On defining "niche" or "marginal" argument structure constructions

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This paper reflects on the concepts of "niche constructions" and "marginal argument structure constructions" as introduced in Goldberg (2019) and Hoffmann (2020), respectively. Goldberg (2019: 93) informally characterises niche constructions as "constructions with particularly unique functions" that "are broadly generalizable without idiosyncratic exceptions", i.e. that are highly productive, occurring with a large variety of verbs. She cites the English *way-* (*He murdered his way through central California*) and 'time'-*away* (*Let's dance the night away*) constructions as cases in point. Hoffmann (2020: 2) observes that, in addition to fully schematic "central" argument structure constructions that encode basic human event types, "languages also possess 'marginal' Argument Structure constructions that […]remain partially lexically filled and considerably more restricted in their meaning". The example he gives is the [V *the* N$_{taboo-word}$ *out of*]-construction, as in *He really acted the crap out of this role*.

"Niche" constructions of this kind have played an important role in constructionist theorizing – their prominent presence in the CxG literature of the past three decades has probably contributed in no small part to the misconception in other frameworks that CxG is a theory "obsessed with linguistic marginalia" (cf. Michaelis 2012: 32). Still, while many linguists will share the intuition that there is something special about the abovementioned patterns, it is by no means easy to pinpoint the exact features that set them apart from more "default" argument structure constructions.

This paper is aimed at disentangling the various properties that may contribute to a construction being perceived as "niche" or "marginal". High type frequency, for instance, while definitely a relevant parameter, cannot be the whole story, as constructions such as, say, the transitive construction or the intransitive motion construction are highly type-frequent, too, but can hardly be claimed to be niche. Other properties to be discussed include semantic specificity and degree of expressivity ("rich" or "unique" semantics), as well as the presence of competing patterns, lexical filledness, and the semantic and frequency relations between the (partially) schematic patterns and their instantiating verbs. It will also be explored whether the notion of "grammatical metaphor" as this is used in the framework of Systemic-Functional Linguistics (SFL) can be fruitfully applied to the domain of argument structure and whether the criteria that have been proposed in this tradition for identifying cases of (ideational) grammatical metaphor are relevant to construction grammar, too. Originally introduced by Halliday in the 1980s, grammatical metaphor refers to all kinds of cases where meanings are expressed by means of grammatical forms that differ from the "default" grammatical strategies used for encoding them (see, e.g., Taverniers 2017).

Data for the investigation are for the largest part drawn from existing case studies of (potential) niche constructions in English and Dutch. In addition, part of the argumentation is based on a newly compiled data set on the construction illustrated with a number of examples from COCA (Davies 2020) in (1), i.e. a hitherto largely undiscussed 'fraudulent dispossession' pattern with *out of*.

(1)   a.   Around Boston, skimmers went as far as planting this sign to calm suspicious ATM users, **then con them out of about $50,000 bucks.** (COCA)

        b.   ... and the easier it would be for him to exploit them somehow, **to trick them out of gold or daughters.** (COCA)

        c.   The government's case against Kumar includes complaints from seven men who allege **that they were cheated out of their kidneys**. (COCA)

References

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