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# 'WHAT'S IN A NAME?' SENSES OF THE TERM 'CONSTRUCTION' IN LINGUISTIC STUDIES

*Introduction.*
The term 'construction' is neither completely new nor particularly problematic. However, having been used for describing disparate phenomena, there is no commonly accepted definition of the term in linguistic literature. The purpose of the paper is to present the different meanings attributed to the term 'construction' by the most representative linguists.
*1. Views of constructions before construction grammars.*

In traditional descriptive grammar the term (grammatical) construction was and is still not always used as a strictly defined term. Starting out from different aspects selected as definitional criteria, descriptive grammarians make various classifications of constructions. Quirk et al (1985) take into account the criterion of the verb class of the clause's predicate and distinguish intransitive, monotransitive, ditransitive, complex transitive and copular constructions. Another classification is made starting from the general meanings that clauses express in multiple sentences: additive, adversative, alternative, causal, conditional, concessive, consecutive, final. A third criterion used in the classification of constructions by descriptive grammarians is information structure, in particular the assignment of topic and focus in a clause. Thus, constructions can be: cleft and pseudo-cleft, active and passive, existential, etc. Quirk et al. (1985: 1377-1414) call such units "sentences" and/or 'constructions'. The term 'construction' is used by Givon (2001) in the sense of "clause type". In addition to the types of constructions mentioned above, English also exhibits a number of individual constructions such as the cognate-object construction, the marked-object construction and others.

In a broader sense, the term 'construction' refers to any linguistic unit larger than a word that is, clauses, sentences and phrases alike, such as infinitive, participial and gerund constructions or nominal and appositional constructions. What is essential for any combination of words to be a construction is that they must represent an integral whole. This is obvious for sentential and clausal constructions but less so for smaller units, i.e. phrasal patterns, or combination of words that form a constituent. For language users constructions are arrangements of words that are functional, that is meaningful in the widest sense of the word. Schonefeld (2006: 5) argues that constructions are loosely understood as "(primarily clausal) grammatical patterns, as particular formal configurations of words with certain functions associated with them".

The following pages, devoted to the notion of construction viewed from more theoretical perspectives, will indicate that the notion of construction is theory-dependent and covers linguistic phenomena that are not necessarily the same.

In American structuralism, (Bloomfield 1984 [1933], Harris 1946, Wells 1947) the term 'construction' is associated with the notions of "constituent' and 'constituent structure'. More precisely, any recurrent (functional) group of constituents is conceived of as a construction. A constituent is defined as any linguistic unit or construction that enters into some larger construction. In the American structuralist school the notion of 'construction' is not restricted to the level of clause but sometimes subsumes any smaller expression



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provided that it is still a complex form. This leads to a further subdivision into morphological and syntactic constructions, with the former extending the notion of construction to morpheme combinations (e.g. *duke* and *-ess* combine in the form *duchess*) and the latter – consisting of free morphemes – including compound words, phrases and clauses/sentences.(e.g. *poor John* and *ran away* combine in the form *Poor John ran away*). American structuralism cannot, however, account for cases of complex ambiguous constructions such as *They are [visiting scholars]* vs *They are visinting [scholars].*

In Generative Grammar (Radford 1988) the term 'construction' relates to the constituent phrases of a sentence and its rewrite rules. These rules are applicable to lexical and functional categories alike and license all of a language's potential constituents. The re-write rules or phrase structure rules together with transformations (e.g. move α) can also be assumed to generate all the constructions (syntactic configurations) occurring in a language. The notion of construction in its sense of clause or phrase that serves a specific function is absent from generative models of language. In the Minimalist Program grammatical features carried by words suggest which word can merge with which word(s). These features are (1) head features which describe intrinsic grammatical properties such as tense for verbs (2) complement features (which describe the grammatical complements they take and (3) specific features (which describe the kinds of specifier/subject they can have. In this model there is no need for constructions (Schönefeld 2009:11). In the Minimalist program syntax reduces to a simple description of how constituents drawn from the lexicon can be combined and how movement is possible (Marantz, 1995: 380). In all versions of generative grammar the term 'construction' is used non-technically and refers to particular clause/sentence types, such as the passive construction, the depictive or the resultative construction. In its more technical sense, i.e. a form associated with a particular function, the term is no longer needed, since any specific expression which does not follow from the principles of universal Grammar is relegated to the lexicon or to the periphery of a language's grammar. However, in his 2000 publication, Chomsky acknowledges that grammatical constructions are useful in descriptions of a language even if they have no theoretical standing (Chomsky, 2000: 8)

In corpus linguistics the notion of construction covers not only clausal and phrasal patterns but also lexical templates such as proverbs and verbal formulae, idioms and various types of collocations. Strings of words or lexical bundles such as *and the*, *of the*, *a new* do not meet the requirements for being constructions, that is (1) they are not self-contained units or constituents of larger constructs and (2) they do not exhibit the feature of being functionally related.

*2. Constructions in cognitive linguistic studies*

Construction grammar is an alternative approach to the analysis of syntactic structures, alongside Generative Grammar. It emerged from the necessity to explain idioms; the study of idioms led to the rethinking of the syntactic representation proposed in the generative framework since the semantic and syntactic unpredictability of idiomatic constructions represents a problem for the generative theoretical framework. Construction grammar has grown largely out of the work on frame semantics (Fillmore 1985) and an experientially based approach to language (Lakoff, 1987). It was Fillmore and Kay (1988) who first coined the term Construction Grammar. Their early work on idioms and idiomatic phrasal patterns such as *let alone*, *even*, and *What's X doing Y*? laid the foundations for many of the variations of Construction Grammar that have since developed.

The term 'Construction Grammar' is used to refer to related cognitive approaches to grammar which share certain guiding principles. One of its basic tenets is that no clear



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boundary can be drawn between grammar and the lexicon, i.e. syntax and semantics. Another major assumption is that the meaning of a particular construct is the result of the integration of the meanings of lexical items into the meaning of the construction (s).

3.In construction grammars the notion of construction is of central importance; these theories of language regard constructions as the basic units of grammar. Construction grammarians define 'construction' in Saussurean terms, seeing it as a symbolic configuration, a complex sign, a pairing of form and meaning.

Though his approach can be situated in the generative tradition, Fillmore puts the old notion of construction back to centre stage, making obvious that the elimination of the notion of construction in its sense of structures with particular use and meaning deprives a linguistic model of the possibility to account for important language data. Fillmore emphasizes that constructions are not merely a formal pattern, but formal patterns having particular meanings and uses associated with them. He distinguishes between substantive and formal idioms, that is, lexically filled idioms with all the elements fixed, on the one hand, and lexically open ones with some elements fixed and others free to choose in accordance with a language's structural principles on the other.

The Construction Grammar strand of Fillmore et al. invokes the non-predictability criterion as a condition *sine qua non* for recognizing a linguistic unit as a construction. Actually, this is the standard position concerning the specific conditions under which the construction status can be granted for a particular meaning-function correspondence:

> "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 recognized to exist". (Goldberg, 2003: 219)

In Langacker's understanding, constructions subsume both complex items and syntactic structures. His view relates to Bloomfield's who used the term 'construction' to also refer to morpheme combination, i.e. complex words, and who spoke of the meaningfulness of syntactic constructions. Langacker views construction as a symbolic complex expression of a language, as a combination of symbolic structures. This means that fully and partially lexically specified idioms as well as complex lexical items and also the more schematic (abstract) syntactic patterns or phrase structure rules can be covered by the term 'construction'.

In Cognitive Grammar phrase structure rule figures as constructional schemas. A constructional schema is 'a template representing in schematic terms the common relationship among component and composite composite structures observable across the set of specific expressions that support its extraction (Langacker, 1993: 3), Constructional schemas function as nodes linked by categorizing relationships of elaboration and extension. Langacker (1987) maintains that constructions are partially compositional in the sense that the component parts give clues to the meaning of complex structure. Besides these, all kinds of peculiar expressions such as formal and substantive idioms (in Fillmore's sense) as well as complex lexical items, such as derivations and compounds (the meanings of which may be quite opaque) fall under the notion of construction.

Croft (2001) proposed a variety of grammar called Radical Construction Grammar. He believes that constructions are the basic units of syntactic representation. His inventory of constructions includes everything from simple words to fully schematic and regular patterns.



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Goldberg **(**1995) reintroduces and re-establishes constructions as a theoretical concept in linguistic theorizing, trying to explain the semantics of English clause patterns. Her understanding and definition of the term 'construction' is close to Fillmore's. The criterion of unpredictability is also defining for a construction, in the sense that at least one of the properties of a construction must not be predictable from its constituent parts and its formal make-up. As a consequence, the unpredictable form-meaning associations need to be stored or listed to be available to the speaker. Goldberg's (2006) later definition of construction differs from Langacker's in that it also subsumes simple units (morphemes and simple words). Another difference is Goldberg's criterion of "a stored unit, in the sense of mastered routine. Langacker uses the term 'construction' for any composite symbolic structure, no matter whether it is a stored unit or a novel expression.

In Goldberg's (2003) view constructions are units learnable on the basis of input and general cognitive mechanisms and are expected to vary cross-linguistically:

> "Crucially, all linguists recognize that a wide range of semi-idiosyncratic constructions exist in every language, constructions that cannot be accounted for by general universal or innate principles or constraints". (Goldberg, 2003: 222)

She further states that two constructions in different languages can be identified as instances of the same type of construction if and only if they serve a closely related function and form. For example, two constructions might be of the passive type in that they share certain functional and formal characteristics even if they are not identical.

Another important idea discussed in Goldberg (1995) relates to the notion of 'fusion', used "to capture the simultaneous semantic constraints on the participant roles associated with the verb and the argument roles of the construction". Goldberg's Construction Grammar assumes that fusion or lexical constructional integration is facilitated by the Semantic Coherence Principle and the Correspondence Principle.

The Semantic Coherence Principle states that participant roles are matched with argument roles with which they overlap, such that one can be construed as an instance of another. For example, general categorization principles enable us to determine that the THIEF participant role of the verb steal overlaps sufficiently with the argument role AGENT, because both share semantic properties such as ANIMACY, INTENTION, CAUSATION and so on.

The Correspondence Principle states that profiled argument roles are obligatory matched with profiled participant roles. If the verb has three profiled participant roles, then one of them may be fused with a nonprofiled argument role of a construction.

*Final remark*.

In this paper we have presented an overview of the main approaches to the notion of 'construction' in the last twenty years. The decisive factor that unites all the senses discussed above is the idea that constructions are symbolic units, that is, units that link a particular form to a particular meaning, with meaning understood in its widest sense as the representation of a particular semantic and/or discourse function. The term 'construction' as used in Construction Grammar constitutes a broadening of the traditional notion. According to Construction Grammar, syntactic phenomena can never be described adequately without reference to semantics and pragmatics.



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## RÉSUMÉ


**'WHAT'S IN A NAME?' UNE APPROCHE LINGUISTIQUE DU SENS DU MOT *CONSTRUCTION***

*Le but de cet article est de présenter les sens dans lesquels le terme 'construction' a été utilisé dans la grammaire descriptive, traditionelle, dans le structuralisme americain, dans la grammaire générative, dans la linguistique cognitive, etc.*



**Mots clés**: *construction, constructions de la structure argumentale, fusion, le principe de la cohérence sémantique, grammaires des constructions*.





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