

Cognitive Contact Linguistics as an essential ingredient of diachronic construction grammar

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Background

“Diachronic construction grammar” is a field of investigation that brings together two, still relatively young, research traditions, which one could characterize as historical construction grammar and constructionist grammaticalization theory (Noël 2013). Both traditions deal with the (phylogenetic) development of “constructicons”, i.e. with evolutions in the constructional resources of languages, but they have come to this research focus from different angles, the latter being the result of a constructionist turn in grammaticalization theoretical thinking, while the former has launched off from synchronic constructionist linguistics, comprising work on schematization, “diachronic constructional semasiology” (Coleman & De Clerck 2011), “constructional attrition” (Coleman & Noël 2012) as well as “constructional borrowing”.

This last term was first used by Goldberg (1990) but I am using it to refer to a sub-strand of historical construction grammar which subsumes much more recent work by Mithun (2008), Noël (2008), Doğruöz & Backus (2009), Zenner (2013) and Fischer (2013). Linking up with a different research tradition, Zenner (2013) has coined the term “Cognitive Contact Linguistics” for this line of work. Indeed, as in contact linguistics, not all of the work listed here is methodologically diachronic, but to the extent that it is concerned with the evolutionary question of how certain constructions have entered a language it can be listed under the heading of diachronic construction grammar.

Much of the work in the historical construction grammar strand of diachronic construction grammar is contrastive in nature, either because, for various reasons, it compares evolutions in different constructicons, or because, as in the case of the constructional borrowing sub-strand, it looks at changes in a constructicon which are effected by another constructicon in a language contact situation. Work in constructionist grammaticalization theory is rarely contrastive, however. A recent book emanating from this tradition, Traugott and Trousdale (2013), which, since it purports to offer an “overarching view of constructional change” (p. 39), can to all intents and purposes be considered to present itself as a textbook on diachronic construction grammar, even consciously and explicitly disregards the issue of contact in language change (p. 35). Making reference to work in the constructional borrowing strand of diachronic construction grammar, I will argue in this paper that the account of “constructionalization” (the development of new constructions) proposed in this book is imperfect as a result and I will offer a corrective to it, to conclude that to draw a complete picture of the development of constructicons diachronic construction grammar cannot do without Cognitive Contact Linguistics.

References

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