A constructional corpus-based approach of ‘weak’ verbs in French
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‘Weak’ verbs are often treated in linguistic literature from a merely pragmatic point of view: they are characterized as « parenthetical », « evidential » or « epistemic » verbs, and, through a process of advanced grammaticalization or pragmatization, are often assimilated with adverbs. In this paper we will argue that those verbs do not undergo a change of category but simply remain verbs and that they can be fruitfully described in a constructional framework: they enter a specific construction, an original pairing of syntactic properties with a specific meaning. In French, ‘weak’ verbs, particularly frequent in spoken discourse, occur in a cluster of three related structures, revealing the same semantic meaning of “mitigation”.

(1) je trouve que c’est dommage
[I think that this is a pity]
(2) c’est dommage je trouve
[this is a pity, I think]
(3) - c’est dommage
[it’s a pity]
- oui je trouve
[yes I think]

Other verbs can enter one of those syntactic patterns, but only with the “weak” verbs do all three possibilities occur. The three related structures present interesting differences in word order and scope. They are often used by speakers of French in an alternative way.

The inventory of verbs entering the construction is not an easy one to draw and it presents interesting cross-linguistic differences. In this paper, we will limit ourselves to the three most frequent verbs in modern French: je crois, je pense, je trouve. We will describe the syntactic properties of each realisation and the specific selectional properties of each verb. Our study is based on some 2000 examples taken from a corpus of spoken French.

Each of those three verbs can enter other constructions, with different meanings. The link between the “strong” and the “weak” meanings of those verbs has been described as semantic bleaching, as part of the “grammaticalisation” process. For us, however, this is merely a case of verbal polysemy and the coexistence of different meanings linked to different constructional properties.

References