

3. Syntactic Constructions

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Abstract

The term construction is widely used descriptively in discussing grammar, and is still used informally in most theoretical work for characteristic formal patterns of syntactic categories or features, usually associated with a meaning and/or function. Modern linguistic theories employ a range of formal devices to produce or characterize surface constructions; they may be rules, or schemata, or constraints. It is usually assumed that competence in a language consists largely of these formal devices together with a lexicon; the constructions themselves are epiphenomenal. As such, constructions are an abstraction over the data which linguistic theory must analyze; insight in syntax is achieved through discovering generalizations across constructions.

1. Introduction

The term *construction* is ubiquitous in contemporary syntactic literature, being used informally to refer to linguistic expressions in a variety of ways. The term also has a technical sense in the theory of Construction Grammar, as detailed in Chapter 28.

The term *construction* is widely used to characterize certain kinds of form–meaning pairings, as when we refer to “possessive constructions” or “the verb–particle construction” to refer to examples like those below.

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- (1) Three examples of possessive constructions
 - a. *Seymour's new friend*
 - b. *a new friend of Seymour's*
 - c. *Seymour has a new friend*

- (2) Three examples of the verb-particle construction
 - a. *We picked up a lamp at the flea market.*
 - b. *We picked a lamp up at the flea market.*
 - c. *What did you pick up at the flea market?*

In general, linguists would not refer to the three examples in (1) as comprising a single possessive construction, because they are too different in their syntax; in (1a) the possessor precedes the possessed noun, in (1b) the possessor follows the possessed noun, and in (1c) the possessor is expressed as a distinct argument outside the possessed noun phrase. These differences represent three different ways of expressing the concept of possession, in English.

In (2), on the other hand, many linguists would be inclined to refer to all three sentences as manifesting a single verb-particle construction, on the basis of the perceived similarity of the syntax of the three cases. There is a very large class of verb-particle pairings which allow the ordering alternation shown in (2a)–(2b), where the order reflects no apparent difference in meaning (such as *drop off*, *smash up*, *fix up*, *turn on*, *leave out*). In such cases, the object can systematically be the focus of a question, as in (2c); so the general consensus would be that these three sentences illustrate the verb-particle construction.

On this view, (1) illustrates three different form–meaning pairings, even though one component of the meaning is shared across all three, while (2) illustrates one form–meaning pairing, even though independent factors distort the shared form (and the correct characterization of the meaning component may be elusive).

At the same time, (2c) illustrates a *wh*-question construction, in addition to the verb-particle construction. Since the properties of the *wh*-question construction (e.g. *wh*-expression in clause-initial position, auxiliary in second position) are independent of the verb-particle construction (e.g. the predicate includes a particle like *up*, *down*, *out*, etc.), there is no motivation for formulating a distinct “verb-particle *wh*-question construction.”

1.1. Toward a definition

The term construction is not a technical term (outside of Construction Grammar), and consequently it is difficult to define. As an approximation, it can be defined as follows.

- (3) A construction is a characteristic formal pattern of syntactic categories or features, usually associated with some meaning and/or discourse function.

The use of the word *pattern* here is an attempt to be as theory-neutral as possible; a pattern might be a structure, or a template, or the output of a rule. The notion *formal* is meant to include aspects of form which are of significance to grammar. In some theories word order is a primitive of grammar, while in other theories word order is derived from structure, such that structure, but not linear order, would count as a formal property (see Chapters 18 and 40 on Word Order).

The notion *syntactic categories* is intended to include major parts of speech but also minor or functional categories such as the class of English verb-particles, or the class of determiners. The notion *syntactic features* in the definition is meant to include morphosyntactic features such as the past participle or dative case but also semantico-syntactic features such as negation or “wh” (borne by interrogative expression like *what* and *who*). Together *syntactic categories or features* includes function words such as infinitival *to* and bound formatives such as possessive *'s*, on any analysis.

The definition in (3) is meant to exclude phonology and surface exponence, which do not characterize constructions as the term is ordinarily used in mainstream syntax. For example, we would not expect to find a construction which necessarily involved words beginning with the phoneme /w/, even if we speak loosely of various kinds of *wh*-constructions. Similarly, if there is more than one formal category in English which is spelled out by the suffix *-ing*, then we expect a construction to be identified by the underlying features which are being spelled out (e.g. progressive, or gerund), not by the phonological form of the exponent doing the spelling out. Though we might descriptively call something an *Acc-ing* construction, for example, in a more careful statement of its characteristics, we would distinguish the feature or category that *-ing* manifests.

Thus, the definition offered above is intended to stress syntactic form, not phonological form. This is in accord with the usual use of the word construction in syntax. An idiom like *kick the bucket* meaning ‘die’ requires the lexical items *kick* and *bucket*, and hence makes direct reference to exponents with phonological content (see Chapter 41 on Idioms). As such, ordinary usage would not make reference to a *kick the bucket* construction (Construction Grammar, however, is different here: idioms are considered to be constructions).

In this way, more or less functional elements like the interrogative pronoun *what* and the light verb *do* are treated together with syntax as opposed to lexical items like *kick* and *bucket*. Thus is it not controversial to speak of a construction of the form *What's X doing Y?* meaning roughly ‘Why is X Y?’, where X is a subject and Y is a predicate. For example: *What's the newspaper doing in the bushes?* or *What are you doing leaving without your shoes?* This construction requires *what* and *do* as well as the progressive with an appropriate form of *be*.

The definition offered in (3) also suggests that a construction is usually associated with some meaning and/or discourse function. The importance of meaning is

somewhat loosely applied in practice. Thus, it is not usually considered necessary to have a rigorous statement of the meaning of a possessive construction like the one in (1a) in order to call it a construction, if it has a clearly defined syntactic form. But if there are two disjoint meanings involved, then it is common to think of them as involving two distinct constructions. For example, in English, the auxiliary inverts with the subject when a *wh*-item is fronted, but also when a negative element is fronted, as in (4) (cf. Chapter 13, on V2).

- (4) a. *Which of them would he recommend?*
b. *None of them would he recommend.*

Even if the syntax of the inversion is identical in the two cases, it would be most natural here to speak of subject-auxiliary inversion constructions in the plural, rather than a single subject-auxiliary inversion construction which was indifferent to whether the initial element was a negative or an interrogative phrase—though practice varies somewhat here (and in Construction Grammar, there is no limit to how abstract a construction can be).

The notion of discourse function in (3) is intended broadly, to include various pragmatic inferences and affect. For example, the *What's X doing Y?* construction is only used when there is some sense that it is incongruous or inappropriate for X to be Y (as discussed by Kay and Fillmore 1999). Thus the question *Why are men rebelling?* can be asked in a range of contexts, but *What are men doing rebelling?* can only be asked if there is some salient sense (perhaps the speaker's opinion, but not necessarily) that it is inappropriate, incongruous, or outrageous for them to be doing so.

1.2. Applying the definition

Returning to the examples in (1)–(2), we can apply the definition offered in (3) to show that it is harmonious with the common intuition that (1) illustrates three different possessive constructions while (2) represents three different manifestations of a single construction.

According to (3), a class of phrases or sentences must share a characteristic formal pattern in order to belong to a single construction. The formal differences among the three examples in (1) are fairly clear; (1a) lacks *of* and the possessor precedes the possessum, while (1b) contains the function word *of*, and the possessor follows the possessum. Furthermore, in (1a), the possessum is understood as definite, while in (1b), the possessum is indefinite. The example in (1c) is predicative, and contains the verb *have*. So the fact that the three expressions describe the same semantic relation is not normally taken to imply the existence of a single possessive construction. Thus it seems that the definition appropriately picks out each of the three as a construction.

Turning to (2), we can first address the question of whether (2c) represents a different construction from the other two. Of course it does, as it involves

wh-movement, but this is irrelevant to the verb–particle construction. The interrogative construction simply applies to a clause that has a verbal particle in the predicate, just as it does in an ordinary transitive clause.

The second question is whether there is motivation to treat examples like (2a) and (2b) as distinct constructions. This cannot be conclusively determined without formal analysis. By and large, the two are distinguished only by word order, not by meaning, nor by functional categories or features. There are some differences, for example (2b) allows the object to be pronominal (*We picked it up*), but (2a) does not (**We picked up it*). If such differences can be independently explained, then an analysis can be motivated in which there is a single construction with some flexibility of order, that is, a single ‘characteristic formal pattern of syntactic categories or features’ in which whatever determines the placement of the particle before or after the internal argument is not characteristic, or is not a syntactic feature. This is the usual consensus (see Ramchand and Svenonius 2002 for one such account), though alternative analyses exist in which the two represent distinct constructions (see Farrell 2005).

2. Examples of constructions

To further illustrate the notion of construction, several examples of constructions are listed in this section. No detailed characterization or analysis is attempted. The examples serve simply to give an impression of a small part of the range of syntactic constructions.

2.1. Argument structure, grammatical functions

A number of constructions involve valency, argument structure, and grammatical functions (see Chapter 9 on Grammatical Relations). For example, a passive construction involves the demotion of the external argument, compared to the active use of the same verb (see Chapter 23 on Voice). In English, the demoted external argument can be expressed in a *by*-phrase or left implicit, and the verb appears in a past participle form, with a form of the auxiliary *be*. The implicit argument can control a purpose clause, as illustrated in (5b), just as with the active construction in (5a). English also has a middle construction, in which the external argument cannot appear in a *by*-phrase, and is not syntactically active as diagnosed by a purpose clause, as illustrated in (5c).

- (5) a. *The owner sold the house (to pay off debts).*
b. *The house was sold (by the owner) (to pay off debts).*
c. *Houses sell easily (*by the owner) (*to pay off debts).*

In a conative construction, illustrated in (6b), the internal argument is oblique and is not as fully affected as in a regular transitive construction, compare (6a).

In a benefactive construction, illustrated in (6c), an indirect object derives some benefit from the action, or comes into possession of the direct object (see Chapters 10 and 37 on Arguments and Adjuncts).

- (6) a. *The baker cut the bread.*
- b. *The baker cut at the bread.*
- c. *The baker cut me a piece of bread.*

Resultative and depictive constructions involve secondary predicates, as illustrated in (7a) and (7b) respectively.

- (7) a. *They drank the bar dry.*
- b. *They ate the bread dry.*

Control, raising, and so-called Exceptional Case Marking (ECM, or accusative-with-infinitive, or subject-to-object raising) constructions usually involve infinitive complements in which arguments are, descriptively speaking, shared across the two clauses (see Chapters 15 and 38 on Control).

- (8) a. *Ian wants to stay at the house.* (control)
- b. *Ian seemed to stay at the house.* (raising)
- c. *We believed Ian to stay at the house.* (ECM)

English provides many more examples of constructions involving various configurations of arguments, and other languages provide yet more. In some cases, the availability of a construction may be tied to the availability of a lexical item; for example, it may be that if a language has an ECM construction if and only if it has a verb with the selectional properties exhibited by English *believe* in (8c). However, in other cases, the availability of a construction in a given language does not seem to be connected to lexical items. An example is the resultative construction illustrated in (7a), which many languages lack, despite having verbs and adjectives which are otherwise like the ones used in the English resultative construction (Snyder 2001).

2.2. Unbounded dependencies

There is a range of constructions which have been analyzed as involving displaced constituents, or filler-gap dependencies. These include (in the order in which they appear in [9]): *wh*-questions, embedded *wh*-questions, clefts, pseudoclefts, relative clauses, comparative constructions, and (contrastive) topicalization (for some discussion of some of these and related constructions, see Chapter 13 on V2, Chapter 14 on Discourse Configurationality, and especially Chapter 22 on Relative Clauses and Correlatives).

- (9) a. *Which book did you read?*

- b. *I asked which book you read.*
- c. *It was this book that I read.*
- d. *What I read was this book.*
- e. *The book that I read was long.*
- f. *She read a longer book than I read.*
- g. *THIS book, I read.*

These constructions have in common that the dependency can cross finite clause boundaries.

- (10) a. *Which book did your mother think you read?*
- b. *I asked which book your mother thought you read.*
- c. *It was this book that my mother thought I read.*
- d. *What my mother thought I read was this book.*
- e. *The book that my mother thought I read was long.*
- f. *She read a longer book than my mother thought I read.*
- g. *THIS book, my mother thought I read.*

In this respect they contrast with passive, as illustrated in (11a), and for example raising, as illustrated in (11b) (compare [12]).

- (11) a. **The house was thought (by his mother) the owner sold.*
- b. **Ian seemed stayed at the house.*
- (12) a. *It was thought the owner sold the house.*
- b. *It seemed Ian stayed at the house.*

In fact, the constructions in (9)–(10) can cross indefinitely many finite clause boundaries, and for this reason are known as unbounded dependencies.

- (13) a. *Which book did you think your mother thought you read?*
- b. *I asked which book you thought your mother thought you read.*
- c. *It was this book that I thought my mother thought I read.*
- d. *What I thought my mother thought I read was this book.*
- e. *The book that I thought my mother thought I read was long.*
- f. *She read a longer book than I thought my mother thought I read.*
- g. *THIS book, I thought my mother thought I read.*

The availability and properties of unbounded dependency constructions can vary somewhat from one language to the next. For example, sometimes there is a resumptive pronoun in the gap position, and in other cases there is no displacement on the surface, with the filler element remaining *in situ*. Unlike the case with argument structure alternations, this kind of variation tends not to be dependent on lexical items, though it may be connected to the properties of functional elements such as *that* and *which*.

In fact, it has been proposed that properties of constructions are largely determined by the properties of their heads. This is explicit in the name of the theory Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar (see Chapter 27 on HPSG), but is also a common assumption in other theories (e.g. Borer 1984). For example, the properties of a relative clause could conceivably be entirely determined by the cluster of features contained on its (possibly abstract) head. The head would be a kind of C[omplementizer] taking a finite TP complement, attracting a suitable nominal element to its specifier, and projecting a category which could be used as a nominal modifier.

2.3. Complex constructions

In this regard, constructions like the *What's X doing Y?* construction mentioned above are complex, as they appear to involve an interdependency of several heads. Mainstream theory would probably treat a construction of this kind as a special kind of idiom.

Construction Grammar, in contrast, holds that there is no principled difference between a fully general construction and a highly idiomatic one, or even between a fully general abstract construction and a lexical item; each is a pairing of form with function, broadly construed.

3. Constructions and syntactic theory

Traditional descriptive grammars may characterize and exemplify a list of constructions in a given language. They may organize the constructions according to perceived similarities, and may attempt to state generalizations which transcend the individual constructions. This much is extremely useful in a reference grammar (see Chapter 61 on Reference Grammars).

Modern syntactic theory necessarily goes further, and is based on the assumption that higher-level generalizations are necessary in order to achieve what Chomsky (1964) called explanatory adequacy, a model of language which accounts for how individual languages are learnable by children.

Traditional grammar posited rules to characterize or generate constructions, such as passive and relative clauses. Generative grammar took this as a starting point and went on to abstract properties from classes of rules, such as elementary transformations and different kinds of formal conditions constraining them. Generative grammar in the 1970's explored the ways in which the properties interacted in rule systems, and sought to discover constraints on them.

For example, Emonds (1976) observed that transformational rules did not produce structures unlike those which had to be base-generated ("structure preservation"), suggesting that the full power of transformations was unneeded. Chomsky

(1977) showed that the class of unbounded dependencies displayed highly uniform properties, suggesting that they were not produced by distinct rules.

Subsequent work has increasingly focused on higher-level generalizations over rule types, shedding much light on the nature of grammar.

Thus, generalizations about constructions involving valence and argument structure led to those being analyzed in Lexical-Functional Grammar as the output of lexical rules (see Chapter 25 on LFG), accounting, for example, for their structure-preserving properties and their relative sensitivity to lexically listed traits of individual verbs. Similarly, generalizations about the class of unbounded dependencies as a whole led to the development of Move- α in Government-Binding Theory (Chomsky 1981), and the SLASH feature as used in Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar (see Chapter 27 on HPSG).

The development of Principles and Parameters theory (Chomsky 1981) involved rethinking the nature of rules entirely; once deconstructed into a system of invariant universal principles interacting with parametric points of variations, there are no rules per se. This is expressed in the following quote from *Lectures on Government and Binding*: “The notions “passive,” “relativization,” etc., can be reconstructed as processes of a more general nature, with a functional role in grammar, but they are not “rules of grammar”” (Chomsky 1981: 7).

Since constructions were the output of rules in the traditional conception of grammar, the elimination of rules from the theory means that in a Principles and Parameters framework, constructions are epiphenomenal, as reflected in the following quote, also from Chomsky but a decade later: “A language is not, then, a system of rules, but a set of specifications for parameters in an invariant system of principles of Universal Grammar (UG); and traditional grammatical constructions are perhaps best regarded as taxonomic epiphenomena, collections of structures with properties resulting from the interaction of fixed principles with parameters set one or another way” (Chomsky 1991: 417).

Since that time, although the notion of parameter has been substantially rethought, mainstream syntactic theories continue to regard the notion of construction, like the notion of rule or transformation, as a descriptive stepping stone on the path to greater understanding rather than as an analytic result in its own right.

Work in Construction Grammar, too, recognizes that insight does not come from simply listing the individual surface constructions in a language, and therefore, like other theories, seeks generalizations over constructions; the difference between Construction Grammar and other theories mentioned here is that in Construction Grammar, the generalizations are themselves modelled as abstract constructions. Nor is this just a terminological distinction: the claim in Construction Grammar is that the generalizations have the same kinds of properties as the constructions themselves, at a suitable level of abstraction.

4. Conclusion

I have characterized a construction as a characteristic formal pattern of syntactic features, usually associated with some meaning or discourse function. The way constructions are characterized in descriptive work tends to combine morphological, syntactic, and semantic facts. Purely phonological facts, however, tend not to be significant for the characterization of constructions. The precision of the syntactic characterization is usually taken to be more important than the semantic description of the meaning of a construction (e.g. even if two possessive expressions had exactly the same meaning, substantially different syntaxes would usually lead to them being classified as distinct constructions).

Some such notion is descriptively indispensable in syntactic work. Descriptive grammars must contain detailed characterizations of surface properties of constructions, and all careful empirical work makes reference to numerous construction types, as will be seen in the other chapters in this work.

Linguistic theory advances through the careful examination of the properties of constructions. Ultimately, principles are sought which transcend the individual constructions themselves, and the construction itself can be taken to be a taxonomic artifact.

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