

A Constructional Grammar approach to genre

Alexander Bergs & Thomas Hoffmann
University of Osnabrueck

Construction Grammar is among one of the most productive recent models in cognitive linguistics and the notion of constructions as mental representations of conventionalized form-meaning pairings has been successfully applied to a wide variety of phenomena and language levels. What is still lacking, however, are studies on the role of constructions in larger linguistic units such as texts and genres. One of the aims of this talk is to probe into the possibilities of extending Construction Grammar in such a way.

We argue that texts and text types can be treated as constructions in a technical sense, i.e. as conventionalized form-meaning pairings. These text and genre constructions are available at different levels of schematicity, from concrete text (e.g. the Lord's Prayer) to abstract genre (e.g. short story), resulting in textual micro-, meso- and macro-constructions. Just like smaller constructions, texts and genres are learned linguistic units, and constrained by complex factors regarding their realization and use. These factors include among others sensitivity to frequency effects, rich semantic, pragmatic, and context features, prototype effects, and network organization of the inventory of constructions.

The form side of text/genre constructions can be more or less concrete (depending on the degree of schematicity and fixedness of the text or genre) and is paired with a function/meaning side which also ranges from fairly concrete (e.g. recipes) to more abstract and open (e.g. literary texts). Shakespearean sonnets, for example, are typically characterized by three quatrains and a heroic couplet, iambic pentameter and an abab cdcd efef gg rhyme scheme. Moreover, modern popular culture typically associates romantic love and solemnity as one of their central functions (NB despite whatever their original function was). In our approach, Shakespearean sonnets constitute meso-constructions in between concrete single sonnets (e.g. no 18) as micro-constructions and the more general macro-construction of poems as a genre. Note, however, that meso-constructions can form a network and develop into macro-constructions (e.g. qua frequency and prototype effects), so that modern popular culture developed a macro-genre concept or macro-construction of "poems" in general, which includes the arrangement in stanzas and the use of rhymes on the form side in combination with solemnity and the expression of feelings and emotion on the function side. Different forms and functions of what we classify as poetry (e.g. Haiku), then, can be included as members of a prototype arrangement; innovations, i.e. new genre forms and functions, can be elegantly captured by the notions of coercion and constructionalization.

The theoretical claims made in this paper will be illustrated by examples from a number of different literary and non-literary genres, ranging from recipes through poems to rarely investigated phenomena such as soccer chants. We argue that a Construction Grammar viewpoint on genre not only improves the explanatory power of the framework as such, but also leads to a new and fruitful conceptualization of genre conventions as a cognitive phenomenon.