

Applying constructional approach to second language teaching and learning

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Abstract. The inevitability of addressing constructional approach in modern linguodidactics is caused by the crisis in teaching practices aimed at providing students with a set of static information. The ever- and fast-changing nature of the modern system of knowledge leads to the necessity of teaching students how to search for, analyze and critically assess actual language data. The paper discusses problems and prospects of applying constructional approach in second language teaching and learning and posits an algorithm of studying construction semantics of the ‘noun + get + adjective’ construction as an example. The research methods include analysis and synthesis for identifying problems and prospects of introducing constructional approach in second language learning. A set of resultative meanings of the ‘noun + get + adjective’ construction is obtained by way of semantic clusterisation. As a result, major advantages and challenges of applying constructional approach to second language teaching and learning are established. The paper emphasizes the need for students to have a sufficient theoretical basis in language typology and corpus linguistics. The current research also offers an algorithm of construction analysis and includes a listing of key resultative meanings of the ‘noun + get + adjective’ construction and its restrictions. The results can be of certain interest for corpus linguistics and construction semantics. Prospects for the future research in this field reside in developing strategies aimed at introducing construction grammar in the learning process and cataloguing constructions within different types of languages as well as identifying dependencies between constructional patterns and types of languages.

Keywords: construction semantics, corpus linguistics, second language learning, construction grammar

1 Introduction

Modern linguodidactics is experiencing a critical moment as it has to reassess the existing teaching practices in the search for new techniques and approaches which would facilitate

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in-class performance. Besides these global factors affecting the teaching and learning process, there are some intralinguistic aspects of the problem that are connected with certain approaches to language description. The first to mention is lexicographic practices. As is known, dictionary compilers never aim at covering all words or a whole range of their contextual meanings. Hence, dictionaries cease being the only lexicographic source to depend on in second language teaching and learning (SLT&L).

The traditional teaching method with ‘a strict division between the lexicon as a repository of meaningful words and morphemes and meaningless syntactic rules’ sometimes has nothing to do with communicative skills [1]. No wonder, due to the ‘unpredictability of meaning’ [2] such expressions as ‘How do you do?’ are included in dictionaries as separate language entries. According to M. Bila and A. Kacmarova, the meaning of such multi-word units ‘is not generated again and again, rather stored in the users’ minds’ [3].

Conventionalised expressions constitute the most typical operational units of language, i.e. constructions. B. Leclercq also states that ‘when discussing the meaning of constructions, one already focuses on meaning conventions’ [4]. Moreover, the notion of construction ‘encompasses morphemes, words, idioms, as well as abstract phrasal patterns’ [5].

These assumptions emphasize the need to modernise teaching practices in linguodidactics embracing the achievements of construction grammar and incorporating the constructional corpus-based approach within language studies.

2 Methods

The current paper belongs to a series of research studies on semantic variability of ‘verb + nominal part of speech’ constructions in English. The objective of the work is to display the application of constructional approach to solving SLT&L problems using the analysis of semantic variability of the ‘noun + get + adjective’ construction as an example. The verb ‘get’ belongs to one of the most frequent and semantically diverse verbs in the modern English language which is often analysed in recent studies from historical [6]; second language learning [7-9]; semantic [10-12]; constructional and corpus-based [13, 14]; bilingual translations [15, 16] perspectives.

The research encompasses a consecutive implementation of the following procedures:

1. Defining prospects and issues of applying constructional approach in SLT&L.
2. Forming a request in corpus database and creating a representative sampling of the ‘noun + get + adjective’ construction instances, or collocations.
3. Contextual analysis of the obtained collocations in order to increase the quality of the sampling.
4. Semantic clusterisation of the right- and left-context collocates of the verb ‘get’.
5. Interpretation of the resultative meanings of the clusters.

After discussing the application of constructional approach to SLT&L, the article presents an algorithm of constructional analysis and identification of the semantic variability of the verb in the construction under study.

The research employs analysis and synthesis for positing advantages, downsides and prospects of applying constructional approach in SLT&L. The empirical part of the research draws upon Corpus of Contemporary American (COCA).

First, the request NOUN GET ADJ formed in COCA. The request and contextual analysis resulted in 4047 collocations – the instances of the construction under study.

The initial sampling is formed by the continuous sampling method. After the refinement of the sampling, the obtained collocations are divided into groups by the semantic clusterisation method. It implies that variable right- and left-context elements in collocations possess mutual hypo-hyperonymous links (e.g. ‘women: mother/ girl/ wife get pregnant’) which can serve as evidence of a viral nature of the collocation. Consequently, resultative meaning of each of the clusters is defined.

3 Results

One of the prospects of constructional approach is large sets of unexplored language data which can motivate teachers and students to not only study a foreign language or translation but also develop a wide range of soft skills – to learn in practice how to search for information, to critically assess it, to analyse it, to make well-thought conclusions and give proper arguments when interpreting language facts. Furthermore, the language data from corpora are available for qualitative and quantitative processing and interpretation. In other words, ‘corpora may provide counterexamples for hitherto widely-accepted claims’ [17].

From a communicative standpoint, constructional approach may prove efficient in overcoming language interference, and help increase fluency and develop skills of spontaneous speech [18]. According to M. Fried, ‘knowing a language with a native-like fluency means knowing (and learning) the constructions of that language’ [19].

Nevertheless, introduction of constructional approach in SLT&L, despite being extremely timely, faces some challenges:

1. Students’ lack of theoretical knowledge. Studying constructions, students are assumed to have certain knowledge and skills to work with language corpora and concordances which highlights the need for preliminary theoretical preparation.

2. Relevance. At the moment comprehensive corpora have been developed only for major languages (e.g. English, German, Russian, etc.). The volume, balance, scope, time period and relevance of the data constitute a different issue which can affect the quality of samplings and distort the results. Additionally, tagging also makes work with the data complicated.

3. Speed and efficiency. According to I.N. Remkhe and L.A. Nefyodova, ‘translators find it time-consuming and unreliable at times of tight schedules’ [20].

3. In its turn, introduction of constructional approach requires experimental substantiation of its efficiency and a thorough restructuring of teaching practices which can be a complicated and time-consuming enterprise [21]. To resolve the restrictions of applying constructional approach to SLT&L, construction semantics and patterns must be studied further to obtain a critical mass of data.

Henceforth the ‘noun + get + adjective’ construction will be discussed in detail. The collocations of the ‘noun+ get + adjective’ construction form six clusters (Table 1).

Table 1. Clusters of collocations of the ‘noun+ get + adjective’.

No.	Left context	VERB	Right context	Resultative meaning	Notes
1	thing(s), situation, problem, going(s)	GET	bad, worse, serious, complicated, difficult, heated, hot, crazy, weird, messy,	worsening of the situation	The largest cluster – 1484 instances (~ 36,7%). Right-context collocates share the semi ‘danger’ or ‘complication’. A significant number of collocates consists of root + y suffix. Adjectives based

			rough, tough, ugly, hairy, dicey, sticky, tricky		on this morphological model typically mean uncontrollable and weird state (e.g. 'barmy', 'loopy', and 'dicey', 'hairy', 'messy').
2	things	GET	better, interesting	improvement of the situation	Comparatively small frequency and variety of collocates.
3	days, weather	GET	shorter, colder, warmer	change of weather	The collocations are strongly connected to high-frequency attributive collocations, e.g. 'the weather gets colder – cold weather'.
4	things, message, invitation	GET	lost	loss of objects	Collocations combine elements with antonymous semantics, i.e. 'get' – 'to receive, to obtain', while 'lost' is Participle II from the verb 'lose' which means 'to no longer have something because you do not know where it is'.
5	face, eyes, knees, feet	GET	red, hot, big, wide, weak, cold	physiological reactions as a consequence of emotions	The left-context collocates define parts of the body. Strong connections to high-frequency attributive collocations – 'red face', 'wide eyes', 'weak knees', 'cold feet'.
6	[people]	GET	[status or a state]	change of emotional or physiological state of people, their state or status	The left-context collocates define groups of people.
6.1	women, girls, wife, mother	GET	pregnant	conceiving a baby	The right-context collocate restricts left-context collocates (female humans).
6.2	parents, people	GET	divorced	breaking a marriage	
6.3	people	GET	mad, angry, fed up, stuck, confused, tired, scared, upset, frustrated, nervous, desperate, bored, sick	a negative change of mood	The right-context collocates define strong emotions of fear, annoyance or anger.
6.4	people, person, mother, father, child(ren), kid, wife	GET	sick	falling ill	The left-context collocates contain hyperonyms (people, person) and hyponyms which share the same 'family'.
6.5	people	GET	rich	financial welfare	

6.6	people, men, women	GET	old	become old	
6.7	child(ren), kids, students	GET	older	grow up, age	Despite the fact that the right-context collocates 'old' and 'older' represent a positive and a comparative forms of the same adjective, the left-context collocates in clusters 6.6 and 6.7 do not interchange, i.e. 'kids get older', but not *'kids get old'. These limitations can be connected to a kind of universally shared prototypical assumptions.
6.8	people, kid	GET	hurt, killed	to be injured	

4 Discussion

Speaking of resultative meanings of constructions, it is worth mentioning that the verb 'get' in the construction is desemantized and functions as an auxiliary verb in a complex nominal predicate. Complex predicates constitute a large proportion of predicative structures in English, which is related to its typological features. The English language is a language with predominant analytical tendencies. These tendencies imply that typically the language has analytical forms of predicates consisting of an auxiliary verb and a nominal or verbal component. The auxiliary verb is generally desemantized and has a grammatical meaning while the nominal or verbal component is grammatically static and expresses the semantics of the complex predicate. Such allocation of responsibilities explains why, despite the semantics of the verb 'get' ('to receive, to obtain'), collostructions 'get small', 'get short', 'get lost' do not contain any internal contradictions in their semantics. The verb 'get' here is desemantized and only performs in a linking function. Moreover, it can be assumed that certain language types gravitate towards specific constructional patterns.

5 Conclusion

As a result of the current research, the major advantages and issues related to the application of constructional approach in SLT&L are identified. The need for students' substantial theoretical awareness is highlighted. The major resultative meanings and their restrictions of 'noun + get + adjective' clusters have been detected. The results obtained can be further used as a case study in corpus linguistics, semantics or theoretical grammar. The prospects of studying construction semantics are connected with cataloguing constructional patterns in languages belonging to different types and ascertaining pattern regularities and dependencies. To sum up, to be seamlessly introduced in SLT&L constructional approach in linguodidactics requires revising teaching practices and techniques which should undergo cardinal changes.

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