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# Reflecting on 35 years of constructions

Lotte Sommerer[1] & Stefan Hartmann[2]
[1] University of Freiburg [2] HHU Düsseldorf

**Abstract**

35 years have passed since the publication of Fillmore et al. (1988), which can be seen as one of the foundational works of Construction Grammar (CxG). The present special issue celebrates this anniversary with a collection of papers that revisit influential papers or ideas from the history of constructionist approaches. In this introduction, we motivate our choice of Fillmore et al. (1988) as a seminal paper for CxG, and give a brief overview of the ideas behind this collection of papers as well as of the papers themselves.

## 1 35-ish years of constructions

Most readers of this journal will be familiar with Conceptual Metaphor Theory, an approach to figurative language pioneered by Lakoff & Johnson (1980) that continues to be quite influential in Cognitive Linguistics. One often-cited example of a conceptual metaphor is THEORIES ARE BUILDINGS. Arguably this metaphor indeed captures the scientific process quite well, including the development, rise and potential decline of theories and frameworks (Kuhn 1970). As it is hard to pinpoint the birth of a building – The first architectural plans that someone drew? The first bricks that were laid? The completed construction? –, it is not easy to track the origin of influential scientific ideas. In the case of Construction Grammar, there are various candidates that arguably have shaped the field so significantly that they can be regarded as the starting points of the framework. One obvious candidate would be Goldberg's (1995) seminal monograph. However, Goldberg could already draw on concepts that had been under development for quite a while. As Boas (2021: 43) points out, the basic ideas of CxG can be traced back to Fillmore's (1968) influential paper "The case for case". Although this paper focuses on issues of semantic valency, and uses the term "construction" only in the sense in which it is commonly used in syntactic studies (i.e., referring to syntactic patterns, rather than all kinds of form-meaning pairs), some key ideas of CxG are already anticipated there, for instance the key insight that some constructions are highly selective regarding the lexical items they combine with. As a result, we see Fillmore's work as a starting point for the constructional enterprise.

To honor his line of work, we have decided to edit a special issue in which we invited the authors to submit empirical studies as well as non-empirical think-pieces which take a cue or concept from early influential papers and discuss to what extent

**Corresponding authors:** Lotte Sommerer, University of Freiburg,
lotte.sommerer@anglistik.uni-freiburg.de; Stefan Hartmann, HHU Düsseldorf, hartmast@hhu.de

the ideas hold up in more recent approaches, especially in the light of new empirical evidence. The idea is that the original arguments and ideas are briefly summarized after which the authors present their own research, (critically) reflecting on the concept(s) highlighted and proposed in the key papers. Several colleagues have followed our invitation and have submitted highly interesting, thought provoking papers.

Three of the papers (Ungerer, Haspelmath, Silvennoinen) explicitly deal with the notion of 'constructionhood' and the question of how constructions should be conceptualized and defined in the first place. In most versions of CxG today, morphosyntactic knowledge in the speaker's mind is conceptualized as symbolic and gets represented in the form of constructions. Constructions have been described as emergent 'conventionalized form-meaning pairings' or 'form-function units' (Goldberg 2006: 3; Diessel 2011: 830). A construction is a symbolic sign in the sense that it links a formal side to a particular meaning and a function via a symbolic correspondence link. The 'form' side of a construction is associated with syntactic, morphological and phonological information, whereas the 'meaning' side is understood to include all semantic-pragmatic and discourse-functional properties (Croft & Cruse 2004: 258; Boas 2013: 234).

Although there seems to be superficial consensus about how to broadly define constructions, scholars have come up with different definitions of what a construction is throughout the years. For instance, in the earliest constructional models, a construction was defined in a rather restricted way as a grouping of more than one word which has some idiosyncratic behavior, i.e. either it has unusual formal characteristics or a meaning or pragmatic effect which is not derivable by any rules (e.g. idioms, fixed phrases) (Fillmore et al. 1988; Goldberg 1995). In later, usage-based, constructional work, some scholars started to use a much wider definition. For example, Bybee defines constructions as "frequently used and thus conventional word sequence[s]" (Bybee 2013: 55) or "processing units or chunks" which are "sequences of words (or morphemes) that have been used often enough to be accessed together" (Bybee 2001: 173). This definition clearly allows for high frequency to be a constituting factor. Later, and inspired by other definitions, Goldberg (2006: 5) adjusted her definition to the following:

> Any linguistic pattern is recognized as a construction as long as some aspect of its form or function is not strictly predictable from its component parts or from other constructions recognizable to exist. In addition, patterns are stored as constructions even if they are fully predictable as long as they occur with sufficient frequency.

Similarly, Hoffmann & Trousdale (2013: 5) point out that idiosyncracy is no longer the only criterion that can lead to independent constructional status:

> anything that has been encountered often enough to be accessed as a whole is considered a construction, even if it exhibits no idiosyncrasy of form and meaning (and therefore could also be assembled on-line as a construct that is fully licensed by the combination of other constructions).

As is well known, Goldberg's "sufficient frequency" criterion begs the question of what we consider "often enough". The question is how frequent a construction has to be

for it to get cognitively entrenched. Even in CxG models which do not strive for psychological plausibility, the question remains what should be taken as an acceptable frequency threshold for a construction to be realized as an independent node in the constructicon. Recently, Hilpert (2021: 20) offered a definition which provides a more nuanced perspective on frequency. "A linguistic form is a construction if it deviates from canonical patterns, if it shows non-compositional meanings, if it has idiosyncratic constraints and if it has collocational preferences" (Hilpert 2021: 20). It is not necessarily raw frequency that counts, but relative frequencies and collocational attraction, which should be taken into consideration as one out of several criteria to decide on constructional status.

Since Goldberg (2006), most definitions of what counts as a construction include single morphemes as well. This commitment has manifested itself in the literature as Goldberg's famous claim for language to be "constructions all the way down" (2006: 18). At the same time, Goldberg has recently provided a much more psychological definition: "Constructions are emergent clusters of lossy memory traces that are aligned within our high-(hyper)! dimensional conceptual space on the basis of shared form, function and contextual dimensions" (Goldberg 2019: 7).

When looking at all these definitions, three main controversies can be identified when it comes to defining constructions. One issue is whether high token frequency is enough for constructional status. Another debate revolves around the question if words (i.e. single lexical units) should be considered constructions as well. Thirdly, some ask if constructions are primarily mental entities entrenched in the minds of individual speakers or if they should better be conceived from a (social) population perspective. Related to this, the following questions pertain: What are the strategies to decide on constructional status? Which strategies should we as construction grammarians use to demarcate constructions in a particular language when we work empirically? Is constructional status a categorical issue or a gradient notion?

## 2 The current special issue

This is where our authors come in: **Tobias Ungerer**, in his paper "A gradient notion of constructionhood", argues that earlier categorical views, which assume that linguistic units either qualify as a construction or do not, have increasingly given way to a gradient conception of what a construction is. In that sense linguistic patterns vary in their degree of "constructionhood." His paper summarizes key arguments for the gradient perspective, before addressing some of its implications for current and future constructionist research. These include the question of how constructionhood can be quantified, how appropriate thresholds can be chosen, and to what extent constructional networks can capture gradience. **Martin Haspelmath** in "On what a construction is" proposes a definition of the term construction for general linguistics and relates it to definitions which have been proposed in the previous literature. Importantly, and in contrast to many others, he defines constructions as at least partially schematic (i.e. having one or more open slots) excluding single lexemes from his definition. At the same time, he sees constructions as parts of languages as historically evolved semiotic systems, not (necessarily) parts of mental knowledge systems. He refrains from a specific mentalistic definition. In a similar vein, **Olli O. Silven-**

**noinen** asks the question, "Is construction grammar cognitive?". His paper examines the view that usage-based construction grammar is a cognitive theory of language. In constructionist theorizing, constructions are typically assumed to be mental representations. In Silvennoinen's paper, this view is examined against the backdrop of the distinction between mental and social levels of analysis. He argues against treating constructions as mental representations by definition, and advocates caution in using the notion of construal in characterizing constructional meanings. Constructions are argued to be social conventions that function as intersubjective cues for meaning. Specific instances of constructions (i.e. constructs) are produced with the aid of mental representations, but constructions are not necessarily coextensive with these representations.

Some aspects that are discussed in the three papers just mentioned relate to other issues like the popular notion of allostructions, polysemy, and the principle of no synonymy. These issues are discussed in depth in some of the other papers, in particular in the contributions by Zehentner and by Leclerq Morin. **Eva Zehentner**, in her article "Allostructions re-revisited", sheds light on and discusses the important notion of allostructions, a concept first introduced by Bert Cappelle in one of the most well-known and widely-cited contributions to this journal (Cappelle 2006). Zehentner critically reflects on the concept of 'allostructions' as proposed in Cappelle (2006) and further developed in Perek (2012, 2015). Her main focus is on open questions that persist regarding the specific theoretical assumptions underlying the idea of allostructions and constructemes, as well as empirical challenges that might be met when discussing alternation phenomena in allostructional terms.

**Benoît Leclercq** and **Cameron Morin**, in their contribution "No equivalence: A new principle of no synonymy", discuss the no-synonymy principle – famously introduced by Goldberg (1995) – which states that when two constructions differ in form, they must be semantically or pragmatically distinct. As concerns have been raised regarding its theoretical and descriptive accuracy (e.g. Uhrig 2015; Laporte et al. 2021), the authors present a critical discussion aimed at showing that the principle is neither overrated nor inaccurate. It gets argued that the principle would gain in precision and explanatory power if it were to be conceptually fine-tuned under a new name, namely the 'principle of no equivalence'. Notions of competition and distributional niche are crucial to understanding the principle and alongside the 'semantic' and 'pragmatic' types of meaning, the notion of 'social' meaning is another crucial factor that needs to be taken into account.

In their corpus-based study "*Casi palmo de la risa*. A corpus-based study of a Spanish constructional idiom with the causal preposition de" , **Carmen Mellado Blanco** and **Pedro Ivorra Ordines** analyze the Spanish construction [$V_{\text{bodily reaction}}$ de DET $N_{\text{emotion / feeling}}$], whose constructional meaning can be paraphrased as 'experience $N_{\text{emotion / feeling}}$ in its highest degree'. In line with the topic of this special issue, they link their discussion to Fillmore et al.'s (1988) notion of "formal idioms" such as *the x-er the y-er*, i.e. lexically open idioms, which Fillmore et al. distinguish from substantive or lexically filled idioms like *so far so good*. Following up on recent work that has set out to combine phraseology and Construction Grammar, they argue that we can assume an idiomaticity continuum on which the causal construction [V *de* NP] and the [$V_{\text{bodily reaction}}$ de DET $N_{\text{emotion/feeling}}$] occupy different positions. The latter

they see as a metonymic or metaphorical extension of the former construction. The authors arrive at the conclusion that "idioms can be conceived of as pairings of form and function with fuzzy syntactic profiles", which opens up exciting possibilities for studying them from a Construction Grammar perspective.

Finally, additional papers and their ideas have been revisited by our contributing authors. For instance, **Frank Brisard**, in his paper "Spectacle and sensationalism in Construction Grammar", returns to one of Kay & Fillmore's (1999) seminal pieces, namely the article "Grammatical constructions and linguistic generalizations: The *What's X doing Y?* construction". While the *What's X doing Y* construction, as in *What's that fly doing in my soup?*, has often been described as non-compositional, Brisard argues that claims about a non-compositional constructional meaning should not be made to quickly, and demonstrates how the seemingly purely idiomatic meaning of the WXDY construction can perhaps be attributed to local sources of interpretation. Specifically, he demonstrates that schematic semantic representations of the progressive on the one hand and of the category of perfective verbs such as *do* on the other can help us understand the semantics of the WXDY construction. From this point of view, Construction Grammar can essentially be seen as "an attempt to unify the formal machinery used to describe symbolic constructions". Also, Brisard argues for an even more cognitively-oriented semantics in Construction Grammar.

The issue of cognitive plausibility also lies at the heart of **Simon Kasper** and **Christoph Purschke**'s contribution, entitled "Whatever happened to the Scene Encoding Hypothesis? Salience and pertinence as the missing links between the Usage-Based Model and Scene Encoding". Like Brisard, they revisit an idea from a highly influential publication, namely Goldberg's (1995) seminal monograph: the Scene Encoding Hypothesis, according to which argument structure reflects how people perceive situations and events. They observe that the attention in constructionist approaches has shifted away from the Scene Encoding Hypothesis in favor of the usage-based model as put forward by e.g. Langacker (2000), which puts factors like frequency and entrenchment center stage. They argue that the interplay of two factors, salience and pertinence, with unexpected stimuli being seen as 'salient' and expected ones being seen as 'pertinent', can bridge the gap between the semantically-oriented Scene Encoding Hypothesis and the usage-based model.

Overall, then, the contributions to this special issue highlight that Construction Grammar is a field that keeps reflecting on the problems and limitations of its key concepts, thus contributing to a long-standing and stimulating discussion on open questions in the field (see e.g. Hilpert 2018; Hoffmann 2020; Cappelle 2024). Importantly, however, the papers do not only point to open questions and problems but also propose constructive and, in many cases, innovative solutions to these problems. Some of the contributions were written by linguists who come from outside the "inner circle" of Construction Grammar, which allows for a much-needed fresh perspective. In sum, the contributions also show that Construction Grammar is a flourishing field that will certainly continue to thrive another 35 years and longer.

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