

What about French Construction Grammar?

Book review of *L'expansion pluridisciplinaire des grammaires de constructions* (J. François, ed., 2021)

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Abstract:

Construction Grammar (henceforth CxG) has become a worldwide influential theoretical framework in linguistics over the last decades. A focus mainly on English is however still typical of a long tradition of research in CxG. Surprisingly, this observation does not only hold for “smaller” languages, but also still applies to prominent languages such as French. In 2021, Jacques François, professor emeritus of the University of Caen in France, brought together nine chapters on CxG mostly applied to French in the edited volume *L'expansion pluridisciplinaire des Grammaires de Constructions*, published by Presses Universitaires de Caen. The central aim of the book is to demonstrate how CxG has considerably contributed to yield pluridisciplinary approaches in French linguistics and to enhance the appreciation for this theoretical framework among French (and more generally European) linguists because of these innovative extensions. The present review article summarizes the different chapters of this book and evaluates its relevance for the linguistic community in France and abroad.

Keywords: Construction Grammar; French linguistics; theoretical linguistics; diachronic linguistics; applied linguistics

Construction Grammar (henceforth CxG) has become a worldwide influential theoretical framework in linguistics over the last decades. Unfortunately, a focus mainly on English is however still typical of a long tradition of studies in CxG, while studies that investigate the validity of the CxG approach to other languages are still too scarce. Surprisingly, this observation does not only hold for “smaller” languages, but also still applies to prominent languages such as French. Recently, Jacques François, professor emeritus of the University of Caen in France, brought together nine chapters on CxG mostly applied to French in the edited

volume *L'expansion pluridisciplinaire des Grammaires de Constructions* published by Presses Universitaires de Caen. The chapters are written by prominent linguists working on French and/or in France and all contribute to show how CxG has recently extended its scope in different subfields of French linguistics.

In the **Introduction** of the book, the authors **J. François, M. Achard, G. Desagulier, D. Legallois and A. Morgenstein** address the divide between *grammatical construction*, on the one hand, a notion that is well established in the European linguistic tradition, and the more recent notion of *construction* in the constructionist sense, the latter used to designate the association between a form and a meaning. The authors argue that exploring this distinction could help us better understand to which extent the 'construction' actually differs from the traditional 'grammatical construction', why CxG has struggled to gain a foothold in France, and finally, why it is important to emphasize the multidisciplinary dimension of constructional studies since the beginning of the 21st century.

The use of the term 'construction' is indeed not new and in fact already goes back to the 6th century when the Latin grammarian Priscian examines under the heading of 'constructio' (as a semantic calque of the Greek word *syntaxis*) the relation between the parts of speech and the different semantic functions expressed by *nomen substantivum* and *nomen adjectivum*. The term develops in the course of history and is progressively reduced to its syntactic value. In current grammars such as that of Riegel et al. (1994), the term is used in a rather ambivalent way to refer to different types of syntactic and discursive structures.

In their introduction to the *Oxford Handbook of Construction Grammar*, Hoffmann & Trousdale (2013: 2) define the 'construction' as a conventionalized form-meaning pairing, which can be conceptualized as an extended notion of the Saussurean sign because it goes beyond the word level and includes all levels of grammatical description (morphemes, words, idioms, abstract phrasal patterns). Banished from generative syntax since Chomsky's *Principles and Parameters* theory (1981), constructions have long been rejected from the dominant syntactic models as being epiphenomenal compared to the core system of language. However, since the beginning of the 20th century, Construction Grammar has become an increasingly influential theory worldwide, albeit still closely connected to other theories that focus on the correlation between syntax and semantics.

In contrast, French linguists often do not share the current enthusiasm for the Construction Grammar framework. François et al. refer to several factors that may explain this disinterest.

French linguists often share the feeling that the sudden rediscovery of Saussure's theory stands in flagrant contrast with the complete ignorance of other European and especially French theories, such as G. Guillaume's *psychomécanique* or A. Culioli's *linguistique énonciative*, which already paid close attention to the dynamics of meaning construction. Moreover, the use of the term 'construction', as a key notion of an innovative linguistic theory, has not always been well accepted, because the term had already been too semantically loaded throughout a long European grammar tradition.

Despite these obstacles, a growing interest in this paradigm emerged in Europe and France in the last years, mainly due to the undeniable progress that CxG made possible from a pluridisciplinary perspective, with research conducted in the fields of diachronic, cognitive and computational linguistics. This edited book aims precisely to demonstrate the pluridisciplinary progress CxG allowed for in the field of French linguistics. In this way, it seeks to further enhance the appreciation for CxG among the French scholarly community. This is done in nine contributions which are organized into four larger sections corresponding to different multidisciplinary extensions of CxG.

Part 1 has an introductory purpose and focuses on the **theory and applications of CxG**.

In the first chapter, **D. Legallois** discusses the relevance of schematicity, not only for the theory of CxG but also beyond. Legallois argues that schematicity constitutes a key cognitive operation that involves many levels of linguistic description (morphological, lexical and grammatical units). Starting from Langacker's cognitive conception of schematicity, seen as complementary to the operation of categorization, the author further explores studies in various fields (metaphors, proverbs, technical terminology, etc.) that independently of Cognitive Grammar or Construction Grammar implicitly illustrate the cognitive functioning of schematicity. Finally, the role of schematicity in CxG is illustrated by the French dative construction, which corresponds to the schema [N0_S V à N1_{DAT}] with the dative realized either lexically or in a clitic form. Since this construction can be instantiated by a wide variety of sub-constructions and substantive expressions (e.g. *il ment à ses parents* 'he lies to his parents', *la tête lui tourne* 'his head is spinning', *ce cadeau me déplaît* 'I don't like this gift'), the case study also revisits the fundamental question up to which point linguists' progressive schematizations correspond to cognitive realities of actual language users.

The second contribution of Part 1 argues that principles considered typical of CxG, such as the grammar-lexicon continuum, actually build on a long-standing grammatical tradition and have

their roots in, among others, Cognitive Grammar. **Ph. Gréa** refers to Langacker's concept of constructional schema, which substitutes for the notion of grammatical rule, to underpin the validity of the lexicon-grammar continuum. The Langackerian approach is illustrated by two French – at first sight near-synonymous – semi-schematic constructions with a taxonomic function: [*mode de N*] and [*type de N*] (e.g. *un mode / type de raisonnement* 'a mode / type of reasoning'). A closer analysis of these constructions shows however to which extent they differ from each other with respect to coercive effects, collocational preferences and idiosyncratic constraints. It is for instance argued that [*mode de N*], contrary to [*type de N*], coerces a 'complex event nominal' interpretation of the noun, which retains the constituent structure of its source verb, and is not compatible with 'simple event nominals' which have lost their original constituent structure (e.g. **le type / le mode de designation du président* 'the mode of appointing the president' vs **le mode / le type d'entreprise* 'the type of company' (p. 62)). The case study supports the Cognitive Grammar view of linguistic constructions as constructional schemas, rather than being the result of grammatical rules.

Part 2 deals with the **diachronic extension of CxG** and focuses on the process of **constructionalization**. This second part again contains two chapters.

L. Ben Hamad studies the diachronic change of the French preposition *pendant* 'during' in the framework of constructionalization (Traugott & Trousdale 2013). Contrary to earlier approaches that assume diachronic transitions between a lexical (meaning) pole and a grammatical (structure) pole, constructionalization "aims to account, in a uniform and principled way, for the kinds of changes which have traditionally been described as 'grammaticalization', [...], 'lexicalization' and 'degrammaticalization'" (Trousdale 2014: 2). An insightful overview of the framework is followed by a rigorous corpus-based analysis of the diachrony of the French preposition (e.g. *pendant la journée* 'during the day' (p. 72)), originating from a present participle (e.g. *le jugement pendant* 'lit. the judgment pending' (p. 84)). The formal change from participle to preposition was accompanied by a semantic change from a concrete and spatial meaning towards a more procedural meaning expressing simultaneity, ultimately resulting in a new form-meaning pairing. Yet, the synchronic function and meaning were acquired only after a series of changes spanning several centuries, including processes such as rebracketing, category relabeling, phonological change and semantic-pragmatic reinterpretation. It is argued that these micro-changes are not only driven by contextual factors, but are also closely related to profound macro-changes in the language system itself, such as morphosyntactic shifts, that in the end lead to the emergence of a new

prepositional schema. It is concluded that diachronic linguistics of French, and more generally, can benefit greatly from a theory such as constructionalization that matches the form and meaning of linguistic signs (p. 91).

In the same diachronic vein, the chapter by **R. Gmir** studies the semantic changes that have affected the French verb *connaître* ‘to know’ since the end of the 19th century. From its original cognitive meaning (e.g. *Je connais l’anglais* ‘I know English’), the verb has undergone a process of semantic bleaching through a series of metaphoric shifts. As a result, the French verb synchronically displays a polysemic range of lexical and more bleached meanings, namely experiential (e.g. *avoir connu la faim* ‘to have experienced hunger’) and relational meanings (e.g. *une règle qui ne connaît aucune exception* ‘a rule that knows no exceptions’) (p. 98). In the contemporary French press a new use has recently emerged in which *connaître* functions as support verb combined with a subject without any experiential value (e.g. *Le nombre de visiteurs de la Tour Eiffel connaît une augmentation constante*, or the alternative structure *La Tour Eiffel connaît une augmentation constante du nombre de ses visiteurs* ‘The number of visitors to the Eiffel Tower is constantly increasing’) (p. 115). This most recent use shows that the constructional family of relational uses is still expanding and that the verb’s constructional change has not yet come to an end. Due to the syntactic changes and the semantic discrepancies from the original cognitive verb, Gmir argues that the new use is the result of constructionalization.

The extension to the fields of first and second/foreign language acquisition is covered in **Part 3** of the book: it concentrates on the **psychological and developmental dimension of CxG**.

In a first chapter in this third part of the book **J. François** evaluates to what extent CxG has contributed to research in the fields of psycho- and neurolinguistics and, conversely, how the latter scientific fields have corroborated the principles of the CxG. In this historical overview, it is first shown that from the 1980s the psycholinguistic foundations of usage-based linguistics gained increasing interest. In this vein, Cognitive Construction Grammar (Goldberg 1995) proved to be a valuable framework for experimental studies in the domain of language acquisition. Close attention is paid to major studies, such as the ones by M. Tomasello and H. Diesel, which have led to significant progress in this field. Next, the chapter discusses subsequent derived theories that ensured considerable developments, such as embodied CxG founded by J. Feldman and its computational application by N. Chang. J. François also addresses the question of the neurological basis of CxG and refers to the ground-breaking study by Pulvermüller et al. (2013) which claims that usage-based and constructionist theories

provide a neuroscientifically plausible model, thanks to, among other things, the natural amalgam of syntax and semantics they imply and the implementation of different levels of more or less abstract and complex constructions. Finally, the author refers to the pioneering work of L. Steels who considers language acquisition and evolution ‘complex adaptive systems’, similar to other domains of lively interaction like ecology, meteorology and macro-economics.

The next chapter by **Chr. Parisse, A. Morgenstern and S. de Pontonx** argues that the dynamic view on language put forward by CxG makes the model perfectly compatible with the dynamic developments observed in children’s language acquisition, not only with respect to the acquisition of linguistic forms but also with respect to the acquired meanings associated to these forms. Evidence is provided by a study on children’s use of very abstract concepts such as temporality and displacement, i.e. “the ability to talk about absent objects or people, to speak for absent people, or to create fiction” (p. 268). The study is based on a detailed data analysis of video-recorded interactions between adults and children (1,5 - 4,5 years old) in which the children first start to speak in very concrete situations before integrating more abstract elements thanks to the scaffolding provided by their adult interlocutors. According to the authors, although constructions are form-meaning pairs, CxG has mainly focused on the development of the form part of constructions and too little attention has been paid to the development of the meaning associated with the form. Based on their case study, the authors argue that the acquisition of meaning follows the same development as the acquisition of linguistic forms, which also starts with concrete exemplars which progressively generalize and become organized along with language use and experience.

The third chapter in the part on psycholinguistic approaches to CxG is by **M. Achard** and focuses on second language (L2) pedagogy. The author argues that L2 grammatical instruction in the current trend of communicative teaching has not sufficiently followed the developments in linguistic theory and would considerably benefit from adopting the cognitive view on language and linguistic organization. This cognitive approach of L2 learning should start with a clear understanding of the complex and subtle parameters that govern natives’ language use, which “constitutes the starting point from which the target language can be understood as a dynamic social system which learners can confidently participate in to express their own conceptualizations” (p. 194). In the remainder of the chapter, the author illustrates with concrete examples (e.g. French impersonal and identifying constructions) to which extent Cognitive Linguistics may allow L2 teachers to introduce their students to such a dynamic user-based view on the linguistic system. It is concluded that this cognitive approach has two main

advantages: first, the scope of grammar instruction extends from the traditional formal categories to collocations and idioms in order to include all constructions that are part of the grammar of the target language, and second, the speaker-centered approach stimulates learners to feel more involved in language production and in the learning process, and to be creative in expressing their own conceptualizations. Ultimately, it is advocated that both cognitive linguists and L2 instructors will mutually benefit from this approach and collaboration.

Finally, **Part 4** concentrates on the third extension of CxG, namely towards the field of **lexical statistics**. This section concludes the book with two chapters.

The chapter by **V. Goossens, D. Legallois, I. Novokova** aims to provide an overview of a series of methods in corpus linguistics that enable linguists to (semi-)automatically extract lexico-grammatical structures that qualify as ‘constructions’. The following four methods are reviewed: 1) the StringNet method (Wible & Tsao 2010) which allows to extract hybrid n-grams combining lexically filled slots with abstract grammatical categories from the BNC corpus (e.g. *pay* [noun] *to*), 2) the methods developed by Forsberg et al. (2014) to semi-automatically extract constructions from the Swedish PAROLE corpus in order to create a Swedish construction database, 3) the N-grammar method proposed by Cappelle and Grabar (2016) which aims to develop a usage- and frequency-based grammar intended for L2 English learners, and finally 4) a set of diverse methods relating to the notion of ‘motif’, i.e. a recurring syntactic sequence or textual unit that characterizes particular text types. It is shown that these methods can be fruitfully used for multiple purposes: the realization of a language-specific ‘construction’, the development of educational resources, the identification of lexical-grammatical structures with a central role in a particular text or discourse.

In the final chapter, **G. Desagulier** tackles the question whether only schematic and maximally productive patterns should qualify as constructions, as claimed by non-redundant taxonomic CxG models such as Berkeley CxG. Conversely, Cognitive CxG adopts a non-reductionist approach allowing for redundancies and exceptions. The author conducts a statistically sophisticated corpus study on the productivity of the English [*it* BE ADJ *to* V_{INF} *that*] pattern in the BNC corpus. Productivity is assessed by a combination of association measures and hapax-based measures. The study reveals that in spite of low productivity of the schematic pattern mentioned above, some partially filled subschemas do show (high) productivity (e.g. *it* BE *hard/important/easy/... to* V_{INF} *that*). Consequently, partially schematic patterns should therefore be taken into consideration as potential independently existing constructions.

Schematic patterns, conversely, do not always display full productivity but may serve as templates for the formation of new productive subschemas.

I warmly congratulate the editor and all the authors included in this volume on having presented their high-quality research which covers a wide range of multidisciplinary approaches in CxG. As a researcher who pays close attention to the cross-linguistic implications of CxG, I can only rejoice that an almost entire volume is devoted to French Construction Grammar. As already mentioned above, from its very beginning CxG has almost exclusively focused on English. It is however urgent “not to lose sight of the many linguistic details exhibited by constructions in individual languages” (Boas 2010: 5). This is all the more true because it has been shown that “the relationship between meaning and form may be constrained by typological differences between languages” (Boas 2010: 15). To give an example, the recent semantic change observed for the French verb *connaître* in the chapter by Gmir may not (yet) be paralleled in English (e.g. *cela connaît un grand succès* / ?it knows (a) great success). Therefore, I strongly believe that a theoretical model that strives for psychological plausibility should not be restricted to a single language.

In addition to this multilingual value, another important asset of the book is that it not only seeks to promote CxG but also takes a critical look at it. It shows for example that certain insights and notions that are nowadays systematically linked to CxG are actually not as innovative as suggested and were already assumed or used by earlier linguistic theories. This fact is for instance nicely illustrated for the notion of ‘schematicity’ in Legallois’ chapter. As stated in the introduction of the book, this is possibly one of the reasons why French linguists generally show more scepticism towards this framework.

On the other side of the coin, it should also be acknowledged that some recent developments in CxG have not always been fully integrated into the presented research yet. For instance, the recent volume edited by Sommerer & Smirnova (2020) provides innovative views on the conceptualization of the constructicon as a connectionist network of nodes, as well as critical insights into concepts such as constructionalization, whose integration could have contributed to even more interesting reflections and up-to-date research. The same is true for the chapters dealing with language acquisition and pedagogy, which surprisingly do not refer to the valuable insights provided in the collection of studies in *Applied Construction Grammar* (De Knop & Gilquin 2016) that apply CxG to relevant issues in L2 acquisition and teaching.

As said before, the central aim of the book is to demonstrate how CxG has considerably contributed to yield pluridisciplinary approaches in French linguistics and to enhance the appreciation for this theoretical framework among French (and more generally European) linguists because of these innovative extensions. To serve this goal, it is fairly justified that the majority of the contributions (seven out of nine) are written in French. I believe however that this volume could also be an opportunity to give the Anglo-Saxon world an interesting insight into the constructionist work going on in France, despite the limited numbers of chapters written in English. The target audience should therefore not be restricted to French-speaking linguists who want to learn more about the constructionist framework or need to be convinced of its values, but could also include non-French-speaking constructionists who are curious to know which linguistic developments are taking place on the French territory and to which results the application of CxG to the French language is leading. To overcome the language barriers, a more balanced ratio of chapters written in English (here only two out of nine) could have increased its attractiveness beyond the French-speaking audience. Earlier publications in English on French and Romance Construction Grammar (Bouveret & Legallois 2012; Boas & González-García 2014) have proved to successfully achieve this goal and call for follow-up publications. Far from advocating that scientific research should exclusively be published in English, I would like to encourage the authors to publish their research in English *as well*, in order to fully generate an open and constructive dialogue from which all parties, and above all the framework itself, will ultimately benefit.

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