

CONSTRUCTIONS

- The notion of construction, which comes from structural linguistics, was abandoned by formal linguists (e.g. Chomsky) in favor of postulating a transformational apparatus regulated by universal syntactic principles independent of semantics.
- But the notion was reinstated into linguistics by cognitive linguists following the analysis of “there” constructions made by Lakoff (1987).
- One of the best known proponents of the constructionist approach to language is Goldberg (1995). There is now strong psycholinguistic evidence that constructions are mental constructs (cf. Goldberg & Bencini 2005; Eddington & Ruiz de Mendoza 2010).
- A construction is generally defined as a conventional meaning-form (or function) pairing (Goldberg 1995, 2006).
- The definition in the Lexical Constructional Model (Ruiz de Mendoza, 2013):
“ [...] a form-meaning (or function) pairing where form affords access to meaning and meaning is realized by form to the extent that such processes have become entrenched, through sufficient use, in the speaker’s mind and are generally recognized by competent speakers of the language in question to be stably associated or are at least potentially replicable by other competent speakers of the same language with immaterial variation in its form and meaning.”

**CONSTRUCTION TYPES
IN TERMS OF FORM**

- “All levels of grammatical analysis involve constructions” (Goldberg 2006: 5). Thus, constructions can range from morphemes (which are meaning units) to complex conventional expressions:
 - “Fruitless” is an amalgam of two meaningful units: fruit + less (‘producing no fruit’; hence ‘futile’, ‘having no visible result’).
 - “An apple a day keeps the doctor away” is an idiomatic construction conveying the idea that eating nutritious food will keep you healthy.
 - “What’s X Doing Y?” conveys the idea that the speaker is worried or bothered by the situation the speaker is rhetorically asking about (e.g. *What’s the child doing in the fridge?*) (Kay & Fillmore 1999).

**CONSTRUCTION TYPES
IN TERMS OF MEANING OR
FUNCTION**

- ARGUMENT STRUCTURE CONSTRUCTIONS:
 - Ditransitive X CAUSES Y TO RECEIVE Z: *Paul sent Joe a package* (Subj V Obj1 Obj2)
 - Caused-motion X CAUSES Y TO MOVE Z: *She sneezed the napkin off the table* (Subj V Obj Obl)
 - Resultative X CAUSES Y TO BECOME Z: *She kissed him unconscious* (Subj V Obj Xcomp)
 - Intransitive Motion X MOVES Y: *The fly buzzed into the room* (Subj V Obl)
 - Conative X DIRECTS ACTION at Y: *Sam kicked at Bill* (Subj V Obl at)
- *Scene Encoding Hypothesis*: “constructions that correspond to basic sentence types encode as their central sense event types that are basic to human experience” (Goldberg 1995: 39); the transitive construction codes the basic event of an agent performing an action that either affects or has an object within its scope.

- IMPLICATIONAL CONSTRUCTIONS:
 - What's X Doing Y?: *What's the child doing in the fridge?* [the speaker is bothered by an ongoing event]
 - Who's Been XP Y?: *Who's been messing with my laptop?* [the speaker is bothered by a past event he has just become aware of]
 - *Don't You X Me!:* *Don't you "daddy" me!* [the speaker is upset that the addressee is trying to mitigate the consequences of his misbehavior by using an endearing appellative]
 - *I told you so! !* [the speaker reminds the addressee that he was warned about the undesired consequences of his behavior]

- ILLOCUTIONARY CONSTRUCTIONS:

- REQUESTING: Can You (Please) X?: *Can you (please) drive faster?*
- PROMISING: You Shall X: *You shall have another chance (I promise)*
- SUGGESTION: You Ought To XVP: *You really ought to try this new stuff*
- OFFERING: May I Help You X?: *May I help you cook?/with the meal?*
- THREATENING: XIMP Or I YVP: *Hands up or I will shoot you dead*
- THANKING: XP Means A Lot To Me: *What you said means a lot to me*
- APOLOGIZING: I Am Sorry (XP): *I'm sorry I bothered you*
- PARDONING: No Offense Taken: *It's okay. No offense taken*
- BOASTING: Nobody XVP Like Me: *Nobody rides a horse like me*

- DISCOURSE CONSTRUCTIONS

- X Let Alone Y: *I won't eat that garbage, let alone pay for it* (Fillmore, Kay & O'Connor 1988).
- Just Because X Doesn't Mean Y: *Just because we don't talk doesn't mean I don't think about you* (cf. Bender & Kathol, 2001).
- X As Is Evidenced By Y: *This threat is continuing to this day, as is evidenced by the recent attacks in Indonesia and Israel.*
- X On Condition That Y: *She said she'd help with the costumes on condition that she would get ten free tickets.*

NON-COMPOSITIONALITY

- Very often, constructional meaning is not fully predictable by combining the meanings of its constituent parts:
 - *What's X Doing Y?* is compositionally just a question about what X is doing, but constructionally it is not a question but an expression of complaint potentially requesting for remedial action (*What's the child doing in the fridge?*)
 - *Can You X?* is often a request rather than a question (cf. *Can you stay a little longer?* vs. *Can you swim?*).
 - *X Let Alone Y*, besides the lesser likelihood of Y, expresses S's refusal to making X happen and an even stronger refusal to making Y happen (cf. *I won't eat that garbage, let alone pay for it!*).

NON-COMPOSITIONALITY AND L2 LEARNING

- Non-compositionality is not a problem for L2 learners provided that there are close equivalents in L1 with similar meaning implications:
 - *What's the child doing in the fridge? > ¿Qué está haciendo el niño en el frigorífico?* (S is bothered by the child's behavior)
 - *Can you stay just a little longer? > ¿Te puedes quedar un poquito más?* (S really wants H to stay longer)
 - *I won't eat that garbage, let alone pay for it > No voy a comer esa porquería y mucho menos voy a pagar por ella* (S emphasizes the improbability of paying for a meal he won't eat)

THE CHALLENGE FOR L2 LEARNERS

However, non-compositionality can be a problem when constructions pair form and meaning in ways that differ drastically between L1 and L2:

- Caused-motion (lit.): *She sneezed the napkin off the table* (Sp **Estornudó la servilleta hacia fuera de la mesa*; cf. *Lanzó la servilleta fuera de la mesa de un estornudo* ‘She sent the napkin away from the table with a sneeze’).
- Caused-motion (fig.): *She laughed me out of the room* (Sp **Ella me rió hacia fuera del cuarto*; cf. *Me hizo salir del cuarto con sus risas* ‘She made me leave the room with her laughter’).
- Way-construction (lit.): *Ellen pushed her way through the crowd* (Sp **Ellen empujó su camino a través del gentío*; cf. *Ellen se abrió camino a empujones a través del gentío* ‘Ellen opened herself way by pushing through the crowd’)
- Way-construction (fig.): *Carlos worked his way through college* (Sp **Carlos trabajó su camino a través de la Facultad*; cf. *Carlos se abrió camino en la Facultad por medio de su esfuerzo* ‘Carlos opened himself way in college by means of his effort’).

PEDAGOGICAL GRAMMAR (PG)

- A PG is a principled inventory of all the form-meaning units of a language and their relations, whatever their nature, combined with a didactic approach as to how to best learn them (Dirven 2001; De Knop and De Rycker 2008).
- A PG should have not only descriptive but also explanatory adequacy (Ruiz de Mendoza & Agustín 2016), which means that all relevant generalizations have to be taught in a way that is intuitively accessible to students.
- The adequacy of a pedagogical grammar needs to be grounded in empirical research into the psychological validity of the categories it uses, i.e. if constructions were not a psychologically real category, learners would profit very little from their inclusion in any learning materials.

POSSIBLE PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGY FOR ADVANCED STUDENTS (L1 = SPANISH; L2 = ENGLISH)

- STEP 1: IDENTIFY AN L2 SOURCE CONSTRUCTION
- STEP 2: USE THE L2 SOURCE CONSTRUCTION TO UNDERSTAND THE L2 TARGET CONSTRUCTION
- STEP 3: IDENTIFY OTHER L2 TARGETS FOR THE SAME L2 SOURCE CONSTRUCTION AND FOLLOW THROUGH STEPS 1 AND 2 AGAIN

STEP 1: FINDING AN ADEQUATE L2 SOURCE CONSTRUCTION

- Identify an L2 target construction that is problematic for learners; e.g. the English caused-motion construction for L1 = Spanish and L2 = English; e.g. *The child kicked the ball into the net*/*El niño pateó la pelota hacia dentro de la red.
- Find a close L2 construction (i.e. one bearing family resemblance to the L2 target construction) that has a reasonable equivalent in the learners' L1; e.g. the manipulative (*They wanted him out of the country*/*Le querían fuera del país*).
- This close L2 construction thus becomes an L2 source construction for comparison with the L2 target construction.
- Study the L2 source construction (e.g. the manipulative) in terms of its formal features, semantic structure and actual use. Make sure the L2 learners master this L2 source construction.

STEP 2: USE THE L2 SOURCE CONSTRUCTION TO UNDERSTAND THE L2 TARGET CONSTRUCTION

- Once mastered, the L2 source construction can be used to understand formal and functional aspects of the L2 target construction.
 - Look for similarities and differences between the source and target constructions.
 - Focus attention on the meaning motivation for the differences and try to determine to what extent they can be (partially) captured through other L2 constructions and even by L1 constructions.

USING THE MANIPULATIVE CONSTRUCTION TO LEARN THE CAUSED-MOTION CONSTRUCTION

- The English (L2) “manipulative” construction has a counterpart in Spanish (L1)
 - English: *I want you in my office now* (cf. *I want you to come to my office now*).
 - Spanish: *Le quiero en mi despacho ahora* (cf. *Quiero que venga a mi despacho ahora*)
 - English: *I want you out of my life* (cf. *I want you to get out of my life*)
 - Spanish: *Te quiero fuera de mi vida* (cf. *Quiero que salgas de mi vida*)
- There are formal and functional coincidences between the English “manipulative” and “caused motion” constructions.
 - Manipulative: *I want you in my office/She wanted me in her office*
 - Caused-motion (lit.): *She pushed me into her office*
 - Caused-motion (fig.): *She stared me into her office*

SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE MANIPULATIVE AND CAUSED-MOTION CONSTRUCTIONS

- Formal: the two make use of secondary predications:
NP(subj)+V+NP(obj)+PP(loc)
- Semantic: in both someone causes someone else to change location or state.
- Use: they both convey compulsion on the object; the two can be used either literally or figuratively.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE MANIPULATIVE AND CAUSED-MOTION CONSTRUCTIONS

- Formal: the “manipulative” construction (except when the event is reported) requires present simple and first person sg. or pl. This is not so with the caused-motion construction (cf. *I kick the ball into the net* vs. *I kicked the ball into the net*).
- Semantic: the “manipulative” construction requires a verb of volition or necessity (want, need). The caused-motion construction (when used non-figuratively) requires verbs that can involve the motion of an object (e.g. contact-by-impact verbs: push, kick, strike).
- Use: the “manipulative” construction conveys a degree of speaker’s involvement in causing the state of affairs denoted by the predication to hold. There is no such speaker’s involvement in the caused-motion construction.

**STEP 3: OTHER L2 TARGET CONSTRUCTIONS
FOR THE MANIPULATIVE**

THE RESULTATIVE

- AP resultative: *She painted the house green* (Sp. Pintó la casa verde/*de verde); *The blacksmith hammered the metal flat* (*El herrero martilleó el metal plano/aplanó el metal a martillazos ‘flattened the metal by hammering’)> it follows the same pattern as the caused-motion construction, but an AP takes the place of the PP.
- PP resultative: *We hammered hot iron into knives* (*Martilleamos hierro candente en cuchillos/Hicimos cuchillos golpeando el hierro candente con un martillo ‘we made knives by hitting the hot iron with a hammer’) > it makes figurative use of the caused-motion construction usually when there is no resultative adjective available to express result.

INTRANSITIVE RESULTATIVES

- They combine the inchoative construction (e.g. *The vase broke* vs. *Someone broke the vase*) with a resultative pattern:
 - AP resultative + inchoative: *The door slammed close* (La puerta se cerró dando un golpe ‘the door closed itself with a slam’)
 - PP resultative + inchoative: *The vase broke into a thousand pieces* (El jarrón se rompió en mil pedazos)

FAKE REFLEXIVE RESULTATIVES

- They combine a fake reflexive (cf. **He drank himself*) with a resultative pattern
 - AP resultative: *John drank himself hoarse*
 - PP resultative: *John drank himself to sleep*
- The reflexive is possible only if construed as the object of a causal pattern (i.e. John caused himself to be hoarse or to sleep by drinking). As with other secondary predications (e.g. *He believes himself ugly*), the resultative holds true of the verbal object.
- The resultative element cannot be omitted with fake reflexives: **He drank himself* (vs. *He hammered the metal (flat)*).

CONCLUSION

- Constructions have been reinstated into linguistic theory on the basis of linguistic and psycholinguistic evidence.
- Constructionist approaches to language allow us to systematize aspects of language use that have so far been neglected.
- Such a systematization has consequences in terms of explicit L2 instruction in the context of Pedagogical Grammar.
- A possible L2 teaching strategy that takes constructions into account should start by working with constructional families to identify an L2 source construction, one that has a reasonable equivalent in the learners' L1. An L2 source construction can serve as the starting point to teach a number of L2 target constructions by following and exploring their family resemblance connections in terms of formal, semantic and language use similarities and differences.