A cognitive-functional approach to utterance pairs: A critical review of dialogic construction grammar

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Abstract: The combination of construction grammar and dialogic syntax in cognitive linguistics facilitates a novel cognitive-functional approach to investigating dialogues, which highlights the engagement of interlocutors and aims to examine the cognitive motivation and mechanism underlying the resonances and temporary constructions in utterance pairs. Nevertheless, studies on dialogic construction grammar are scarce and unsystematic, some of which concern theoretical explanation instead of practical application with sufficient data. As a result, it is demanding to testify its explanatory force in diverse types of utterance pairs in natural language. Basically grounded on the monograph *Dialogic Construction Grammar: A Theoretical Framework and Its Application*, this review sorts out the development of dialogic construction grammar, and manages to presents how the Event domain-based Schema-Instance model is constructed to explore the cognitive mechanism of common types of utterance pairs, particulary, wh-question and answer pairs, namely wh-dialogues, with the intention to explain how dialogic construction grammar theory is applied to investigate the cognitive-functional properties of common utterance pairs in linguistic communication, at the same time pointing out the future work that might be done in the studies on construction grammar.

Keywords: dialogic construction grammar; utterance pairs; wh-dialogue; resonance; cognitive mechanism

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1. Introduction

The conventional aspects of dialogue analysis mainly center around forms and meanings of single utterances, as well as the influence of culture and discourse function on utterance meanings (Zeng, 2017). It is the advent of dialogic syntax that shifts the research focus of cognitive-functional approaches to language to the paired utterances, to the relation of utterance and utterance, along with the relation of language and speakers, namely the process that how language makes language (Du Bois, 2014). Inspired by the philosophical view of postmodernism, cognitive linguists are

encouraged to scrutinize dialogical utterances from distinct perspectives, one of which is from the perspective of the integration of construction grammar and dialogic syntax, or dialogic construction grammar. According to the theoretical assumptions of dialogic construction grammar, engagement of speakers in constructing dialogues has been significantly neglected in dialogic analysis. Essentially, engagement is the basis for dialogic resonance (cf. Wang and Zeng, 2016) produced in conversation. According to Brône and Zima (2014), dialogic constructions are ad hoc constructions that are different from the form-meaning pairings traditionally defined in construction grammar in that the later are acknowledged as conventionalized structures, whereas the former cover temporarily routinized paired constructions conceptually shared between interlocutors in consecutive turn-takings. In this sense, the ultimate intention of dialogic construction grammar studies is to figure out how interpersonal interaction contributes to the reasoning of utterance meaning, how cognitive motivation fosters the interaction between speakers and the objective world, and how interlocutors perceive structural parallelism in dialogue (Zeng, 2019b). In reality, as a new theory, dialogic construction grammar has not yet been fully probed into in different languages, and the motivation of this review is to introduce one of the very recent research findings in this field.

2. A brief review of the application of dialogic construction grammar theory

The past few years have witnessed increasing studies on dialogues and interaction (e.g. Verhagen, 2005; Nikiforidou et al., 2014; Linell, 2017; Couper-Kuhlen and Selting, 2018; Hsieh et al., 2019). Among others, the work entitled *Dialogic Construction Grammar: A Theoretical Framework and Its Application* (Zeng, 2019a), is a study mainly on wh-question and answer pairs, exemplifying one of the applications of dialogic construction grammar theory. This monograph not only clarifies the research findings in previous works and a state-of-the-art of dialogic analysis, but makes substantiate contributions, spanning the theoretical innovation, to broaden the realm of construction grammar in cognitive linguistics. Strikingly, with the Event domain-based Schema-Instance model (short for ESI), the cognitive features and mechanisms of utterance pairs inherently grounded on the construction of interactional meaning are investigated in detail, supposed to shed some lights on the further studies on natural languages from a dialogic view.

For this book, there is a beginning with the introduction to the dialogic turn in cognitive linguistic studies, discussed in chapter 1. As a term originating from "interactional turn" intending to yield dynamic perspectives in examining discourse and interactional language, '*dialogic turn*' unveils the view that intersubjectivity in interpersonal interaction among humans ought to be probed in the construction of paired utterances (Zima and Brône, 2015; Zeng, 2018).

In chapter 2, this monograph provides a detailed overview of work on grammatical constructions, which reviews the works on the constructions at the single sentence level, constructions in dialogue and dialogic construction in discourse, as well as their essential distinctions. Technically speaking, a '*dialogic construction*' refers to the schematic construction abstracted in paired utterances, and what the dialogic construction grammar postulates is that meaning is an interactive result between interlocutors and the interaction between speakers and the objective world. Such an assumption incorporates the philosophical view of embodied-cognitive linguistics rooted in usage-based linguistic theories. The highlight of the interaction and dialogicality in meaning construction and meaning understanding renovates the research idea of dialogic philosophy in the context of

postmodernism.

In the next chapter, a theoretical framework for the dialogic studies form the view of dialogic construction grammar, namely the ESI model, is proposed. This model is in fact the integration of Event-domain Cognitive Model and Schema-Instance principle. According to ESI model, a typical "dialogic construction" involves a "priming utterance" and a "newly-built utterance", where the priming utterance uttered by speaker A activates an event schema, with the utterance itself being an instance of the schema, and the utterance of speaker B (the hearer at the same time) functions as the new instance of the event schema, simultaneously indicating that speaker B produces newly-built utterance. In a single local dialogue, if speaker B follows the structure of the utterance uttered by speaker A, dialogic resonances are accordingly formed, which means the emergence of a dialogic construction. At the end of this chapter, four properties of dialogic construction in linguistic communication are discussed, including the property of being temporary, conventional, productive or dynamic. Based on the analyses of dialogic resonance, in the process of dialoguing, the symmetrical structures at the syntactic level, semantic inheritances, and pragmatic inferences are interpreted. In comparison, the leading argument in this chapter is that the ESI model can be interpreted from a dialogic view, which lies in the analyses of the negotiation of speakers, the dynamic features of ongoing interaction, and the emergence of meaning.

As for chapter 4, it authenticates the explanatory power of the ESI model via analyzing the cognitive features of English wh-dialogues, which involves a wh-question and an answer. According to the author of this book, the communicative meaning of a wh-dialogue is to gauge unknown information and verify known information from the respect of utterance pairs, which complies with the essence of form-meaning pairings in construction. In this chapter, previous findings on wh-question-and-answer dialogues are expertly scrutinized from the perspectives of structural linguistics, formal linguistics, functional linguistics, and cognitive linguistics. The shortcomings of existing research, as summarized in this chapter, are mainly the exclusion of interlocutors' cognitive engagement and the lack of large corpus-based investigation on dialogue. In contrast, the author argues that the ESI model functions well to make amends to some extent, based on the cognitive theory of grounding, which refers to the process that the speaker leads the focus of the hearer to something specific in order to generate mutual mental contact. The question and answer in a wh-question respectively in fact are a priming utterance and a newly-built utterance, and accordingly represent an ECM-question and an ECM-answer. In an ECM-question, the wh-word is the focus being salient, while the auxiliary and remainder are the background of construing the focus, then constituting the alignment of figure and ground. In specific, a wh-word represents a Schema-1, and an ECM-question represents a larger unit, or Schema-2. It is therefore concluded that the relation between a wh-question and an answer is a Schema-Instance relation, in accordance with which, different types of wh-dialogue constructions are classified, covering the cases of the direct instances of dialogic focus, the cases of indirect instances of dialogic focus, and the examples of the zero instances of dialogic focus. The first type depicts that a wh-question is directly paired with its answer, with the realization of Schema-Instance relation. The second type occurs when the information of the answer fails to directly present the information corresponding to the wh-question but through reasoning, while zero instances of dialogic focus cover the cases of dialogic interactions with focal transferring, negative answers, non-complete answers, and pragmatic marker-based answers. As for the cognitive features of wh-dialogue constructions, this chapter gives an excellent

investigation combining varied and rich data from COCA. Syntactic resonance, a key term in this chapter, is the syntactic feature of wh-dialogue construction, including cases of focal resonance, frame resonance, focal and frame resonance together with non-resonance, with the reliance on the parallelism between a wh-question and its answer. Due to the conceptual abstraction of an ECM-question, what the wh-answer represents is then a particular event or its elements decided by the specific dialogic situation, during which the semantic grounding of the dialogic focus is elaborated. The categories of semantic grounding mainly encompass focal grounding, frame grounding, focal and frame grounding, and non-grounding, each category elucidating a distinct degree of semantic specificity and prototypicality. Cooperation patterns between interlocutors, in line with coupling degrees of events, are also scrutinized in terms of pragmatic features of wh-dialogue construction. In the context of the ESI model, event coupling is defined to be the matching process of the ECM-Q and the ECM-A, suggesting whether the ECM-A is a valid instance of ECM-Q, and then work together to construct a new and integral ECM. The author eventually sheds light on wh-dialogue constructions in discourse in that they play a crucial role in achieving cohesion and expanding the size of a local dialogic discourse, where dynamic meaning construction and agent negotiation process are analyzed.

While, wh-dialogues with negative answers are particularly discussed in chapter 5, on account that this kind of question-and-answer pairs unveils special strategies that interlocutors use when construing events. It is argued that negation has been the research priority in numerous domains, such as philosophy, logic, psychology, linguistics, etc., but what is concerned is merely at the single sentence level instead of at the level of utterance pairs, to which this book makes supplements. At the end of this chapter, the author draws a conclusion on three ways by which wh-dialogues with negative answers are formed, containing the cases of a negative answer providing detailed instance, a negative answer negating the appropriateness of ECM-question and its focus, along with a negative answer negating the Schema-Instance relation between the question and the answer. With regard to the semantic features distinct from the analysis in chapter 4, the author concretizes the features of a wh-question and the features of a negative wh-answer. The author argues that, there are several factors decisive in interpreting a negative answer, encompassing the location of negative markers, the frequency of negation in a single wh-answer, and a cluster of structural types. Structural affinity has its place in wh-dialogue with negative answers as well, which is the source of syntactic resonance. When it comes to the focal part in this type of wh-dialogue, the author pays much emphasis on the discussion of the categories of semantic grounding of the focus of wh-questions, with the finding that, frame resonance and event frame grounding are more universal in wh-dialogue with negative answers. In terms of the pragmatic features, wh-dialogues with negative answers are productive in a dialogue in that such dialogues are the motivation of the novel message in conversation. Multi-interactive relations are also dealt with based on the relation between utterance and utterance, speakers and language, speaker and speaker. It is interesting to note that partial interpersonal cooperation is prominent in wh-dialogue with negative answers.

Chapter 6 makes preliminary contribution to the study on ellipsis phenomena in Mandarin-speaking children's dialogues under the same theoretical framework for dialogic construction grammar analysis, which is an innovative perspective in this realm, intended to make an explicit explanation on the development of children's linguistic and cognitive capacity. Grounded also in the ESI model, for children, the acquisition of language is essentially the acquisition of the network of

dialogic constructions, and the elliptical utterance is fundamentally an implicit instance of the event schema.

3. Dialogic construction grammar: Looking forward

In general, one of the notable merits of dialogic construction grammar is that this approach to language develops further what Du Bois (2014) has done for dialogic syntax. Although Du Bois endeavors to lay out the foundations of a theory related to dialogic syntax and plays emphasis on social interactions, viz. the subscribe to usage-based linguistics, he does not work at length out the cases of how and to what extent the theory could be applied (Brône and Zima, 2014). What Du Bois (2014) gives center stage to is the language phenomena of dialogic resonance, parallelism, analogy, priming, in paired utterances. According to Du Bois (2014), dialogic syntax is particularly concerned with dialogic resonance, with a claim that dialogic resonance reflects a common but not constant feature of language use. Nevertheless, Du Bois does not make efforts on exploring those in detail, to which the author makes striking contributions. Du Bois (2014) appeals for three detailed investigation, namely being a development of quantitative measures of dialogic resonance and the implementation of a precise operationalization of the concepts in dialogic syntax, the clarification of the role of priming, and the extension of the scope of investigation to a broader sample of the world's languages. Strictly speaking, to certain degree, this book has made achievements in the first issue. Strongly supported by the sufficient analyses of data from COCA, the author polishes up the resonance concept Du Bois (2014) defines as the catalytic activation of affinities across utterances but without elaborate description just with a general explanation of affinity, engagement, and coordination between two interlocutors. By contrast, the author adopts a strongly empirical perspective from studies on syntax, semantics, and pragmatics by virtue of ESI model, summarizing the kinds of resonance covering focal resonance, frame resonance, focal and frame resonances, non-resonances, and semantic resonances. Moreover, the author builds connections between event coupling and speakers' cooperation modes to discuss the implications of resonance and manages to explore the response strategies with cognition mediated in question-and-answer pairs.

In addition to what Du Bois (2014) appeals for, this book enriches Du Bois's existent findings. Firstly, the author introduces the grounding theory that is used in cognitive grammar to indicate the speech event, its participants (speaker and hearer), participants' interaction, and the immediate circumstances, which is in compliance with the process of instance in ESI analysis (Langacker, 2008). Since meaning and dialogic interaction go hand in hand so often that the semantic function of grounding theory furnishes better opportunities for cognitive linguists to make better explanation on how human language works. Secondly, the author undertakes a more detailed examination of contrast analysis on dialogue with negative answers to which Du Bois pays less attention. The author makes it clear that a negative answer might in fact be a concrete instance to the wh-question schema. On certain conditions it functions to be the negation of the existence of an ECM-question or a refusal to answer the question.

Besides the merits mentioned above, this contribution has other general strengths as well. For instance, as the author puts it in chapter 1, analyzing the meaning of dialogue at the level of utterance pair is the research frontier of cognitive researches, meanwhile, the integration of dialogic syntax and construction grammar is another research frontier in cognitive analysis of dialogue.

What the author has done is the combination of those research frontiers to accomplish an excellently demanding and innovative work. Moreover, this monograph not only adheres to Goldberg's perspective but also helps answer Goldberg's question, namely, what children acquire when they are engaged with language (Goldberg, 1995). The answer is that for children, the acquisition of language is equal to the process of acquiring the network of dialogic constructions.

What is more, this book is a user-friendly work for novices. In the beginning, the author lists the branches of dialogic studies in recent years with a purpose to arouse readers' interest and desire in reading. Then, the author takes a systematic inquiry into the evolution of construction to assist readers in laying foundations for reading this monograph.

However, this work still has certain room to get somewhere. As for language, the author spares no efforts to uncover the repertoire of English wh-dialogue with the help of the ESI model, but in accordance with what Du Bois (2014) puts forward, researchers ought to expand the scope of investigation to a broader sample of the world's languages, which means the author is bound to take a step in other languages, such as Chinese, to make comparison and contrast between English and Chinese. With regard to the studies on wh-dialogues, the finding suggests that there exist nine kinds of universal wh-words in COCA oral subcorpus, among which *what* represents *Being* element in ECM, while *when*, *how*, *why* stand for Action element in ECM. The question is, why does the author determine to do research on wh-dialogue instead of yes-no dialogue? Is the situation of yes-no dialogue easier or more difficult than that of wh-dialogue? Is the ESI model still powerful for explaining yes-no dialogue? One more puzzle is supposed to come in the classification of wh-dialogues, since what the author has discussed is just the typical form, i.e., a wh-question and a wh-answer. To intensify the persuasion, the focus should turn to other communication modes, such as self-answering, multi-answers to one question, and one answer to multi-questions. Moreover, chances are that speakers with various social identities are inclined to reflect their personal traits when they interact with others, which means features of these kinds of wh-dialogues are worthwhile to explore, especially for the application in language teaching.

Another shortage has something to do with the ESI model, which has thrown much light on events and schema-instance relation, but priming is neglected to some extent. As mentioned above, What Du Bois (2014) holds is that priming is an essential preparation for a more overall examination of the implication of the resonance cycle on cognitive and linguistic processes such as analogy, transfer, learning, and grammaticization. In practice, it seems that the addition of grounding is beneficial for expounding on the issue of priming. However, the correlativity is too subtle to get straight, consideration worthy of taking here. What's more, when the wh-dialogues are illustrated in the discourse, the engaged interlocutors ceaselessly construct new turns in anticipation of achieving the desired message or ending the dialogue as soon as possible. During the whole process, both the speaker and the hearer have their own strategies in cognitive cooperation. Whereas, the author mainly centers on answering strategies, as a result, skating over questioning strategies in the pragmatic features of wh-dialogues. Questioning strategies are such vital skills that are applied to negotiation occasions, interviews, conferences, especially for educational applications. There is evidence suggesting that rational teachers' question strategies are more successfully apt to recall students' understanding, catch students' attention, deepen students' thinking level, and encourage students to engage in class activities (Astrid et al., 2019). Whether the ESI model can be employed to explain questioning strategies in the pragmatic features of wh-dialogues deserves an in-depth

examination.

One more suggestion for this volume after reading might be concerned with a tiny structural adjustment. When the author mentions grounding for the first time in chapter 4, he gives a concise interpretation of what grounding is and its link with the ESI model, while the grounding strategies are not put forward until chapter 5, which causes a little confusion for the readers.

4. Concluding remarks

There being a growing consensus that dialogic construction grammar has a long way to go, as one of the cornerstones of nowadays achievement, this monograph is highly recommended to readers from any level to serve as intensive reading material in spite of a few limitations. As for those new to enter into dialogic construction grammar studies, this work furnishes abundant resources about literature reviews, latest progress in recent years. The most rewarding experience for this category of readers might be sparking points on researchable domain around the corner. As for those having set foot in the domain, this forward-looking contribution with the convincing argument is a genuine delight.

Conflict of interest

No conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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