Are Tibetan monks really revolting? A constructional look at Experiencer verbs.

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Setting the stage for a fresh look at some Experiencer verbs (like amaze, intrigue, or move, revolt etc.) the paper begins with an attempt to characterize the current Construction Grammar (CxG) paradigm against a backdrop of well established historical analyses of specificity levels in terms of ‘collocation vs. colligation’ (Firth) or even ‘etic vs. emic’ (Pike), and to view the familiar opposition between specific/lexical and schematic/formal expressions from a new vantage point as a continuum rather than a dichotomy.

One obvious candidate for a CxG reanalysis is the motley group of verbs loosely referred to as Psychological Predicates, and particularly the fifty or so physical/emotive Experiencer verbs (e.g. revolt) which display a systematic dualism between a literal “physical action” interpretation and a more metaphorical “psychological reaction” interpretation, each participating in their respective (and distinct) grammatical constructions. The crucial point is how to construe their meaning in expressions devoid of contextual clues, such as the question in the title of this paper, which can easily be disambiguated by replacing the adverb by “openly” or “somewhat,” forcing the respective physical/emotive reading. Determining the precise cognitive content of a given surface expression thus hinges crucially on the nature of its conceptual underpinnings as revealed (or concealed) by constructional elements.

A similar case can be made for possibly resolving certain conventional indeterminacies in the realm of terminology, where the often variable behavior of “multi-word terminological units” can be seen as quite similar to that of multi-word idioms containing variables (e.g. “pull [somebody-possessive] leg”). It is not obvious whether such expressions are best handled paradigmatically through listing of every variant in the lexicon, or syntagmatically through a grammatical rule filling in slots which are lexically unfilled, but again the CxG framework offers a fresh perspective for exploring these alternatives on the basis of concrete terminological examples.

The paper will argue that CxG, observed in the long historical perspective, can be viewed as an offshoot of Saussurean “sign” theories. Although a recent school of thought, it turns out to have long roots reaching into the rich soil of the history of linguistic ideas.

References

