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Author(s)	Itagaki, Hiromasa
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Categorization and Flexibility of a Frozen Idiomatic Phrase

ITAGAKI Hiromasa

1. Introduction

This paper offers a case study for the CATEGORIZATION and flexibility of language structures; in particular, the frozen idiomatic phrase *actions speak louder than words*. Categorization, whereby we can categorize and recognize new experiences to flexibly accommodate into existing categories, is a concern of Cognitive Linguistics. This cognitive process is argued by many Cognitive Linguistics researchers to contribute to the establishment of our language structures.

Although the cognitive process helps to store general language expressions through identifying the relation between the existing categories and newly non-identical but related expressions, some idiomatic phrases are constantly immovable; thus, we would not encounter the non-identical but related expressions to the phrases. Phrases of this sort, therefore, seem to be exceptional for general language expressions, since we may not have to associate them with the novel but related expressions. If so, you may not think that it is necessary to apply the cognitive process to those phrases as long as the speakers of English memorize them. However, we will show that it is also essential to adopt the categorization in the Cognitive Linguistics approach for this idiomatic phrase due to the ample appearances of its extended instances.

2. Categorization of Constructions

Grammar in Cognitive Linguistics is understood to involve the description of how linguistic elements combine into complex expressions. Traditional Generative Grammar, termed as DICTIONARY PLUS GRAMMAR BOOK MODEL by Taylor (2012), views grammar of language as a set of autonomous and abstract rules capable of generating an infinite group of sentences. However, this approach fails to generate some actual language expressions different from the assumed output produced by the grammar. Sometimes this model overgenerate and undergenerate language expressions. Instead of the abstract rules, Cognitive Linguistics, in particular, Cognitive Grammar claims that a language can be described in terms of only three kinds of entities – phonological structures, semantic structures, and symbolic relations between the above two structure (Langacker 1987; Taylor 2002). This means that a language should be described as “a structured inventory of conventional linguistic units” (Langacker 1999: 98). Additionally, as mentioned by Broccias (2013), Cognitive Grammar argues that a language is grounded in language-independent cognitive processes. That is, “Cognitive” in Cognitive

Linguistics focuses on the various kinds of Cognitive abilities based on physical experiences like construal of events, attention, memory, interaction with society, sensory modalities, spatial cognition and so on.

As Langacker (1999: 98) states in Cognitive Grammar, language structures are assumed to be stored by processes of SCHEMATIZATION which extracts a general schema from the commonality inherent in multiple experiences, and CATEGORIZATION which uses previously existing structures to interpret new experiences. Those processes are compatible with a usage-based model for language structures, which Cognitive Grammar adopts. In a usage-based model, knowledge of a language is based in knowledge of actual usage and of generalizations made over usage events (Taylor 2002: 27). That is, the language knowledge should be regarded as storage based on a lot of actually encountered expressions parallel to various kinds of specific social and cultural experiences. Therefore, Cognitive Grammar proposes that language structures are stored in terms of schematization and categorization induced from actual language expressions.

Moreover, these processes allow us to describe the novel expressions. Cognitive Grammar posits that language structures create their categorical network in terms of categorical extension and schematization. As Langacker (1999: 102) mentions in Figure 1, extension tends to be accompanied by schematization, and the outward growth of a network by extensions from a prototype tends to induce its upward growth via the extraction of higher-level schemas. Figure 1 shows that a higher order schema (A') is extracted (schematized) from a conventional unit [A], and then the (A') sanctions a novel instance (B). At the same time, the usage event (B) is extended from [A].

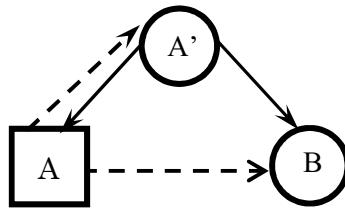


Figure 1 (Langacker 1999: 102)

The categorical network mentioned above captures the grammatical constructions as well as the lexicon, since both grammatical structures are considered to be fundamentally symbolic units, consisting of pairings of form and meaning, known as the syntax-lexicon continuum theory. In fact, even frozen expressions such as proverbs can be flexible to create the novel instances extended from them, and therefore it is appropriate that those expressions should also constitute their categorical network, which will be discussed in the following section.

3. “Actions speak louder than words”

3.1. Prototypical usage

In English, the expression underlined in (1) is used like a proverb. The phrase will also be found in the English dictionary like (2).

(1) a. On this playing field, actions speak louder than words.
(BNC K52, 8743, underlines mine)

b. With Cooney actions always speak louder than words.
(BNC K2D, 3389)

(2) actions speak louder than words:
what a person actually does means more than what they say they will do
(Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary)

As shown in (1), the expression usually occurs in the simple present tense since it denotes a property of a general lesson for us. It is also noteworthy that noun phrases of the phrase *actions* and *words* are allowed to be bare plural.

Of course, it could be possible that the phrase is used to convey the speaker’s thought different from the genuine meaning which the expression really signifies. The sentence (3) designates that the speaker thinks words are important as well, and thus the proverb does not perfectly work in the real world.

(3) I think that while actions may speak louder than words, it doesn’t mean that words still don’t matter.
(COCA, MAG)

While the phrase like (3) appears with the auxiliary verb *may*, that phrase seems to be preferred when it occurs without another element. In fact, we can find that even the entirely fixed term [actions speak louder than words] – therefore though we excluded the expressions like (3) in this case – occurs 73 times in Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), which is a corpus of 520 million words that cover the period from 1990 to 2015. This phrase may well be more remarkably frequent than other famous proverbs. The well-known proverb *easy come, easy go* occurs 32 times, and *time flies like an arrow* occurs only twice.

Goldberg (1995: 4) argues that CONSTRUCTION should be identified as a form-

meaning pair, which is not strictly predictable from the expression's component parts. In this definition, the expression *actions speak louder than words* is difficult to regard as the construction, even though it may be said not to be predictable from the phrase's meaning parts because "actions" do not literally "speak". However, in accordance with more recent argument of the following description (4) by Goldberg (2006), this expression inheres in one of the constructional idioms in the English grammar.

(4) Any linguistic pattern is recognized as a construction as long as some aspect of its form or function is not strictly predictable from its component parts or from other constructions recognized to exist. In addition, patterns are stored as constructions even if they are fully predictable as long as they occur with sufficient frequency.

(Goldberg 2006: 5)

In the following sections, we will show the syntactic and semantic extension of this constructional idiom, which comes to acquire more constructional properties by the previous definition by Goldberg. In addition, the discussion as follows indicates that this extension can be appropriately captured if we adopt the theory for the categorical extension of constructions.

3.2. Extended usage

As mentioned in last section, the phrase *actions speak louder than words* is seen as a conventionally constructional unit in English language structures. However, the constructional idiom does not always produce the same syntactic expression. The idiom allows for co-occurrence with the negation or modifications, as in (5) or (6). It is noticeable that past tense examples like (6a) can be found amenable in spite of low frequency.

(5) Actions don't always speak louder than words, though.

(COCA, MAG)

(6) a. The Secretary of State for Energy, Mr Nigel Lawson, had not fooled them with his praise for the fast reactor two days earlier; for his action, to delay the work all but indefinitely, spoke louder than his words.

(BNC B7F 29)

b. But as long as his actions on the court speak louder than his words, they can live with it.

(COCA, NEWS)

The flexibility of the constructional idiom allows it to further sanction novel expressions where noun phrases themselves in the idiom can be exchanged into another phrase semantically analogous to them. Those expressions can be found in (7) or (8).

(7) a. Behavior speaks louder than words.

(COCA, MAG)

b. Her behavior speaks louder than her words and we understand more than she actually thinks we know.

(COCA, SPOK)

c. Body language speaks louder than words, says Sharyn Wolf, author of Guerrilla Dating Tactics...

(COCA, MAG)

(8) Our actions speak louder than the surveys.

(COCA, MAG)

The sentences shown in (7) take *behavior* or *body language* in the subject position instead of the noun phrase *actions*, and the noun phrase *the surveys* in the sentence (8) is substituted for *words*. Notice that the meaning of the component parts in those examples above is not so different from the original constructional idiom. Both *behavior* and *body language* designated in (7) imply a bodily action, while *the surveys* in (8) is similar to *words*, in the sense that the two phrases entail the supposed situation that a person states. This means that the constructional idiom permits its semantic extension as long as the newly embedded phrase is semantically close to the component parts of the construction.

The semantic extension spreads itself out and enables the constructional idiom to put different words into its grammatical subject. In fact, the phrase which does not involve a bodily action occurs in the subject position of the idiom, as exemplified in (9).

(9) a. A famous Chinese saying alleges that facts speak louder than words.

(COCA, ACAD)

b. I have put pen to paper sparingly, aware that pictures speak louder than words.

(BNC ASU 13)

c. DAVIS: I don't know, it's hard to actually explain, and- but-

Mr. FERRY: Well, music always speaks louder than words, doesn't it?

DAVIS: Yes, it does.

(COCA, SPOK)

Although the subject nouns in the sentences in (9) may not designate the actual movement someone intends to do, these bare nouns are still analogous to the original phrase *actions*. They imply the actual situation as contrasting to the latter word, which refers to the supposed situation that someone states. We can extract, namely schematize, the actual situation from the meaning of *actions*, whereby we are able to extend the subject noun into semantically similar phrases. Hence, these sentences are acceptable by virtue of the schematization and analogical extension from the constructional idiom. Now, the constructional idiom as a whole can be depicted as follows. The lower-level construction as shown in (10) does not only sanction the canonical sentences like (1) or (2), but the extended examples like (7) or (8). The more schematized formation from the proverb *actions speak louder than words* corresponds (11) in which the further extended sentences like (9) can be recognized as instantiation of the construction.

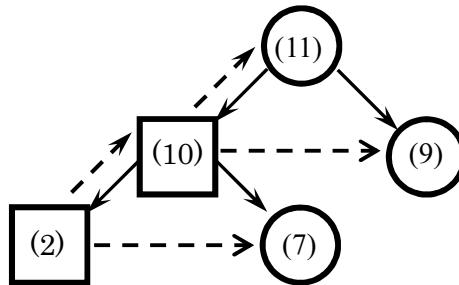


Figure 2: Categorical network for the “actions speak louder than words” construction

(10) SYNTAX: { actions } speak louder than { words }
SEMANTICS: what a person actually does means more than what they say they will do

(11) SYNTAX: NP1 speak louder than NP2
SEMANTICS: Actual situation by NP1 has more significance than what a person assumes by NP2

3.3. Creative usage

The constructional idiom *actions speak louder than words* has room to sanction further novel expressions, indicating that we can cognitively create some interesting expressions by means of conventional and even frozen units. In this section, we will show the creative usage for the constructional idiom. Consider the following examples:

(12) a. Well, the first 30 seconds were fine, and it only got better from there. The little things spoke louder than rumors.

(COCA, NEWS)

b. And in this land of new promise, we will have reformed our politics so that the voice of the people will always speak louder than the din of narrow interest, regaining the participation and deserving the trust of all Americans.

(COCA, NEWS)

c. The Ravens continue to say they believe Smith and Judon can develop into impact players who might one day succeed Suggs and Dumervil as the starters. But Harbaugh acknowledged that results speak louder than projections.

(COCA, NEWS)

d. While the Polish government has suggested 2015 as a target date, its lagging commitment to meeting necessary criteria may speak louder than words.

(COCA, NEWS)

These expressions are fascinating for us because some grammatical subject in the expressions cannot occur with the verb *speak*, as in (13). That is, the phrases *results* or *the commitment* become acceptable by virtue of support of the constructional schema, although they intrinsically violate a selectional restriction of the verb.

(13) a. ?* Results speak { loudly / briefly }.
(✓ Results speak for themselves.)

b. ?* The commitment may speak { loudly / briefly }.

Furthermore, the following expressions as in (14), expressing political matters, differ from the canonical idiom since *actions* is exchanged from *words* in a syntactic position:

(14) a. Both Republicans and Democrats have demonstrated that “Words speak louder than action.”

(COCA, NEWS)

b. For in politics words often speak louder than actions, and ...

(COCA, MAG)

Those sentences are incompatible with the constructional schema (11) above because NP1 and NP2 in the schema do not semantically correspond to the component parts of the sentences, respectively; *words* does not imply the actual situation, nor does *actions* suppose the event. Thus, they may be regarded as realizations of only a parodic instance, and thus seem to be exceptional for the constructional schema. It could be possible to capture apparent exceptional data if the following schematic construction is established.

(15) SYNTAX: NP1 speak louder than NP2

SEMANTICS: NP1 is more significant than NP2

However, this schema appears to give rise to overgeneralization, because all noun phrases cannot occur in this constructional idiom (the sentence like **potatoes speaks louder than carrots* is definitely unacceptable, for example). Unacceptability of the sentence above is of significance since it suggests that the semantic restriction involved in the lower-level constructional schema (11), rather than the higher-level schema like (15), should be imposed on this constructional idiom due to the conventionalization of this lower-level schema. In other words, the schema like (15) is not capable of sanctioning all language expressions which could otherwise be instantiated.

Still, what is more important here is that although this sort of the high-level constructional schema, like (15), is not fully conventionalized in the English grammar, the grammar allow for the analogical extension for the fixed proverb so as to create the novel sentences above like (12) or (14). Again, those sentences are not compatible with the constructional schema (11). If they are judged grammatical, we can entertain the supposition that we partially apply the not-fully conventionalized schema (15) to the sentences. In any case, the constructional idiom in question can be said to constitute its language category parallel to other general language expressions, and to afford to induce further extension.

4. Conclusion: Categorization of the Proverb

In this paper, I have discussed the usage of the English proverb *actions speak louder than words*. This examination indicates that while the idiomatic construction seems to be a fixed and frozen expression, it is able to create new extended expressions, as

suggested in the examples above. This result leads to the implication that even idioms of this sort can function as constructions to constitute their categorical network, and then they can flexibly produce the creative instances based on the network.

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Corpus

British National Corpus.

Corpus of Contemporary American English.

Dictionary

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary