

## entreviSta

### ADELE E. GOLDBERG

*Por Diogo Pinheiro (UFRJ)*<sup>1</sup>

One way to introduce Adele E. Goldberg is to simply say that she is a professor of psychology at Princeton University, who took her Ph.D. at the University of California, Berkeley, under the supervision of cognitive linguistics “founding father” George Lakoff. That would be terribly unfair, though, since her own work has been hugely influential in the fields of construction grammar and cognitive linguistics for the last two decades or so. To be sure, professor Goldberg’s early work, which culminated in her 1995 book *Constructions*, not only extended construction grammar beyond idioms (and into so-called “core grammar”), but also inspired a great many researchers and students around the world to pursue constructionist analyses.

This is not to say, however, that her influence is a thing of the past. In fact, Goldberg’s more recent work keeps helping shape the field, with its focus on key issues such as language learning (how do speakers generalize beyond the input? And how can they possibly avoid overgeneralization?), form-function relations (is it possible to motivate grammatical forms, albeit conventional, from semantic and pragmatic functions?) and linguistic universals (how can we explain alleged universals without innate universal grammar?). The answers coming out of her lab have been adding to the ever-growing body of evidence that (i) we (human beings) can do just fine without UG when it comes to learning a language and (ii) we (linguists) can do just fine without UG when it comes to explaining (near?) universal tendencies.

Where will it lead us to? If I can add a very personal note (with which some dear friends and colleagues will certainly disagree), it might lead to a broad theoretical change: a shift in focus from the “linguistic system” or even “linguistic knowledge”, as if it were a self-contained device, to the *language user*, with all her/his domain-general abilities of categorization (schematization, analogy, induction) and statistical learning.

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**Revista Linguística:** Can you tell us a bit about your background? What were your undergraduate studies? How was your first contact with construction grammar and when did you decide you would like to dedicate yourself to it?

**Adele Goldberg:** I was an undergraduate major in math and philosophy at the University of Pennsylvania, and didn't know what I wanted to do after that. I found a graduate program that seemed to combine both areas at Berkeley, a program in Logic and the Methodology of Science. But when I arrived, I realized I was never going to be a professional mathematician, and philosophy wasn't addressing the questions I was really most interested in. At that point, I happened to take an undergraduate course with George Lakoff. That was in 1986 and he was going over a draft of *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* to us. I was absolutely riveted. One of the appendices in that key book was a constructionist account of *there* constructions. His combining psychology and linguistics really resonated with me, and I quickly transferred to the linguistics department, where George became my advisor. It was a time at Berkeley where there was a lot of excitement and a lot of interactive discussions among Chuck Fillmore, Dan Slobin, Paul Kay, Eve Sweetser, Bob Wilensky, Alison Gopnik, and others. I was always very interested in the mind, and the constructionist approach offered an opportunity to focus on the psychology of language.

**Revista Linguística:** Usage-based, emergentist theories of language learning are sometimes said to be “empiricist”, which evokes an association with Skinner’s behaviorist approach. Is that a misconception? Why?

**Adele Goldberg:** That is a misconception. No one today believes our behavior is determined only by simple stimulus-response interactions. Chomsky was right to put language in the mind. But while Skinner overemphasized nurture, Chomsky and his followers continue to overemphasize nature. New research has demonstrated beyond any doubt that even prenatal influences of the environment interact with our genetic potential to give rise to human cognition. Moreover, there is every reason to believe that language is a learned skill. It requires certain prerequisites (particularly a uniquely human type of social cognition), and it is shaped by human constraints and biases (on memory, attention, categorization), but there is no need to stipulate that nouns, verbs, tree structures, or any other syntactic aspect of language needs to be “innate”.

**Revista Linguística:** Usage-based constructionist models are well-known for eschewing formalization. Thomas Hoffmann (2011: 235), whilst generally agreeing with the usage-based approach, argues that commitment to formalization is helpful. He specifically quotes Pollard and Sag (1994: 6), for whom “as theories become more complicated and their empirical consequences less straightforwardly apparent, the need for formalization arises”. As I see it, what they mean is that formalization helps (and forces) us to keep track of all descriptive consequences of our proposals, thus reducing the risk of internal contradiction. What’s your opinion about this argument?

**Adele Goldberg:** I have a lot of respect for Thomas Hoffman and I think formalisms are fine as long as they don't obscure the point one is trying to make. I don't believe there currently exists a truly helpful formalism for capturing semantics so I tend to use as little formalism as is needed to make my points clear. I know that disappoints some readers, so I'm happy that others' have made various formalisms available. Ron Langacker's formalism is great at capturing a lot of semantic insights, and Luc Steels' demonstrations are very helpful as a way to envision emergent behavior. For syntax, Sign-based construction grammar, Fluid Construction Grammar, and HPSG all have reasonable formalisms. I will say that I am newly excited about certain modeling work on how constructions can be learned; Libby Barak has a wonderful model that is very useful for implementing usage-based proposals and providing various ways of testing them.

**Revista Lingüística:** The inheritance metaphor, which is very productive in the constructionist camp, embeds a top-down directionality. However, usage-based models are clearly bottom-up: the assumption is that higher level constructions are created through a process of abstraction (schematization, induction) from lower level constructions. In a model that relies so heavily on induction and pattern-finding abilities, is there any gain in insisting with the inheritance metaphor?

Actually inheritance has always allowed a bidirectional system, despite the choice of word "inheritance". Note that as long as both mother and daughter are fully specified (as they are in what Flickinger (1985) had called "normal" inheritance), there is no reason not to have bidirectional arrows. I argued for this in 1995, in cases in which the daughter and mother node simultaneously motivate each other. This is the norm.

**Revista Lingüística:** To conclude, could you briefly talk about your upcoming book and how it relates to your previous books?

**Adele Goldberg:** The upcoming book, *Explain me this*, addresses the long-standing issue of *partial productivity*: how it is that we can readily generalize a construction for use with some words but not others. For example, native English speakers find it acceptable to say *she popped him a punch* but not *explain me this*. I had suggested some ideas in chapters 2 and 5 of *Constructions* (1995), namely semantic constraints and *statistical preemption*, but I had little data to back up those ideas at the time. I returned to this topic in *Constructions at Work* (chapter 5) as well, but only now do we have enough data – from our and others' experiments – to make the importance of semantics, statistical preemption, and also another proposed factor, *coverage*, truly convincing.

The book argues that constructions are productive only when the semantics of the words can be construed to fit the semantics of the constructions, and that productivity is encouraged by *coverage* (a concept from the literature on general induction, which combines type frequency, variability and similarity); at the same time, productivity is constrained by statistical preemption: the existence of a conventional, readily available alternative that expresses the intended message at least as well. That is, native English speakers don't say *explain me this* because almost every time the double-object

construction might have been appropriately used with *explain*, we consistently have heard *explain NP to NP* instead. The book draws analogies to learning word meaning, and addresses why L2 learners often have difficulty circumscribing constructions the way native speakers do.

## REFERENCE

Hoffmann, T. (2011) *Preposition placement in English: a usage-based approach*. Cambridge: University Press.