

Relations between Constructions: An Analysis of Child-Directed Speech

The study explores the architecture of the constructicon by investigating the relations between constructions indicated by parents in child-directed speech.

Several relations between constructions have been proposed in various versions of construction grammar (e.g. Kay & Fillmore (1999): inheritance and unification; Croft (2001): post hoc abstraction links; Goldberg (1995): polysemy, subclass, instance, sense extension). So far, however, it is open whether this is an exhaustive set of relations, and how the different relations interact. If lexicon and grammar indeed form a continuum, lexicon and constructicon cannot be structured in incompatible ways. Instead, it can be expected that the semantic relationships identified for the lexicon might be found in the constructicon as well, at least to some extent, which might entail a much broader set of organizing principles.

To investigate this hypothesis empirically, a study of the semantic relations between constructions in speech directed at children has been carried out. Child-directed speech was chosen because if the architecture of the lexicon-constructicon is systematic, there may be systematic ways of signalling such relations to the language learner.¹ Küntay and Slobin (2002) suggest that adults provide children with variation sets, containing rich syntagmatic and paradigmatic information about grammar. The highly repetitive and reformulative nature of child-directed speech has often been noted (e.g. Slobin 1975, Karmiloff & Karmiloff-Smith 2001), yet in how far reformulations may contribute to identifying systematic relationships between constructions has not yet been explored.

From a corpus of English child-parent interactions from the Chiles database, a set of reformulatory episodes was extracted. The reformulatory episodes in the input children receive were then investigated for indications of semantic relationships between constructions. In the study presented, which is part of a long term project on the architecture of the constructicon, ubiquitous indicators of semantic relations, such as synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy, meronymy (e.g. Cruse 2000, Murphy 2003); of semantic frames (Fillmore & Akins 1992, Fillmore et al. 2006); and of semantic fields (Lyons 1977) were found. Most frequent, however, were reformulations that constituted little scenarios, for instance:²

Adult: *Maybe we should get your crayons # want to get your crayons?* Child: *yeah.*

Adult: *I'll get your crayons. (...) Here's the crayons.*

The results from the empirical studies suggest that the architecture of the constructicon relies on a broader variety of relationships than previously suggested and that constructicon and lexicon may indeed be structured in similar ways.

¹ Self-evidently, not all of these relationships will have to be learned from input; relationships may also be due to other, more general, organizing principles, such as metaphor and metonymy, phonological similarity, etc., which have been shown to influence the lexicon (e.g. Aitchison 2003).

² From Clark (1976), target child age: 2;2.16; age of child may play a role in the types of relationships signaled, which was preliminarily ignored for the purpose of this study.

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