

A crosslinguistic corpus-based study of the “construction proper” vs “patterns of coining” distinction

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One of the hot topics in constructionist approaches to the study of language is which traits are to be considered essential to posit a construction, as can be attested in the wide range of definitions that have been put forward when stating how a construction looks like (compare the definition of “construction” in redundant models such as in Goldberg (2006) and complete-inheritance models such as in Fillmore (2002)). In this respect, proponents of complete-inheritance models such as Kay (2013) draw a clear-cut distinction between “construction proper” and “pattern of coining”, the latter corresponding to the sphere of coining. This means that these patterns are used to coin new units based on analogy with an existing one, lack full productivity and should therefore not be considered constructions (see “coining” vs “generating” in Fillmore 2002).

Against this background, I depart from the assumption that the frontier between “proper construction” and “pattern of coining” is rather blurred, and speakers cannot know without experimentation whether each string is learnt individually and whether speakers are likely or not to build new expressions analogized to these patterns (see Desagulier 2016, Ivorra Ordines 2022). With a corpus-based methodology, I am at scrutinizing the proper-construction – pattern-of-coining continuum by means of apparently lexically filled proverbs which may undergo constructionalization on the basis of the lexical substitution of certain lexical items (analogical extensions).

With instances of proverbs in Spanish and their functionally counterpart in English from the esTenTen18 corpus and enTenTen13 corpus (Sketch Engine), I examine the productivity and schematicity of these patterns by means of the role of high token frequency in the postulation of analogical extensions (productivity as extensibility) and of semantic connectedness in the distribution/clustering of the types (productivity as regularity). Some examples are showed below:

(1) Yo por mi parte he aprendido la lección: *Más vale dividiendo en mano que ciento volando*. (esTenTen18, 1544378706)

(2) The only time this principle didn't work is when Americans got it mixed up. Instead of “*A bird in hand is worth two in the Bush*”, they understood it as “*A vote in hand is worth two Bushes in office*”. (enTenTen13, 4266626736)

(3) Por los alimentos y comidas que prefiere cada cual pueden descubrirse muchas cosas (*dime lo que comes y te diré quién eres*). (esTenTen18, 88211686)

(4) *A man is known by the quotations he keeps*. (enTenTen13, 1219708248)

(5) Recuerda bien: *una mosca no hace verano*, ni el caso que tú puedas conocer, si es que conoces alguno, te permite generalizar. (esTenTen18, 1217140098)

(6) As the saying goes: “*One warm day in April does not make a summer...*” and one lone Pinnacle Award from 1998 does not make a great salesperson. (enTenTen13, 251181998).

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