Constructions around the relaters about and between

The broader aim of this paper is to contribute to the body of empirical data in support of a construction grammar approach to the description of English. The words about and between belong to a relatively small set of highly multifunctional items which, in the traditional analysis, are assigned a marginal role as appendages to adjacent entities. Construction grammar opens up for a more sophisticated analysis, taking into consideration all that is happening around the word in focus. This paper presents a construction grammar account of about and between, as part of a larger project investigating the relaters in general.

All occurrences of about and between were extracted from the sub-corpus ‘spoken conversation’\(^2\) of the BNC (4,2 million words) in order to identify and catalogue the constructions around them in terms of: [X r Y], [X r], and [r Y] where X and Y stand for constituents of different types (r = relater). The results of the analysis show that form-meaning mappings indeed emerge, producing constructions from the most substantive to the highly schematic. We also find that discourse function is frequently involved in these mappings.

In the case of about, for example, when the X element is an adjective there is even at the most schematic level [X about] a persistent or unfavourable orientation either in the item preceding r (1), or in its close environment (2). Where negative orientation is apparently absent, closer investigation frequently reveals a background situation that is somehow problematic (sickness, financial problems) and where the about construction signals an improvement in the otherwise undesirable situation (3).

(1) And we were concerned about their land rights or in other words, their human rights their natural human rights. NEGATIVE SEMANTICS OF ‘CONCERN’

(2) My girlfriend’s a Villa fan but isn’t always happy about it especially when I suggested painting the bedroom claret and blue. NEGATION IN CLAUSE

(3) (Uttered in the context of a door that is difficult to open): She said she’s looking forward to the day that we get it fixed! Said, oh I'm sorry mum, I'll go and get you some eggs! Cos they are quite tame, I mean that’s one thing about the hens I mean they can't come out though... POSITIVE ORIENTATION AGAINST NEGATIVE BACKGROUND

With between, one interesting pattern is the concurrence of between in the ‘connecting’ sense with a following (Y) element that is almost always a plural personal pronoun referring to humans:

(4) and they bought that house between them Romana’s mum and dad
(5) maybe we can sort something out between us
(6) knowing that you wanted to get somewhere between you

Further, in contrast to the case of about, it is only in the ‘separating’ sense of between that there is a marked semantic affinity with the preceding (X) element – with words denoting difference, division, choice, and separateness.

In the traditional account, the distinction between bound (eg. about) and unbound (eg. between) prepositions is unclear. A construction grammar analysis captures many of the subtler nuances along this cline and provides a framework for the comprehensive analysis of items in the relater category in their own right.

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1. An umbrella term for all words that can be prepositions, many of which can also belong to other word-classes.
2. We assume that informal speech encodes the most salient and core meanings. We therefore use conversational data in order to create a benchmark for the investigation of other discourse types.