

Corpus evidence for a lexical account of the English conative construction

Previous corpus-based studies of the interaction of syntax and lexis in Construction Grammar showed that “strong collexemes of a construction provide a good indicator of its meaning” (Stefanowitsch and Gries 2003:227); for example, the ditransitive is biased towards verbs lexicalizing its core meaning of caused possession such as *give*. In this talk, we suggest some refinements of this claim on the basis of a corpus-based study of the conative construction in English.

This construction realizes the Patient argument of a transitive verb not as its direct object, but as a prepositional phrase headed by *at*, as exemplified by such contrasts as *John kicked at the ball* vs. *John kicked the ball*. The semantic import of the construction varies according to the verb instantiating it from an iterative reading to an interpretation of attempted action (Levin 1993:42, Goldberg 1995:63-64, Broccias 2001). While the conative frame is frequently cited in discussions of transitivity alternations, there has not been any exhaustive study of the construction in its actual usage, as provided by corpora.

We extracted all occurrences of the conative construction in a 16 million-words corpus of narrative written prose taken from the BNC (2217 attestations). We found that, in contrast to previously studied constructions, the most significant verbal collocates of the conative are so diverse that they do not help us attribute a general meaning to the construction. However, if we analyze the distribution of verbs within semantically defined classes, the meaning of the construction appears more clearly. For example, for verbs of ingestion, the semantic structure of the most preferred verbs, *nibble*, *sip* and *gnaw*, already incorporates an iterative and 'bit-by-bit' reading that has been argued to be the semantic import of the construction for verbs of this class, whereas verbs that do not feature such semantic components are less preferred; the least preferred verb in this class is the highly general *eat*.

Our study thus sheds some light on the relation between constructional and lexical semantics by showing that the semantics of the conative construction is not a unified whole, but rather a conglomerate that can be explained by local lexical generalizations over classes of verbs. We argue that clusters of such low-level generalizations are, at least in this case, a more psychologically valid mental representation of constructional meaning than general schemata deriving from prototypical verbs.

References

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