A Construction Grammar Analysis of Written English Quotatives

While syntactic theories have focused on the descriptions of clausal and phrasal relationships such as subordination and coordination, these syntactic theories have limitations when addressing the more complex relationships between quotatives and direct quotations. In (1), the quotative is bolded:

(1) “You should have seen him, Dad,” I plead. (Korman 2002: 109)

In previous studies, quotatives have been labeled ‘main clauses’ and quotations ‘subordinate clauses’ (e.g., Suñer 2000). Other studies base the syntactic relationship between quotatives and direct quotations on specific quotative features, such as quotative position (Ruppenhofer 2001, Vries 2006) and quotative inversion (Collins and Branigan 1997). Ruppenhofer (2001) and Vries (2006) analyze quotatives in the initial position—like the example in (2)—as main clauses and quotatives in medial or final positions—like the examples in (3) and (4)—as parenthetical clauses.

(2) Initial: As I took it out of my wallet, he continued, “To say you were over the speed limit is putting it mildly.” (Duncan 1989: 148)

(3) Medial: “I know you’re new here, Lola,” purred Carla Santini, “and you don’t understand how things work yet.” (Sheldon 1999: 47-48)


Collins and Branigan (1997) state that non-inverted quotatives—those quotatives in which the Speaker precedes the quoting verb, as in (5)—are main clauses while inverted quotatives—those in which the quoting verb precedes the Speaker, as in (6)—are parenthetical clauses.

(5) “Blair doesn’t know, does she?” Serena asked Nate quietly. (von Ziegesar 2002: 35)

(6) “Have you listened to one word I’ve said?” asked Ella. (Sheldon 1999: 96)

However, these analyses do not account for many quotative features, such as quoting verb variety.

Based on data I collected of written English quotatives, I analyzed features of the quotatives, including position, inversion, and the vast variety of quoting verbs authors creatively use in quotatives, many of which do not intrinsically denote speech acts (e.g., explode, snap, sigh). I argue that the varying relationships between quotatives and quotations are the products of constructions, some of which determine the order of the quotative relative to the quoted speech and some of which create the possibility of using creative quoting verbs. By using constructions and not confining the analysis to terms such as ‘coordination,’ and ‘subordination,’ even marginal examples of quotatives (such as those interpreted as being co-temporal to the quotation, like the example in (7)) can be included in the analysis and not listed as exceptions.

(7) “Come on!” the guy pounded the door with his fist. (Caletti 2002: 264)

Thus, a construction grammar approach to analyzing the relationship between quotatives and quotations allows a discussion inclusive of more variable quotative features.

Cited References and Data Sources: