Constructions in language contact situations: A usage-based perspective

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Despite usage-based linguists' concern with processes of emergence and change, overt links to contact linguistics are remarkably rare (but see Höder 2012; Hakimov & Backus 2020). The present study aims at contributing to fill this gap by exploring how constructional schemas may diffuse in language contact situations. Traditionally, it has been proposed that speakers only copy connectives in language contact situations. Here it is shown that there may be more to the story. In many languages around the world, connectives occur in constructions with specific properties (Gestalt Features, such as tense-aspect-mood markers, prosody, order of clauses). For instance, in many Mesoamerican languages not genetically related, a multi-word expression meaning 'at the time when' must appear in a construction in which the main clause appears with 'and' (Olguín Martínez 2022). Furthermore, both clauses appear in the irrealis. This gives rise to the constructional schema in (1). From a construction-grammar perspective (Croft 2001: 52), the Gestalt Features in (1) work in concert in the expression of 'when'. These cues taken as a whole provide a Structural Gestalt which aids the hearer in identifying the 'when' construction as a whole. The diffusion of adverbial constructional schemas through language contact is the result of pattern replication. In this scenario, only the patterns of the other language are replicated (Heine & Kuteva 2006; Matras & Sakel 2007). Put another way, no phonetic substance is involved (Kuteva 2017: 166).

In this presentation, we adopt a Radical Construction Grammar approach to explore adverbial constructional schemas in four Mesoamerican languages not genetically related: Huasteca Nahuatl, Papantla Totonac, San Gabriel Huastec, and Uxpanapa Chinantec. These languages have been in contact for a long time. Accordingly, this has led to the diffusion of adverbial constructional schemas from Huasteca Nahuatl to Papantla Totonac, San Gabriel Huastec, and Uxpanapa Chinantec. The data used in this work are drawn from the field work of the authors. We compare and taxonomize three constructional schemas in these languages: 'let alone', 'instead of V-ing', and 'until'.

While most of the time speakers copy all Gestalt Features from a constructional schema, our work also shows that sometimes speakers may copy a constructional schema from 'X' language to express another function in the recipient language. This can set the stage for further processes of development, which may be internally motivated. This is known as analogical pattern replication. For instance, Huasteca Nahuatl encodes double 'without V-ing' constructions (e.g. 'she left without paying the bill and without saying goodbye') with the schema in (2). While Papantla Totonac and San Gabriel Huastec copied the Huasteca Nahuatl schema for expressing double 'without V-ing' meanings, Uxpanapa Chinantec copied the Huasteca Nahuatl schema for expressing 'neither….nor…' meanings. From a usage-based perspective, this replication makes sense given that double 'without V-ing' meanings and 'neither…nor….' meanings are semantically related. Both meanings signal the non-realization of two situations. This indicates that in language contact situations speakers can create associative links between construction schemas and meanings in the grammar network (see Diessel 2019).

(1)   *AT THE TIME WHEN*_____IRREALIS, *AND*_____IRREALIS.

(2)   MAIN.CLAUSE.VERB_____, CONJUNCTION+NEG_____+ CONJUNCTIONJ+NEG_____.

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