

Nordic Journal of Linguistics

<http://journals.cambridge.org/NJL>

Additional services for *Nordic Journal of Linguistics*:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



Thomas Hoffmann & Graeme Trousdale (eds.),
The Oxford Handbook of Construction Grammar.
Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press. Pp.
xvii + 586.

Benjamin Lyngfelt

Nordic Journal of Linguistics / Volume 36 / Issue 03 / December 2013, pp 381 - 387
DOI: 10.1017/S0332586513000310, Published online: 25 October 2013

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0332586513000310

How to cite this article:

Benjamin Lyngfelt (2013). Nordic Journal of Linguistics, 36, pp 381-387
doi:10.1017/S0332586513000310

Request Permissions : [Click here](#)

REVIEWS

Thomas Hoffmann & Graeme Trousdale (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Construction Grammar*. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press. Pp. xvii + 586.

doi:10.1017/S0332586513000310

Reviewed by Benjamin Lyngfelt

Department of Swedish, University of Gothenburg, Box 200, SE 405 30 Gothenburg, Sweden. Benjamin.Lyngfelt@svenska.gu.se

Since its introduction in the 1980s, Construction Grammar (CxG) and related constructionist approaches have been gradually gaining influence and adherents. This growth, however, has long been hampered by the lack of an authoritative reference work, a standard “bible” such as Chomsky (1995) for the Minimalist Program or Pollard & Sag (1994) for HPSG/Head-driven Phrase Structure Grammar. There was a coursebook used in various versions at UC Berkeley during the 1990s (e.g. Fillmore & Kay 1993), but it never got officially published, and the book was hard to get hold of for anyone without a connection to Berkeley. Consequently, linguists interested in this approach have had to rely on less extensive journal articles such as Fillmore, Kay & O’Connor (1988) and Kay & Fillmore (1999), and introductory chapters such as Fried & Östman (2004). In the absence of a comprehensive CxG guide, the work of Adele Goldberg (Goldberg 1995, 2006) has become highly influential, although she has mainly focused on certain types of constructions – especially argument structure constructions, which accordingly is one of the main topics in the CxG literature.

In this situation, the publication of *The Oxford Handbook of Construction Grammar* is most welcome. It does not replace the old Berkeley coursebook as the standard source for mainstream CxG, since there no longer is a particular model that can be called mainstream CxG. Rather, it presents current constructionist approaches in all their diversity, while also emphasizing the core ideas that unite them. The majority of the chapters address how CxG applies to various subfields of linguistics, such as morphology, second language acquisition, information structure, psycholinguistics, and language change. Thus, construction grammarians wishing a brief survey of a particular field, as well as other linguists curious about what CxG has to offer, can both easily find the information they seek.

After an introductory chapter, where Thomas Hoffmann & Graeme Trousdale introduce construction grammar and present the contributions to follow, the book is organized in five major parts. I will address the contents of these parts in turn.

In Part I, entitled ‘Principles and methods’, some of the central issues in CxG are discussed. First, Adele Goldberg presents the core assumptions that constructionist approaches have in common, defining constructions as ‘conventional, learned form-function pairings at varying levels of complexity and abstraction’ (p. 17). For a brief survey of constructionist theory in general, this is the chapter to read.

In the next two chapters, issues such as productivity and frequency of constructions are addressed from two points of view. On the one hand, Paul Kay represents the stricter end of the scale, restricting the notion of construction to fully productive (within their respective domains) patterns, which are distinguished from semi-productive so-called patterns of coinage. On the other hand, Joan Bybee advocates an emergentist view, where constructions are usage-based generalizations based on frequency. While quite different in several respects, both views are compatible with a constructionist approach to language.

Ray Jackendoff introduces his PARALLEL ARCHITECTURE framework, and outlines the role of constructions (although with different terminology) in this model. While this chapter raises some general issues about how constructions relate to different parts of the linguistic system, it might perhaps be more at home in Part II. Last in this section, Stefan Gries addresses the role of data in construction grammar, covering various uses of introspection, corpus data, experiments and computational approaches. This kind of critical overview of methodology is relevant not only for CxG but for linguistics in general.

Part II, ‘Constructionist approaches’ consists of introductions to different construction grammars and related models. First, Charles Fillmore presents what is nowadays called Berkeley Construction Grammar (BCG), the original CxG model developed in Berkeley. The chapter can be viewed as an updated summary of the old CxG coursebook (e.g. Fillmore & Kay 1993) and provides an account of the most central notions in BCG. Second, Laura Michaelis introduces Sign-Based Construction Grammar (SBCG), which is a hybrid of BCG and (constructional) HPSG (Ginzburg & Sag 2000) and a highly formalized constructionist model.

The next couple of chapters cover two computational approaches to CxG. Luc Steels introduces Fluid Construction Grammar (FCG), a fully implemented CxG model which is not a competing theory but rather a tool for constructionist researchers ‘who want to test the implications of their grammar designs for language parsing, production, and learning’ (p. 153). Benjamin Bergen & Nancy Chang present Embodied Construction Grammar (ECG), a cognitively oriented computational model approaching language processing in terms of mental simulation.

The final three approaches in this section are less formal. Cristiano Broccias introduces Langacker’s Cognitive Grammar (CG). Whether this is a kind of CxG or whether CxG is a component of cognitive linguistics is essentially a matter of perspective. In any case, there is considerable agreement on many theoretical issues, and constructions play a significant role in CG. William Croft presents his own

typologically oriented Radical Construction Grammar. On the basis of distributional analysis, a key feature of RCG, he argues that grammatical categories are not only language-specific but also construction-specific. Finally, Hans Boas introduces Cognitive Construction Grammar (CCG), which is based on work by Goldberg and, less directly, George Lakoff. It is closely related to CG, but essentially and explicitly a kind of CxG. If any approach can claim to be mainstream CxG today, it is probably CCG.

This apparently motley crew of constructionist approaches is actually less diverse than it might seem. There are of course some theoretical differences between them, but no more than there is room for within a single framework. In most respects they are compatible – and, except for some of the more technical metalanguage, mutually intelligible. The majority of the approaches are cognitively oriented, and SBCG may look like the odd one out, due to its HPSG character. However, as shown by Fillmore, Lee-Goldman & Rhomieux (2012), less formalized, more mainstream CxG analyses can be translated into SBCG and, hence, vice versa.

For those interested in more thorough introductions, there are book-length presentations of several of these approaches, for example SBCG (Boas & Sag 2012), FCG (Steels 2010), RCG (Croft 2001), and numerous introductions to CG (e.g. Langacker 2008). A CxG textbook based on CCG is in its final stages of production (Hilpert to appear).

Part III, ‘Constructicon: From morphemes to clauses and beyond’, treats the application of construction grammar to different linguistic levels, including morphology (Booij), words and idioms (Wulff), collostructional analysis (Stefanowitsch), phrasal and clausal constructions (Hoffmann), and information structure (Leino). Together, these levels make up the CONSTRUCTICON of a language. CxG generally rejects the sharp traditional distinction between grammar and lexicon, and much early work in CxG treated “borderland” cases (patterns that might be viewed as peripheral or interface phenomena from a more modular perspective), showing how these patterns integrate syntactic and lexical constraints. Indeed, the closer ones looks at it, the more one sees how constructions of other kinds also combine constraints associated with different linguistic levels. Such analyses are what CxG is best known for, but it is equally applicable to more homogeneous linguistic patterns, as shown by the chapters in this part of the book.

Geert Booij addresses how morphological patterns may be treated as constructions, both regarding word formation and inflection, while also illustrating the benefits of doing so. In the chapter on words and idioms, Stefanie Wulff summarizes the original CxG approach to idiomatic constructions from the 1980s and provides a methodological update by bringing frequency data into the picture. In an updated echo of the early arguments for CxG in Fillmore, Kay & O’Connor (1988), she concludes that idioms are not fundamentally different from other constructions; the same kind of idiomatic variation also appears in other constructions, although not as easily observable (p. 288).

Anatol Stefanowitsch introduces collocation analysis, a statistical approach to the relation between words (lexical constructions) and the grammatical constructions they occur in. Roughly, collocations may be viewed as a CxG correlate to collocations. The chapter by Jaakko Leino deals with information structure, on the one hand introducing central notions such as presupposition, activation, topic and focus, and on the other hand illustrating how these notions are employed in CxG, which to a high degree builds on the work of Lambrecht (e.g. 1994). As for phonology, the book contains no such chapter, but the place of phonology in CxG is discussed by Höder (to appear).

In his chapter on phrasal and clausal constructions, Thomas Hoffmann presents CxG accounts of various syntactic phenomena and also compares different constructionist approaches to syntax. The ambitious scope of this chapter may make it a bit hard to process in full detail for readers without previous knowledge of the models in question, or at least some familiarity with syntactic formalisms in general, but even a surface reading will still provide a good basic understanding of syntax in CxG. What may look a bit unfamiliar, maybe even unattractive, to a syntactician is the high prominence of fairly low-level generalizations even among abstract syntactic patterns. Mainstream tradition in syntax has long been characterized by a wish to avoid redundancy in the system and derive specific patterns from a few general principles. However, modern research has taught us that the mind makes extensive use of redundancy and that the crucial mental restrictions concern processing load rather than storage capacity (see review of Part IV below). Hence, although a multigrain approach to syntax such as CxG may look less elegant, depending on ones aesthetic preferences, that should be of less concern if it is also more accurate.

Part IV, 'Acquisition and cognition', is mostly concerned with the grounding of CxG in related disciplines. Holger Diessel conceptualizes first language acquisition as usage-based in general and constructionist in particular, arguing that grammatical development starts with lexically fixed expressions, gradually expands to more variable patterns and eventually reaches complex and schematic constructions. Similarly, Nick Ellis advocates a usage-based approach to second language acquisition as well, with a particular focus on the interplay between construction and REconstruction in L2 development. He also stresses the need for more data, especially from longitudinal studies, and outlines some desired directions for future research.

After these chapters on acquisition, Giulia Bencini turns to psycholinguistics, focusing on the perspective of production. The research presented is clearly compatible with and can be straightforwardly accounted for by a constructionist approach to language. Last in this section, Friedemann Pulvermüller, Bert Cappelle & Yury Shtyrov pose the question of whether CxG is plausible from the viewpoint of neuroscience. Their answer is 'Yes, but with a but' (p. 415). For the most part, they find the main assumptions of CxG in accordance with neurolinguistic findings, but

the characteristic syntax–lexicon continuum receives only partial support. Hence, the authors argue that the syntax–lexicon distinction should not be entirely abolished.

The expansion of CxG into these areas is a relatively recent development, and – with the exception of first language acquisition – the amount of available research on these issues from a specifically constructionist perspective is still small. On the other hand, the evidence that there IS looks quite promising for CxG. Furthermore, a wealth of ongoing constructionist work in second language research seems to be well on its way to improve the empirical situation. In addition to addressing the empirical GROUNDING of CxG, some of this work also concerns its APPLICATION, notably in language pedagogy.¹

In Part V, ‘Language variation and change’, the first three chapters deal with diachronic variation. Mirjam Fried addresses constructional change and relates CxG to grammaticalization theory, fused in the notion of constructionalization. She argues for CxG as a useful tool both for uncovering the MOTIVATION of grammatical change and for the ANALYSIS AND REPRESENTATION of its gradual nature. Jóhanna Barðdal applies CxG to historical-comparative reconstruction, thereby incorporating the old neogrammarian tradition into modern theoretical linguistics. In particular, she discusses the development of argument structure constructions in Indo-European. The chapter by Martin Hilpert, in turn, illustrates how modern corpus linguistics can provide a more nuanced picture – and, hence, a better understanding – of constructional change.

Regarding synchronic variation, Jan-Ola Östman & Graeme Trousdale apply CxG to dialects on the one hand, and discourse variability on the other, showing it to be a fruitful approach to both kinds of variation. They also stress, as does Hilpert, how synchronic and diachronic variation are essentially two sides of the same coin. In the final chapter, Willem Hollmann presents cognitive sociolinguistics, which deals with the interaction between cognitive and social factors in language variation, and the study of constructions from this perspective. He illustrates how the perspectives may be fruitfully combined, while also noting that this meeting between disciplines has so far been somewhat one-sided. The research in this area appears to have mostly been conducted by cognitivists and constructionists interested in sociolinguistics, rather than the other way around, and Hollmann stresses the need for more dialogue.

As pointed out by Östman & Trousdale, the growing interest in language variation in CxG is a reflection of the same tendency in linguistics in general. It is also a reflection of a trend within constructionist research towards more usage-based models, which are based on a view of language as inherently variable. The theoretical apparatus is simply well suited for this line of research.

The Oxford Handbook of Construction Grammar illustrates the diversity of contemporary CxG, mainly in the shape of its application in different areas of linguistics. Consequently, it is well suited as a general reference work in the sense that it provides an impressive set of thematic overview chapters. A chapter on phonology would have been welcome, but what is most lacking is a chapter on Frame Semantics.

Although semantics is incorporated in any constructionist approach – constructions being systematic associations of form and meaning – the meaning aspect is often represented in terms of semantic frames. Indeed, CxG and Frame Semantics may be viewed as sister theories, inherently related and both of them fathered by Chuck Fillmore. A chapter devoted to the notion of a language as a network of constructions of varying abstraction and complexity – a constructicon – would also have been appreciated. Except for that, the central areas are covered.

The Handbook is NOT a reference work in the sense that the reader can easily look up central terminology from constructionist literature, such as ‘construct’, ‘inheritance’, ‘prototype’, ‘feature’, ‘coercion’, and ‘unification’. The choice not to attempt such an endeavor was clearly a wise one, since it basically would have required the editors to focus on a single model of CxG. The terminology differs more between the various constructionist approaches than the theory and methods do. For a more consistent introduction to CxG, see, for example, Hilpert’s (to appear) textbook, based on CCG.

A general impression from *The Handbook* is an increasing overlap, both theoretically and in terms of adherents, between CxG and cognitive linguistics. This may of course be due to the choice of authors, but the lineup of contributors represents leading construction grammarians fairly well. In fact, the same trend can also be observed simply by comparing the list of speakers and topics at conferences on CxG and cognitive linguistics, respectively. Another strong trend in recent years, also reflected in *The Handbook*, is the increasing importance of usage-based methodology and more sophisticated uses of corpora and statistics. Thus, in all the diversity – real and apparent – there are also clear tendencies towards unification.

All in all, *The Oxford Handbook of Construction Grammar* fills a serious gap in the linguistics literature. It will be a most valuable resource for anyone interested in construction grammar and related approaches to language, and a standard reference in the field for many years to come.

NOTE

1. For example, see the papers at the CALP [Constructionist Approaches to Language Pedagogy] conference, in Brussels, November 2013 (which has not yet taken place at the time of writing).

REFERENCES

- Boas, Hans & Ivan A. Sag (eds.). 2012. *Sign-Based Construction Grammar*. Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications.
- Chomsky, Noam. 1995. *The Minimalist Program*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Croft, William. 2001. *Radical Construction Grammar: Syntactic Theory in Typological Perspective*. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press.

- Fillmore, Charles J. & Paul Kay. 1993. *Construction Grammar* coursebook. Ms., Department of Linguistics, University of California at Berkeley.
- Fillmore, Charles J., Paul Kay & Mary Catherine O'Connor. 1988. Regularity and idiomatity in grammatical constructions: The case of *let alone*. *Language* 64, 501–538.
- Fillmore, Charles J., Russell Lee-Goldman & Russel Rhomieux. 2012. The FrameNet constructicon. In Boas & Sag (eds.), 309–372.
- Fried, Mirjam & Jan-Ola Östman. 2004. Construction Grammar: A thumbnail sketch. In Mirjam Fried & Jan-Ola Östman (eds.), *Construction Grammar in a Cross-language Perspective*, 11–86. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Hilpert, Martin. To appear. *Construction Grammar and its Application to English*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Höder, Steffen. To appear. Phonological elements in Diasystematic Construction Grammar. *Constructions and Frames*.
- Ginzburg, Jonathan & Ivan A. Sag. 2000. *Interrogative Investigations: The Form, Meaning, and Use of English Interrogatives*. Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications.
- Goldberg, Adele E. 1995. *Constructions: A Construction Grammar Approach to Argument Structure*. Chicago, IL & London: University of Chicago Press.
- Goldberg, Adele E. 2006. *Constructions at Work: The Nature of Generalization in Language*. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kay, Paul & Charles J. Fillmore. 1999. Grammatical constructions and linguistic generalizations: The *What's X doing Y?* construction. *Language* 75, 1–34.
- Lambrecht, Knud. 1994. *Information Structure and Sentence Form: Topic, Focus and the Mental Representations of Discourse Referents*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Langacker, Ronald. 2008. *Cognitive Grammar: A Basic Introduction*. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press.
- Pollard, Carl & Ivan A. Sag. 1994. *Head-driven Phrase Structure Grammar*. Chicago, IL & London: University of Chicago Press.
- Steels, Luc. 2010. *Design Patterns in Fluid Construction Grammar* (Constructional Approaches to Language 11). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Terje Lohndal (ed.), *In Search of Universal Grammar: From Old Norse to Zoque* (Linguistik Aktuell/Linguistics Today 121). Amsterdam & Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins, 2013. Pp. 361.

doi:10.1017/S0332586513000322

Reviewed by Ida Larsson

Department of Swedish and Multilingualism, Stockholm University, SE-106 91 Stockholm, Sweden. ida.larsson@su.se

Over the last almost 40 years, Jan Terje Faarlund has contributed to the growing knowledge of human linguistic competence, on a variety of topics and from different perspectives. He has done substantial work on language change, focusing in particular on Old Norse. His books *Syntactic Change: Towards a Theory of Historical Syntax*