

Reappraising the role of alternations in construction grammar: the case of the conative construction.

In construction grammar, syntactic alternations have no theoretical status: constructions are seen as symbolic structures that receive their meaning from surface generalizations (Goldberg 2002) independently of other constructions that exist in the grammar. This paper aims to reappraise the role of alternations through a study of the conative construction (*John kicked at the ball*) vs. the transitive construction (*John kicked the ball*).

In construction grammar, the meaning of argument structure is usually described as an event type (cf. Goldberg 1995, 2006). In case of event type mismatch between verb and construction, the meaning of the verb is integrated in the event denoted by the construction, such that all instances of a construction denote the same event type, a phenomenon we refer to as event shifting.

On the basis of a corpus of examples drawn from narratives in the BNC, we show that the semantics of the conative is not easily captured by event shifting. It appears that the choice of the conative over the transitive is motivated by the absence of various kinds of implicatures normally associated to the transitive variant, albeit according to the situation of utterance. In lieu of event shifting, we suggest that the conative should be better viewed as a *profile* shifting construction whose instances acquire much of their meaning with reference to the transitive variant.

Our case study shows that, in some cases, linguistic constructs receive their meaning not only from generalizations over surface forms, but also most likely from contrast with the meaning of paradigmatically related forms. This analysis echoes the basic insight that language users pay attention to the choices of speakers and attribute semantic contrasts to them, which we suggest should be made more explicit in construction grammar.

References

- Goldberg, A. (1995). *Constructions: a construction grammar approach to argument structure*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Goldberg, A. (2002). Surface generalizations: An alternative to alternations. *Cognitive Linguistics* 13.4, 327–356.
- Goldberg, A. (2006). *Constructions at Work: The Nature of Generalization in Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.