

Hans Boas, *Contrastive Studies in Construction Grammar*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2010. vii + 244 pp. ISBN 978 90 272 0432 5.
[Constructional Approaches to Languages 10]

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Contrastive Studies in Construction Grammar comprises a collection of seven papers plus an introductory chapter by the editor that demonstrate how a constructional framework can be applied to the contrastive analysis of languages. Apart from this common theoretical viewpoint, the chapters also share that they all start from an analysis of some phenomenon in English and then proceed to describe how that phenomenon is handled in some other language. The first set of papers (Hilpert, Gonzálves-García, Gurevich) presents a comparison of English with some Indo-European language. The second set of chapters (Leino, Timyam and Bergen, Hasegawa et al.) compares English with a Non-Indo-European language. The book closes with a chapter by Croft and colleagues, who take a broad scale typological view of grammatical constructions. In light of the spatial limitations of this review, I shall only briefly sketch the contents of the respective chapters so as to free some space for some evaluative commentary.

Hilpert presents a corpus-based contrastive analysis of English and Swedish comparative constructions. He starts from the observation that both grammars accommodate two types of constructions capable of expressing gradation: a construction in which a comparative suffix attaches to an adjectival base, and a periphrastic construction in which a free morpheme expressing the meaning 'more' is combined with the adjective. Drawing on data from the BNC and the PAROLE corpus, he then offers a contrastive overview of the distributions of a number of variables from various areas of linguistic description. Hilpert is able to show some interesting distributional differences, from which he then derives a number of gradient constraints that distinguish between the languages. The procedure employed, identifying constructional analogues and investigating the distributions of their associated properties, strikes me as both sensible and natural from the perspective of constructionist frameworks (at least in the context of comparing genetically related languages as these are more likely to exhibit common principles of grammatical organization). The only criticism that came to my mind is methodological in nature and concerns the fact that these probabilistic differences are described only in terms of the direction of contrast and not in terms of estimations of their respective strengths. To illustrate this

point: Hilpert writes that “[i]t can thus be concluded that [...] English shows a more strongly pronounced bias towards predicative meta-constructions.” Note that this is the weakest probabilistic statement possible. From my point of view, this is a little unfortunate as the underlying data would have afforded stronger, more informative statements had they been subjected to appropriate statistical analysis. As a reader, I would have liked to learn more about the degree of quantitative difference (cf. Wiechmann 2011 for a proposal of how such differences can be assessed).

Gonzálves-García compares English and Spanish with respect to two complementation strategies, the Accusative cum Infinitive, as in *He found that chair [to be uncomfortable]*, and what is described as the “NP XPCOMP” pattern, as in *He found that chair [uncomfortable]*. He reports a number of “subtle though nonetheless interesting differences” (page 79) in the usage of these constructions across the two languages. However, in light of the fact that his findings are based on very limited corpus observations, which are in part complemented by native speaker acceptability judgments, and because these findings are not subjected to any kind of statistical analysis, I contend that these are best viewed as interesting hypotheses, which should now be subjected to more rigid empirical testing.

In what is the last of the comparisons of English and some Indo-European language, **Gurevich** applies the theoretical apparatus of Mental Spaces theory to contrast English and Russian conditional constructions and concludes that the two languages differ with respect to their explicitness of the marking of viewpoint and epistemic distance. While the results are certainly interesting, it remains questionable if the applied methodology – Gurevich presents only introspective data to back up these conclusions – can at all lead to a sufficient degree of descriptive adequacy. Personally, I feel inclined to answer this question in the negative.

Turning to the comparisons of English with Non-Indo-European languages, the book in some sense steers into deeper waters, as the greater typological distance between the compared languages makes it more difficult to contrast two languages on the level of constructions, viz. symbolic units. That is to say that it is a lot harder to decide on principled grounds what exactly it means for two constructions to correspond to each other. **Leino** picks up this issue in his discussion of similarities and differences between three argument structure constructions in English and Finnish (the English ditransitive construction, caused motion construction, and resultative construction and their Finnish counterparts). He concludes that finding instances of true correspondence, in the sense of true isomorphism, seems highly improbable (and more so with growing typological distance between the languages). So, rather than true correspondence

what one can hope to find is strong similarity between two constructions. Leino argues that this similarity first and foremost must reside in the semantic pole of the construction but he adds “that similarity in form should also be taken into account”. I agree with Leino insofar that—even though the statement in its present form is a bit vague—this seems to be what is required if one is committed to finding corresponding constructions, i.e. corresponding pairings of form and meaning. This, however, I do not consider to be the most feasible strategy. I shall return to this issue below.

In what is arguably the empirically most rigorous paper of the book, **Timyam & Bergen** offer a contrastive study of caused motion and ditransitive constructions in English and Thai. On the basis of a behavioral experimental data (a description selection experiment) and corpus data, they argue that the constructions are language specific, i.e. they are “associated with specific constraints from language to language” (p. 165). One of these differences pertains to the role of syntactic weight of VP-internal constituents and its impact on constructional choices in the two languages. When reading this section, I was surprised to see that some critical work on the ditransitive has gone unnoticed, specifically the work by Bresnan and colleagues (e.g. Bresnan et al 2007), who assessed the roles of numerous variables, including syntactic weight, in predicting structural alternations. The omission of this work is particularly unfortunate in my view, as I believe that the multifactorial modeling conducted in that work could have been fruitfully employed in Timyam and Bergen’s study as well so as to measure potential differences in effect sizes of shared constraints across languages.

Hasegawa and colleagues present a contrastive analysis of measurement expressions in English and Japanese. Their answer to the acknowledged problem of identifying corresponding constructions is taking an onomasiological approach, which starts from a common conceptual category and then seeks to uncover the formal means that the compared languages hold available for expressing this category. Their analysis is supported by the theoretical and notational tools of Frame Semantics and constructions grammars and asks what set of constructions is available for the expression of the the domains of measurement and comparison. They report a limited set of constructional overlap and disclose numerous constructional differences. From my perspective, this onomasiological approach is the most sensible one when the goal is (1) to find a common procedure that affords the comparison of all conceivable pairs of languages and (2) one wishes to frame one's analysis in a sign-based, constructionist framework.

The final chapter written by **Croft and colleagues** evaluates Talmy's typological classification of motion event constructions against new typological data. Based on a constructional analysis, they propose two revisions of Talmy's typology of

complex event constructions, namely (1) that it should be expanded so as to include coordination and compounding along with serialization, the only construction type discussed so far in the literature and (2) based on data from Bulgarian and Icelandic, they proposes that the typology should also include what is referred to as the double framing construction. As indicated earlier, this paper stands out insofar as it represents a typological piece of work rather than contrastive linguistic one.

Having sketched the individual chapters, I shall now comment on some more general issues: one of these issues concerns the question why cross-linguistic investigations should be conducted within the framework of construction grammar. Another issue concerns the level of methodological sophistication demonstrated by the papers in this book. I shall start with the latter point, since it is in my view less controversial and also less central to the overarching aim of the volume, namely to “determine to what degree grammatical constructions can be employed for cross-linguistic analysis” (page 1). As indicated earlier, the volume as a whole does not recommend itself for its methodological rigor. Considering the growing role of corpora in the fields of contrastive linguistics, typology (Stoll and Bickel, 2009) and dialectometry (Szmrecsanyi, 2011) at this point, and considering further the strong general movement of the language sciences towards the employment of advanced statistical tools, the present volume does not exactly constitute a milestone in the development of an empirically grounded contrastive analysis. This is not to say that the volume does not present many interesting observations. However, for the most part, the reported results lack what I consider a sufficient degree of empirical validation.

With these methodological reservations out of the way, we may now address the question of whether construction grammars lend themselves particularly well towards cross-linguistic comparisons. And conversely, we may also ask to what extent the development of construction grammars can profit from assuming cross-linguistic perspectives. Foreshadowing my answers to these questions a bit: while I am in general very sympathetic to the constructionist enterprise, I do not see pressing reasons to engage in construction-based contrastive analyses. And, I do not see pressing theoretical reasons to engage in cross-linguistic comparison to further develop construction grammars either. Both answers rest on the assumption that constructions are by their very nature language-specific (cf. Croft 2001). Let me elaborate. In his introductory chapter Boas writes that “[t]he [...] perhaps most intriguing insight is that the notion of construction lends itself so well for cross-linguistic analyses because it allows the researcher to arrive at results involving all levels of grammatical structure [...]”. I must admit that I fail to see the argumentative force of the argument and conclude that Boas overestimates the additional gain that can be expected from constructional contrastive analyses (by virtue of their being framed in a construction grammar framework). It certainly is *not* the notion of construction that allows the

researcher to arrive at results involving all levels of grammatical structure. And while it is notationally convenient to be able to write down properties that pertain to different levels of grammatical description into a single attribute-value-matrix, this should also hardly constitute anything worth calling a pressing reason to assume a constructionist perspective. I hasten to add that so far this does not entail that one should *not* adopt a constructionist perspective when comparing two languages. All I would like to point out is that the very notion of construction alone does not seem to add anything substantial to an attempt to compare two languages at all levels of grammatical structure.

What it does offer, though, is the possibility to have the construction act as the basic unit of comparison and we might ask ourselves if that constitutes a substantial advantage. Some of the papers in the present volume (e.g. Hilpert) embrace this possibility, while others take either a common formal pole (Timyam & Bergen) or a common semantic pole (Hasegawa et al.) as their starting point. It is my contention that taking the construction as the basic unit of comparison can constitute an interesting angle if and only if we are comparing genetically closely related languages (cf. Hilpert's study). The greater the typological difference becomes, the lower the likelihood will be to find pairs of corresponding constructions (cf. Leino's contribution). As a result, a strictly construction-based contrastive linguistic would thus either force us to restrict our analyses to only those fractions of the grammatical systems that comprise corresponding constructions or requires that we postulate generalizations of language-specific constructions. The downside of the first contingency is immediately obvious: why should contrastive linguists want to restrict themselves to only that subset of grammatical constructions that happen to be shared across languages, especially if that subset gets smaller with growing typological distance? On the other hand, postulating what may be called *covering constructions*, i.e. constructions that subsume more specific language-particular constructions, to me seems to be at odds with the spirit of many current construction grammars, whose objective is to characterize linguistic knowledge in a psychologically/cognitively plausible way, such as Goldbergian construction grammar (Goldberg 2006) or Cognitive Grammar (Langacker 2008). As I understand these theories, they aim at uncovering and accounting for all and only those constructions that jointly constitute a speaker's knowledge of language. Entities that are abstractions of constructions from different languages may very well be entities that are not part of the constructional repertoire of *any* language user. Whether or not postulating such 2nd order constructions is considered desirable is certainly debatable.

In closing, I would like to emphasize that the papers presented in the edited volume are overall very readable, interesting and offer a lot of insight into their respective phenomenon and as such are certainly of interest to the contrastive linguist. The different approaches with their pros and cons should also capture the interest of practitioners of construction grammar who seeks to apply the framework in contexts of cross-linguistic comparison.

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