



**A DISCUSSION ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN VARIATION
AND CHANGE IN CONSTRUCTION GRAMMAR: INTERVIEW
WITH *MARTIN HILPERT*¹**

**UMA DISCUSSÃO SOBRE A RELAÇÃO ENTRE VARIAÇÃO
E MUDANÇA NA GRAMÁTICA DE CONSTRUÇÕES:
ENTREVISTA COM *MARTIN HILPERT***

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We have gathered here questions⁵ that are of great interest to Brazilian researches developed in the field of Functional-Cognitive Linguistics and Construction Grammar centered

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5 We are grateful to the undergraduate student *Gabriel Lucas Martins* (UFRJ) for his contribution in carefully reading the questions.



on the experience of use and/or perception-processing/subjective evaluation. In this set of questions, Professor Martin Hilpert has the opportunity to reflect on some of our concerns, in order to contribute to the debate in Brazil on the constructional representation of stabilization, variation (by polysemy and similarity) and linguistic change phenomena. These themes are approached by the second number in volume 21 of *Diadorim: revista de estudos linguísticos e literários*, a periodical journal of the Postgraduate Program in Vernacular Letters of Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ).

Question 1

In Hilpert (2014, p. 185), we find this observation: “the analysis of linguistic variation has only recently been put on the research agenda of Construction Grammarians, who are thus relative late-comers to a phenomenon that has already been studied intensely for several decades within the tradition of quantitative sociolinguistics (TAGLIAMONTE, 2006; TROUSDALE, 2010)”. Also, in the Brazilian linguistic literature, more frequent references to the concepts “variation by synonymy / similarity” (KLAVAN, 2012; MACHADO VIEIRA, 2016) and “degeneration” (VAN DE VELDE, 2014) are added recently.” What is your view of this situation nowadays? What does explain the fact that the phenomenon of variation has either not taken place in most of the constructional descriptions or displayed a peripheral position in these descriptions?

In my view, the situation is currently changing. Variation has gained in importance as a topic of constructional research. I see three principal reasons for this, all of which are actually related. The first reason is that constructional research has increasingly turned towards the use of corpora. Corpus data tend to be messy, so that the researcher is forced to reflect on variation and on the boundaries of a given linguistic phenomenon. Corpus data can also be surprising: They reveal how constructions vary, often in ways that the researcher did not anticipate. The second reason is a pronounced shift towards quantitative research designs, specifically multivariate methods that include regression techniques, clustering, correspondence analysis, and the like. When these techniques are applied, it becomes apparent that many factors that influence linguistic behavior are probabilistic. They do not lead to crisp categorical differences, but they reveal gradience in the data, thus underscoring the importance of understanding variation. The third reason is that recent work in Construction Grammar has produced theoretical constructs that necessitate measurements of variation. Let me give you two examples of ideas that have been put forward after my 2014 statement. One is the notion of constructional contamination, which has been developed by Pijpops and Van de Velde (2016). Constructional contamination occurs when a construction that can vary between two forms is biased towards one form because of another, unrelated construction that ‘contaminates’ it. Consider the English passive, in which the order of adverb and participle can vary. You can say *Johnson was democratically elected* and *Johnson was elected democratically*. How do speakers decide which variant to use? It turns

out that other, formally similar constructions have an influence. In the English noun phrase, *a democratically elected leader*, the sequence of adverb and participle is used as well. Provided that the two elements are used frequently enough in this way, constructional contamination will lead to a bias in the passive, so that speakers in this case prefer the adverb-initial order. Another theoretical idea with a built-in link to variation is Adele Goldberg's (2019) concept of statistical preemption, which is proposed as an explanation for the curious fact that speakers of a language simply know that certain sentences do not work. Goldberg uses the example of ditransitive *explain*, as in **Please explain me the problem*. Goldberg argues that speakers keep track of the variation in the use of verbs across synonymous constructions, such as *give* in the ditransitive and in the prepositional dative construction. If a verb, such as *explain*, is not seen to vary, speakers infer that a grammatical constraint must be at work. Variation is thus a key issue in how knowledge of constructions comes into being.

Question 2

Particularly convincing, and equally relieving, are the insights that, very recently, quantitative approaches have brought to the constructional variation approach (cf. PEREK, 2016 and PIJPOPS; VAN DE VELDE, 2016), which shed new light on key issues such as the relationship between frequency and productivity, or as how similar constructions in form and meaning (in other words, "close" ones in the construction network level) can influence each other and as how these things help us in order to understand the linguistic change processes. How do you see this relationship between quantitative approaches and the treatment of variation?

I see the relationship as mutually reinforcing: An interest in variation will naturally lead a researcher towards quantitative research designs, and once we start measuring natural language data, we are confronted with the importance of variation. This implies that there is also a challenge. It is easy to get the impression that linguistic variation is practically without limits and that everything is a matter of gradualness. The quantitative study of variation needs to be counterbalanced with theoretical work that offers a frame with principles and hypotheses. Here I see a relative weakness of Construction Grammar. In comparison to other linguistic theories, Construction Grammar does not offer a particularly clear set of predictions that would encourage a refinement of the theory. Simply compare it to grammaticalization theory, which posits an entire network of related hypotheses about how languages can and cannot change. I am thinking for example about the hypothesis of unidirectionality, which rules out a large number of changes that would be theoretically possible, but that are rarely observed in actual data. Current theories of constructionalization and constructional change are less explicit and do not make predictions of the same strength.

Question 3

One question that seems still undeveloped is whether the entrenchment in the construction network affects the links between (different) constructions, in the constructions themselves, or both, in the speakers' mind. The most common view of Construction Grammar seems to conceive entrenchment as an inner characteristic of constructions (cf. HILPERT, 2015), that is, as nodes in the network of constructions, which represent the linguistic knowledge of the speakers. Although there are already some research developments on this (e. g. GOLDBERG, 1995, DIESSEL, 2015, and HILPERT, 2014), there seems to be no consensus as to how a network of linguistic knowledge of a speaker should be modeled/patterned. Thus, the question is: if pairings of different configurations (such as morphemes, words, complex word formations or complex sentences, and discursive practices or textual genres) are constructions, that is, mental representations of linguistic forms/objects, then all of them can be entrenched in different degrees of schematicity; does such a concept imply that an entrenchment is necessarily chunking or resulting of a process of chunk storage?

I agree that entrenchment is most commonly viewed as a property of constructions themselves. This view doubtlessly owes a lot to Ron Langacker's work, who defines entrenchment in the following way (2013: 16), "a structure undergoes progressive entrenchment and eventually becomes established as a unit". We can call this the 'unit-based view', and it corresponds very closely to the idea of chunking. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Schmid (2017) re-thinks entrenchment exclusively in terms of associations, that is, in terms of links between nodes, so that this approach can be called the 'link-based view'. Both views equally allow for constructions at different levels of schematicity, and they account for the same phenomena. For example, both approaches would hold that entrenchment yields the effect that two units that are used together very frequently are more easily processed together than individually: *government* is thus easier to understand as a whole word, rather than as a verbal host with a derivational suffix. The unit-based view offers a straight-forward account of non-compositional meanings and coercion effects, which is an asset. The link-based view is elegant and plausible. Ultimately, it would be very useful to think of scenarios in which the two approaches would make conflicting predictions that could be tested. I am not sure myself whether such scenarios actually exist, but hopefully someone will come up with a good idea.

Question 4

In 2016, during your participation in ICCG9 2016 in Brazil (UFJF), your conference was entitled "Three open questions in Diachronic Construction Grammar", which is published in Hilpert (2018). The issues, at the time, were: (i) What is the object of study in Diachronic Construction Grammar?; (ii) When is a new construction a new construction?; (iii) What knowledge is represented by the nodes and the connections between them? Have they been

resolved? If they have, which are the solutions already found? Or are they still open to solution? In addition, as it is reported in your text, a fourth question is added, linked to the fact that, on the one hand, the Diachronic Construction Grammar is the historical study of constructions, that is, it is centered on how constructions change over time; and, on the other hand, the cognitive view is centered on psychological foundations. This leads us to the following question: “since these two objectives are not equivalent”, what is the solution to such a situation?

I raised those questions not so much with the intention of proposing answers. I don't believe they are easily answered. Rather, I hoped to stimulate a discussion and to make others reflect on issues that I think were left implicit for too long. My personal views at this point are that Diachronic Construction Grammar studies cognitive structures, that the idea of a “new construction” is a relative term that depends on a starting point that is chosen by the analyst, and that we should take care to explain as much as possible with connections rather than nodes. These are working assumptions and time will tell how far they will take our research forward. Some disagreement on these issues within the Construction Grammar community is probably a good thing. Ideas should compete, so that the ones that actually work replace those that do not.

Question 5

A very necessary debate in Construction Grammar is the treatment of linguistic variation by (relative) similarity. Although there are already some advances in this sense (FRIED; BOAS, 2008, CAPPELLE, 2006, 2009, HOFFMANN; TROUSDALE, 2011, LEINO; ÖSTMAN, 2005, KLAVAN, 2012, PEREK, 2012, 2015, HILPERT, 2014), the constructionist model lacks a representation of the knowledge of variation as part of the knowledge of the construction network. Evaluating the theory, the model becomes more economic, because it relegates this representation to the background. On the other hand, the idea of emergent grammar is based on the conception of a network of constructions interconnected by inheritance and extension relations, a network that is configured upon the experiences of use in real situations of communication. In other words, “the potentiality of internal variability to constructional patterns (due to the process of matching linguistic items in slots) and the conventionalization of similarity relations between constructional patterns or of synonymy between attributes of these patterns are part of the knowledge of the mentally stocked language and, therefore, they must take place in the theoretical-methodological architecture of the constructionist model. After all, similarity relations (either between forms that are compatible in the slot of a constructional pattern or between constructional patterns or attributes of them) can be conventionalized by the speakers from the experience of use (centered on the regularity of analogical events)”, (MACHADO VIEIRA; WIEDEMER, 2019, forthcoming). What is your perspective on the treatment of the phenomenon of variation? How do you conceive generalizations about variation in the scope of Construction Grammar and generalizations about the relationship between variation and

linguistic change?

You are right to point out that variation is relegated to the background in formal representations of constructions such as Adele Goldberg's (1995) box diagrams of constructions or attribute-value matrices such as the ones that are used in sign-based construction grammar. In my work, I have been interested in the kind of variation you describe for a long time. Specifically, starting with my dissertation, I have been analyzing patterns of attraction between constructions and lexical items, following the collocation approach that has been developed by Stefan Gries and Anatol Stefanowitsch (Stefanowitsch & Gries 2003). The fact that constructions have collocational preferences is not easily modeled within box diagrams or attribute-value matrices, although for example Thomas Herbst (2018) has been a strong advocate of recognizing the importance of this. Collocational preferences and also variation by similarity are very easily modeled in terms of links, because that is essentially what they are: connections. As work in Construction Grammar is increasingly gravitating towards working out how connections in the construction are organized, I hope that we will be in a better position to come up with formalizations that allow us to actually represent these issues. These representations will have to allow for an inherent dynamicity, so that they can accommodate variation, gradient and change. Connections can vary in strength, they can emerge and disappear (cf. my 'three questions' paper), so again, links are central to this enterprise.

Question 6

Bybee (in an interview in TORRENT, 2012, p. 2) states: "The more recent field of language variation and change is more likely to incorporate usage-based methods and ideas because it is more attuned to the study of language in context and the inherent variability of language ". In Hilpert (2017), you focus your considerations on the relation between Historical Sociolinguistics and Construction Grammar. To what extent do Sociolinguistics or Historical Sociolinguistics and Construction Grammar challenge themselves to reconfigure each other and/or benefit each other from mutual collaboration in terms of linguistic mappings centered on the experience of uses and triggered by cognitive processes and in terms of generalizations about the relationship between linguistic plasticity and dynamism and knowledge/sensitivity to statistical trends? What are the challenges, the advantages and the limits for the compatibility of theoretical and methodological orientations of these approaches? What guidelines and goals do they put into play in this articulation of theories? Which one does become prominent? And which one does become opaque?

In my paper, I argued that there are a number of mutual challenges, which can however lead to a mutual strengthening. While there are significant converging tendencies between Construction Grammar and Historical Sociolinguistics, such as the commitment to corpus-based methods and a strong focus on the communicative function of language, the two approaches do

not fully overlap in their assumptions and goals. Construction Grammar has traditionally focused on the linguistic knowledge of a single, idealized speaker. By comparison, the investigation of language at the level of communities of speakers and language variation between groups of speakers, which are both mainstays of Historical Sociolinguistics (and of sociolinguistics in general), have received relatively little attention. A second issue concerns language contact and multilingualism, which is only beginning to be addressed by constructional research (Hilpert and Östman 2016), but which has been of central importance for historical sociolinguistics from its inception. Thirdly, despite the commitments of usage-based Construction Grammar, which assign a central place to social interaction, it has to be conceded that existing attempts to actually integrate concepts and methods from interactional linguistics into the constructionist perspective (Deppermann 2011, Brône and Zima 2014, Zima 2014, Imo 2015) have not yet been adopted as widely as would be desirable. In Historical Sociolinguistics, the importance and usefulness of ethnographic and interactional approaches has been recognized more fully. In my view, Construction Grammar can benefit from incorporating these ideas and considering their implications for constructional research.

Question 7

Bardódal (2008), Boyd; Goldberg (2011) and Suttle; Goldberg (2011) mention that there are several known factors that determine the productivity of a construction, such as: the frequency type; the variability of the attested instantiations; the similarity; and statistical preemption. The productivity of a particular construction depends on how the instantiations are distributed and on their potential for these instances (in the sense of a ‘pre-packaged’ alternative, which statistically anticipates it, according to GOLDBERG, 2013). These frequency patterns are important for identifying the categories that are formed in the schematic slots in the constructions. How does the Construction Grammar deal with the relation between (co)lexemes and constructions, considering that there are forces of attraction/repulsion and coercion implied therein, as well as with the phenomenon of variation involved?

The productivity of any given construction is indeed the outcome of several interacting factors. At the heart of it is in my view the simple issue of how useful a construction is for the expression of ideas that speakers want to convey in lots of situations. Inflectional endings that encode case, tense, aspect, modality, person, or number are as productive as they are because they allow speakers to communicate information that is crucial to them: Who did what to whom, when did it happen, how does the speaker view the situation, etc. I take it that your question is more about the limits of productivity in constructions that can occur with a large number of different lexical elements, but crucially not will all of them. I used the example of the ditransitive construction and the verb ‘explain’ before. Why do speakers feel that “She explained me the problem” is not a well-formed sentence of English? I have already made reference to

Goldberg's account of statistical preemption that offers an explanation here. More generally, the attraction and repulsion between constructions and lexical elements can be dealt with in terms of connections between these elements in the construction. Statistical preemption represents not just an absence of a connection, but rather the absence of a connection that speakers would expect to exist. Conversely, a strong attraction between a construction and a lexeme means that a connection is there that is even stronger than one could expect, given the frequencies of the construction and the lexical item.

Question 8

The constructivist approach to grammar conceives the linguistic knowledge in light of the notion of construction network. Diessel (2015, p. 15-16), in dealing with the relationship between lexemes and constructions, argues that there are associative links and probabilistic links. In addition, the author states that constructions are organized at different levels of abstraction (*taxonomic links*), being: (i) constructions of different levels of abstraction (*taxonomic links*); (ii) constructions of the same level of abstraction (*horizontal links*); (iii) constructions and syntactic categories (*syntactic links*); and (iv) constructions and lexical expressions (*lexical links*). In addition to this representation, there are several models of Construction Grammar (BOAS; SAG, 2012, GOLDBERG, 1995, 2006, CROFT, 2001, STEELS, 2011, BERGEN; CHANG 2005, etc.), that present different representations, not to mention the classification of inheritance links offered by Goldberg (1995). Considering this framework of organization of constructions, which options are there to capture vertical and horizontal relationships between constructions within a network?

In my view all of these links boil down to associations. Schmid (forthcoming) explicitly argues that links in the construction are of four different types: symbolic, paradigmatic, syntagmatic, and pragmatic. The first type of link is an association between a form and a meaning. Paradigmatic links connect linguistic units that are similar or at least related in form and meaning. Syntagmatic links are associations between elements that tend to follow one another. Pragmatic links are associations between linguistic elements and contexts in which they are likely to be used. All the links you mention in the question can be classified as one of these four.

Question 9

It is well known that the study of pragmatic knowledge, which plays a role in the comprehension of sentences and texts, still awaits a systematic investigation. There are some theoretical essays on the subject, such as (i) the works developed by Leino and Östman (2005),

which focus on patterns of discourse-level constructions, similar to what is presented by Frames Semantics, or (ii) the research of Hoffmann and Bergs (2018), in which it is proposed a relation between mental entrenchment and the development / apprehension of genres as constructions. Thus, what is your view on the possibility of effectively considering “contextuality” as a parameter of analysis and/or some constructional category as “discursive pattern”/“discursive paradigm”, in order to deepen our observations and generalizations about discursive and pragmatic attributes of the functional side/face of the pairings/constructions? And yet, how contextuality can affect the compositional parameter?

There is a literature on pragmatic aspects of constructions, some of which I discuss in chapter six of my (2014) textbook. Constructions such as cleft sentences can only be used if the communicative context is such that certain pieces of information are shared by the speaker and the hearer. In that sense, there are ways in which context has figured in constructional analyses. Context is obviously also a factor that influences variation. Depending on what my interlocutor knows, I am influenced in my choice of alternating constructions, specifically constructions that allow me to place new information at the end of my utterance. At the level of lexical elements, context influences the choice between formal and informal variants, or, in the case of multilingual communication, the choice between elements from different languages. Work by Höder (2014, 2016) is very insightful in this regard.

Question 10

*In the text “Tuning in to the verb-particle construction in English”, Goldberg (2016) notes: “Gries (2003) argues for a constructional account of verb-particle combinations, although he posits two distinct constructions (“construction1” and “construction2” to account for the two word order possibilities instead of underspecifying the word order as is done here); similarly, Cappelle (2006) argues for distinct allostructions to account for the different word orders, although in agreement with the present account, he additionally explicitly relates the two word order patterns via an underspecified more abstract construction”. What do you think about: (i) the association of the theoretical construct of **allostructions** to constructions of active and passive predication (GOLDBERG, 2013: 455), to verb-particle constructions and constructions of phrasal verbs/complex predicates, according to Cappelle (2006), to constructions of predication with verb support and simple verb predication constructions (to make reference and to refer; or to take/have a look and to look, for example), according to MACHADO VIEIRA (2016), as well as (ii) the reference to **constructeme** or **metaconstruction** to represent the area of constructional variation?*

There is good evidence that constructions with paradigmatic relations are connected through associative links. Speakers associate the ditransitive construction with the prepositional

dative construction, the active with the passive, as well as verb-particle constructions with different placements of the particle. Perek (2012) presents experimental evidence for this, Goldberg's concept of statistical preemption is another indicator. It is likewise uncontroversial that paradigmatically related constructions have their own idiosyncratic behaviors, which means that they have to have an autonomous representation, as argued by Goldberg (2002) in her surface generalizations hypothesis. Where it gets interesting is with regard to the question of how generalizations across constructions are to be represented. Is a generalization across the active and passive a construction, or is it something else? Here different researchers will give you different answers. My view is that this is a matter of degree. Some construction pairs share much of their structure, so that it makes sense to view them as a single construction with several variants. Other pairs, such as for example active and passive, are sufficiently different so that I would be hesitant to posit a single underlying construction that manifests itself differently. Gabriele Diewald (2009) has been arguing that entire paradigms, for example of modal auxiliaries, should be recognized as high-level generalizations, that is, as constructions. This issue takes us back to the question about entrenchment and its effect on nodes and connections. The concept of an allostruction or a constructeme invites us to think of a high-level node that undergoes entrenchment. Connections between paradigmatically related constructions are a necessary precondition for that, and it would probably not be far-fetched to say that the stronger these connections are, the more likely it is that speakers will in fact create such a generalization. Proponents of the link-based view would say that everything lies in the strength of the connections, so that an allostruction would really be an epiphenomenon of very strong links between constructions with formal or functional relations.

Question 11

In the book *Constructional Change in English*, you present a study about the development of concessive constructions and concessive parentheticals with *while*, *if*, *although*, and *though*. Your researches demonstrate that these parentheticals are in variation in contemporary English, but they present differences of degrees of subjectivity and formal differences in their contexts of use. Could you highlight here the main contributions of the constructivist approach to the development of hypotactic and parenthetical constructions? Would you say that the cline parataxis > hypotaxis > subordination (HOPPER; TRAUGOTT, 1993) – used to explain the formation of new relationships between clauses – continues to be considered in constructionalist studies and it would be sufficient to explain the formation of hypotactic or subordinate constructions? Do you think that the conception of memorizing chunks (and hence schemas) goes against the conception of subordination? Instead of thinking of, for example, [I suppose] + [subordinate clause], can we think of a construction [[NP V that] [clause]], without main clause and subordinate one? The memorization design of *chunks* (and consequently of

schemes) does not surpass the conception that there would be a construction with a subordination *link* in relation to the other, as with the classical idea of matrix clause and subordinate clause? Instead of thinking of *I suppose + subordinate clause*, can we think of a construction today [NP V that] [clause]], without nuclear clause and subordinate clause?

In my view, broad grammaticalization tendencies such as the development of hypotaxis out of parataxis are fully compatible with constructional research. What the trend captures is a strengthening of associations that ends in the entrenchment of a unit, which is an instantiation of Traugott and Trousdale's concept of constructionalization. There is of course a tension between the concept of subordination and chunking, although I would express it as the alternative between hierarchical organization and sequential organization. Here, my view is that the burden of proof lies with accounts that propose that there is hierarchical constituent structure. Anything that can be explained with sequential association does not need to be explained in terms of hierarchy. The example of comment clauses that you mention (e.g. *I think, I suppose*, etc.) illustrates that not every structure that may be analyzed as hierarchical is in fact hierarchical.

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