

Ordered and unordered constructions: The role and representation of word order in Construction Grammar

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Word order plays a central role in expressing grammatical relations, information structure, or other meaningful features of expressions. Yet, scarcely little has been written about word order in the context of Construction Grammar (henceforth CxG) up to date. To the extent that a tradition exists, word order has been discussed in terms of ordering constructions “which determine the linear order of sentence constituents that is not necessarily tied either to constituent structure or to valence requirements” (Fried & Östman 2004).

The paper points out the need to make the distinction, at a general level and in the CxG notation, between ordered and non-ordered constructions: constructions which consist of component parts which may be in different orders depending on other constructions which they unify with, on the one hand, and constructions which consist of component parts in a fixed and pre-defined order, on the other.

An example of an ordered construction is the English transitive sentence construction: it requires that the main constituents—the subject, the verb, and the object—be in a fixed order. An example of a non-ordered construction is the Finnish transitive sentence construction: it allows, at least in principle, all possible permutations of the main constituents, though under different information structure restrictions.

On a closer analysis, the division turns out not to be clear-cut, however. Both in principle and in practice, constructions may underspecify the order of their components to any degree. Word order is like any other potential quality of a conventional construction: it may or may not be a defining feature of the construction, and it may be specified fully, partially, or not at all. Representing partially ordered constitutes a challenge for the notation, however.

The paper compares two possible solutions. One is based on features in Attribute Value Matrixes, notably the features Adjacency, Precedence, and position. With these features, constituent order can be represented in sufficient flexibility and accuracy, at least in most cases, but the representation may be somewhat difficult to perceive or comprehend. The other solution is based on graphical representation, e.g. with shades of black and gray and/or solid vs. dotted lines used for representing fixed vs. free positioning of constituents. This representation is much easier to perceive but may not be flexible enough for all purposes.

Overall, word order has a number of functions in the CxG view of the language system. Therefore, the chosen representation should not limit the possible functions of word order variations in too narrow a fashion. This is naturally allowed for by the inherent flexibility of the CxG framework: whether word order restrictions are represented as features in AVMs or as properties of constituents in a pictorial way, they can, in principle, be freely associated with any other features. This is in line with the general CxG tradition of not imposing a priori restriction on what is possible to be expressed within the framework.

References

Fried, Mirjam & Jan-Ola Östman 2004. Construction Grammar: A thumbnail sketch. In Fried, Mirjam & Jan-Ola Östman (eds.): *Construction Grammar in a Cross-Language Perspective*. CAL 2. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. 11–86.