

As simple as that? A corpus-based contrastive analysis of the [ADJ as NP] and related constructions in English, French and German

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In this talk, we argue that a contrastive constructionist approach to the idioms studied here provides a more consistent account of their semantic structures and the links between general comparison and the expression of a high degree than preconstructional approaches.

In their introduction to the Oxford Handbook of Construction Grammar, Hoffmann & Trousdale (2013: 3) state that as a reaction to approaches focusing on a 'core-system' of language, "Constructionist Grammar approaches provide a uniform analysis of more idiosyncratic 'peripheral,' as well as 'core,' linguistic features." But soon after that (ibid: 4), the authors remark that "the question as to what counts as a construction is far from clear". And since this inclusive approach characteristic of construction grammars arguably started with idioms, they seem like a good domain to discuss the notion of cross-linguistic constructions. Taking up the idea of a need for a distinction between what speakers know about their language and what they have to figure out, we want to examine, in a constructionist cross-linguistic approach, the [ADJ as NP] pattern and related patterns in English, French and German (pace Croft 2001, Kay 2013); our aim is not to reach universal typological generalizations, but to compare similar patterns in specific languages, in an approach similar to that advocated by Boas (2010).

First, phrases like *as black as coal* or *as clear as crystal* belong to the English language as familiar idioms, and as such, they are duly described in phraseological dictionaries. But they also have close counterparts in French (*malin comme un singe = as clever as a monkey...*) and in German (*arm wie eine Kirchenmaus = as poor as a church mouse...*), also described in phraseological dictionaries. The same goes for Russian (*здоров как бык = as healthy as a bull...*) or in other, unrelated, languages such as Mandarin Chinese (*安(ān)如(rú)磐(pán)石(shí) = as stable as a rock...*) or Japanese (*こおりのようにつめたい: kouri no you ni tsumetai = as cold as ice*).

Even with the inverted syntax in Japanese, the similarities are striking, and they can hardly be the result of a coincidence. There seems to be a family of constructions, or schematic idioms, of the type [ADJ as NP] across various languages, that enable to intensify the value of the adjective by complementing it with a noun phrase.

This is why we decided to investigate in corpora a phenomenon that is much broader and systematic than what is accounted for in idiom lexicons. Such a corpus study has already been conducted on English in the BNC (Desagulier 2015), but since the size of the corpus might be critical, we decided to use a larger corpus, the COCA (560 million words). For French, we used Frantext (251 million words), and for German, the DeReKo in two versions, a non-annotated version (approx. 8.628 billion words) and an annotated one (approx. 1.23 billion words).

The first observations of these corpora showed that along with quantitative observations, a qualitative approach was necessary. In English alone, as far as frequency is concerned, the [as ADJ as NP] and [ADJ as NP] behave markedly differently, and they also compete against [ADJ like NP] (*crazy like a fox, heavy like a rock*), which again behaves differently. These differences, largely ignored until now, must be accounted for. We have different patterns, not just one idiosyncratic pattern, but the similarities of form and function enable us to argue for the existence of a cross-linguistic family of constructions.

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