

Constructing a construction-based grammar

This paper explores the challenges and advantages of basing a grammatical description on the framework of Construction Grammar; the case study is a grammatical description in progress of an Australian language with flexible constituent order.

In Construction Grammar, language is viewed as a repertoire of patterns (constructions) in which formal and semantic aspects are paired in conventionalized, non-compositional ways (for overviews, see Croft 2001 and Fried & Östman 2004). This approach is highly compatible with a typological-functional approach to language description: in principle, constructions can be entirely language-specific, but aspects of form and meaning pairing can also be seen as cross-linguistically recurring (and in that case, presumably motivated by principles such as iconicity). Arguably, a construction-based theoretical framework is also very well compatible with standard grammaticographic practice, in terms of a systematic description of constructions at different levels (word, phrase, clause, complex sentence) and the ways in which constructions at a lower level embed into those at a higher level.

The focus in this paper is on prosodic constructions, i.e. constructions that have prosodic characteristics as an integral part of their formal makeup (cf. e.g. Michaelis and Lambrecht 1996, Gras & Elvira-García 2021). In recent years it has become common practice to incorporate prosodic information in grammatical descriptions (e.g. Hellwig 2019: 48-63). The advantage of a construction-based approach to phenomena where prosody conveys crucial distinctions – in particular, phenomena related to information structure such as topic-comment partition, right-dislocation, and prosodic focus marking – is that it allows for an account of how such prosodic constructions are superimposed onto and potentially interact with constituent order and argument structure constructions (Kuningas & Leino 2006; Leino 2013: 341). Remaining challenges include the formulation of an abstract meaning associated with a prosodic construction and the inclusion of probabilistic information such as the preference for (initial) topic constituents to be agents and the higher likelihood of using an absolutive rather than an ergative case-marking construction for such topical agents.

References

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