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The author and the text in radically usage-based diachronic construction grammar, or why historical linguists have started analysing text again

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As the historical morphosyntactic branch of ‘cognitive linguistics’, research in ‘diachronic construction grammar’, which concerns itself with the study and theory of the evolution of the constructional resources of languages, is often explicitly affiliated with a ‘usage-based’ perspective on language. A central concept in this model is the ‘usage event’, an ‘instance of use’ of a form-meaning pairing in a text, which in usage-based approaches to constructional change is considered to be the locus of innovation. Innovative instances of use are products of individual minds, but owing to modern (historical) linguistics’ traditional fixation with conventionalized systems there was until recently little interest in idiolectal grammars. More ‘radically’ usage-based research has now begun to surface which centrally relates innovative grammar to individual usage and which takes into account the textual context of usage events.

... it is not true that all those who analyze texts are text linguists... (Berry 1996: 2)

Maybe there is a band playing and maybe Johnny is in step with the music even though he is out of step with his fellows. Maybe the rest of his troop are taking no notice of the musical beat. (Berry 1989: 5)

One does not expect a new theory to spring into life fully documented. (Berry 1982: 74)

1. Usage-based linguistics and diachronic construction grammar¹

Following the 2000 publication of Michael Barlow’s and Suzanne Kemmer’s seminal edited volume on “Usage-based models of language”, ‘usage-based’ has arguably become one of the catchiest adjectives in 21st-century linguistics. A fair degree of semantic bleaching may be both

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cause and effect of this, since many now seem to be using it as a rather vague methodological expression which alternates with ‘corpus-based’, while “[i]mportance of usage data in theory construction and description” is only one, and only the sixth, of nine central properties of usage-based models listed by Kemmer & Barlow (2000: xv). It is a practical tenet which was not emphasized by Ronald Langacker when he coined the term “usage-based model” to refer to a conception of language in which “[s]ubstantial importance is given to the actual use of the linguistic system and a speaker’s knowledge of this use” (Langacker 1987: 494). Much more crucial to this model is the theoretical assumption which is listed first by Kemmer & Barlow (2000: viii–ix), viz. that there is an “intimate relationship between linguistic structures and instances of use of language”, first and foremost because the latter are the sole basis of all of a speaker’s linguistic knowledge. A usage-based approach consequently not only entails that usage data are considered, including, but not limited to, corpus data, but also implies a general stance on the nature of linguistic cognition and how it comes about.

Langacker calls an instance of use a ‘usage event’, which he defines as “the pairing established on a particular occasion between an actual conceptualization and an actual vocalization” (Langacker 1987: 426). In view of the indeterminate nature of form-meaning pairings suggested by this definition, it is unsurprising that the concept is an appealing one to those who adopt a usage-based perspective on language change. Usage events are where innovations are considered to come about. Von Mengden & Coussé (2014: 4–5), for instance, write that “[i]n order to give rise to new meanings out of old ones [...] usage-based approaches generally assume that in each usage event speaker and hearer engage in the negotiation of (new) meanings”. The concept also crops up in Traugott & Trousdale (2013), the first book to attempt a holistic account of ‘constructionalization’, i.e. the creation of new constructions, and of constructional change more generally, which very explicitly takes a perspective which is both constructionist and usage-based. Here usage events are equated with what Fried (2008) had earlier termed ‘constructs’, which they define as “empirically attested tokens [...], instances of use on a particular occasion, uttered by a particular speaker (or written by a particular writer) with a particular communicative purpose” (Traugott & Trousdale 2013: 16). They mention that language production and processing makes the construct the locus of individual innovation and subsequent conventionalization. Which quite naturally leads to the question of why historical linguists should consider texts (again).

2. Internal vs. external systems

Usage events, or constructs, are necessarily embedded in texts (cf. Langacker 2001),² and are unavoidably attributable to individual speakers, irrespective of whether the texts are monologic or dialogic. To be able to account for innovation (as well as conventionalization, but first things first), a comprehensive usage-based explanation of language change should consequently pay due attention to the role of individual cognition and a methodological consequence should be a return to the text, i.e. to the constructs produced by individual authors. Up until very recently, however, post-Neogrammarian and post-philological historical linguistics was generally marked by a lack

² In view of the theme of this section, I am using ‘texts’ to refer indiscriminately to bounded stretches of both written and spoken language. For convenience, I will stick to the convention of using ‘speakers’ to refer to both writers and speakers.

of interest in individuals' language production and this has extended to early work in usage-based diachronic construction grammar.³ For this, there are three intertwined reasons. The first is that innovation, as a feature of individual minds, is merely considered to be potential for change and that only replicated, conventionalized, innovations count as true change (Traugott & Trousdale 2013: 2). Modern theoretical linguistics indeed focuses on a conventionalized system. This leads to the second reason: all speakers of a language are assumed to share the same system. There is an overall lack of interest in individual differences, even from cognitive linguists, in spite of the fact that inter-speaker differences are both predicted by and corroborative of usage-based theory (Dąbrowska 2016: 485). The third reason, in turn, follows from this: an assumed to be shared conventionalized system is not only considered to be the output of language change but also its input.

The adverse effect of such a preoccupation with a single code is inherent to Traugott & Trousdale's (2013) model of constructionalization, which I have argued in Noël (2016, 2017) to be imperfect from a usage-based perspective for reason of its entanglement of individual knowledge and a conventionalized system which they refer to as 'community knowledge' but which cannot have a cognitive ontological status. The model rests on 'mismatch' between what speaker/hearers do (produce/interpret) and *the* conventionalized system, but speaker/hearers' linguistic behaviour can hardly be at odds with their own linguistic knowledge, nor can they be assumed to access two distinct linguistic knowledge sets, their own individual one and the conventional one. Cognitively there can be no mismatch, therefore.

I have also argued in Noël (2016, 2017) that Fischer's (2007), also explicitly usage-based, account of morphosyntactic change is more 'radically' usage-based, i.e. more cognitively realistic, because it is founded on match rather than mismatch, in that speakers' innovations are analogically motivated by their own grammars. Fischer (2008: 338) stresses "the need to look at the process of grammaticalization [or morphosyntactic change, or constructionalization, DN] from the point of view of the speaker, that is, we should consider how the structure that is said to grammaticalize [or constructionalize, DN] is embedded in the synchronic system of grammar that is part of the speaker's acquired knowledge". In Fischer's model there is no confusion of internal and external systems. While Traugott and Trousdale's narrative, as a further development of grammaticalization theory (see, e.g., Hopper & Traugott 2003) and in step with common practice in (historical) linguistics, is a language-centred account, notwithstanding the many references to speakers and hearers, Fischer's proposal is more firmly speaker-based, which in my opinion puts her more in step with the music the 'language change' band is playing than most of her fellow marching linguists (some readers may recognize the metaphor used by Margaret in her "Johnny" paper, i.e. Berry 1989). Studies in grammaticalization trace the semantic and syntactic development of linguistic forms, and Traugott and Trousdale continue to do this, considering reanalysis, or 'neoanalysis', to be the primary 'mechanism' of change (Traugott & Trousdale 2013: 58), whereas for Fischer a semasiological path is "an analyst's generalization, a convenient summary but not something that has actually 'happened'" (Fischer 2009: 18–19).

³ For article-length introductions to diachronic construction grammar, see Noël (2007) and Barðdal & Gildea (2015).

3. Entrenchment, constructional innovation, corpora and texts

Though she has nowhere emphasized this herself, it follows from the underlying precept of Fischer's proposal that we turn to individuals' language production to look for explanations for innovations, given that speakers' experience-based internal systems cannot possibly be fully identical. The latter, formulated as "No two members of a speech community have identical linguistic knowledge", is treated as axiomatic by Schmid (2015: 4) in the theoretical exposition of his usage-based socio-cognitive 'Entrenchment-and-Conventionalization Model' of language (as is the equally obvious "Members of a speech community share linguistic knowledge"). Two sources of inspiration he points to are empirical studies by Dąbrowska (2012) and Barlow (2013). The former argues that it is a myth that all language learners converge on the same grammar by reviewing a number of experimental psycholinguistic studies which examine aspects of native speakers' knowledge of what she explicitly characterizes as "core grammatical constructions", revealing there to be considerable differences in how much speakers know about them. Barlow uses corpus linguistic techniques to determine variation in the use of a wide range of lexicogrammatical patterns in a corpus of transcribed speech of six White House press secretaries and observes inter-speaker variability to be greater than intra-speaker variability measured over a period of months.

The least that can be concluded from both these studies is that different speakers are not equally familiar with generally common constructions even. So, if individual instances of use are the locus of innovation, and if new grammar somehow matches old grammar, one may expect innovations to be connected with grammar the innovators are familiar with. To test this, and to be able to account for specific innovations, we cannot rely on conventional corpus research, a) because the corpora used in such research are not representative of idiolects but of the present-day language "as a whole", of a dialect or sociolect, or of a historical variety of a language, and b) because corpus linguistic techniques are conventionally employed for the detection of general regularities through 'secondary analysis' (Adolphs 2006: 3), which makes complete abstraction from specific usage events in individual texts. I have to disagree, therefore, with the implicit suggestion made in other contributions in this section that all corpus linguistics is by definition text analysis.

However, quite different from the more common type of diachronic corpus investigations, there is already cutting-edge research in radically usage-based diachronic construction grammar which makes use of historical idiolectal corpora and which pays due attention to both particular usage events as well as typical contexts for types of usage event. Schmid & Mantlik (2015) study both the individual entrenchment and the conventionalization of the [N *BE that*] construction using a data collection that differentiates between 139 historical authors. They identify which authors were the first to enter specific nouns in the construction and establish connections between individual authors' usage (or entrenchment) profiles, the pragmatic function of the utterances in which they typically use the construction and the genre context. Petré (2016) examines the competition between [*GO to INF*] and [*BE going to INF*] in the writings of 19 17th- and early 18th-century writers with a view to collecting evidence that the latter construction was an 'extravagant' innovation. One such piece of evidence is that [*BE going to INF*] was hardly used in contexts where there was no need for extravagance. Finally, De Smet's (2016) study of the quite recent development of the noun *key* into an adjective comes closest in addressing a research agenda invited by Fischer's

proposal on constructional change in that it connects individual speakers' use of the innovative construction with their use of more conventional constructions that provide 'analogical support'. De Smet analyses data for 169 different speakers collected from the Hansard Corpus, covering the three final decades of the 20th century. In addition to establishing a correlation between their use of the innovative construction and their entrenchment of more conventional ones, he also considers specific usage events to find out whether conventional uses of *key* 'prime' innovative uses.

Such research constitutes the way forward in the documentation of a radically usage-based diachronic construction grammar which connects innovations with the innovators' individual grammars. As it involves texts as the co(n)text where constructional innovation surfaces, it comprises a justified return to the text in historical linguistics, without it entailing a shift to text linguistics or a restoration of philology.

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