Interview with Paul Kay

by Tiago Timponi Torrent[1]

This issue of LinguiStica on Construction Grammar would not be complete without an interview with one of the founders of the field. Together with the late Charles Fillmore, Paul Kay was responsible for shaping distinguishing aspects of constructionist approaches to grammar. In this interview, this history is revisited, and key aspects of linguistic theory - such as generativism and formalism - are discussed. The Emeritus Professor of Linguistics at the University of California also discusses the turn of Berkeley Construction Grammar towards Sign-Based Construction Grammar. Paul Kay's answers to the following questions couldn't be more in tune with the theory he helped create: beyond simplistic distinctions, he sheds light on both the more general features of Construction Grammar and on the equally relevant peripheral anecdotes that paved the way for the development of the field in the last three decades.

Linguíſtica: Thirty years ago, a paper by you, Charles Fillmore and Mary Catherine O'Connor (Fillmore, Kay & O'Connor, 1988) presented the bases on which not only one, but a set of approaches to grammar were developed. Looking back over these thirty years, what is your general assessment of the constructionist effort so far? What were the most relevant achievements in the field, in your opinion?

Paul Kay: Maybe the most useful idea to come out of 80's construction grammar was the rejection of "core grammar" in favor of the recognition (if I may) that idiomaticity is an inherently gradient phenomenon with no clear boundary between "core" and "periphery". Grammatical patterns associating meaning with form, or specifying form alone, can and do exist along a continuum between total fixity of all elements (*Drop dead!*) and maximal abstraction $(S \rightarrow NP\ VP)$. The *let alone*

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Rio de Janeiro | Volume 14 | número 1 | p.30-34 | jan.-abr. 2018
Gramática de Construções | *Construction Grammar | Gramática de Construcciones*

Revista Linguíſtica **30**

construction of Fillmore, Kay & O'Connor (1988) provided an extended example of a grammatical pattern in between these extremes.

Linguíſtica: And what did you expect to be different?

Paul Kay: I'm not sure I had any well-formed expectations, as distinct from hopes.

Linguíſtica: Around the same time, you and Fillmore taught a graduate division course on construction grammar that gave rise to Berkeley Construction Grammar (Kay & Fillmore, 1999). Among your students, were some of the people whose books became the basic readings for other approaches to construction grammar. Which aspects of that first course do you think were preserved in those other approaches and which ones you wish had been preserved, if any?

Paul Kay: What I might wish to have been pursued more actively in some constructional approaches was further development of the gentle push toward formalism presented in Kay and Fillmore (1999). Sign-Based Construction Grammar (SBCG) is the current incarnation of that desire that I'm personally involved in.

Linguíſtica: And why do you think that didn't happen? I mean, why do you think some approaches to Construction Grammar, other than SBCG, either don't embrace formalism consistently or avoid it?

Paul Kay: In part as a result of the influential work of Adele Goldberg, a less formally self-conscious type of construction grammar, concerned centrally with argument structure and theoretically oriented toward Cognitive Linguistics, has been found congenial by a number of linguists who find formalism in grammatical study more obscuring than illuminating.

Linguíſtica: Some approaches to Construction Grammar tend to call themselves usage-based, as opposed to unification-based (i.e. more formal) approaches. How do you see this differentiation? Is it somehow rooted in or related to the avoidance of formalism mentioned in the previous question?

Paul Kay: I have to preface my answer by admitting that I don't know the usage-based literature as well as I should. I guess I'm not more strongly attracted to it than I am precisely because it's not as formal an approach as I would like to think possible. I accept that in the end the usage-based approach

Rio de Janeiro | Volume 14 | número 1 | p.30-34 | jan.-abr. 2018
Gramática de Construções | *Construction Grammar* | *Gramática de Construcciones*

Revista Linguíſtica **31**

may turn out to be something like *right,* in the sense that it's the best we are able to do; maybe formal approaches *ipso facto* commit themselves tacitly to unrealistically strong assumptions. That may be correct, but I hope it isn't. I would like language to turn out to be less messy than usage-based approaches appear willing, even eager, to accept. With regard to the second question (about avoidance of formalism), it seems to be a fact that there is substantial overlap between the Cognitive Linguistics and usage-based communities and that attitudes toward formal linguistics in these communities tend to run from indifferent to antagonistic. It's not really for me to say why the many excellent linguists who harbor these attitudes do so.

Linguíʃtica: In your contribution to the Oxford Handbook on Construction Grammar (Kay, 2013), you propose a differentiation between grammatical constructions and coining patterns, the former being generative, while the latter can't be predicted by any grammar. In the concluding section of the chapter, you recognize that, most probably, such a distinction is less clear for those adopting a more usage-based approach to Construction Grammar (Kay, 2013, p. 46). However, given the historic opposition between (Usage-Based) Construction Grammar and Chomskyan Generative Linguistics, such a distinction may have seemed odd to some constructionists instead. In other words, do you think that framing Generative Linguistics and Construction Grammar as opposing approaches to grammar imposes unnecessary biases to the model?

Paul Kay: That's a pretty complex question. In the chapter you refer to, I added the part about usage-based approaches at the request of the editors of the Handbook. I observed that the distinction on which I was, perhaps tiresomely, insisting is not something that naturally arises in the usage-based view. Incidentally, I should emphasize here that my view of grammar is subsumable under "Chomskyan Generative Linguistics" only in the broadest, and original, sense of "generative grammar" as denoting mathematically explicit grammar. To the degree that usage-based approaches to grammar and formal approaches are opposed, it might be worth noting that the idea of grammatical construction has been found useful by workers on both sides of that divide.

Linguíʃtica: After some time, not only you, but also other subscribers of Berkeley Construction Grammar, moved to Sign-Based Construction Grammar. Could you summarize the main reasons for that, given that Berkeley Construction Grammar was already a formal approach to grammar?

Paul Kay: Berkeley Construction Grammar (BCG) was a *semi*-formal approach to grammar. When Fillmore, Kay and O'Connor presented an oral version of the 1988 *Let Alone* paper at Stanford,

Rio de Janeiro | Volume 14 | número 1 | p.30-34 | jan.-abr. 2018
Gramática de Construções | *Construction Grammar | Gramática de Construcciones*

Revista Linguíʃtica **32**

Ivan Sag told us that constructional analysis was precisely the way he was taking his work in HPSG and suggested collaboration. Soon after that, I presented some form of the 1993 (deservedly) unpublished Fillmore & Kay ms. to a seminar of Ivan's at Stanford and Ivan, among others, pointed out some important formal flaws in the way we were using the notation of BCG, which I took back to Chuck Fillmore and the BCG group. This led to a series of meetings between Ivan, Chuck, Laura Michaelis and me. SBCG was born out of the meeting of BCG with constructional HPSG.

Linguíʃtica: Could you elaborate further on these formal flaws and also on the main points of these discussions?

Paul Kay: The linking theory we proposed exhibited several of these flaws. It employed an intuitive notion of set unification that had no proper mathematical definition. For example, the valence of the main verb of a sentence like (1) could be augmented by the "Oblique Goal Construction" to license a sentence like (2). But in creating the verbal valence that could license a sentence like (3), rather than add a valent, the oblique goal template would have to unify with the already present, partially specified, goal valent, although there was nothing in the theory that would make that happen. Even adding a filter that said in effect that all "final" valence sets must be 'well formed' in some sense probably wouldn't solve the problem.

(1) I hit the ball.

(2) I hit the ball to you.

(3) I handed the ball to you.

Similarly, Kay & Fillmore employed an incoherent concept of set unification in their discussion of adjuncts (See Müller, 2006). A quite general and importantly undesirable property of BCG was the assumption that all paths in a tree representing a phrase or sentence have to end in an overt feature-value. This amounted to an omnipresent filter, which undercut the goal of monotonicity. Finally, Müller 2006 showed that the attempt in Kay 2002 to establish in BCG an explicit recursive licensing procedure for sentences did not work.

Linguíʃtica: Most recently, Construction Grammar has been used in computational applications, such as constructicons, parsers and so on. How do you see the move of Construction Grammar into

Rio de Janeiro | Volume 14 | número 1 | p.30-34 | jan.-abr. 2018
Gramática de Construções | *Construction Grammar* | *Gramática de Construcciones*

Revista
Linguíʃtica **33**

a field usually dominated by metrics? If Construction Grammar applications were to be evaluated, which parameters would you like to see be taken into consideration in such an evaluation?

Paul Kay: I am not a computational person. The most advanced work relevant to this question of which I am aware is described at the LinGO Grammar Matrix[2], which contains, among other things, implemented HPSG grammars of a growing number of languages.

Linguíʃtica: What are the challenges remaining to Construction Grammar approaches? What do you see as the most promising developments to tackle them?

Paul Kay: I like working in SBCG and would applaud further development of this framework. Almost all the work in SBCG so far has been in English. I would like to see SBCG employed in grammatical descriptions and analyses of other languages, especially unwritten languages.

Linguíʃtica: Is there any question I haven't included in this interview that you'd like to have been asked?

Paul Kay: Not that I can think of.

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2   http://matrix.ling.washington.edu

Rio de Janeiro | Volume 14 | número 1 | p.30-34 | jan.-abr. 2018
Gramática de Construções | *Construction Grammar | Gramática de Construcciones*

Revista Linguíʃtica **34**