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# The Constructionist Modelling of “Non-native Discourse”

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**Résumé** Situé à l'intersection de la sociolinguistique et de la théorisation grammaticale, cet article examine de possibles rapprochements entre des approches empiriques du discours des « non-natifs » (« non-native discourse ») et l'explication théorique offerte par la grammaire de construction. Selon les modèles basés sur l'usage de la grammaire de construction (Goldberg; Croft), la variation, l'émergence de nouvelles constructions et leur grammaticalisation sont des phénomènes centrales et même des constructions non-standards sont prises en considération au sein de ce modèle (Bybee ; Hoffmann ; Gries). De la même manière, le discours des « non-natifs » pourrait être analysé avec le formalisme descriptif de la grammaire de construction, ce que j'essaie de montrer avec des exemples tirés de *l'anglais comme lingua franca parlé* (Seidlhofer). Cependant, comme il s'agit de formes essentiellement dynamiques et instables et comme le modèle actuel n'est pas assez élaboré pour une conceptualisation de variations *ad-hoc*, je mets finalement en doute la possibilité de représenter ces formes en tant que constructions (dans le sens constructionnel).

**Abstract** Located at the intersection of sociolinguistics and grammar theory, my paper discusses the possibilities of connections between empirical approaches to “non-native discourse” and the theoretical accounts proposed by recent Construction Grammar models. According to the usage-based model of Construction Grammar (Goldberg; Croft), variation and change, the emergence of new constructions and their grammaticalisation are common phenomena and new, even non-standard constructions are taken into consideration as well (Bybee; Hoffmann; Gries). In this paper, I try to show this by using some descriptive formalisms from Construction Grammar in the analysis of examples from spoken *English as a Lingua Franca* (Seidlhofer). In addition to the difficulties of representing each construction, I especially draw attention to the “network of constructions”, which I view as being particularly complex when one speaks a second language. However, given the difficult nature of “non-native discourse”, I question the possibilities of representing those structures as “constructions” – a notion which itself is not clear enough.

**Mots-clés :** Grammaire de construction, sociolinguistique, anglais comme lingua franca, discours des non-natifs, langage parlé, agrammaticalité, émergence.

**Keywords:** Construction Grammar, Sociolinguistics, English as a Lingua Franca, Non-native Discourse, Spoken Interaction, Ungrammaticality, Emergence.

# 1 Introduction

The investigation of creativity, irregularity and heterogeneity of language use has long been excluded from the formal modelling of language. In order to posit a homogeneous and regular object of study, grammatical sentences of “native speakers” have been given a dominant position in mainstream grammar theories. Basing my discussion on existing studies and my own observations of current language phenomena, I want to call into question this central position of the native speaker in linguistics. I specifically want to examine what alternatives to the concept of “grammatical rule” can be developed by a formalized approach to grammar in order to be able to grasp the characteristics of “non-native discourse” as well. More broadly, I argue that with the rejection of the innateness of linguistic rules, which is a core tenet of several current linguistic theories, the notions of grammaticality and appropriateness become unstable, since regularity is connected with various accounts of linguistic and extra-linguistic features.

Located at the intersection of sociolinguistics and grammar theory, my paper discusses the possibilities to connect empirical approaches to the complex ad-hoc variation in “non-native discourse” and the theoretical accounts proposed by recent Construction Grammar models. In order to illustrate concrete “non-native constructions” and discuss the issues concerning Construction Grammar as a possible model of “non-native discourse”, I use examples from two corpora of spoken interactions in English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). In addition to the difficulties of identifying and representing each particular construction, I especially draw attention to the “structured inventory” and the “network of constructions”, which I view as being particularly complex when one speaks a second language. I argue that, besides the constructions from the target language, i.e. English, the network also includes constructions from the speakers’ respective first language(s), which also have an impact on the form of the produced ELF-construction. The cross-linguistic transfer and interference should thus be taken into account in the representations, something that recent publications on the subject did not emphasize sufficiently. By analyzing these concrete examples taken from ELF, my main aim is, however, to address more general questions regarding current modellings of language in their attempt to describe and conceptualize irregularities, unstable forms and emerging structures.

## 2 Construction Grammar

The usage-based accounts of Construction Grammar propose a dynamic concept of “construction”, which is based on usage frequency and is supposed to replace the traditional notion of stable grammatical rule. Since the first constructionist papers from the late 1980s (Langacker, 1987; Kay & Fillmore, 1999), several sub-schools, which differ in more or less important degrees, have emerged, forming a whole family of grammar theories. In this paper, I will nevertheless, under the name of Construction Grammar (CxG), assume one model of grammatical description, drawing special attention to the usage-based approaches developed primarily by Adele Goldberg and William Croft. As the essential question of my paper is related to the investigation of “non-native discourse”, I will briefly address, in the next section, only those principles of CxG that are relevant for this topic and, from my point of view, enable an analysis of second and foreign language data. I will then focus more on the “structured inventory”, a model which I view as being particularly suitable for this kind of data:

- CxG attempts to reach a holistic and integrated theory of language “with universal impact” (Fried & Östman, 2005: 1), a theory capable of integrating into the representation also semantic, prosodic and pragmatic characteristics;
- The term “construction” is the key concept of the theory: Constructions are symbolic form-meaning pairings – the form is linked to a specific semantic or discourse function – which are

learned. In a broad sense, the formal side of the construction ranges from morphemes and words to (partially) lexically filled patterns, idioms but also fully generalized phrasal patterns (see Goldberg, 1995; 2006; Croft, 2001; Tomasello, 2003; Croft & Cruse, 2004; Fried & Östman, 2005; Ellis, 2013);<sup>1</sup>

- According to the usage-based approach constructions are based only on general cognitive processes and usage frequency, which means that grammar is not hard-wired in the human brain but learned from the input (Goldberg, 2006; Bybee, 2010; 2013);
- As the division between competence and performance is rejected, CxG can (in principle) account for interaction and not just grammatical sentences out of context (Östman, 2005; Geeraerts, 2010);
- The context is supposed to influence meanings and their modifications; what actually changes are the connections within the “structured inventory” (Langacker, 1987; Croft, 2005), where grammatical markers and constructions are organized in a (semantic) network (Langacker, 1987; Goldberg, 1995). This network therefore is not stable but restructured in the course of the speakers’ linguistic experience (Bybee, 2013).

As a consequence of these principles, in recent years, the extension to dynamic language use can be observed within the theory. In general, CxG as an analytical framework of Cognitive Linguistics seems particularly connectable with sociolinguistics and applied linguistics, as also several scholars from various linguistic fields have argued (Hopper, 1998; Tomasello, 2003; Fischer & Stefanowitsch, 2006; Blommaert, 2010). Due to this suitability various kinds of discourse and variation, i. e. dialects and varieties (Mukherjee & Gries, 2009; Hoffmann, 2011), second language acquisition and production (Gries & Wulff, 2005; Ellis, 2013), collexemes (Stefanowitsch, 2013) and even data from learner language (Deshors & Gries, forthcoming) have already been analyzed from a constructionist perspective. This paper, however, will not further discuss these studies, but will limit the discussion to selected representation models from the Californian CxG, trying to apply them to the very interesting but complex data of English as a Lingua Franca.

## 2.1 Structured inventory and network of constructions

As indicated above, according to CxG, meanings and forms constitute a structured inventory and are connected in a network. Due to its integration of different kinds of elements and connections between different levels, this representation model seems very productive for a schematic representation of “non-native discourse” and is therefore used in this paper. Following several construction grammarians, these statements can sum up the characteristics of the structured inventory:

- The structured inventory captures generalizations, but allows for irregularities and exceptions at the same time (Goldberg, 1995: 67);
- Each construction is a node in the network, and it is influenced by the idiosyncratic linguistic knowledge of the speaker (Croft & Cruse, 2004: 263);

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<sup>1</sup> Initially, the inquiry in CxG focused almost exclusively on “non-core” or “peripheral” constructions and idioms such as the so-called *What’s X doing Y? construction* (*What’s that fly doing in my soup?*), the *caused motion construction* (*sneeze the napkin off the table*) or *idioms* (*kick the bucket*) (Goldberg, 1995; Kay & Fillmore, 1999).

- Constructions “inherit” characteristics from other constructions (Goldberg, 2006: 14), so they form a hierarchy, but this hierarchy is not strict (Croft & Cruse, 2004: 264);
- Constructions can have multiple parents (Croft & Cruse, 2004: 264);
- In language, it is constructions all the way down and the network captures all of these units (Goldberg, 2006: 27);
- The network representation is “an alternative mode of grammatical organization to a generative theory’s system of components and rules encapsulated within components” (Croft, 2005: 276);
- The network can be represented as follows:<sup>2</sup>

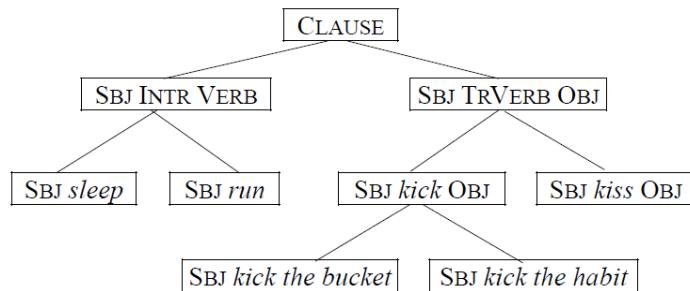


Figure 1: Example of a taxonomic network (Croft & Cruse, 2004: 264).

- For some scholars, not only constructions but also words are organized in networks. For example, Bybee strongly bases her model on similarity, i.e. analogy, considered as “the essential organizing feature of the network of words” (Croft & Cruse, 2004: 303). A simplified version of this kind of network is given in Figure 3:

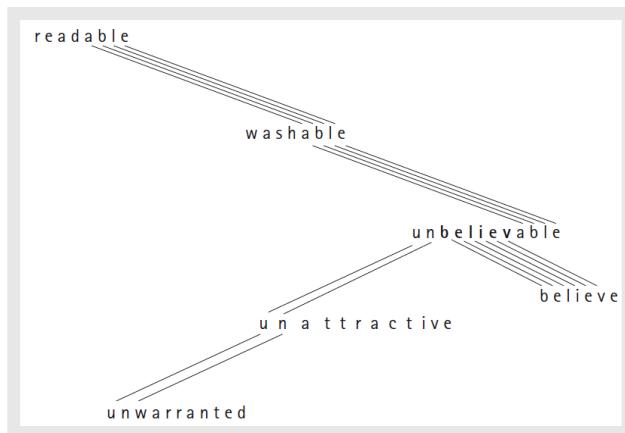


Figure 2: The internal structure of *unbelievable* as a derivative with its relations with other words (Bybee, 2010: 23).

<sup>2</sup> It is quite striking, though, that many construction grammarians do not try to actually elaborate a netlike formalism, but simply avoid dealing with it as they represent only individual constructions, mostly in a linear manner (Goldberg, 1995; 2006).

At the end of this section, it nevertheless must be stressed that the characteristics of the structured inventory remain a problematic issue. As Croft put it in 2005: “Of [...] [the] unresolved issues, one in particular stands out. This is the nature of the network organization of constructions” (Croft, 2005: 310).

### 3 Illustration of concrete “non-native constructions”: the case of English as a Lingua Franca

In order to illustrate concrete “non-native constructions”, I use examples from two corpora of spoken interactions in English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), i.e. VOICE (Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English) and ELFA (English as a Lingua Franca in Academic Settings). Without going into detail about how ELF as a research field and language phenomenon is to be conceptualized,<sup>3</sup> I would just like to use some examples from ELF: first, because ELF is clearly considered as “non-native discourse”, and second, because the available corpora are large and well-constructed. For my purpose ELF is very suitable also because it is not a (stable) “non-native variety” (which could be considered as a kind of English dialect), but simply a means of communication between speakers of different first languages (Seidlhofer, 2011: 7).

The choice of examples is motivated basically by their ungrammaticality. For “grammaticality judgements” as the leading criterion of traditional grammars, provided of course by means of introspection, limit these grammars’ analysis to native speaker discourse. In addition to ungrammaticality and non-standard forms, also the on-line production, the emergence or the blending of forms and the mutual accommodation between speakers can be posited as typical features of “non-native discourse”.<sup>4</sup> For ELF in particular, some “preliminary lexicogrammatical characteristics” (Seidlhofer, 2004: 220) have been detected, which also led my choice of forms.

#### 3.1 Non-standard multi-word units: *handle with something*

According to Seidlhofer, one of the “preliminary lexicogrammatical characteristics” is “[i]nserting ‘redundant’ prepositions, as in *We have to study about ...*” (Seidlhofer, 2004: 220). Two examples from VOICE and ELFA can illustrate this use (emphases added):

*Speaker2: what is important we're coming together to discuss **about the subject** and not to prepare a presentation (VOICE 2013: EDwsd306)*

*Speaker1: i have got a situation and somebody is telling me i have to **handle with this situation** and it's important to **handle good with this situation** and and that's my goal and then i'm satisfied and and and that's what really i get to know (ELFA USEMD180)*

In the schematic representation of these constructions, I will first use a common, linear formalism, following Goldberg, 2006. So, the construction (*Verb + with + Obj*) with the meaning *deal with sth., cope with sth.* is a frequent construction and as such “entrenched”; but the concrete verbs which fill the “open slot” (Hoffmann, 2011) of the general construction, can also be non-conventional and more varied than in

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<sup>3</sup> For more on the description and conceptualization of ELF, see Seidlhofer (2011). Furthermore, the ontology of ELF is still controversial, but I cannot address this question in detail here.

<sup>4</sup> By stating these characteristics, it has to be stressed that “non-native discourse” is in fact not essentially different from “native discourse”; speakers always try to accommodate, constructions can be emerging on-line and the meaning of the forms depends on context in every type of discourse. What is unique to “non-native discourse” is that these processes are less conventional and as such more apparent and more important for intelligibility.

native speaker English. Using William Croft's terms (2001: 179), we could also say that the "selectional restrictions" are specific in "non-native speaker discourse".

$[V - PP]$	$[V - PP]$
$[V - about-PP]$	$[V - with-PP]$
$[talk - about - sth.]$	$[deal - with - sth.]$
$[discuss - about - sth.]$	$[handle - with - sth.]$

These examples show that the multi-word unit *discuss about sth* is formed as an analogy to *talk about sth*, and that, in the same way, *handle with sth* can be seen as an analogy to *deal with sth*. The general schematic construction [V – PP – Obj] enables different verbs to fill the "V-slot". But this kind of analysis still leaves unresolved such questions as how can the "meaning"-part be represented and what does the structured inventory, one of the key concepts of the theory, look like. The linear form also fails to provide a possibility to represent connections by analogy, which influence the final form so substantially.

### 3.1.1 Networks of non-standard multi-word units

A clearer and more thorough schema is, in my view, the representation with a network. I want to use Bybee's model (see figure 3) to show, first, how the representation of the internal connection between words can be expanded to multi-word units as well and, second, how even non-standard and definitely unstable constructions can be explained and represented by the extension of this kind of network model:

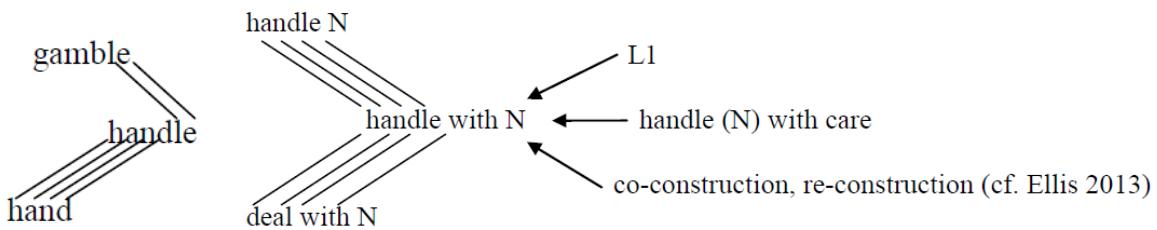


Figure 3: The internal structure of the verb *handle* and the structure of the ELF-construction *handle with sth.* (cf. Bybee, 2010: 23)

In figure 5, a further extension of the model, the crossed lines should indicate the unconventional (and ungrammatical) character of the connections. And the curved lines mark semantic analogy, which is completely absent from Bybee's scheme. The diagrams are, of course, only attempts that can also demonstrate some of the weaknesses of the model:

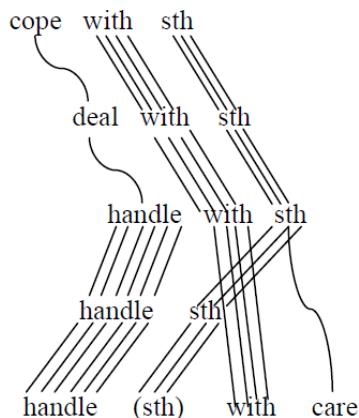


Figure 4: Schematic network representation of the ELF-construction *handle with sth.*

## 3.2 Words with non-standard suffixes or use: *enjoy INTR*

Some of the often-cited “typical” ELF-cases of ungrammatical morphology are omitting the third person present tense -s (*he make, she come*) and unconventional plural forms (*evidences, informations*). Here, I will examine another interesting example, namely the shift (or extension) of a word’s valency. I have chosen the “intransitive use of a (normally) transitive verb” because, on the one hand, it is a common “error” in “non-native discourse”,<sup>5</sup> pointed out in language courses and learner’s dictionaries, and, on the other, the transitive/intransitive constructions are among the truly basic constructions in grammar analysis and are also often the object of inquiry and representation in CxG. The following examples show that this phenomenon is quite common in ELF (emphases added):

*Speaker1 [L1: Somali] i don't really enjoy with him erm during the er the elections er presidential elections in united states (ELFA: ULECD030)*

*Speaker1 [L1: Polish] i hope that you will enjoy and you will be mhm erm er you will take a part in the discussion so please put the questions (ELFA: USEMD150)*

*Speaker3 [L1: Serbian] thank you very much /.../ i really enjoyed (VOICE LEcon548:684-6)*

Hence, by focusing on the intransitive use of the standard transitive verb “to enjoy”, I try to show that the valency of a verb need not be considered as only an inherent and unchangeable feature of the lexeme, but that the verb can – in less conventional linguistic settings, such as ELF – figure as a “filler” for the “open slot” of an intransitive construction as well. Again, as in the above case of redundant prepositions, the “selectional restrictions” (Croft, 2001: 179) of the construction are different in “non-native discourse” (NND).

### 3.2.1 Networks of non-standard uses of words

Hence, if represented by the formalism of Croft & Cruse, one can postulate the introduction of the lexeme “enjoy” in the “open slot” of the schematic intransitive construction (SBJ INTRVERB: see figure 6). And in the concrete speech situation in ELF, “enjoy” can have an object or not, which means that one can assume it has the transitive and the intransitive constructions as parents:

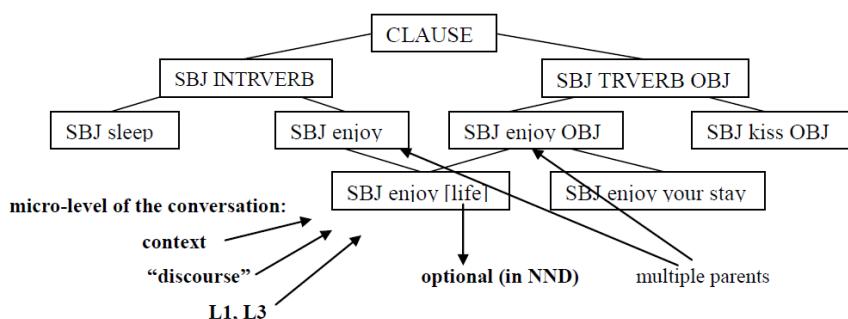


Figure 5: Network representation of “enjoy” used intransitively in ELF

<sup>5</sup> See also Seidlhofer, who quotes the *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* and comments on it in the following way: “[T]here is no [...] concession to ‘World English’ but on the contrary a rigid insistence on standard ENL norms. [...] [Learners] are advised that enjoy cannot be used intransitively or be followed by the infinitive, and this point is driven home graphically with strikethrough: ~~‘Thanks, I really enjoyed’~~” (Seidlhofer, 2011: 190f.).

Another option is that “enjoy” INTR is formed by an analogy to other partly filled intransitive constructions similar in meaning, such as “relax” INTR:

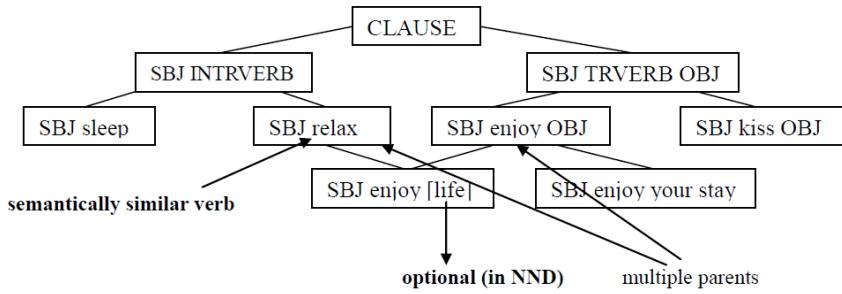


Figure 6: “Enjoy” INTR with two parent constructions with different verbs

Finally, the introduction of other languages (basically the L1) into the network can also serve as an explanation:<sup>6</sup>

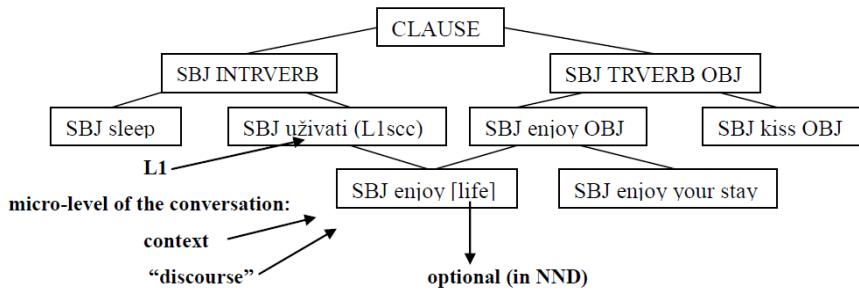


Figure 7: The L1-influence represented within the network

Considering these (formal and semantic) connections, the non-standard and ungrammatical constructions are clearly intelligible and thus legitimate elements of the speakers’ linguistic repertoire(s). As stated above, in these representations also analogy and interference should play an important role. Actually, these phenomena have an effect also beyond the scope of the particular language, for in “non-native discourse” also the respective first/other language(s) of the speakers influence the form of the constructions. Hence, analogy, which is a central concept in usage-based accounts in general (Bybee, 2010: 57ff.), is even more “powerful” in “non-native discourse”. The diagrams above are, of course, only a hypothesis that would have to be (empirically) tested. What is left as an open question is, for example, how the networks of the different languages interact and at which level the transfers and interferences really take place. Apart from that, a major remaining problem is, how to represent these different kinds of analogy and the discourse-functional properties, which – theoretically – are part of the construction itself, but have no place in the representation format of the model. But the network model as such enables a lot of connections and is therefore, in my view, adaptable to “non-native discourse” as well. It should, however, be developed further in order to enable the representation of more complex connections, multiple (not only binary) branching, the integration of discourse-functional and pragmatic properties within the network etc.

From the specific perspective of “non-native discourse” it also seems productive to introduce the notions of emergence, on-line production of forms and ad-hoc constructions. In this sense, new structures can be

<sup>6</sup> A combination of the proposed connections would probably be the most convincing option, but, for the sake of clarity, I have chosen a representation in three separate networks.

formed which are not (yet) part of the structured inventory (or are only part of an individual's network). Approaches of this kind are highly controversial in linguistic theorizing (and in science as such) and will be my concern in the following section.

## 4 Emergent and ad-hoc constructions

In this last part I want to focus on the gulf between some key tenets of Construction Grammar. On the one hand, the concept of "construction" is dynamic (that is, opposed to stable grammatical rules, and connected to on-line, linear, ad-hoc production); on the other hand, constructions are commonly conceived as conventionalized, inherited, entrenched units. So there is an important discrepancy between a linear, on-line view of grammatical production and the taxonomic networks with fixed and inherited relations and characteristics.

Following the usage-based approach, for instance the emergence of constructions is becoming a central point in certain recent grammar theories: linguistic structures can emerge constantly, so they can be "emergent" and not (necessarily) stable and well-defined (in advance). According to Hopper (1998; 2011), there is actually no stable, definite state of an adult grammar: language acquisition is never fully completed, grammar is constantly "emerging", even a competent speaker can modify, extend and change it. Performance is shaped by social, cultural and discursive forces: "Structure, or regularity, comes out of discourse and is shaped by discourse in an ongoing process. Grammar is, in this view, simply the name for certain categories of observed repetitions in discourse" (Hopper, 1998: 156). Hopper's reflexions are based on observations of the usual "native speaker discourse". But if the principles of usage-based accounts are really taken seriously, all kinds of discourse should be seen in the same way: linguistic structures are bound to their respective context and are produced on the ground of the linguistic and general social experience of a particular speaker. The form of the structure can be either conventional or ad-hoc.

Similarly to Hopper and other scholars in the field (Traugott, 2008; Geeraerts, 2010; Auer & Pfänder, 2011; Diessel, 2011), within ELF-research Seidlhofer argues that the notion of an "end-state" grammar is actually anomalous (Seidlhofer, 2011: 99). In fact, in ELF-studies the emergence and ad-hoc production of linguistic units is in general repeatedly emphasized. Jenkins, Cogo & Dewey, for instance, show that "[s]peakers routinely – but not unvaryingly – exploit the language systems of English to the extent that we can identify EMERGING PATTERNS of lexical and grammatical forms" (Jenkins *et al.*, 2011: 288-289).

The notion of ad-hoc constructions and the on-line production of forms are, however, matters of constant debate among linguists. On the one hand, something that is produced ad-hoc is dependent on the situation itself: the context, the speakers in the concrete interaction, etc. In this respect, an analysis of this kind of data goes beyond the scope of possible rigorous scientific analysis. On the other hand, there surely exist ad-hoc structures in linguistic production, which should be conceptualized. An attempt to deal explicitly with "ad-hoc constructions" has come – only recently – from a German research group that bases the research on the principles of CxG. In their paper about ad-hoc constructions Zima and Brône basically try to show how specific forms emerge in a particular speech situation, and how they are appropriated and finally also modified by other speakers. They claim that these specific forms situate themselves on the "local micro-level" (Zima & Brône, 2011: 266) and can as such be called constructions (in the constructionist sense). Most important, Zima and Brône claim that these constructions develop in the same (or a similar) way as usual, conventionalized constructions, but "before our very eyes", i.e. on-line. The syntax in this case is "dialogic". The salient point of this claim is actually that they posit different levels of language in grammar theory and locate their investigation on some "micro-level". The problem is that in typical CxG the different levels are in no way defined, nor does the choice of language level figure among the factors of the model. In the most prominent "schools" of CxG, constructions are defined as

conventionalized, entrenched units, and in this sense they are part of an established taxonomic network. On the other hand, sociolinguistic and variationist lines of research in CxG employ a – more promising – frequency-based operationalisation of construction (Tomasello, 2003; Gilquin & Gries, 2009; Bybee, 2010; Ellis, 2011; Gries, 2013; Stefanowitsch, 2013; Deshors, forthcoming). Nonetheless, if the constructions are formed ad-hoc without any possibility to establish the frequency of the variation, the question of their status arises, posing, in my view, a major challenge to future research on the constructionist model.

## 5 Conclusion

This analysis is only an initial attempt to integrate the characteristics of “non-native discourse” with the constructionist model. As the model itself is very heterogeneous and as we lack clear criteria for the representation model, this direction of research seems quite necessary. But on the other hand, it is actually questionable if, from a more rigid point of view, the chosen constructions would be considered as constructions in a constructionist sense at all and if it is legitimate to adapt a theory so substantially.

Consequently, one major problem of CxG is, which types of discourse can be included in the investigation and which should not be. The heterogeneity is, on the one hand, very good for investigations of dynamic spoken interactions (among which “non-native discourse”), but on the other hand, it extends the theory to a vast field of investigation that at this stage may be difficult to theorize at all.<sup>7</sup> Since more and more new topics are being included in the model, it is becoming even vaguer. In this respect, it is interesting to notice, that some researchers find the basic idea, and the initial theory, valuable, but reject the new theoretical directions. I claim that this is especially due to the fact that the new studies in CxG try to include too many (or not enough formalized) phenomena in all their complexity, going perhaps too far and making the theory too vague.<sup>8</sup> The notion of construction itself is perhaps not clear enough; indeed, there is no scholarly consensus about the degree of entrenchment and the respective roles that semantics, pragmatics and discourse play in the model of representation. Accordingly, I stress the necessity of clearer boundaries and a better defined, possibly standardized model of representation. Following the work of Nick Ellis, I hence tried to show that “properly representing semantics [and discourse-functional properties] in these models remains a major problem” (Ellis, 2013: 377).\*

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<sup>7</sup> Some distinguished scholars even consider CxG as a fuzzy, unscientific approach that should not be taken seriously (Leiss, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> See also Stefanowitsch (2011), for the difficulties of conceiving CxG as a proper grammar theory.

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