

A usage-based approach to constructional ambiguity

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In the present paper, we argue that the structural properties of a construction can be affected by constructional ambiguity, i.e. the ambiguity that arises in actual language behaviour when two or more constructions are formally identical, but semantically/functionally distinct. More particularly, we show how the constructional ambiguity between Dutch embedded [PART V_{fin}] and embedded [ADJ V_{fin}] constructions (V_{fin} = finite verb), in which both ADJ and PART are instantiated by a participle, influence the degree of word order variability of these constructions. Traditionally, it is assumed that when the participle occurs in the [PART V_{fin}] construction, it inherits both the constructional properties “action” semantics and variable sequential order (the participle either precedes or follows the auxiliary verb; cf. example 1a and 1b). When the participle occurs in the [ADJ V_{fin}] construction, it is assumed to inherit the adjectival properties of the construction (cf. example 2a for a typical example of the construction), i.e. the “state” semantics and invariable sequential order (the adjectival participle always precedes the verb; example 3a is, just like the typical [ADJ V_{fin}] construction (cf. example 2b), the only possible word order).

- (1a) [...] dat de winkel gesloten is.
[...] that-COMP the shop-OBJ closed-PART is- V_{fin} .
[...] that the shop has been closed.
- (1b) [...] dat de winkel is gesloten
[...] that-COMP the shop-OBJ is- V_{fin} closed-PART.
[...] that the shop has been closed.
- (2a) [...] dat de winkel open is.
[...] that-COMP the shop-OBJ open-ADJ is- V_{fin} .
[...] that the shop is open.
- (2b) *[...] dat de winkel is open.
*[...] that-COMP the shop-OBJ is- V_{fin} open-ADJ.
[...] that the shop is open.
- (3a) [...] dat de winkel gesloten is.
[...] that-COMP the shop-OBJ closed-ADJ is- V_{fin} .
[...] that the shop is closed.
- (3b) [?][...] dat de winkel is gesloten.
[?][...] that-COMP the shop-OBJ is- V_{fin} closed-ADJ.
[...] that the shop is closed.

However, some researchers have observed that [ADJ V_{fin}] constructions may exhibit word order variability when participles instantiate the construction (i.e. both word order variants in (3a) and (3b) coexist).

In order to test this hypothesis empirically and quantitatively, we first have to deal with the following double-sided problem: (i) both constructions are formally not distinguishable from each other (cf. e.g. example 1a and 3a) and (ii) the semantics/function of the ambiguous constructions under scrutiny is hard to access. Hence, the methodological question to be answered first is:

How do we discriminate on a concrete level (e.g., in corpus data) which construction is activated? Formulated somewhat differently, how do we discriminate between the adjectival and the verbal use of participles, in such a way that the word order effect can be tested in a quantitative usage-based study?

The present paper presents a procedure which enables a fine-grained, non-intuitive, systematic and reliable detection of the actual status of a participle, and, hence, the actual status of the construction. The general architecture of the procedure involves the following questions:

- (1) To what extent do contextual elements disambiguate the constructional ambiguity? To answer this question, we developed an intersubjectively validated complex of contextual criteria (e.g., is the construction modified by a temporal adjunct)?
- (2) What are the chances for a participle being interpreted as an adjective? This is measured by means of two indices: the first index is computed as the ratio between the frequency of the participle and the frequency of all the other corresponding verb forms (assuming that an increased index corresponds to an increased degree of adjectivity); the second index is computed as the ratio between participles that were tagged (by independent corpus compilers) as verb and participles that were tagged as adjective.
- (3) What are the chances for a participle being used in an unambiguous adjective context (e.g., can the adjective be used in attributive position)?

The procedure, which uses frequency information of both the CELEX-database and the annotated CGN corpus of spoken Dutch, will be discussed in extenso. The results show that some participles are more eligible to be incorporated in the [ADJ V_{fin}] construction than other participles, i.e. participles exhibit varying degrees of adjectivity/verbality. Moreover, the hypothesis that the [ADJ V_{fin}] construction exhibits some word order variability is confirmed, even though there is a very strong statistical correlation between the use of the [ADJ V_{fin}] construction and the absence of word order variability. On the basis of these results, it is argued (i) that the extension of the structural possibilities of the [ADJ V_{fin}] construction starts out from the constructional ambiguity with the formally similar [PART V_{fin}] construction, whereas the process involved is constructional analogy (language users transfer the structural possibilities of the [PART V_{fin}] construction to the [ADJ V_{fin}] construction); (ii) that construction membership is not an all-or-nothing matter, but is gradual in nature, so that the notion of a construction continuum between related constructions should be introduced in a construction grammar approach to language; (iii) on a methodological level, that construction grammarians should pay more attention to the operationalization of theoretical notions, such as constructional ambiguity and gradience effects, if one wants to develop a representative usage-based construction grammar model.