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CONSTRUCTION GRAMMAR AND FOREIGN/ SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHING

Construction Grammar (CxG) is a cognitively based approach to language analysis that has become quite well-developed and whose methods and techniques have been well-documented in the vast body of literature presenting studies on various issues of (predominantly English) language. CxG recognizes language as a set of complex linguistic units called constructions and regards lexicon and syntax as two poles along a continuum. After introductory chapter on basic notions and concepts of CxG this paper presents the constructionist framework as a viable tool for L2 instruction which in combination with other teaching techniques and methods can guide L2 students to the desired levels of proficiency and accuracy while at the same time raising their language and cultural awareness.

Keywords: Construction Grammar, construction, construct, L2, semantics, grammar, form, function, meaning

Introduction

Over the years, with more or less success many (new) theoretical linguistic frameworks found their practical implementation in applied linguistics and methodology of foreign and second language (L2)² teaching.

In this paper we will present the possibilities that are offered to both language teachers and their students through the theoretical and practical concepts and principles of Construction Grammar. Construction Grammar is a linguistic framework developed on cognitive linguistic principles which has been around from the 1980s. In recent years, as the communicative approach to language teaching has not achieved the desired “quality of production” (Hinkel 2012), Construction Grammar has offered to teachers some efficient and effective strategies to help their students reach high levels of language proficiency and fluency.

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2 Traditional applied linguistics distinguishes the notion ‘foreign’ from the notion ‘second’ language. Most recent views, however, tend to disregard such strict distinction. For the purpose of this paper we will use L2 to refer to both foreign and second language.

Basic notions of Construction Grammar³

Construction Grammar (CxG) stemmed from Fillmore's Case Grammar (Fillmore 1968) which, as a linguistic framework, came into being at the time when linguists were in search of "semantically" defined underlying structure in language. Fillmore's Case Grammar was not related to the Generative Semantics of the late 1960s, but quickly became close to the research into idiomaticity done by Wallace Chafe (1970). It was the dawn of cognitive science at Berkeley University (San Francisco, California, USA) and Fillmore together with Chafe, Robin Lakoff and George Lakoff were in pursuit of the cognitive and pragmatic correlates of linguistic expressions. One of the earliest contributions to the development of CxG as a linguistic framework is the work of G. Lakoff (1977), often referred to as a "Gestalt Grammar", which emphasizes the association of grammatical relations with a particular sentence type. Lakoff believed that "thought, perception, emotion, cognitive processing, motor activity and language [are] all organized in terms of the same kind of structures, *gestalts*" (Lakoff 1977: 246–247).

The work of Berkeley scholars at the time evolved around the Berkeley Cognitive Science Program and was focused on the cognitive foundations of grammar. In such an atmosphere Charles Fillmore developed Frame Semantics which would later become (in)directly linked to Construction Grammar. Frame Semantics is a particular model of "semantics of understanding" which holds that the meaning cannot be structured or represented unless the relationship between meaning and morphosyntactic patterns is taken into consideration (Fillmore, 1975, 1977, 1982, 1984, 1986). At the same time Lakoff took interest in constructions by discussing Deictic construction (Lakoff 1987). In 1995, A. Goldberg published her influential book on argument structure constructions in English giving an exhaustive account of the notion construction from a cognitive perspective (Goldberg 1995). Much like Case Grammar, Construction Grammar was primarily developed as a theory of grammar searching for explanation(s) on the "intricate relationship between (phonological, morphological and syntactic) form and meaning" (Östman and Fried 2004: 12). Looking into the matter of meaning CxG includes not only pragmatic and discourse factors but it looks deeper investigating the relation that exists between meaning and categorization and conceptualization patterns. Frame Semantics, which has recently embraced a large corpus developed as a part of Fillmore's FrameNet project at the International Computer Science Institute in Berkeley, has become a semantic complement to Construction Grammar (Fillmore et al. 2000; Baker et al. 2000; Fillmore et al. 2003).

As seen from above, Constructional Grammar aims at providing a cognitive linguistic model which is reflected in its approach to language analysis. CxG sees language as a cognitive system with an internal structure which is not inherent but acquired/learned. It represents a mighty tool for interpreting expressions and creating new ones.

3 For a detailed overview of the theory of Construction Grammar see Fried and Östman 2004.

Clearly, by emphasizing the cognitive approach to language study CxG erases the (traditional) strict categorical syntax-lexicon distinction. However, CxG does not reject the notions of “lexical” and “grammatical”. For CxG there are no language phenomena that are regarded as “core” as opposed to the “peripheral” ones. Lexical items are highly schematic while grammatical patterns are abstract. The lexical and the grammatical are seen as two poles of a continuum along which much of our linguistic knowledge can be arranged. Similarly, linguistic categories are treated as functional prototypes. They are seen as specific focal points along a continuum of categoriality.

Concept of construction

CxG wants to study language in its entirety. Following its goal to explain the relationship between different language forms and their meaning, CxG established a basic unit, a complex sign which represents a pairing of form and meaning (and function). Such unit is called **construction**.

Construction is defined as “a symbolic sign which provides a general, multidimensional ‘blueprint’ for licensing well-formed linguistic expressions” (Fried 2015: 976). In Construction Grammar, linguistic expressions are not necessarily syntactic forms. They can be both complex words and phrases or clauses.

Constructions may differ in the degree of their specificity and schematicity. Lexical items, on the one hand, are usually fully specific and rather fixed with almost nothing left to variation (e.g. *boy-friend*, *White House*, *development*). Morphological, syntactic and morphosyntactic patterns are fully schematic in the sense that it is just the relation between their constituents or their constituents’ distribution that is specified and fixed. The partially schematic constructions lie along the continuum between the fully specific and fully schematic constructions. In partially schematic constructions some part is fixed while the rest is variable. The Table 1 taken from Fried (Fried 2015: 978) and slightly modified illustrates the types of constructions in English:

Degrees of schematicity	Degrees of specificity	Examples:
fully filled and fixed	Fully specific	<i>blue moon</i> , <i>by and large</i> , <i>children</i> , <i>ink</i> , <i>blue</i>
fully filled and partially flexible	Partially specific	<i>go[tense] postal</i> , <i>hit[tense] the road</i>
partially filled	Partially specific	<i>the</i> [AdjP] (e.g. <i>the rich/ hungry/ young</i>) [time expression] <i>ago</i> (e.g. <i>six days/beers ago</i>) <i>adj-ly</i> (e.g. <i>richly, happily</i>)
fully schematic		[V NP]VP, [NP VP]S stemV-PAST (e.g. <i>walk-ed</i> , <i>smell-ed</i>)

Constructions should be distinguished from *constructs*. While constructions are abstract generalizations of grammatical patterns, constructs represent the concrete realizations of constructions, the instances of constructions. Constructions are ‘pieces of grammar’ (Fillmore and Kay 1996: 2), while constructs are “physical realizations of constructions in actual discourse” (Fried 2015: 980). Examples of some constructions in English and the corresponding constructs are given below:

Passive construction	<i>be interrupted by strange noise</i>
Adverb construction	<i>sadly, oddly, beautifully</i>
Determination construction	<i>a car, much noise, her mother</i>
Subject-Predicate construction	<i>Mosquitoes bite.; The car crashed.</i>

In the process of language acquisition and learning, constructs come first initiating constructional abstraction and generalization.

According to Fillmore a construction is an object of syntactic representation that “is assigned one or more conventional functions [...] together with whatever is conventionalized about its contribution to the meaning or the use of structure containing it” (Fillmore 1988: 36). Therefore, constructions as pieces of grammar have certain function which is different from (their) meaning which is expressed by linguistic expressions (constructs). This distinction between the function and the meaning of a construction is made clear in the following definition by Fillmore. He finds that constructions are “dedicated to a particular function in the creation of meaningful utterances in the language” (Fillmore 1989: 18).

Construction Grammar and L2 learning/teaching; theoretical implications

Constructions are not only the basic units of linguistic analysis and representation, but are also taken to be hypotheses about speakers’ linguistic knowledge. All of CxG research is motivated by one basic general question: what constitutes speakers’ native-like knowledge and understanding of any given linguistic structure?

Construction Grammar is usage-oriented. Its aspirations are to explore language in its authentic manifestations, which defines it as an empirically grounded analytical tool. Methodologically this translates into an inductively oriented approach: a search for recurring patterns about which we can formulate adequate “surface generalizations” (Goldberg 2002: 327–356).

Indeed, CxG is a phrase oriented approach to language (learning and teaching) and as such is not new. In the 1950s the first theoretical (Fries 1952) as well as practical (Roberts 1956) works on L2 acquisition and learning done in structuralist tradition defined language acquisition as the process of learning of an inventory of patterns which are arrangements of words with their associated structural meanings. Phraseology has been present in different segments of applied linguistics and teaching methodology theory in the works of Corder (1973), Nattinger (1980), Ellis (1996, 2003, 2006).

As seen from CxG approach to language study, construction is a basic unit of language. Consequently, one's language knowledge is made of the knowledge of constructions and so far there have been numerous studies (e.g. Goldberg 1995; Pickering 2006) which prove the “psychological reality of constructions in native speakers' language”. Such studies prompted research investigating how constructions affect the second language learners' linguistic competence, and how L2 learners adapt their constructional knowledge to “construction-specific preferences in terms of the words that preferably occur in those constructions” (Ellis 2013: 367). It is clear that L2 acquisition depends on the learners' experience of language usage and how well they can use such experience and target it towards their own proficiency.

There is a plethora of diverse psycholinguistic factors that conspire to the acquisition and usage of constructions in the language-learning process. Such factors include salience and frequency of language forms, prototypicality of an utterance and its significance for comprehension in communication, factors related to the learner's attention such as transfer, overshadowing or blocking (Ellis 2003: 365–378).

Key elements that affect the acquisition of constructions are the following:

- a) *Input frequency.* Frequently experienced constructions are processed more easily. The same accounts for those constructions that have a high type and/or token frequency. Token frequency refers to how often a certain construction appears in input (discourse), while type frequency refers to “the number of distinct lexical items that can be substituted in a given slot in a construction, whether it is a word-level construction for inflection or a syntactic construction specifying the relation among words” (Ellis 2013: 369). An example for type frequency would be English regular plural form *-s* (as in *girls*, *forget-me-nots*) which has a very high type frequency because it can be used in a number of different nouns. On the contrary, the type frequency of the vowel change plurals (as in *goose* > *geese*, *foot* > *feet*) is much lower. The examples illustrating high token frequency would include particular forms with articles such as *the USA*, *the European Union*, *the end*, *the United Kingdom*, *the same*, *the last*, *the first* as opposed to the use of definite article with the names of newspapers⁴ or in the construct ‘*the European Community*’.
- b) *Salience and perception.* Salience refers to the relative strength of the language stimuli. Forms with low salience are generally considered harder to learn. The research done in the 1970s (Rescorla and Wagner 1972) showed that the amount of what is learned from an experience of cue-outcome as-

4 The examples used here to illustrate token frequency are taken from the study on writing competency in advanced EFL students which the author did in 2012. The research showed that the students experienced no difficulty to use correctly constructs such as *the USA* and *the European Union* or *the first*, which had quite high token frequency in their input (syllabus). On the other hand, over 90% of the students taking part in the study had the problem with the construct *the European Community*, (as an older term to denote ‘the European Union’), using the term without the article. The construct ‘the European Community’ had a relatively low token frequency in their input. (Vujić, J. i Aralica, T. 2013: 295).

sociation depends largely on the salience of the cue and the importance of the outcome. Typically, in the foreign language learning process, the most difficult constructions for learners to grasp are those with low salience. For example, from the perspective of Serbian EFL/ESL learner articles have low salience. Demonstrative determiners (*this/that/those/these*) have higher salience than the definite article (*the*) with deictic meaning. While both provide cues to denote particular, definite nouns, demonstratives are more likely to be perceived thus overshadowing *the*. Consequently, the article(s) present one of the most difficult grammatical meaning-form relationships in English for Serbian EFL/ESL learners to acquire.

- c) *Prototypicality (of meaning and function)*. A prototype as a central ideal description of a particular (semantic or grammatical) category is the member of the category that best exemplifies and summarizes the representative features of the category it represents. For example, the present tense form denoting present or habitual action is a prototypical example of its meaning and function. Other instances of present simple tense in English (such as when referring to future actions or actions in the past) are compared and classified against this prototypical meaning and function. Generally, prototypes have high token frequency and are acquired more efficiently and accurately. It is a well-known fact among teachers that the most efficient and successful way to introduce a concept or a category is by providing prototypical examples. In the beginning, the prototypical examples may be used to cover other meanings and functions but many foreign language learners replace them by more specific and definite meanings and functions at later stages of interlanguage development.

Such factors and their mutual interactions and interfaces supported by an individual's experience of the world are foundations of both L1 and L2 language acquisition. The meaning of words and the ways they can (or cannot) be used in combination depends on an individual's perception and categorization of the real physical world. In order to grasp and conceptualize the meaning of linguistic constructions one often needs physical experience, active participation and visualization (e.g. lexemes denoting spatial relations or grammatical constructions with deictic meaning). Language reflects this experience. Consequently, constructions as conventionalized linguistic means for presenting different interpretations of an event emphasize certain aspects of our experience through the linguistic options that are available in a particular language. By highlighting a particular aspect of an experience, abstract linguistic constructions (e.g. passives, determinatives etc.) focus the listeners' attention on that aspect "while backgrounding other aspects" (Ellis 2013: 375).

Speakers of different languages construe their experience and reality in different ways mainly due to the fact that different languages offer different means (i.e. types of constructions) to their speakers to formulate their experience. As a result, speakers of different languages prioritize different aspects of their experience (e.g. passive constructions in Serbian and English).

Construction Grammar and L2 learning/teaching: Practical implications

We have seen that the way the speakers of one language construe the world depends on their native language. Therefore, learning a foreign language means learning how to construe the world like the native speakers of that language.

After years of teaching practices which almost completely excluded L1 from foreign language instruction, modern cognitive and psycholinguistic research has shown that L1 constructions can indeed serve as a foundation for L2 constructions. However, they do not necessarily need to be similar as even the different constructions in L1 and L2 can be used in the process of foreign language learning to the advantage of students. L2 learners come equipped with the apparatus to survey L2. This apparatus was developed while they acquired and learned their native language (L1). Thus they are sensitive to L1 cues, to the L1 attention-directing devices which may hinder and overshadow the L2 devices. That is why in the process of language teaching/learning the focus should be put on form in communicative context, something which can successfully be done through CxG approach.

There are numerous advantages of application of CxG models to L2 pedagogy and they need not conflict with those teaching practices that have proven to be efficient and productive.

It has been pointed out that explicit instruction is much more effective and durable than the implicit one. By adopting CxG approach, language is accessed as a grammar-vocabulary continuum of constructions, from the highly schematic and regular (e.g. past tense –ed in regular verbs or plural noun form –s) to fully specific and idiomatic. It can be used to teach all segments and aspects of language (phonology, morphology, grammar, lexis, etc.) including some of the notoriously difficult areas such as idioms, phrasal verbs, articles or prepositions. In addition, the process of L2 learning goes from concrete examples and samples of language, which are used repetitively at early stages of interlanguage development, to abstract generalizations which are deployed for productive language use at more advanced stages.

Form-focused instruction in which L2 constructions are introduced as the form-meaning-function pairings in the way that L2 learners can explicitly process them with all their semantic, grammatical and pragmatic features has long-lasting results. When faced with whole constructions, learners realize the importance of both form and function. Constructions have certain morphosyntactic features which, together with semantic and pragmatic functions, contribute to (differences in) their usage. CxG relies predominantly on L2 learners storing constructions as abstract patterns rather than producing them. However, unlike some fervent advocates of CxG model of language teaching (Hinkel 2012) who advocate learning of prefabricated chunks of concrete language (constructs) we are not in favour of such an approach. What they highlight as one of the arguments is that teaching and learning of prefabricated ('ready-made') chunks of language expedites the process of

language learning. As a matter of fact, CxG does not presuppose the storing of constructs as concrete language expressions (constructs) but the storing of abstract patterns (constructions) followed by making generalizations and applying the stored patterns productively. We believe that constructional awareness leads to production and generating of new utterances instead of repeating the memorized ones.

In addition, there are authors who, when speaking of constructions, actually refer to constructs, which is something that often results in confusion among scholars (Hinkel 2006, 2012; Nation 2001; Wray 2002).

We are not suggesting, however, that learning concrete prefabricated chunks of language does not have certain practical value in the L2 learning process. There is even the term “lexical phrase” which denotes “pedagogically applicable unit of prefabricated language” (Nattinger and De Carrico 1992). Such an approach can be highly practical, economical and effective in the instruction of the particular phraseology of English for Special Purposes or English for Academic Purposes in which the speakers’ fluency and proficiency largely depend on the knowledge of particular phraseology. On the other hand, we challenge it as a universal tactics and strategy for L2 learning.

Concluding remarks

Construction Grammar as a cognitively oriented approach, which sees the language as a set of complex units that are a compilation of semantic, grammatical and pragmatic features, acknowledges that the language is all about interactions. Human psyche, consciousness, experience and emotions, social interactions, cultural and historical factors are reflected in the patterns of language. Those are the same factors that influence the process of L2 acquisition and learning. In this paper we have tried to give arguments why CxG model of language can be extremely valuable in L2 instruction and learning. The studies have shown that the knowledge that cognitive linguistics offers can be used in L2 pedagogy showing learners how constructions are conventionalized ways of matching certain expressions to specific situations and guiding instructors in precisely isolating and clearly presenting the various conditions that motivate speakers’ choice (Achard 2008; Tyler 2008).

We can conclude that the theoretical notions of Construction Grammar with their usage-based aspirations can successfully be applied in L2 teaching practices, which does not have to be in collision with other teaching practices that have proven successful and efficient. By adopting constructionist approach and introducing complex linguistic units in discourse L2 teachers can significantly improve not only language fluency and proficiency of their students but their communicative and cultural competence, as well as upgrade their social communicative skills in L2.

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**КОНСТРУКЦИОНА ГРАМАТИКА И НАСТАВА СТРАНИХ
ЈЕЗИКА****Резиме**

Конструкциона граматика (CxG) је когнитивно оријентисан приступ проучавању језика који се у последњих десетак година веома развио и проширио на различите аспекте лингвистике. Конструкционе студије о различитим језичким појавама у енглеском језику су инспирисале истраживања у другим језицима као што су јапански, фински, француски, руски и сл. Конструкциона граматика као основну језичку јединицу види конструкцију, а сходно томе језик је скуп конструкција. CxG лексикон и синтаксу посматра као два пола језичког континуума дуж којег је смештено наше језичко знање. У овом раду смо представили основна теоријска полазишта CxG и покушали да укажемо на предности конструкционистичког приступа у настави страних језика.

Кључне речи: Конструкциона граматика, конструкт, конструкција, Л2, семантика, форма, функција, значење.

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