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ScienceDirect

Lingua xxx (2018) xxx–xxx

Lingua

www.elsevier.com/locate/lingua

Exploring attachment patterns between multi-word verbs and argument structure constructions

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Received 14 November 2017; received in revised form 15 February 2018; accepted 2 April 2018

Abstract

The present paper reports the results of two corpus studies of multi-word verbs in the context of *Cognitive Construction Grammar*. The main claim of the constructionist approach adopted in this paper is that the meaning of specific multi-word verbs (MWVs), that is, combinations of a verb proper and a particle (spatial adverb, preposition, or both), overlaps the meaning of the argument structure construction in which it appears, thereby facilitating the positing of motivated categories. This theoretical claim is supported by the results of a two-staged corpus study. The first part of the study uses the affordances of the online interface of the 520-million-word *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA). The results show that the identified MWVs in the corpus are skewed toward motional usages in spoken registers. The list of frequent MWVs provides the data for the second study. In this case, the results confirm the hypothesis that MWVs overlap specific argument structure constructions following distinct attachment patterns. This finding also suggests that argument structure constructions are high-order constructions that interface thought and language at a deep cognitive level.

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Keywords: Argument structure constructions; MWV-ASC attachment patterns; Cognitive Construction Grammar; Constructions; Embodiment; Motivation; Multi-word verbs

1. Introduction

Multi-word verbs (henceforth MWVs) are one of the most complex areas of English grammar. One of the reasons is the fuzziness of their grammatical status, which has resulted in dichotomous and sometimes contrasting definitions of MWVs as words or phrases conveying either abstract or literal meanings. Two main strands of MWV research can be identified in the literature (see [Tables 1 and 2](#) for a summary):

- 1) **The lexico-syntactic** strand whereby MWVs are classified in terms of their compositionality (e.g., [Biber et al., 1999](#); [Cappelle, 2005, 2012](#); [Dagut and Laufer, 1985](#); [Darwin and Gray, 1999](#); [Gardner and Davies, 2007](#); [Hampe, 2012](#); [Hulstijn and Marchena, 1989](#); [Liu, 2011](#); [Quirk et al., 1985](#)). This category includes four MWVs, namely (1) *free combinations* (compositional); (2) *prepositional verbs*, i.e., verbs that take fixed prepositions; (3) *phrasal verbs* (idiomatic); and (4) *phrasal prepositional verbs*, i.e., verbs that take two particles with which they are semantically related (these verbs are restricted to informal usage).

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Table 1
Lexical-syntactic classification of MWVs.

Lexical-syntactic classification of MWVs	
MWV	Example
Free combination (shifted)	“Highwire sits up , pushing himself off the ground and onto his elbows”
Free combination (adjacent)	“Angel went down on hands and feet and pressed herself close to the ground.”
Phrasal verb (shifted)	“Later that same year, I dropped my son off at school on St. Patrick’s Day”
Phrasal verb (adjacent)	“Think back to the driverless car that just mowed down a flock of schoolchildren”
Prepositional verb (shifted)	He put his hand on his shoulder.
Prepositional verb (adjacent)	The car inched through the mob.
Phrasal prepositional verb (Shifted)	“Downey responds, ‘Trust me, we’ve got plenty’, and leads Duvall downstairs to an office to load him up with promotional hats, shirts and paperweights.”
Phrasal prepositional verb (Adjacent)	“She gave up on me watching it for the night, (. . .)”

Adapted from Torres-Martínez (2016, pp. 8–9).

Table 2
Semantic classification of MWVs.

Semantic classification of MWVs		
MWV	Definition	Examples
<i>Non-idiomatic (literal)</i>	Combine a lexical verb (usually a general purpose verb) with a particle (either a directional adverb or a preposition). The meaning of the compound can be predicted from the individual meaning of its constituents.	“He took them away ”
<i>Semi-idiomatic (aspectual)</i>	Combine a lexical verb (usually a common verb) and a particle (a directional adverb, a preposition, or both) carrying aspectual meaning. The components of these constructions are semantically analyzable.	“When I dreamed up [invent, fabricate] this scheme, I was sort of assuming Antigonus would still be around.
<i>Highly idiomatic (idiomatic)</i>	These are frozen formulas whose meanings are not predictable from the semantics of their constituents.	“He drifted off to sleep [to fall asleep gradually] without having figured it out.”

Adapted from Torres-Martínez (2016, p. 9).

2) **The semantic strand** draws on the description of the nature of the constituents of a MWV (the lexical verb+the particle) to predict its overall meaning (e.g., Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Garnier and Schmitt, 2016; Jackendoff, 2010; Quirk et al., 1985).

Unfortunately, the lack of a consistent ontology of MWVs (a clear definition of the phenomenon to be studied) has led to the proliferation of contrasting epistemologies (how this phenomenon should be studied). In this context, depending on the researchers’ method (linguistic or neurolinguistic) or theoretical affiliation, the results of a study can favor either a lexically-driven type of processing (e.g., Cappelle et al., 2010), a phrasal analysis (e.g., Konopka and Bock, 2009), or a mixed lexical-phrasal processing model (e.g., Blais and Gonnerman, 2013; Gonnerman et al., 2007). The present approach to the analysis of MWVs seeks to take a much closer look at the nature of these constructions in order to answer the question as to whether a MWV inheritance network can be postulated that captures both word-like and phrase-like properties. In addition to providing a model of constructional relations between MWVs, I will argue for a combination of lexical and constructional meaning as a means to reduce polysemy. The constructionist approach endorsed in this paper can thus be considered as an independent approach to the research strands reviewed above, since both the semantic and the formal side of individual MWVs is deemed to become integrated in the syntax-semantics of the clause. This conceptualization does away with the traditional dichotomy that views MWVs as either phrases or words.

The rest of the paper is divided as follows. In Section 2, I present the theoretical tenets of the study in the context of *Cognitive Construction Grammar* (CCxG; Goldberg, 2006; Torres-Martínez, 2015, 2016, 2017). I claim that this version of construction grammar provides a solid theoretical framework for the analysis of MWVs. Hence, the notions of both *construction* and *argument structure constructions* are explained as essential conceptual tools for the analysis of native

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