

“Words as constructions: Some reflections
from a contrastive (English-Spanish)
perspective”

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1. Some preliminary considerations

There is no mainstream Construction Grammar but rather a family of Construction Grammar(s):

- **Fillmore and Kay's formulations of CxG: Berkeley CxG** (Fillmore, Kay & O'Connor 1988[2003]; Fillmore & Kay 1995) and **Sign-Based CxG** (Fillmore, Kay, Michaelis & Sag to appear).
- The version of CxG originally put forward in **Lakoff (1987)** and its recent direct offshoot under the rubric of **Embodied Construction Grammar** (Bergen & Chang 2005).
- The **Goldbergian Cognitive Construction Grammar** (Goldberg 1995, 2006).
- **Cognitive Grammar** (e.g. Langacker 1987, 1991).
- **Croft's Radical Construction Grammar** (Croft 2001).
- The constructional stance taken by advocates of **Emergent Grammar** (Hopper 1987, 1988), such as Bybee & Thompson, *inter alia*, in **later refinements of the model in question** (e.g. Bybee & Hopper 2001; Fox & Thompson 2007; Bybee & Eddington 2006).
- The frame-semantic approach advocated in Boas (2003, 2008, 2010).



2. The foundational assumptions of Construction Grammar(s):

2.1. The central features:

- In diametric opposition to the mainstream generative grammar conception of constructions as “taxonomic artefacts” (Chomsky 1995: 170), CxG submits that constructions must be recognized as **abstract free-standing entities which are psychologically real for language users (and language learners, too)** (see Goldberg 2006; Martínez Vázquez 2004; Valenzuela and Rojo 2008).
- In addition, CxG emphasizes that constructions exist independently of the lexical items (in particular of the matrix verbs) that lexically fill them in (Goldberg 1996: 3-4, 2006). *She toptomasoed Mary a drink.*
- **All types of lexicogrammatical units (i.e. morphemes, words, idioms, lexically filled and fully abstract or general phrasal patterns) are taken to be constructions, viz. (learned) pairings of form with semantic and/or discourse function**

•The totality of our knowledge of language can be captured *via* a highly structured web of interrelated constructions or, alternatively, the construct-i-con. On this view, grammar and the lexicon, far from being two distinct, separate modules, are considered to form a **continuum**, albeit with a soft, dividing line (cf. Boas 2010b). In addition, it is recognized that phrasal constructions differ from lexical items only in terms of their **internal complexity**.

•The relationship between semantics and pragmatics is regarded in terms of a **continuum**, comprising of a relatively wide number of aspects ranging from lexical semantics to discourse pragmatics, including textual and register considerations.



- In line with the “functional” view, it is argued that language in general, and constructions in particular, are in the service of constructing and communicating meaning and/or accomplishing certain functions. However, **this should not by any means be taken to imply that constructionist approaches claim that grammar is *wholly* motivated on semantico-pragmatic grounds.** In fact, there are **idiosyncratic** facts that must unavoidably be learned.

“The functional approach does not mean that *all* structures in language are determined by function in the sense that they are iconically related to their meanings, as many generative grammarians misconstrue the claim (e.g. Newmeyer 1991)” (Tomasello 1998: xii, emphasis added to the original).

- Constructionist approaches take **explanatory adequacy** very seriously. Specifically, CxG is **generative** “in the sense that it tries to account for the infinite number of expressions that are allowed by the grammar while attempting to account for the fact that an infinite number of expressions are ruled out or disallowed” (Goldberg 1995: 7; Kay 1995[1997: 124]). Moreover, (un)grammaticality is understood in **relative** rather than absolute terms, and **grammaticality judgements are sometimes established on the basis of a combination of resources other than native speaker’s judgements, such as corpus data and experimental work.**

- Unlike mainstream generative approaches, CxG posits **no transformations or derivations** by insertion or deletion rules. In other words, semantico-pragmatic differences are directly associated with surface form. By the same token, **syntactic elements without any overt formal realization or (highly) abstract categories are usually dispensed with**. Furthermore, the meaning of a particular construct is taken to be the result of the integration (or, alternatively, unification) of the meanings of lexical items into the meaning of the construction(s).

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- Finally, language-specific generalizations are captured *via* (complete or normal) inheritance networks, whereby **low-level** or concrete constructions are seen as inheriting a number of properties from **higher-level** or more abstract constructions in an **inheritance hierarchy**, unless otherwise noted.



2.2. Some further characteristics

- Some formulations of CxG invoke non-classical categorization, revolving around prototypes and extensions of prototypes, while others (e.g. Berkeley CxG and Sign-Based CxG use Minimal Recursion Semantics).
- Certain constructionist variants have placed an uncompromising focus on **psychological reality**. Specifically, drawing on experimental work, as well as on converging evidence from processing, aphasia, and language acquisition, empirical evidence has been provided for constructions as theoretical entities in their own right.



- Learning and experience are deemed to be fundamental in explaining language acquisition, with constructions (whether words or phrases) being **learned inductively** on the basis of **positive input** as well as **general cognitive mechanisms** (Tomasello 2005). Constructionist approaches generally do not invoke, or at least are quite cautious about positing, the existence of an innate, formal Universal Grammar that is specific to language. In other words, **certain biological prerequisites or cognitive mechanisms are understood to be necessary for language acquisition, but no claim is made that these involve any innate linguistic knowledge.**
- In addition, even if some grammatical categories (e.g. nouns and verbs) are recognized to be universal, **it does not necessarily follow that these have to be taken to be innate.**
- Most constructionist approaches make the prediction that a high proportion of cross-linguistic generalizations must be **language-specific** and possibly also **construction-specific** (see especially Croft 2001), such generalizations being handled as tendencies which are amenable to explanation in terms of general cognitive constraints in conjunction with the functions of the constructions concerned.

Two important **interim conclusions**:

- Despite the above, constructionist approaches, as Goldberg (2003) notes, share with mainstream “generative linguistics” the following premises:
 - (i) **the assumption of language as cognitive (mental) system;**
 - (ii) **the premise that structures may be combined to create novel utterances (e.g. *She mooped him something*); and**
 - (iii) **the recognition of the fact that a non-trivial theory of language learning is needed.**
- As Goldberg (2003: 223) notes, what makes a theory that allows for constructions a “construction-based” theory is assumption that the network of constructions captures our knowledge of language *in toto* (i.e., **it’s constructions all the way down**).



3. On the connection(s) between Construction Grammar(s) and Contrastive Linguistics

Contrastive Construction Grammar

“(...) the **meaning** pole of constructions should be regarded as the primary basis for comparisons of constructions across languages – the form pole is only secondary. (...) [C]onstructions are viable descriptive and analytical tools for cross-linguistic comparisons that make it possible to capture both language-specific (idiosyncratic) properties as well as cross-linguistic generalizations.” (Boas, 2010a, emphasis added to the original).



4. What exactly is a construction?

The original definition of the construction

“C is a CONSTRUCTION iff def'n is a *form-function* pair, such that some aspect of the form or some aspect of the function is **not strictly predictable** from C's component parts” (Goldberg 1998: 205, emphasis added to the original)

- (1) (a) Pat faxed Bill the letter (**ditransitive**)
- (b) Joe bought his way into the exclusive country club (**way-construction**)
- (c) What's this fly doing in my soup? (**The WXYD construction**)
- (d) Pero qué hace esta mosca en mi sopa ('What's this fly doing in my soup?')
- (e) El amor es lo que tiene ('That's love for you')

The “usage-based” definition of the construction

“(...) patterns are stored as constructions even if they are fully predictable as long as they occur with **sufficient frequency**” (Goldberg 2006: 5, emphasis added to the original).

- (2) (a) I love you
 - (b) I'm lovin' it
 - (c) ¿Qué tal estás? ('How are you?')
 - (d) Nos vemos ('See you soon')
- 

TABLE 1: Examples of constructions at varying levels of size and complexity (adapted from Goldberg & Suttle 2010: 2)

Construction	Form/example
Word	Example: ornithology or ornery <i>idiosincrasia, huelga</i>
Partially filled word (aka morpheme)	Example: anti-N, pre-N, V-ing <i>anti-aborto, prepredido</i>
Complex word (filled)	Example: daredevil, shoo-in <i>pagafantas, chivo expiatorio</i>
Idiom (filled)	Example: trip the light fantastic; what's up?; <i>de uvas a peras; a regañadientes</i>
Idiom (partially filled)	Example: jog someone's memory sacar a alguien de quicio
Covariational-conditional Construction	Form: the Xer the Yer (e.g., the more you think about it, the less you understand; <i>cuanto más, mejor</i>)
Ditransitive (double-object) Construction	Form: Subj, V, Obj1, Obj2 (e.g., He baked her a muffin; <i>le hizo magdalenas</i>)
Passive construction	Form: Subj aux Vpp (PPby) The hedgehog was struck by lightning; <i>América fue descubierta por Cristobal Colón</i>

5. On the semantics of the complement-taking strategies of cognition verbs in English and Spanish:

(3) (a) I found *that the chair was uncomfortable* (finite “that”-clause)

(a') *Encontré que la silla era incómoda*

(b) I found *the chair to be uncomfortable* (accusative and infinitive)

(c) I found *the chair uncomfortable*

(c') *Encontré la silla incómoda*

(depictive object-related secondary predication) (cf. González-García 2009)

I found the chair uncomfortable (personal, direct, forceful judgement by the subject/speaker)

(#but in my opinion the chair was not uncomfortable)

(#but I've never experienced how uncomfortable the chair is)

(#but the chair is not really uncomfortable)



6. Coercion

In CxG, coercion is the resolution of a conflict between the semantics of the construction, on the one hand, and the semantics of the construction's components, on the other. In this conflict, the **former** wins out over the latter (Michaelis 2003).

(4) (a) Give me some *pillow*

(b) They sampled some *wines*

(c) When a visitor passes through the village, young lamas stop picking up trash to mug for the camera. A gruff 'police monk' *barks* them to work (Newsweek 10/13/97)

(Examples taken from Michaelis, 2003b: 261, emphasis in original)

(d) La Voz de Almería. *Más Almería*



7. Coercion via reflexives in English and Spanish

The occurrence of a reflexive pronoun saves an otherwise unacceptable result in the secondary predication construction.

(5) (a) (...) dinner guests could know **themselves** safe from distasteful anecdotes about carving knives or missing kidneys (BNC)

(b) # Dinner guests could know **everyone at the table** safe from distasteful anecdotes

Interestingly, this lower-level configuration fits into the semantics of the higher-level secondary predication construction (e.g. I found the chair uncomfortable).

(6) (a) #Dinner guests could know the members of the family safe from distasteful anecdotes about carving

(b) (#but they did not think they would be safe from distasteful anecdotes about carving knives or missing kidneys)



(7) (a) Ramón quizá **se piensa** líder de ese otro fascismo musoliniano y español.

‘Ramón perhaps thinks himself the leader of that other Mussolinean and Spanish fascism’ (CREA)

(a’) *La opinión pública piensa a Ramón líder de ese otro fascismo musoliniano y español

‘Public opinion thinks Ramón the leader of that other Mussolinean and Spanish fascism’

(8) (b) Señor, en este domingo de Adviento **nos reconocemos** pobres, miserables y pecadores ante ti y ante los hermanos

(b’) ‘Our Lord, on this Sunday of Advent, we acknowledge ourselves poor, shameful and sinners before you and the brothers’
(CREA)



A further twist to the behavior of saber in secondary predication in Spanish

(9) (a) Luis **se sabe**/*conoce ante todo español.

‘Luis knows himself above all to be Spanish’

(b) #Luis sabe a su amigo escritor.

*‘Luis knows his friend a writer’

(10) (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. (**sensory perception**)

‘It made her unhappy to know that his son was in jail’.

(c) **Se sabe** la persona más encantadora del mundo. (**cognitive perception**)

‘She knows herself to be the most charming person in the world’.

(d) **Se sabe** en la cárcel más inhóspita del mundo. (**cognitive/sensory perception**)

‘She knows herself to be in the most inhospitable jail in the world’.

How to account for the distribution of *saber* in 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 (10)(b) above. This explains why states of affairs with an overwhelmingly evaluative interpretation are not felicitous in this construction, as shown in (10)(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. In addition, the choice of the reflexive pronoun in (10)(c)-(d) also contributes a further meaning nuance intrinsic to this lower-level reflexive configuration, namely, that this judgement value is the result of introspection by the subject/speaker (see further González-García, 2007).



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 (10)(c)-(d). Interestingly enough, Spanish *saber* is also sensitive to (i) the **human** or **non human** nature of the entity in the object slot as well as to (ii) whether the state of affairs in the XPCOMP can be **directly perceived** or **not**.



8. Coercion via an imperfect tense (with a counterfactual interpretation)

(11) I had you in Lebanon

(12) (...) Hombre, Penia, te hacía en Colombia
'My dear Penia! I thought you were in Colombia' (CREA)

(13) Hola Vanesa, soy Alegría, la nieta de Conce, te suponía por Italia, (...)
'Hi Vanesa, it's me Alegria, Conce's granddaughter, I thought you were somewhere in Italy!'

(<http://www.pueblos-espana.org/asturias/asturias/felgueras/Entrada+por+casa+Polo/>)

(14) ¡Te creía perdida en la lontananza!
'I thought you were somewhere far away'

(

http://www.troyano.com/marxmadera/foro/marx_foro.mv?parm_func=showmsg+parm_msgnum=1001510)

(15) (a) *Te hago en Dangriga

*'I make you in Dangriga'

(b) # Te creo en el Líbano

*'I believe you in Lebanon'

A contrastive generalization

An important similarity regarding the interpretation of (6a)-(6b) is that they both express the fact that the speaker has first-hand evidence that a prior prediction by the subject (NP1) about a given state of affairs – usually a location – (encoded in the XPCOMP) concerning an animate being – prototypically, a person – (NP2) is blatantly wrong. However, the Spanish configuration, as in (6b), differs from its English counterpart, (6a), in at least one important respect: the fact that the element in the object slot is necessarily realized by a pronoun and is more likely than not topicalized, signalling a stance of empathy on the part of the speaker toward the hearer.

- (16) (a) Te hacía en Londres:: *Yo hacía a tí en Londres
(b) I had you in Lebanon:: *You I had in Lebanon



9. Closing Remarks and Outlook

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 sub-constructions can be seen to emerge:

- (i) '*know* + reflexive + XPCOMP <evaluative state of affairs>,
They knew themselves safe from anecdotes
- (i) '*saber* + reflexive + XPCOMP <evaluative state of affairs>,
Se sabe español
'He knows himself to be Spanish'
- (iii) '*saber* + NP + XPCOMP <perceivable state of affairs>,
Le entristecía saber a su hijo en la cárcel
It made her sad to see her son in jail
- (iv) '*had* + pronoun + XPCOMP'
I had you in Lebanon
- (v) 'pronoun + *hacía* + XPCOMP'.
Te hacía en Londres

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.



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