CONSTRUCTION GRAMMAR: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

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Construction grammar is one of the more recent semantics-based theories of grammar, as opposed to syntax-centered generative theories initiated by Chomsky. Construction grammar is related to a very powerful, influential, and inspiring semantics-based grammatical theory called cognitive grammar.

Let us look at some basic principles shared between cognitive and construction grammars (Lakoff 1987; Langacker 1991, 1999; Goldberg 1992, 1995), which I am going to illustrate as relevant with examples related to the English ditransitive (or double object) construction and also point out the occasional dividing lines between the two.

A. There is no clear division between the grammar (structures) and the lexicon (meaningful words to plug into structures), rather there is a continuum between them. As Lakoff (1987:465) puts it: "…just about all other theories assume that there is a clear division between the grammar and the lexicon, with the grammar providing structures and the lexicon providing meaningful words to plug into grammatical structures. We will see that such a clear division is problematic, and that there is more likely a continuum between the grammar and the lexicon."

B. The meaning of a grammatical construction cannot be directly computed from the meanings of its parts but is only motivated by them (holistic approach). "[O]ther theories of grammar assume some form of atomism, namely, that the meaning of a grammatical construction is a computable function of the meanings of its parts. We will argue instead that grammatical constructions in general are *holistic*, that is, that the meaning of the whole construction is motivated by the meanings of the parts, but is not computable from them." (ibid.)

C. Syntactic categories and grammatical relations have a radial structure: there is a prototypical center that is predictable on semantic grounds, and there are non-central members which are not predictable on a semantic basis but which are semantically or pragmatically motivated (ibid.). To give an example of this, in the case of the English dative or ditransitive or two object construction, the prototype is *give: The family gave him a gold watch for his birthday.* It describes a situation in which three obligatory participants (the referents of the expressions underlined) are involved and physical transfer of an object implies transfer of property. A non-central member of this construction is, e.g., *tell: He told her the good news about his promotion.* Again, it describes a situation with three obligatory

participants and also reveals the central role of metaphorical extension in language (i.e., that we understand and experience one thing in terms of another). The metaphor that licenses the participation of *tell* in the construction is the IDEAS ARE OBJECTS metaphor, according to which ideas can be packed, sent in the communication channel, received, unpacked, and owned:

> (1) *He got the ideas across to Jo.*
> *Jo received the information from Sam.*

Another non-central member is represented by *bake: His wife baked him a chocolate cake for his birthday.* It describes a situation with two obligatory participants, the referents of the underlined expressions. The metaphor that licenses the participation of *bake* in the construction is ACTS THAT ARE PERFORMED FOR THE BENEFIT OF A PERSON ARE OBJECTS WHICH ARE GIVEN TO THAT PERSON.

D. The same objectively existing situation can be given a different construal (cognitive representation) by the conceptualiser (generally the speaker), which has crucial consequences for grammatical structure as it determines the assignment of functional roles:

> (2) a) *The family gave Jack a gold watch for his birthday.*
> b) *The family gave a gold watch to Jack for his birthday.*

In the case of (2)a), the focus is on the transferred object that is given to Jack and the state arising from the transfer is highlighted (when he comes into the possession of the watch)—in this sense, the proximity of the NPs *Jack* and *a gold watch* is iconic.

In the case of (2)b), the focus is on the recipient *Jack*, and the path on which the gold watch moves is put into the foreground and thus its route is highlighted.

In generative grammar, a) and b) are semantically equivalent, and it is assumed that one is derived from the other with the help of a movement. This raises the question which is the first version generated in the mind (D-structure) and which is secondary. In order to give an answer, researchers turned to first language acquisition. Data, however, testified (Gropen et al., 1989) that the double object and the prepositional constructions appear roughly at the same time in children's speech, with neither of them preceding the other, thus they provide no evidence for the postulated asymmetry.

On the other hand, in cognitive grammar, a) and b) are held to be semantically different, and according to construction grammar, a) and b) are semantically identical but pragmatically different. This reveals a dividing-point between cognitive and construction grammars: cognitive grammar does not accept the division of semantics and pragmatics on the grounds that language does not exist independently of context, which means that cognitive grammar has no belief in the possibility of investigating the ideal speaker's competence. Construction grammar separates semantics and pragmatics (and thus separates the propositional content of utterances from their thematic meaning).

E. Knowledge is organized in our mind in the form of idealized cognitive models (describing a situation, its participants, and the relationships that hold between them), the structured form of which is the scenario, consisting of a sequence of events with components provided by kinesthetic image schemas (notions such as source-path-goal, container-

content, center-periphery, linkage, force, balance, etc., originating from and grounded in our everyday bodily experience and playing an essential role in structuring our mental world):

The scenario for the ditransitive construction is:

1. A volitional human agent transfers a concrete or abstract entity to a human recipient.
2. The transfer is successful as it is iconically implied by the juxtaposition of the verb and the NP denoting the human recipient.
3. The recipient has the object in his possession or at his disposal.

(3) ? *She gave him the hat, but he didn't take it.*

In view of the scenario above, this utterance is infelicitous (which is indicated by the question mark) because in spite of the ditransitive construction in it, it implies an unsuccessful transfer.

The scenario for the prepositional construction is:

1. An animate (human) agent volitionally transfers a concrete object (landmark) to an animate recipient on a path.
2. The purpose of the transfer is that the recipient will possess or utilize the object.
3. There is an expectation that the object will get to the recipient.
4. It is possible that the object will not be transferred to the recipient because there may be "obstacles" on the path.

(4) *She gave the hat to him, but he didn't take it.*

In contrast to (3), this utterance is felicitous on the basis of item 4 in the scenario.

F. Metaphor is a fundamental aspect of our mental activities. Cognitive domains are metaphorically structured: a target domain is structured and understood with reference to another, more basic source domain. (See also C above.)

In the case of the English ditransitive, the source domain is the caused-motion construction, whereas the target domain is the transfer-caused-motion construction as is illustrated by the following utterances describing physical movement resulting in the referent of the subject coming into or losing possession.

(5) *They took his house away from him.*
He lost his house.
Suddenly several thousand dollars came into his possession.

G. Constructions are independent entities in grammar: if one construction is conventionalized, it becomes a pattern that might be extended to other elements of vocabulary. Simple clause constructions are associated directly with semantic structures which reflect scenes basic to human experience. The ditransitive construction came into being in connection with verbs like *give* (three-place predicate) and attracted other classes of verbs on the

basis of semantic motivation. The transfer of objects from human to human is a basic experience: human society is based on it.

H. The polysemy of lexical items and constructions is an essential feature of language (otherwise, the finite human brain would not be able to describe the infinite world). In the ditransitive construction, there appear verbs which refer to the transfer of concrete physical objects, but also messages *(Fax me your answer)* or artistic experiences *(Sing me a love song)* and the transfer itself may be actual or intended.

I. The lexical item contains the grammatical environments in which it may occur.

Generative theories have a problem in accounting for the appearance of verbs representing two-place predicates (*Jill baked Jack a cake.*) in the ditransitive structure. In order to give an explanation for this and comply, at the same time, with the Projection Principle, they have to postulate unlikely verb senses such as *X bakes Z intending Y to have it*, which would appear only in this structure.

For this problem, construction grammar offers a more plausible solution: the ditransitive construction is associated with agent, patient, and recipient roles, and verbs of creation like *bake* are associated with the construction itself.

To sum up, while several basic principles are shared by cognitive and construction grammars (continuum between grammar and lexicon, a holistic approach, the radial structure of syntactic categories, the idea of cognitive construal, the existence of idealized cognitive models, the fundamental role of metaphor in language, polysemy of lexical items and constructions), a basic difference is that whereas cognitive grammar does not subscribe to the division of semantics and pragmatics, construction grammar separates these two levels in the investigation of linguistic facts.

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