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Discourse constructions in English: the case of complementary-contrastive constructions

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Abstract

The present paper examines a group of constructions at the level of discourse. Such constructions are part of the family of complementary-contrastive constructions in English. These constructions result from the combination of two elements, which despite being apparently contrary, actually complement each other. Using Ronald Langacker's (1987; 1999) notions of meaning base, profile, and active zone, the study addresses the question of the classification of discourse constructions, and analyzes within this constructional family, two specific meaning profiles: constructions that make the second element of the construction more important and constructions that correct or modify the content elements of an utterance, whatever its illocutionary force.

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1. Introduction

Discourse markers have generally been studied from a non-constructionist perspective in the cognitive-linguistic literature. These studies have generally avoided the explanation of the semantic relations that hold between these markers. For this reason, this cognitively-oriented study, which follows the main assumptions of Goldberg's (2006) Construction Grammar (CxG) and the Lexical Constructional Model (Mairal & Ruiz de Mendoza, 2009; Ruiz de

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Mendoza & Mairal, 2008; 2011), provides a preliminary cognitive account of a group of constructions at discourse level that are still unexplored. The constructions analyzed here are characterized by finding a point of contrast between two otherwise complementary states of affairs. That is why these meaning configurations have been labeled *complementary-contrastive* constructions.

As it is well known, for Langacker (1987; 1999) concepts are understood in terms of profile/base relationships. The profile of a concept is whatever it designates. For example, the profile of a table is a piece of furniture with a flat top and usually one to four legs. But the same concept *table* can be profiled very differently depending on the background knowledge (base domain) we associate with it (i.e., a table is understood very differently in terms of a kitchen, in an office, or in a carpentry workshop). Within this framework, the active zone of the profiled entity refers to a relevant part of a meaning characterization with respect to a domain or relation. It may or may not coincide with the profiled entity. For example, the word *table* in *I saw the table* and *Termites infested the table* profiles (or designates) the same entity (a table, whether in a kitchen, an office or in the carpenter's workshop), but it is interpreted in terms of different active zones: the visible aspects of the entity in terms of size, shape, color, etc., on the one hand, and the non-visible wooden matter that the termites feed on, on the other hand. Departing from these notions of *profile*, *base*, and *active zone*, our investigation proves that all complementary-contrastive constructions also conform to this conceptual distinction. This is so because these constructions share the same meaning base (i.e., the idea that the constructional variables X and Y are antithetical but not mutually exclusive of each other), although they profile this meaning from different angles, thereby allowing us to classify them according to the subtleties in meaning they display. These meaning subtleties were identified (i) by comparing the definitions provided by English language dictionaries and thesauri of each of the connectors in question[†], and (ii) studying their constructional use in real language data using the *British National Corpus*, the *WebCorp*, and the *Contemporary Corpus of American English*. These searches revealed valuable information on the semantic make up of each of the connectors in question, which allowed for a cognitively motivated classification of complementary-contrastive constructions according to the meanings these connectors could profile in context. Most dictionaries treat many discourse markers giving rise to complementary-contrastive constructions as fully synonymous, in spite of the realization that sometimes one connector may not be permitted in a given construction while another may be. Within the family of complementary-contrastive discourse constructions, this paper focuses its attention on two kinds of meaning that the constructions can profile: (i) constructions that endow the content of the second variable with greater importance, either because the giving prominence to the first variable might be regarded as undesirable from the perspective of the interpersonal function of language or because the second variable is actually more important than the first (ideational function); and (ii) constructions that correct or modify the content elements of an utterance whatever its illocutionary force by changing all or part of it or by specifying it.

2. Constructions whose second variable is more important.

The constructions that give greater prominence to the content of the second variable within the complementary-contrastive constructional family are *X in any case/event Y*, *X at any rate Y*, *X anyway Y*, *X anyhow Y*, *X besides Y*, *X but then Y*, and *X still less Y*. What these constructions transmit is that whatever the nature of X, what really matters is Y, as in *I don't want to have eggs for breakfast. Besides, there's nothing else in the fridge* or *she seems very stupid, but then she gets high marks*. Owing to space constraints, however, only the first four of these constructions will be analyzed in this paper.

Each of the constructions cited above exhibits meaning nuances that the others do not have. These semantic differences may allow for the interchangeability between markers in different contexts, as in the above mentioned examples where the marker *besides* could have been replaced by *anyway*, *but then*, *in any case*, etc. This is because in practice, the meanings these constructions profile have become very similar by means of a metonymic extension

[†] The dictionaries used were the Collins Cobuild Dictionary, the Merriam Webster Dictionary Online, the Cambridge Dictionary Online, the Dictionary.com, the Wordreference Online, and Thesaurus.com

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