

Exploring the Content Requirement

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A major tenet of Cognitive Grammar is the "Content Requirement" (Langacker 1987: 53–54), according to which every grammatical construct must be defined exclusively in terms of phonological, semantic and symbolic properties. Yet there are many constructions whose slots do not seem to be definable in these terms. For example, it is not immediately clear how such properties would figure in the definition of the set of nouns that can appear in a masculine NP construction in Spanish such as [*este* X] 'this X', even though certain subclasses (e.g., nouns ending in -o, or those profiling masculine things) clearly can be defined with reference to semantic or phonological properties.

Langacker (2008: 338–340) shows that a "contentful" characterisation of gender classes in Spanish is indeed possible, once we realise that "symbolic properties" include not only (combinations of) properties of the semantic pole and the phonological pole, but also collocational ("extrinsic") properties of the symbol as a whole. Thus, for example, the set of nouns capable of following *este* could be defined in terms of their occurring a certain percentage of the time in the [*e/* N] construction (where *e/* is the masculine singular definite article), a certain percentage of the time in the [*un* N] construction (where *un* is the masculine singular indefinite article), and so on.

This sort of approach has the potential to be extended to a wide range of construction-slots which seem to require some sort of transformation or deletion as part of their definition. For example, consider the verb-group slot in an English finite-clause construction. According to Langacker (1991), a verb-group profiles a grounded process. But so does a finite clause—so why isn't it possible to fill a verb-group slot with an entire finite clause (*[John [he has seen it] the film]), potentially *ad infinitum* (*[He [he [he [...] it] it] it])? Under the current approach, this situation can be avoided by stipulating that the slot must be filled by something that typically occurs in a finite clause, with all the arguments and modifiers of the clause appearing outside of it (in effect, a finite clause "minus" its arguments and modifying phrases).

We may also consider constructions of the sort that form the traditional object of study in transformational grammar, such as long-distance-dependency (LDD) questions. According to Dąbrowska (2004), the category of LDD questions may actually be mentally represented in terms of low-level schemas such as *WH do you think S-GAP?*. Yet this still leaves the problem of how to define "S-GAP" contentfully; defining it as a unit profiling a grounded process does not exclude un-gapped Ss (**What do you think he saw it?*). In the present approach, this could be avoided by stipulating that the {WH,S-GAP} pair must instantiate a structure (e.g. {NP,NP V}) that often appears contiguously as a full declarative finite clause.

Finally, it is possible to verify the above analyses empirically, by checking (for example) whether the rated acceptability of an LDD question correlates with the proportion of the time that the structure instantiated by the {WH,S-GAP} pair occurs as a declarative finite clause.

References

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