

Argument disambiguation strategies between morphology and syntax: Challenging construction grammar

Eva Zehentner, University of Zurich

The present paper discusses the theoretical (and methodological) challenges of approaching changes in argument marking from a construction grammar perspective. Specifically, the paper assesses how diachronic shifts from morphological to syntactic means of disambiguating agents from recipients in English ditransitive clauses (as in 1) can be modelled in constructionist terms.

(1) **The teacher** gave the students some cake.

As is well known, English has undergone a change from a more synthetic language to a more analytic system over time. That is, while earlier English relied predominantly on case marking and other inflectional patterns, Present Day English mainly uses constituent order and prepositions to distinguish arguments (e.g. Baugh & Cable 2013; also Allen 1995; Hawkins 2012; De Cuypere 2015a, 2015b). This is exemplified in sentences (2) and (3), the former of which illustrates two morphological strategies for disambiguation, viz. inflectional morphology on the nouns (nominative for agents/ subjects and dative for recipients/ indirect objects, respectively) and agreement between subject and verb morphology. By contrast, neither noun nor verb morphology provide any cues in (3), but agent and recipient are disambiguated by position (SVO order), and the preposition *to*.

(2) tham acennedan cyningeDAT **we**NOM bring $\alpha\delta$ goldACC
the newborn king we bring gold
'we bring the newborn king gold'
(cocathom1, 7: 239, 233; De Cuypere 2015a: 234)

(3) **The teacher** gave cake to the student.

The present paper now first aims to trace this development by means of relevant data from a corpus of Middle English (PPCME2, Kroch & Taylor 2000; 1150-1500). Drawing on a dataset of about 1,600 ditransitive clauses, and determining the 'disambiguation power' of each of the 4 strategies outlined (nominal marking, agreement, constituent order, and preposition use), the results confirm that order indeed comes to play a much more prominent role in the course of this period, while the cue reliability of verb inflection decreases. Importantly, however, prepositional marking only temporarily surges and falls in frequency again in later texts, and noun morphology continues to disambiguate at least to some extent (with many personal pronouns maintaining distinct subject and object forms to this day). This suggests a more complex interplay between morphological and syntactic strategies than a straightforward trade-off scenario (cf. also Szmrecsanyi 2012, 2016; Levshina 2021).

The results are then discussed in a usage-based, constructionist framework, giving particular focus to the question of plausibility of links between morphological and syntactic constructions in language users' minds, and the level of schematicity such connections may be posited at. The paper thereby taps into recent debates on the psychological reality of highly abstract constructions (e.g. Blumenthal-Dramé 2012; Hilpert 2014; Audring 2019; Jackendoff & Audring 2019). More precisely, I assess the likelihood of higher-level schematic 'argument marking strategy' constructions such as 'case' or 'constituent order', and possible horizontal links between such, versus lower-level links between (verb- or argument-) specific, substantive patterns, and hone in on the challenging aspects of modelling this phenomenon of argument marking (as well as the observed changes) as straddling the boundary between morphology and syntax in construction grammar.

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