

International Linguistic Association

Monthly Lecture Series

Saturday, November 4, 2023. 11 AM - 12 PM (EST)

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Constructions, Holism, and the Reciprocity of Parts and Wholes

Abstract

In early work on the development of Construction Grammar, Charles Fillmore and colleagues drew attention to a sprawling and densely populated territory of linguistic patterning that shows a poor fit with a modular conception of language. Something about the meaning or conventional use of these fugitive patterns does not follow from knowing independently what a lexicon could tell us about their component words or what a grammar could tell us about maximally general rules for combining words. One practical consequence is that these constructions fall within a poorly charted gap that continues to evade the coverage of dictionaries on the one hand and grammars on the other. They pose a corresponding family of unique and often overlooked difficulties for language learners and educators as well. In this talk, I try to offer some clarity on the following two kinds of overlapping challenge that lexico-grammatical constructions pose and then illustrate some of our efforts to address them.

- (1) In light of the gap in coverage between dictionaries and grammars, what kind of alternative resources could help uncover and represent lexico-grammatical constructions? We have approached this by developing an inspectable and navigable language model that stands in contrast to recent black box large language models (LLMs).
- (2) How can lexico-grammatical constructions be rendered accessible (even discoverable) by language learners and teachers? Specifically, I investigate how these usages could come to learners by way of discovery from input rather than by direct instruction and what conditions could foster this discovery.

Our concern with (1) and (2) above has led us to reconsider the nature of the meaning-bearing units of language, how they are constituted, and how language users come into possession of them. As a consequence, we see the need for a brand of holism as an alternative to the atomism implicit both in item-based inventories of units and in the compositionality assumption that derives the meaning of complex expressions predictably from the meaning of their parts. The most satisfying and fruitful conception for operationalizing such an alternative holism has turned out to be Zellig Harris's distributional view of meaning and structure (1945; 1954). I trace out in practical terms some implications of this view. For example, distributional relations open up the possibility of 'few shot learning', by-passing much of the central role that frequency of encounters plays in most usage-based accounts of construction learning. In passing (and time permitting) I show how the conception and role that Harris ascribed to distributional relations finds direct expression so many decades later in recent breakthroughs seen in ChatGPT and the design of large language models that power it.

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David Wible is professor emeritus at National Central University's Graduate Institute of Learning and Instruction, where he has served as dean of the College of Liberal Arts and director of the university's Language Center. Currently he is visiting professor in the International College at Tunghai University in Taiwan. He has published on corpus and computational linguistics, applied linguistics, language acquisition and pedagogy, and Chinese and English comparative syntax and morphology in journals such as TESOL Quarterly, Corpus Linguistics and Linguistic Theory, Computers and Education, Language and Linguistics, and Journal of Computer-Assisted Learning.

Date & Time: **November 4, 2023 at 11:00 AM Eastern Time (US and Canada)**

ZOOM LINK: <https://bmcc-cuny.zoom.us/j/83213447103>

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