[Review]

Construction Morphology


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1. Introduction

Construction Morphology is the first comprehensive introduction to the theory of Construction Morphology (CM), which has been developed by the author and several other scholars over the last decade (Riehemann (2001), Gurevich (2006), Booij (2013); see also the special issue of Morphology on this theory edited by Booij, Issue 22 (2012)). Booij takes as a point of departure the theory of Construction Grammar (Fillmore and Kay (1995), among others), whose major foci have been sentences and idioms, and extends it to complex words and word-like phrasal units on the basis of rich data mainly but not solely from Dutch. He analyzes many of these lexical units in terms of what Jackendoff (1997), among others, has called “constructional idioms”: “a type of idiom in which not all positions are lexically fixed, and hence some are variable” (p. 13).

For Booij, a (grammatical) construction is “a pairing of form and meaning” (p. 11), seemingly in particular one in which non-compositionality (unpredictability) and/or high frequency can be identified (see Goldberg (2006)). Booij cites as a well-known example of a syntactic construction the following caused-motion sentence from Goldberg (2006).

(1) Pat sneezed the foam off the cappuccino. (Goldberg (2006: 73))

This transitive use of the verb sneeze is unpredictable, and Goldberg (1995: 152) solves this problem by attributing the caused-motion meaning (i.e. ‘X causes Y to move Z’) to the entire syntactic template (i.e. [SUBJ [V OBJ OBL]]).

A constructional view of morphology as such is not a novel one but rather part of the norm in Construction Grammar (see Croft (2001), Fried and
Östman (2004), Goldberg (2006), Hoffmann and Trousdale (2013)). However, this book is certainly a remarkable achievement and an important extension of the theory in that it helps us to recognize morphology as another fertile field for constructionism.

This review is organized as follows. In Section 2, I will outline the author’s constructional approach to morphology and grammar. In Sections 3 through 6, I will briefly evaluate the book in terms of four fundamental issues, respectively the specific location of CM within morphological studies, functional motivations for morphological constructions and their typological implications, detailed constructional specifications, and types of productivity as measures of constructional status. Section 7 will conclude the review.

2. Outline

Construction Morphology consists of eleven chapters. The first three describe the basic tenets of the CM theory, including the “hierarchical lexicon” (Chapter 2) and “subschemas” (Chapter 3). Chapters 4 through 8 present case studies mostly adapted from the author’s previous publications on a wide range of topics: “quasi-incorporation,” separable complex verbs, progressives, phrasal names, and numerals. Chapters 9 and 10 discuss two more general issues in morphology—respectively, the “recycling” of affixes as “construction markers” (e.g. Germanic genitive case markers reinterpreted and “regrammaticalized” as linking elements in NN compounds) and the relationship between morphology and phonology. Chapter 11 concludes the book by mentioning some remaining issues, particularly inflection and periphrasis (see Booij (2013) for a CM approach to these issues).

Booij agrees with the major constructional/cognitive view of language in terms of the role of the “syntax-lexicon continuum”—a framework that represents syntax, idioms, morphology, syntactic categories, and words/lexicon in common, in that they all consist of form-meaning pairs (pp. 15–16, where he cites Croft (2001)). This general perspective on grammar is the basis of CM, which applies a set of notions and assumptions that have played a central part in the investigations of syntactic constructions to the analysis of complex words and word-like phrasal units. Special emphasis is put on what Booij calls the “hierarchical lexicon.” In this perspective of the lexicon, words (or “constructs”) and morphological constructions at various levels of abstraction are linked with one another in a hierarchical fashion—each construct(ion) inherits the properties of its mother node. Booij illustrates this idea using -er-nominals in Dutch, English, and German. As
(2) below shows, deverbal -er-nominals in Dutch are classified into three major semantic types (Agent, Instrument, and Object), each of which is productive, and the Agent type is further divided into Personal and Impersonal. Note that the left side of the constructional representation on top shows the formal (i.e. morphological and phonological) specifications, and its right side, the semantic specifications. (This arrow representation is based on Jackendoff’s (2002) view of the grammar as a (tripartite) parallel architecture.) The relation between the two sides is specified by co-indexation of the constituents.

(2) \[ V_{-er}N_j \leftrightarrow \text{[entity involved in SEM}_{ij}] \]

Booij further argues that \([V_{-er}]_N\) is in turn an instantiation (or “subschematic”) of the general \([X_{-er}]_N\) construction, which also subsumes (i.e. is inherited by) -er-constructions in which \(X\) is filled by \(N\) (e.g. Utrecht-er ‘inhabitant of Utrecht’), QN (e.g. tien-pond-er ‘ten-pound-er’), and Num (e.g. twintig-er ‘person in his twenties’) (p. 84). Similar hierarchical networks have been proposed for syntactic constructions. For example, Goldberg (1995: 161–164) posits for the English caused-motion construction five subconstructions (e.g. ‘X ENABLES Y to MOVE Z,’ ‘X PREVENTS Y from MOVING Comp(Z)’), which form a polysemy network.

The advantage of CM is not just its overall parallelism with constructionist models at other levels of the syntax-lexicon continuum. Another benefit is the way this “output-oriented” monostratal theory, which targets surface realizations rather than underlying representations or “base” forms, provides a straightforward account for some distributional facts that may cause problems in an “input-oriented,” derivational approach. First, CM accounts for complex words without base forms; for example, anglic-ist, aut-ist, bapt-ist, bolshev-ist, and pacif-ist in English do not exhibit identifiable base words from which they can be derived in a derivational account (p. 30). These words suggest the existence of the schema \([X_{-ist}]_N\) paired with the meaning ‘person with ability, ideology, disposition Y,’ which licenses them without reference to any base word. Second, constructional schemas account for the productivity of words (cf. Section 6). A clear example is the agentive nominal skyp-er (p. 2), which one can readily coin using the new denominal verb skype ‘to communicate by means of Skype’ and the highly established \([V_{-er}]_N\) subconstruction for “Personal Agent” seen in (2). Third, CM ap-
pears to be compatible with the existence of a diversity of roots in some
types of word formation. For example, as discussed above, the general
schema \[X\text{-er}_N\] accounts for a diversity of categories of \( X \).

Thus, it seems quite reasonable to claim that the constructional view of
grammar works well in both syntax and morphology. In the rest of this
review, I will suggest what parts of CM should be extended and made
more accurate to allow the enhancement of the theoretical soundness of the
framework on empirical grounds.

3. The Theoretical Locus of CM within Morphology

I would like to start with a comment that is brief but crucial, concerned
with how CM is located within the broader field of theoretical morphol-
ogy. As Hoeksema (2012) correctly points out, Booij fails to compare CM
with other similar morphological theories, such as Distributed Morphology
(Halle and Marantz (1993)), word-based morphology (Blevins (2006)), and
radical templatic phonology (Vihman and Croft (2007)) (see also Riehemann
(2001), Gurevich (2006)). Meanwhile, he does argue against derivational,
input-oriented approaches, although without clearly naming specific theories
(see e.g. his counterargument to zero-affixes starting on p. 36). These are
nontrivial lacunae for a book intended to function as an introduction to a
new theory. An attempt to fill the gap should also be accompanied by a
clear resolution of the problem of predictability and falsifiability, whose ab-
sence is sometimes pointed out as problematic in constructionist treatments
in general (Hoeksema (2012)).

4. Motivations

The reader will also hope to find extensive discussion in this book of the
functional motivations for each morphological construction, as well as their
typological implications. Although a large part of the data presented in this
book is from Dutch, Booij also discusses other languages, both Germanic
and non-Germanic. For example, in Chapter 4, Booij applies his con-
structional analysis of Dutch quasi-incorporation (e.g. college lopen (lecture
walk) ‘to attend lectures,’ koffie zettan (coffee make) ‘to make coffee’) to
Japanese “su-compounding” (e.g. kenkyuu-su- (research-do) ‘to do research,’
sampo-su- (walk-do) ‘to take a walk’). Booij points out the parallelism be-
tween these verbal complexes, showing that they are less tightly bound than
compounds, and are separable under restricted circumstances. However, it
is not thoroughly considered what the observed crosslinguistic existence of quasi-incorporation suggests in broader, typological terms. It is true that constructions are language-specific (Fillmore and Kay (1995)); nevertheless, as we have learned from Croft’s (2001) explorations in Radical Construction Grammar, typological generalizations are also of great interest to current construction grammarians.

In this connection, Booij remarks that quasi-incorporation is applied to noun-verb combinations that denote “nameworthy” “conventional actions” (p. 107). One possible way to elaborate on this somewhat elusive functional characterization would be to cite the accumulating literature on iconicity in language (see Haiman (1985)). Specifically, many morphological constructions, including quasi-incorporation constructions, appear to illustrate the principle of “iconicity of cohesion,” which says that two concepts in a cohesive relationship are encoded in a cohesive structure (i.e. in the present case, a word-like unit). It is functional motivations of this sort that one would really expect to discover in the crosslinguistic comparisons of such constructions. This approach would give us a glimpse of why certain types of construction are or are not found across languages, an investigation that would also help us to clarify the theoretical locus of CM as discussed in Section 3 above.

5. Detailed Constructional Specifications

In the statement “Constructions are form-meaning pairings,” both “form” and “meaning” are cover terms that can be divided into finer dimensions (see Fried and Östman (2004)). As illustrated in (2) above, Booij’s constructional representations comprise morphophonological and semantic poles on the left and right sides of a correspondence arrow, respectively. Some constructions are further defined in paradigms, as in $<[x\text{-ism}]_{Ni} \leftrightarrow \text{SEM}_{i}> \approx <[x\text{-ist}]_{Nj} \leftrightarrow \text{[person with property Y related to SEM}_{i}>$ (p. 33), in which $\approx$ stands for ‘is paradigmatically related to.’ Constructions in paradigms share their variables, as illustrated by pairs like pacif-ism vs. pacif-ist and abolition-ism vs. abolition-ist.

These relatively coarse-grained descriptions benefit from enrichment by finer constructional dimensions. Included in the information of particular relevance here is what is often referred to as “encyclopedic knowledge” or, more vaguely, “pragmatics.” For example, Tsujimura and Davis (2011) discuss the functional feature “playfulness” as a crucial constructional component of innovative verbs in Japanese, such as jikor- ‘to have a traffic
accident’ (<jiko ‘accident’), kopir- ‘to make a copy’ (<kopii ‘copy’), and gugur- ‘to conduct a Google search’ (<guuguru ‘Google’). This is a necessary part of this highly colloquial word-level construction, as it limits the register of verbs instantiating the construction. Akita (to appear) adds to these examples several more register-specific word groups in Japanese, each of which has characteristic formal features (e.g. the unaccented bipartite forms of new nominal adjectives in Internet/pop culture slang, such as yuru-fuwa ‘loose and fluffy’ and mote-kawa ‘popular and cute’).

In Booij’s CM, detailed constructional specifications, both formal and functional, are given separately as additional conditions, as in (3), and also scattered throughout the text (see e.g. pp. 174–175 for the stylistic characteristics of Italian N + N expressions).

(3) The Definite -s Construction in Dutch
[[…… [x-s]NPi ….. Nj]NPk ↔ [the …. Nj of NPj]k
NPj has one of the following forms:
(i) a (simplex or complex) proper name, or a coordination of instances of such expression;
(ii) a quantifying (pro)noun denoting human beings;
(iii) nouns that can function as forms of address, optionally preceded by a possessive pronoun;
(iv) (substandard): NPs that denote human beings.

(adapted from p. 221)

Putting these pieces of information together, as in some constructional models (Fried and Östman (2004), Boas and Sag (2012)), may well make CM more solid and faithful to the actual state of affairs of our mental lexicon (see also Gurevich’s (2006) descriptions of morphological constructions that employ the encyclopedic-semantic notion of “frame” in the sense of Fillmore (1982)).

6. Productivity

Throughout the book, Booij appears to see productivity as a major index of constructions, as do many other construction grammarians (e.g. Goldberg (2006)). “Productivity” is an essential but ambiguous term in Construction Grammar. Some studies use type (or token) frequency or other statistical scores as a measure of productivity (Baayan (1992), Bybee and Hopper (2001), Asao (2007)); in contrast, Booij appears to use the term to refer to (estimated) type frequency and suitability for creative coinages. Thus, constructions like the agentive [V-er]N construction, which can yield innovative
forms such as skyp-er, may be “productive” by both measures. The Dutch numeral constructions discussed in Chapter 8, which form cardinal (e.g. vijf-miljoen ‘five million’), ordinal (e.g. honderd en eerste ‘a hundred and first’), and fraction numerals (e.g. drie-acht-ste ‘three-eights’), are also characterized by their high productivity, by both measures. However, it is not very clear whether this kind of coining is possible for other morphological constructions discussed in the book. For instance, as already mentioned, Dutch quasi-incorporation is limited to noun-verb pairs expressing “nameworthy” “conventional actions.” This semantic restriction may keep this construction from being available for creative coining. Therefore, “productivity” as applied to quasi-incorporation appears to refer to (static) type frequency alone.

In summary, different schemas have different degrees of productivity of whatever type, which may at least partly determine their constructional status (cf. p. 52). A general lesson to draw from the present discussion would thus be that one must clarify what type of productivity, one assumes, reflects the constructional status of a schema, particularly when it does not exhibit obvious non-compositionality. Without this caveat, CM might inspire the unproductive and unconstructive criticism that it is a “theory of everything.”

7. Conclusion

In this review, I have outlined Booij’s constructional approach to complex words and word-like phrasal units. Despite its clarity and simplicity, some essential aspects of Construction Morphology in its current form need elaboration. The firmer establishment of the framework will have to come after the clarification of many points, including its locus in relation to other morphological theories, functional-typological motivations for each morphological construction, the treatment of detailed constructional specifications, and the type(s) of productivity as a defining feature of a construction. Although all these issues are relevant to the core CM theory, the answers should not impair the overall framework that Booij has successfully constructed and supported with abundant data. Therefore, I recommend this book, as well as some other related ones, as a must-read to anyone who is concerned with morphological and constructional research. After reading the book, one will find that there is a long list of complex lexical units waiting to be analyzed from a constructional point of view, across languages and language families.
REFERENCES


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