

How to Do Thing “with an elbow” —A Constructional Approach to Adjuncts—

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While diverse constituents of a sentence contribute to the meaning of the sentence differently, verbs have generally been considered to have a strong influence, as indicated by the special attention paid to verb-centered constructions in construction grammar (cf. Goldberg, 1995; Corft, 2003). This study examines how adjuncts (i.e., prepositional phrases) in English contribute to the meaning of sentences from the perspective of frame semantics and construction grammar. We argue that adjuncts can semantically make a significant contribution depending on the semantic properties of nouns occurring in them.

In this study, 2,157 cases of the adjunct, “with an elbow” in English Web (2013) (Jakubiček et al., 2013) are analyzed in terms of the verbs which co-occur with it and the meaning of the sentences with the adjunct. As a result, three observations were made.

(a) Compared to adjuncts with other body-parts names, such as “with a hand”, the type frequency of co-occurring verbs of “with an elbow” is fewer, and the meaning of the whole sentence tends to be more aggressive. The limited use of an elbow in the real world (usually specialized for professional wrestling or martial arts) may limit the verbs that co-occur with this adjunct.

(b) As shown in (1), the original meaning of the verb (i.e., WELCOMING) can be overwritten by “with an elbow”. Although the verb “welcome” in (1) refers to a friendly interaction among people, the whole sentence refers to a form of attacking due to the presence of “with the elbow”. This “overwriting” phenomenon may indicate that the semantic property of this adjunct is strong enough to topple the semantic influence of verbs.

(1) “He welcomed me with an elbow in the chops,” Glover told the Kitchener- Waterloo Record in a 2017 interview.

(c) As shown in (2), there are numerous instances where “with an elbow” is used without a verb and performs essentially the same predicative function as a verb. In (3), a sentence containing “with an elbow” without a verb is in coordinating conjunction with a sentence containing a verb, indicating that this adjunct performs a verb-like function. This kind of usage is not found in the adjunct “with a hand”.

(2) Jones with an elbow to the back of the head.

(3) Jorgensen with an elbow and Gamburyan gets a takedown.

Based on these findings, we argue that verbs do not necessarily play a central role in constructing the sentence meaning and that even adjuncts can contribute to the same degree as verbs, depending on the nature of the nouns contained in them. The nature of nouns and their semantics should be captured in terms of frame semantics (cf. Fillmore et al., 2003). We also argue that descriptions of constructions need not be verb-centered but that the core parts of constructions should be selected according to the degree of their contribution to the meaning of the sentence. Like Goldberg (2006), we treat frequent and conventional patterns in language that convey structured meanings as constructions, which does not necessarily rely on word classes of their constituents. This “word-class-neutral” approach to constructions accords well with the Langacker’s symbolic view of grammar (cf. Langacker, 2008).

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