Language and Cognition – lecture 6

Constructional schemas

What is language?

“Objectively, there is no single entity that can be so identified. There are simply lots of people—hundreds of millions of them—who talk in roughly similar ways (sometimes very roughly indeed). Strictly speaking, each person has a distinct linguistic system (…) These individual systems do exhibit a strong family resemblance, however, and like the members of an extended family, some systems resemble one other quite closely, others more distantly. On this basis we can group them into ‘dialects’ of various sizes and degrees of cohesiveness (…) If thought of as a clearly delimited entity with definite boundaries, neither a dialect nor a language exists in the wild, but only as a mental construction—the product of idealization (…) and metaphor.” (Langacker 2008, 217)

What is a rule?

- A rule can be a **“law”** governing our behavior. Linguistic rules are not like laws, because they are not explicitly made and declared by “law-makers.”
- A rule can be an **algorithm**. An algorithm is an **instruction** for putting together linguistic expressions. Algorithms do not resemble sentences.
- A rule can be a **schema**. A schema is a **template** for putting together a sentence. Schemas do resemble sentences, but are more abstract. Cognitive linguistics views linguistic rules largely as schemas.

Constructional schema

- Constructional schemas are abstract concepts of composite expressions (inflected forms, phrases, sentences, etc.).
- Schemas are acquired through abstracting regularities from linguistic expressions during language acquisition.
- For example, a noun (e.g. *cat*) has several schemas associated with it:
  - [DET N] as in *the cat*,
  - [ADJ N] as in *big cat*,
  - [N PP] as in *cat on the roof*,
  - etc.

Major and minor schemas

- Major constructional schemas are typically responsible for "regular" patterns; e.g. *-ed* as the past tense marker.
- Minor constructional schemas are typically responsible for "irregular" patterns; e.g. *write-wrote*, *drive-drove*, *break-broke*, *speak-spoke.*

Alternate schemas

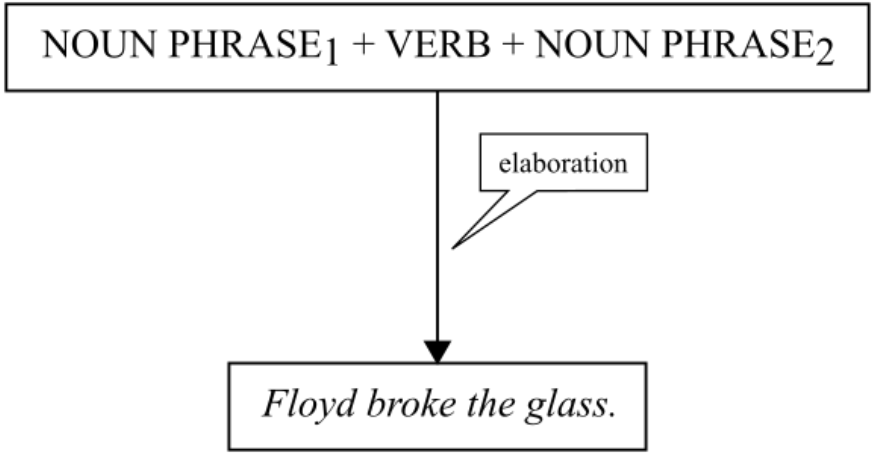
- The verb *hang* has two constructional schemas for forming the past form:
  - *hang* ⟶ *hung* (hanging things, minor schema)
  - *hang* ⟶ *hanged* (hanging people, major schema)
- Typically, alternate schemas become **specialized** for particular meanings and context, or one of them disappears.
  - A minor schema may also survive when it is **entrenched** (i.e. remembered more easily due to frequent use, like *be–was*).
- Sometimes, however, both alternate schemas survive, although individual speakers may have preferences for a particular schema.
  - *dive* ⟶ { *dove* / *dived* }

Categorization – elaboration

- There is a close relation between schemas and prototypical composite constructions. Consider, the constructional schema of a transitive sentence:

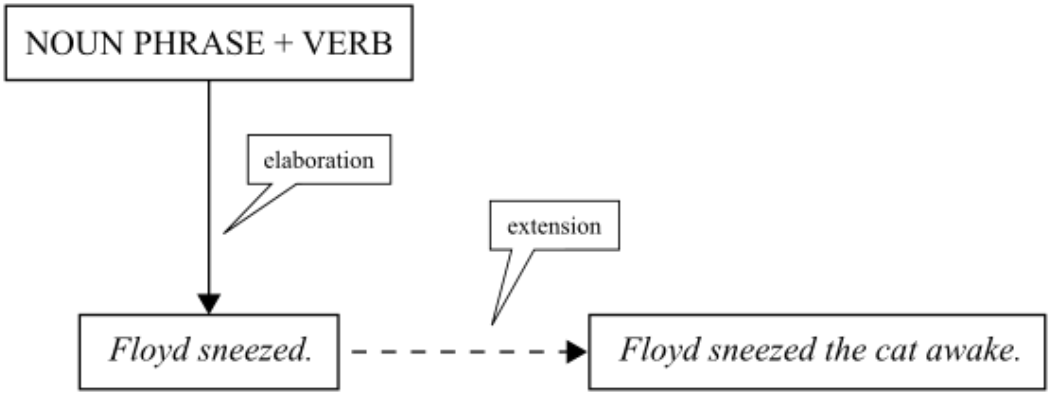
  NOUN PHRASE$_1$ + VERB + NOUN PHRASE$_2$ (+ with NOUN PHRASE$_3$)

- When a sentence is categorized as a prototypical transitive sentence, the sentence **elaborates** the schema (i.e. the sentence specifies the schema in more detail).



Categorization – extension

- When expression A is not categorized in accordance with its schema, but modifies another expression B, expression A is said to **extend** expressions B.



Mielić or *mleć*?

mleć / pleć

- *mełłem / pełłem*
- *mełłeś / pełłeś*
- *mełł / pełł*
- …

minor schema

mielić / pielić

- *mieliłem / pieliłem*
- *mieliłeś / pieliłeś*
- *mielił / pielił*
- …

major schema

Tyć and *być*

tyć* / *myć

- *tyjemy / myjemy*
- *tyjecie / myjecie*
- *tyją / myją*
- *tyłem / myłem*

major schema

być

- *jesteśmy / * byjemy*
- *jesteście / * byjecie*
- *są / * byją*
- *byłem*

minor schema

Włączać or *włanczać*?

-ą-	***-an-***	***-on-* → *-an-***
• *włączyć*	• *włanczać*	• *zak**ończy**ć*
• *wyłączyć*	• *wyłanczać*	• *zak**ańcza**nie*
• *włączenie*	• *włanczanie*	• *zak**ończe**nie*
• *przełączyć*	• *przełanczać*	• *zak**ańcza**nie*

Simplified pronunciation

	o-a schema	**a-a schema**
[wy-łõn̩-čyć]	[wy-ł**õ**n̩-č**a**ć]	??[wy-ł**ã**n̩-č**a**ć]
[za-kõń-čyć]	*[za-kõń-čać]	[za-k**ã**ń-č**a**ć]

References

- Langacker, Ronald W. 2013. *Essentials of Cognitive Grammar*. Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press.
  - Chapter 8
- Langacker, Ronald W. 2008. *Cognitive Grammar. A Basic Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.
  - Chapter 8