Review of Thomas Hoffmann. 2022. *Construction Grammar: The Structure of English*

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1   The starting point

Introductory textbooks on Construction Grammar are surprisingly rare, given that this field of cognitive linguistics comes with a more than 30-year long history and has established itself as a major field of morphosyntactic research within linguistics in general. Besides a state-of-the-art handbook (Hoffmann & Trousdale 2013), the only English textbook available to the public has been Hilpert (2019) for a few years now.

This raises quite some expectations for Thomas Hoffmann's textbook, which has been in the making for a long time, as the author admits in the preface. For the sake of transparency, Hoffmann makes clear that parts of the book draw on earlier publications of his, ranging from his own contribution to the handbook he co-edited (Hoffmann & Trousdale 2013) to articles mostly on theoretical aspects of Construction Grammar.

Following his own line of research, the basic approach for the book is rooted in usage-based Construction Grammar, as opposed to more formal approaches. But Hoffmann makes heavy use of a self-developed, light formalism for what he calls 'constructional templates', a notation that proves useful as a quick, shorthand insight into the formal and functional properties of the constructions he analyses throughout the book. As a matter of fact, there are quite a few of those analyses.

2   The structure of the book

Hoffmann's book consists of eight chapters. Following the Introduction (Chapter 1), a commitment to usage-based Construction Grammar (Chapter 2) prepares the ground for the remainder of the book, by distancing itself from traditions in generative linguistics as well as from other branches of Construction Grammar. Hoffmann then goes on to visit different levels of grammatical description from a Construction Grammar point of view: morphological constructions (Chapter 3), words, phrases and idioms (Chapter 4) as well as complex phrases and clauses (Chapter 5). Chapter 6 is devoted to language variation and change, whereas Chapter 7 goes back to the start and

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discusses a variety of usage-based and non-usage-based approaches to Construction Grammar and their use of formalisms. Chapter 8 provides an outlook on emerging research topics beyond the scope of the textbook.

Each chapter concludes with a brief summary as well as a selection of exercises to provide additional food for thought. In the appendix, a useful glossary and a list of abbreviations provide quick access to important terminology. An index of constructions is added to guide the reader through the numerous example constructions used throughout the book.

3   The onset

Right at the beginning of Chapter 1, Hoffmann sets off to introduce the notion of the Saussurean sign, which serves as the foundation of Construction Grammar, since constructions are seen as form-meaning pairings and therefore basically Saussurean signs. As usual when working with this notion of a linguistic sign, the examples that come to mind first are words. Words being the most basic realizations of linguistic signs, Hoffmann uses them to introduce constructions on a lexical level. He then goes on to extend these ideas to morphological constructions (e.g. the prefix *un-* to turn the meaning of adjectives into the opposite), idiomatic constructions that are partially schematic (in this case the idiom *take sth. for granted*) and finally fully schematic constructions like resultative constructions (*he shrieked himself unconscious*). This way, the chapter serves as a compact overview of the different levels of linguistic description which Construction Grammar usually targets – leaving out phenomena beyond the clause level.

As expected, Hoffmann also provides a (very simple) working definition of the term 'construction' (p. 4) but does not quote any existing definitions. He also provides an important terminological distinction by differentiating between 'constructions' and 'constructs' as the instances of constructions (p. 4) – a distinction that is often missing in serious scholarly work. Hoffmann also does not fail to introduce the aforementioned formalism that will be used throughout the book (p. 3) as well as pointing out that his book focuses primarily on syntax (p. 9), an important detail that is mirrored by the structure of the book.

In the second part of the chapter, Hoffmann points out four basic assumptions that all Construction Grammar approaches share: the lexicon-syntax continuum, the taxonomic network organization, surface-structure orientation and cross-linguistic variability and generalization. However, when discussing the second assumption, Hoffmann gets a little carried away by comparing Construction Grammar approaches in terms of their level of formalization (pp. 14–15). Given that differences between the approaches will be dealt with in Chapter 7, one might ask if this discussion is needed at this early stage and could not be postponed until later.

The usage-based focus of the book is emphasized with Chapter 2. It starts with a detailed discussion of usage-based approaches to language acquisition, including a comparison to classic generative accounts that are based on the 'poverty of the stimulus' argument. In great detail, Hoffmann explains the different stages of usage-based first language acquisition, mostly following Tomasello's (2003) seminal work. After

that, he discusses the role of exemplar models in research on category building, while he also introduces important terms like type and token frequency, entrenchment, analogy, semantic frames and pre-emption.

The last third of the chapter is dedicated to a more in-depth discussion on what constructions actually are. Hoffmann explains his view of the internal structure of a construction that consists of a PHONOLOGY and a MORPHOSYNTAX level on the form pole and a SEMANTICS and a PRAGMATIC level on the meaning pole. Surprisingly at this point, Hoffmann takes inspiration from constructionist approaches that are not usage-based (like Sign-Based Construction Grammar) as well as approaches that are at best considered belonging remotely to Construction Grammar, like Parallel Architecture (Jackendoff & Audring 2019). However, his inclusion of Frame Semantics for descriptions on the semantic level is refreshing. Finally, Hoffmann comes up with an extended version of the earlier working definition for 'construction', which does not only include the aforementioned levels of descriptions but also draws upon Goldberg's (2006) state-of-the-art definition (p. 43). In order to stress the empirical nature of usage-based linguistics, the chapter concludes with a brief introduction into corpus linguistics, including a list of corpora that Hoffmann uses for authentic examples throughout the book. No doubt that this is quite a ride for a single chapter!

4   The core (grammar)

Chapters 3 to 5 form the backbone of Hoffmann's textbook, since this is the place where he aims to go through all levels of grammatical complexity from a Construction Grammar point of view, beginning with morphology. Since morphology has only recently received more serious attention in Construction Grammar, it is very positive to see that Hoffmann takes a close look at it in Chapter 3. The chapter starts out with a comparison between morpheme-based approaches to morphology (like in traditional grammar) and word-based approaches (like in Construction Grammar). What makes this discussion interesting is that Hoffmann picks up on traditional terminology (like 'free' and 'bound' morphemes) and explains how these concepts are handled in a constructionist approach. Hoffmann also touches on inflectional morphology and the distinction between 'lexical' and 'grammatical' morphemes as well as word formation, including the three major types (derivation, compounding and conversion) and several special cases. He frequently comes back to language acquisition and usage-based principles in general, making the discussion rather in-depth at some points.

In Chapter 4, Hoffmann covers words, phrasal and idiom constructions. To account for words, he uses a distinction between 'lexeme constructions' on the type level (e.g., KICK) and various 'word constructs' (*kicks*, *kicked*, etc.) on the token level. However, he does not limit the discussion to individual lexemes or words, but also mixes in thoughts on valency and argument structure, as well as frame-semantic perspectives. In his view of word classes, Hoffmann adopts the Cognitive Grammar tradition of defining nouns as prototypically denoting 'things' and verbs denoting 'processes' (Langacker 1991).

The discussion of noun phrase constructions focuses mainly on existential (definite and indefinite) constructions. After a few pages of combining the concept of a phrase

with that of a construction, Hoffmann expands on this by describing possible networks around definite and indefinite nominal-phrase constructions. Since this is the first time constructional networks are investigated, it would have been a good move to introduce possible types of relations between constructions and the idea of construction families. However, Hoffmann remains on a very descriptive level, providing analyses of the constructions themselves rather than notions or methods which help to look at them. Subsequently, he introduces modifiers into his model of phrase constructions. It certainly makes sense to unfold phrase constructions in such a step-by-step fashion – however, making this more transparent from the beginning would serve the reader better in order to navigate through the chapter more easily. The following sections on adjective, verb and prepositional phrases are considerably shorter and follow their own content logic.

During these sections, Hoffmann quickly brushes on valency aspects like the number of arguments to a verb or obligatory prepositional phrases – without actually making use of the term 'valency'. This is unfortunate, not only because Construction Grammar and valency theory share certain interests, but also because it would provide an easy access point for readers who are already familiar with valency theory and would like to expand their understanding with Construction Grammar.

The final section of this chapter, on idioms, feels a little disconnected. Obviously, idioms are not only a phenomenon on phrase level, and they are, as Hoffmann admits, "a fairly complicated and heterogeneous phenomenon" (p. 168). Since he almost exclusively sticks to classic examples like *kick the bucket* or *spill the beans* and does not include more recent research, it might be better to give this topic more room in a separate chapter.

Chapter 5 deals with the heart of Construction Grammar: argument structure. In this chapter, Hoffmann tackles additional topics like tense and aspect constructions or information structure. He begins by reviewing the basic argument structure constructions of English. This is probably the best example of him doing justice to the subtitle of the book, *The Structure of English*. Hoffmann covers resultative constructions, intransitive constructions, transitive constructions, the conative construction, the copulative attribute construction, the intransitive motion construction, the caused motion construction, the causative *with* construction, the *way* construction and finally the ditransitive construction. Why he has opted for this particular order of presentation remains unclear. It is certainly not the order in which students will most likely encounter these constructions in the literature, nor is it an order based on empirical criteria like frequency or productivity of these constructions. Interestingly, the *way* construction, which Hoffmann deems "marginal" (p. 188), is given priority over the ditransitive construction, which is more abstract and most likely much more productive. In his description, Hoffmann largely stays within Goldberg's (1995) approach to argument structure, but he also points to more recent literature as well as critical issues.

In the following subsections, Hoffmann concentrates on the network of argument structure constructions, taking the ditransitive construction as an example, before moving on to the interaction between lexical and phrasal constructions when discussing the role of the passive voice within the use of constructions. In passing, readers will find a brief introduction to collostructional analysis (Stefanowitsch & Gries 2003)

– showing that he does not strictly divide between theoretical and methodological issues in his presentation.

The rest of Chapter 5 somewhat builds upon the discussion of argument structure constructions, which provides nice coherence. Section 5.2 is on tense and aspect constructions and remains quite short for such a wide topic. Instead, Hoffmann combines an overview over past, present and future tense constructions with just a few words about their progressive variants. Section 5.3 tackles 'core clause constructions', again taking a Construction-Grammar perspective on a topic that is well covered in standard grammars. The focus here is on WH- and imperative constructions, in no particular order, resulting in a grouping of constructions which mixes up formal and functional aspects. Without the notation of the constructions discussed during the text, it might be tough for some readers to follow along. On a more positive note, the sections on information structure (5.4) and filler-gap constructions (5.5) come with clear explanations and nicely blend into what has been looked at before, since they not only make use of ideas on argument structure constructions, but also on the discussion of clause constructions.

5   The bonus tracks

Having passed the extensive examination of constructions on different levels of linguistic description in Chapters 3, 4 and 5 on more than 180 pages, the remaining three chapters of the book are considerably shorter. While the core of the book consists of three chapters that are inherently interconnected, Chapters 6 and 7 must be seen as wildcards or mere 'bonus tracks', since they somewhat stand on their own and could have discussed any topic related to Construction Grammar. Hoffmann decided to include aspects of constructional variation and change (Chapter 6) and an overview over the different branches of Construction Grammar and the role of formalisms (Chapter 7).

Chapter 6 deals with constructional variation and change, whereby Hoffmann spends the most part on the former, the latter taking up considerably less space. The choice to include these topics for one of the chapters seems reasonable, since variation and change are indeed relevant in the context of the main part of the book. However, I find it a little hard to understand what the exact objective and/or the learning outcomes of the chapter are.

Section 6.1 on synchronic variation largely offers a readable introduction to sociolinguistics, including a discussion of Labov's famous *fourth floor* studies. Besides the fact that Hoffmann frequently adds constructional templates for (especially phonological) constructions, aspects directly related to Construction Grammar sometimes fall behind. However, it is worth mentioning that Hoffmann somewhat dedicates this section to pragmatic and sociolinguistic variables within constructions, something that is often neglected in 'vanilla Construction Grammar'. With this in mind, it is interesting to see that he includes aspects like language contact – only from the perspective of English, of course.

Overall, Chapter 6 is more geared towards a discussion of examples and constructional templates, less towards theoretical or methodological aspects. This also holds

for Section 6.2 on diachronic change. With an analysis of future constructions, a nice link to Chapter 5 is drawn. The only theoretical aspect Hoffmann mentions is the distinction between the notions of constructional change and constructionalization (p. 254). The reader has to decide individually whether this focus on examples over a theoretical and methodological toolbox is actually helpful.

Chapter 7 stands in stark contrast to the main part of the book , since it provides an overview of the different – usage-based and non-usage-based – branches of Construction Grammar. This is certainly nothing the reader would not be able to find elsewhere, as Hoffmann himself admits (p. 258), since the major branches of Construction Grammar are all covered in Hoffmann & Trousdale's (2013) handbook. Hoffmann divides them into three groups: complete inheritance approaches (Berkeley and Sign-Based Construction Grammar; Section 7.2), models of human language processing (Parallel Architecture, Fluid and Embodied Construction Grammar; Section 7.3), and non-formalized usage-based approaches (Cognitive and Radical Construction Grammar; Section 7.4).

At this point one might not only ask what the objective of this chapter is (since its content can largely be found elsewhere), but also why Hoffmann does not discuss any literature published after 2013, giving the impression that this chapter is somewhat outdated. Also, principles of usage-based Construction Grammar are already covered in Chapter 2, resulting in some redundancy. Given that a more up-to-date overview is provided by Ungerer & Hartmann (2023), it would have been better to use the word count for some other topic beyond what has been covered in the main part in Chapters 3 to 5. Maybe the extensive discussion of language acquisition in Chapter 2 would have been better suited for a separate chapter, separated from more basic aspects so that readers not interested in language acquisition could easily skip it.

6   The surroundings

The final chapter (Chapter 8) attempts to put into practice what has been learnt throughout the book by giving a brief introduction to the CASA model (Constructional Approach to Syntactic Analysis; Herbst & Hoffmann 2018) which Hoffmann co-developed (Section 8.1). It is a very brief introduction, but nevertheless provides some kind of toolbox to get started with an actual Construction Grammar analysis.

The other three sections in this chapter are again a collection of aspects Hoffmann picked out to give some inspiration for further research. Section 8.2 on multimodality picks up on a hot and relevant topic in Construction Grammar. Hoffmann even argues for a view that highlights multimodality in *constructs*, not so much *constructions* – providing a solution for the controversial question on how to include multimodality in the modelling of constructions. Section 8.3 deals with the notion of creativity – another topic Hoffmann has worked on before. He emphasizes that creativity goes beyond what is also known as productivity and expresses the need for more research on how such creativity is possible in language use. Finally, Section 8.4 is a reflection on the controversial topic whether Construction Grammar is a falsifiable theory. This theoretical discussion is a nice round-off for a book like this, which is mostly concerned with actual analyses without in-depth theoretical discussions. It is too bad that Hoffmann's book appeared too early to include a reference to Cappelle (2024),

who dives deeper into this topic.

The book closes with a comprehensive, combined glossary and list of abbreviations, particularly useful when looking at the numerous constructional templates given throughout the book. Besides definitions of standard terminology, Hoffmann also included entries for non-Construction Grammar terms like frame elements and various corpora. The last pages of the book are taken up by an index of constructions and a general index, the latter being somewhat sparse (with a length of a little more than 3 pages) and also a name index at the same time. For example, even though Hoffmann devotes large parts of Chapter 4 to phrasal constructions, there is no entry for *phrase*, let alone *noun phrase* or *definite noun phrase* in the general index.

7   The verdict

Are the high expectations for a textbook on Construction Grammar met? Hoffmann's book is certainly a comprehensive account of Construction Grammar on most (but not all) levels of linguistic description. It seems that the author tried to cover as much as possible, especially in Chapters 3, 4 and 5. While this undoubtedly speaks for his expertise in the field, it is not always a service to the uninitiated reader. It is hard to tell what target audience Hoffmann had in mind when designing this book. For students that like to dip their toes into Construction Grammar, the analyses in the main part of the book might be too lengthy and tedious at some points, even though they pick up on the reader's prior knowledge of (functional) grammar. This by itself, by the way, is a plus point for the book. It might attract a lot of readers unfamiliar with Construction Grammar and assures good accessibility for beginners. However, the question arises what the more experienced scholar might pick up from Hoffmann's book. To me, the most interesting part would be again Chapters 3, 4 and 5, since they provide ideas on how to approach traditional grammatical categories from a Construction Grammar perspective – which makes for a long to-do list for constructionist approaches.

If we focus again on beginners as the target audience, there is some room for improvements from a didactic point of view. For example, it would be very helpful to provide an overview at the top of each chapter on what topics and aspects to expect and what the learning outcomes are supposed to be. Keep in mind that a textbook is not necessarily read entirely front to back. The exercises at the end of each chapter could be redesigned to serve different levels of difficulty. It would also be helpful to provide at least some remarks on how possible solutions might look like.

The amount of information Hoffmann includes in his book is certainly impressive. However, someone new to Construction Grammar might wish for more guidance through the various aspects of one particular topic. For example, the part on language acquisition in Chapter 2 takes up more than 20 pages (pp. 17–38), making it a rather long chapter. While research on language acquisition undoubtedly is a major branch of usage-based linguistics and provides strong evidence for the plausibility of grammatical constructions, one might ask if such a lengthy discussion is placed best at the outset of an introductory book. An experienced reader might face less problems, but undergraduates that want to get their foot into Construction Grammar and might even want to apply it to a research question of their own might struggle at this point. This problem also holds for Chapters 3, 4 and 5, which are all more than 60 pages

long. The way things are presented right now makes it sometimes easy for the reader to get side-tracked and hard to locate where to look when you have a certain research question in mind. But this should be a straightforward fix: in a second edition, Hoffmann could rearrange the text slightly to separate the essentials from the deeper dives and those from the good-to-know stuff. To guide the reader, a finer-grained chapter structure or even splitting of some chapters into several shorter ones could be used alongside a transparent marking of the level of importance of a particular section.

To conclude, a second edition might want to prioritize the didactics behind the presentation more. It should not so much follow an inherent content logic, but take into consideration levels of difficulty and reader expectations. I believe that this would strengthen this book's contribution as a comprehensive and insightful textbook. There is nothing wrong with its content, which nevertheless makes it a valuable addition to the relatively small range of introductory literature on Construction Grammar.

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