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Construction Grammar and its application to Greek

Introduction

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1 Construction Grammar: Basic premises[1]

Construction Grammar developed as a non-modular, non-derivational grammatical theory aimed at covering language as a whole, the regular as well as the more or less idiosyncratic (Fillmore, Kay & O'Connor 1988). Alongside the original approach, developed further by Kay & Fillmore (1999) and Fried & Östman (2004), other constructional approaches have since emerged. These include Cognitive Construction Grammar (Goldberg 2006, 2019), Radical Construction Grammar (Croft 2001), and Sign-based Construction Grammar (Boas & Sag 2012), all representing prominent versions of the constructional paradigm. All constructional approaches draw on the idea that linguistic form is inextricably and conventionally bound with its meaning and communicative function, and that this semiotic basis underlies any descriptively and explanatorily adequate theory of language (Fried 2015).

1 The contributions in this issue originated as talks in the thematic panel "Construction Grammar and its application to Greek", which took place at the 16th International Conference on Greek Linguistics (ICGL-16), at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. The organizers of the panel (and guest editors of the current issue) have put together this special issue in the hope that it will serve to introduce Construction Grammar as a theory and showcase its potential for the analysis of Greek. We wish to thank the editors of JGL for giving us this opportunity.

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In its thirty or so years of existence Construction Grammar has developed into a full-fledged theory with two international handbooks—*Oxford Handbook of Construction Grammar* (2013), *Cambridge Handbook of Construction Grammar* (2025)—and has yielded extensive analyses of many different languages, providing a broad empirical basis of relevant features and possible universal constraints. While constructional approaches do not assume the existence of a universal inventory of constructions, nor are all constructions expected to include preset categories of morpho-syntactic, semantic and pragmatic features (only those that are empirically justified for a given language), universal properties and constraints or cross-linguistic generalizations are sought in particular types of form-meaning mappings and/or in the way constructions map onto conceptual space (e.g. Croft 2001). In constructional theory, then, languages are learned ('constructed') on the basis of the linguistic input—token and type frequency, idiomatic/formulaic language, and exemplar-based learning are important notions in this context—along with general cognitive, pragmatic and processing factors (Goldberg 2006, 2019; Tomasello 2010, 2019). Recent work (Goldberg 2024) highlights in fact the compatibility of constructionist approaches with Large Language Models.

A theory of this kind requires a complex unit of analysis, which accommodates features of form (prosodic, morphological, syntactic) as well as features of meaning and function, ranging from lexical semantics, event structure and participants, pragmatic properties, and discourse context. This symbolic unit, or sign, is called a 'construction' and applies to all kinds of linguistic expressions, from fixed idioms to productive syntactic patterns. The grammar of a language then is seen as an inventory of constructions, which are organized in structured networks of varying degrees of complexity and schematicity (or specificity). Networks are primarily formed on the basis of "inheritance" relations in terms of shared features between constructions (passed on from more general to more specific patterns) and features that are idiosyncratic and set them apart.

Since constructions capture the entirety of speakers' knowledge as observed in language use (the latter represented in corpora), they range from fully schematic (productive) patterns to fully substantive (lexical in traditional terminology) ones at the extreme ends, defining the lexicon-syntax continuum (also known as the "idiomaticity continuum"; Kay & Michaelis 2012). We can illustrate the continuum with some examples from Greek. An expression like *Και του χρόνου!* '(same thing) next year' is an instance of a fully substantive construction with no morphological, syntactic, or lexical flexibility (cf. *και τον χρόνο, *του χρόνου και, *και του έτους). At the other end, fully schematic constructions comprise, for example, the various subject-verb-complement order-

ing constructions, with no morphosyntactic or lexicosemantic restrictions, yet associated with pragmatic topic/focus/contrast functions (e.g. *Θέλει τον ψωμά* 'She wants the baker' vs. *Τον ψωμά θέλει* 'It's the baker she wants'), with intonation of course also being an integral part of such constructions. However, of great theoretical significance are constructions that lie somewhere in the middle of the continuum since these are not easily accommodated in frameworks that recognize only a lexicon on the one hand and syntactic rules on the other. These are constructions characterized by obvious similarities to more schematic and productive patterns (cf. rules in generative and/or minimalist frameworks), yet lexically and grammatically constrained by idiosyncratic features. An example would be the Greek construction *Έτσι κάνει/κάνουν το καλό παιδί/τα καλά παιδιά*; 'Is this how a nice kid/nice kids should behave?'. While this pattern does not deviate formally from yes-no questions, its meaning, i.e. the conventional implicature of disapproval/disagreement possibly motivated by syntactic structure and lexical semantics, is not fully derivable and needs therefore to be attributed to the construction as a whole, i.e. to a pattern we can informally represent as [*έτσι* $V_{\text{indicative}}$ + NP?], with italics denoting the fixed/substantive element.

2 Constructional literature on Greek and the papers in this issue

Our aim in this special issue is to extend the still-limited yet rapidly growing constructionist research on Greek in all possible domains of application: morphology, syntax, semantics, discourse-pragmatics and diachronic developments, all through the notion of the construction. Earlier related work selectively includes Koutsoukos (2013) on inflection and derivation in Modern Greek and Griko, Koutsoukos & Michaelis (2020) on complex words, Marmaridou (2012) on the indefinite nominal constructions of Modern Greek, Nikiforidou (2022a) on *που* 'that' complementation, and Georgakopoulos et al. (2020), Nikiforidou (2022b), and Georgakopoulos & Nikiforidou (2022) on constructional approaches to polysemy and the building of semantic maps in Ancient and Modern Greek. Papers that focus explicitly on constructions that fall in between the fully regular and the fully fixed (idiomatic) include Nikiforidou & Torres Cacoullos (2010) on future-marked conditionals, Nikiforidou, Marmaridou, & Mikros (2014) on imperative *έλα* 'come' with exclamative functions, Kefalidou & Athanasiadou (2019) on the *από X* 'from X' construction in Greek Twitter, Alvanoudi (2025) on negative directive constructions, Thomou & Koutoulaki (2022) on figurative constructions with *αυτί* 'ear' and *μάτι* 'eye', and Ioannou (in preparation) and Ioannou & Nikiforidou (2026) on *έχω να* 'have to' clauses.

The papers in the present issue extend constructional research by focusing on hitherto unidentified constructions in Modern Greek and further applying constructional analysis to more applied domains including constructicography and semantic maps. All the papers rely on robust empirical, corpus-based analysis and all but the last deal with semi-schematic constructions i.e. patterns with both regular and unpredictable features that tend to "fall through the cracks" of mainstream syntactic theory.

The paper by **Dalpanagioti** walks the reader through all relevant steps—from identifying constructional features to delimiting constructional families to building constructicon entries for Modern Greek—with interrogative-negative exclamatives as the case study in point. Examples like *Και τι δεν είχε μέσα!* 'And what didn't it have inside?!', *Και ποιος δεν το ξέρει!* 'And who doesn't know that?!', *Πόσα δεν έχουμε δει μέχρι σήμερα!* 'How many things have we not seen until today?!' are treated as instances of three distinct but related constructions, respectively represented as [*τι δεν* VP], [*ποιος,-α,-ο* (N) *δεν* VP], [*πόσος,-η,-ο* (N) *δεν* VP]. Although each is characterized by idiosyncratic features and preferences (e.g. regarding semantic prosody, pragmatic effects, the presence vs absence of *και* 'and, even', the possibility of conjoining the initial constituent, etc.), at the same time they are clearly related to each other and to the general exclamative construction in terms of basic form and function. The relatedness is captured through hierarchical inheritance relations, from the more general/schematic (exclamative) pattern all the way down to privileged, frequency-entrenched instances of the three constructions (e.g. *και τι δεν θα (έ)δινα!* 'And what wouldn't I give?!').

Insights concerning the relation of lexically restricted constructions to more general and unconstrained patterns are also offered by **Ioannou**'s treatise on *έχω να* 'have to' constructions focusing on examples like *Έχω δυο μήνες να φάω σοκολάτα* 'I haven't eaten chocolate in two months', where a temporal expression appears in the sentence. In the absence of a negative marker in Greek, the construction has been previously analyzed as non-compositional; however, embedding the pattern into a hierarchical network of productive syntactic constructions from which it inherits features of function and form (including the transitive construction, the present-tense construction, *na*-complementation, and locative-existential constructions) significantly motivates its negative perfective meaning and increases compositionality. The analysis illuminates important aspects of the construction, notably its experiential meaning with concomitant restrictions on the subject, collostructional preferences for the verb in the *na*-clause, and discourse parameters of use, all relevant to its differentiation from its compositional counterpart *Έχω δυο μήνες να τελειώσω το άρθρο* 'I have two months to finish the article'.

The paper by **Geka** and **Piata** shows how the rise of constructions can be tied to specific genres, while also venturing into the very new domain of multimodal features of constructions. The authors investigate the *ας έστελνε*(*ς*) 's/he should have texted' construction as used in Greek X, identifying all features of form and meaning that qualify it as a distinct pattern. Properties inherited from the more schematic *as* + IMPERFECTIVE PAST construction crucially include counterfactuality and reprimand, the latter functioning as the primary motivation in the creation of the new construction. At the same time, the strong preference of the new pattern for the 3rd person singular, the exceptionless omission of the object with its specific interpretation (i.e. 'a text message expected in dating'), and the distinction between the reader of the meme and the intended (fictive) addressee of the reprimand render it a distinct sub-construction. By its very nature the construction further raises the issue of integrating non-verbal features into constructional makeup, since the visuals in the memes often contribute propositional content absent from the actual text, a topic insightfully discussed by the authors in the light of recent literature.

Another context-bound construction, the relevant context being conversation, is investigated in the paper by **Alvanoudi** on interrogatives with question words followed by the vocative particles *βρε* and *μωρέ* (the *QWIs-plus-vre/more* construction; e.g. *ποιος το θέλει μωρέ*:? 'Who wants it *more*?'). Combining Interactional Linguistics methods and Construction Grammar principles, the author shows that interpretations of such patterns (as identified in actual talk-in-interaction) go beyond the expected information-seeking; in combination with the vocative particles in specific positions, they express pragmatic meanings that include the challenging of a prior assertion, counter-expectation to the speaker, and interpersonal solidarity. Given that these are hardly attributable to the vocative particles themselves, they are best seen as meanings associated with the whole interrogative (and otherwise schematic and productive) pattern plus the vocative particle in a fixed sequential position. The conventional combination of these meanings with sequential structure and form points to the existence of a two-turn construction with a delimitable range of meanings.

The last paper by **Georgakopoulos** and **Nikiforidou** does not draw on grammatical but on *lexical*, verb-headed constructions, i.e. patterns with one slot lexically filled by a verb and other—grammatically and/or lexically specified—slots representing the complements, morpho-syntactic properties, and collocational preferences of the head. Focusing on 'go' verbs in Ancient Greek, Coptic, and Arabic (*baínō* and *eîmi/érkhomai*, *bôk*, and *ḏahaba* respectively), the authors argue that lexical constructions are the appropriate analytical unit both for intra-language polysemy and for typology and semantic maps.

Through corpus-based, behavioral profile analyses of these verbs it is shown that features that systematically correlate with their various senses, whether morpho-syntactic or lexico-semantic, are adequately captured as lexical constructions. In the context of an ongoing debate in the typological literature, the authors further suggest that the constructional approach is more compatible with the overlap of such features in more than one verb and language and with the fact that their clustering represents frequency-based rather than necessary trends.

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