Diachronic construction grammar: A state of the art

Dirk Noël
The University of Hong Kong

1 This paper offers an impression of the state of the art in diachronic construction
2 grammar.[1] It assumes no familiarity with any particular brand of construction
3 grammar, only with the basic tenets of constructionist linguistics (for introductions to
4 these, see Goldberg 2003; Goldberg & Casenhiser 2006, Hoffman & Trousdale 2013,
5 Goldberg 2013).
6   As far as I know, the term "diachronic construction grammar" was used for the
7 first time as a name for a linguistic discipline in a paper by Deborah Ziegeler on a
8 diachronic study of the English causative *have* construction that underscored the
9 relevance of constructions to grammaticalization as well as the mutual relevance of
10 construction grammar and grammaticalization theory (Ziegeler 2004). Ziegeler used
11 the term to refer to work on grammaticalization only, as a synonym for grammatical-
12 ization theory. However, in a paper I published in 2007 entitled "Diachronic con-
13 struction grammar and grammaticalization theory" (Noël 2007), I argued in favour of
14 a discipline dealing with the development of the taxonomically organized inventory of
15 the constructions of languages, also known as their "constructi-*c*-ons" (cf. Goldberg
16 2003), that was wider than grammaticalization theory. The reason behind this was that
17 some of the phenomena grammaticalization theorists had been trying to squeeze in
18 under the heading of grammaticalization appeared to be very different in nature from
19 what had for a long time constituted the core business of grammaticalization studies,
20 i.e. lexical material getting to be used to signal grammatical meanings. Indeed a lot of
21 energy has been spent, and continues to be spent (a recent such effort is Trousdale
22 2010), on arguing that the development of schematic, lexically non-specific, con-
23 structions is grammaticalization just like the development of lexically-specific
24 grammatical constructions, i.e. that the same mechanisms are at work in both
25 developments, but perhaps more can be gained by broadening one's perspective rather
26 than by focussing on that fairly narrow question. Elizabeth Traugott (Forthcoming)
27 has recently stated that in diachronic construction grammar "attention is not on the
28 source but rather on the outcome of a change" and that this "readily allows gramma-
29 tical constructionalization to encompass cases of grammaticalization that have various
30 sources", i.e. not just "standard examples of lexical to grammatical change" but also
31 "cases of grammaticalization with no or only marginal lexical sources".
32   In a footnote to the 2007 paper I wrote that a discipline dealing with the
33 history of constructions with a wider scope, or a different focus, than grammatical-
34 ization theory was also needed because certain questions need to be addressed which
35 are not the specific focus of grammaticalization theory. The questions I listed were the
36 following: "How do constructions accumulate meanings [once they have come into

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[1] This paper is an expanded adaptation of the first part of a lecture delivered at the IV Seminário Internacional do Grupo de Estudos Discurso & Gramática, TEORIA DA GRAMATICALIZAÇÃO E GRAMÁTICA DE CONSTRUÇÕES, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Norte, Natal, Brazil, 27 November 2012.

being]? What universal or language specific extension mechanisms play a part in this? [And, I would like to add now, how do constructions lose meanings?] How do fluctuations between constructional prototypes and constructional peripheries evolve? How do the relationships between competing constructions develop?" This was not intended to be an exhaustive list, or a programme for diachronic construction grammar, but not much constructionist research addressing questions like these had surfaced when I wrote that footnote. Obviously certain things were already going on then and floated up soon after, and more has been happening since then, so that one can safely say that the development of diachronic construction grammar as a discipline is truly under way now. Evidence that diachronic construction grammar has started to become established as a field of investigation in linguistics is the organization of workshops that explicitly situate themselves in this area, and the appearance of the discipline name on the lists of areas of interest mentioned in calls for papers of conferences, most notably those targeting cognitive linguists generally or construction grammarians specifically. There is some typographic indeterminacy, however, between "Diachronic Construction Grammar" (Barðdal 2011, Hilpert Forthcoming), with capitalization of all three words in the discipline name, "diachronic Construction Grammar" (Trousdale 2012a), which capitalizes only Construction Grammar, and "diachronic construction grammar", without any capitalization (Noël 2007, Trousdale 2012b, Traugott Forthcoming).

So what is happening in diachronic construction grammar, i.e. in historical constructionist linguistics, or constructionist historical linguistics? I consider there to be two main strands in the research that is contributing to the development of the discipline. One of these I will simply call the "construction grammar" strand. It consists of work by people who have come to *diachronic* construction grammar from *synchronic* construction grammar. The other major strand has its origin in grammaticalization theory, a discipline whose roots are of course much older than those of construction grammar.

Starting with the latter, the discipline name "diachronic construction grammar" also captures — as explicitly recognized by some of the major protagonists in the field, most notably Elizabeth Traugott and Graeme Trousdale — the research efforts of those working within grammaticalization theory who have relatively recently come to recognize that the most central theoretical concept of construction grammar is a highly relevant and useful one in the description of and theorizing about grammaticalization changes and who have now even started to use the term "constructionalization" in lieu of "grammaticalization" (e.g. Traugott 2011, Forthcoming; Trousdale & Norde 2013), or more precisely "grammatical constructionalization", as opposed to "lexical constructionalization". The pioneer in this line of work is undoubtedly Elizabeth Traugott. Her distinction between "micro-constructions" (individual construction types), "meso-constructions" (sets of similarly-behaving specific constructions) and "macro-constructions" (schematic form-meaning pairings like the NP-*of*-NP Degree Modifier Construction) is very compatible with the constructional taxonomies of construction grammar (see, e.g., Traugott 2008). In fact, she has very recently abandoned this terminology in part, aligning it more with standard constructionist terminology, replacing the term "macro-construction" with "schema" and "meso-construction" with "subschema", but retaining the term "micro-construction" (Traugott Forthcoming).

Intuitively, though, the discipline name "diachronic construction grammar" seems to most naturally cover diachronic work that is rooted in construction grammar, i.e. work by people who first and foremost profile themselves as construction gram-

87 marians and who consider from a historical perspective constructions that have
88 received a lot of attention from a synchronic one. Within this strand there are three
89 areas of investigation, or sub-strands of the construction grammar strand in diachronic
90 construction grammar, which I would like to draw attention to.
91   A first sub-strand consists of work by Goldbergian construction grammarians
92 who consider particular argument structure constructions from a historical perspective,
93 gauging the semantic evolution of such constructions on the basis of the type frequen-
94 cy of the verbs entering them. Three representative examples are Barðdal (2007) and
95 (2011), and Colleman & De Clerck (2011). Barðdal (2007) and Colleman & De
96 Clerck (2011) both look at the history of the ditransitive construction, the former
97 (mainly) in Scandinavian languages and the latter in English. The study by Barðdal is
98 an exercise in comparative linguistics. It compares the range of meaning extensions of
99 the ditransitive construction in various Germanic languages and dialects to reconstruct
100 the semantic structure of the construction in Proto-Germanic. Barðdal observes that
101 the range of meaning extensions is the widest in Icelandic and that all the meaning
102 extensions present in the other Germanic dialects looked at are also present in
103 Icelandic, and she concludes that the situation in Icelandic is likely to come closest to
104 the situation in Proto-Germanic. Colleman & De Clerck make the theoretical point
105 that, just like lexical items, schematic syntactic patterns are vulnerable to sema-
106 siological shifts (in other words, semantic change). Comparing data from 18th-century
107 Late Modern English with Present-day English, they show that the semantic evolution
108 of the English ditransitive, or double object, construction presents a case of what they
109 call "specialization", in the sense that the range of meanings associated with the
110 construction has become much narrower over time. Verbs that could at one time enter
111 the construction can now no longer do so. The type frequency of the construction
112 consequently *de*creased (there are fewer types of it), while its semantic transparency
113 *in*creased. (In other words, the construction moved more in the direction of "One
114 Form, One Meaning"). Barðdal (2011) found that something similar has occurred in
115 the evolution of the Dative Subject Construction in Icelandic, which went through "a
116 narrowing and focusing of its semantic scope", making it "more coherent
117 semantically". A correlated change is a reduction in the type frequency of the
118 construction. It nevertheless became more productive, because it replaced the
119 Accusative Subject Construction as a result of its increased semantic transparency,
120 which allows Barðdal (2011: 77) to argue, pace Bybee (1995), that type frequency is
121 not "the most important factor for productivity".
122   The difference between this first sub-strand of the construction grammar
123 strand and the grammaticalization strand in diachronic construction grammar already
124 makes clear that while the grammaticalization strand is concerned with the question of
125 how languages acquire constructions, this is not necessarily the case in the construc-
126 tion grammar strand. A prominent concern in the Goldbergian construction gramma-
127 tical strand is diachronic semantic variation in existing schematic constructions like
128 argument structure constructions.
129   Looked at from a different angle, the study by Barðdal just talked about on
130 Dative Substitution can also be brought under the heading of a second thread of
131 research I would like to distinguish in the construction grammatical tradition. The
132 "ousting of accusative subjects by dative subjects" (Barðdal 2011: 60) can indeed be
133 looked at as a case of what Timothy Colleman and myself have called "constructional
134 attrition" (Colleman & Noël 2012), since the rise of dative subjects meant the demise
135 of accusative subjects. In the very recent text already referred to, Traugott
136 (Forthcoming) identifies this as one of several possible "post-constructionalization"

137 "constructional changes", which she calls "obsolescence". As an example of
138 obsolescence she points to the decline in the use of the modal auxiliaries in English in
139 the second half of the 20th century, which was established in research by Geoffrey
140 Leech and a number of collaborators (Leech, Hundt, Mair & Smith 2009: Chapter 4).
141   Constructional attrition revealed itself as an area of inquiry in diachronic
142 construction grammar in a study by Trousdale (2008) on the disappearance of the
143 impersonal construction in English and in contrastive research by Timothy Colleman
144 and myself on the diachronic evolution of the frequency and the inclusiveness of
145 *believe*-type raising-to-object and raising-to-subject constructions in English and
146 Dutch (Noël & Colleman 2010; Colleman & Noël 2012). Since diachronic
147 construction grammar, unlike grammaticalization theory, is less exclusively pre-
148 occupied with the question of how languages acquire grammar, it can indeed also ask
149 the opposite question of whether languages sometimes lose grammar.
150   Trousdale (2008) was the first study to discuss the loss of a construction from
151 a construction grammatical perspective, i.e. from a perspective which considers
152 constructions as symbolic form-meaning pairings that form a network of taxonomies.
153 It connects the demise of the English impersonal construction (of which the archaism
154 *methinks* is a still familiar relic) with the rise of the transitive construction, i.e. with an
155 increase of the schematicity of the transitive construction, in the sense that it became
156 more productive (e.g. allowing a wider range of subject types), more general (the
157 arguments of the verb could express a wider range of roles) and less compositional
158 (e.g. some variants of the construction became less clearly telic). As a result of this
159 increased schematicity, the transitive construction became a "superordinate category"
160 which also took in the semantic niche that was previously reserved to the impersonal
161 construction. Trousdale offers this diachronic construction grammatical account,
162 which makes reference to changes in the composition of the constructicon of a
163 language, as an alternative to a previous, purely formal, account which attributed the
164 loss of the impersonal construction to a gradual rejection of the option of lexically
165 case-marking subjects.
166   My joint research with Timothy Colleman on English and Dutch *believe*-type
167 raising-to-subject (or "nominative and infinitive", or "NCI") constructions, which
168 documented the drastic reduction in the productivity or inclusiveness of the NCI in
169 Dutch, also explains constructional attrition with reference to the competition con-
170 structions face from other constructions in the constructicon. It is contrastive research,
171 and the contrastive dimension not only helps to identify constructional areas of
172 interest but also offers explanations for either the presence or the absence of certain
173 form-meaning pairings in the constructicon of a language by pinpointing differences
174 in the competition existing between constructions in particular areas of the construc-
175 tional taxonomies of different languages. The contrastive dimension is not essential to
176 it, however.
177   This is different from the research in the third area of investigation, which
178 appeals to language contact and borrowing to explain the presence of a construction in
179 the constructicon of a language. Let's call this the "constructional borrowing" sub-
180 strand of the construction grammar strand of diachronic construction grammar. The
181 term was first used by Adele Goldberg in an early short text (Goldberg 1990) written
182 during her student days in Berkeley, which is downloadable from her website but
183 which, as far as I can tell, never made it into print. It is about a number of originally
184 Yiddish constructions that "have been assimilated by a group of native English
185 speakers", like the ones illustrated by *What's to forgive?*, *She's a crazy!*, and *Milk
186 shmilk*. A more serious contribution to this strand is Mithun (2008), in which "an

187 apparent structural anomaly" (p. 225) in some languages of the Northwest coast of
188 North America is accounted for with reference to the borrowing of a construction
189 from a language spoken in the same "linguistic area" but genetically unrelated to them.
190 Work of my own (Noël 2008), some of it jointly with Timothy Colleman (Colleman
191 & Noël 2013), contributes to this strand as well. This is first of all work which argues
192 that not only the nominative and infinitive, or NCI, pattern in English generally is a
193 borrowing from Latin, but also the "evidential" NCI construction; and second, work
194 that deals with the question of how Dutch ended up with a deontic construction that is
195 cognate with English deontic *be supposed to*. We suggest that this is the result of
196 language contact rather than grammaticalization. Speakers of Dutch who already had
197 constructions in their constructicons which were formally similar to and which shared
198 a meaning with the more polysemous English pattern *be supposed to* copied that
199 polysemy as a result of extensive contact with English and started to use the Dutch
200 cognate patterns with the additional meaning.

201 The work that can be considered to be a continuation of the grammaticaliza-
202 tion paradigm represents by far the largest body of research falling under the heading
203 of diachronic construction grammar, however. As mentioned above, perhaps the two
204 central theoreticians that need to be mentioned here are Elizabeth Traugott and
205 Graeme Trousdale, who have been contributing to this strand of research both
206 individually and jointly, an eagerly awaited publication being their co-authored book
207 on *Constructionalization and constructional changes* (Traugott & Trousdale Forth-
208 coming). Other scholars that need to be mentioned are Joan Bybee (e.g. Bybee 2003,
209 2010), Hendrik De Smet (e.g. 2009, 2012, 2013), Mirjam Fried (2008, 2009, 2013)
210 and Olga Fischer (e.g. Fischer 2007, 2008, 2010), but this short list is by no means
211 exhaustive. Work in this strand has moved from establishing the centrality of
212 constructions to grammaticalization changes and the appropriateness of a usage-based
213 approach (see Kemmer & Barlow 2000; Tomasello 2003; Bybee 2013) in studying
214 grammaticalization, over discussions of whether schematic constructions grammatic-
215 alize just like substantive ones do, to distinguishing between grammaticalization and
216 lexicalization in constructionist terms, i.e. between "grammatical construction-
217 alization" and "lexical constructionalization", and, most recently, between "construc-
218 tionalization" and "constructional changes" (in Traugott Forthcoming, which
219 summarizes parts of Traugott & Trousdale Forthcoming). That is, with relation to the
220 latter distinction, whereas at first the terms "grammatical constructionalization" and
221 "grammaticalization" appeared to be used interchangeably, "grammaticalization" is
222 now used as a cover term subsuming constructionalization and constructional changes.
223 (Grammatical) constructionalization is said by Traugott (Forthcoming) to be
224 "approximately equivalent" with what she previously termed "primary grammatical-
225 ization" (in Traugott 2002), i.e. it happens when "a new micro-construction or schema
226 is added to the [constructional] network, because a new conventional symbolic unit,
227 and hence a new type node, has been created", i.e. "[w]hen there have been
228 morphosyntactic and semantic reanalyses that are shared across speakers and hearers
229 in a social network" (Traugott Forthcoming). Contructionalization is preceded by and
230 can be followed by "constructional changes". The pre-constructionalization construc-
231 tional change is analogically motivated semantic reanalysis, resulting from the
232 association of "an invited inference from a construct [or token] with the semantics of
233 an existing construction in the constructional network". Post-constructionalization
234 constructional change may be collocational expansion, reduction of form as a result of
235 routinization and token frequency, or obsolescence (referred to as "attrition" above).

236 Notice that there is reference here to analogy as a precondition for construc-
237 tionalization, and indeed a focus on the operation of analogy in language change is
238 one of the hallmarks of diachronic construction grammar, but reanalysis appears to be
239 more central to Traugott's definition of constructionalization. In other words, taking a
240 diachronic construction grammatical approach seems not to resolve the outstanding
241 issue of whether or not grammaticalization involves reanalysis. This is probably the
242 result, first of all, of the fact that many who have come to diachronic construction
243 grammar from grammaticalization theory think in terms of sources and outcomes (cf.
244 Hendery 2013, who calls grammaticalization a source-outcome model). This is
245 captured very nicely by Fried's (2013: 422) characterization of grammaticalization as
246 being "concerned with identifying changes in the relationship between form and
247 function within a particular linguistic *pattern*", as when deontic *be bound to* is seen to
248 be the source of "epistemic" *be bound to* (example from Noël 2011). A second likely
249 cause for the inclination to think in terms of reanalysis is that, in spite of one's usage-
250 based outlook, one is analysing chronologically ordered snapshots of the external
251 linguistic system (linguists' descriptions of observed data), instead of focussing on
252 speakers' internal ("cognitively instantiated") systems (cf. Kemmer & Barlow 2000:
253 viii). As I have mentioned elsewhere (Noël 2011), however, speakers for whom, for
254 instance, deontic *be bound to* served a perfectly good use are unlikely to have started
255 putting it to a different use, added to which there is evidence that the form *bound*
256 developed its epistemic meaning outside of the pattern *be bound to*. "Deontic *be*
257 *bound to* > epistemic *be bound to*" might consequently, using Fischer's (2009: 18-19)
258 words, merely be "an analyst's generalization, a convenient summary but not
259 something that has actually happened". The way forward may be a more radically
260 usage-based approach that takes into consideration "multiple sources" (Hendery 2013)
261 and "a multiplicity of causes" (Fischer 2013).
262 To conclude, however, let me emphasize that Traugott's (Forthcoming)
263 distinction between constructionalization and constructional changes provides a
264 potentially useful framework for organizing the phenomena dealt with in diachronic
265 construction grammar. As far as the ones mentioned in this paper are concerned,
266 constructional attrition is obviously a post-constructionalization constructional change,
267 and so are the semasiological shifts of the work on argument structure constructions
268 referred to. Constructional borrowing is evidently a kind of constructionalization
269 because it creates new type nodes in the constructional network.

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