Construction Grammar

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Words seem to have a prototype structure; but language does not only consist of words.
What is the nature of grammatical categories?

1. conjunction
2. subject
3. transitive clause
Grammatical categories

- Hypothesis 1: Grammatical categories are like words. They have a prototype structure grounded in experience?
- Hypothesis 2: Grammatical categories are like mathematical categories? They have clear-cut boundaries and are not grounded in experience.
Generative grammar

Noam Chomsky
The autonomy of syntax

Colorless green ideas sleep furiously.

[Chomsky 1957]
Categories and rules

Parts of speech: N, V, DET
Phrasal categories: NP, VP, S

Phrase structure rules:

NP → DET (A) N
VP → V (NP)
S → NP VP
The cat caught the mouse.

Categories and rules

S
  /\  
 NP  VP
  /\  /\  
 DET N  V  DET N

The cat caught the mouse.
Construction Grammar

Charles Fillmore
Paul Kay
George Lakoff
Adele Goldberg
Construction Grammar
Construction Grammar
Construction Grammar

What is a construction?
Construction Grammar

A construction is a complex linguistic sign that combines a specific form with a particular meaning.

(1) An apple a day keeps the doctor away.
(2) The grass is always greener on the other side.
(3) Birds of a feather flock together.
Idioms

Idioms are prefabricated chunks, conventionalized collocations, utterance formulas.
Idioms

(1)  a. How are you doing?
b. Thank you, I’m fine.
c. What can I do for you?
d. Get the hell out of here!
e. You can’t have it both ways.
f. Either way is fine.
g. Say that again.
h. I don’t believe what’s happening.
i. You gotta be kidding.
j. No, I’m dead serious.
Idioms

(2) a. Why don’t you ___.
b. I don’t know ___.
c. Do you mind if ___.
d. I am just about to ___.
e. Would you please ___.
f. ___ is not in the position to ___.
g. I can’t help Ving ___.
h. ___ never got around to ___.
j. That’s just about the ___ that ___.
k. I wonder if ___.
Idioms

The frequent use of prefabricated chunks (i.e. idiomatic expression) is one of the features that distinguishes the speech of native speakers from the speech of second language learners.

[Pawley and Syder 1983]
Idioms

Native-like competence and fluency demands such idiomaticity.

[Nick Ellis 2003]
## Idioms

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<thead>
<tr>
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- Tied to a specific pragmatic context
- Not tied to a specific pragmatic context
## Idioms

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<td><em>It took one to know one.</em></td>
<td>__ let alone__ .</td>
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<td>So far so good</td>
<td>Why don’t you __ ?</td>
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<td><em>So far so bad.</em></td>
<td>__ never got around to__ .</td>
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| *It takes one to know one.*  
> *It took one to know one.*  
*So far so good*  
>*So far so bad.* | *The ___ the ___.*  
___ let alone___.  
*Why don’t you ___ ?*  
___ never got around to___ . |
| Lexically filled and grammatically invariable | Partially filled by lexical items and partially variable |
Hypothesis:
Idioms are fixed irregular expressions that are learned and memorized like words.
Idioms

(1) He kicked the bucket.
(2) *The bucket was kicked.
(3) *They kicked the buckets.
(4) He will kick the bucket.
(5) ?He had kick the bucket.
Let alone
Idioms

(1) a. We’ll need shrimp and squid.
b. Max won’t eat shrimp, let alone squid.

(2) a. I want to cook the shrimp and clean the squid.
b. Max won’t touch the shrimp, let alone clean the squid.
Idioms

(3)  a. Bill will drink beer and whisky.
    b. Bill won’t drink beer and whisky.

(4)  a. *Bill will drink beer let alone whisky.
    b. Bill won’t drink beer let alone whisky.
Idioms

(5)    a. Shrimp and squid, John won’t eat.
       b. *Shrimp let alone squid, John won’t eat.

(6)    a. Shrimp, John won’t eat, let alone squid.
       b. *Shrimp, John won’t eat and squid.
Idioms

(7) a. Max won’t eat shrimp but Minnie will.
    b. *Max won’t eat shrimp let alone Minnie will.
Idioms

Conclusion:
Idioms have both idiosyncratic properties that must be memorized and general grammatical properties that characterize ‘regular’ grammatical expressions.
What’s left?
Are there fully regular grammatical expressions?
Passive

(1) The meal was cooked by John.
The meal was cooked by John.
Passive

- The subject functions as patient rather than actor.
- The verb occurs in a particular form (be + past PTC).
- The by-phrase has a particular function/meaning.
There is no principled difference between idiomatic constructions and regular grammatical constructions
Caused-motion construction

(1) She dragged the child into the car.
(2) He wiped the mud off his shoes.
(3) She forced the ball into the jar.
(4) He pushed the book down the chute.

Form: SU V DO PP

Meaning: <X causes Y to move somewhere>
Caused-motion construction

Where does the meaning come form?

Traditional view: The meaning of the construction is derived from the meaning of the words it includes.
Caused-motion construction

Verbs: drag x into
wipe x off
force x into
push x down

causative + motion
Caused-motion construction

(1) She sneezed the napkin off the table.
The caused motion construction is idiosyncratic in that it evokes a construction-specific interpretation.

The meaning of the construction is more than the meaning of its components.

The construction as a whole has a particular meaning.
Resultative construction

(1) Peter meeked the bleek dizzy.

<X changes Y in such a way that Y becomes Z>
Conclusion

There is no principled difference between idioms and grammatical constructions:

Both involve regular and idiosyncratic properties.

If constructions include idiosyncratic properties they must be stored and memorized like words.
A construction is a complex linguistic sign that combines a specific form with a particular meaning.
Linguistic sign

raebit
Constructions are 'big words'. (Dąbrowska 2000)
Passive construction

X is affected by Y

SUBJ  be  V-ed  by PP
Caused motion construction

X causes Y to move somewhere
Resultative construction

X affects Y so that it turns Z
If grammatical units are linguistic signs, grammatical categories may be of the same type as words.
Gramatical categories

How is the category ‘subject’ represented in mental grammar?

-> Is the subject a category of non-linguists?
Subject

- The subject is the NP before the verb.
- The subject agrees with the verb.
- Pronominal subjects occur in nominative case.
- The subject functions as controller of participle adverbial
Subject

(1) Peter met Mary.
(2) John hates country music.
(3) He likes this picture.
(4) Watching TV he did not noticed Jane.
(1) Peter walked down the street.
(2) The man kicked the ball.
(3) The dog was barking.

Subject = agent
Subject

agent

NP_{NOM} (V ... )
The subject precedes the verb:

(1) Yesterday, Peter met Mary.
(2) Across the bridge lived an old man.
The subject agrees with the verb in third person.

(1) Peter likes bananas.
(2) There are my shoes.
Subject

The subject occurs in nominative case.

(1) He(*him) is a teacher.
(2) Him be a doctor!
Subject

The subject controls the actor of the omitted subject of participle adverbial clauses and coordinate sentences.

(1) Entering the room, Peter saw Mary.
(2) The conference closed, we left London.
The subject functions as actor.

(1) Peter kicked the ball.
(2) The ball was kicked against the wall.
(3) The bomb exploded.
Subject

subject
Transitive construction

X is acting on Y

SUBJ  V  OBJ
Subject

(1) a. Peter kicked the ball.  
b. Peter likes bananas  

(2) a. Peter is eating it up.  
b. Peter is eating it.  

(3) a. I write your name.  
b. I forgot your name.  

[activity vs. psych]  
[telic vs. atelic]  
[+/-volitional]

Hopper & Thompson 1984
Subject

(4) a. I kicked the ball. [+/-punctual]
    b. I was kicking the ball.

(5) a. I drank the beer. [+/-countable]
    b. I drank some beer.

(6) a. I kicked the ball. [+/-negative]
    b. I didn’t kick the ball.

Hopper & Thompson 1984
Genitive

Peter’s car
(1) Peter’s car
(2) John’s hand
(3) John’s train (to London)
(4) the secretary’s computer
(5) the dog’s bone
(6) the car’s door
(7) the play’s final act
Genitive

(1) John’s photograph

1. the photograph that John owns
2. the photograph that John took
3. the photograph that depicts John
Genitive

1. NPs referring to abstract entities
2. NPs referring to concrete entities
3. NPs referring to humans
Genitive

Gries 2001
Genitive

(1) a. my father’s car  
    b. the car of my father

(2) a. the student’s name  
    b. the name of the student
Genitive

Gries 2001
Genitive

S-gentive

of-gentive
Genitive

s-genitive
1. Human’s concrete Peter’s car
2. Human’s abstract Peter’s idea

of-genitive
1. Abstract of abstract the foundation of the theory
2. Abstract of concrete the consequence of the accident
3. Concrete of concrete the roof of the house
Collostructional analysis

Collostructional analysis is a corpus-linguistic method that measures the associations between words and constructions.

Gries and Stefanowitsch 2003, 2004
Collostructional analysis

Collexemes

Collostruct
Double object vs. *to*-dative

(1)  a. Peter gave the dog a bone.
     b. Peter gave the bone to the dog.
Double object vs. *to*-dative

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<td>give</td>
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<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>send</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>314</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tell</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bring</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>offer</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>22</td>
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Double object vs. to-dative

(1) a. I lend Peter the book.
    b. I lend the book to Peter.
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<td>1517</td>
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<td>Total</td>
<td>1.035</td>
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Expected frequency = \( \frac{x \times y}{\text{total}} \)
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Grammar consists of constructions (i.e. complex linguistic signs).

Linguistic signs are prototype categories.

The prototype of a construction is characterized by the meaning of words that are strongly associated with a construction.
Questions

- Constructions have been characterized as ‘big words’. What does that mean?
- Explain in which sense ‘regular’ constructions such as passive sentences (e.g. *The door was opened by Jane*) or resultative sentences (e.g. *Joe pushed the door open*) are similar to idioms such as *He kicked the bucket*. 