



## MULTILINGUALISM AND DIASYSTEMATIC CONSTRUCTION GRAMMAR

Interview with Dr. *Steffen Höder*

## MULTILINGUISMO E GRAMÁTICA DE CONSTRUÇÕES DIASSISTÊMICA

Entrevista com o Professor Doutor *Steffen Höder*

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### ABSTRACT:

Steffen Höder is a Full Professor of Scandinavian Linguistics at the Institute of Scandinavian Studies, Frisian Studies and General Linguistics at Kiel University. He has a PhD from University of Hamburg (Scandinavian Studies) and his main research interest regards Language contact, Areal linguistics, Language change and variation, Construction grammar. Professor Höder is the author of several articles in international peer-reviewed journals and some of his current researches are about the Diasystematic Construction Grammar model. The present interview offers explanations that reveal mature reflections on the cognitive representation of grammar in a diasystematic perspective, contributing to interpretations of acquisition and descriptive phenomena of languages.

**KEYWORDS:** Diasystematic Construction Grammar; Linguistic Contact; Cognition.

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**RESUMO:**

Steffen Höder é professor titular de Linguística Escandinava no Instituto de Estudos Escandinavos, Estudos Frísios e Linguística Geral da Universidade de Kiel. Ele possui PhD pela Universidade de Hamburgo (Estudos Escandinavos) e seus principais interesses de pesquisa dizem respeito ao contato linguístico, à linguística regional, à mudança e variação linguísticas, à Gramática de Construções. Professor Höder é autor de vários artigos em periódicos internacionais revisados por pares e algumas de suas pesquisas atuais são sobre o modelo da Gramática de Construções Diassistêmica. A presente entrevista traz explicações que revelam maduras reflexões sobre a representação cognitiva da gramática em perspectiva diassistêmica, a contribuir para interpretações de fenômenos aquisicionais e descritivos das línguas.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Gramática de Construções Diassistêmica; Contato linguístico; Cognição.

*Question 1*

**We would like to start by saying thanks for Dr. Höder’s accepting our invitation for this interview. Before we start with the questions, we believe it would be fruitful if you could talk a little about your recent projects and precisely about the forthcoming *Constructions in Contact 2* book.**

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to talk about my work. The volume on *Constructions in Contact 2*, co-edited by Hans Boas and myself (to appear in the *Constructional Approaches to Language* series with Benjamins), is a follow-up to our earlier book *Constructions in Contact* (Boas & Höder, 2018). Both have grown out of theme sessions on language contact that we organized for the 2014 and 2018 *International Conference on Construction Grammar*, supplemented by a few additional contributions. While the first volume focuses on contact phenomena in Germanic languages, especially contact-induced change, the second one includes a wider range of topics and languages, ranging from multilingual practices such as code-switching to language acquisition and from Indo-European languages such as Spanish, Afrikaans and Welsh to Malayalam and American Sign Language (ASL). Both volumes deal with the application of constructionist approaches to different aspects of language contact, mainly from a usage-based perspective. There’s been a growing interest in this kind of research over the recent years, and my impression is that this increase is going to continue – for good reasons: On the one hand, contact linguists have been struggling with shortcomings of older frameworks for decades, and many have felt a need for a theoretical approach that is capable of modelling the wide range of phenomena that are observable in language contact situations – preferably one that takes into account both social and cognitive factors. On the other hand, construction grammar is built around the claim that “it’s constructions all the way down” (Goldberg, 2003: 223), which is basically a way of saying that limits are off limits: we should be able to describe *all* types of linguistic knowledge in constructional terms, as long as there is a pairing of form and function – no matter whether it’s words, syntactic structures, or textual patterns. In a way, construction

grammar is, and has to be, a perpetual exploratory journey: Investigating phenomena that, traditionally, have been thought of as lying on the fringe of grammar usually reveals facts about the way we use and process language which are also relevant for our understanding of language in a more general sense. I think that, in this respect, the study of language contact phenomena is comparable to constructionist approaches to multimodality or, famously, idiomatic expressions.

## ***Question 2***

**What was the insight for the DCxG proposal? And how would you summarize the main tenets of the model?**

I have a background as a historical linguist and contact linguist. My interest in construction grammar developed when I was working on the contact between Old Swedish and Medieval Latin back in the 14th and 15th century and the profound impact this contact had on the development of Swedish as a written language (Höder, 2010, 2012). On the face of it, Swedish speakers (or rather writers) borrowed a lot of grammatical structures from Latin – and ended up using a written variety of the language whose syntax was considerably different from both earlier stages of Swedish and contemporary spoken varieties. But that probably isn't what they thought they were doing. They were simply using syntactic patterns they felt were appropriate for written communication – and the fact that such patterns originated in Latin somehow didn't prevent them from combining them with Swedish lexical material. At first I used construction grammar simply as a descriptive tool for describing these changes in Old Swedish, but at some point I realized it had greater potential: If bilinguals use virtually the same constructions in different languages, why would they store and process them as different things, in isolation from each other? Wouldn't it be more economic, in cognitive terms, to have *one* construction that can be used in either language? And if there were no cognitive advantage, how and why would languages in contact tend to become more similar over time?

The main tenet of the usage-based constructionist approach I've been working on since then (*Diasystematic Construction Grammar*) is that if your input is multilingual, your construction will be multilingual as well – but that doesn't necessarily mean that every construction has to be assigned to a specific language. Contact linguists (e. g. Matras, 2020) have long embraced the idea that multilinguals have one single linguistic 'repertoire' from which they choose the words and grammatical elements that are appropriate according to the type of situation they're in – who they're talking to, what they're talking about, how formal or informal the communication is, and so on. (Multilingual speakers, and in particular multilingual communities, typically associate their different languages with different communicative settings.) So, in my view, multilinguals have one single, unified construction that consists of their linguistic knowledge in its entirety. Many constructions are language-specific (*idioconstructions*), which means that can only be used in specific communicative contexts associated with a particular language. That's part of their pragmatic meaning. However, there are also language-*unspecific* constructions

(*diaconstructions*) that can be used across communicative contexts. For example, from the 15th century on, the repertoire of the Latin-Swedish bilinguals that I was investigating some years ago contained many syntactic diaconstructions, i.e. schematic constructions that could be filled with lexical material from either language. The lexemes themselves, in contrast, were idioconstructions.

One important consequence is that, if you take the usage-based approach seriously, the traditional view of grammar as something that belongs to a *language* can be quite simplistic – on the contrary, the grammar of the same language may be organized into quite different constructicons in different *communities* (that’s why one of my papers is entitled “Grammar is community-specific”, Höder, 2018). In a way, ‘languages’ don’t exist in DCxG – the notion of ‘languages’ is just a convenient way of reifying and labelling different, but overlapping subsets of constructions within one multilingual constructicon. On top of that, experimental studies have found that, in general, individual grammars are more heterogeneous than collective grammars (cf. Dąbrowska, 2019). The fact that the same language is often used side by side in multilingual and (more or less) monolingual communities may very well be a factor here.

### ***Question 3***

**You recently said that “all speakers are multilingual or at least multilectal to some extent, meaning that they use several different (standard) languages or various varieties/dialects productively or receptively to some degree”. How do you relate such idea to the Interlanguage traditional concept, DCxG and Usage-Based CxG?**

First of all, what counts as a language and what counts as a dialect is, as we all know, rather arbitrary from a linguistic point of view. So, there is no way to distinguish categorically between multilingualism and ‘multilectalism’ using criteria that are cognitively relevant. Second, multilingualism (of, if you insist, multilectalism) is the rule rather than an exception if we compare speakers and societies historically and globally – it would indeed be very odd for a speaker to be completely ‘monolectal’ in the sense that she knows and only ever uses one variety of one language. Unfortunately, grammatical theory has always had a tendency to abstract away from intralingual variation as well as language contact. Instead, the focus has usually been on idealized homogeneous speech communities and fully competent, but also completely monolectal speakers. Evidently, that’s a fundamental misconception. Usage-based approaches must – at least in principle – have more convincing ways of dealing with variation and contact. DCxG tries to provide a more realistic approach that puts multilingualism centre stage.

Of course, all that doesn’t mean everybody’s fluently and flawlessly multilingual in the naive sense of being able to use different languages with equal ease in all circumstances. But multilinguals usually know enough to achieve their own communicative goals. In other words,

functional multilingualism is based on *partial* competences in different languages. From a DCxG perspective, that doesn't imply a qualitatively different *type* of competence – being partially competent simply means that a speaker's constructicon contains fewer constructions that are used for a particular language, compared to the constructicon of more fully competent speakers of the same language. This is also the normal case for additional language (AL) learners: Whenever speakers are acquiring another language, they're essentially acquiring new constructions and incorporating them into their pre-existing constructicon, starting with very few constructions and then gradually accumulating enough linguistic knowledge to communicate successfully in their AL. The term *interlanguage* is often understood to refer to intermediate stages on the AL learners' way towards native-like competence. But you never know how far a learner will proceed on that way: any stage could be the final one. In our recent paper (Höder, Prentice & Tingsell, 2021) we argue that – since linguistic knowledge is constructional knowledge – AL acquisition boils down to the gradual entrenchment and (re-)organization of individual constructions. In other words: an ever-growing and ever-changing, increasingly multilingual constructicon.

#### **Question 4**

**How do you see that DCxG is correlated with sociolinguistic aspects concerning language variation and change?**

One key insight from sociolinguistics is that you can say “the same thing” (in terms of referential meaning) in different ways, but this variation carries socio-pragmatic meaning, and therefore it must be included in a socio-cognitively realistic model of grammar. (That said, there's been different proposals in construction grammar and related usage-based approaches on *how* this type of meaning can be accounted for; e.g. Kristiansen, 2008, Hollmann, 2013.) This is basically the same type of socio-pragmatic meaning that idioconstructions are assumed to carry in DCxG, so there's some degree of overlap here. Another interesting aspect that DCxG has in common with more typical sociolinguistic approaches is the fact that socio-pragmatic meaning is seen as being attached to individual structural elements rather than linguistic (sub-) systems as a whole: you don't have to use a particular variety *consistently* in order to express socio-pragmatic meaning (although communicative norms in your community may require you to) because even single variants can be used as meaningful markers. This is relevant when it comes to code-switching and interlingual creativity.

Another aspect is the contrast between *innovation* and *change* that is fundamental to sociolinguistic approaches to variation and change. Multilingual individuals will often produce innovative forms that can be explained in terms of simplifications in their constructicon. One type is what I've labelled ‘diasystematically anchored *innovations*’: ad hoc formations that are innovative in the language they're uttered in, but nevertheless comprehensible to members of the same multilingual community because they can be decoded using available diaconstructions. In

the long run, however, such innovations may be conventionalized by the community, resulting in a type of language *change* that is called ‘pro-diasystematic’ in DCxG: a construction loses its language-specificity, which entails a simplification of the multilingual construction, since less information has to be stored and processed. But of course, the interplay between cognitive and social factors (more precisely: between entrenchment and conventionalization, cf. Schmid, 2020) is very complex, which is why being cognitively advantageous doesn’t always mean getting established in the speaker community: not every useful innovation ultimately makes it.

### *Question 5*

**In the article *Grammar is community-specific: Background and basic concepts of Diasystematic Construction Grammar* you mention the concept of language-specificity as a pragmatic property of some constructions, saying that language-specific ‘idioconstructions’ coexist with language-unspecified ‘diaconstructions’ in the same constructional network. Could you extend the idea of language-specificity/unspecificity trying to relate it to different language contact phenomena?**

One contact phenomenon that usually isn’t even thought of as a contact phenomenon (and no wonder!) is the parallel use of isomorphous patterns in two or more languages. For example, both German and Danish mark different clause types by word order. While these patterns are often described in different terms cross-linguistically, both languages mark polar questions by clause-initial finite verbs and declarative main clauses by verb-second patterns. You can’t distinguish the two languages by using one of these word order patterns – and bilingual speakers use them across all communicative contexts. From a DCxG perspective, we’d assume that they’re stored and processed as diaconstructions, even if this fact doesn’t lead to any non-canonical utterances in either language.

But there are, of course, more obvious phenomena. I’ve already mentioned pro-diasystematic change (idioconstructions losing their language-specificity), a key mechanism in contact-related structural convergence, as well as diasystematically anchored innovations, which explain more ad hoc phenomena (spontaneous loan translations and the like). Another case in point is the conventionalization of lexical equivalents in multilingual communities: Local dialects of German and Frisian that are spoken near the Danish border, in a region that has traditionally been multilingual, have an interesting feature: an infinitive marker that is homophonous with the conjunction AND. This can be traced back to the homophony between the equivalent elements in nearby Danish dialects (although the actual history is a bit more complex; cf. Höder, 2021.). From a diasystematic perspective, this innovation makes sense because it simplifies the multilingual construction: it means you can use an and word in the same contexts across all languages in the region, even if you have to still choose the language-

specific lexeme that instantiates and (such as Standard German *und*, Low German *un*, North Frisian *än*, dialectal Danish *a* and so forth) in order to fill the slot in the infinitive construction. This illustrates that there's often a kind of division of labour between idioconstructions and diaconstructions that are used productively in combination with each other in multilingual speakers' speech.

### **Question 6**

**How do you apply DCxG to Additional Languages Acquisition phenomena? Would you talk a little about the article *Acquisition of additional languages as reorganization in the multilingual construction* (Höder, Prentice & Tingsell, 2021), that will be part of the *Constructions in Contact 2* book? We believe these ideas will be a very important contribution to the constructionist studies and the AL research, including sign languages and deaf learners.**

In our article, my colleagues (Julia Prentice and Sofia Tingsell) and I propose a DCxG model for how additional language (AL) learners organize their linguistic knowledge. The key idea is that acquiring an AL means *becoming multilingual* (or, if you already speak more than one language: becoming even more multilingual). This emerging multilingualism can be modelled in DCxG. We had to tweak the model a bit, though, because in its original form, DCxG combines two dimensions of the multilingual construction: the social dimension and the individual dimension. On the social side, DCxG is about conventionalized constructions that are shared by members of a community. On the individual side, DCxG is about constructions that are cognitively entrenched. The social dimension isn't relevant for AL acquisition scenarios in the same way as in multilingual communities, because there are no community-specific conventions for when to use what language (the AL vs. the learner's L1) – there are none. What the learner does is rather to establish specific communicative routines even if she doesn't share them with anyone else (assuming she isn't one in a group of learners with the same linguistic profile). Acquiring AL constructions means learning not only their form and their referential or grammatical meaning, but also how they're associated with relevant communicative settings, such as “speaking to colleagues/non-family members/local people”. So, it's primarily the cognitive dimension that is relevant for applying DCxG to AL acquisition.

AL acquisition is different from L1 acquisition in that you don't start from scratch. Ellis (e.g. 2006: 184) and others have used the image of a *tabula repleta* (a ‘replenished table’): Learning an AL isn't about filling a constructional *tabula rasa* with newly acquired elements, but rather about adding to what is already there. But adding new linguistic knowledge also implies some extent of integration with pre-existing constructions. In our model, we describe this in terms of

constructional *reorganization*, leading to the gradual emergence of a multilingual constructicon, in which the AL is partly represented by idioconstructions and partly by diaconstructions that it shares with the learner's L1. One intriguing – and perhaps counter-intuitive – insight from this perspective is that a monolingual's constructicon, prior to AL acquisition, only consists of diaconstructions: none of the construction a speaker knows carries the type of pragmatic meaning that distinguishes different communicative contexts. Being monolingual means that you all of your constructions are underspecified in this respect. In DCxG terms, you do not have one 'language' until you have two.

I don't know of anybody who has applied DCxG to the AL acquisition of sign languages or of vocal languages by Deaf learners, but since DCxG has been applied to multilingual ASL signers (Lepic *forthc.*), I wouldn't be surprised to see people adapt this approach in the future.

### *Question 7*

**During AL production it is common that speakers produce constructs that seem to result from some sort of blending in which we can identify characteristics coming from L1 and L2 constructions. How can the concept of diaconstruction explain that?**

While it's difficult to give a universally valid answer to this question, one explanation could be that such constructs reflect diasystematically anchored innovations (see Question 3). If we assume that this is the case, we have to understand (at least) two reorganizational steps in the multilingual speaker's (or community's) constructicon. Step 1: generalization over L1 and L2 idioconstructions with partial similarities leads to the establishment of a more schematic diaconstruction that captures these similarities. There is an ongoing debate in construction grammar on how much generalization is cognitively plausible – as of today, most constructionists would probably agree that highly schematic constructions are less likely to play a major role if they don't serve any additional purpose beyond what can be achieved by less schematic ones. But sometimes they *do* play a role, in particular when they're used productively in a way that wouldn't be possible using less schematic constructions alone. This could be step 2: The diaconstruction arrived at in step 1 becomes productive in a way that doesn't match any of the L1 or L2 idioconstructions. But you'd really have to look at empirical data to come up with a more adequate, and more detailed, analysis. Among other things, it would be important to take into account such questions as: Are we dealing with an ad hoc innovation used by an individual speaker or an innovation that is used regularly by one speaker or speaker group? Does the innovative pattern have constructional properties that can't be the result of a mere generalization or could it be a direct instantiation of a schematic diaconstruction?



### **Question 8**

#### **How do domain-general cognitive processes play a part in explaining the DCxG model?**

The whole idea of the multilingual construction – and, at its heart, the notion of diaconstructions as opposed to idioconstructions – depends on the claim that speakers generalize over recurrent tokens in their multilingual input in precisely the same way as they do over monolingual input. Ultimately, constructions – and, hence, diaconstructions – are seen as the cognitive representation of categories formed on the basis of similarities between tokens in actual utterances. So, *categorization* (including processes that have been variously labelled as abstraction, generalization, or schematization) is the most important cognitive mechanism in this regard. Another important issue is *rich memory*, i.e., the storage of detailed information from the input, including information on (recurring) social and pragmatic circumstances in which a particular pattern is experienced, along with more abstract schemas. Considering the emphasis that DCxG puts on *socio-pragmatic* meaning and its acquisition, domain-general processes and phenomena related to social cognition are also crucial. While, for instance, *joint attention* and the ability to form a *theory of mind* are usually considered to be important for usage-based approaches in general, it's obvious that these things are even more essential for multilingual communities. Choosing adequate constructions depending on the communicative setting presupposes that speakers share a common ground with each other. This includes, among other things, knowing conventional patterns of language choice as well as being able to interpret others' linguistic choices accordingly.

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