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### CONSTRUCTION PRAGMATICS: A BRIEF SKETCH

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**Abstract:** Construction grammar is a theory of linguistic knowledge as well as a branch of cognitive linguistics, which claims that constructions are basic units of language, i.e., form-meaning pairings, and knowledge of language is a large inventory of constructions. But unfortunately, the pragmatic aspects of constructions are not investigated quite enough. The paper, based on construction grammar and pragmatics, spells out the pragmatic issues of constructions, and points out that a new discipline "construction pragmatics" needs to be established.

**Key words:** cognitive linguistics, construction, construction grammar, construction pragmatics.

#### 1. Introduction

Construction grammar is an important component of cognitive linguistics, which has made fruitful achievements in recent years. Construction grammar holds that there is no strict boundary between semantics and pragmatics, as Goldberg states:

*"Construction grammarians also share an interest in accounting for the conditions under which a given construction can be used felicitously, since this is taken to be part of a speakers' competence or knowledge of language; from this interest stems the conviction that subtle semantic and pragmatic factors are crucial to understanding the constraints on grammatical Constructions" (1995: 6).*

But from the current state of research on construction grammar, it is still mainly concerned with syntactic and semantic issues, with little or no attention to the

pragmatic aspects of constructions, and pragmatics touches little on issues of constructions as well. Therefore, it makes good sense to combine the study of constructions with pragmatic studies, examining both the form and meaning of constructions as well as the pragmatic aspects of constructions. The purpose of the paper is to establish a new discipline "construction pragmatics" by combining construction grammar with pragmatics. First of all, it explains construction and construction grammar in terms of some Chinese and English examples, then it accounts for the relationship between construction and pragmatics, and finally it explicates why it is necessary to have such a discipline.

## **2. Construction and construction grammar**

The term "construction" has existed since the period of structuralist linguistics, during which it was referred to as the general structure of language, equivalent to "structure". *A Student's Dictionary of Language and Linguistics*, for example, defines construction as "any grammatical structure which appears systematically in some language or any particular instance of it" (Trask 1997: 53). *The Oxford Dictionary of English Grammar* defines construction as "A conventional pairing of a particular syntactic structure or pattern with a meaning. The term is not always defined precisely, and different concatenations of linguistic elements can be said to qualify as constructions" (Aarts et al. 2014: 93). Bloomfield also says: "Whenever two (or, rarely, more) forms are spoken together, as constituents of a complex form, the grammatical features by which they are combined, make up a construction" (1933: 177). Thus, the grammatical features of the form *duchess* combined by "duke" and "-ess" constitute a construction, or the grammatical features of the form "poor John ran away" combined by "poor John" and "ran away" also constitute a construction. This view is, of course, influenced by atomism, componentialism, and reductionism in philosophy. However, this view is clearly inappropriate for the analysis of idioms in language. For idioms have their own characteristics in at least two aspects: (1) their meanings cannot be predicted exclusively on the basis of the words that they consist of, that is, it is difficult for us to

determine the meaning of an idiom based on the meanings of the composite words in the idiom; (2) they may sometimes even violate the rules of syntactic combination. For example, it is difficult to judge the meaning of the following Chinese (Ch.) and English (Eng.) idioms by the meanings of their constituent words.

- (1) a. Ch. 破釜沉舟 (Eng. burn one's boats), Ch. 刻舟求剑 (Eng. disregarding the changing circumstances), Ch. 朝秦暮楚 (Eng. change one's loyalty frequently), Ch. 画蛇添足 (Eng. gild the lily), Ch. 东山再起 (Eng. stage a comeback), Ch. 声色犬马 (Eng. luxury enjoyment)
- b. call it a day, have ants in one's pants, pull smb's leg, warm the bench

The following idioms even violate the rules of syntactic combination.

- (2) a. Ch. 非不为也，是不能也 (Eng. Neither do I, nor can I)
- b. no can do, year in year out, trip the light fantastic, by and large, take sick

Obviously, linguistic phenomena such as Examples 1 and 2 pose problems and challenges for the study of componential grammar. First, the semantics of most of the idioms here are irreducible and cannot be broken down into different units based on the constituent words. Thus, these idioms seem to be more like lexical items, the pairs of forms and meanings. Second, the idioms in Example 2 do not follow the general rules of grammar. From a componential point of view, all languages have such complex structures. It is because of these unique idioms that such complex structures hold a special status.

In addition to the idioms, a large number of sentence patterns have their own syntactic rules, such as the following sentences in English:

- (3) a. The thing is they speak like that, the question is why.

- b. There was a farmer had a dog.
- c. Go help your mother.
- d. What, me worry?

What is interesting is that some native speakers think that these sentences are unacceptable, but others think that they are acceptable and use them.

In addition to the above linguistic phenomena, sometimes the syntax itself is self-consistent. Both componentialism and reductionism argue that words have fixed meanings. The problem, however, is that words in a complex structure are semantically self-consistent with each other and will gain specific construal in the actual context in which they are used. For example,

- (4) a. My book was broken.
  - b. My pen was broken.
  - c. My car broke down.
  
- (5) a. The boys were swimming in the sea.
  - b. The dog was swimming in the sea.
  - c. The fish was swimming in the sea.

In Examples 4a, 4b, and 4c, the construal of those broken things is certainly different. The possible situation can be that the book cover was lost, the pen ran out, and that the car driver failed to get the engine started. Similarly, the construal of the concepts of "swimming" (5a, 5b, 5c) is also different in some aspects.

The various examples above demonstrate that there seems to be a close correspondence between the conceptual structures and syntactic structures that originate in everyday life, and that the overall meaning of a complex structure never comes from the simple

summary of the meanings of constitute words but has its own meaning independent of the meanings of words. As far as the self-consistency of sentences is concerned, certain words seem to get part of their meanings from the complex structure. From this, we can conclude that a construction is an abstract mental or cognitive structure consisting of concrete forms and meanings. Of course, just like metaphor, it can be divided into conceptual metaphor or metaphorical concept, and linguistic metaphor or metaphorical linguistic expression. Conceptual metaphors are based on our bodily experiences, while linguistic metaphors are the realizations or manifestations of conceptual metaphors in language. Analogically, we can also divide construction into conceptual construction, which is a psychological or cognitive structure that comes from human bodily experience with the characteristics of embodiment, and linguistic construction, which is the realization of the conceptual construction in language. For example, we have the mental or cognitive structure of the ditransitive constructions, which are realized by different linguistic constructions in the same language or in different languages.

Construction grammar views constructions as the speaker's grammatical knowledge and argues that the meaning of complex structures is not fully reducible. As Langacker (1987) puts it, full attention is paid both to the actual use of the language system and the speaker's knowledge about the actual use of the language; grammar includes the full range of conventional linguistic knowledge that the speaker has, whether or not it can be incorporated under a more general name. The model based on use is a non-reductionist approach that uses a clear and explicit graphical network and emphasizes the importance of low-level graphs in study of language structures.

In order to achieve this, construction grammar had to abandon atomism as well as the reductionist philosophical thoughts and develop a new theory of grammar. According to this theory, grammatical knowledge is actually based on the complex structure of language, which is construction, or form-meaning pair, not entirely dependent on the meaning of constitute words. Thus, construction grammar is actually a linguistic theory

concerning the nature of a speaker's linguistic knowledge. Constructions are the basic units of language, which themselves convey some conceptual content and can be used to express basic conceptual scenarios or basic concepts, which are what Goldberg calls "the Scene Encoding Hypothesis", that is "Constructions which correspond to basic sentence types encode as their central senses event types that are basic to human experience" (1995: 39). For example, many of the grammatical constructions discussed in constructive grammar, such as argument structure constructions, ditransitive constructions, caused-motion constructions, resultative constructions, existential constructions, middle constructions, etc., are closely related to basic human experience situations. The fact that grammatical constructions can be used to express basic meanings and basic experiences in human life is one of the greatest benefits of using the concept of constructions, which makes the study of constructions very interesting and valuable.

### **3. Constructions and pragmatics**

Although construction grammar includes different theoretical schools of thought, such as the "cognitive construction grammar" by Lakoff (1987) and Goldberg (1995), the "construction grammar" by Fillmore et al. (1988), "radical construction grammar" by Croft (2001), "embodied construction grammar" by Bergen and Chang (2005), "fluid construction grammar" by Steels and Beule (2006), "sign-based construction grammar" by Michaelis (2010) and "cognitive grammar" by Langacker (1987), they hold much in common: The basic unit of language is construction; knowledge of language consists of a large network of constructions, and nothing else in addition; and grammar is not a modular system so it cannot be studied by separating the aspects of phonology, vocabulary, syntactic, semantic, pragmatic, and textual functions; language, like all other cognitive systems, is intricately woven into all cognitive systems; and linguistic structure, or grammar, is formed in language use. These claims define the research scope and content of construction grammar.

Construction grammar emphasizes that syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic information are so equally important that none of three can function independently of the other two, e.g., Fillmore et al. argue that "a large part of a language user's competence is to be described as a repertory of clusters of information including, simultaneously, morphosyntactic patterns, semantic interpretation principles to which these are dedicated, and, in many cases, specific pragmatic functions in whose service they exist" (1988: 534). However, as far as the research results of construction grammar are concerned, little attention has been given to pragmatic issues in construction grammar. Moreover, the issues of constructions are rarely mentioned in pragmatics research as well. Pragmatics generally examines context-dependent meaning and rarely deals with the meaning of linguistic forms. For instance, the constructions in Example 6 appear to contain intrinsic pragmatic points, that is, pragmatic information may have some conventional relations with these particular linguistic forms to form grammatical constructions. These constructions conventionally link specific pragmatic forces or pragmatic effects to specific morphosyntactic structures (Wen 2014: 22), and some constructions even possess meaning or pragmatic effects only in certain specific contexts.

(6) a. Good morning/afternoon

b. There, there

c. Once upon a time

d. I pronounce you husband and wife.

e. See you later.

f. How are you doing?

g. Him help an enemy?

In Examples 6a and 6g, for instance, "Good morning" is generally used in the morning until lunchtime (around 1 p.m.), when it has pragmatic effects; "Good afternoon" can only be used in the afternoon (around 2 p.m. to 6 p.m.), when it has pragmatic effects.

Both expressions can be used in the situations of meeting or breaking up, with the rising tone in the former situation and falling tone in the latter one. Example 6g conveys a skeptical attitude.

Similarly, there are a large number of examples in Chinese.

(7) Ch. 幸会幸会, 久仰久仰 (Eng. It's a pleasure to meet you. It's an honor to meet you at last.)

The expressions of "幸会幸会" and "久仰久仰" are all polite expressions indicating an honor to meet with the other party, and they are meaningful and possess pragmatic effects only when used in a meeting situation. From the point of view of construction grammar, the pragmatic effects of these constructions come from the transmission of language convention, not the result of conversational reasoning.

In fact, the constructions themselves contain pragmatic information, and their use is often limited by context, since most of them derived from our bodily experience, which in turn is context-based. Not surprisingly, construction grammar, cognitive linguistics in general, is a usage-based theoretical model with the claim "WYSIWYG" (what you see is what you get) (Winters & Nathan 2020: 20).

In the following, we will talk specifically about information packaging constructions (IPCs) or information structure construction, and metalinguistic constructions. The constructions of this kind can demonstrate how constructions are related to pragmatics. To study information-packaging constructions, we have to deal with information packaging and verbal communication. By information packaging, according to Chafe, it means how "the speaker accommodates his speech to temporary states of the addressee's mind, rather than to the long-term knowledge of the addressee" (1976: 28). Chafe discusses the statuses of some nouns or noun phrases, which are related to how



information or content of the utterance is packaged by the speaker and send to the hearer:

*"I have been using the term packaging to refer to the kind of phenomena at issue here, with the idea that they have to do primarily with how the message is sent and only secondarily with message itself, just as the packaging of toothpaste can affect sales in partial independence of the quality of the toothpaste inside" (ibid., 28).*

Obviously, packaging is closely related to verbal communication, which involves the sending and receiving of information. In communication theory, this process is stated in a very simple model: S (message source) to N (noise or interference) to R (receiver). This model is called the conduit model. For human communicators the process of communication is regarded as a more complex set of interactions, negotiated across a wide spectrum of linguistic, cognitive, cultural, and situational contexts. It usually needs to conform to the "5W Communication Mode", i.e., who, say what, through which channel, to whom and with what effect is produced. In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the American mathematician C.E. Shannon created the Information Theory, which was later applied to many fields in the natural and social sciences. If we evaluate verbal communication activities from the point of view of information theory, we do not judge whether the speaker's speech is grammatical or not, but whether the speaker conveys a large or small amount of information, whether it is useful (effective) or useless (ineffective) information, whether it is primary or secondary information, whether it is necessary or redundant information, and whether it is new or old information, etc. In general, successful verbal communication depends to a large extent on the ability of the listeners to combine new information with old information. This is often the case with information packaging constructions or information structure constructions, which organize and arrange meaning, combining new information/meaning with old information/meaning, rather than just conveying meaning. In a given context, a speaker chooses a particular information construction based on his or her own assumptions, such as what is known to the listener, what the listener might deduce, what information is new to the listener, and so on. Thus, when discussing information packaging

constructions, we have to think about these assumptions, i.e., we have to take these pragmatic issues into consideration.

Information packaging constructions are closely related to information structure, which is defined by Lambrecht as "that component of sentence grammar in which propositions as conceptual representations of states of affairs are paired with lexicogrammatical structures in accordance with the mental states of interlocutors who use and interpret these structures as units of information in given discourse contexts" (1994: 5).

Based on this definition, we can try to construct the characteristics of the information packaging constructions: information-packaging constructions are the sentence-level constructions that the speaker uses to express complex meanings when recognizing the current knowledge of the listener. They are used to serve "the function of organizing and arranging meanings, relating new meanings to old meanings, rather than conveying meanings themselves" (Hilpert 2014: 102). Lambrecht (1994: 51) argues that propositions, i.e., complex meanings, typically link information known to the listener with information unknown to him or her. According to this, we can also consider that information in sentence-level constructions is partly old information and partly new information. For example,

(8) When did you stop beating your wife?

This example is an ambiguous sentence that philosophers usually employ to make people confused. If you were not smart enough, absolutely you would be cheated, because Example 8 has a pragmatic presupposition "You used to beat your wife". According to Lambrecht (1994), old information is actually pragmatic presuppositions which are propositions that are activated by the vocabulary or syntactic structure of a sentence or knowledge that the speaker assumes to be known or shared by the hearer

or what is taken for granted by the speaker. New information is pragmatic assertion: a proposition expressed in a sentence, something that the speaker expects the hearer to know, or takes for granted when the hearer hears the words. Linking known information with pragmatic presuppositions and new information with linguistic assertions is exactly the kind of analysis that combines construction grammar and pragmatics, and thus we can also reveal the pragmatic features of constructions.

Let's analyze the metalinguistic constructions in language. Metalinguistic constructions are those constructions about the discussion of language itself, such as hedging constructions, whose main pragmatic function is to make things or meanings vague or ambiguous, or to moderate the tone of speech. For example,

(9) Loosely speaking, metaphor is more fundamental than metonymy.

Although some cognitive linguists believe that metonymy is more fundamental than metaphor, still other cognitive linguists believe that metaphor is more fundamental than metonymy. The use of the hedging constructions "loosely speaking" in Example 9 significantly moderates the tone of speech and makes the idea more acceptable to the readers.

Some hedging constructions can also change the constituent structure of a category. Let us take the category "bird" as an example. If we use the hedging constructions "par excellence", we get the following sentences (Lakoff 1973; 1987):

- (10) a. A robin is a bird par excellence.  
b. \*A chicken is a bird par excellence.  
c. \*A penguin is a bird par excellence.  
d. \*A bat is a bird par excellence.

The purpose of "par excellence" is to pick out the typical members of the category of "bird". Since robin is a typical member of the bird category, and chicken, penguin and bat are atypical, only Example 10a is acceptable, while Examples 10b-d are not. If we use the hedging constructions "loosely speaking" to comment on the above sentences, we get the following:

- (11) a. \*Loosely speaking, a robin is a bird.  
b. Loosely speaking, a chicken is a bird.  
c. Loosely speaking, a penguin is a bird.  
d. Loosely speaking, a bat is a bird.

"Loosely speaking", in contrast to "par excellence", excludes the typical members of the category of "bird", but includes the atypical members of the category of "bird". Therefore, Example 11a is unacceptable, while Examples 11b-d are acceptable. From the above analysis, we can at least conclude that the hedging constructions have special pragmatic effects, which can change the truth-value of a proposition.

#### **4. Construction pragmatics**

Construction pragmatics is a new interdisciplinary study of the combination of construction grammar and pragmatics, which focuses on examining the pragmatic issue of constructions from the perspective of pragmatics. One of the keys to the study of pragmatics is to consider the important factor of context. Whether it is a cultural context, a situational context, or a linguistic or contextual context, it can be a limiting condition for language use and comprehension. The American anthropologist Hall (1976) also divides context into high and low contexts, arguing that meaning making and comprehension vary significantly across contexts. For example, the American culture is often considered as a "low-context culture", where the meanings that people express in communication are often literal and have little to do with the context. For example, when Americans say "Great job", they mean it literally, and their

understanding is not dependent on the context. In contrast, in a "high-context culture", the same linguistic expressions can have different meanings depending on the context. For example, in Italian, "Great job" is likely to be a bit sarcastic, because Italians do not like to give or receive such comments in public and are immediately suspicious if someone says in this way.

The context is such a great limitation and constraint on language use. By the same token, the production, use, and understanding of constructions are also constrained and influenced by the context. It is based on this understanding that we propose the idea of a new discipline of Construction Pragmatics, in order to provide a new perspective on the study of Construction Grammar and to further enrich and improve the theory of Construction Grammar. Of course, it is not an easy task to establish a new discipline, and some basic questions must be addressed and answered, such as the nature of the discipline, basic theories, guiding principles, main perspectives, research methods and scope of research, the pragmatic conditions for the formation, change and variation of constructions, the relationship between constructionalization and pragmaticalization, the pragmatic characteristics of constructions, the contextual constraints on the use and comprehension of constructions, the relationship between the constructional meaning and pragmatic meaning. The following is a brief explanation of the "assertive construction" in Chinese.

Assertive constructions are constructions that determine what the subject is or is not. The subject and the predicate are both nouns or noun phrases. For assertive constructions in Contemporary Chinese, a copula "是" (shi, to be) or "不是" (bu shi, not to be) is added between the subject and the predicate (Lv 1990: 59), while for ancient Chinese, the copula "是" came into use until around the Eastern Han Dynasty. As in the line "问今是何世" (wen jin shi he shi) in "The Travel of the Peach Blossom Garden" by Tao Yuanming, which means "to ask what dynasty is now". In ancient Chinese, there are other ways of expressing the assertive construction, such as using

"者 (zhe)", "也 (ye)", the verb "为 (wei)", the adverbs "即 (ji)、乃 (nai)、则 (ze)", the indicative pronouns "此 (ci)、是 (shi)", the auxiliary words "维 (wei)、惟 (wei)", the negative adverbs "非 (fei)、匪 (fei)", nouns or noun phrases, and so on and so forth. For example,

(12) a. 陈胜者，阳城人也。（《史记》）

Chen Sheng zhe, Yangcheng ren ye.

Chen Sheng, Yangcheng person

"Chen Sheng, the local person of Yangcheng." (*Records of the Grand Historian of China*)

b. 知之为知之，不知为不知，是知也。（《论语》）

zhi zhi wei zhi zhi, bu zhi wei bu zhi, shi zhi ye.

To know is to know, not know is not know, this is wisdom

"You must not pretend to know when you do not know, and pretend not to know when you know, which is wisdom." (*The Analects of Confucius*)

c. 吾乃梁人也。（《战国策》）

wu nai liang ren ye.

I am Liang person

"I am from Liang dynasty." (*Strategies of the Warring States*)

d. 滔滔者，天下皆是也。（《论语》）

tao tao zhe, tian xia jie shi ye.

Surging floods are everywhere

"There is growing unrest and bad social climate." (*The Analects of Confucius*)

e. 明德惟馨。（《左传》）

ming de wei xin.

Bright virtue only sweet smelling

"It's virtue that matters most." (*The Chronicle of Zuo*)

f. 子非鱼，安知鱼之乐？（《庄子》）

zi fei yu, an zhi yu zhi le?

You are not fish, how do you know the enjoyment of fish?

"Don't always judge others in your own light." (*Chuang Tzu*)

With respect to these linguistic assertive constructions, it seems that we can ponder such a question: are their constructional meanings the same as their pragmatic meanings? How did they come into being? Can they all be used in the same context, or differ in contexts of use? Is its understanding context-dependent (high context)? Do the assertive constructions differ for different languages? Do they differ in the context in which they are used? And so on. All these questions appear to be difficult to solve without consideration of the context and other pragmatic factors. It follows that the pragmatic issue of constructions is worth being examined, and that the discipline of construction pragmatics can be established.

## **5. Conclusions**

In this paper, the relationships between construction and construction grammar and between construction and pragmatics have been discussed. Constructions are the basic units of language, and grammatical constructions can be used to express the basic meanings of human life. Pragmatic information is combined in grammatical constructions, so that construction grammar and pragmatics can be integrated and studied. Construction grammar is a theory of linguistic knowledge, and pragmatics is the study of linguistic meaning in context. Construction pragmatics proposed in the paper is the integration of construction grammar and pragmatics aimed to study the pragmatic issues of construction so as to compensate for the deficiencies in the study of construction grammar and also to enrich the study of pragmatics. Admittedly, this new discipline has just started and is in need of further exploration.

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## Résumé

Construction grammar is a theory of linguistic knowledge as well as a branch of cognitive linguistics. It is one of the important components of cognitive linguistics, and a very hot topic of cognitive linguistics as well. Construction grammar was developed

to cope with such cases as idioms, set phrases, and fixed expressions that generative grammar did not deal very well with. According to construction grammar, constructions are basic units of language, i.e., form-meaning pairings, and knowledge of language is a large inventory of constructions, i.e., a CONSTRUCTICON. Within construction grammar, syntax, semantics and pragmatics are equally important, none of which can play roles without the others. But unfortunately, the pragmatic aspects of constructions are not investigated quite enough. In order to solve such a problem of construction grammar, we think it is imperative to establish a new discipline "construction pragmatics" which focuses on the study of the pragmatic issues of constructions. The present paper, first of all, explains constructions and construction grammar. And then based on the theories of construction grammar and pragmatics, it spells out the pragmatic issues of constructions in terms of information packaging constructions (e.g., *When did you stop beating your wife?*) and metalinguistic constructions in language (e.g., *Loosely speaking, a chicken is a bird*), which shows that pragmatic issues are closely related to constructions. For example, "*When did you stop beating your wife?*" is a discourse that philosophers usually take use of to make you be cheated. If you were not smart enough, absolutely you would be cheated, because this construction has a pragmatic presupposition "*You used to beat your wife*". Finally, this paper points out a new discipline "construction pragmatics", a new interdisciplinary study of the combination of construction grammar with pragmatics.

**Key words:** cognitive linguistics, construction, construction grammar, construction pragmatics.

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