The reification of situational dynamic modality without modals:
Hakka idiomatic “yu1/mo5 N ho2 V” constructions
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While situational dynamic modality cross-linguistically is usually denoted by modal verbs as English can, Hakka has an idiomatic construction that can covertly express this situational ability meaning: yu1/mo5 N ho2 V (have/not have N suitably V). In this construction, whereas N and V stand for schematic elements, the other two are fixed: yu1, literally meaning ‘have’, alternates with mo5 (a negative marker) to denote existence or non-existence; ho2, literally meaning ‘good’, is grammaticalized into an adverb denoting ‘suitably’ (e.g. Gi5-deu1 mo5 mi2 ho2 siit8 (they not have rice suitably eat) ‘There exists no rice suitably for them to eat’.) Adhering to the tenets of Construction Grammar, insisting that both item-specific knowledge and generalizations coexist (cf. Goldberg 1995, 2006; among others), the generalizations and peculiarities displayed will be shown in this study.

Four specific issues will be dealt with. First, this construction displays a substantive-schematic scale (cf. Fillmore et al. 1988: 505). On the schematic end, the manifestations of N and V are flexible and predictable; in the middle of the scale, N is fixed as mak8-ge3 ‘what’, possessing the generalized meaning ‘something’ in this case; on the substantive end, N even disappears and this implicit theme construction “yu1/mo5 ø ho2 V” is not productive and can be used only when N is semantically recoverable (cf. Goldberg 2005). Following this issue, the next topic is the ambiguity of this construction. Take yu1 mak8-ge3 ho2 siit8 (have what suitably eat) as an illustration. In addition to expressing situational ability (Does there exist anything suitably for someone to eat?), this sentence can display another meaning (Is there anything delicious?) derived from the compounding meaning of ho2-siit8 (delicious). This ambiguity occurs only in the cases when V becomes substantive and is further compounded with ho2. Moreover, it is noted that the semantic roles played by N relating to the verbal actions can be Patient (e.g. mo5 mi2 ho2 siit8 ‘have no rice to eat’), Instrument (e.g. mo5 sui2 ho2 cung1 pien3-so2 ‘have no water to flush the toilet’), Place (e.g. mo5 vuk8 ho2 het8 ‘have no house to live’) or Time (e.g. mo5 sii5-gien1 ho2 bot4-mung3 ‘have no time to dream’). Therefore, the third issue to be analyzed is the semantic relationships between N and V from the frame-semantic perspective, the semantic constraints on V, the definiteness condition of N, and the syntactic manifestation resulting from these semantic relationships. Finally, since Construction Grammar is considered a usage-based model, with the help of sufficient contexts, the pragmatic functions such as threatening and advising in the seemingly interrogative form yu1 mak8-ge3 ho2 V (have what suitably V) ‘Does there exist anything suitably for one to…’) surfacing from form-function mismatches will be analyzed.

After examining this construction from the formal as well as the functional perspectives, this study will not only provide a complete and full-fledged analysis of this specific construction in Hakka, but also help to understand how situational dynamic modality, a linguistic issue hardly touched upon, is manifested in language.