

Cognitive Constraints on Resultative Constructions in English

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In this paper I discuss some specific constraints on the English resultative construction from the standpoint of Goldberg's (1995) Construction Approach, which shows that a resultative construction is posited which exists independently of particular verbs that instantiate it, and the approach views a construction as having its own semantics.

A first constraint is the Direct Change Constraint, which requires that a change of state described by the resultative construction must be understood to be directly caused by the action denoted by a verb. With this constraint, we can explain the following contrast:

- (1) a. Bill wiped the table clean.
- b. *Bill wiped the table dirty.

The change of state in (1a), i.e., "the table became clean" can be understood to be directly caused by the wiping action. On the other hand, the change of state in (1b), i.e., "the table became dirty" cannot. That is, the latter situation is directly caused not by the wiping action but the napkin which was dirty. Thus, since (1b) does not meet the Direct Change Constraint, it is unacceptable as a resultative construction. A similar explanation applies to the following sentence:

- (2) *Midas touched the tree gold. (Simpson (1983: 146))

This example is not acceptable on the resultative interpretation, even if Midas is a myth and he has the power of turning anything he touches into gold. That is, in this case, the direct cause of the change of state "the tree became gold" is attributed to the power of Midas, not to the touching action itself. (2) does not meet the Direct Change Constraint, and so it is unacceptable.

A second constraint is the Perceivable Change Constraint, which requires that a resultant state denoted by the resultative phrase must be directly perceivable. With this constraint, we can account for the difference in grammaticality between (3a) and (3b):

- (3) a. Bill broke the door open.
- b. *Bill broke the vase worthless. (Jackendoff (1990: 240))

The resultant state *open* in (3a) can be directly perceived, while the resultant state *worthless* in (3b) cannot, because *worthless* expresses value judgement or evaluation. Since (3b) does not meet the Perceivable Change Constraint, it is not acceptable as a resultative construction.

The last constraint is the Pre-existence Constraint, which requires that an entity which can appear in the object position of the resultative construction must be the entity which is understood as being already in existence prior to the action denoted by the verb. Observe the following sentences:

- (4) a. (*)He built the house splendid.
 b. He rebuilt the house splendid.

(4a) does not receive a resultative interpretation; it receives an adverbial interpretation. Of the two, only (4b) is acceptable as a resultative construction. For the object *the house* in (4b) is understood as being already in existence prior to the action of rebuilding, while the object in (4a) *the house* is understood as coming into existence only after the action of building. For the same reason, only (5a) is unacceptable on the resultative reading:

- (5) a. (*)She made the chair beautiful.
 b. She remade the chair beautiful.

However, even if the noun phrase which appears in the direct object position of the resultative construction is understood as existing prior to the action denoted by a verb, some sentences are not acceptable as resultative constructions, as in (6):

- (6) a. * He dug the ground deep.
 b. (*)She opened the window wide.

In these cases, we must pay attention to the predication relation between the postverbal NP and the resultative phrase, because in the resultative construction the resultative phrase is predicated of the postverbal NP. Here I will test the predication relation in question by linking the postverbal NPs to the resultative phrases with the verb *be*, as in (7):

- (7) a. *The ground is deep.
 b. *The window is wide.

The ungrammaticality of (7) shows that the adjective *deep* and *wide* cannot be predicated of *the ground* and *the window* respectively. This is why (6a) and (6b) are not acceptable.

In conclusion, I have shown three constraints on the resultative construction in English: Direct Change Constraint, Perceivable Change Constraint and Pre-existence Constraint.

Selected References

- Goldberg, Adel E. (1995) *Constructions: A Construction Grammar Approach to Argument Structure*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Jackendoff, Ray (1990) *Semantic Structures*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- Simpson, Jane (1983) "Resultatives," in L. Levin, M. Rappaport, and A. Zaenen, eds., *Papers in Lexical-Functional Grammar*, 147-157, the Indiana University Linguistics Club, Bloomington.