

Phrasal words, compounds and phrases: a constructionist perspective

The paper addresses the issue of distinguishing between lexical(naming)-constructions and syntactic(describing)-constructions from a Construction Grammar perspective (cf., a.m.o., Fillmore, Kay & O'Connor 1988; Goldberg 1995, 2006). As is known, in a constructionist framework there is no clear-cut division between lexical items and syntactic structures: the construction is the basic unit of linguistic analysis and the syntax-lexicon distinction is rather a matter of degree.

Under this view, “intermediate” phenomena between syntax and the lexicon are quite expected. Compounding is a well-known case in point (e.g. English *truckdriver*, German *Haustür* lit. house+door ‘front door’, Spanish *sordomuto* lit. deaf+mute ‘deaf-mute’). However, in various languages we find a number of other multi-word strategies, whose study is less established than that of word-formation, but whose function is to “name” entities precisely like traditional morphological mechanisms. We will refer to these units as “phrasal words”. Some examples of nominal phrasal words (hence phrasal nouns) in Romance languages are given in (1):

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| (1) | a. | Spanish | [N Adj] | <i>luna nueva</i> | lit. moon new | ‘new moon’ |
| | b. | Italian | [N da N] | <i>camera da letto</i> | lit. room from bed | ‘bedroom’ |
| | c. | French | [Adj N] | <i>premiere violon</i> | lit. first violin | ‘first violin’ |
| | d. | Portuguese | [N de N] | <i>cadeira de rodas</i> | lit. chair of wheels | ‘wheel chair’ |

Generally speaking, the phrasal nouns in (1) (as many other phrasal words) follow the syntactic rules of the language, e.g. [N P N] constructions follow the regular pattern for nouns modified by a PP. This notwithstanding, these items have a clearly lexical, “naming” function and give rise to multi-word lexemes, not syntactic phrases.

The constructionist perspective adopted here allows us to classify quite straightforwardly phrasal words as both phrases and lexemes, since constructions are technically defined as conventionalized associations of a form and a meaning (cf. e.g. Booij 2002, 2005, 2007; Masini 2007, in preparation). On the one hand, this preserves the notion of word, as advocated in Booij (2007); on the other, it allows us to classify phrasal words on a par with morphological complex words and to speak of a wider family of “lexical constructions” that act as naming strategies and therefore differ functionally from syntactic constructions.

Of course, this also entails that phrasal words are not “canonical phrases”. Indeed, they are more restricted syntagmatically and paradigmatically and tend to display peculiar properties. Let us take for instance the Italian phrasal noun *casa di cura* lit. house of cure ‘nursing home’: its constituents cannot be singularly modified by an adjective (2a) nor substituted by near-synonyms (2b), and the second noun cannot be preceded by a determiner (2c)

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| (2) | a. | * <i>una casa accogliente di cura</i> | lit. a home cosy of cure | ‘a cosy nursing home’ |
| | b. | * <i>una abitazione di cura</i> | lit. a dwelling of cure | |
| | c. | * <i>una casa della cura</i> | lit. a home of the cure | |

In the paper we will go deeper into the analysis of the formal constraints on phrasal words, and lexical constructions in general, in Italian and other languages. In particular, we will explore the hypothesis, already hinted at in other works, that the input constituents of lexical constructions tend to display a low or null referential force and, consequently, a reduction of grammatical contextual features (cf. e.g. Dahl 2004, Simone 2007). Also, we will show how these properties can be formalized in a constructionist approach in order to keep lexical and syntactic constructions separate. Finally, the preference of Romance languages for phrasal naming strategies is compared with the tendencies displayed by other languages such as Germanic languages and Russian.

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