

The Synchronic and Diachronic View on the Motivation for the use of Dangling Participles in English and Japanese

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Dangling participles are considered incorrect usage in written Standard English. Nonetheless, dangling participles enjoy widespread usage, particularly in spoken English. This paper argues that the use of dangling participles is semantically and cognitively motivated. In adopting a usage-based view and analyzing attested data from the British National Corpus, this study shows that constructions with a dangling participle describe a coherent “cognizance scenario” as their constructional meaning (cf. Goldberg (1995, 2006)).

The cognizance scenario comprises two situations: an agentive event and a state or non-causative event. The agent instigating the event is at the same time the conceptualizer of the state or non-causative event. In the dangling participial construction, the participial clause expresses the agentive event and the main clause the conceived/perceived state of non-causative event. The agent and the conceptualizer are implicit and have to be inferred. Thus, in (1), the person approaching may be the speaker/hearer or a virtual/generic person, and this person also implicitly conceives/perceives the geography and the point where the street turns off when approaching it.

The two situations are related in terms of “figure and ground alignment principle,” which is the underlining semantic principle of participial construction in general. The agentive participial event serves as the (back)ground for the main clause situations as a figure, which is construed, based on the constructional meaning, as depicting the “conceptualizer’s finding or conception” of an incidental or ensuing state of non-causative event. Thus, in the above example, the figure event of the street turning off can be interpreted as occurring during or after one’s approaching a particular point on the road. This highly complex process of meaning construction is motivated by the dangling participial construction.

The corpus survey also reveals that the construction is prototypically structured, and closely related to the Ground, i.e., the speaker/hearer and the time of speech. Its constructional meaning is therefore highly subjective (cf. Langacker (1990)), or, in including the hearer, intersubjective (cf. Verhagen (2005), Traugott (2003)). Thanks to the constructional semantics, the dangling participle is especially common in text genres which focus on the interaction with the hearer. This feature further motivates the historical development of the semantics and the usage of participial-derived prepositions as in (2) as well as metalinguistic/directive usage of pseudo-conjunctions as in (3), which will be demonstrated through some historical data.

Moreover, both the similarities and differences observed in Japanese counterparts are also contrasted. It will be shown that, though English usage of pseudo-conjunctions derived from dangling participial constructions develop their intersubjective aspects, Japanese counterparts are not, remaining in their subjective meaning. The difference is attributed to the tendency that each language prefer different encoding patterns of the two realms: Subject of conceptualization (i.e., speech event participants who construe and report the situation to the other participants) and Object of conceptualization (situation construed), as discussed in Verhagen (2005).

Hopefully, this study will contribute how theoretical notions, such as (the establishment of) constructional meaning, (inter)subjectification, and semantic motivation, interact within a construction through the viewpoint of diachrony within synchrony, as well as linguistic contrast in event encoding.

Data

- (1) *Approaching from Sedbergh, the street turns off (...)*
- (2) *(e.g., regarding the light, considering the matter, failing him)*
- (3) *(e.g., Moving on to the next section, Getting back to your question, Talking about the matter)*

References

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