Can We Take Construction Grammar Beyond Sneezing Napkins Off Tables?

Looking at a sentence like "John kicked the bucket", one quickly realizes that there are at least two readings available. On the one hand, there is somebody called John performing an action, namely "kick", on some entity called bucket. On the other hand, there is somebody called John, and this person ceased to be, he died. Traditional grammatical analyses like Chomskian generativism have always had a hard time with these 'ambiguities', the fringes and exceptions in grammar. How, for example, can it be explained that "John kicked the bucket" in the sense of 'cease to be' looks like an ordinary sentence with subject, verb and object, but in fact does not behave like one – the plural cannot be used (*John kicks buckets.), the long passive sounds infelicitous (*The bucket was kicked by John.), the short passive even impossible (*The bucket was kicked.). In the other sense (the literal kicking) all these options are available and perfectly fine. Moreover, stylistically the literal sentence is completely neutral, the metaphorical one clearly very informal. The traditional way to solve this problem was to call these structures that apparently show non-compositional semantics "exceptional phrasal idioms", and to treat them as part of the lexicon or vocabulary, not as part of the grammar itself. Some more examples of these exceptions which are usually not covered by traditional grammatical rules might help to clarify the problem:

- Peter twisted the night away.
- John, a dentist?!
- The more, the merrier.
- What is that chocolate cake doing there?

All of these utterances are perfectly fine everyday language, and yet, generative accounts have had a very hard time with them. From a generative perspective the 'core' grammar is responsible for all regularities, patterns, or rule-based phenomena while the lexicon is responsible for all irregularities in the language, including single words and the more complex phrasal idioms (cf. Chomsky 1965: 142, Botha 1968). It was argued that irregular expressions and idioms are marginal phenomena in language anyway, and that they need not play a role in the basic grammatical description of a language. Simplifying somewhat unfairly, one could say that traditional analyses see language essentially as a regular, rule-based core with rare exceptions at the fringes. The job of linguists, then, is to find out about the core since this appears to be the key element in language and human cognition. Exceptions do not actually reveal that much about language and the human mind, and can therefore be mostly ignored.
But then Construction Grammar (henceforth abbreviated as CxG) offers a different perspective. Construction Grammar (CxG) has developed out of various functional-cognitive approaches to grammar over the last thirty years, mostly under the auspices of its two leading figures—Charles Fillmore and Paul Kay at Berkeley (for a history of CxG, see Fried & Östman 2004; Fried & Bouka 2005). In contrast with most traditional approaches, such as Chomskyan generativism, CxG does not relegate the phenomena mentioned above to fringes and exceptions, but they take center stage. Many empirical studies on language use have shown that everyday colloquial language—and much of written communication as well—contains a surprisingly large number of seemingly unanalyzed chunks and phrases, idioms, and fixed expressions (Hopper 1987; Sinclair 1991; Wray 2002; McCarthy 2004). In fact, the proportion of newly formed rule-guided sentences is actually quite small. Altenberg (1998: 101-102), for example, mentions that maybe up to 80% of the words in the half-million word London-Lund-Corpus of English may be part of some recurrent word-combinations, i.e. chunks of some sort. Therefore, one may assume that at least from an empirical point of view, fixed expressions and chunks in general are not the exception, which need not be explained. On the basis of this diagnosis, Construction Grammarians run a very simple but compelling argument: if a model or a theory that can capture the apparently tricky exceptions and difficult cases can be found, the easy part and basic patterns should come to boot. In other words, if an apparently random non-compositional idiom like "kick the bucket" and its related phenomena can be captured, one will probably have only few problems in explaining "John ate a cookie", i.e. the regular, compositional SVO pattern.

In CxG it is argued that linguistic systems do not consist of items like nouns, noun phrases, or adjectives, plus some rules that put these items together, but rather that language is a structured inventory of conventionalized form-meaning pairings at all levels of linguistic structure. In other words, grammar does not differ in any fundamental way from the lexicon, the vocabulary of a language. These elements, the conventionalized form-meaning pairings, are the CONSTRUCTIONS of a language, and they can be found on the level of syntax, morphology, phonology, and possibly also discourse and texts. Moreover, constructions can be categorized along two parameters, namely complexity and abstractness. We thus arrive at a two-by-two matrix:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Simple</th>
<th>Complex</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Concrete</td>
<td>book, kick the bucket</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>noun, SVO</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CxG explicitly claims to be a cognitive model, i.e., it aims for psychological plausibility and tries to tie in its theoretical claims with those of other branches in cognitive science and cognitive linguistics. This is reflected in three central assumptions that are commonly made in Cognitive Linguistics, and Construction Grammar in particular:

1. Language is not an autonomous cognitive faculty;
2. Knowledge of language emerges from language use—perhaps there is no categorical difference between language structure and language use;
3. There is no categorical difference between items and rules, i.e. between grammar (syntax) and lexicon.

For example, constructions are stored in a structured inventory. The structure of this inventory in turn is partly motivated by general cognitive principles, such as metaphor and metonymy, gestalt and prototypicality, principles of perception and neurolinguistic processing (e.g. in connectionism). The acquisition of constructions—both irregular, idiom-like ones and the more regular schematic patterns—is based on general cognitive abilities such as pattern-recognition, and a theory of mind means that there is no need for an extra language learning mechanism or procedure, like the language acquisition device or universal grammar. Constructions can contain information on their syntactic, morphological and phonological form and their semantic meaning or function but also pragmatic and discourse-functional properties if these are necessary. "Kick the bucket" in its non-compositional reading is informal; the use of "whom" is very formal and written, etc. The descriptions and analyses in CxG are usage-based, i.e., they begin with actual language data often extracted from large corpora of spoken and written language, some of them containing more than 100 million words of running text. So-called collostructional analyses—hugely complex statistical operations on enormous amounts of corpus data—have shown that in some cases minute differences in use can be indicative of different constructional and cognitive status for superficially very similar items (Stefanowitsch & Gries 2003; Gries & Stefanowitsch 2004). Only one example: one can either say "Let's go and find out" or "Let's go find out". At first sight, these two structures look very similar indeed and one might be tempted to think that they are actually one and the same construction (and this is also what most generative accounts would assume). However, a recent collostructional study by Wulff (2006) was able to show that a number of verbs attract the go-V construction, while others like to pattern with go-and-V. The former group includes zoom, figure, walk, run, unbend, plop, swim, search etc., the latter collect, live, visit, talk, watch, ask, re-clean and vandalize. Some occur equally frequent in both constructions: get, see, sit, fetch, look, fuck, work and some more. Going one step further and trying to analyze these verbs and verb types more closely, one can see that go-and-V prefers so-called telic verbs, while go-V prefers so-called atelic process verbs. This in turn means that whenever a verb is used in the go-and-V construction, it is likely to get an event-like interpretation with a beginning and an endpoint. In the go-V construction this is not the case. A constructional approach, combined with a collostructional analysis, can thus reveal some interesting and hitherto unrecognized facts about the cognitive processing and perception of certain elements in their specific contexts.

A very decisive question for the future of CxG is: Can we take Construction Grammar beyond sneezing napkins off tables? One of the developments in CxG seems to be that most studies have focused on what has been neglected in traditional analysis: idiomatc/phrasal constructions and verb-argument structures. These, obviously, were the
best starting and testing ground for CxG, given its theoretical premises. So today we have numerous excellent studies on idiomatic/phrasal constructions such as:

- The "let alone" construction: John won't eat fish, let alone sushi (Fillmore et al. 1988).
- The mad-magazine construction: John, a dentist?! (Lambrecht 1990)
- The V-away construction: He slept the days away. (Jackendoff 1997)
- The coxenial construction: The more cookies you eat, the more you want.
- The what's x doing y construction: What's that fish doing on the table? (Kay & Fillmore 1999)
- The verb-particle construction(s): Bring the criminal in – bring in the criminal (Gries 2002; Capelle 2006)

With regard to verb-argument structures, a rich body of interesting research is also available today. This has mainly focused on what we could call "unexpected" verb-argument combinations (all of the following examples come from Goldberg & Casenhiser 2006):

- John sneezed (intr) – John sneezed his napkin off the table (caused motion)
- She smiled (intr) – She smiled herself an upgrade (resultative)
- We laughed (intr) – We laughed our conversation to an end (resultative)

It is also worth considering the many interesting uses of "to slice":

He sliced the bread. (transitive)
He sliced the carrots into the salad. (caused motion)
He sliced her a piece of pie. (ditransitive)
He sliced and diced his way to stardom. (way construction)
He sliced the box open. (resultative)

In traditional accounts one would be forced to perform all sorts of tricks to account for all these patterns. They would either be exceptions or regular patterns plus some pragmatic-contextual override or extra, or they would be examples of five different verbs (this is of course a drastic simplification of the matter; nevertheless the general idea is true). Construction grammarians like Goldberg (1995; 2006; Goldberg & Casenhiser 2006) have shown that all of these five examples belong to different (more or less abstract, general) constructions, namely the transitive construction, the resultative construction and so on, and that the verb "to slice" simply gets an interpretation according to the construction in which it appears. This is also the way in which certain patterns can be ruled out. The fusion, or better perhaps the unification of different constructions, like that of a verb and some more abstract schematic construction, requires compatible semantics for both of them. An utterance like "He sliced into a coma" would be very unusual and unexpected. "He sliced himself into a coma" is much better and here the influence of the additional reflexive, resultative construction, as in "She smiled herself an upgrade", can be seen.

Can CxG ideas further expand than these domains and problems, and is there possibly a link or a bridge between linguistics and literary analysis here? Two ideas present themselves.

1. Constructions need to share some semantic features in order to be unifiable, to be able to merge. Looking at certain noun phrases, for example, one can see that an uncountable noun like "snow" usually only unifies with "much" as a quantifier, not with "many", which is used for countables. But this is only partly true. There is also a mechanism called coercion which can step into action when apparently the semantics of a construction is unified with. Looking again at the example of noun phrases, it becomes obvious that "beer" for example, which is actually uncountable, has recently become countable when it unifies with a numeral. "Coffee" went along the same route, "tea" and "water" didn't. Arguably, this new reading of countability is coerced out of "coffee" and "beer" every time they unify with a countable determiner. Similarly, it is possible to decipher what it means when somebody says "I have had too much book today". Again, "book" should not unify with "much", but nevertheless a good interpretation of the utterance through coercion is possible. This could be an interesting point where linguistics and literature can meet. Literature, and poetry in particular, is very rich in what might be called "marked structures", i.e., unconventional language use. Hopkins' *The Sea and the Skylark* might serve as an example:

Left hand, off land, I hear the dark ascend
His rash-fresh, re-winded new-skenind score
In crisps of curl off wild winch whirl

(Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Sea and the Skylark*, 1918)

It might be a very promising project in the future to see what literary scholars working in this particular field and construction grammarians can contribute to the understanding of the production and reception of these new, unconventional forms and their function in poetry and literature in general. Here construction grammar might have to contribute something to the study of poetic language in literary studies. Also, what is very desirable from such collaboration is a vigorous but constructive restriction of the notion of coercion. When can coercion be expected, when is it impossible, when unlikely? When does a poet successfully use the conventions of language, when does he go too far? Or when does some language use transgress the boundaries of automatic, natural processing and is only interesting for intellectual purposes?

2. Constructions are defined as conventional form-meaning pairings at all levels of linguistic structure. The case studies mentioned before mostly focus on syntactic constructions. And while there are some studies on the smaller levels, i.e., phonology and morphology in CxG terms, there is practically no research on the higher level units – despite the fact that numerous other studies, dating back at least to the 1970s, have demonstrated convincingly that there can be linguistic structure beyond the sentence, at the level of utterances, turns, and also texts (e.g., Beaugrande & Dressler 1981; Werlich 1983, and many more). The problem with these units is that they do not have
the same kind of fixedness in form as it can be found in syntax and morphology, for example. Nevertheless, one could argue that even in texts there are certain conventions which could be formalized as constructions. And these also fit into the two-by-two matrix discussed before. For example, there are very concrete and simple text types or genres in the widest sense and very abstract schematic ones which can be filled by various different subtypes. One example for the former would be a newspaper headline. One example of the latter would be a novel. For example, so a tentative two-by-two matrix for texts can be developed with the following examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Simple</th>
<th>Complex</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Concrete</td>
<td>Opening of parliament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schematic</td>
<td>Novel</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note that the notions of simple and complex, and concrete and schematic, need not be seen as strictly binary here. Needless to say, there appear to be numerous steps in between. Also, the notion of simple and complex, while being clearly distinguishable in syntax, are sometimes very difficult to assess in the case of texts. More data and analyses from text linguistics proper will have to feed into the construction grammar classification here. Text types or genres can thus be interpreted as conventionalized pairings of a (more or less) specific form with meaning, i.e., function. Headlines, postcards, novels, poems, recipes, etc., do have a particular form and structure, and also a particular (more or less complex) function which distinguishes them from other text types and genres. This idea can be developed somewhat further. In a CxG framework, the constructions, i.e., the text types and genres would be arranged in the previously mentioned structured inventory. Again this is something that can actually be found. Text types such as letters, postcards, faxes, telegrams, emails, and short messages are related and connected in some specific ways, and so are novels, short stories, and other literary genres and subgenres. Also, some genre-constructions actually comprise a number of subconstructions. Newspapers, complex and fairly schematic, are organized and laid out in very specific ways; they include the editorial, the sports section, finance, etc., i.e., less complex but still quite schematic subparts. In Aristotelian drama there are three different main parts or, according to Freytag, five different parts; the Shakespearean sonnet comprises fourteen lines and balances quatrains and tercets (or quatrains and the final couplet); stories of adventure have recurring episodes constructed according to basic narrative structures. All these elements need to come together in order to result in the complex construction of a certain text. A novel without a title would be awkward, and so would a recipe without ingredients; a sonnet with fifteen lines would strike readers as remarkable, and so should a newspaper without headlines. But, needless to say, all these features are possible, and they can be used deliberately for the creation of special, perhaps aesthetic, effects. Coming back to coercion as a mechanism, it could even be claimed that the unconventional use of certain techniques coerces a new reading, and a new style (e.g., Tristram Shandy, Finnegans Wake, The Satanic Verses, etc.). Literary history offers many examples: the novel, the epistolary novel, the stream of consciousness, epic and absurda drama and also post-modern fiction struck each of its respective audiences as something remarkable and interesting because it broke with literary (linguistic) conventions. But nevertheless, all these forms could be understood, and in constructionist terms this was the job of coercion.

Conclusion

This paper shows that there is some very promising and fruitful meeting ground for studies in literature and linguistics. There is no need to call this the "cognitive turn". In fact, this is not even desirable. But general cognitive principles and ideas such as used in empirical literary criticism, metaphor theory, text linguistics, and also cognitive linguistics and construction grammar can provide ample ground for the two subfields to meet and interact. Whenever the two arrive independently at the same conclusions, and when these conclusions are — independently — compatible with what research in cognitive science can establish, they are on the right track.

References

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