

A Grand Tour of English Grammatical Constructions

Martin Hilpert, *Construction Grammar and its Application to English*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014. Pp. xii + 220. Paperback £19.99, ISBN 978-0-7486-7585-2

Reviewed by Jacqueline Laws, University of Reading

This introductory text successfully achieves its ambitious goal of demonstrating how the Construction Grammar framework can be applied in a systematic fashion to a range of sub-disciplines within Linguistics. Construction Grammar (CG) is a unified theory of knowledge of language modelled on knowledge of constructions. Each chapter illustrates the application of CG to a different sub-discipline, from those that are more well-established in the literature, such as argument structure and information packaging, to areas that have been addressed in depth more recently from this perspective, such as morphology, language variation and language change.

Books in this series (Edinburgh Textbooks on the English Language – Advanced) are aimed at intermediate and advanced students and, appropriately, each chapter opens with a highly accessible overview of the essential concepts the reader needs to be familiar with in order to appreciate the breadth and depth of issues addressed. At all stages in the development of the argument, numerous illustrative examples are provided as well as references to relevant studies that assist the researcher in exploring the phenomena under consideration in greater depth.

The opening chapter provides an introduction to CG, illustrating the key principle of this theoretical framework: a speaker's knowledge of language consists of form-meaning pairings that are stored in an inter-related network of constructions, the 'constructicon' (Fillmore, 1988), referred to in this volume as the 'construct-i-con' after Goldberg (2003:219). The main sections include what is a construction and what is not, how to define a construction, the difference between constructs and constructions, and a set of useful strategies to employ to identify them.

In the second chapter, the concepts of syntactic argument structure (valency), event structure and thematic roles are introduced and clearly explained. The main valency-increasing constructions, the Ditransitive, the Caused Motion and the Way constructions are discussed in sufficient detail for the reader to extract the key issues and form a solid grounding for exploring the effects in greater depth elsewhere. The valency-decreasing constructions covered are the familiar Passive and Imperative constructions, and the less well known Null Instantiation construction, one example of which is 'labelese', as in: *contains nuts* and *made in Italy*. In each case, very clear examples are provided to show semantic idiosyncrasies, constraints and collocational preferences of the various constructions. The chapter concludes with a discussion on the importance of analysing syntactic alternations in their own right, rather than in terms of the grammatical relations that link the pairs.

At a timely position after two introductory chapters that set the scene with essential concepts and terminology, the third chapter addresses more theoretical issues, specifically the nature of the construct-i-con and what may be stored in it. The structure of the construct-i-con is discussed in terms of Inheritance, the types of links that relate higher and lower level constructions: Instance, Polysemy, Metaphorical and Subpart links. The chapter concludes with a discussion on redundancy of information in the construct-i-con: the more elegant and economical 'complete inheritance' approach proposes that linguistic information is stored only once, whereas the opposing view is that this information is represented redundantly across all constructions that require it. Studies from corpora and



JACQUELINE LAWS is Associate Professor of Linguistics in the Department of English Language & Applied Linguistics at the University of Reading. She lectures in grammar at all undergraduate and postgraduate levels and has also lectured in first language acquisition and theoretical syntax. Her main research interests include English derivational morphology, corpus linguistics, argument structure in English, Italian and Mandarin, and motion event cognition. Email: j.v.laws@reading.ac.uk

psycholinguistic research are presented which provide some convincing evidence to support the latter stance.

Chapter 4 addresses the relatively recent application of CG to morphology; the work of Booij (2010, 2013) is reviewed with clear examples of how CG can account for English inflectional patterns and derivational processes. An interesting array of derivational constructions is exemplified including affixation, BLEND constructions, such as *motel*, and compounding. In relation to the last of these, it is posited that a generalised ENDOCENTRIC COMPOUND construction connects via instantiation links to multiple compounding construction types in English, from the straightforward N-N COMPOUND construction (*limestone*) to more complex types such as the PHRASAL COMPOUND construction (*over-the-counter drug*). A comprehensive treatment of the complex phenomenon of morphological productivity is presented: it is demonstrated how corpus analysis can provide the means for determining the strength of morphological constructions stored as nodes in the construct-i-con. The second half of the chapter considers some knotty theoretical and empirical issues that have been documented in the derivation literature, the most well known of these being the affix ordering phenomenon; the contribution of the level-ordering hypothesis to explaining affix ordering patterns is provided, with counter-arguments. Hilpert then illustrates how the complexity-based ordering hypothesis (Hay, 2002 and Hay & Plag, 2004) can account for the relationship between productivity and the parsability of complex words, and how the principles of this psycholinguistically-motivated approach are consonant with the CG approach.

The application of CG to Information Packaging is the topic of Chapter 5. As is typical of each topic covered in this volume, the chapter opens with a very clear introduction to the area, in this case principally the work of Lambrecht (1994, 2001). The Information Packaging constructions that speakers select reveal their assumptions about the hearer's knowledge of what information is shared and what is not. The basic concepts of pragmatic presupposition, pragmatic assertion, topic, focus and the relationships among them are explained through accessible examples and a transparent analytical process. The main section illustrates Lambrecht's analysis of three variants of the cleft construction, the *WH-CLEFT*, the *IT-CLEFT* and the Reverse *WH-CLEFT* constructions, all of which convey the same underlying proposition; the pragmatic and morphosyntactic factors that determine the speaker's choice of construction as a function of context are clearly illustrated. Similarly well-exemplified comparative analyses are presented for LEFT/RIGHT DISLOCATION constructions and other closely-related information structures. This comprehensive,

dense but thoroughly accessible chapter concludes with an information packaging account of the island constraint phenomenon.

Chapter 6 presents empirical evidence for the assumptions that underlie the CG approach by providing results from psycholinguistic studies that have explored language comprehension and production; this is achieved very effectively. The results of a series of studies are reported that lend stronger support to the notion that abstract, lexical-independent, form-meaning pairs are accessed in language comprehension, than to the proposal that sentence meaning is predominantly derived from verb meaning, i.e., the verb-centred view. Convincing evidence is presented that knowledge of constructions influences the processes involved in unacceptability judgements and incidental verbal memory tasks. The second part of this chapter describes the results of studies that demonstrate how the CG approach can predict language production phenomena, such as reduction effects in speech, syntactic priming effects, construction-specific preferences and sentence completion effects.

The chapter on CG and first language acquisition compares predictions made by the rule-based account (the continuity hypothesis) with those derived from the item-based learning (CG) approach. The former proposes that children's representations of syntactic rules and categories are adult-like. By contrast, the latter proposes a piecemeal process of acquisition during which proto-structures (pivot schemas) develop through generalisations to form a network (construct-i-con) of increasingly complex abstract constructions. Empirical studies reveal that children are less creative in their production of novel forms than is commonly assumed, and that these novel productions often deviate from the target form. These findings challenge the view embodied by the continuity hypothesis which would predict that, once acquired, a syntactic rule would produce abundant and reliable output. Instead, the evidence appears to support the item-based learning approach: the acquisition process proceeds cautiously, bit-by-bit, so that individual parts of the construction are tested out in different contexts to develop increasingly abstract, inter-related representations.

In the final content chapter, Hilpert discusses the significance of language variation and change from the CG perspective and explains that recent interest in these areas has emerged from the more well-established empirical work in quantitative sociolinguistics. Constructions, at word, clause and sentence level, are viewed in terms of many-to-many mappings between sets of related forms and meanings. The examples provided, such as the polysemous *S-GENITIVE*, the *DATIVE* alternation and the variant forms of the *RELATIVE CLAUSE* construction, demonstrate how

constructional variation is part and parcel of the linguistic knowledge that speakers use to distinguish between viable and non-viable forms of language. Furthermore, this knowledge of a language, English in this case, is not invariant: corpus analyses of varieties of English spoken in different parts of the world reveal that although there is commonality in the pragmatic interpretation of alternations, differences can be observed in the relative strength of underlying factors that constrain the use of the construction in different contexts. In the final section Hilpert focuses on language variation over time, and includes examples that illustrate changes in form, function, spread and frequency characteristics both within and across communities.

In conclusion, this is a highly accessible introduction to CG, presented in a refreshingly transparent and engaging fashion. This very slim volume provides more than just the bare essentials of CG; the breadth and depth of coverage are to be applauded and the text forms an excellent primer for the student to pursue a more extensive treatment of each topic in *The Oxford Handbook of Construction Grammar* (Hoffmann & Trousdale, 2013). Hilpert's text is an extremely valuable resource for students and lecturers alike. The Study Questions included at the end of each chapter present the 'student' reader with a useful mechanism for consolidating the information they will have gleaned from the content, and they provide the 'lecturer' reader with some interesting ideas for essay question titles. The section on further reading for each

chapter also guides dissertation students in their literature search towards inter-related, up-to-date studies in that area. This volume will definitely be recommended to my advanced undergraduate and postgraduate students. The lecture videos that accompany this volume are also highly recommended.

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