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No equivalence: A new principle of no synonymy

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Abstract

Goldberg's (1995: 67) *principle of no synonymy* features among the foundational conceptual tools of Construction Grammar. This principle states that when two constructions differ in form, they must be semantically or pragmatically distinct. In recent years, increasing concerns have been raised as to its theoretical and descriptive accuracy however (e.g. Kinsey et al. 2007; Uhrig 2015; Laporte et al. 2021), leading Uhrig (2015) to argue that it is largely 'overrated'. The aim of this paper is twofold. First, we present a critical discussion aimed at answering these concerns and we contend that the principle is neither overrated nor inaccurate. Second, we argue that the principle would gain in precision and explanatory power if it were to be conceptually fine-tuned under a new name: the 'principle of no equivalence'. We show that the notions of competition and distributional niche are crucial to understanding the principle and that, alongside the 'semantic' and 'pragmatic' types of meaning, the notion of 'social' meaning is another crucial factor that needs to be taken into account.

1 A brief genesis

This article presents a critical discussion of the 'principle of no synonymy' as spelled out in Goldberg (1995). We will turn down recent objections that have been raised against this principle and we will argue that it only needs to be conceptually fine-tuned under a new name, the principle of no equivalence. In order to do so, a brief theoretical overview is in order.

Within Construction Grammar, the 'principle of no synonymy' constitutes one of the key seminal concepts and was first made explicit in Goldberg's (1995: 67) foundational monograph:

> *The Principle of No Synonymy*: If two constructions are syntactically distinct, they must be semantically or pragmatically distinct (cf. Bolinger 1968; Haiman 1985; Clark 1987; MacWhinney 1989). Pragmatic aspects of constructions involve particulars of information structure, including topic and focus, and additionally stylistic aspects of the construction such as register.

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> *Corollary A*: If two constructions are syntactically distinct and S(emantically)-synonymous, then they must not be P(ragmatically)-synonymous.
> *Corollary B*: If two constructions are syntactically distinct and P-synonymous, then they must not be S-synonymous.

In short, this principle states that pure synonymy (whereby two linguistic signs serve exactly the same function) does not exist and that any difference in form should entail a difference in meaning. This assumption is not novel. Before Goldberg (1995), it had been formulated in various ways across different approaches (see, for instance, Bréal 1897; de Saussure 1916; Bloomfield 1976; Bolinger 1977; Haiman 1980; Givón 1985; Kirsner 1985; Clark 1987, 1988; Langacker 1987; Quine 1987; Wierzbiecka 1988). What gives this assumption a special status within Construction Grammar is that it is among the earliest conceptual tools that significantly contributed to the development of the theory. Specifically, this principle was one of the arguments used against the alleged transformational rules discussed in traditional generative grammar. There it is argued that different 'surface' structures will have the same meaning (i.e. truth-conditions) as long as they are derived from the same 'deep' structure (Chomsky 1957, 1965, 1971; Katz & Postal 1964). Typical examples of such transformations include the active/passive alternation (1) and the locative alternation (2).

(1) a. Lily drew the tree
b. The tree was drawn by Lily.

(2) a. Tom spread the bread with butter.
b. Tom spread butter on the bread.

Construction Grammar rejects the view that these pairs of sentences are mere formal alternatives (i.e. paraphrases) and considers that each form deserves to be analyzed in its own right (Goldberg 2002). In the case of the locative alternation, for instance, there is a crucial semantic difference (see Anderson 1971; Perek 2012): example (2a) entails a holistic reading, whereby the bread is fully covered with butter (here, focus is on the result state); example (2b) makes only a partial reading available, with only part of the bread being covered with butter (here, focus is on the action). This observation is taken as evidence that there must be two distinct constructions involved, the *with*-Applicative construction in (2a) and the Locative Caused-Motion construction in (2b), each of which has its own formal and functional properties (cf. Perek 2012).

These initial discussions of 'syntactic' patterns (i.e. abstract phrasal/clausal structures) explain why Goldberg originally formulates the principle as pertaining to constructions that "are *syntactically* distinct" (our emphasis). However, it is commonly understood that the principle of no synonymy applies to all *constructions* (i.e. linguistic signs), regardless of their complexity or schematicity.[1] That is, the principle actually covers differences at all levels of *form* (i.e. phonological and/or morpho-syntactic, cf. Hoffmann 2022: 39). This has been clearly illustrated in the domain of modality,

[1] Remember that Construction Grammar rejects the dichotomous view of language, which assumes a strict distinction between the lexicon and syntax, and instead posits that language is composed of a vast network of more or less complex and schematic *constructions* (i.e. form-function pairings) (Goldberg 2006: 220).

for instance, where there is accumulating evidence that functional differences can be found e.g. between full and contracted/reduced forms (e.g. *would* vs. *'d*, Daugs 2021; *want to* vs. *wanna*, Levshina & Lorenz 2022), between auxiliaries and (supposedly) morpho-syntactic suppletive forms (e.g. *will* vs. *be going to*, Hilpert 2008; *can/could* vs. *be able to*, Leclercq & Depraetere 2022; *must* vs. *have to*, Leclercq et al. 2023), as well as between more complex idioms (e.g SUBJ *can't help but* VP vs. SUBJ *can't help* V-*ing*, Leclercq 2022).

The main challenge with the principle is not so much to identify differences in form but to pin down what counts as a (relevant) difference in meaning. Recently, this issue has been critically discussed, the main claim being that different forms may not, in fact, systematically have different meanings (Kinsey et al. 2007; Uhrig 2015; Laporte et al. 2021). As a result, Uhrig (2015: 336) concludes that "the Principle of No Synonymy is overrated." Likewise, Laporte et al. (2021) argue that it might be formulated too strongly and that it needs to be toned down (namely, in leaving "room for some degree of formal variation", p. 258). We disagree with these analyses and we aim to provide counter-arguments to those claims. Specifically, our goal is to show that the principle of no synonymy makes correct predictions but needs to be fine-tuned in order to achieve maximal descriptive accuracy. This paper is structured as follows. Section 2 provides a critical discussion of key issues that seem to challenge the principle. This includes considering potential theory-internal contradictions within Construction Grammar. In Section 3, we reformulate Goldberg's principle of no synonymy as the principle of no equivalence. First, we argue that, in addition to the 'semantic' and 'pragmatic' types of meaning (which should be defined more clearly), the notion of 'social' meaning is another crucial factor that needs to be taken into account. Second, we argue that the notions of competition and distributional niche (Goldberg 2019: 26) are crucial to understanding the principle.

2 On recent concerns

2.1 Theory-internal 'contradictions'?

The validity of the principle of no synonymy has recently been called into question. While the main concerns bear upon its descriptive accuracy (see Section 2.2), one source of skepticism arises from considerations of theoretical consistency. That is, in spite of its foundational role, the principle has been argued to collide with other key concepts in Construction Grammar, including the semantics-pragmatics continuum, statistical preemption, and allostructions. We will show that this is not the case.

One minor such friction comes from the definition of the principle itself. Goldberg's initial formulation makes it very explicit that constructions that differ in form must be either 'semantically' and/or 'pragmatically' distinct. Yet it is rather curious that these two terms are used here since there is a general tendency in Construction Grammar to deny a clear distinction between semantics and pragmatics (see discussion in Leclercq 2020). This has raised the question whether the principle was correctly formulated by Goldberg (Paiva & Araújo de Oliveira 2020). In the more recent literature, including Goldberg's own writing, these two notions are in fact often omitted and the principle is spelled out in more general terms: a difference in form entails a dif-

ference in 'meaning' (e.g. Hilpert 2008: 14; Goldberg 2019: 26; Bergs 2020: 117). However, we concur with Paiva & Araújo de Oliveira (2020) that a more explicit distinction is needed between semantics and pragmatics in Construction Grammar (see also Cappelle 2017; Finkbeiner 2019; Leclercq 2020), and that the principle of no synonymy is most explanatory when maintaining a clear distinction (cf. Section 3 for details).

A more serious concern has been voiced by Herbst (2014: 282) who points out that the principle of no synonymy seems incompatible with the notion of 'statistical preemption', another key concept in Construction Grammar.[2] Statistical preemption is defined as a speaker's acquired disposition "not to use a formulation if an alternative formulation with the *same* function is consistently witnessed." (Boyd & Goldberg 2011: 55; our emphasis) For instance, statistical preemption explains why speakers of English prefer to use the irregular past form *went* to the regular form *goed*. The problem here is that statistical preemption seems to presuppose precisely what the principle of no synonymy rejects: sameness of meaning. This apparent contradiction explains Herbst's (2014) observation. However, the principle of no synonymy and statistical preemption are intrinsically related (see Goldberg 2019: ch. 5), and both actually reject constructional synonymy. Indeed, while the principle of no synonymy posits that no two *constructions* have the exact same function, statistical preemption ensures that this be the case by blocking the use of an alternative (or new) form when a function is already associated with a specific construction. The term 'construction' was highlighted in the previous sentence because it is used in the principle of no synonymy in its most technical sense as referring to *conventional* linguistic signs. (This is a crucial observation that will be relevant in Section 2.2.) By comparison, the forms that are blocked by statistical preemption are non conventional and, therefore, the principle of no synonymy holds.

The last theoretical point of contention relates to the notion of 'allostructions'. This concept was developed by Cappelle (2006, 2009) who aptly observed that, if Construction Grammar truly intends to model all of our linguistic knowledge, then it should account for speakers' intuitions of similarity between alternating constructions (such as, for instance, in the case of the locative alternation discussed above). Specifically, by analogy with the concepts of allophones and allomorphs, he argues that when two constructions are perceived as formal variants (e.g. *He put on his socks* [V Prt Obj] vs. *He put his socks on* [V Obj Prt]), these constructions should still preferably be analyzed as allostructions (i.e. distinct "manifestations", Cappelle 2006: 21) of a more abstract (and formally underspecified) construction (e.g. [V Prt Obj Prt]). This concept may have required some fine-tuning (cf. Perek 2012, 2015; De Vaere et al. 2020), but it is now an integral part of the constructional toolkit (though see Hoffmann 2022 for discussion). Proof that this concept is theoretically established is that allostructions

[2] This problem is also discussed by Uhrig (2015: 332). While we understand Herbst's (2014) concerns, we disagree with the view developed by Uhrig however. He seems to take issue with the formal and functional distinction between the Ditransitive and the Prepositional Dative constructions. Yet this difference has "been documented time and again by many researchers" (Goldberg 2011: 134; cf. references cited therein), and we fail to see how this might potentially threaten the principle of no synonymy. Quite the opposite, Goldberg's (2011) paper on statistical preemption indirectly provides further supporting evidence for the principle of no synonymy.

are now used as an argument against the principle of no synonymy (Uhrig 2015: 330; Laporte et al. 2021: 234). Indeed, as Uhrig (2015: 330) points out, Cappelle (2009) defines allostructions as "(truth-)semantically equivalent but formally distinct manifestations of a more abstractly represented construction." (Cappelle 2009: 187) Broadly understood, this definition could be taken to suggest that allostructions are purely formal variants that have the exact same function (since no explicit mention is made of other potential differences). This is the case in Laporte et al. (2021), who reserve the label 'allostructions' for "constructions that do not appear to encode a difference in meaning or function" (Laporte et al. 2021: 235), an approach which, as they point out, directly contradicts the principle of no synonymy. There are two main issues with this approach. First, it is not clear how this view differs from the transformational account against which Construction Grammar was developed (a difference which Cappelle 2006 explicitly intends to maintain). More importantly, this is not how the notion of allostructions was initially conceptualized. While the definition just discussed is arguably ambiguous, it is clear for Cappelle (p.c.) that allostructions are *not* functional equivalents. The constructions that fall under this label may be 'semantically' (i.e. truth-functionally) synonymous, but there is no questioning they are 'pragmatically' different (a feature that was also shown to be central in Perek 2015 and De Vaere et al. 2020). When defined in those terms, allostructions thus fall perfectly in line with corollary A of the principle of no synonymy, which shows there is no theoretical contradiction between the two concepts.

Beyond issues of theoretical compatibility, Uhrig (2015) and Laporte et al. (2021) raise the potential issue of allostructions (and, more specifically, that of free variation) not only on theoretical grounds but also on the basis of conflicting empirical observations. It is these empirical counterarguments that we now turn our attention to.

2.2 Empirical evidence against the principle?

The first type of empirical evidence that Uhrig (2015: 327) and Laporte et al. (2021: 234) discuss comes from a study conducted by Kinsey et al. (2007) on the use (or omission) of *that* as a subordinator (3) or as a relative pronoun (4).

(3) a. I think *that* the sky is blue.
b. I think **Ø** the sky is blue.

(4) a. This is the ball *that* I hit.
b. This is the ball **Ø** I hit. (Kinsey et al. 2007: 1)

According to the principle of no synonymy, the difference in form observed in each example should point to a difference in meaning. Kinsey et al. (2007: 1) list a number of references that discuss such potential differences and report on experiments designed to test two of the main hypotheses, namely 'emotionality' (with *that*-forms indexing less emotional engagement than *zero*-forms) and 'time distance' (with *that*-forms indexing "greater temporal distance between the main clause and the embedded clause", ibid.). The results reveal that there is no significant difference between the two forms however. Kinsey et al. (2007) thus view these results as evidence against

the principle of no synonymy, a claim that Uhrig (2015) and Laporte et al. (2021) are quick to endorse. Yet it is not clear that these results provide solid counter-evidence to the principle. First of all, it is possible that there is only "one construction with an optional element rather than two distinct constructions at least for the case of the subordinator *that*, which removes the problem of synonymous constructions." (Uhrig 2015: 328) Even if that were not the case though, there is still no real threat to the principle of no synonymy. For one thing, Kinsey et al. (2007) have tested only two hypotheses, yet there could be differences among (any of) the other conceptual axes they did not test. The authors acknowledge this fact, but they argue that "the burden of proof should be on those making the claims." (Kinsey et al. 2007: 4) That may be the case, but the point remains that their study does not actually provide definite proof against the principle of no synonymy: it only provides evidence that the two forms do not differ in terms of 'emotionality' and 'time distance'. Importantly, it appears the authors have ignored a number of important criteria that are otherwise known to play a major role in the choice of constructions (cf. Gadanidis et al. 2021 for a comprehensive analysis of these factors for the *that*/zero alternation). This is the case, for instance, with register, which we will discuss in Section 3 in terms of 'social meaning'. A clear distinction has been identified, with the subordinating *that*-form preferring the formal/written register and the *zero*-form preferring the informal/spoken register (Gadanidis et al. 2021: 6). Another crucial dimension concerns the linguistic (i.e. collocational and/or collostructional) preferences of these forms. Here as well, specific patterns can be found. To give but one example: when epistemic verbs such as *think/bet* are used in the main clause, the zero-form is preferred (Thompson & Mulac 1991: 244); when verbs of "belief/knowledge/conjecture" such as *realize* and *find* are used, the *that*-form is preferred (Torres Cacoullos & Walker 2009: 23). This means that the two forms are *not* equivalents that occur in free variation but that they each have their own distribution, a feature which is crucial to understanding the principle of no synonymy (cf. Section 3).

This discussion about lexical biases and distributional preferences reinforces the view, now widely shared in Construction Grammar, that looking at lower-level (i.e. more specific) constructions enables us to identify more clearly individual patterns of use. Paradoxically, it is precisely such low-level constructions that Laporte et al. (2021) find most problematic for the principle of no synonymy. Specifically, they argue that the principle might hold only for abstract constructions (e.g. argument structure constructions) but not so much for (more) lexically specific constructions. In order to test this claim, they analyze different formal realizations of subject extraposition (e.g. *It is interesting to note that caffeine affects melatonin levels*, *It appears that I missed the message*), which they organize across three levels (cf. Figure 1), from more abstract (level 1) to more lexicalized (level 3).

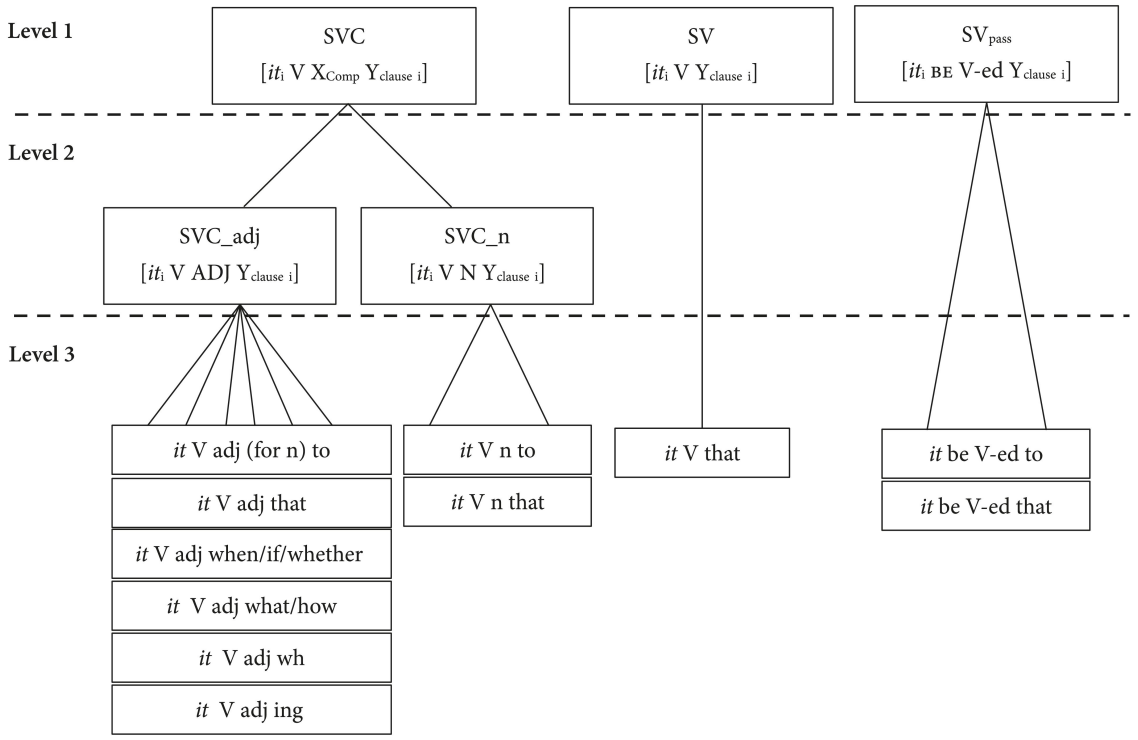

Figure 1: The network of the hierarchy of form. (Laporte et al. 2021: 242)

Using corpus data, they try to establish whether the different patterns listed here are also functionally distinct. To do so, they use three binary features (i.e. *hedges*, *attitude markers* and *emphatics*) — whose combination can in principle form up to 8 distinct functional categories — to pin down individual differences. The results show that some of the constructions in level 3 seem to have the same function, which they view as counterevidence to the principle of no synonymy.

Before looking into these results in detail, it is important to discuss the methodology. First, it is not clear whether all of these patterns actually constitute distinct *constructions* (in the technical sense of entrenched symbolic units). In fact, the authors consider some of these patterns to be *potential* constructions only (Laporte et al. 2021: 240). This makes sense given that, as Schmid (2020: 217) points out, corpora provide aggregate data from many speakers and they do not necessarily reflect individual patterns of entrenchment. Yet, as Hoffmann (p.c.) points out, "the principle of no synonymy pertains to individual mental grammars." If the patterns discuss are not constructions, the results obtained might not be relevant to the discussion since, as we have argued previously, the principle of no synonymy applies to constructions only. Second, one could argue that their results (whereby some of the level 3 'constructions' encode the same function) was to be expected prior to any corpus analysis since they look at 16 different forms but posit only 8 possible functions for those: the principle of no synonymy could not but be challenged. In addition, this methodology is inadequate to *prove* the principle wrong. Indeed, like in the previous study, the results only show that the 3 features used do not suffice to distinguish between a subset of constructions. Yet there may well be other conceptual dimensions, not considered in that paper, which contribute to the function of these constructions. Finally, as will shortly be discussed, the authors do not appear to take the concept of 'multiple inheritance'

into account, which is however crucial when looking further down the constructional hierarchy.

Laporte et al. (2021) show that the three constructions identified in level 1 each have a distinct function (namely, 'attitude', 'hedging' and 'observation'), which falls perfectly in line with the principle of no synonymy. Problems start to emerge at level 2. While the SVC_adj pattern inherits its 'attitude' function from the higher-level SVC construction, this is not the case of the SVC_n pattern which actually prefers the function of 'observation' already encoded by the SV_{pass} construction. This naturally raises the question of synonymy. However, the authors admit that this similarity is due to their "high-level functional analysis" (Laporte et al. 2021: 250) and that finer-grained distinctions can be found upon closer investigation: the SV_{pass} construction encodes '*impersonal* observation' and the SVC_n construction encodes '*direct* observation'. Though this qualitative analysis comes across as rather post-hoc, it highlights the need not to limit oneself to pre-established functional categories when making claims about the principle of no synonymy (which can therefore be maintained). The remaining question is whether similar distinctions can be found in level 3. For reasons of space, we will focus on the daughters of the SVC_adj construction. Laporte et al. (2021: 253) argue that all of these patterns inherit the 'attitude' function from their mother construction but that two clusters emerge. All of the constructions that contain a *wh*-clause seem to function as 'negative attitude markers', while the other patterns (i.e. with *that*- and *to*-clauses) function as 'general attitude markers'. The problem, they argue, is that no further distinctions can be found within those clusters, which they view as evidence against the principle of no synonymy (at least for low level constructions). We beg to differ. First, nothing proves that these patterns are distinct *constructions* (and the alleged lack of functional difference could precisely be used as an argument that this is not the case). One might argue for instance that there is only one general '*It* V Adj *wh*-clause' construction. Second, there *are* clear functional differences. While these patterns do not differ *pragmatically* (i.e. they all typically serve as negative attitude markers), the different *wh*-words that are used make them semantically different (since the meaning of *what* radically differs from that of *whether*, for instance). The function of these specific patterns results from multiple inheritance, in the sense that it is not only made of the pragmatic function inherited by the general SVC_adj construction but it also includes the individual function of the *wh*-words that are used. As a result, none of these patterns are semantically synonymous, which falls perfectly in line with corollary B of the principle of no synonymy. Unlike Laporte et al. (2021), we therefore maintain that the principle applies, even at lower levels of the constructicon.

In the remainder of this section, we examine and respond to a series of issues raised by Uhrig (2015) regarding apparent clashes between the principle of no synonymy and the modeling of language variation (and change). This turns out to be a discussion with important ramifications: as a theory of language, Construction Grammar needs to be clear about its capacity to adequately explain inherent variability and social stratification in the mind and the community (Östman & Trousdale 2013).

Before he discusses sociolinguistic variation directly, Uhrig (2015: 327) cites the interesting spelling pair *color/colour* as being differentiated by "social meaning" – i.e., the first item is associated with the broad regional variety of American English, and the

second with British English, justifying their distinction as two different constructions. Uhrig contrasts this example with other pairs such as *girly/girlie*, *convener/convenor*, *dependent/dependant*, *distracter/distractor*, and *ambience/ambiance*, claiming that they are a challenge to no synonymy, because they are variations of form at the level of spelling which "of course" do not lead to any differences in meaning. However, we do not believe these cases of spelling variation are a threat to no synonymy. Firstly, each of these examples would deserve a specific study or at least some amount of evidence to ascertain that the forms do indeed have identical meanings. Yet, Uhrig provides no such evidence. Take the example of *dependent/dependant*. Firstly, the Merriam-Webster dictionary indicates that "[t]he difference between *dependent* and *dependant* is merely a matter of preferred spelling. *Dependent* is the dominant form in American English for both the noun and adjective, while in British English, *dependant* is more common for the noun. *Dependent* is still used to indicate the adjective form in British English but its use in this form is uncommon."[3] Therefore, there appears to be a social meaning distinction between the two spellings that acts as a probabilistic constraint on their knowledge and use as distinct constructions. Furthermore, a quick search in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA, Davies 2008-) also reveals a clear frequency skew where *dependent* (22102 tokens) is almost 50 times more frequent than *dependant* (448), suggesting that there is a strong probabilistic constraint disfavouring the use of the second item in the pair in American English. Examining each of Uhrig's remaining examples is too fastidious for this paper, but there are reasons to believe that many, if not all of these spelling patterns might boil down to (skewed) inter-speaker variation that can be easily described while preserving the principle.

We now turn to the broader and more crucial problem of sociolinguistic variation. Uhrig (2015: 331) suggests that the principle of no synonymy is the "principle of no variation". In other words, he suggests that there is a logical contradiction between no synonymy and the natural mechanisms of language variation and change. We contend, however, that the criticism is not valid and that the principle can be preserved. As we see it, the root of the problem is that the principle of no synonymy of Construction Grammar is being narrowly interpreted as a principle of no semantic synonymy. This is made manifest in much of Uhrig's argumentation.

First, Uhrig bases his argument on an example of inter-speaker variation discussed by Bolinger (1977: 3), namely the pronunciation variants ['aɪðə] and ['i:ðə] for *either*. Bolinger says there might be some predictive factors for this difference, such as "social group", but that they do not affect the "content of a communication" – in other words, they are (semantically) synonymous. In addition, Uhrig makes use of Labov's (1972) concept of the envelope of variation, where "the variants are identical in reference or truth value, but opposed in their social and/or stylistic significance" (Labov 1972: 272), and states that it is "automatically excluded by [the principle of no synonymy]" (Uhrig 2015: 332). We believe there is an unfortunate misunderstanding of what the term "synonymy" denotes in the construction grammar notion of "no synonymy" as opposed to the views entertained above by Bolinger, Labov, and Uhrig, which gives rise to this apparent contradiction. Synonymy in these views is understood as

[3] Source: https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/spelling-variants-dependent-vs-dependant (last accessed: 14/12/22).

relating to referential or truth-conditional, i.e. semantic meaning. Yet the principle of no synonymy is not a semantic principle, but covers *any* distinct aspect of the meaning of a construction. This includes semantic meaning, pragmatic meaning, as seen in the case of allostructions, but it also includes the sub-component of pragmatic meaning that is *social meaning*, i.e, the social and/or stylistic significance. In some instances, social meaning is the main contrastive trait between two constructions, for example between the spelling variants *colour/color*, which Uhrig himself discusses and correctly analyzes. Therefore, the principle of no synonymy is perfectly compatible with socially stratified inter-speaker variation.

Uhrig also claims there is a clash between no synonymy and intra-speaker variation, on the basis that some speakers use different variants (cf. Labov 1972 on the use of centralized diphthongs in Martha's Vineyard), sometimes in the same setting such as the sociolinguistic interview. We are not sure we understand how this could in any way contradict the principle of no synonymy. Individual speakers have the ability to entrench a wide array of variants with different social meanings and flexibly use them as part of their dynamic construction of sociolinguistic identity (Lepage & Tabouret-Keller 1985; Eckert 2012), often in the same setting and in very short timespans.

Finally, a similar equation between 'synonymy' and 'semantic synonymy' is at the heart of Uhrig's claim that the principle of no synonymy is incompatible with language change: "For instance, syntactic change in the history of a language, such as the shift from the Old English word order OV to the late Middle English VO, does not necessarily entail a semantic change" (Uhrig 2015: 331). We completely agree that these two word orders are probably semantically synonymous. However, such a complex and widespread shift probably also entailed a number of distributional, pragmatic, and social changes inherent to the process of language change (Traugott 2012), which are well beyond the scope of this squib, but well within the scope of a principle of no synonymy that has not been straw-manned.

3 From 'no synonymy' to 'no equivalence'

Goldberg's (1995) principle of no synonymy passes both theoretical and empirical tests, and there is no questioning its descriptive (and predictive) accuracy. Contra Uhrig (2015), we therefore conclude that this principle is *not* overrated. At the same time, we acknowledge the recent concerns that have been voiced, which, we firmly believe, are not simply due to a lack of understanding. Rather, nearly thirty years after its first integration in Construction Grammar, we view these concerns as an invitation to fine-tune the principle and to make more explicit each of the crucial points that were discussed in this paper. Specifically, we propose to reformulate the principle as follows:

> *The Principle of No Equivalence*: If two competing constructions differ in form (i.e. phonologically, morpho-syntactically or even orthographically), they must be semantically, pragmatically and/or socially distinct.

One of the major changes concerns the name of the principle, which we believe is most explanatory when couched in terms of 'no equivalence'. This is because, as was just mentioned in the previous section, the notion of synonymy is too often understood

in a narrow sense as applying to semantic (i.e. referential/truth-conditional) meaning only. Although Goldberg's initial formulation makes it clear this is not how she uses the term, the ambiguity of the term 'synonymy' still shines through in some of the views discussed[4], and so it appears necessary to get rid of this ambiguity from the name of the principle.

Another crucial difference with Goldberg's initial formulation is the range of functions that are explicitly identified. Like Goldberg (1995), we believe it is important to maintain a clear distinction between semantic and pragmatic meaning, a distinction which has been shown to play a crucial role in the case of allostructions for instance. Although these two notions are usually dismissed in Construction Grammar (in favour of the more general term *function*), we concur with Leclercq (2020) that it is both useful and necessary to distinguish between semantic and pragmatic aspects of meaning. The notion of 'semantics' is used in its most traditional sense as referring to truth-conditional features of a construction. The notion of 'pragmatics' applies to non-truth conditional features (such as conventional implicatures, speech acts, attitudes, etc). In addition, we have shown that it is necessary to identify a third type of function, namely 'social' meaning. This type of meaning is usually subsumed under the notion of pragmatics (cf. Hoffmann 2022), and could be defined as including recurrent elements of speaker background and socio-cultural context that come to be entrenched and conventionalised in socially-specific utterance types (Schmid 2022), or in our framework, constructions. This includes but is not limited to classic supra-local social categories such as register, class, age, region, gender, etc. We believe that this tripartite distinction enables us to be most descriptively accurate when trying to pin down specific functional distinctions. Looking back at the modal domain again, it is clearly a semantic difference that sets apart *can* from *could* (in terms of temporal location and type of possibility expressed). By comparison, besides formal properties, it is a pragmatic feature that separates *can/could* from *be able to* (which is the only form conventionally associated with an implicature of actualization, cf. Leclercq & Depraetere). Finally, different modal constructions can also differ in social meaning. This is the case for *can* and *may*, for instance, which are typically used in different registers (*may* is more formal than *can*). Likewise, the double modal construction *I might can come tomorrow* in Hawick Scots (Morin 2021) is often analyzed as a regionally-specific alternative to a Standard English modal expression *I might be able to come tomorrow* for instance (cf. Brown 1991). It is crucial to understand that this revised principle therefore predicts language variation in that variants are constructions that can be semantically or pragmatically (near-)equivalent but that are crucially socially distinct.

It will have become clear that the principle of no equivalence captures the observation that each construction occupies a unique functional niche (be it at the semantic, pragmatic and/or social level). This is fundamental in Construction Grammar as this principle underpins other key phenomena. For instance, it is this functional specificity that enables statistical preemption (cf. Section 2.1). Among other factors, statistical preemption occurs because, in some contexts, speakers must choose between different constructions which therefore come in competition (Goldberg 2019). The notion of

[4] For instance, Cappelle (p.c.) admits using the term 'synonymy' in relation to *semantics* only (which is why allostructions, though *pragmatically* distinct, can be described as 'synonymous' since they are *semantically* similar).

competition refers to the inevitable onomasiological pressure to chose between alternative candidate constructions in expressing a certain function. Which construction is used thus depends on which meaning the speaker intends to communicate exactly (and the construction that matches this function will block those that do not). It will not have escaped the reader's attention that in our revised principle, the term 'competition' directly features in the definition. This is because the notion of competition is another crucial element of the principle, not always taken into account, though it plays a central role. Most of the constructions that we have discussed in this paper are either semantically, pragmatically or socially distinct. This is because these constructions can (in principle) all enter in a paradigmatic competition (i.e. they can all serve as alternative forms that need to be chosen from). There are constructions that never engage in such competitions however. Consider for instance the different realizations of the past morpheme *-ed* in English (i.e. [d] after a voiced consonant, e.g. *changed*; [t] after a voiceless consonant, e.g. *stopped*; [ɪd] after an alveolar stop, e.g. *rented*). In keeping with the usage-based approach adopted in Construction Grammar, Hoffmann (2022: 62) argues each form is probably stored as an individual schema, i.e. construction. If that is true (we believe it is), then the principle of no synonymy could seem to be challenged once more (since three different forms have exactly the same function). However, such examples do not threaten the principle in any way. Indeed, these three constructions never compete with one another: speakers are *not* at liberty to choose one of the three forms as they please to express past tense, they can only use that form which the linguistic (syntagmatic) context licenses. In other words, their functional equivalence would be a problem for the principle if the three forms could be used interchangeably, but this is not the case. This directly relates to the notion of distributional niche, which, as we saw in the case of the *that*/zero-form alternation (p. 5), plays a crucial role. We speak of distributional niche when a construction has a unique syntagmatic profile and does not enter a formal paradigm. When different constructions have distinct lexical, morphosyntactic and/or phonological constraints, they cannot compete, and so the principle of no equivalence is preserved.

This squib is part of a special issue that celebrates the 35 years of ground-breaking research in Construction Grammar since Fillmore et al.'s (1988) seminal paper. We hope to have shown that the principle of no equivalence comes out as a necessary adjustment in this theory of language in order to improve its theoretical consistency, its explanatory adequacy, and its descriptive power. There have been recent concerns on the nature of Construction Grammar and whether it is a falsifiable theory of language (Hoffmann 2020; Cappelle to appear); we view the present discussion as a wholesome example of how the sharpening of some core tenets of the theory ultimately contributes to answering this question positively, by spelling out more explicitly the exact conditions under which the principle of no equivalence is true or false.

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