British heads and American asses

Regional, register and recent variation in the Body Part *Off*/*Out* Construction

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The Body Part *Off*/*Out* Construction

*Susan worked / swam / danced her head off last night.*

*Fred talked his head / his ass / his butt off, but to no avail.*

(Jackendoff 1997a: 551)

*John cried his head off / his eyes out / his heart out.*

(For full references, see our abstract.)
The Body Part *Off*/*Out* construction

A subtype of the resultative (or caused-motion) construction?

... *we’ve developed a whole new set of exercises that tone every part of your body, and blowtorch the fat off in no time.* (www)

Not really. Syntactically yes, semantically no.

*I have been exercising my ass off for the past 3 weeks and I think I have lost oh about ONE POUND!!!! Discouraging much!!!!* (www)
Claims in this presentation

There’s a lot of conventionality in the use of the BPOC because of differences

1. between languages (e.g. English and Dutch)
2. between verbs (and the body part nouns they combine with)
3. between registers \rightarrow \text{register variation}
4. between BrE and AmE \rightarrow \text{regional variation}
5. between periods of time \rightarrow \text{recent variation}
6. between individual speakers, no doubt
1. Differences between languages

En  He’s laughing his ass off.
Du  *Hij lacht zijn gat af.

En  *She sang her lungs out of her body.
Du  Ze zong haar longen uit haar lijf.

En  *That boy runs him(self) the balls off of the body.
Du  Die jongen rent zich de ballen van het lijf.

En  *I’m laughing my(self) a hunch.
Du  Ik lach me een bult. (intensifying double object construction)
2. Differences between verbs (and choice of body part noun)

Jackendoff (2002a: 86): “the choice of verb seems totally open, whereas by contrast, the choice of NP is totally fixed”.

Jackendoff’s statement is not accurate:
- more nouns than just *head, heart, ass* and *butt*
  - but
    - there are only so many different body parts
    - not all of them are used
- the choice of *verb* is not unconstrained
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3. Differences between register varieties

- Spoken
- Fiction
- Magazine
- Newspaper
- Academic

pmw

Am.E
Br.E.
4. Differences between regional varieties

![Bar chart showing differences between BrE and AmE usage of head and ass/arse/butt.](image)
5. Differences between periods of time
Conclusions

• The Body Part *Off/Out Construction* varies a lot
  • Register variation
    obviously more infml than fml
    • strong affective value
    • common in fictional writing, more so than in other genres (even than in spoken subcorpus)
  • Regional variation
    AmE especially *ass/butt*, BrE especially *head*
  • Recent variation
    in recent decades, the BPOC has increased (in printed books)
    • but only in AmE
    • and most notably for the *V one’s ass off* subconstruction

• OK, nice. But so what?
Conclusions

Can the BPOC help to give us an answer to one of the Big Questions?

What is language?
• Does it exist in the brain/mind?
• Does it exist in the community?

What is linguistics?
• a cognitive science?
• one of the social sciences?

Yes it can, and the answer is...
Conclusions

... language is both.

Yes, but why?

Language involves knowledge of units stored in the brain/mind. These units are stored precisely to the extent that they are conventional in a given community in a certain area, in a certain era.

Thank you!