

Spectacle and sensationalism in Construction Grammar

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Abstract

This paper concerns a think-piece on Kay & Fillmore (1999), “Grammatical constructions and linguistic generalizations: The *What’s X doing Y?* construction”. I argue that claims about non-compositional constructional meaning (i.e., the idiomatic meaning of incongruity ascribed to WXDY as a whole) should not be made too quickly. I also argue for a reappraisal of schematic representations of sub-constructional elements, specifically at the level of grammatical meaning. In particular, I submit that the meaning of incongruity is at least partially motivated by a similar set of meanings associated with the English present progressive, which is a necessary constituent of WXDY.

1 Introduction

In usage-based and cognitively oriented linguistics, the issue of granularity, or how much detail goes into the mental representation of linguistic structural knowledge, has never really been resolved (see, e.g., Sandra & Rice 1995 for an initial attempt at expounding the problem within cognitive linguistics), whether such representations concern formal or semantic categories or form-meaning pairings (i.e., constructions, both lexical and grammatical). Many suggestions to this effect have been made, most guided by the assumption/commitment that linguists should be concerned with discovering analytical constructs and mechanisms that can be argued to boast a certain degree of psychological reality, possibly or even preferably with relevance beyond the domain of linguistic architecture and processing. Fairly recently, for instance, Branigan & Pickering (2017) have famously proposed that structural priming offers an implicit method of investigating linguistic representations that should end the current reliance on acceptability judgments, providing empirical evidence regarding the nature and consistency of linguistic representations. At the very least, however, one might expect a certain consensus among those approaches that call themselves usage-based, including Construction Grammar in all of its variants, that linguistic knowledge is massively represented, possibly down to the level of (salient) individual usage events, given the bottom-up orientation of such approaches, which implies that (grammatical) rules are abstractions/generalizations over lower-level instantiations. Nevertheless, the question remains to what extent a linguistic description should aim to be a maximal model of the speaker (or of speaker and hearer) during the online process of speech production (and/or interpretation).

The discussion is nicely illustrated by past and ongoing debates about semantic networks and the representation of homonymy, polysemy, and monosemy. Concretely, should we or should we not assume that language users work with representations of different related or unrelated senses for any given ambiguous expression, while at the same time being sensitive to more abstract elements that may be shared between them? Once

again, that presupposes the idea that representations, including more schematic ones, is only analytically plausible if a language user demonstrably orients to them, i.e., is explicitly aware of them, or if they can be examined directly through a behavioral measure (like priming). Intuitively, then, that would rule out certain highly abstract forms of (e.g., semantic) representation, which a linguist may come up with but which cannot plausibly be held to be actively entertained by language users themselves. Still, the usefulness of schematic representations, alongside more obviously manifested concrete ones, follows quite naturally from an integrated approach to abstract structure and instance-based detail, denouncing the so-called rule/list fallacy (Langacker 1987; “generalizations are always rules, lists only contain exceptions”) as well as the complementary generality fallacy (Croft 1998; “only the simplest analysis is psychologically real”). In other words, any particular linguistic phenomenon can in principle be analyzed at various levels at once, and there is no one level that should be allowed to obscure or otherwise make potential factors of influence irrelevant. That is what I wish to argue in the present paper, and I will illustrate my point by focusing on the issue of constructional semantics and the bearing of simultaneous contributions by constituent elements on that overall level of meaning, even if, as in the case I am presenting below, that contribution is only apparent from a highly schematic perspective.

Construction Grammar, in essence, constitutes an attempt to unify the formal machinery used to describe symbolic constructions. Symbolic constructions are conventional associations of form and meaning of varying complexity, from individual morphemes to abstract syntactic patterns. A non-derivational grammar should represent syntactic and semantic information in an integrated way, with complexity achieved as an emerging property of interacting constituent elements merging within a given configuration. The case study presented in Kay & Fillmore (1999) was meant to exemplify these fundamental principles on the basis of an extensive analysis of one specific grammatical problem in English.¹ With this study, the authors wanted to demonstrate how the postulation of an independent, sub-schematic, and lexically partially specified construction in English can be analytically justified. What seems crucial in their line of reasoning is the assumption of exotic² semantic (but also formal) properties that can only be assigned to the construction as a whole, because they cannot be derived from its constituent parts.

In the following section, I will briefly go into some basic principles in Construction Grammar with respect to the semantic description of grammatical constructions. I will specifically address Kay and Fillmore’s claim that the global semantics of the construction they are discussing cannot be reduced to the sum of the semantics of its constituent parts, a well-known claim in Construction Grammar. I will argue, however, that the way they

¹ Kay and Fillmore mention a number of predecessors also concerned with unification from a formalist perspective, such as generalized phrase structure grammar, head-driven phrase structure grammar, lexical functional grammar, and others. What these theories have in common is that they treat syntactic “projections” as primarily being generated from the lexicon.

² The use of the term “exotic”, and of the words “spectacle” and “sensationalism” in the title of this paper, is not meant to represent Kay & Fillmore’s wording of the line of argumentation developed in their article. Rather, they are used here solely for rhetorical (or indeed, dramatic) effect. The inspiration for their use comes from Kay & Fillmore’s own references to concepts like “vanilla *doing*”, representing “ordinary” uses (of *do*) which they argue are not directly involved in the more idiosyncratic, non-compositional types of meaning characterizing idiomatic constructions (such as *WXDY*). In contrast, I argue that such ordinary uses, of *do* but also of other elements in the construction, may in fact contribute to constructional meaning without detracting in any way from a construction’s overall idiomatic status, and that these should therefore not be prematurely dismissed as constructionally irrelevant. Doing this anyway is what I will call “sensationalist” etc. in this paper.

want to demonstrate this claim is staged too spectacularly. Specifically, I will argue that the claim only holds partially for the construction at issue, and other motivating factors not identified by the authors can be found in the meanings of individual elements contributing to the constructional meaning. For this to be convincing, it is necessary to refer to schematic semantic representations of grammatical (and lexical) expressions, and, as such, I will at the same time hope to show the (practical) relevance of abstract linguistic representations.

2 On the *What's X doing Y* construction

Kay & Fillmore (1999) discuss the utterance in example (1a) as involving a special grammatical construct in English, i.e., the *What's X doing Y?* construction (WXDY):

- (1) a. Diner: Waiter, what's this fly doing in my soup?
b. Waiter: Madam, I believe that's the backstroke.

The exact interpretation of this construction is said not to be based on normal processes of semantic composition. In other words, there is a semantic residue at the level of constructional meaning that cannot be explained either on the basis of inferential reasoning in terms of conversational logic (i.e., the meaning is not strictly pragmatic). This special semantic feature is then presented as the conceptual counterpart of the construction's formal properties, which involve a number of idiosyncrasies as well.

The expression of "incongruity" is proposed by the authors as part and parcel of WXDY's semantics, in contrast with other constructions that may be formally similar or very close but which do not express that same meaning. The judgment that the fly does not belong in the soup, let alone that it could develop some meaningful activity in that context, belongs to the *conventional* meaning of (1a). In terms of illocutionary force, we are not dealing with a literal question or request for information (but rather with an accusation or reproach), which is what the waiter's response in (1b) exploits. The meaning of incongruity cannot be attributed to one or several of the individual expressions making up the construction and is in this sense idiomatic. When subtle changes are applied, as in (2), the constructional meaning disappears and the utterance can only be taken literally (as a request for information):

- (2) What's this fly in my soup doing?

Moving the locative expression *in my soup* leads to an interpretation that lacks the typical rhetorical value of WXDY.

Formally, the WXDY construction features a specific ordering of the constituents involved, together with a number of additional formal requirements. The semantics of three of these, which I believe are downplayed by the authors, are the subject of the following section: the English progressive, its instantiation by the main verb form *doing*, and the interrogative pronoun *what*. Since each of these elements makes a semantic contribution that Kay and Fillmore disregard to a certain extent, the question can be raised whether the constructional meaning of incongruity comes on top of the individual constituent meanings, or whether it is better described as directly motivated by (some of) them. In the latter case, which I will argue for, it is still possible to claim that the

construction has a special meaning, but not that such a constructional meaning *needs* to be fully idiomatic (i.e., unmotivated by the construction's constituent parts).

3 Local sources of interpretation

3.1 The English progressive

The value of incongruity that is ascribed to WXDY entails an intrinsically negative judgment that is not per se present in possible paraphrases of the construction. Kay and Fillmore attribute this value directly and exclusively to the use of WXDY, which expresses the speaker's disapproving attitude in and of itself. It is said to be *conventionally* associated with the construction's use, instead of, for instance, a conversational implicature generated on the basis of certain contextually guided assumptions (e.g., if the actions of a fly in a liquid cannot be interpreted in other terms than as an attempt to get out, then the question what that fly is doing is ostensibly non-cooperative). For one, the meaning of incongruity is not cancelable, in contrast with real context-bound inferences as in (3):

- (3) Look what your children are doing in my garden. How adorable!
- (4) ?What are your children doing playing in my garden? How adorable!

Kay and Fillmore propose that the basic meaning of WXDY is one of incongruity, or the expression of a negative form of "surprise". Since this negative judgment cannot be canceled, as in (4), the authors conclude that the utterances in (3) and (4), though formally close, are semantically basically unrelated. The utterance in (4) illustrates the WXDY construction and therefore must express incongruity, while the utterance in (3) features a "normal", temporal use of the progressive.³ However, even the utterance in (3), by virtue of the presence of a progressive verb form, can also be argued to suggest an element of surprise or, perhaps somewhat less spectacularly, "contingency" (cf. below). This raises the question whether some conceptual connection can be found between uses of the progressive in English featuring relatively less obvious extra non-temporal connotations (in the sense of being more obviously, but perhaps not exclusively, motivated by the speaker's concern with expressing ongoingness) and its (apparently obligatory) appearance in the WXDY construction.

If an element of surprise, however carefully defined, can be demonstrated to be part of the semantics of the English progressive more generally, then the negative value that it displays in the context of WXDY can be seen as a special, but to a certain extent still motivated, association. In that case, the constructional meaning, of incongruity, can at least partially be related to the semantics of one of the construction's constituent parts. Specifically about the progressive, the authors state that it loses its normal aspectual function as part of the WXDY construction. One of the arguments that is meant to show this concerns the combinatorial possibilities of the progressive with different types of lexical aspect (i.e., imperfective states vs perfective events). Kay and Fillmore observe that the progressive can be combined with imperfective verbs that normally resist progressive

³ In terms of Construction Grammar, the utterance in (3) can be seen as an instantiation of highly abstract constructional schemas in English, which is why it is neither formally nor semantically particularly idiomatic. WXDY, in contrast, involves a concrete schema, which is lexically and syntactically rather specified and thereby triggers the expectation of having a special communicative function.

marking outside of WXDY (presumably barring clear cases of aspectual coercion,⁴ not mentioned by them). Compare the examples in (5) and (6):

- (5) What's he doing knowing the answer?
- (6) *He's knowing the answer.

However, in example (5) the *-ing* form in *knowing*, for one, is arguably not “a progressive” strictly speaking, but rather the present participle that is one of two elements, together with auxiliary *be*, that make up the progressive construction. Such present-participle uses appear not, or significantly less, subject to the aspectual restrictions noted by Kay and Fillmore. Uses of present participles with a modifying function (e.g., modifying the subject *he* in 5) in principle sanction all kinds of verbs, including the most imperfective of them all, viz., *be*. Moreover, contemporary developments in Present-Day English testify to a gradual shift whereby aspectual constraints are loosened in favor of a more liberal use of the progressive in combination with imperfective verbs, provided some kind of dynamic construal is imposed on a given situation (including, for instance, the evocation of internal changes-of-state and a certain level of effort needed to sustain a certain state, and/or a suggestion of limited duration). Probably the best-known contemporary example in the literature about this phenomenon is the commercial slogan “*I'm lovin' it*”. This is exactly what is meant by the term “coercion”, and, again, such uses appear to be gaining ground and become less marked. In an utterance like in (5), the verb form *doing* contributes to the interpretation of the ‘knowing’ at hand as an observable activity (‘*showing* that you know’) rather than as a purely internal mental state (the canonical or default interpretation of *know*). This “perfectivizing” interpretation of lexically imperfective verbs is a more general phenomenon with progressive marking and certainly not limited to WXDY.

The relative nature of a verb's lexical aspect (*Aktionsart*) or, in other words, its contextual variability, is a well-known phenomenon. While some verbs can typically be placed at either end of the scale of imperfective/perfective states of affairs, the majority seems to be situated somewhere in the middle, where their aspectual interpretation depends on contextual factors. This can be called a matter of construal (see also Langacker 2001). The following examples illustrate this:

- (7) Theo {is lying/*lies} on the beach.
- (8) Belgium {lies/*is lying} between France and the Netherlands.
- (9) I {am living/live} in Brussels (right now).

Depending on the type of grammatical subject, a verb like *lie* allows both an imperfective and a perfective reading, as in (7–8): Theo's position is much more volatile (one could say, contingent) than a country's and in principle subject to his own will/control, and therefore more temporary⁵ and perfective. This makes progressive marking more eligible. *Theo lies on the beach* is only possible when Theo is construed as somehow immobilized, e.g., in a coma, or in general-validity (e.g., habitual) statements: *This time of day, Theo usually lies on the beach*. A verb like *live*, in contrast, is less outspoken in its “natural” preferences for either aspectual construal, and sometimes will allow two different construals of the same

⁴ See, for instance, de Swart (1998) and Michaelis (2004).

⁵ In Cognitive Grammar, this is technically a matter of “boundedness”: a perfective construal of a verb like *lie* entails a notion of instability, and thus of termination. This termination, however, need not be construed as *intrinsic* (i.e., telic). That is why I call the verb *do*, which is atelic, perfective as well.

situation, as in (9). The selection of the simple vs progressive verb form expresses how the speaker gauges the temporal (in)stability of the situation: systematically, the progressive form suggests a more temporary construal of the situation at hand, as illustrated straightforwardly in (9). More generally, there seems to be a conventional association between the use of the (present) progressive⁶ in English and a suggestion of contingency, temporariness, and (epistemic) non-necessity. The expression of contingency, a modal concern, can even be said to be at play in contexts which seem to focus on mere temporal progression. Goldsmith & Woisetschlaeger (1982) call this the “phenomenal” nature of a situation marked by the progressive, as opposed to their notion of “structural” knowledge that is expressed by means of the simple present. It can be argued, and indeed it has been (cf. the references in Footnote 5), that this contrast is *always* immanent in the relation between simple vs progressive marking, even in contexts where the modal connotations of the use of the progressive are not as obvious as in, say, the WXDY construction. This is illustrated by Goldsmith & Woisetschlaeger (1982: 80) by means of the “minimal pair” in (10):

(10) The engine doesn’t smoke / isn’t smoking anymore.

Basically, events in the world can be described in two ways: “what things happen in the world” (accident) and “how the world is made that such things may happen in it” (essence). This is not an aspectual but an epistemological judgment, and in (10), as in fundamentally *all* uses of simple vs progressive present-tense marking in English, determines the choice of aspectual construal involved: the simple present suggests reference to a structural property or state (e.g., of the engine in 10, with the speaker *guaranteeing* that it will not smoke anymore), while progressive marking suggests a construal of the same state as a temporary coincidence. In other words, events (in fact, the majority of them) may be taking place in the world so that they can be described, but that does not mean that they *need* to have taken place, as the expression of some structural quality of the world. This is what being phenomenal amounts to, and it is this that is signaled, sometimes more openly than at other times, by the progressive in English.

The phenomenal quality that Goldsmith and Woisetschlaeger propose as a central and constant feature of the English progressive correspondingly can be said to act as a semantic schema that is instantiated in different ways in various usage contexts. There are contexts, as with the use of the WXDY construction, in which a situation is explicitly flagged as incidental (i.e., not structural/expected), which may often be the cause of some kind of negative evaluation (e.g., of incongruity). In the following examples, the expression of temporal progression (i.e., the aspectual meaning of the progressive) can arguably be claimed to be conceptually relatively backgrounded, in favor of a focus on the epistemic status of a designated situation:⁷

⁶ It is important to note that this seems to be a property of the progressive that is perhaps more manifest in English than in other (related) languages that also boast a progressive construction. The reasons for this are historical and reviewed in De Wit (2017), which also posits a basic modal meaning for the (English) progressive, besides (or on top of) its canonical temporal meaning. In addition, the properties referred to here are more manifest in the present-time paradigm, for conceptual reasons. These are discussed in, e.g., Brisard (2022), which also proposes the term “contingency” as an umbrella term to characterize the many non-temporally motivated uses of the progressive.

⁷ Examples are taken from the Santa Barbara Corpus of spoken American English and are discussed more elaborately in De Wit & Brisard (2014).

- (11) They were supposed to go up... at the end of... August.
 ... When .. they usually run,
 and,
 ... (TSK) (H) <VOX fish **weren't running** this year VOX> , you know,
 it's like everywhere.
 ... Nothing's **doing** what it's supposed to,
 (12) ALINA: but of course that got ripped off also.
 VOX But never mind VOX> .
 (Hx[=])
 LENORE: [He's <X **having** X>] bad luck with that car.

Notice that, while *do* in (11) is a typically perfective verb, the verb *have* in (12) is typically imperfective but construed here as explicitly temporary and involving a type of experience that can most accurately be described as a kind of dynamic event “happening” to a person (instead of that person just “having bad luck” as a matter of course). Likewise, in contrast with a normal world in which fish “run” once a year (*they usually run*; simple present), they are not this year in (11), and that is construed by the speaker as a remarkable, unexpected situation morphologically marked on the verb by the progressive (*fish weren't running; nothing's doing what it's supposed to*). Here, it is grammar, by way of the progressive, that helps the speaker flag a situation as somehow atypical and marked, on top of any other lexical means that they might have available to do this. Now, the expression of atypicality and unexpectedness is of course closely related to the semantic notions (“surprising and/or undesirable”) that Kay & Fillmore (1999: 29) identify as relevant for the WXDY construction. This raises the question whether the semantics of WXDY is (solely) constructionally motivated, or whether sub-constructional elements can be said to contribute to the constructional meaning. I believe it is fair to say that, by now, a case can be made to attribute just that to the obligatory presence of progressive marking in the construction.

Kay & Fillmore (1999: 5) wonder whose judgment of incongruity is at stake with the use of the WXDY construction. They claim that the construction itself remains vague about this and that the addressee is supposed to resolve this on the basis of contextual knowledge. This is why they add the mark “prag(matic resolution)” to the argument of the so-called *incongruity-judgment frame* (at the highest representational level of the construction). They motivate this by analyzing the example in (13), in which a criminal defense team is discussing its strategy:

- (13) How are we going to deal with our client's confusing account of what the photographs were doing in his briefcase?

Whose judgment of incongruity is it that is expressed in (13)? Kay and Fillmore claim that nothing that is explicitly associated with this sentence, or with its utterance, can be identified as a source of the incongruity judgment, and that it is exactly because this judgment is exclusively constructionally motivated that it cannot *in principle* be ascribed to an element that is an explicit part of the construction. But is it actually the case that no sentence-internal component can be related to the expression of incongruity in the subclause in (13)? It seems that the expression *confusing* implicitly (in Cognitive Grammar terms, subjectively) evokes an entity that is confused, a target of discomposure that is not explicitly encoded but that can still be said to function as the implicit source of the

judgment of incongruity that is evoked.⁸ Once again, there seems to be a premature decision to avoid attributing elements of the constructional meaning to entities at lower levels of representation. Perhaps the reason behind this is an understandable desire to motivate a postulated constructional meaning as much as possible at the level of the construction, making the case in a way more “sensational”. I do not think, however, that this is wholly necessary: a case can be made for a constructional meaning without (elements of) that meaning being completely idiomatic in the sense of unmotivated from a compositional perspective, and I believe such a move can be avoided by, among other things, analyzing sub-constructional lexical and grammatical elements more systematically in more schematic terms, as illustrated with the progressive above. Also, from a cognitive perspective there is no need to assign a pragmatic status to the procedural meanings that are ascribed to many grammatical expressions and constructions involving various presuppositions, whereby the addressee is “instructed” to identify referents independently. An encyclopedic cognitive semantics, which does not categorically distinguish between semantic vs pragmatic meanings, allows for an integrated treatment of implicit meaning elements in ways that a formal semantics typically does not. Identifying the source of the incongruity judgment in WXDY was presented here as a (brief) case in point.

3.2 “Vanilla *doing*” and *what*

Ordinary vanilla doing can be contrasted with more idiomatic uses, usually as part of a specific construction. With respect to WXDY, Kay and Fillmore identify a variant use of the verb *do* specifically related to the construction and unrelated to other usage types. However, hints or molecules of vanilla doing might still be said to persist in this construction’s palate.

Kay and Fillmore mention that the verb *do* in (14a) does not refer to a literal activity and is in this sense idiosyncratic. In general, the WXDY construction does not sanction simple-present uses of this verb (14b), which adds to its morphosyntactic markedness:

- (14) a What’s this scratch doing on the table?
 b *What does this scratch do on the table?

The fact that a construction as in (14b), with a perfective verb taking the simple present, is marked in English as a way of describing an ongoing singular event follows from the more general characterization hinted at above: due to its association with designating structural situations, the English simple present with perfective verbs is generally restricted to statements with general validity, such as generic ones, or other “special contexts” (see Langacker 2001) and typically not available for describing events coinciding with the time of speaking — that is what the progressive does. In fact, this demonstrates that *do* is still construed as a perfective verb in the WXDY construction, which already suggests a minimal link with vanilla *do*. Schematically (think of uses of so-called operator *do* for instance), what this verb minimally involves is reference to a perfective event (this can be called its schema), limited in time and with at least a hint of dynamicity. The latter can be interpreted in a very abstract way in terms of a functionality which one entity has for another, or of the manifest lack of it, as in (15–16):

⁸ This of course presupposes a conception of a cognitive semantics (as in, e.g., Chen 2023) that minimally distinguishes between a kind of figure vs ground (one that is not necessarily available in all versions of Construction Grammar), such that it is not just explicitly encoded entities that are at play in the conception of a state of affairs as expressed by a clause.

- (15) What does this scratch do on the record?
 (16) Look at what this color does to / ?in your room!

Examples (15) and (16), both featuring the simple present, are not instances of WXDY, but the use of *do* here to describe some type of (desired or undesired) effect does echo the sense of incongruity that Kay and Fillmore posit for WXDY. In fact, the notion of incongruity can be paraphrased as the absence of a plausible function for a given object within a specific frame: this (absent functionality) is what the *what* pronoun is about, and the obviousness of this absent functionality is why the question typically does not need/trigger an answer, i.e., is rhetorical.⁹ While there is no sense of any literal activity in these utterances either, that is no reason to deny any kind of connection with prototypical uses of physical *do*. The latter is potentially problematic because it invites analyzing what *doing* is doing in WXDY in terms of pure (“meaningless”) auxiliaries, which is exactly what Kay & Fillmore (1999: 21) do. I believe there is neither a need nor a good reason to do so.

It is not the case that WXDY *doing* does not contribute to the semantics of the construction, as the authors claim: the verb marks the perfective (temporally bounded) profile of the situation construed as incongruous, with all the semantic implications that come with such a profile (e.g., its temporary/non-structural nature), and minimally indicates a (negative) effect of the presence of the X constituent on what is evoked in the Y constituent, which implies a certain dynamicity (a hallmark of perfectivity) on the part of X. It is therefore not surprising that leaving out *do* from the construction leads to less than idiomatic variants without any notion of dynamicity or effect:

- (17) Why is this scratch / there a scratch on the table?

Technically, Kay & Fillmore (1999: 19) note, they do not treat WXDY as a lexical lemma for *be*, the head of this verbal construction, because such an analysis would, according to them, incorrectly suggest that the value of incongruity is just a meaning of *be*, and not of the construction. But given the central role of the progressive in this construction, such a suggestion, viz., that the value of incongruity follows from one (or several) element(s) of WXDY (e.g., *be... V-ing*), would actually not be entirely useless. This would not make the construction less interesting, because enough special (morphosyntactic) features remain to justify a separate treatment as a special object. Besides the contribution of *be... V-ing*, the presence of *do* may be said to have at least an equal impact on how the construction should be described, to the extent that certain typical “selections” can be directly ascribed to it.

4 Conclusion: Meaning everywhere

This think-piece has focused on two things. First, I have attempted to demonstrate the usefulness of discussing schematic semantic representations (i.e., of the progressive and of the category of perfective verbs, most abstractly instantiated by the verb *do*) in relation to

⁹ For instance, a possible reply to (15) could be something like “It produces audible pops”, presumably a negatively valued effect (cp. “What does this footnote do?” – “It attempts to clarify a point from the text”). Example (16), too, could trigger a similarly non-facetious response, in contrast with most uses of WXDY, which are rhetorical. We could say that WXDY involves an ironically intended question about the functionality of an unexpected element that does not prompt a sensible reply.

constructional meanings. In passing, I have also briefly argued for a more cognitively oriented semantics, which nowadays is of course present in many varieties of Construction Grammar, because this can contribute to certain questions at the level of constructional meaning as well (such as the question of the source of the judgment of incongruity evoked). Together, these points have served as arguments meant to substantiate the main aim of this paper, which was to warn against the temptation to make the case for a constructional meaning that is unmotivated by the construction's component parts in an overly and needlessly spectacular way.

Kay and Fillmore posit the validity of analyzing the WXDY construction as a special grammatical object, and they are largely successful in this. They argue convincingly that the grammar of English contains a specific convention (rule, schema, construction) that motivates sentences of the type WXDY, and only those. Methodologically, their approach implies that features of the data are filtered out of the analysis if they can be attributed to other constructions in English (including separate morphemes/lexemes). This is how Construction Grammar aims to explain both the most idiomatic as well as the most general grammatical patterns of a language. From this perspective, it is tempting to focus (only) on strictly idiomatic properties of a given pattern, at least in a paradigm that is out to demonstrate the non-compositional nature of certain constructions. However, sometimes this goes at the expense of attending to more general properties (though there is no compelling theoretical reason in Construction Grammar why this should be so), such as the schematic meanings of selected constituents. I believe this is partly what happened in Kay & Fillmore (1999). The main problem I have with this is that, when it happens, we lose track of the idea that the idiomatic aspects of language do not tell us anything except in interaction with motivated or non-arbitrary aspects. When looked at more closely, some of the more mundane ("vanilla") features of a construction might actually turn out to harbor interesting elements contributing to that same construction's overall "exotic" feel.

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