# 11 - Construction Grammar

## (Verbs in the passenger seat)

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December 12, 2018

11 - Construction Grammar
Nick Riches
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2. Weird Them.rels
A solution
Goldberg's theory
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1. She sneezed the napkin off the table



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1. Special sense of *sneeze*, e.g. sneeze = make a sudden involuntary expulsion of air from the nose and mouth due to irritation of one's nostrils **such that the resulting air flow propels an object X from location Y**.
2. The meaning comes from **the construction**



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By assuming that constructions have meaning, we can overcome a lot of problems with traditional Verb Argument Structure accounts.



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1. She sneezed the napkin off the table
2. The naughty students laughed the teacher out of the room
3. She juggled her way to the semi-finals of the juggling contest
4. Can you chop me some carrots?
5. Quote me happy! (Recent advert for insurance)



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# 2. Weird thematic relations

There are plenty of verbs which take arguments with 'weird' roles, e.g.

1. She is happy



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1. She is happy
2. The table needs a leg



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1. She is happy
2. The table needs a leg
3. That coat suits you



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2. The table needs a leg
3. That coat suits you
4. The coat fits me



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There are plenty of verbs which take arguments with 'weird' roles, e.g.

1. She is happy
2. The table needs a leg
3. That coat suits you
4. The coat fits me
5. She swapped her Porsche for a Ferrari



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2. The table needs a leg
3. That coat suits you
4. The coat fits me
5. She swapped her Porsche for a Ferrari
6. They loaded the truck with hay



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# 2. Weird thematic relations

Dozens of attempts by linguistics to come up with a definitive list!

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# Goldberg's (1995) theory of Verb Argument Structure Constructions

When we use verbs in sentences, we insert them into Verb Argument Structure Constructions (VAS Constructions).

These are syntactic units with their own **independent meaning**.



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# Valency augmentation

1. The multiple sense account.
2. The construction based account.
   The extra argument is specified by the construction itself.



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# Weird thematic relations

If roles are (in part) given by the construction itself, we are not committed to a small set of roles.



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# Weird thematic relations

(2)

| Die hard | is | $\left\{ \begin{array}{c} great \\ a\ great\ Christmas\ film \end{array} \right\}$ |
|---|---|---|
| $NP_1$ | copula | ADJ / $NP_2$ |

ADJ / $NP_2$ denotes a property of $NP_1$

# Weird thematic relations

(2) Die hard is $\left\{\begin{array}{c} great \\ a\ great\ Christmas\ film \end{array}\right\}$

NP$_1$ copula ADJ / NP$_2$

ADJ / NP$_2$ denotes a property of NP$_1$

(3) One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter

NP$_1$ copula NP$_2$

Both NPs identify the same referent

# Weird thematic relations

(2) Die hard is $\left\{\begin{array}{c} great \\ a\ great\ Christmas\ film \end{array}\right\}$
NP$_1$ copula ADJ / NP$_2$

ADJ / NP$_2$ denotes a property of NP$_1$

(3) One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter
NP$_1$ copula NP$_2$

Both NPs identify the same referent

(4) George Clooney is George Clooney
NP$_1$ copula NP$_2$

The individual identified by both NPs has a property which is relevant to the discussion.

# Weird thematic relations

(5) We $NP_1$ 're going to $\left\{ \begin{array}{c} need \\ require \end{array} \right\}$ a bigger boat $NP_2$

Verb of needing

$NP_1$ needs $NP_2$



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# Weird thematic relations

(6) That dress $\begin{Bmatrix} \textit{fits} \\ \textit{suits} \end{Bmatrix}$ you

$NP_1$ verb of fitting/suiting $NP_2$

$NP_1$ looks good on $NP_2$



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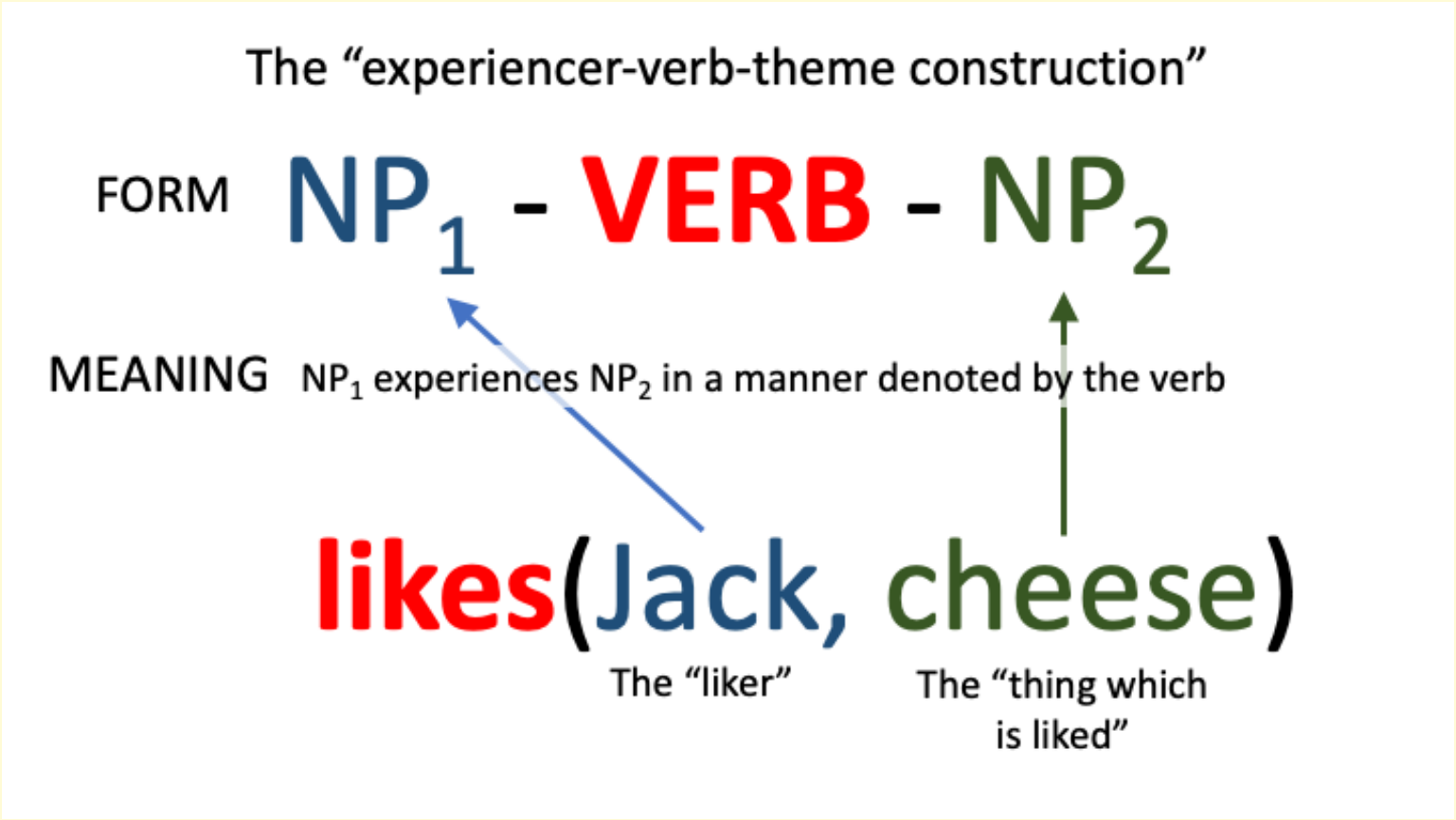
# Fusion



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# What about traditional roles, e.g. “AGENT” / “PATIENT”?

Traditional labels could be used to describe slots in VAS Constructions with very general/abstract meanings, e.g. AGENT + VERB + PATIENT

But importantly, the roles are specified **by the construction**, and are not independent of it



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# What about traditional roles, e.g. "AGENT" / "PATIENT"?

Some of the more general roles are 'echoed' across constructions...

| THEME + VERB + EXPERIENCER | EXPERIENCER + VERB + THEME |
|---|---|
| The film **pleased** me | I **liked / enjoyed** the film |
| The film **scared** me | I **feared** the film (I was frightened of the film) |
| The film **impressed** me | I **admired** the film |
| The film **repulsed** me | I **hated** the film |



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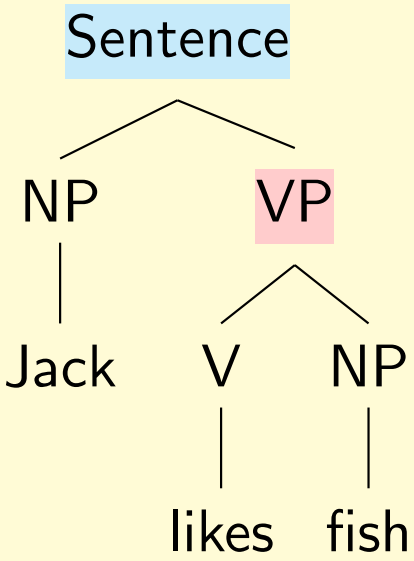
# Words and rules account

The words and rules account (e.g. Chomksyan linguistics):

RULE 1: VP $\Leftarrow$ V + NP
RULE 2: Sentence $\Leftarrow$ NP + VP




(7)

INTERPRETATION: A situation involving two NPs whose roles are determined by the verb.



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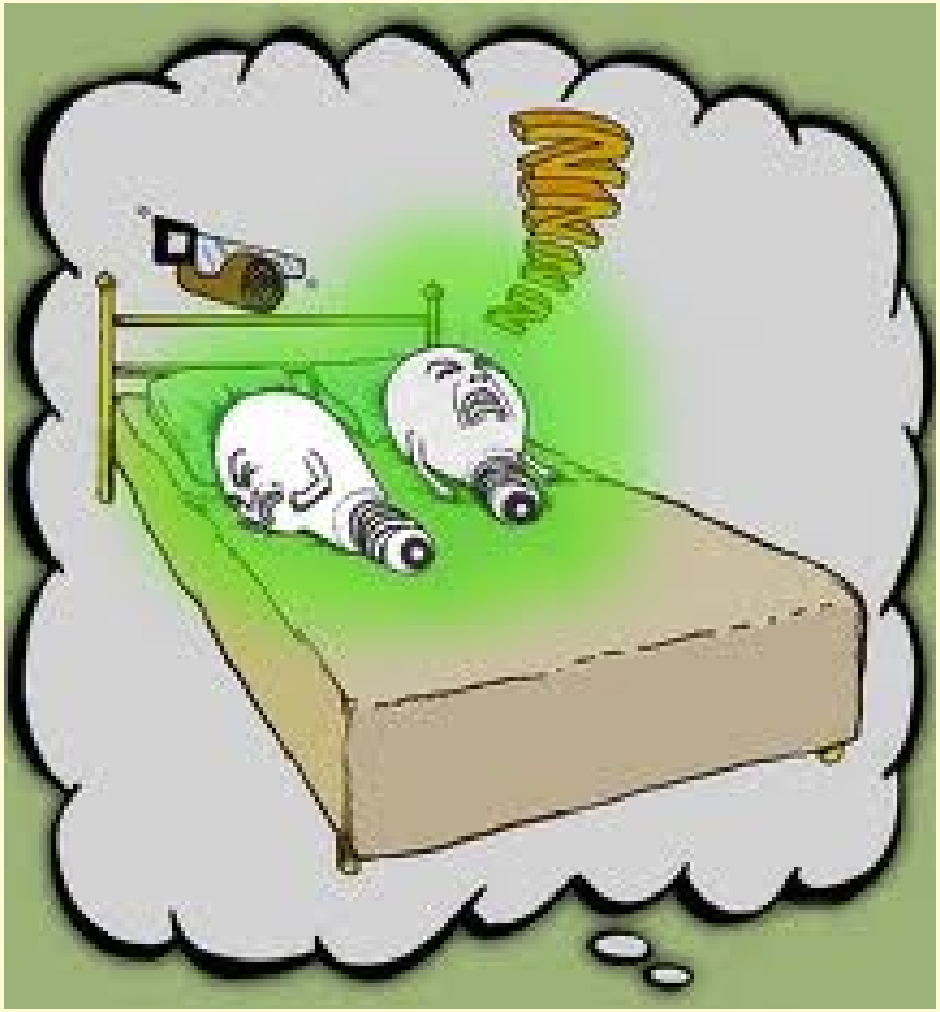
# Words and rules account

Colourless green ideas sleep furiously





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# Words and rules account

Categorical distinction between syntax (combinatorial rules) and the lexicon (repository of meaning)



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Syntactic constructions can also be **meaningful**.

No distinction between syntax and the lexicon.

Words involve mapping between form and meaning. Constructions also involve a mapping between form and meaning.



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Clip from While we're young



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(8) ARTHRITIS arthritis!?

(9) It's tuna salad, not SALAD-salad.

(10) Is he french, or FRENCH-french?

(11) Oh, we're not LIVING-TOGETHER living-together
(NB Verb Phrase is doubled)



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ARTHRITIS arthritis!?

FORM: N + N
MEANING: We evoke a scale of authenticy. N + N is placed higher on the scale than N



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StuW232
**Birmingham, United Kingdom**
22 24

Reviewed 5 December 2017 via mobile

**There are burgers and then there are burgers...**

On a very quiet, very wet Tuesday in December I dropped in for a late dinner and had the restaurant all to myself which was really quite lovely as it's super cozy even when it's just you on your lonesome! I've simple tastes so had French onion soup followed by the house burger and chips. Now this was a burger, piled high with salad, crispy bacon and a beef patty that was cooked to perfection, super crunch chips and great relishes to dip in to.
Simple doesn't have to be basic and in this instance it was for me a pretty perfect burger.

Ask StuW232 about Restaurant Underhuset

(12) There are burgers and then there are burgers
There is/are $NP_1$ and then there is/are $NP_2$

2nd NP is more authentic than the first



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(13) Now watch me go and drop this cake!
Now watch Non-finite clause
We are 'tempting fate'



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(14)

| She | worked | her way | to the top of the class |
|---|---|---|---|
| SUBJ. | V | his/her/its way | PREP. PHRASE |

SUBJECT changes location (literally/metaphorically) by performing action denoted by the verb. Movement is **effortful** and **circuitous**

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# Comparison

According to the Words and Rules Approach

1. There is a categorical distinction between words (meaning) and rules (form)
2. Linguistic knowledge consists of (a) lexical knowledge, and (b) syntactic knowledge (ability to combine words)
3. Semantic interpretation of a sentence is seperate (and subsequent to) syntactic interpretation



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# Comparison

According to Construction Grammar accounts

1. Words and syntactic constructions are all part of the **same system**, sometimes called the "Constructicon"
2. Linguistic knowledge = knowledge of constructions (words can be described as "minimal constructions")
3. Semantics and syntax are inseparable (as syntactic constructions are meaningful)



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Some syntactic phenomena do not appear to be linked to meaning, e.g. subject + verb agreement.



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When teaching children grammatical constructions we need to higlight the **meaning** of those constructions.

e.g. Riches (2013) highlights the meaning of the passive construction (the verb is highly affected), e.g.

1. The vase was smashed by the dog (Vase is highly affected)

This is reflected in children's early use of the passive. We very rarely have passives in which the subject is not highly affected, e.g.

1. It was dreamt about.

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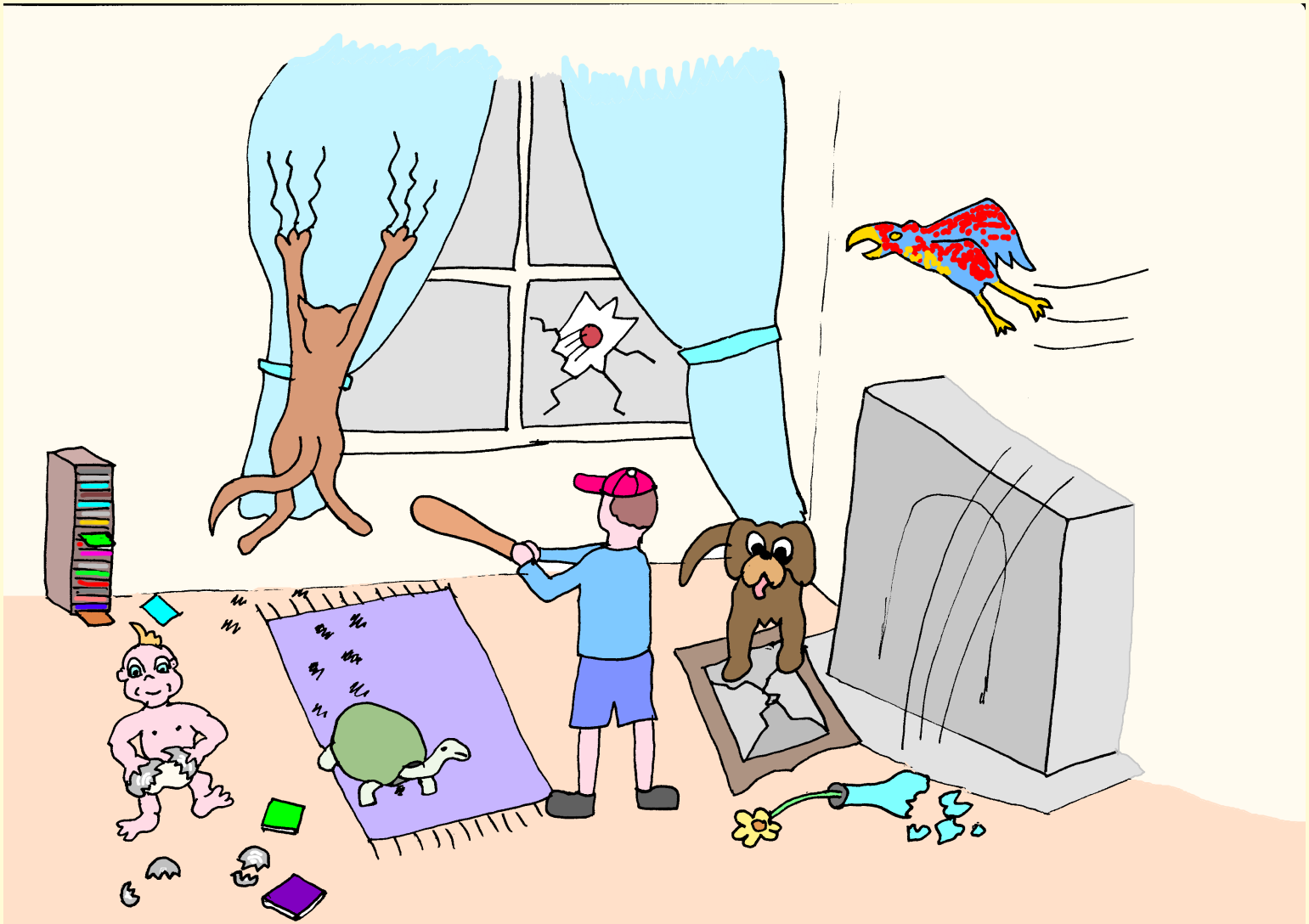



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