

1 Introduction

1.1 THE CONCEPT OF CONSTRUCTIONS

What is it children learn when they learn to speak a language? What is the nature of verb meaning and what is its relation to sentential meaning? How and to what extent are novel utterances based on previously learned utterances?

These questions are addressed here through a study of basic sentence types—the “simple sentences” of traditional grammarians. A central thesis of this work is that basic sentences of English are instances of *constructions*—form–meaning correspondences that exist independently of particular verbs. That is, it is argued that constructions themselves carry meaning, independently of the words in the sentence.

The notion *construction* has a time-honored place in linguistics. Traditional grammarians have inevitably found it useful to refer to properties of particular constructions. The existence of constructions in the grammar was taken to be a self-evident fact that required little comment. In the early stages of transformational grammar (Chomsky 1957, 1965), constructions retained their central role, construction-specific rules and constraints being the norm. In the past two decades, however, the pretheoretical notion of construction has come under attack. Syntactic constructions have been claimed to be epiphenomenal, arising solely from the interaction of general principles (Chomsky 1981, 1992); the rejection of constructions in favor of such general principles is often assumed now to be the only way to capture generalizations across patterns.

At the same time, the rising tide of interest in semantic and pragmatic properties has led to a renewed focus on the idiosyncratic properties of particular sentence patterns (cf. Levin 1993, for example). In order to reconcile the theoretical desire for construction-independent principles with the empirical necessity of recognizing pattern-specific properties, all such idiosyncratic properties have been attributed to individual lexical items, lexical entries being the last refuge of the idiosyncratic.

There is no question that a large amount of information is contributed by individual lexical items (cf. chapters 2 and 5). However, in this work it is argued that an entirely lexically-based, or bottom-up, approach fails to account for the full range of English data. Particular semantic structures together with their associated formal expression must be recognized as constructions independent of the lexical items which instantiate them.

Adele E Goldberg
Constructions: A Construction
Grammar Approach to Argument
Structure
Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1995