Morphology in constructions: implications, opportunities, consequences

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When the first monograph on Construction Morphology (Booij 2010) appeared, the theory made a fairly smooth entry into the existing theoretical landscape — much smoother than the rise of Construction Grammar among the then current (generative) models of syntax. Within morphology, the constructionist approach connected well with central observations such as the commonness of idiomaticity, the evident limitations on predictability, and the necessity to assume a close relation between grammar and the lexicon. Yet, more than a decade later, the implications of embracing a constructionist view are coming into clearer focus, and some turn out to be more consequential than might have seemed at first glance. This talk explores the ways a constructionist view makes old questions appear in a new light. It focusses on three central issues:

- relationality: the links within and among morphological constructions,
- productivity, especially limited productivity,
- paradigmaticity, or the role of 'sister relations' between complex words and between the schemas along which they are built.

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Lexically restricted phonological alternation: the case for via-rules

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This talk addresses lexically restricted phonological alternation, focusing on a case-study from present-day Spanish: the alternation between high and mid vowels that affects the roots of approximately 24% of third-conjugation verbs (Bermúdez-Otero 2016: §2). Membership in this alternating set is unpredictable, but, when a verb does take part, the distribution of its alternants is phonologically conditioned, automatic, and exceptionless.

Crucially, although the alternation submits to a straightforward autosegmental solution involving an underlying floating [-high] feature, behavioural and neurolinguistic evidence (Linares et al. 2006) reveals that, in fact, learners of Spanish fail to adopt this analysis, opting instead for listing the two allomorphs in the lexicon. I therefore model the alternation as involving phonologically driven selection among listed stems. This approach maintains modularity, correctly predicts the size of local domains for allomorph selection, and demarcates the productive and unproductive aspects of the alternation. It is also independently supported by evidence from recognition latencies (Domínguez et al. 1999, 2000).

Elaborating this approach, however, I argue that stored allomorphs are linked by VIA-RULES (Vennemann 1972: 225), i.e. by 'non-directional, non-generative relational rules' (Tiersma 1978: 65) akin to the 'non-productive schemata' of Jackendoff & Audring (2018). Since they are non-generative, via-rules play no role in production and are therefore unable to trigger the systematic extension of allomorphic patterns. They do, however, play a role in lexical acquisition: language learners are subject to a general anti-alternation bias (McCarthy 1998; Hayes 2004; Tessier 2006, 2016; Do 2013, 2018), but they accept a new alternating item more readily if its behaviour matches a pattern of allomorphy encoded in a via-rule.

Via-rules thus capture a range of facts: that lexically restricted phonological alternations typically fall into a small number of recurrent patterns (Revithiadou et al. 2019), that the learnability of an 'irregular' form depends not only on its own frequency but also on that of its class (Yang 2005), and that unproductive patterns may show 'islands of reliability' (Albright et al 2001). More generally, positing via-rules in the context of a modular stratal architecture of grammar (Bermúdez-Otero 2018) allows us to capture the differences between strong suppletion, weak suppletion, and the stem-level phonology proper, which behave differently in paradigm extension and show different frequency effects.

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The (small) syntax of stative passives

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One of the basic questions in the theory of morphology concerns the nature of *word formation*: how morphemes are assembled into larger objects, and—crucially—whether there are distinct systems that do this (Lexicon versus syntax), or just one. Stative (a.k.a. "adjectival") passives like *opened* in *the opened door*, or *flattened* in *the metal is flattened*, have provided an interesting testing ground for a comparison of different approaches to word formation. Contrasts with eventive ("verbal") passives were used as evidence that stative passives are formed Lexically, while eventive passives are syntactic (e.g. Wasow 1977, Levin and Rappaport 1986 and related work). A contrasting line of research goes in a different direction, arguing that stative passives are sometimes (Kratzer 2001) or always (Embick 2004) syntactic. Much subsequent work in this second vein has developed the idea that stative passives can appear in fully phrasal structures, essentially like their eventive passive counterparts.

In this talk I examine a number of properties of English stative passives which—taken together—raise problems for a fully phrasal treatment. These include (i) modification asymmetries relative to eventive passives; (ii) scope problems with *un*-prefixation, and (iii) argument-licensing asymmetries. The generalizations that are revealed suggest that stative passives are indeed built syntactically, but "small", i.e. without phrasal internal structure. I conclude by outlining some general implications of this line of argument, concerning in particular how the small versus phrasal dichotomy does (and does not) relate to the Lexical versus syntactic distinction, and point to questions for further research.