

Testing low-frequency verbs in grammatical constructions

This study focuses on the use of grammatical constructions like the *x's way* (e.g. *The firefighters pushed their way into the building*) in order to describe their semantic content. In the cognitive literature, many constructions are believed to carry rather graphic and rich meanings, contrary to what could be expected from closed-class forms. For example, the *x's way* is argued to convey “motion in the face of difficulty” (Goldberg 1995); the *into-gerund* construction (*She charmed him into buying her a car*) is said to convey causation through “manipulation” or “trickery” (Wierzbicka 2006). But while these views of rich contentful meanings in schematic constructions are fairly implausible, they do seem to capture most attested uses, while exceptions are only found in uses featuring verbs that, although attested, appear less frequently (e.g. *He strolled his way to victory*).

This poses a challenge to research – how can the established views be verified if exceptions are rare? On the one hand, given their infrequency, these uses could be dismissed as unrepresentative. On the other, it seems sound practice to explore the exceptional uses more thoroughly, if only because they can provide insights into the functioning and actual meanings of constructions that would otherwise be unavailable. That is, if it could be demonstrated that some rarely-attested verbs are more likely to appear in a construction than some verbs that are consistent with the rich-semantic analyses, that would suggest the accepted rich-semantic analyses are not correct. In this study, an acceptability judgment task is used to elicit reactions to “exceptional” sentences with verbs that are either rare or absent in corpus material. This design has yielded data that are otherwise invisible even in very large corpora. Additionally, the results make it possible to postulate an alternative view of the *x's way* construction, involving a description of its meaning and use different from the cognitive analyses.

Goldberg, A. (1995) *Constructions: A Construction Grammar approach to argument structure*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.

Wierzbicka, A. (2006) *English: meaning and culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.