A convent of sisters without a mother superior? – Discussing abstract nodes in the constructional network

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In this paper, we question the need to postulate extremely abstract generalisations (grammatical schemas) in the constructional network. We discuss different types of highly abstract constructions and investigate methodological problems in identifying them.

With regard to theoretical modelling, the paper revisits some core principles of usage-based, cognitive CxG: Constructions are defined as form-meaning pairings, entrenched in speaker minds through repeated usage. Initially (e.g. in first language acquisition) speakers start from substantive, fully specified constructions, but later are capable of generalising over elements perceived as similar. This leads to an intricate, complex network of constructions on different levels of schematicity or abstractness, which are vertically linked. In this hierarchical network, the lower-level constructions instantiate the higher-level constructions; for example, a construct like *my birthday* is licenced by the semispecific [*my* CN]$_{NPdef}$ construction, which is a daughter of the more schematic construction [POSS CN]$_{NPdef}$ which in turn is linked to a more abstract 'definite NP construction' [DETdefCN]$_{NPdef}$. It can even be argued that this construction is vertically linked to a referential super-DP [DET CN]$_{NP}$ which subsumes all kinds of referential NPs (definite, indefinite, …). Recently it has also been suggested that speakers abstract over structurally different yet semantically overlapping constructions such as the two members of the English dative alternation. Viewed as 'allostructions', these patterns are taken to be linked to an underspecified, higher-level generalisation over the features common to both constructions, the 'constructeme'.

However, the postulation of such abstract templates can be criticised: One main tenet of usage-based cognitive CxG is that it aims to present a "psychologically plausible […] theory of human language" which implies that such highly general schemas do in fact constitute part of speakers' mental knowledge (Hoffmann & Trousdale 2013: 3). The question is how likely it is that speakers abstract and entrench such extremely general schemas in a bottom-up acquisition process? We agree with Lieven & Tomasello (2008: 186), who point out that "higher-level schemas may only be weakly represented and, indeed, they may sometimes only exist in the formalized grammars of linguists!". In a similar vein, Blumenthal-Dramé (2012: 29) states that "the most schematic constructions in the constructional hierarchy only represent potential (rather than actual) abstractions in the mental representation of speakers", while Hilpert (2014: 57) maintains that "purely formal generalizations, that is constructions without meaning, have no natural place in the construct-i-con".

Although we do not want to dismiss the existence of abstract templates altogether, we argue that empirical evidence is needed to corroborate the psychological reality of superconstructions. We discuss the insights that can be gained from diachronic corpus data by drawing on case studies such as the history of the English dative alternation or the development of the English article system. Ultimately, we believe that it is often not feasible to posit abstract nodes. The linguistic knowledge of speakers can in many cases be described equally well by staying on the lower levels, via horizontal links between sister nodes. This calls into doubt the need for a 'mother node' (Jackendoff & Audring 2018).

References

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