Re-appraising the role of alternations in construction grammar: the case of the conative construction

Florent Perek
Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies & Université de Lille 3
florent.perek@gmail.com
• Overview
  – The conative construction: introduction and review
  – A new analysis
    • Based on examples from the written narratives of the BNC
  – Theoretical implications for construction grammar
The conative construction

- The conative construction
  - One variant of the conative alternation
    - A case of preposition insertion
    - Concerns transitive verbs
    - Direct object realized as an *at*-PP, e.g.:
      - John kicked the ball *vs.* John kicked at the ball
      - Mary cut the bread *vs.* Mary cut at the bread
      - Bill wiped the counter *vs.* Bill wiped at the counter
  - Several different classes of verbs; no clear semantic alignment (cf. handout)
The conative alternation

- Towards a construction grammar account
  - Argument structure = constructions (Goldberg 1995, 2006)
    - Pairing of a syntactic pattern with an abstract schema
      - Textbook example: the ditransitive construction
        \[ \text{NP}_X \text{ V} \text{ NP}_Y \text{ NP}_Z \leftrightarrow 'X \text{ causes } Y \text{ to have } Z' \]
    - Verb meaning is constant but flexible (frame semantics)
    - Verb meaning in context = integration of the verb's frame semantics into the constructional schema
  - For the conative alternation:
    - Alternation = two constructions: any semantic difference is to be accounted for by different constructional schemata
    - The meaning of the transitive counterpart should play no role
What is the meaning of the conative construction?

- Classical example of transitivity alternation but still resists a general characterization
- Levin (1993:42): “describes an “attempted” action without specifying whether the action was actually carried out”
- Pinker's (1989:104): “the subject is trying to affect the oblique object but may or may not be succeeding” (p. 104)
- Goldberg (1995:63-64):
  - “the verb designates the intended result of the act denoted by the construction. The semantics of the construction can be represented roughly as 'X DIRECTS ACTION AT Y'.”
  - e.g., *Ethel strikes at Fred*: “Ethel does not necessarily strike Fred, but striking him is the intended result of the directed action” (ibid.)
In search for the conative meaning

- Broccia (2001) enlarges the definition to two schemata:
  - the **allative** schema: translational motion towards a target, contact and affectedness are possible but not necessary ≈ Goldberg's “directed-action”
    
    *Sally kicked at the ball*
  
  - the **ablative** schema: contact is made but does not bring the intended effect and is open to repetition
    
    *He sipped at a tumbler of water*
  
  - Generalizable to “no effect” (albeit context-dependent)
In search for the conative meaning

- State of the art: two kinds of two-participant constructions:
  - The transitive entails affectedness of the patient
  - The conative does not necessarily entail affectedness of P

  e.g., the transitive would be contradictory in the four following cases, where affectedness is contextually prevented

- no effect (ex. 1-4)
- no contact (ex. 5-8)
- no energy (ex. 9-10)
- no significant effect (ex. 11)
Beyond non-affectedness

● Previous accounts focus of the notion “non-affectedness”
  - However, not always the relevant difference with transitives
  - For instance: the conative must be used if no effect on the patient is intended by the agent,
    ● Either: because the agent is not volitional (ex. 11-14)
      - Inanimates (natural forces, plants), abstract entities, etc.
      - They cannot be ascribed intentions or consciousness; a transitive would thus sound odd
    ● Or: the motivation behind the act is other than the intention to bring about an effect on the patient
      - Anger, nervousness, playfulness, anxiety (ex. 15-24)
      - A transitive would entail that affectedness is sought
  ● In both cases: affectedness (if any) is purely contingent and irrelevant (cf. ex. 19); it is not the focus of attention
Beyond non-affectedness

- Another use of the conative: intensified contact
  - With verbs of seizing and holding: *clutch, catch, grab, grasp, grip, hold*, ...
  - May be used even when contact is made (ex. 25-26)
  - The conative gives a reading of intensified contact
  - “Affectedness” (spatial configuration) of the patient is backgrounded
  - The *at*-phrase referent seems more like a setting; the focus is more on the agent
  - However: no event-level semantic difference, objectively, it is the same event
The conative construal

- The function of the conative
  - Not an event schema
    - Unnecessary affectedness is not a sufficient characterization
    - Apparently no event-level properties that
      - (1) hold for all conatives
      - (2) distinguish them from transitives
    - What conatives have in common is only the lack of some properties of the transitive
    - Events described by transitives and conatives may not objectively differ; it is only subjectively that they do
The conative construal

- The function of the conative
  - Does not denote a type of event, rather a type of construal
    - The focus shifts from causation to the agent and its activity
    - The patient loses its status as landmark (focal participant) and becomes part of the setting
  - In line with Dixon's (1991) remarks on preposition insertion
    - Marks “the deviation from an 'ideal' transitive event”, “that it [the object] lacks some of the salient properties associated with the syntactic relation 'object’”
    - “to indicate that the emphasis is not on the effect of the activity on some specific object (the normal situation) but rather on the subject's engaging in the activity”
The conative construal

- The ideal transitive event (Langacker 1991, Taylor 2003)

  - Two participants, an agent A and a patient P
  - A acts **consciously** and **volitionally**
  - A **initiates** and **controls** the event, and **intends** to bring about an **effect** on P
  - A makes **energetic physical contact** with P
  - P suffers a **perceptible change of state**
  - The event is **real** and **punctual**; it has a clear **endpoint**
The conative construal

- A matter of choice?
  - The two constructions are available for conceptualizing two-participant events
  - So, what motivates the use of a conative (vs. transitive) construal?
    - The only acceptable construal for some events
      - Non-volitional agent or non-intended affectedness
      - Explicitly non-effective event
    - In competition with the transitive for others
      - It thus imposes a certain view on these events
      - In this sense it conveys meaning: intensified contact, underspecification of the effect
    - Main function = to avoid implicatures that the transitive counterpart might trigger: volition, causality, effect, ...
Where do these implicatures come from?

- Not from the transitive construction itself
  - Causal chain = just a prototype, not all of its properties necessarily hold for all instances
  - Large departures from the prototype are attested: non-volitional agents, non-causal relationships, non-affectedness can all occur in transitive sentences
- So they come from the transitive use of the verb
  - For some verbs, the transitive use evokes a scenario which is at odds with the target conceptualization; e.g., “agression” for kick and bite, “cleaning” for brush, …
  - Avoided by the conative construal which focuses on the action
Back to the theory; in construction grammar:

- Clauses receive their meaning from independent surface generalizations (cf. Goldberg 2002)
- Syntactic alternations have no theoretical status
- Our analysis of the conative construction shows that:
  - It is a type of construal rather than a type of event
  - When and why this construal is used crucially depends on the transitive counterpart
  - Conatives sentences acquire much of their meaning from contrast with the transitive counterpart
  - This suggests that at least some alternations might play a greater role than what has been considered so far
  - This should be better studied and made more explicit in construction grammar
Thanks for your attention!


