Inheritance as a useful notion in a usage-based constructicon

Andreas Buerki
Cardiff University

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In constructionist approaches to grammar, linguistic knowledge consists of a structured inventory of constructions (sometimes referred to as the constructicon). This structure consists of relations (or links) between constructions and has been conceptualised using notions including instantiation, sub-part links, prototypicality and extensions, amalgamation (or multiple parenting) and metaphorical links (e.g. Goldberg 1995:75-81; Hilpert 2014:63). All of these may be described as inheritance relations, but this presentation will focus on instantiation which has featured prominently in constructionist theory as a means to capture generalisations across constructions at differing levels of abstraction. Although understood variously in different constructionist frameworks, the notion of inheritance through instantiation is typically understood to mean that more substantive constructions inherit features from one or more related, more abstract constructions. Such an asymmetric relationship allows both a structuring of relations and the avoidance of (some of the) redundancy in a network.

This paper explores the extent to which the notion of inheritance is useful or even compatible with a usage-based understanding of constructions, based on theoretical considerations and a series of case studies of constructional networks anchored at the substantive (e.g. phraseological) end of the schematicity spectrum. Specifically, I show that:

1) Inheritance may encourage the positing of unnecessary levels of abstraction (e.g. a novel utterance like 'long time no hear' or LTNW ('long time no write'), constructed from the expression 'long time no see', should not necessitate the existence of a partially schematic representation such as 'long time no [verb of perception]' to explain its existence).

2) The uni-directionality (the asymmetry of links) implied by the notion of inheritance is problematic. Psychologically plausible acquisition paths (early L1 as well as naturalistic L2 learning) suggest an 'inverted' inheritance from substantive to more schematic representations during acquisition which has to be reversed in the mature language user if 'a given construction is motivated to the degree that its structure is inherited from other constructions in the language' (Goldberg 1995:70). But continuous change in linguistic knowledge throughout the lifespan must mean that such a reversal point is never reached for the whole constructicon and suggests that directional complexity is likely the norm.

3) If redundant storage is allowed, the concepts of generalisation and instantiation may be more informative than the idea of inheritance and may render it superfluous as a theoretical concept.

References
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