

Concerning the notion of constructional polysemy

Enrico Torre

Independent Scholar

According to proponents of Construction Grammar, grammatical ‘constructions’ are inherently meaningful, independent of the lexical items they feature. Moreover, they are polysemous: each pattern is typically associated with several related senses, organized in a radial network, with a central sense and a few semantic extensions.

On the basis of a corpus-informed study of the so-called English ‘caused-motion construction’, I will call for caution on the radial network view of ‘constructional meaning’. Indeed, an in-depth analysis of the data suggests that the distinction between different senses of a construction is less than ideal to do justice to the range of similarities and differences which characterize the many instantiations of this pattern, which seems to be better captured by a series of lower-level generalizations over distinct semantic configurations centered on the verb (cf. Boas 2003).

These lower-level generalizations include a number of different instantiations which share the same syntactic structure and but whose meanings are only connected by a series of overlapping similarities, and no one feature is common to all the sentences. As an example, consider the sentences in (1) below, which are supposed to instantiate the central sense of the pattern (X CAUSES Y TO MOVE Z) and those in (2), which are supposed to instantiate one of the radial extensions (X PREVENTS Y FROM MOVING Z):

- (1) a. ...she put the violin back into back in its case, rather than toss it in the fire...
b. Frank sneezed the napkin off the table.
- (2) a. ... time for you to just lock them in the basement.
b. ... always keep your horse at a safe distance from the other horses.

The verb *toss* in (1a) inherently denotes a caused-motion semantics, thus overlapping with the constructional meaning. The verb *sneeze* in (1b), instead, is not even transitive: its co-occurrence with this syntactic pattern which makes the sentence take a caused-motion meaning. The example in (2a) denotes an action whereby a causer participant inhibits a theme participant from leaving a place by imposing a physical barrier. The example in (2b), though, depicts a causer participant’s manipulation of a theme participant’s behavior to prevent an accident. All these four sentences can be seen as sharing the very general meaning of denoting a change of circumstances in regard to a motion event, but the specific meaning of each of them is fully dependent on the lexical items which they feature (see Broccias 2003).

On the basis of my analysis, I will argue that the notion of ‘constructional polysemy’ is less than convincing, and that the realizations of the grammatical pattern known as ‘caused-motion construction’ are better characterized as a continuum of sentences which stand in a relationship of family resemblance, rather than displaying a radial network structure. This claim will be substantiated by the illustration of more examples.

References

- Boas, H.C. (2003). *A constructional approach to resultatives*. Stanford, CA: CSLI.
Broccias, C. (2003). *The English change network*. Berlin and New York: De Gruyter.