Abstract:

This paper presents research in progress that investigates the cognitive reality of two fundamental concepts in Cognitive Grammar and Construction Grammar: construal and constructional alternatives. Cognitive Linguistics defines construal as a speaker’s ability to construe a situation in alternate ways. Alternating constructions “transform one conceptualization into another that is roughly equivalent in terms of content, but differs in how this content is construed” (Langacker 1987: 138).

The present paper focuses on the dative alternation, i.e. the alternation between the double-object construction (e.g. The boy gave the girl a flower) and the prepositional construction (e.g. The boy gave a flower to the girl). Previous corpus-based studies of the dative alternation have determined various factors that drive speakers’ choice when selecting between alternatives to express similar conceptual content in construing an experience. The double-object construction, for instance, prefers recipients that are animate, definite, pronominal and shorter than the theme (Theijssen et al. 2013, Bresnan et al. 2007). Our study complements these corpus-based studies by providing evidence from on-line processing that goes beyond prediction (Bresnan & Ford 2010) and instead looks at conceptualization. Using the visual world paradigm (Tanenhaus et al. 1995), we explore the interplay between linguistic and visual processing and investigate whether the choice for one construction over another maps onto how the experience is construed.

We conducted an eye tracking study and recorded the eye movements of 60 native speakers of English. 9 dative verbs were included in the experimental stimuli: award, feed, give, pass, pay, sell, serve, show, write. For each verb, two versions of the sentence was constructed; one with the double-object pattern and one with the prepositional pattern. There were 16 dative sentences and 64 filler sentences. A visual image depicting a real-life situation was presented simultaneously with an audio stimulus containing one of the two constructions. We measured fixation durations and saccades to critical properties (i.e. the prime predictors) and analyzed the data using General Additive Mixed Models (Wood 2006).

By establishing whether competing linguistic constructions map onto slightly different mental conceptualizations as revealed by distinct eye movement patterns for each of the two dative constructions, we aim to shed light on the cognitive processes underlying language comprehension and (in)validate “construal” as a cognitively realistic notion.
References:


