Constructionist approaches (Goldberg 1995, 2006; Boas 2006, 2010a, b, *inter alios*) vindicate the centrality of constructions as free-standing theoretical entities, in sharp contrast to the Chomskyan position that these are mere taxonomic artefacts devoid of any explanatory power (Chomsky 1995: 170). Specifically, constructions are argued to be (highly frequent) form-function correspondences. In keeping with this, it is accepted that all types of lexico-grammatical units, regardless of their degree of morphosyntactic complexity and/or compositionality/idiosyncrasy, are taken to be constructions. In other words, in opposition to the Chomskyan conception of grammar and the lexicon as two distinct modules, Construction Grammars (henceforth CxGs) conceive these components as forming a continuum, albeit with a soft dividing line (Goldberg and Suttle 2010, Boas 2010b).

The main goal of this talk is to illustrate the descriptive and explanatory convenience of regarding specific words (or combinations of words) as constructions in a contrastive (English-Spanish) constructionist analysis (Boas 2010a and references therein). Specifically, we will concentrate on a number of otherwise puzzling asymmetries involving cognition verbs (e.g. *know*, *saber* (*‘know’*)) in the secondary predication construction (or, alternatively, in the subjective-transitive construction, Gonzálvez-García 2009).

The phenomenon of coercion, as the term is understood within GxG circles (Michaelis 2003), provides a compelling piece of evidence in favour of two premises: (i) when there is a conflict between lexical denotata and constructional denotata, the latter wins over the former, and (ii) the elements triggering coercion, alone or in conjunction with other elements in the construction, fit in nicely with the idiosyncrasy requirement invoked in the original definition of a construction. Let us consider the case of coercion via a reflexive pronoun (cf. Gonzálvez-García 2007).

(1) (a) (...) dinner guests could know themselves safe from distasteful anecdotes about carving knives or missing kidneys (*BNC CJF* 1867).
   (b) #Dinner guests could know the members of the family safe from distasteful anecdotes about carving.

(2) (a)*Ella sabe a su hijo la persona más encantadora del mundo.*
   ‘She knows her son the most charming person in the world’.  
   (b) *Le entristecía saber a su hijo en la cárcel.*
   ‘It made her unhappy to know that his son was in jail’.  
   (c) *Se sabe la persona más encantadora del mundo.*
   ‘She knows herself to be the most charming person in the world’.

The acceptability contrasts in (1)-(2) above can for current purposes be explained as follows: when complemented by the secondary predication frame, the verb *saber* (*‘know’*) may zoom in on a visual perception interpretation if the object slot is filled in by a lexical NP, as in (2)(b) above. This explains why states of affairs with an overwhelmingly evaluative interpretation are not felicitous in this construction, as
shown in (2)(a) above. However, if the object slot is realized by a reflexive pronoun, the Spanish verb saber (‘know’) brings into focus a cognitive perception (i.e. self-evaluation) interpretation roughly equivalent to that of consider-type verbs. Thus, while both English know and Spanish saber are drawn into the orbit of evaluation when the object slot is realized by a reflexive pronoun, Spanish saber is more liberal than its English counterpart regarding its distribution with the reflexive pronoun, as shown in (5)(c). Interestingly enough, Spanish saber is also sensitive to the human or non human nature of the entity in the object slot as well as to whether the state of affairs in the XPCOMP can be directly perceived or not. Within Cognitive Linguistics, Dąbrowska (2009) has argued for the need to connect (i) argument structure, (ii) the lexical representation of a given verb, and (iii) a given collocation between the verb and any other element(s) in the construction. In the case of the cases discussed so far, the following subconstructions can be seen to emerge: (i) ‘know + reflexive + XPCOMP <evaluative state of affairs>, (ii) ‘saber + reflexive + XPCOMP <evaluative state of affairs>, (iii) ‘saber + NP <+human> + XPCOMP <perceivable state of affairs>, (iv) ‘had + pronoun <+human> + XPCOMP’, and (v) ‘pronoun <+human> + hacía + XPCOMP’.

A number of conclusions emerge from the discussion and analysis of the data presented in this talk: (a) further evidence is provided for the claim made in Usage-Based Linguistics that speakers make generalizations at different levels of granularity, (b) the lexicon-grammar continuum needs to accommodate in-between cases, such those in (i)-(vi), which are partly idiosyncratic and partly transparent, partially filled in and partially open, and (c) the construction- and language-specific nature of argument structure (Croft 2003) is further corroborated.

SELECTED REFERENCES


