How metonymy motivates constructions –
The case of monoclausal if only constructions in English

Bogusław Bierwiaczonek
University of Częstochowa

The talk is an attempt to show how constructional metonymy, whereby a part Y of a grammatical construction X is used to access the whole construction X, leads to the emergence of new grammatical constructions (cf. Bierwiaczonek, in press). Such metonymically motivated constructions are called dependent constructions, as opposed to autonomous constructions they originally targeted. It is demonstrated that at least some of the syntactic and/or semantic properties of dependent constructions can only be explained in terms of the full autonomous constructions they have emerged from as their parts. The construction we consider in detail is the monoclausal if only .... construction. First, we illustrate the concept of constructional metonymy with the formal metonymic account of the-Adj constructions suggested by Bierwiaczonek (2007) and monoclausal if- constructions and that-constructions analyzed by Panther and Thornburg (2003, 2011). Then we discuss Dancygier and Sweetser’s (2005) analysis of the monoclausal if only … construction and show that their analysis fails to account for some of the important properties of this construction which can only be explained if we abandon the idea that there is one if-only construction and, instead, analyze it as a network of at least four if-only constructions. It is argued that at least some of the idiosyncratic properties of each of those constructions are inherited from the corresponding autonomous biclausal if-only constructions. These properties include their time reference and epistemic stance. For instance, the full biclausal underlined if-only sentence in (1) has time reference: FUTURE and epistemic stance: LIKELY, and these two properties are inherited by the monoclausal (2).

1) Insurance policies, wise investments, sensible diets and burglar alarms: if only we can lay down enough of them, we can maybe hold the fort against the chaos that rages outside

2) If only we can lay down enough of them

These properties explain the differences in the conventional illocutionary forces of different if-only constructions. Furthermore we argue that, contrary to Dancygier and Sweetser, the conjunction if-only preserves its “minimal scalar” meaning in monoclausal if-only sentences, as this meaning is independent of the constructions in question – it shows up also e.g. in adverbial clauses of purpose, as in (3), so it should be considered as a “mini construction” in its own right.

3) His work rate is so high that his players are inspired to perform if only so that the old so-and-so does not get the better of them

The proposals made in the talk are interesting because they show that the same cognitive metonymy process which is often used on the conceptual level is used on the formal level of language as well, motivating the emergence of new grammatical constructions.

References