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Language Creativity of Novel Instances: The Case of Perceptual Expressions for Tactile Sense *

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1. Introduction

In this squib, I will investigate creative extensions of [NP_{SUBJ} – V_{INTR} – ADJ_{COMP}] from a COGNITIVE CONSTRUCTION GRAMMAR perspective for language creativity. These instances for the creative extensions are represented in (1).¹

- (1) a. The mattress sleeps comfortable especially for side sleepers. (Itagaki 2021: 68)
b. The alternative would be silk, which wears warm. (Itagaki 2021: 61)
c. The hood fits snug under your helmet. (NOW Corpus: *Outside*)

The underlined phrases in (1) represent evaluations of the grammatical subject. The above sentences are idiosyncratic in that they express the logical object as the grammatical subject. The phrase in (1a), for instance, includes *the mattress*, which is normally construed as the instrument of sleeping, as the grammatical subject, and takes *comfortable* as an adjectival complement only after the verb *sleep*, although this verb is usually used with an agent (a sleeper) in the subject position.

Why are we able to use the sentences mentioned in (1) even though they seem to deviate from ordinary English grammar? Certainly, these idiosyncratic expressions are “grammatically incorrect” because they should co-occur with adverb adjuncts instead of the adjectival complement (e.g., *this mattress sleeps comfortably*, or *the hood fits snugly*). In addition, my informant reported that such adjectival complements should be avoided in public use. However, in current usage, these English expressions occur. They are understandable and even considered acceptable by most. Thus, this squib examines the motivations for sanctioning creative sentences such as (1).

Language creativity is one of the fundamental issues of linguistics. While some novel expressions can be accepted as imaginative or creative, other sentences merely sound awkward or unacceptable. For example, a sentence such as *this oven doesn't bake very well* is completely acceptable, while a similar sentence like *??this saucepan doesn't boil very well* would appear inappropriate.² A comprehensive explanation of the differences between these two sentences must be provided. In other words, a precise line should be drawn between flexibility and unacceptability in language expressions.

This study draws on a Cognitive Construction Grammar approach. The main idea is that speakers' language knowledge can be modelled as knowledge of constructions (Hilpert 2014: 22). Constructions

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¹ All underling was done by the author.

² These two interesting contrastive sentences are adapted from Taylor (1998: 174–175).

are defined as pairings of form and meaning that include not only idiosyncratic functions, but also morphological or phonological properties and the pragmatic or contextual dimensions in which a particular utterance is found (Goldberg 2006; Hilpert 2014). Constructionists thus argue that constructions are crucial to language description.

The Cognitive Construction Grammar approach, which is used by linguists to analyze expressions in terms of human cognitive apparatus such as perception, memory, abstraction, or attention, focuses on categorical networks between constructions, such as family resemblances or categorization among constructions (Goldberg 2006). A categorical network can account for the motivation of innovative expressions as an extension. This theory posits that language creativity and extensions can be divided based on constraints to the extent that an existing construction can partially sanction novel expressions based on similarity (Taylor 2002). Thus, in the Cognitive Construction Grammar approach, grammatical acceptability depends on the strength of the relationship between a conventionalized linguistic unit and a novel expression. If we cannot determine how to establish syntactic or functional similarity between one expression and a conventionalized construction, it is considered ill-formed. If an expression can be construed, fully or partially, as sanctioned by the construction, it is judged grammatical. Therefore, this approach may allow us to account for the motivation of the peripheral intransitive sentences in (1) with reference to well-established constructions.

I investigate the expressions in question, using evidence taken from corpus data and introspection. The corpora used for this study include web corpora as well as the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). Since web data are not controlled for genre or grammatical acceptability, some of the collected data are likely to include awkward sentences. However, as Taylor (2012) reported, given the vast amount of language data on the Web, it is an invaluable source for the study of less frequent language items. As long as English native speakers judge the data to be acceptable within the given context, language items in web data can be valuable language evidence. Therefore, I will use the News on the Web Corpus (NOW corpus), which contains 14 billion words of data from web-based newspapers and magazines from 2010 to the present, and the iWeb corpus, which contains 14 billion words from 22 million web pages.

2. Observations

First, we discuss idiosyncratic expressions that involve the verb *sleep* with an adjectival complement, as in the underlined phrases in (2).

- (2) a. On the plus side, the bed sleeps cool and provides the just-right firmness to support you on your side or back. (Itagaki 2021: 66, NOW Corpus: *Nunatsiaq News*)
- b. The North Face's Beeline 900, which packs small and sleeps warm thanks to plenty of 900-fill-power down. (Itagaki 2021: 66, COCA, MAG)

- c. The mattress sleeps very cool and comfortable. (Itagaki 2021: 68, NOW Corpus: *Buzzfeed*)

In the expressions above, we can confirm that the verb *sleep* occurs with the adjective, which refers to temperature, such as *cool* or *warm*, or a sleeper's feeling like *comfortable*. Note that the adjectival complements appearing in (2) commonly designate not only the property of the subject complement but also the sleeper's feeling during sleep. Thus, sentence (2c) may be paraphrased as follows: *when we sleep on the mattress, it feels very cool and comfortable, which makes us cool and comfortable*.

Sentences similar to the *sleep* expressions can be observed in *wear* sentences, as exemplified in the following expressions (3).

- (3) a. They [i.e., = trousers] are most likely made of a fine Sea Island cotton, which is soft, lightweight and comfortable in the heat. The alternative would be silk, which wears warm and is avoided on hot summer nights. (Itagaki 2021: 61, iWeb)
- b. On my average size wrist, it wears great, comfortable and also looks like the right size. (iWeb)
- c. It [i.e., = the sweater] wears cooler than your standard wool or cashmere sweater, allowing it to work Spring through Fall. (Google³)

The grammatical subject in (3) corresponds to clothing or a personal ornament, which should be originally encoded in the grammatical object of the verb *wear*: *wearing a coat, hat, or watch*. This pattern also designates the features of the grammatical subject that put us in the state described by the adjectival complement.

Another example of the idiosyncratic expressions discussed in this study is given by the *fit* pattern. The grammatical subject in the underlined expressions in (4) stands for something that we put into our body, although these expressions may be less likely to describe the condition of wrapping our body than the above *sleep* or *wear* patterns.

- (4) a. The hood fits snug under your helmet, while a tall collar helps block drafts and rain from your face. (NOW Corpus: *Outside*)
- b. There's a neoprene sleeve that fits snug to your leg, helping the shin guard stay in place during more intense sessions. (NOW Corpus: *heavy.com*)
- c. They [i.e., = earbuds] are lightweight and fit comfortable in the ear without causing any sort of disturbance. (NOW Corpus: *Nasi Lemak Tec.*)
- d. It fits excellent with or without the feather bed under the pad. (NOW Corpus: *BuzzFeed*)

³ <https://propercloth.com/products/amalfi-beige-cotton-and-linen-sweater-446.html>

As represented in (4), the adjectival complement in the *fit* pattern designates our feeling when we put the grammatical subject on. Expressions of this sort can be confirmed with a different verb, as in (5).

- (5) Velcro straps in the sled keep the weighted bags in place, and the belt sits comfortable on your waist and attaches to the sled with a ring that is specifically constructed to allow for quick changes in direction. (NOW Corpus: *tmz.com*)

3. Analysis

Cognitive linguistics accounts for language creativity by means of our cognitive abilities, such as categorization or schematization, which enable us to create a novel usage by extending an existing construction. As mentioned in Section 1, novel expressions are licensed by a conventional construction to the extent that they bear formal or semantic similarities in the conventional construction (cf. analogical extension discussed in Goldberg 2019). An analysis via cognitive linguistics makes it possible to construe the copula-like intransitive expressions observed in the previous section as outcomes resulting from analogical extension of a well-established construction. This squib argues that these creative expressions are sanctioned by virtue of analogical extension from the conventionalized perceptual constructions that Taniguchi (1997) terms copulative perception verb constructions (CPV constructions), which are reviewed below.

3.1. CPV constructions

The CPV construction is exemplified in (6).

- (6) a. John looks happy. (Taniguchi 1997: 270)
b. This cake tastes good. (ibid.: 271)

The CPV constructions presented in (6) are generally composed of three elements: a noun phrase (NP), perception verb, and adjectival complement. They are of the popular type in nature: a copula sentence is a configuration that contains a functionally attenuated verb, followed by a complement denoting some property of the subject NP (Taniguchi 1997: 271). The characteristics of these constructions have been commonly reported in the literature. First, adjectival complements are obligatory for the CPV construction (Rogers 1974; Taniguchi 1997) as shown in (7).

- (7) a. * He looks. (Taniguchi 1997: 272)
b. * That sounds. (ibid.)

The second property of CPV constructions is that although they are not used in the passive voice, the

grammatical subject plays the role of a perceptual object, similar to a seemingly logical object, not a perceptual experiencer (Rogers 1974; Taniguchi 1997). *John* in (6a), for example, is not the visual experiencer but someone who is being visually experienced by others. Finally, CPV constructions connote an implicit experiencer, who can be marked by a prepositional phrase, as in (8). An implicit experiencer is interpreted as either the speaker (*to me*) or a generic individual (*to everyone*).

- (8) a. The cake tastes good to me. (Taniguchi 1997: 272)
 b. John looks happy to everyone. (ibid.: 273)

3.2. Analogical extension from the CPV construction

This section points out that the copula-like intransitive expressions mentioned above share enough semantic and formal characters with the CPV constructions to realize the analogical extension of this construction.

First, the subject participants in the copula-like intransitive construction are semantically the objects in the verbal events. This construction profiles the property of the grammatical subject (that is, the instrument or theme), as opposed to backgrounding the agent of the action.

It is also observed that the copula-like intransitive construction in question requires an obligatory complement, similar to the CPV construction. This fact is confirmed by judging whether the element following the intransitive verb functions as a complement or an adjunct. As suggested by Bergs (2021: 148), complements usually add information on the quality of the grammatical subject, while adjuncts provide information on the action regarding time, space, reason, manner, or the like.⁴ The last section has shown that the elements in the copula-like intransitive construction designate the properties of the grammatical subject, and thus may function as a complement. Additionally, complements are obligatory, whereas adjuncts are always optional (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 221). Therefore, the complement in a sentence like *Kim became ill* cannot be omitted without loss of grammaticality (**Kim became* by Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 261). The construction in question is quite similar to the CPV construction in the sense that it requires an obligatory adjectival complement because it would be less acceptable without the adjective, as in (9).

- (9) a. The mattress sleeps ??(warm).
 b. The hood fits ??(comfortable).

⁴ Bergs (2021) goes on to explain a theoretical limitation of the clear-cut boundary between complements and adjuncts. For instance, the sentence *he stayed very quiet* illustrates a complement, while the sentence *he cried very loudly* has an adjunct. The contrast, however, leads to some confusion because the underlined phrases in both sentences semantically refer to properties of the subject. In fact, some scholars, including Bergs (2021), argue that the status of elements as complements and adjuncts is “a matter of degree” (see also Langacker 2003; Keizer 2004).

Moreover, the copula-like expressions as well as the CPV construction avoid the syntactic constraint in which subject-oriented depictives, which take an adjective as an adjunct, do not undertake *wh*-movement, as shown in sentences (10) to (12).

- | | | |
|---|---------------------------|-----------------|
| (10) How pretty does Betty look? | [CPV constructions] | (COCA, SPOK) |
| (11) How comfortable do the earbuds fit? | [copula-like expressions] | |
| (12) * How angry did John leave the room? | [depictives] | (Hoshi 1992: 2) |

Finally, the copula-like intransitive construction implies a conceptualizer who performs the verbal action. Itagaki (2021) argued that the *sleep* pattern is subjectively construed and implies the existence of the implicit conceptualizer, since the adjectival complements appearing in this pattern designate the sleeper's feeling as well as the subject referent. This can be represented as in (13).

(13) *Sleep* patterns as a construction:

SYNTAX: NP_{SUBJ} – *sleep* – ADJ_{COMP}

SEMANTICS: NP_{SUBJ} feels ADJ_{COMP} and makes someone (mainly, the conceptualizer) ADJ_{COMP}
as s/he sleeps on it.

The semantic structure shown in (13) supports the argument that this pattern has been extended from the CPV construction. Many cognitive linguists have observed that the CPV construction is subjectively construed in that the implied experiencer, namely the conceptualizer, is strongly involved in the denoted situation even if s/he is not literally encoded (Taniguchi 1997; Whitt 2011). The *sleep* pattern shares functional characteristics with CPV constructions, such as the subjective status of construal, as well as the syntactic configuration [NP – V – ADJ]. In fact, we can find attested data like (14) and (15) showing that the patterns of *sleep* or *fit* can occur with the experiencer in a *to* prepositional phrase, as in the CPV construction in (8).

- | | |
|---|------------------------|
| (14) a. Everyone says it sleeps cool but <u>it slept warm to me</u> . | (Itagaki 2021: 69) |
| b. <u>This mattress sleeps cool to us</u> , [we] never woke up hot... | (ibid.) |
| (15) a. I have been looking for <u>a small shoulder bag that fits snug to me</u> that I could use when we walk around the parks ... | (Google ⁵) |
| b. <u>It fits snug to me</u> and rides comfortably wherever I choose to clip it. | (Google ⁶) |

Overall, the copula-like intransitive construction can be analyzed as an extension of the CPV

⁵ <http://abitofpixiedust11.blogspot.com/2011/07/walt-disney-world-anniversaries.html>

⁶ <https://www.severacustomleather.com/testimonials>

construction.

4. Motivation

So far, this paper has shown that copula-like novel expressions are instantiated as an extension of the CPV construction. Peripheral instances embodied through language creativity have found to be closely related to well-formedness, which can be accounted for on the basis of conventionality in cognitive linguistics (Evans 2019). Therefore, the well-established CPV construction sanctions new creative expressions with regard to the similarity of the function of the CPV construction.

Nevertheless, we cannot fully answer the question as to “why” the copula-like new expressions are produced even if the last section discussed “how” these sentences came into being. This section will account for the motivation for sanctioning these expressions on the basis of the CPV construction, by arguing that the expressions function as a compensation for the desire to depict a situation that cannot be accurately represented by the CPV (and in particular the *feel*) construction.

The CPV construction designates some evaluations as to the evocation or production of the sensation by the stimulus of the experience. Sensory verbs—*look*, *sound*, *smell*, *taste*, and *feel*—play a role in describing each sensory modality. Although the *feel* construction expresses a description of the tactile sense, this construction is noticeable because many examples that we come across of this construction in Web corpora refer to a physical sensation through touching by the hands, as in (16).

- (16) a. Her hair feels rough under my hand, so I smooth it down and smooth it down, until she closes her eyes and says, “June.” (COCA, FIC)
b. Contemplating and rubbing the cooled gel between his fingers, Eskins noticed it felt smooth but not greasy. (COCA, ACAD)

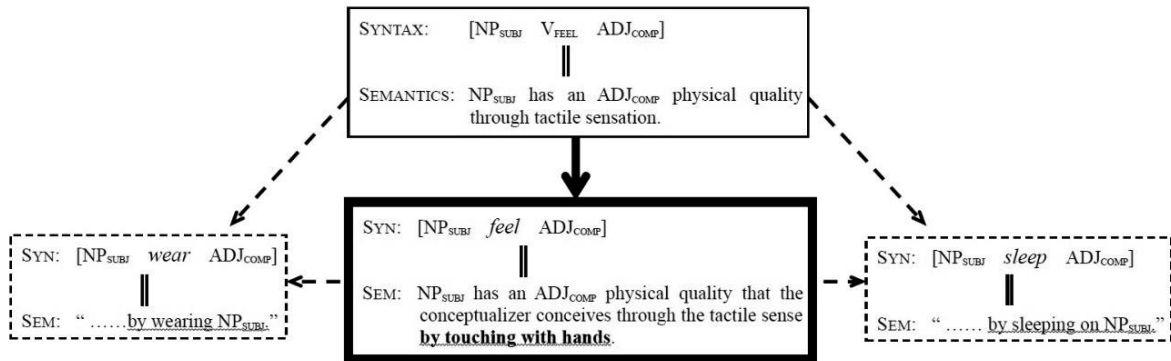
Furthermore, the descriptions of the verb *feel* in dictionaries imply the feeling of using our hands, as exemplified in (17) to (18), which suggests that the prototypical usage of the *feel* CPV construction depicts a sensory modality through touching.

- (17) To give you a particular physical feeling, especially when you touch or hold something.
Her hands felt rough. (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English)
(18) To have a particular physical quality which you become aware of by touching.
The water feels warm. (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary)

It is cognitively and linguistically plausible to divide tactile sense into the two aspects of “sensation by the hands” and “sensation by other body parts.” In cognitive science, it has been proposed that cognition is embodied, such that it depends on the experiences that result from

possessing a body with given physical characteristics and a particular sensorimotor system (Borghi 2005). Some researchers, such as Gibson (1962), claim that many properties of surfaces and objects can be registered by active touch, which is an exploratory process of touching something with our fingers. Colby and Goldberg (1999) explain that human beings can identify a spatial location not only by sight or sound, but also by reaching for it with either hand, as there are some neurons that fire more strongly when the target is moved within reaching distance. Linguistically, the language phenomena associated with “sensation by hands” have unique conceptual metaphors that are not reflected in “sensation by other body parts,” as shown in the conceptual metaphor UNDERSTANDING IS GRASPING (e.g., *I’m trying to grasp the meaning of this verdict*, or *I think I finally have a handle on the statistical principles* in Lakoff and Johnson 1980).

These previous discussions would support my argument that the *feel* CPV construction prototypically expresses the physical sensations in which we contact the subject NP referent by touching it with our hands, although it is not impossible for this construction to designate evaluations based on another tactile modality caused by contact with other body parts. This allows us to assume, in turn, that the tactile modality sourced by other body parts should alternatively be applied to and compensated with the representation of the copula-like intransitive expressions in question. Reconsideration of the examples presented in Section 2 reminds us of the characteristics of the expressions in which they describe the properties of the subject NP (as well as the conceptualizer’s evaluation) on the basis of tactile information obtained from body parts besides the hands. Cognitive linguistics posits that language creation results from the dynamicity of human communication, whereby speakers are able to innovate some expressions by means of extension from previously established constructions, even if the inventory of constructions available in a language is finite and cannot accurately depict certain situations in which speakers attempt to get across to listeners (cf. Tomasello 2008; Evans 2019). In this case, the use of copula-like intransitive expressions is motivated by a conflict in which the *feel* CPV construction cannot fully capture the particular situation. This constructional network can be described as follows.



This explanation is supported by the unacceptability of the *touch* expression. Taniguchi (1997) reports that the sentence in (19) is almost unacceptable in current English. My informant answered in the same way. Expressions of this sort are hardly seen in the corpora.

(19) *? This table touches hard.

(Taniguchi 1997: 295)

The unacceptability of *touch* expressions may be related to the statistical preemption process. Statistical preemption, as proposed by Goldberg (2016, 2019), is a type of indirect negative evidence that plays an important role in avoiding unacceptable sentences. According to Goldberg (2016: 377), when speakers recognize after repeated encounters that formulation B is the appropriate form in a given context, they implicitly learn that a semantically and pragmatically related alternative formulation A is not appropriate in this context. The situations observed in sentences such as (19) can be accounted for by statistical preemption. That is, because the verb *feel* is semantically and pragmatically quite similar to the verb *touch*, the well-established CPV construction may preempt the copulative use of *touch* as an alternative formulation, and as a result, these sentences are blocked by the CPV construction.

5. Concluding Remark

The Cognitive Construction Grammar approach for language creativity assumes that our cognitive apparatus allows us to create a new expression via an analogical extension from a well-established unit that speakers generalize over usage events. This squib has shown that copula-like novel expressions are indeed an analogical extension from the CPV construction; moreover, they are motivated by our desire to permit the expression of tactile sensations that the *feel* CPV construction cannot fully describe.

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