

From ‘no synonymy’ to ‘no equivalence’

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This article presents a critical discussion of the ‘principle of no synonymy’ as spelled out in Goldberg (1995). We will turn down recent objections that have been raised against this principle and we will argue that it only needs to be conceptually fine-tuned under a new name, the principle of no equivalence.

Goldberg’s (1995, 67) *principle of no synonymy* features among the foundational conceptual tools of Construction Grammar. This principle states that when two constructions differ in form, they must be semantically or pragmatically distinct. In recent years, increasing concerns have been raised as to its theoretical and descriptive accuracy however (e.g. Kinsey et al. 2007; Uhrig 2015; Laporte et al. 2021), leading Uhrig (2015) to argue that it is largely ‘overrated’. The aim of this paper is twofold. First, we present a critical discussion aimed at answering these concerns. This means considering potential theoretical points of contention within Construction Grammar (especially with the concepts of *pre-emption* and *allostruction*) and looking into alleged empirical counter-evidence (with particular focus on the *zero/that* alternation and subject-extraposition constructions in English). After careful examination of each claim, we contend that the principle of no synonymy is neither overrated nor inaccurate. Second, we argue that the principle would gain in precision and explanatory power if it were to be conceptually fine-tuned under a new name:

The Principle of No Equivalence: If two competing constructions differ in form (i.e. phonologically, morpho-syntactically or even orthographically), they must be semantically, pragmatically and/or socially distinct.

This is primarily motivated by the observation that the (construction grammarian) principle of no synonymy is too often narrowly interpreted as the principle of no ‘semantic’ (i.e. truth-conditional) synonymy. This is also motivated by the observation that the notions of competition and distributional niche are crucial to understanding the principle and that, alongside the ‘semantic’ and ‘pragmatic’ types of meaning, the notion of ‘social’ meaning is another crucial factor that needs to be taken into account in order to understand aspects of (individual) variation and change.

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