Myths about Construction Grammar

Laura A. Michaelis
University of Colorado at Boulder

Observers of language behavior from varied backgrounds have converged on the insight that knowledge of language includes grammatical generalizations of varied grains. Cognition researchers offer construction-based models of acquisition (Tomasello 2006), aphasia (Gahl et al. 2000), sentence processing (Glenberg & Karschak 2002, Goldberg & Bencini 2005) and concept learning by autonomous agents (Steels & De Beule 2006). Bewilderingly, however, Construction Grammar (CxG) has affected neither the practice nor ideology of mainstream syntax. Persuading our fellow syntacticians to think constructionally will require us to refute some persistent but inaccurate stereotypes about Construction Grammar: (1) it is anti-formal and therefore nonrigorous; (2) It fails to capture generalizations in grammar; (3) its practitioners are obsessed with linguistic marginalia; (4) it is opposed to compositional semantics; (5) it is not constrained (“anything can be a construction”); and (6) it does not provide a universal framework for syntax. For each of these charges, I will offer a response that effectively reframes the problem:

(1) Not all work in CxG is formal, nor should it be: without descriptive work, there would be nothing to formalize. But constructions also provide tools for formalists. In Sign-Based Construction Grammar (SBCG; Sag 2007), the basic units of grammatical description are signs (licensed either by lexical entry or construction). The grammar comprises a set of lexical entries and a set of constructions, structured by a type hierarchy.

(2) Construction-based transformational grammars did miss generalizations that more recent grammatical research addresses. But SBCG abandons the foundations of TG (string-rewriting systems) in favor of model-theoretic, constraint-based foundations.

(3) The constructions proposed in SBCG are intended to capture all combinatoric patterns of a language—from the most idiomatic to the most general. The latter include the specifier-head pattern and the head-complement pattern. We view the core-periphery distinction as a gradient phenomenon, and do not assume a cut-off point within a language at which our descriptive obligations end.

(4) On the strict view, a compositional language does not contain any paired non-synonymous phrases with identical structure and pairwise synonymous constituents (Szabó 2007). But if this is true, either English is noncompositional or any phrase with both idiomatic and composed readings (e.g., spill the beans) has two different syntactic analyses. For constructionists, each meaning is licensed by a distinct construction. Construction-based grammars are therefore intuitively compositional: if you know the meanings of the words and all the rules that combine words and phrases into larger formal units, then you know the meanings of all the larger units.

(5) Type hierarchies allow us to both capture potentially universal generalizations and describe entrenched exemplars of particular constructions.

(6) SBCG makes strong universal claims, captured by the Sign Principle and the Head-Feature Principle. Other putatively universal constraints on grammatical architecture, in particular those advanced by proponents of Principles and Parameters, appear to confuse representational conventions with linguistic facts.