

Why we can sneeze the foam off other people's cappuccino but not explain them how we do it, or: Why a theory of argument structure constructions needs a valency component

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It will be argued in this paper that the approach towards argument structure constructions taken by Goldberg (2006) and the approach towards complementation taken in valency theory – in its traditional form a subtheory of dependency grammar – can be seen as complementary. Goldberg's theory offers a convincing account of the creative aspect of language (showing in sentences such as *She sneezed the foam off the cappuccino*) on the basis of constructions at a relatively high level of abstraction.

Descriptive (often corpus-based) work done in valency frameworks (such as the *Valency Dictionary of English*) provides evidence for a high degree of item-specificity, including restrictions that may cause problems in foreign language learning such as **She explained him the problem* or **He wanted that they come*. Since both phenomena need to be accounted for in a theory of complementation, possibilities of combining Goldberg's theory of argument structure constructions with a valency approach will be explored.

Central questions to be addressed are:

- to what extent the syntactic behaviour of verbs can be predicted on the basis of their meaning or the semantic roles associated with them or
- what role can be attributed to generalizations in the description of language and in language acquisition.

It will be shown how central concepts of "traditional" valency theory can be combined with the principles of construction grammar – in particular by describing valency properties in terms of valency constructions (i.e. as item-specific constructions in the sense of MacWhinney 2005) comprising formal valency patterns, participant patterns and statements about the meaning of the construction. It will be argued that it is essential that the formal component of such valency constructions is specified in terms of NP or to_INF-clause and that a description of argument structure constructions on the basis of functional labels such as "object" may obscure problems arising in language acquisition.

On the basis of these considerations it will be shown how supplementing Goldberg's (2006) Semantic Coherence Principle by a Valency Realization Principle results in a model that combines the advantages of both approaches in that it accounts for item-specificity as well as for generalizations. Finally, the project of an online Valency Construction Bank will be introduced.

References

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