APPLIED CONSTRUCTION GRAMMAR: WHAT IS THE BENEFIT FOR SL/FL LEARNERS AND THEIR TEACHERS?

Eva Lehečková[1]

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Cognitive linguists claim, on the basis of vast evidence provided by empirical studies, that our knowledge of language is structured into chunks larger than individual words. This theoretical assumption has large implications for the study of both first and second language acquisition. The latter has become the main focus of the present volume which was published as the 32nd volume of the *Applications in Cognitive Linguistics* series in 2016, edited by two key figures of Construction Grammar applied in pedagogical contexts, namely Sabine de Knop (Université Saint-Louis Bruxelles) and Gaëtanelle Gilquin (Université Catholique de Louvain — FNRS). Although not being a recent publication, it is still worth reviewing in 2019 as it represents the first and so far the only book-length collective contribution to establishing the Applied Construction Grammar (henceforth ACxG) as a subdiscipline of applied linguistics.

The *Applications of Cognitive Linguistics* series was founded in 2006 in order to give floor to numerous areas of implementation of theoretical concepts of Cognitive Linguistics, e.g. translation studies (see Rojo & Ibarretxe-Antuñano, 2016), discourse analysis (see Brône et al., 2015) including cognitive poetics (Brône et al., 2009) as well as second language teaching and learning. Since the beginning of the series, the topics in pedagogical linguistics have received steady attention, as evidenced by Boers et al. (2008), de Knop et al. (2010), and Cadierno et al. (2015), among others. In this context, the title of one of the recent volumes, *What is Applied Cognitive Linguistics* (Tyler et al., 2018, vol. 38) implies that the delimitation of the applied cognitive linguistics as an independent field of study is still an ongoing process which has to be reflected upon and demonstrated to researchers of neighbouring linguistic or interdisciplinary specializations. It is in this context of applied cognitive linguistics establishing and promoting its research agenda at the same time, that we have to approach the volume *Applied Construction Grammar*.

1. SCOPE AND TARGET AUDIENCE

Construction Grammar belongs to a growing family of usage-based approaches to language, which expect languages to be learnt through the use with the fundamental support of the general cognitive process of generalization and abstraction. As

such, usage-based approaches to language are particularly suitable for application in the field of second/foreign language learning and teaching. Specifically, the potential of application of Construction Grammar concepts to SLA and teaching have been around for a few years now, and the interest in this agenda is only growing as attested by thematic sessions organized at relevant conferences, e.g. 10th International Conference on Construction Grammar in 2018 in Paris where Sabine de Knop and her colleagues chaired a thematic session on Constructionist approaches to language teaching.

The volume under scrutiny has (reasonably) narrowed down its thematic scope to L2 acquisition, foreign language learning and pedagogical implications (see Introduction, p. 8). The general goal of the book is two-fold: (i) to contribute to the development of ACxG into a mature, fully-fledged discipline, (ii) to use current insights from construction-based empirical research to help overcome some traditional shortcomings of teaching practice as well as to enhance learners' better performance in a second/foreign language.

Generally speaking, a volume of such scope has to be cordially welcome. The present volume brings already numerous, yet dispersed evidence of the applicability of constructional concepts to SLA and teaching practice into one volume which enables the readers to acknowledge true benefits of introducing CxG into practice. A methodological pattern can be observed throughout the volume. Building upon an existing constructional (as well as cognitive, in a few cases) account of a particular construction in a target native language, the individual chapters either investigate L2 speakers' construction forming or the effects of construction-informed teaching methods on the L2 speakers' performance. All papers aim at formulating pedagogical implications of their findings, which are displayed either as separate appendices (e.g. de Knop & Mollica; Sung & Yang) or within the papers themselves (e.g. Herbst, della Putta, Mendoza-Ibáñez & Llach).

Upon reading the book, it is worth asking who the target audience of the volume might be. Naturally, linguists familiar with Construction Grammar (investigating adult/L1/L2 language) might obtain new persuasive arguments and evidence for construction-forming in L2 speakers as well as for effects of construction-based instructions on the performance of learners. They might also find the overview of the current research on constructicons of various languages in the last section of the book informative and useful. Another potential audience consists of researchers and/or university teachers in second language acquisition and foreign language teaching, most probably without previous exposure (or at least not a substantial one) to Construction Grammar. It is this group that the present volume is probably the most suited for and that could benefit the most from it. Consequently, it is mainly in relation to this group that the potential contribution of the volume should be evaluated as its members can be expected to be open to new concepts and findings and have access to real practitioners at the same time. If the editors originally expected practitioners to be another target group ready to use the book directly, without mediation from L2 researchers and university teachers, I have to express certain doubts regarding this expectation. Practitioners usually have a certain theoretical background, and years of teaching experience. If the former works for them and/or if their learners make

noticeable progress under their supervision, the teachers often do not feel the urge to elaborate or even change their methods. According to my experience with the field, the only subset of practitioners probably willing to turn to a volume of this scope by themselves would be those already familiar with corpus linguistics and specialized acquisition and learner corpora applied in teaching practice. These teachers are used to working with naturally occurring data, paying attention to frequency effects, introducing collocations and other corpus-based concepts in class for the measurable benefit of their students.

2. CONSTRUCTIONAL CONCEPTS IN APPLICATION

Apart from the editors' Introduction, the body of the volume is divided into three sections (Constructionist approaches to L2 learning and teaching, Crosslinguistic applications of constructionist approaches, and Constructing the Constructicon for L2 learners) in which several theoretical concepts of Construction Grammar are challenged in the context of their application:

2.1 NOTION OF CONSTRUCTION

The pervasive claim of the whole volume is included in the title of Thomas Herbst's paper "Foreign language learning is construction learning" (p. 45). The Introduction of the volume as well as individual papers center around this statement, gathering the growing body of empirical evidence in its support.

Constructions coined as the core language units in Construction Grammar. As such, they are defined as conventionalized pairings of formal and semantic/pragmatic features. The important claim of constructionist theories is that constructions come in all sizes — from individual words (and even smaller units, as pointed out in Booij, 2010a and 2010b; Jackendoff & Audring, 2017) through multiword expressions to abstract grammar patterns (e.g. valency constructions) as well as sentence and discourse patterns (Fischer & Nikiforidou, 2015; Nir, 2015). The main advantage of CxG in this respect is that it offers a unified account of various units usually treated separately at different levels and modules. As for the point of emergence of a construction, two general accounts can be distinguished (and are mentioned repeatedly in the volume) — a string of expressions equals to a construction if a) it is in some respect unpredictable, i.e. cannot be arrived at compositionally (Goldberg, 1995); b) it is frequent enough to get entrenched in the mind of speakers (Goldberg, 2006), which represents a more radically usage-based perspective (akin to Bybee, 2010, and following elaborations). Both definitions have their problems, e.g. the evidence of seemingly predictable constructions for the former, and the question of the frequency threshold of entrenchment for the latter (see also Divjak & Caldwell-Harris, 2015), which are still discussed within Construction Grammars.[2] However, there is no

2 The plural here indicates that Construction Grammar is a family of particular theories that may differ in some respects while sharing the fundamental assumptions. A compre-

hesitance and controversy related to the core theoretical claim that constructional patterns are what speakers store in their minds, and the present volume brings to the fore the evidence supporting it from the L2 acquisition and learning perspective.

The Introduction section mentions a handful of studies focusing on learning constructions in L2 speakers, carried out prior to the publication of the volume, (Liang, 2002; Gries & Wulff, 2005; Ellis & Ferreira-Junior, 2009; Gilquin, 2015) as well as a very few papers aiming at transferring these findings to teaching practice (Holme, 2010). About a half of the papers in the present volume aims at adding up to this past research. Sung & Yang test the performance of experimental and control group of Korean students learning English transitive resultative construction (*paint the room green*) either through a construction-based, or a form-based instruction. Pre- and post-tests showed improvement in both learning groups, but construction-informed students outperformed those relying on the form-based instruction. Their results also reveal that the overall performance was better for light verbs than for heavy verbs in both groups, indicating that light verbs represent a driving force in constructional learning, and therefore should be used as such in classroom instruction (and thus, the appendix of the paper offers separate classroom activities for learning both the light and heavy verbs in transitive resultative constructions). Gilquin studies the use of periphrastic causative constructions in written production of second (ESL) versus foreign (EFL) language learners of English in comparison with native speakers' performance, using corpus-based data extracted from various corpora of English. She finds that a simplistic usage-based scenario (the more frequent the exposure, the better the performance) in fact more complicated in the following respects: both groups tend to overuse the causative construction (especially with the verb *make*) and prefer to insert more general-purpose and high-frequency verbs in a non-finite slot of the construction when compared with native speakers' production; yet, ESL speakers tend to generalize at a higher level of abstraction than EFL learners who seem to entrench more concrete patterns on lower levels of generalization as mirrored e.g. in distinctive collexeme analysis presented in the study. Following these findings, Gilquin suggests that some features of target constructions may be accessible from naturally occurring input, other that make both groups of learners struggle even at advanced levels (e.g. the specificity of the verb in a non-finite slot, the choice of the causative verb in relation to register) can be successfully introduced through corpus-informed, construction-based instruction. Baicchi also shows, via sentence-elicitation task including constructional priming, that Italian students of English at B1/B2 levels yielded constructional generalizations of prepositional constructions (*The wealthy widow gave/drove an old Mercedes to the church*) even for patterns unattested in their native language.

Unsurprisingly, given the core research agenda in L2 acquisition and FL learning, a few chapters (mainly those included in the second part of the book) tackle the issue of negative transfer in second language learning. Among these, della Putta addressess

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hensive chapter-length introduction to Construction Grammars is to be found in Croft & Cruse (2004), a more elaborate description is provided in Östman & Fried (2005), and finally a recent and detailed survey across several chapters is available in Hoffmann & Trousdale (2013).

the question of whether speakers also have to unlearn (their native) constructions. The answer, as a result of a contrastive analysis of the production of beginner and advanced Spanish learners of Italian during a picture-based dialogue description task with immediate recalls, is positive, showing that the more typologically related the L1 and L2, the longer the effect of negative transfer. More distinct languages, namely Danish as L1 and Spanish as L2, are studied in Hijazo-Gascón et al.'s chapter that studies the acquisition of placement caused motion constructions via experiments based on video-stimuli. L1/L2 relation is also given attention in Mendoza-Ibáñez & Llach's study of non-descriptive language (e.g. metaphor, metonymy, hyperbole, and irony) in English speakers of Spanish as L2, the only one in the volume that addresses differences in conceptualizations in native and non-native speakers and teaching tools to introduce the target former ones to learners.

As the field of Construction Grammar, similarly to other theories and disciplines, currently undergoes a major shift to the study of communication as a multimodal phenomenon, it is a pity that this line of development has not been reflected or at least mentioned in the present volume, showing that co-speech gestures might boost both successful production and comprehension of L2 learners (e.g. Gullberg, 2006). This is certainly one way to broaden the perspective of the applied constructional research in near future.

2.2 LEXIS AND GRAMMAR AS A CONTINUUM

The fact that constructions represent patterns of different sizes and types makes any strict separation of lexicon and grammar (or of vocabulary and grammar instruction in textbooks and teaching practice) neither necessary nor particularly useful. As a consequence, CxG approach reveals that treating lexical and grammatical knowledge separately does not allow for capturing partially schematic constructions such as [*in the* X *of the* X] for time constructions indicating a given part of a time unit, e.g. *in the beginning of the day, in the middle of the night, in the end of the month* and so on. This construction contains lexically filled slots as well as open slots for adverbs and nouns from a certain semantic group. However, there is an additional condition on the relation between those expressions introduced in the X slots, namely that the first has to indicate a temporal subpart of the second. It is not clear how a traditional approach to language could account for these mid-level constructions in a sufficient detail. As this type of constructions is very frequent in language, the constructional perspective that represents lexis and grammar as two poles on a continuous scale leading from full lexical specificity to full schematicity through many transition phases gains a significant advantage over other models, e.g. more traditional approaches to separate lexicon and grammar instruction in both textbooks and classes. In general, this approach links CxG to more communicatively oriented approaches to foreign language teaching, focusing on communicative success and competence needed to reach this goal, irrespective of the level of origin of individual means of expressions.

Apart from supporting the idea of learners' entrenchment of constructions, a few papers of the volume also tackle this issue, aiming at linking grammatical and lexico-semantic instruction, which is still pervasively introduced separately in traditional

teaching materials. De Knop & Mollica, for instance, report on their classroom experiment showing how Italian and French students can benefit from a construction-based instruction. They focus on the learning of literal and idiomatic meanings of German constructions while measuring the performance in pre- and post-tests. Having included their stimuli in the appendix, the authors support a direct replication of their design in other German as L2 classes. Generally speaking, all chapters that target the enhancement of learning of partially lexically-filled constructions, implicitly or explicitly discard the plausibility of discrete lexicon and grammar (cf. della Putta, Herbst, Hijazo-Gascón et al.).

2.3 CONSTRUCTICON

According to CxG, languages are learnt in terms of related families of constructions that share a number of features, most typically both formal and semantic/pragmatic. Akin constructions are organized into multidimensional networks linking more schematic constructions to more specific ones: the more a construction is schematic, the higher its place in a network — the general features are typically inherited by more specific constructions which also add up some idiosyncratic features which specify their meaning and constrain their use to a certain extent. For this model of language, a term *constructicon* (analogous to lexicon) has been adopted. Following this line of reasoning, if knowledge of a language can be modeled as a network of constructions, learners of the language have to learn not only the individual constructions, but also their relations. If this is indeed the case, we could provide learners with instructions including constructional networks and measure its effect on learners' performance. This instruction could take a form of a specific dictionary designed for language learning purposes. All of the four papers of the volume dedicated to the problem of building constructicons of particular languages pursue this goal. Adopting a more frequency-based approach to the constructicon, Cappelle and Grabar stress the need of providing an inventory of frequent constructions to L2 teachers. Therefore, they investigate 100 most frequent POS-based 5-grams of American English, extracted from COCA corpus (Davies, 2008) — they detect a number of frequent and meaningful patterns, e.g. *the X of the X* (*the rest of the world*) and offer some classroom activities based on these findings. Loenheim et al., after presenting the ways of instruction in prevalent Swedish textbooks for L2 learners, take Swedish FrameNet, a network of conceptual frames for Swedish, as a source for the description of partially lexically filled temporal and measure constructions in Swedish instructive for L2 learners. In their discussion, they suggest to include information about prototypical (invariant) core of the target construction, then present varying features, and finally integrate information about communicative function of the target construction in a user-friendly way. Similarly, the last study of this kind, by Boas, Dux & Ziem, through the presentation of German equivalents of *take a NP* construction related to body grooming activities in G-FOL (German FrameBased Online Lexicon), addresses a crucial question of how to build up L2 constructicons in an informative, and yet simplified (and thus learnable) way as well as how to integrate both frame-based and construction-based (or lexical and grammatical, traditionally speaking) information

in the description. These papers, aiming at developing an online tool facilitating L2 students learning of larger "chunks of knowledge" in the target language, represent the farthest step so far in pursuing the constructionist idea that "[e]ntrenchment of experiences should become a well-established practice in language teaching" (Baicchi, 2016, p. 230).

3. CAN THE VOLUME CONTRIBUTE TO INNOVATIONS IN TEACHING PRACTICE?

This question is crucial for the evaluation of the volume as a whole. In this respect, I particularly appreciated Thomas Herbst's realistic and cautious assessment of the current situation of both Construction Grammar and foreign language pedagogy as well as the potential contribution of the former to the latter. In this regard, Herbst's chapter represents a position paper that the specialists in foreign language teaching should perhaps start with and keep coming back to as Herbst's perspective might be the most familiar one. His claim *There is no need to reinvent the wheel* suggests to carefully consider which concepts of CxG bring genuine innovations in SL/FL learning and teaching, and which have already been present in the field for some time, although under different labels. It is obvious that papers in a volume of this kind have to stress the need for change in the target field in order to justify the innovations. However, categorical statements may offend the audience one wishes to positively motivate for trying the approach that has been advocated for. For instance, in Sabine de Knop's chapter, a very solid empirical study on the effects of construction-based instruction, we can find a claim that "[b]ecause of their idiomatic status, phraseologisms do not have any priority in so-called Da-F Unterricht (Teaching of German as a foreign language)" (de Knop, 2016, p. 79). Unfortunately, this oversimplifies the situation in Germany; it may hold for a number of textbooks of German as a foreign language, and, very probably, for a number of practitioners. However, there are visible attempts within Da-F Unterricht which, prior to the birth of ACxG, shifted teachers' and learners' attention to phraseology and its specificities, often using corpus data (and hence fed by general corpus research, traditionally strong in Germany), cf. e.g. *Phraseology: An International Handbook of Contemporary Research* (Burger et al., 2008) which contains three chapters on phraseologisms in L1/L2 learning and teaching, or individual papers by Jesenšek (2006), Hallsteinsdóttir et al. (2006), among others. Such statements often complicate smooth inclusion of new methods into language teaching, and therefore should be avoided for the benefit of all.

Returning to Herbst's assessment of potential CxG contribution to applied linguistics, he finds the following findings particularly worth pursuing in the future: the evidence of learners' generalizations of constructions over individual instances, frequency effects in language learning (detectable through e.g. collostructional analysis), the positive effects of approaching and presenting lexicon-grammar relation as a continuum of specificity-schematicity, and accounts of constructicons and possibilities of their applications both in learner's dictionaries and classroom activities form a set of findings and techniques that could help to boost learners' performance

in class. The success of integrating these concepts into classrooms depends on the future growth of the studies that will report experiences with their application in learner groups of various language backgrounds and proficiency levels.

With respect to the focal area of *Studies in Applied Linguistics*, i.e. applied research of Central European and/or Slavic languages, the present volume, in fact, reveals a niche to be filled: apart from German and a few references to Polish speakers of Spanish in Hijazo-Gascón et al.'s paper, none of the Central European and/or Slavic languages has been targeted — therefore, new body of evidence on construction-forming in L2 learning and on the effects of construction-based teaching instructions might contribute substantially to the integration of CxG into applied linguistics. The present volume, thanks to the enormous effort of its contributors, offers a plethora of inspiring research questions worth applying to Slavic languages and their L2 learners.

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Eva Lehečková | Institute of Czech Language and Theory of Communication, Faculty of Arts, Charles University
<eva.leheckova@ff.cuni.cz>