Back to cognition: the dynamics of constructions and grammar in individuals

Peter Petré[1]
[1]University of Antwerp

For some decades now Construction Grammar has been a major theoretical model of grammar (e.g., Hoffmann & Trousdale 2013). One of its primary aims was to bring grammatical theory closer to actual usage. Yet, despite this usage-based letter of credence, quantitative analysis of attested usage at the individual level is still heavily underrepresented. In this talk I discuss how extensive analysis of individual-level usage of a variety of syntactic constructions across the lifespan can contributed to the theory of Construction Grammar. Data come from a 90 million word corpus consisting of usage from 50 prolific individuals from the Early Modern English period (the EMMA-corpus; Author et al. 2019).

Grammar is often implicitly seen as two-faced. At the community level it exists in the form of shared conventions. At the individual level it may be idiosyncratic, showing in grammatical behaviour that deviates from conventionalized forms. Consistent with the idea that grammar only exists in people's minds, I argue that these two faces are in reality one. It is precisely the combination of norm and deviation that constitutes the grammar network: a balance between individual cognitive processing and social alignment. As far as the cognitive processing goes, I adhere to the connectionist view that our knowledge is built as an associative network. Crucially, this network is larger than what construction grammar typically encompasses, also including mere semantic and mere formal associations (cf. also Diessel 2019). However, many of these associations are not salient enough to become 'active points of grammatical access', and this is also visible in the kinds of patterns that are treated as normative. Similar to what is found by Dąbrowska (2012, 2020), it appears that some individuals' patterns are more likely to be picked up in the community and become conventionalized than others. This happens for social reasons (as amply shown in Labovian sociolinguistics), but can also arguably be cognitively motivated. Constructions , therefore, are to some extent a filter on our cognitive processing. Still, these filters may change due to the underlying associations.

To make this concrete, I will model the interaction between this individual behaviour and longer-term community trends. For each of the constructions under investigation (clefts, copulas, progressives, complementation patterns) I discuss the evidence that (i) it is typically individuals who show higher degrees of idiosyncratic behaviour whose usage forecasts to a larger extent developments of subsequent generations; (ii) individuals who are ahead of their time tend to lose some of their influencer status. It is somewhat unclear whether this is due to retrograde change (going back to a more conservative state of the language later in life; cf. Sankoff & Wagner 2006) or, instead, to a higher degree of 'crystallization' of grammar, i.e. an increase in categorical thinking. I will explore how the second possibility potentially helps explain how a limited number of individuals has an above-average impact and a stabilizing effect on syntactic change similar to what Dabrowska observed synchronically.

References
Langacker, Ronald W. 1987. *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar. Vol. 1: Theoretical Prerequisites*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
Petré, Peter, Lynn Anthonissen, Sara Budts, Enrique Manjavacas, Emma-Louise Silva, William Standing & Odile A.O. Strik. 2019. Early Modern Multiloquent Authors (EMMA): Designing a large-scale corpus of individuals' languages. *ICAME journal* 43. 83–122.
Dąbrowska, Ewa. 2012. Different speakers, different grammars: Individual differences in native language attainment. Linguistic Approaches to Bilingualism 2(3). 219−253.
Dąbrowska, Ewa. 2020. Language as a phenomenon of the third kind. Cognitive Linguistics 31(2). 213-229.
Hoffmann, Thomas, and Graeme Trousdale (eds). 2013. The Oxford Handbook of Construction Grammar. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Sankoff, G., Wagner, S., 2006. Age-grading in retrograde movement: The inflected future in Montréal French. Penn Working Papers in Linguistics 12 (2). 1–14.