Is there any such thing as constructional equivalence?

One of the basic aims of the contrastive linguistics approach taken in the 1970s was that any comparison between two languages should be based on two independent descriptions of these languages (Burgschmidt & Götz 1974). While this claim no doubt holds true today, we will argue in this presentation that this is easier said than done.

One of the more recent frameworks developed in language typology is that of comparative concepts (Haspelmath 2010, Croft 2016). Croft (2022: 19–25) argues that within a Construction Grammar approach three levels of constructions can be identified:
   (a) constructions of a non-language specific kind
   (b) strategies employed by particular languages to express a particular meaning
   (c) language-specific Constructions in the sense of form-meaning pairings

In this presentation, we will argue that there is no immediate need to regard levels (a) and (b) as constructions. Instead, we consider it sufficient to identify as the top level of the model semantic functions that can be expressed in the languages under comparison (for instance, a semantic function such as reference to the 'future' in the case of, say, Latin and English). The strategies employed in these languages differ in that Latin makes use of inflexions, whereas English makes use of combinations of different verbs. It will be argued here that it is only the level of language specific constructions such as the WILL-MODAL CONSTRUCTION and the BE-GOING-TO-V CONSTRUCTION at which the term construction is justified since it is only at this level that a specification in terms of form and function can be made.

Taking the German DITRANSITIVE CONSTRUCTION and the English DITRANSITIVE CONSTRUCTION as an example, we will illustrate at what levels differences between these constructions need to be captured: one very obvious one is form (nominative – dative – accusative vs., in the canonical form at least, word order). What is equally important, however, is that the German and the English constructions have different collo-profiles. We see collo-profiles that show which verbs typically occur in a particular argument structure construction (*give* making up more than 50% of the occurrences of the ditransitive construction in the BNC) (Herbst 2020) as an integral part of the description of constructions in the sense of Goldberg (2019: 7).

The fact that verbs that are generally considered to be equivalent such as *erklären* and *explain* behave differently in that the former occurs in the ditransitive construction whereas the latter does not can be taken as an indication of the complexity of contrasting constructions across languages. We will argue that constructions expressing the same or similar semantic content (*She explained the problem to him*) will have to be considered together with, for instance, the ditransitive and that any contrastive analysis should be based on general semantic functions and argument roles, but not on "general" constructions.

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