



A notable aspect of *how about S* is that under the traditional grammatical stance, the combination of the preposition *about* followed by a sentence is, in general, syntactically anomalous (Quirk, et al., 1985: 658f.). Furthermore, examination of corpora indicates that other categories considered to be syntactically incompatible with *about* have also increasingly been combined with *how about* in recent decades.

This paper examines the recent expansion of these irregular complements of *how about* and argues that “chunking,” as defined by Bybee (2007; 2010), has played an important role in the growing popularity of *how about S* as well as other types of complements incompatible with *about*.

Chunking, according to Bybee (2010), is the linguistic process where adjacent morphemes or words that are repeatedly used together come, in time, to be stored and accessed as single units or chunks. Under this view, compounds, idioms, constructions and even constituent structures are units “chunked” through repetition: chunking is the driving force in their creation. Because chunks are stored/accessed as wholes, they become autonomous, and their compositionality and/or internal structures may be more or less lost.

Let us briefly examine this chunking process with the formation of the complex preposition (CP) *in spite of*, as explained by Bybee (2010: 138–146). While the noun *spite* in this CP was employed with the meaning of “contempt or defiance,” the CP remained compositional because the relation between this noun and other noun instances was transparent. However, as the CP later developed the counter forces and concessive meanings, as found in *in spite of all opposition*, the noun grew remote from other instances. The repetitive use with these meanings led to the decategorization of the noun; the entire phrase became more autonomous, and is now largely accessed as a single unit (see also Hoffmann, 2005, chap. 3) or as a chunk. Chunking also plays an important role in Maeda’s (2019) analysis in which he argues that “half-gerunds” such as *be busy Ving* and *have trouble Ving* have developed from their gerundial counterparts with the preposition *in* through constructionalization.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 examines the spread of *how about S* in two corpora from the BYU suite. Section 3 illustrates that in the *how about* construction, there are other types of anomalous syntactic combinations that have been increasing in recent decades. Section 4 outlines Bybee’s (2007; 2010) notion of chunking and argues that advanced chunking, together with the entrenchment of

frequent instances as independent chunks, is responsible for the expansion of the complement types for *how about*. Section 5 offers a brief summary.

## 2. The spread of *how about S*

This section examines the spread of *how about S* in different text genres, both in recent decades and in a somewhat longer diachronic span in some detail because this aspect is the most conspicuous in the recent complement expansion of *how about*. To examine this spread, we address the rivalry between the *how about S* and *how about (Acc/Poss/NP) Ving* constructions as they both contain predication and in this sense are comparable.<sup>2</sup> We do not consider the *how about if* construction in relation to this rivalry because this construction is sometimes used to ask what should be done if something happens.

Let us first look at the recent spread of *how about S* in different text genres in COCA (last accessed September 2019). Figures 1a to 1c show the rivalry between *how about (Acc/Poss/NP) Ving* and *how about S* in newspapers (Figure 1a), spoken English (Figure 1b), and works of fiction (Figure 1c) in three five-year periods, namely, 1990–94, 2000–04, and 2010–14, respectively. Each figure shows the ratio of *how about (Acc/Poss/NP) Ving* to *how about S* in every ten-year span. The normalized frequencies (per million words (pmw)) are provided on each bar. The search strings employed for *how about (Acc/Poss/NP) Ving* are “how about (\*) \_v?g\*” ((\*) indicates with or without one intervening word hereafter), which retrieved such patterns as *how about + pronoun/just Ving* as well, and “how about \_pp\* \* \_v?g\*” (\_pp\* represents any personal pronoun), which returned one relevant attestation. The strings of “how about \_p\* (\*) \_vv0\*” (\_p\* represents any pronoun and \_vv0\* base forms of any verb) were employed for the retrieval of the *how about S* attestations.<sup>3</sup> As may be expected, there are a few examples that are not captured by these queries. However, a manual checking of the same queries for all the complement types of *how about* in the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA) (see Section 3) revealed that the vast majority of the relevant attestations were, in fact, covered by these queries. Such irrelevant attestations as *How about bullfighting*, for instance, were manually excluded from the results.

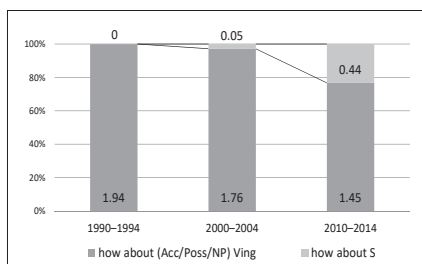


Figure 1a: The rivalry between *how about (Acc/Poss/NP) Ving* and *how about S* [COCA, Newspapers]

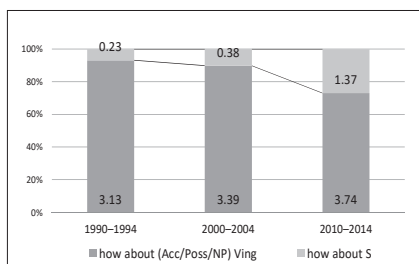


Figure 1b: The rivalry between *how about (Acc/Poss/NP) Ving* and *how about S* [COCA, Spoken]

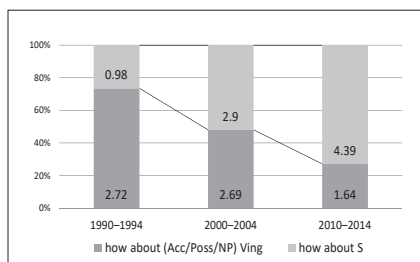


Figure 1c: The rivalry between *how about (Acc/Poss/NP) Ving* and *how about S* [COCA, Fiction]

While it is apparent that the proportion of *how about S* as compared to *how about (Acc/Poss/NP) Ving* has been more or less increasing across text genres, its spread in the Fiction genre is remarkable: in just two decades, the ratio of the two constructions has almost been reversed. While the informality of conversation is a matter of degree, virtually all attestations in the Fiction genre are deemed to belong to fictional casual conversation, which seems to be the more commonly favored register of *how about S*. At first glance, its relative scarcity in the Spoken genre may be surprising. However, this is probably due to the fact that the Spoken section of COCA comprises public broadcasts such as news broadcasts/analyses, talk shows, and interviews with politicians and celebrities. It is perhaps to be expected that these talks tend to be more formal than the casual conversations which many conversations in works of fiction try to depict.

What has been the trajectory of informal spoken English? Although we could not find a corpus of authentic daily conversation in American English large enough to serve

our purposes, the Movie Corpus provided a wealth of examples. This corpus also contains data from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Figure 2 is the result of the analysis of the attestations in American movies in the Movie Corpus (last accessed March 2020). Attestations in Canadian movies and those jointly produced with the USA are manually excluded. The normalized frequencies (pmw) of occurrences are shown. Because a larger number of attestations of *how about Acc/Poss Ving* were found, the data are provided separately. The queries were performed with the basic patterns of “how about \_v?g\*” for *how about Ving*, “how about \_p\* \_v?g\*” and “how about \_app\* \_v?g\*” (\_app\* represents possessive personal pronouns) for *how about Acc/Poss Ving*, and “how about \_p\* \_vv0\*” for *how about S*.

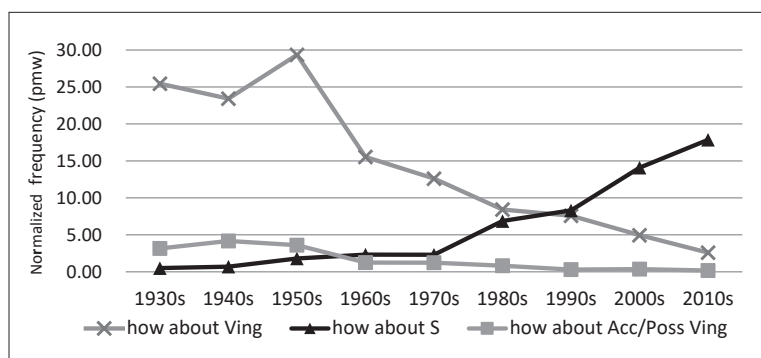


Figure 2: The rivalry among 3 constructions  
[The Movie Corpus, American movies only]

An examination of the diachronic rivalry of the three constructions reveals some interesting points. The frequency of *how about S* started increasing in the 1980s and soon surpassed that of the declining *how about Ving*. In the Movie Corpus, the use of *how about S* (17.87) is nearly seven times more frequent than the use of *how about Ving* (2.58), which represents a much wider gap than we saw in the Fiction section of COCA (see Figure 1c). Therefore, it seems reasonable to consider that in informal conversation, *how about S* is now far more likely to be employed than *how about Ving*. It can also be seen that until the 1950s, *how about Acc/Poss Ving* was a more common choice than *how about S*, although it is now rare in informal English.

### 3. Other syntactically unusual complements of *how about*

The previous section discussed the recent spread of *how about S* in different text genres in American English. One unusual aspect of this construction, however, is that it has the anomalous syntactic combination of the preposition *about* followed by a sentence (see Section 1). Taylor (2012) offers *what about* as an example of “syntactic or constructional idioms,” which have unusual internal syntactic structures. He points out that *what about* is followed by such various items as “noun phrases, prepositional phrases, *Ving* phrases, and certain kinds of subordinated clauses (. . . *if, when, where, before, and after, for example. . .*)” (p. 87). *How about* is also followed by these items. Although Taylor does not mention this, it would also be syntactically unusual for some of these items, that is, PPs and adverbial subordinate clauses, to follow the preposition *about*. Examples of *how about* followed by categories that are considered to be syntactically unusual are provided from COHA in (2):

- (2) a. **How about if** I come back and get you at about one-thirty?  
 [*how about* + *if*-clause]<sup>4</sup> (COHA, Fiction, 1990s)
- b. “That’s putty well, when a man hes any worldly goods” said Sam; “but **how about when** he hesn’t?” [*how about* + *when*-clause] (COHA, Fiction, 1860s)
- c. ISABEL: There’s only one guy for her. IAN: **How about for** you?  
 [*how about* + PP] (COHA, Fiction, 2000s)
- d. [After watching a movie] Linda said, “Now, wasn’t that [i.e., movie] cute?” “**How about silly,**” I said. “That’s almost like cute.” [*how about* + Adjective] (COHA, Fiction, 1980s)
- e. “Can we make it earlier? I have to work then.” . . . “No.” . . . “**How about later?**” “No.” [*how about* + Adverb] (COHA, Fiction, 2000s)
- f. “You don’t say something?” “Like what?” I asked reluctantly. She shrugged, still smiling. “**How about thank you?**” [*how about* + adverbial formulaic expression] (COHA, Fiction, 2000s)

In this section, we first briefly examine COCA to confirm that the combinations of *about* + PP are generally unusual. We do not discuss the irregularities of the other combinations exemplified in (2) because they seem to be obvious and do not require

further examination.

It is generally believed that only certain prepositions take PP complements. Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 640), for instance, point out that *from*, *since*, *till/until* “most readily take PP complements,” as exemplified by *He emerged **from under** the bed* or ***until after** six*. The preposition *to*, on the other hand, does not generally take PP complements except in some combinations. Brown and Miller (2016: 176) likewise state that most prepositions do not take PP complements.

Now, we examine the extent to which the abovementioned [P + PP complement] patterns are represented in the Fiction and Spoken sections of COCA (last accessed August 2019). There were more than 3000 occurrences of *from under*, more than 5000 of *from behind*, 420 of *until after*, and 101 of *since before*, excluding those in which *after* in *until after* and *before* in *since before* were used as subordinating conjunctions. Then, with regard to the pattern of [*about* + PP complement], searches were conducted with the string of [*\_n\** *about* *\_i\**] (any noun + *about* + any preposition).<sup>5</sup> No relevant examples were found in the Fiction section, but two possible examples were found in the Spoken section, both of which are shown in (3):

- (3) a. BARBARA–ALTERS (Off-camera) You are very different off stage than on. What’s the difference? JOAN RIVERS (COMEDIENNE) On stage, I say all the things **about in the shower**. (COCA, Spoken, 2010s)
- b. Michael, you criticized me for putting out just one small idea **about after school**. (COCA, Spoken, 1990s)

It can be seen, however, that in (3a), something is omitted in the [P + PP] phrase, such as in *about what I say (or sing) in the shower*. As for (3b), *after school* is not a usual compositional PP but is rather accessed as a single unit, as suggested by the existence of its derived adjectival compound, *after-school* (club). This may make it possible for *about* to take this particular PP. Thus, it seems that there is something special even with these rare attestations.

As we have confirmed that it is syntactically unusual for *about* to be followed by PPs, Table 1 is provided to show all the attestations of *how about* in COHA, grouped by their complement types (last accessed December 2019).<sup>6</sup> The category “Others” includes *how about* followed by adjectives, adverbs including *here* and *there*,<sup>7</sup> and other

miscellaneous categories, as in (2f).

Table 1: The distribution of the *how about* attestations according to their complement types [COHA, all text genres]

	1840s	1850s	1860s	1870s	1880s	1890s	1900s	1910s	1920s	1930s	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	Totals
how about NP	8	9	35	49	57	90	134	320	380	396	390	488	505	465	410	504	425	4665
how about (Acc/Poss/NP) Ving	0	0	2	1	3	3	13	27	25	74	79	101	80	66	54	62	58	648
how about <i>wh</i> -interrogative	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	4
how about when	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	2	1	0	1	8	1	0	1	4	20
how about if	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	2	0	8	5	12	15	21	64
how about S	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	5	5	4	16	25	55	111
how about PP	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	7	3	7	5	7	33
Others	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	4	5	5	9	14	15	54
Totals	8	9	38	50	60	93	148	348	408	471	474	603	618	549	509	627	586	5599
Percentages of unusual complements	0.00%	0.00%	2.63%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.68%	0.29%	0.74%	0.21%	1.05%	2.16%	5.34%	3.28%	8.64%	9.57%	17.06%	

\*The total number of occurrences of *how about Acc/Poss/NP Ving* is 85.

The complement types observed can be divided into two groups: those compatible with the preposition *about* as complements, i.e., NPs, Vings and *wh*-interrogatives, and those incompatible or unusual, i.e., adverbial *when/if*-clauses, sentences, PPs and others (shaded instances). The question arises as to how *how about* came to take these apparently contradictory complement types. In the next section, we argue that this was made possible because of the advancement of chunking of *how about*, as proposed by Bybee (2007; 2010), on one hand, and the entrenchment of frequent instances, on the other.

#### 4. Gradual chunking of *how about* and the entrenchment of frequent instances as chunks

As already mentioned in Section 1, chunking is the linguistic process where adjacent morphemes or words that are repeatedly used together come, in time, to be stored/accessed as single units or chunks. “Items that are used together fuse together.” (Bybee, 2007: 316; see also Krug, 1998). As chunks are repeatedly accessed as wholes, they become more autonomous, which is more obvious in the case of chunks formed by phonetic reduction such as *I’m* and *you’ll*; those which underwent semantic/pragmatic shifts such as *in spite of* (see Section 1), the discourse marker *indeed*, or the idiom *spill the beans*; or those in which both of the above processes were involved,



such as in derived words like *disease* and *business*. The compositionality and/or analyzability/internal structure of those chunks are more or less lost (Bybee, 2010, chap. 3).

Bybee (2010) also points out the gradient nature of chunks as follows:

[T]he status of a chunk in memory falls along a continuum. . . . [T]here is a continuum from words that have been experienced together only once and fairly recently, which will constitute a weak chunk whose internal parts are stronger than the whole, to more frequent chunks such as *lend a hand* or *pick and choose* which are easily accessible as wholes while still maintaining connections to their parts. . . . On the high-frequency end of the continuum, chunks such as grammaticalizing phrases or discourse makers do lose their internal structure and the identifiability of their constituent parts[.] (p. 36)

This characterization concerns the synchronic gradient nature of chunks, but it is readily translated into diachronic chunking processes, as can be seen in Bybee's (2010) analysis of *in spite of*, outlined in Section 1. With regard to *how about*, we argue that it has gone through two stages of chunking. Specifically, while almost all instances of *how about* in COHA were either *how about NPs* or *how about Vings* until the middle of the 20th century (see Table 1), *how about* was a "weaker chunk" whose internal parts were still identifiable, corresponding to Bybee's second type of chunks mentioned above. Bybee (2010: 36) points out that since the internal structure of "more frequent chunks" (weaker chunks in our terms) such as *lend a hand* is identifiable, a modifier or an indirect object can be added, as in *lend a helping hand* or *lend me a hand*. It is true that *how about* has been a fixed idiom disallowing modification, but given the fact that virtually all instances were *how about NPs/Vings*, its component parts including the preposition *about* were considered to be still identifiable at this stage.

Then, as *how about* continued to be used repeatedly, its internal structure was gradually blurred and then lost. *How about* was now stored/accessed as a (perhaps adverbial) holistic chunk ("fixed chunk" at this stage hereafter). As a result, *how about* was ready to take S's and other "complements" apparently incompatible with the preposition *about*.<sup>8</sup>

As for the approximate period when *how about* developed from a weaker into a fixed chunk as shown in Table 1, the number of shaded attestations in Table 1 is very

low until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (see also “Percentages of unusual complements” at the bottom of Table 1). While the transition into a fixed chunk was apparently under way during this period, a substantial change occurred in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In narrowing this down, the change in the number of occurrences of *how about Ving* is important because this form is sensitive to the internal structure of *how about* including the preposition *about*. *How about NP*, in this respect, can be regarded as licensed by either a weaker or a fixed chunk: NPs can be syntactically followed by *about*, or they are expected to be semantically compatible with *how about* as a holistic chunk (see the next paragraph for its treatment). In Figure 3, these elements have been considered, and it displays the rivalry between *how about (Acc/Poss/NP) Ving* and the shaded constructions of *how about if*, *how about S*, and combined *how about when/PP/others* in Table 1. The graph is plotted based on the normalized frequency of pmw.

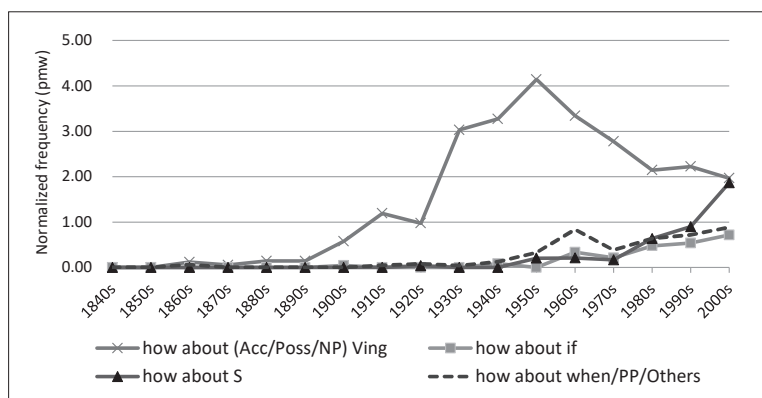


Figure 3: The rivalry between *how about (Acc/Poss/NP) Ving* and shaded constructions in Table 1 [COHA, all text genres]

Taking into account the overall increase in the attestations of three sets of unusual complements, on one hand, and the decrease in those of *how about (Acc/Poss/NP) Ving*, on the other, we assume that it was probably in the 1980s or 1990s that *how about* came to be stored/accessed primarily as a fixed chunk.

This assumption is apparently problematic because even after the 1980s–90s, *how about Ving*, which is supposed to be sensitive to the internal structure of *how*

*about*, remains a dominant pattern. However, it has been pointed out that frequent items such as irregular verb forms are entrenched as they are, resisting analogical leveling (Bybee, 2007: 271). *How about Ving* became so frequent after the 1930s that it is likely that this pattern itself had come to be stored/accessed as a chunk with the open slot of *Ving* by the 1980s. Because of its very high frequency, *how about NP* is also considered to have been stored as an independent chunk with the open slot of NP by the 1980s.<sup>9,10</sup> Thus, the mode of access to *how about Ving* and *how about NP* changed by this time gradually and, maybe, with a certain overlapping period. In contrast, *how about Acc/Poss/NP Ving* has never had a high enough frequency to be stored as an independent chunk (see note in Table 1). It is supposed to be licensed by *how about* as a weaker chunk, for which *how about* as a weaker chunk is still occasionally activated.

Figure 4 summarizes the assumption of the gradual chunking that *how about* has gone through. The darker shades on the bars indicate the major mode of access to *how about* and the lighter ones (extremely) the minor mode of access on the timeline. The two oval items indicate the independently stored chunks with their tentative starting periods shown.

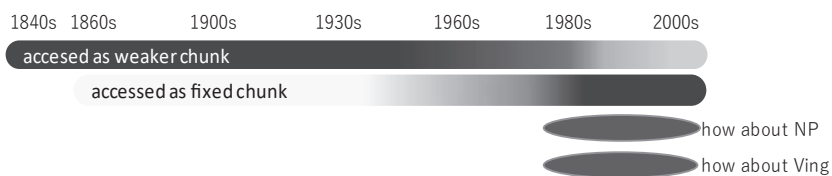


Figure 4: Two stages of the chunking of *how about* and the entrenched independent chunks

Based on Figure 4, *how about* may be accessed as either a weaker or a fixed chunk during the same period, although it is strongly biased to either mode of access. We consider that this synchronic instability in the access mode is natural rather than unusual, considering that language change is, in general, a gradual process.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, we address the issue of *how about* as a fixed chunk because of the loss of its internal structure, erroneously licensing constructions that are in fact (very) rare or virtually impossible as its complements. One such construction type is bare or *to* infinitives.<sup>12</sup> The reason they are (very) rare may be attributed to the existence and saliency of the entrenched independent chunk of *how about Ving*: when people

combine a VP element with *how about*, this chunk is activated—thus, infinitive patterns are basically blocked. Another complement is *for-to* infinitives. It is noticed, however, that this construction is functionally parallel with *how about S* in that they both comprise the subject and its predicate; therefore, they come into rivalry. Evidently, the subject + base verb form of *how about S* is much simpler and easier to employ than *for-to* infinitives, which is probably the reason the latter construction is avoided.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper has examined the spread of *how about S* and other categories that are apparently at odds with the complements of *about* in American English, and we have argued that the advanced chunking and the entrenchment of frequent instances as independent chunks are responsible for the expansion of its complement types in recent decades.<sup>13</sup>

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank three anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions and detailed comments on earlier versions of this paper. Needless to say, all remaining inadequacies are my own.

## Notes

1. Needless to say, *how about Ving* is also occasionally used to ask about another aspect of what is being talked about (The *Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners*, s.v. *how*); *how about S*, however, is very rarely employed in this sense (Denawa, 2017).
2. Note that *how about NP Ving* is rare. Moreover, this paper considers the (*Acc/Poss/NP*) *Ving* complement of *how about* (at least as a “weaker chunk” (see Section 4)) a gerund, which is indicated by the fact that the subject may be in the possessive case (Huddleston and Pullum, 2002: 1220).
3. Note that the subject of *how about S* is generally limited to personal pronouns.
4. Although *how about if* may be now established as an autonomous idiom, it is considered that originally the adverbial conditional *if*-clauses were compositionally combined with *how about* to form this idiom.
5. These searches were performed because those with [<sub>v</sub>\* about <sub>i</sub>\*] returned too many occurrences to check.

6. Identical attestations that occur more than once are counted as one. A handful of attestations of false starts, which are abandoned halfway in fictional conversations, are excluded from the table.
7. Such temporal words/phrases as *tomorrow*, *today*, *now*, (*this/next*) *Sunday*, and *this afternoon* are not counted as adverbs but as NPs in Table 1. This is because they can stand as the subjects of copula sentences, as in *Tomorrow/Today/Next Sunday is my birthday*, and they may be employed as NPs in the *how about* construction.
8. Regarding the relation between the chunking of *how about* and its status as an idiom, we assume that *how about* was already established as an idiom or a weaker chunk when it was first attested in COHA because it had already developed its conventionalized meanings with its fixed, syntactically irregular form. However, this idiomatic phrase has, in our view, further lost its internal structure and developed into a fixed chunk; in other words, its idiomaticity has increased.
9. It is considered that chunks may contain open slots of *Ving* as exemplified by such idioms or constructions as *look forward to Ving* and *there is no Ving*; these *Vings* are presumably parts of chunks stored as wholes. As for the open NP slot, it is contained, for instance, in the *what's X doing Y* construction (Kay and Fillmore, 1999) and the resultative *drive X crazy* construction (Bybee, 2010).
10. It is quite possible that *how about NP*, due to its high frequency, has been stored as a chunk since an earlier period. However, as there is no available evidence that suggests a particular period, this paper assumes that it has been entrenched as an independent chunk by the 1980s.
11. An anonymous reviewer highlighted the gap between the chunking of *in spite of* and that of *how about* suggested in this paper: while the former chunking largely resulted in the change in the kind of the NP complements of the CP and its semantic change, the latter has led to a categorical shift when there was no semantic change in *how about*. While this is an important point to consider, we just want to emphasize here that they differ in that the chunking of *in spite of* results in the same category as *of* but that of *how about* inevitably ends up in a different, perhaps adverbial, element.
12. I thank the anonymous reviewer who reminded me of this point.
13. This line of argument is considered to fare well with the complement expansion of idiomatic *far from* as revealed in Akimoto's (2000) study.

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