with the base form of *prevent* the distribution is even between the variants. With the other verb forms, the variation is strongly tilted in favour of *from-ing*, ranging from 62% to 79%.

Table 1. The whole BNC.

Verb form	<i>from-ing</i>	%	NP- <i>ing</i>	%	Total
<i>Prevent</i>	1399	50	1387	50	2786
<i>Prevents</i>	234	62	142	38	376
<i>Preventing</i>	325	73	122	27	447
<i>Prevented</i>	574	79	155	21	729
Total	2522	58	1806	42	4328

In the written section, the variation is roughly the same. This is due to the fact that the spoken section yielded remarkably few examples of *prevent* with sentential complements overall.

Table 2. The written section of the BNC.

Verb form	<i>from-ing</i>	%	NP- <i>ing</i>	%	Total
<i>Prevent</i>	1365	51	1337	49	2702
<i>Prevents</i>	222	61	140	39	362
<i>Preventing</i>	320	74	111	26	431
<i>Prevented</i>	571	79	151	21	722
Total	2478	59	1739	41	4217

² This string should include only those examples of *prevent* where it is followed by the word *from* as well as an *-ing* form.

³ Here common nouns are represented by "N", demonstrative pronouns by "DT0", and all other pronouns by "PN".

In the spoken section, only 121 examples of *prevent* altogether were found with sentential complements. The distribution is strikingly different from the written section, and the BNC as a whole: NP-*ing* is favored in 60% of the cases. With the base form of *prevent*, the ratio is the same. The other verb forms were present in such few numbers that no conclusions can be drawn.

Table 3. The spoken section of the BNC.

Verb form	<i>from-ing</i>	%	NP- <i>ing</i>	%	Total
<i>Prevent</i>	34	40	50	60	84
<i>Prevents</i>	12	86	2	14	14
<i>Preventing</i>	5	31	11	69	16
<i>Prevented</i>	3	43	4	57	7
Total	54	40	67	60	121

In the written-to-be-spoken section, NP-*ing* is favored overall even more prominently than in the spoken section: it is used in 68% of the examples. Even though the total number of examples is rather small (53), the tendency of the written-to-be-spoken texts to strongly favor NP-*ing* seems clear. The distribution seems to mimic that found in the spoken section of the BNC, in great contrast with the distribution found in the written section and the whole BNC.

Table 4. The written-to-be-spoken section of the BNC.

Verb form	<i>from</i>	%	NP- <i>ing</i>	%	Total
<i>Prevent</i>	7	17	34	83	41
<i>Prevents</i>	1	50	1	50	2
<i>Preventing</i>	4	57	3	43	7
<i>Prevented</i>	2	67	1	33	3
Total	14	32	39	68	53

Comparing the results obtained by Mair (2002) and those obtained in this study show how different corpora can give different pictures on competition between complementation variants. Mair's diachronic perspective, albeit limited to the 20th century, demonstrated that NP-*ing* has become a serious competitor to *from-ing* only very recently. This view is corroborated by the results from the diachronically divided subcorpora in the BNC.

Table 5. Subcorpora of different time periods in the BNC.

1960-1974	<i>from</i>	%	NP- <i>ing</i>	%	Total
<i>Prevent</i>	27	64	15	36	42
<i>Prevents</i>	7	100	-	0	7
<i>Preventing</i>	11	100	-	0	11
<i>Prevented</i>	22	96	1	4	23
Total	67	81	16	19	83
1975-1984	<i>from</i>	%	NP- <i>ing</i>	%	Total
<i>Prevent</i>	68	55	55	45	123
<i>Prevents</i>	23	85	4	15	27
<i>Preventing</i>	19	86	3	14	22
<i>Prevented</i>	38	92	3	8	41
Total	148	69	65	31	213

1985-1995	<i>from</i>	%	NP- <i>ing</i>	%	Total
<i>Prevent</i>	1304	50	1317	50	2621
<i>Prevents</i>	204	60	138	40	342
<i>Preventing</i>	295	71	119	29	414
<i>Prevented</i>	514	77	151	23	665
Total	2317	57	1725	43	4042

Table 5 shows how NP-*ing* was marginal in the 1960-1975 period: it represents only 19% of all examples. Significantly, all examples but one occurred with the base form. This variant is slightly more common in the 1975-1984 period with 31%. Again, other verb forms than the base form are scarcely found at all with NP-*ing*. In the last period, 1985-1995, NP-*ing* is found increasingly also with *prevents*, in addition to *prevent*. Apparently NP-*ing* has evolved into an equal competitor to *from-*ing** mostly through the base form of *prevent*.

Conclusion

The exploratory searches in the BNC with the Sketch Engine have given interesting pointers to future studies on *prevent*. The competition between NP-*ing* and *from-*ing** may indeed be a case of the advance of one at the expense of the other. NP-*ing* is not necessarily in perfectly equal variation with *from-*ing** today, as Mair suggested. The diachronic subcorpora showed that NP-*ing* has advanced first and foremost with the base form, and with this verb form it is in equal variation with *from-*ing** both in the whole BNC and the written section. The Complexity principle may cause the less explicit variant NP-*ing* to be used more often used with the simplest verb form, *prevent*, and also with *prevents* in the latest time period.

In the spoken section, the tables are turned: NP-*ing* has a lead over *from-*ing** with 60%. It could be hypothesized in the spirit of Mair that spoken texts are the most “advanced” as regards the idea that NP-*ing* will eventually overcome *from-*ing**. However, the religious use of *from-*ing** with passivized examples makes one wonder whether NP-*ing* can truly become the sole option as a sentential complement of *prevent*.

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