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CREATIVE, VARIABLE AND FORMULAIC USES IN CONSTRUCTION GRAMMAR
Interview with Dr. *Konrad Szcze*s*niak*

USOS CRIATIVOS, VARIÁVEIS E FORMULAICOS EM GRAMÁTICA DE CONSTRUÇÕES
Entrevista com o Professor Doutor Konrad Szcześniak

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RESUMO

Konrad Szcześniak é Professor de Linguística na Universidade Palacký (República Tcheca) e na Universidade da Silesia (Polônia). É autor de alguns livros (SZCZEŚNIAK; ŁYDA, 2013; SZCZEŚNIAK, 2014) e outros textos, inclusive de artigos sobre a língua portuguesa (SZCZEŚNIAK, 2015, 2017, 2019ab). A presente entrevista centra-se em como as pessoas usam a língua fluentemente e como desenvolvem um domínio sólido da sua língua materna, com base em pesquisas apoiadas pelo subsídio 914106111UVV 2021-*Fond děkanky*.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Gramática de Construções; Variação; Futuridade; Significado; Português.

ABSTRACT

Konrad Szcześniak is Professor of Linguistics at Palacký University (Czech Republic) and University of Silesia (Poland). He is the author of several books (e.g. SZCZEŚNIAK; ŁYDA, 2013; SZCZEŚNIAK, 2014) and other texts, including papers about the Portuguese language (SZCZEŚNIAK, 2015, 2017, 2019ab). The present interview focuses on how people use language fluently and how they develop a solid command of their mother tongue, based on research supported by grant 914106111UVV 2021-*Fond děkanky*.

KEYWORDS: Construction Grammar; Variation; Futurity; Meaning; Portuguese.

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Question 1

We would like to start by thanking Dr. Szcześniak for accepting our invitation for this interview. Could you tell us a little about your academic trajectory? How did you first become interested in Construction Grammar? What are your recent projects?

Thank you for this opportunity to do an interview!

When I started my PhD program, Chomsky's grammar was the main school of thought. It was a compelling and exciting approach, one that I didn't think could be seriously challenged, much less replaced. But soon things looked less and less compelling, because I could see problems that generativism was not very good at handling. One prime example was the question of why native speakers are so much better than foreign learners at what I call *semantic intuitions*. Namely, when we are about to use a word in a new creative way, we feel a lot more confident about it in our mother tongue than in a foreign language. For instance, can I say something like *O país mergulhou nas mãos de Putin*? As native speakers of Portuguese, you will have an opinion about my lexical experiment. Thanks to your semantic intuitions, it'll either sound good to you or you'll say my experiment is a failure. Solid semantic intuitions make it possible to decide whether or not our experimental expression sounds acceptable and natural, but in a foreign language such intuitions are often insufficient. They do become stronger with time and increasing proficiency, but how does that happen? I realized that Chomsky's theory, as august and impressive as it was, didn't provide answers other than "it must be innate."

Construction Grammar makes it possible to study such puzzles because it takes formulaic expressions very seriously. Under Construction Grammar, each language is full of fixed expressions (such as *mergulhar no caos* or *mergulhar na anarquia*). These are treated as constructions, independent entries in our lexicons, which speakers use creatively to invent new experimental expressions. Generativism, on the hand, dismisses formulaic expressions as "periphery" of language, "uninteresting and not worthy of study." So at the moment, I am mostly interested in studying how people get creative with language and how they build their immense lexical knowledge.

Question 2

Regarding your interest in investigating Portuguese, what motivated you to study the language? Which Portuguese corpora do you have access to? Do you consider Portuguese varieties and, among them, Brazilian Portuguese?

Back in college, I listened to Faith No More's album *King For A Day*, where Mike Patton sings one song in Portuguese. I fell in love with the sound of the language and decided right then and there that I wanted to speak the magic language. Then I was lucky to get sent to study at Universidade de Aveiro in Portugal, where I started to really speak the language. Now I can use Portuguese both for pleasure and research purposes, and when I do research, I use *O Corpus*

do Português de Mark Davies. I am most at home with European Portuguese, but I have access to Brazilian Portuguese a lot, especially when listening to Gabriel o Pensador, O Rappa, Lenine or dozens of other Brazilian artists I love.

Question 3

Could you tell us about your experience in collaborating with the Brazilian journal Ciência Hoje Online (https://cienciahoje.org.br/), about, for instance, the experimental research involving 500 people in Brazil and Poland and so on?

In the early 2000s, all *Ciência Hoje* articles were available online for free and I read them mainly to keep my Portuguese alive. At one point, I thought why not write an article in Portuguese and submit it to CH? My submission (*Palavras Relâmpago*) was not only accepted but it was featured as *artigo de capa*. I then became friends with the Editors Alicia Ivanissevich and Cássio Leite Vieira, wonderful people, whom I visited twice in Rio. Later several other papers came out, including the one you mentioned, reporting on an experiment focusing on people's perceptions of language errors. We found that when people hear a sentence, with or without errors, their evaluation of that sentence depends not only on the error itself, but also on who said the sentence. If the sentence comes from a foreigner, people like to expect mistakes almost automatically. On the other hand, if a native speaking professor makes a mistake, people often don't even hear that mistake. Life is not fair.

Question 4

Variation is a phenomenon that has been often overlooked in the field of Construction Grammar. What is your opinion on the growing interest in variation among constructionists? How do you see the relation between Construction Grammar and Sociolinguistics concerning language variation and change?

Construction Grammar may not have been preoccupied with variation at the beginning, probably because it was mainly concerned with other goals. But time has shown that the framework of Construction Grammar has a lot of room for variation. I don't think I can speculate on the reasons behind the growing interest other than the fact that variation is an important part of how language is used. It's just a really good thing that serious efforts are made to understand it better, beyond the banal idea that "language changes". The relation I see is one of interdisciplinary research that combines insights from both fields to appreciate change for its fascinating nature.

What I mean is that language change may seem uninteresting at first glance and we may feel tempted to take it for granted. But on the other hand, it is a really remarkable phenomenon: you take a community of cariocas, and you can hear in an instant that they are not lisboetas. What other aspect of our behavior displays the same specialization? You can't identify a person as carioca based on the way they walk, laugh, breathe or even dance. Language variation is

unique in this respect. The brains can run two different sets of software. Each set is an immense high-precision system that our brains somehow manage to absorb, but at the same time, each system undergoes dramatic changes so that if you listen to recordings from the 1950s, you hear that cariocas sounded so strange that in your mind's eyes you almost see them wearing beaver hats. We can detect the slightest divergence of accent and we know the speaker is not from our times or from Rio. These are really interesting facts, too interesting to be ignored by linguists.

Question 5

What are the main arguments and observations of your study on variation/ alternations motivated by analogy?

I studied the behavior of the English construction [Verb *oneself* PP], typically used in examples like *argue oneself into a corner* or *drink oneself out of the job*. What most uses of the construction have in common is that they convey unpleasant meanings: 'finding oneself at a logical dead-end in an argument' or 'losing one's job because of drinking.' So there's an aura of pessimism around the construction that proficient speakers can sense. But now more and more uses also involve optimistic meanings, a change that probably began with uses like *paint oneself out of a corner* ('solve a serious personal problem'). What made such uses possible is the existence of fixed expressions like *paint oneself into a corner* ('get in trouble'). The thinking behind it was that if you can paint yourself *into* a corner, then you can also paint yourself *out of* it. Such opposite uses are possible (even logical) especially if there's an existing expression you can allude to. The main observation is that it's a short mental step from an unpleasant problem to a pleasant solution, and if we can take this step in using one expression, then by analogy it's also possible in other cases (with other verbs). And then if enough new uses are heard, variation starts spreading.

Question 6

Could you talk about the relation between the concepts of desire, intention, and futurity? Which kind of influence or interaction may polarity, modality and aspectuality have on such concepts?

I think there may be more than one, but a relation that is almost certainly responsible for the link is the relation of ambiguity. In many situations, when I say that I *want* to do something, my intention can be understood as a plan or even guarantee that this something will get done. So there's the ambiguity of 'intention' plus 'guarantee'. What is really interesting is that, given enough time, the two interpretations start changing in people's minds. While 'intention' was originally the main meaning, a few generations later, it is the 'guarantee of future action' part that people hear more loudly. We know that these things happen, but we don't know exactly how or why. Why should the 'guarantee' meaning appear more salient than 'desire'? Why do these changes involve polarity, modality and aspect, I'm almost afraid to discuss here, because I'd have to go on forever, and most of it would be pure speculation.

Question 7

Could you briefly explain the contributions of Cognitive Semantics to the study of linguistic constructions? Which methods, techniques and tools contribute to cognitive semantic studies?

Let's recall the new uses of the [Verb oneself PP] construction, where there's a salient link between opposite meanings of *paint oneself into a corner* and *paint oneself out of a corner*. You hear that someone managed to *paint himself out of a corner*, and you immediately get the reference to the existing expression *paint oneself into a corner*, which seems to function as an anchor. The association with this safe anchor is automatic and effortless. Similarly, if I say *Não meta o cavalinho na chuva*, what happens in your Brazilian minds is that you will immediately activate the expression *tirar o cavalinho da chuva* when interpreting what I may have meant. People are naturally good at seeing and exploiting such analogies. What is interesting is that, at such moments, language makes use of the same cognitive processes that are used in non-linguistic contexts.

Cognitive Semantics shows which processes happen to be present in language processing more often than others. Or what kinds of meanings tend to appear in grammar in language after language. A good example of that comes from Leonard Talmy. He points out that in many different languages, nouns have inflectional endings that signal things like number, gender or size, as in *gat-inha* (singular, masculine, small) but apparently never the color.

Research in cognitive semantics (and more generally in cognitive linguistics) takes advantage of many different methods, even more now than ever, thanks to computer technology. We can now search texts of immense sizes running in the billions of words, which show us interesting patterns in how constructions are used. These are things that would otherwise remain invisible without computers.

Question 8

Which methods of analysis do you use to study the meaning related to constructions and their content attributes?

My favorite method is corpus analysis. Like I said, a corpus search shows us things that would otherwise be invisible or would not even occur to us. To take a rather banal example, a quick search shows two things about the combination *que nem.* One is that it is synonymous with *como*. The other is that it is only used in comparisons (*estúpido que nem uma porta, comer que nem um porco*). It cannot be used interchangeably with *como* in questions: **Que nem se chama?*

Question 9

In the topic of language acquisition and language learning, what are some of the contributions of constructionist studies?

This is where I think Construction Grammar shows its real power, especially in comparison with Chomsky's generativism. If you want to learn a foreign language, Chomsky will kill your dreams. According to the great man, in adulthood we no longer have children's innate predispositions, so learning a foreign language really well is practically impossible. Construction Grammar says there are no innate predispositions for language other than the general cognitive processes like generalization or pattern detection, which are equally accessible both for adults and children. The challenge is to learn all the constructions of the language, ranging from fairly schematic ones (with empty slots) like [Verb *oneself* PP] to concrete ones (without slots) like formulaic expressions *cada macaco na seu galho*. There's a lot to learn, so the task is not easy, but at least it's possible and you know what to do.

Question 10

According to your studies, what are the insights you found on the process of emergence of a new construction? Have you identified any patterns? If so, which ones? Are there multiwords or complex verb constructions among them?

One pattern is probably very obvious. A multiword expression like *cada macaco no seu galho* can appear in the language instantly. Someone famous will use it in a book and the next day people everywhere may start using it. But it takes a lot more time for expressions with empty slots to enter the language. For example, the [*não quer x*] construction (as in *O motor não quer pegar* or *A porta não quer abrir*) took some time to develop the meaning of difficulty / impossibility / future inaction. Originally it was used quite literally to express reluctance (*O filhinho não quer dormir*), and then it gradually took on the additional meanings, but it was a longer process.

Question 11

In your opinion, what kind of prospects can we expect from the field of Construction Grammar in the next few years?

I'd say that research in the framework of Construction Grammar is likely to provide more detailed answers to questions like: *how do people manage to use language creatively?* We now know that novel expressions (like *mergulhar nas mãos do tirano*) "feed off" existing phrases: The combination *mergulhar em x* (or in English, *plunge into x*) sounds acceptable by analogy and by association with *mergulhar no caos / na anarquia / na crise etc. (plunge into chaos / anarchy / crisis* etc). We hear *mergulhar em x*, and our minds automatically create vivid associations with scary, sinister ideas that these fixed *mergulhar* expressions carry, and these ideas give enough color to the new expression to make it sound acceptable.

(As an aside, what's really fascinating about this is just how many fixed expressions exist. According to the latest estimates, an average speaker knows at least tens of thousands of multiword expressions. That's incredible – just think of how many phone numbers you know or how many historical dates you remember. And then, not only do we know so many expressions, but we can access them in the mental lexicon instantly. When you hear *cada macaco…* you can finish the expression before you even hear me say the second part. Note that when I say *mergulhar nas mãos de…,* in your mind you activate the other existing *mergulhar* expressions within a fraction of a second. All this is simply amazing.)

But I guess the most honest answer to your question should be "who knows what lies ahead?" I like to think that the best future discoveries are those we can't even imagine right now. Progress usually happens when people look for one thing and discover something else, something different and much more interesting than what they set out to find in the first place. This is known as *serendipity*, a mysterious sounding word which reflects the mysterious nature of discovery very well.

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