

Where does the mountain stop? A granular approach to the concept of constructions-as-signs

1. Introduction

During the last two decades, a family of syntactic theories that are grouped under the label of *construction grammar* or, sometimes, *cognitive grammar*, has emerged and been tested by linguists working in many different sub-disciplines. Recent publications by Fischer/Stefanowitsch (2006), Stefanowitsch/Fischer (2008) and Fried/Östman (2004) document how the theory of construction grammar can be applied to great advantage in such diverse areas as historical linguistics, corpus linguistics, computer linguistics and interactional linguistics. Especially in the latter field, *construction grammar* seems to have been welcomed as an opportunity to remedy the scarcity of theoretical assumptions traditionally associated with interactional linguistics and research in the structure of spoken language in general (cf. Deppermann 2006: 51 and Hennig 2006: 43). The reason for this (mildly) enthusiastic welcoming of *construction grammar* is that its central assumptions – grammar as a symbolic inventory, holistic descriptions of constructions including prosodic, collocational or context-related features, and grammar as a usage-based phenomenon and emergent structure – are basically the same as those of interactional linguists. Construction grammar appears to be the first theory of grammar that does not immediately succumb to the wealth of empirical facts of language-in-dialogue. The idea that “constructions emerge as form-meaning-units in communicative practice” (Günthner/Imo 2006: 8; my translation) is a central tenet of interactional linguists and conversation analysts, who insist that activities, roles, meanings and structures are interactively produced. Some recent works by Deppermann (2006), Günthner/Imo (2006) and Imo (2007a) show that a combination of the theory of construction grammar with the analysis of empirically attested data of spoken language is indeed possible. What turns out to pose a problem, though, is the assumption of construction grammar that constructions have the status of signs, i.e. that they are to be conceptualized as form-meaning or form-function pairs (in construction grammar, *meaning* is usually meant to include *function*). Quite often, one comes across constructs¹ which share the same formal (morphological, syntactic, prosodic, collocational, sequential) properties but have different meanings. Other constructs have several meanings or functions at the same time and are semantically or functionally ambiguous. Ambiguity is particularly salient in garden path

¹ The term *construct* is used to refer to actually occurring instances of language. The relation between *construction* and *construct* is similar to that of *type* and *token*.

structures (cf. Imo in prep.) or in units that are currently undergoing a process of grammaticalization, pragmaticalization or lexicalization (Günthner/Imo 2003). The following example, taken from Günthner (2008d), illustrates the problems of a sign-based grammar. In her analysis of “adjective + *that*-clause constructions” in German, Günthner (2008d) comes to the conclusion that there is no fixed pattern, but a range of structures which are too closely related to be treated as separate constructions, but at the same time show enough formal and functional differences so as not to be treated as instances of a single construction:

front field	finite verb	middle field	infinite verb	post field
es 'it	Ist is	gÜt, good,		dass es so gekOmmen ist, that it turned out that way,'
	Is 'Is	ja KLAR? clear?		dass der kontakt !NACH!lässt; (.) that the contact weakens;'
	s= 's=	echt SCHAdE, really sad,		dass das jetzt nicht geKLAPPT hat- that it didn't work now-'
		schön 'nice		dass die so schön SCHWER is; that it is so very heavy;'

On a formal level, there are four different ways of combining an adjective with a following subordinate clause. If those four formal patterns were either coupled with four different meanings (or restricted to different situational or sequential surroundings), or, alternatively, showed absolutely no functional and semantic variation, one could either post four or one constructions. Unfortunately, neither solution works, as Günthner (2008d: 21) shows: There are some tendencies towards a functional differentiation of the four patterns, but, on the other hand, there are also many cases where the four forms could be used as functional equivalents. In reaction to the fact that indeterminacy and ambiguity abound in spoken language, Hopper (2004) doubts whether it is advisable to use the concept of constructions at all. Speakers do not produce constructions, he argues, but – at best – they string together “fragments of constructions” (Hopper 2004: 1). On a semantic level, Linell (1998, 2005) argues that constructions usually do not have fixed meanings, but only “meaning potentials” or “function potentials” (Linell 1998: 121), which are activated ad hoc in given contexts. In this view, the sign-based concept is eroded. If Linell and Hopper are right, what does this imply for the status of constructions and grammatical abstractions in general? Are constructions only patterns which are abstracted ad hoc by linguists on the basis of actually occurring speech (“abstractions from utterances”)? Or, alternatively, do they exist before the production of utterances in the minds of the speakers as “abstract structures, underlying concrete, particular utterances” and as “methods of constructing surface structures” (Linell 2005: 219)? Is it possible to rescue the symbolic concept of *construction grammar*?

In the following paragraphs, I will first discuss the idea of *constructions* in construction grammar, then show the advantages of that concept and, finally, I will propose the “theory of granularity” (Bittner/Smith 2001 a, b, 2003; Schegloff 2000) as a possible solution to (at least some of) the problems of the idea of *constructions-as-signs*.

2. What are *constructions*?

In spite of the theoretical and methodological differences between all the different “construction grammars” – among those are, for example, cognitive approaches² (Langacker 1987 and 1999, Taylor 2002), research in language acquisition (Tomasello 2003 and 2006, Wong-Fillmore 1979) and a wide range of usage-based and corpus-based approaches (Goldberg 1995, 1996, 1998; Fischer/Stefanowitsch 2006; Stefanowitsch/Fischer 2008; Günthner/Imo 2006, Imo 2007a) – there is a universally shared consensus about the conceptualization of constructions as (Saussurean) signs.

Fillmore (1988: 36), for example, defines a grammatical construction as “any syntactic pattern which is assigned one or more conventional functions in a language”.³ Or, in Croft’s (2002: 21) terms: “*Construction Grammar* treats grammatical units as fundamentally symbolic, that is, pairings of grammatical form and the corresponding meaning or semantic structure”. The same holds for cognitive grammar, where the “symbolic thesis”, too, is at the heart of the theory:

Cognitive Grammar is driven by the idea that language is essentially and inherently symbolic in nature. Linguistic expressions symbolize, or stand for, conceptualizations. I shall refer to this basic assumption as the symbolic thesis. [...] The symbolic thesis actually amounts to little more than the claim that language is in essence a means for relating sound and meaning. [...] What is special about the *Cognitive Grammar* approach is that syntax itself is regarded as inherently symbolic, and is therefore handled in terms of symbolic relations between phonological and semantic structures. (Taylor 2002: 20-21)

The central position the “symbolic thesis” has for construction grammar can be traced back to the uneasiness Fillmore/Kay/O’Connor (1988) felt about the traditional separation between lexicon and syntax. As an alternative, they proposed viewing both words and syntactic structures as symbols, thus getting a continuum of linguistic units “whose full and proper

² Though there are some differences between *construction grammar* and *cognitive grammar* (e.g. Langacker’s (1987) “Cognitive Grammar”), they share most of the central assumptions about the structure of language. Goldberg (1998: 205) even goes as far as to use both expressions interchangeably: “Within the theory of *Construction Grammar* (also *Cognitive Grammar*)...”. See also Fischer/Stefanowitsch (2006: 5).

³ Goldberg (1996: 68) states: “A construction is defined to be a pairing of form with meaning/use such that some aspect of the form or some aspect of the meaning/use is not strictly predictable from the component parts or from other constructions already established to exist in the language.”

characterization reduces to assemblies of symbolic structures” (Langacker 1995: 153).⁴ In this view, a word (which, being a traditional sign, has an entry in a lexicon specifying form and meaning) differs from a syntactic structure only in that the first is more specific and the latter more schematic and abstract: “Grammatical patterns are analyzed as schematic symbolic units, which differ from other symbolic structures not in kind, but only in degree of specificity.” (Langacker 1987: 58)

The first extension of the sign-based view of language has been towards an inclusion of everything from phonological structures via morphemes, words, and idiomatic expressions to syntactic patterns and even textual structures (Östmann 2005, Imo in prep. a). The second extension concerns the term *meaning* itself: The meaning of a construction not only contains information about its semantic and functional properties, but also includes every relevant fact about the context it usually occurs in, in other words, “facts about the use of entire constructions, including facts about registers, restricted dialect variation, etc. are stated as part of the construction.” (Goldberg 1996: 69)

This extension of both the scope of constructions in general as well as the scope of what is seen as a construction’s meaning has made construction grammar an interesting theory for those branches of linguistics that work with empirically gained data.

3. Some advantages of analyzing constructions as signs

As mentioned above, the sign-based conceptualization of language has been an attractive feature for interactional linguists, because it became possible to integrate the holistic descriptions of qualitative analyses into a grammatical concept. The “richness in information” (Norén/Linell 2007: 413) of linguistic items means that contextual, sequential etc. information has been included into the description of constructions:

Conversation analysis and construction grammar both refuse to view and analyze syntax as an autonomously organized module. It is in fact one of the central tenets of interactional linguistics to reconstruct the holistic interplay of syntax, semantics, prosody, pragmatics, multimodality and sequential aspects of grammatical structures in conversation and to account for the contingencies of the empirically given token in all their informational richness. (Deppermann 2006: 59; my translation).

The holistic approach of conversation analysis has led to an increasing collection of phenomena of spoken language which have so far been ignored by traditional grammars (or, at best, been relegated to some idiomatic “appendix to the grammar”, in the words of

⁴ Jacobs (2008) is critical about the complete reconceptualization of language as consisting only of constructions. Nevertheless, he appreciates the value the idea of constructions has for syntactic theory.

Fillmore/Kay/O'Connor (1988: 504). With the help of construction grammar, it becomes possible to treat them as the “normal” grammatical units they really are.

i. Linguistic phenomena that are “in-between”

Units that are somehow “in-between” traditional categories and linguistic levels are a typical feature of the syntax of spoken language. They can often be described in terms of the lexicon *and* the syntax or of the syntax *and* the text/discourse structure. A good example of such a unit is provided by discourse markers (also called pragmatic markers or discourse particles)⁵, whose functions will be illustrated by the discourse marker *I mean*⁶. The following example is taken from an NBC radio talk program featuring Laporte as the host of the radio show. A caller (M) is talking about the war in Iraq at the time of the crisis in Kuwait.⁷

Example 1 Laporte: *Caller Mark-Michael*

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45   M      kuWAIT is a is a dictatorship .hh of a vEry few people.
46           wOmen are BOUGHT and SOLD in Kuwait,
47           there is NO religious freedom;
48           they NEver had an election,
49           (.) .hh
50           if you're hOmosexual you get HUNG. .h
51   →     i mean it's NOT like a democratic cOUNtry.
52           it's an Oligarchy.
53           it's a religious uh dele dicTAtorship.
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In line 45, the caller argues that “kuWAIT is a is a dictatorship”. He then goes on to substantiate his claim by producing a list of arguments: There are no women’s rights, religious freedom is denied, there are no free elections and the regime is homophobic. The “i mean” in line 51 both marks the end of the activity of listing arguments and projects the start of a new activity, namely that of a conclusion and summary. This “i mean” certainly has some features of a complement taking verb but it can also be analyzed in terms of a complex (phrasal) discourse particle.

If one attempts a grammatical description of this phenomenon, one would have to take into account the following aspects:

- a. On a basic level, one could simply describe *I mean* as a lexical entry, a (complex) word belonging to the construction *discourse marker*, which then is similar to constructions such as *adverb*, *noun* or *verb*.

⁵ Auer/Günthner (2004), Barden/Elstermann/Fiehler (2001), Brinton (1996), Fraser (1990), Gohl/Günthner (1999), Günthner/Imo (2003), Kroon (1995, 1998), Lenk (1998), Schiffrin (1980, 1987) and Schourup (1982).

⁶ The parallel German form *ich mein(e)* has been analyzed by Günthner/Imo (2003) and Imo (2007a).

⁷ This example is taken from Imo (2006). The transcription system used in all examples is the “Gesprächsanalytische Transkriptionssystem (GAT)”, devised by Selting et al. (1998).

- b. On a more complex level, discourse markers are not just words, but parts of a syntactic structure, a fact that Barden/Elstermann/Fiehler (2001) tried to capture with the term “operator-scope-structures”: Discourse markers as operators have a projecting power over a following scope and – similar to the valence of verbs – they let the recipients of an utterance know that “something” is to follow. So, the construction *discourse marker* cannot be viewed as a category paralleling that of an *adverb* but rather as an abstract syntactic structure such as *matrix clause + subordinate clause*.
- c. On a third and even more complex level, it is not just the utterance directly following the discourse marker which has to be taken into account, but the larger sequential structure it is embedded in. One central function of discourse markers is to structure activities. This can be seen in the example above, where *I mean* manages the transition of *producing a list* to *producing a conclusion*. To describe discourse markers holistically, their sequential features have to be included into the entry of the construction.

So far, the dilemma of interactional linguistics has been that the results gained from qualitative analyses of empirically gained data could not be integrated into most of the descriptive and theoretical frames of syntactic theories, which usually stop at level b. By its holistic and sign-based approach, construction grammar is able to solve this dilemma: The description of the functional properties of discourse markers, their sequential and projective patterns and their discourse-structuring power is simply integrated into the sign-based construction *discourse marker*, a fact that is made possible by replacing the artificial separation of linguistics into distinct levels – an inventory of signs (lexicon), a collection of rules (syntax) and the macro levels (text, discourse structure) – with the single, overarching concept of the *construction*.

ii. Units of talk whose description has to contain prosodic or sequential information

A construction closely related discourse markers is that of the *tag question*. In contrast to discourse markers, tag questions are typically produced at the end of an utterance. In English, there are two types of tag questions, the productive and variable class that is formed by attaching a small pseudo question (consisting at least of a pronoun and a verb) to the end of an utterance, and the fixed class Quirk et al. (2003: 814) call “invariant tag questions”. These include expressions such as *am I right?*, *don't you think?*, *right?* or *eh?*. In German, there is only the second class of invariant tag questions. Furthermore, while in English – as Quirk et al. (2003: 814) state – invariant tag questions “take a rising tone”, in German, they can be

realized with a rising or falling pitch. This means that German tag questions (e.g. *gell?*, *nicht wahr?*, *ne?*, *verstehste?* and *weißt du?*) can have different functions depending on whether they take a rising or a falling tone. German tag questions have been treated in a very haphazard and random way in German grammars. Usually, they are viewed as interjections (e.g. in Zifonun et al. 1997) or discourse particles. Nevertheless, they are extremely frequent in spoken German, and by the choice of a falling or rising intonation they can be used either as structuring devices and attention getters or as a means of offering a turn to someone else and asking for an opinion or reaction:

A rising intonation and the production in a separate tone contour activate the gestalt of a tag question, a falling or level intonation and the prosodic latching to the preceding utterance are connected with the gestalt of an attention-getting signal. (Imo 2007a: 335; my translation)

The same form can have very different functions depending solely on its prosodic realization. In the following two examples, which are both taken from the same conversation between family members of a Swabian family (S1 and S2 are brothers, T is their sister), the tag question “woisch” (a dialectal variety of *weißt du* (‘you know’)) is first used as a structuring device (example 2) and then as a tag question fishing for a reaction (example 3):

Example 2 Swabia: *God*

988 S1 ich verSTAND-
 ‘i don’t understand-,’
 989 sage mer sO: irgendwo d leut nit wo also pArtout SA:get;
 ‘let’s put it that way those people who absolutely say;’
 990 was WILLSCH denn mit dem drEck,
 ‘what do you want with this rubbish,’
 991 kommtscho-
 ‘you come again-’
 992 kommscho WIEder mit deim lIEbe gott;
 ‘you come again with your good Lord;’
 993 den GIBT’S nit; .hh
 ‘he doesn’t exist;’
 994 wo des RIChtig Ablehnet,
 ‘who really refuse it,’
 995 → woisch.
 ‘you know.’
 996 des verSTAND i net;
 ‘this I don’t understand;’

Example 3 Swabia: *SS*

639 S2 i kann mir halt vorst- dass zum beispiel au die sS mit dene
 meTHode gschafft hat,
 ‘I can imagine that for example the SS, too, used these
 methods,’
 640 → woisch?
 ‘you know?’
 641 T ha SICHer.
 ‘well of course.’

In example 2, “woisch” (line 995) serves to mark the transition from the activity of describing the argumentation of people who do not believe in God to the evaluation of these opinions in line 996. In example 3, in contrast, speaker S2 uses “woisch?” (uttered with a rising intonation) to prompt his sister to come across with a reaction (preferably a positive one).

As this short discussion shows (see Imo 2007a for a more detailed account), the holistic approach of construction grammar is indispensable if one wants to do justice to the description of German tag questions. Not taking sequential and prosodic information into account leads to such an impoverished description that it is no big surprise many grammars simply relegate tag questions to the classes of discourse particles or interjections, which then serve as a kind of linguistic “dustbin” to collect all phenomena that are too difficult to be described in traditional terms.

iii. Lexicon – syntax – sequential structure – communicative genre

The continuum of constructions does not stop at the border of syntax. Rather, even communicative genres and texts can be described as constructions. Östman (2004) coined the expression “construction discourse” for these larger units. The possibility to describe texts and conversational patterns as signs is a great advantage, as it eliminates the need for switching between different and previously only weakly related methodologies and theoretical inventories (as, for example, *syntactic theory* and *theory of communicative genres*). A more consistent description of language is the result of the unification that is possible under the roof of construction grammar. One example for an interaction between a communicative genre and a syntactic pattern is provided by Günthner’s (2005) “dense constructions”: The communicative genre *everyday narrative* contains as one possible entry the fact that it can be talked into being by using *dense constructions*. Vice versa, *dense constructions* contain the entry of being used in the communicative genre *everyday narrative*. An exemplary analysis of the close interconnection of genres and “smaller” constructions is also given by Imo (in prep. a). The formulae *my problem is* and *my topic is*, respectively, are linked in their occurrence to the genres of *radio counseling phone in* and *radio talk phone in*. The genre *radio counseling phone in* typically contains the first formula, but, reflexively, the formula is also used to talk this very genre into being. The same holds for the relation between *my topic is* and *radio talk phone in*. It could be shown (Imo in prep. a) that such seemingly disparate linguistic disciplines as syntax, phraseology, conversation analysis and the analysis of communicative genres could be united within the framework of construction grammar. The reason for the easy combinability of all these approaches has to do with the fact that all of them view

processes of entrenchment and sedimentation as driving forces behind the emergence of structures – no matter be it syntactic, phrasal, sequential or genre-like structures. In his discussion of language acquisition, for example, Tomasello (2006: 21; my translation) explicitly points out repetition and usage as the main “producers” of syntax:

If people repeatedly say ,similar‘ things in ,similar‘ situations, there develops a linguistic pattern over time, which then becomes schematized in the minds of the users as a new category or construction – with different degrees of abstraction.

The emergence of signs out of use and entrenchment – which is exactly what is meant when “‘similar‘ things” (= forms) and “‘similar‘ situations” (= meanings and functions) are combined – seems to turn out a basic human cognitive strategy of coping with complex input. A theory of grammar taking care of this cognitive strategy has clear advantages over other theories when it comes to the description of naturally occurring language.

Yet, in spite of all the advantages that the sign-based concept of construction grammar has brought into the marriage with interactional linguistics, it has also brought along some serious disadvantages.

4. Problems and limits of the sign-based approach

The vast amount of literature on the constitution, use, definition and nature of signs is riddled with problems, most of which reach back for hundreds of years and are still unsolved. Eco (1977: 189) points out one of the central problems of semiotics: Signs can only be viewed in terms of *possibilities* and *potentials*, but never of fixed results, because the semantic system is continually changing and can only be described in fragments (and only in reaction to actual communicative events). Even within the integrationist approach of Roy Harris (2006), the basic problem of the inherent ambiguity of signs remains unsolved – and ambiguity is something most grammatical theories try to avoid at all cost. In the following paragraphs, I will show in which ways the indeterminacy of signs turns a construction grammar based description of spoken language into a problematic task.

4.1. One form – different or parallel functions

In some cases, there is one phonological form that can have several meanings or functions at the same time. If that is the case, it becomes impossible to argue for an individual construction (i.e. sign) for each of these instances. Instead, the range of meanings and functions somehow has to be integrated into one construction, which leaves open the question of when which meaning or function is active. Even when we include further information about prosody, context, sequential position etc. into the description, we cannot create

systematically structured constructions. This approach would only end in a proliferation of constructions: In the end, every construct would be a construction of its own because every construct has some “quirk” (Croft 2002: 25)⁸ that would justify a new constructional entry. A grammar consisting only of constructs (i.e. tokens) is no grammar, but simply an inventory list of data.

i. Aspects of *jetzt* (‘now’)

The adverb *jetzt* (‘now’) is used with a huge range of different meanings and functions. An analysis of about thirty hours of spoken German (Imo 2009a) showed that it is used to

- signal that the time of the utterance and that of some event or action are directly co-temporal (i.e. at the precise moment of uttering *jetzt* (‘now’), something is happening),
- project an action or event that will take place very soon,
- refer to an action or event that is already past the time of the utterance,
- structure narrative sequences, by referring to imagination (Bühler’s (1982/1934: 123) “deixis at phantasma”) and
- structure any kind of talk in the function of a semantically empty discourse particle.

It has to be mentioned that this list already is the result of massive efforts of decontextualization and abstraction. All those aspects of the meaning/function of *jetzt* (‘now’) are dependent on the actual context in which it is uttered and subject to negotiation between the interactants. Furthermore, instances of *jetzt* (‘now’) can have several meanings and functions at the same time (e.g., temporal and discourse-structural ones). Therefore, it is not possible to argue for five separate constructions. On top of that, the differences between, for example, meaning one (co-temporality) and two (projection) are so gradual that drawing borders proves to be futile. This is what is meant by the question quoted in the heading of this paper: “Where does the mountain stop?” (Bittner/Smith 2001a: 18): It is not possible to tell where one mountain (category, sign) stops and the next one begins. The following example is taken from recordings of one of the German Big Brother TV shows. Verena is talking into the camera, giving mock advice to the watchers of the program:

Example 4 Big Brother: *back to basic*

531 Ver ja dann wollt ich euch noch so n TIPP geben falls ihr mal ähm;
 ‘well then I wanted to give you some kind of tip if you erm;’
 532 so n bisschen bAck to BASic machen wollt,
 ‘want to do a little bit of back to basic,’
 533 äh;; .hh (.)
 ‘erm;;’
 534 nimmt einfach n LAPpen,
 ‘simply take a piece of cloth,’
 535 tut da FILterkaffee,

⁸ “Any quirk of a construction is sufficient to represent that construction as an independent node.” (Croft 2002: 25).

536 'put some filter coffee in it,'
 also KAFfee rein,
 'well coffee in it,'
 537 macht den aber Abends,
 'but make it in the evening,'
 538 WOHL gesagt?
 'right?'
 539 → äh::m (.) wenn man jetzt zu fünf MANN is,
 'erm: if you are five persons now,'
 540 dann macht ihr den Abends,
 'then you make it in the evening,'
 541 und am nächsten MORgen .hhh ähm (.) nimmt ihr dann das halt was
 Übrig bleibt,
 'and the next day erm: you take what is left,'
 542 wärmt des AUF,
 'warm it up,'
 543 und dann habt ihr leckeren KAFfee.
 'and then you have tasty coffee.'

The mixture of meanings and functions can be seen quite well in this example. Verona makes a proposal about how the motto of the Big Brother television format (“bAck to Basic”; line 532) could be put into practice. She starts with a kind of advice to the audience she is talking to via the camera and uses the second person plural to address them. In line 539, though, she jumps from the second person plural to the impersonal third person singular pronoun “man”, which can be translated both by ‘you’ and ‘one’ in English. Why does she use “jetzt” in that context? First, there are two temporal aspects. On the one hand, “jetzt” refers to the current situation of Verona as an inhabitant of the Big Brother container, sharing the room with four further co-inhabitants. On the other hand, “jetzt” also refers to a next step in her narration. After the description of the act of making coffee, the consumers of this coffee are introduced into the narrative. The temporal aspect here does not refer to Verona’s surroundings but to narrative structure. Second, there is a discourse-structuring function, which is closely related to the second temporal function: Verona’s “jetzt” can also be analyzed as a discourse particle that signals a transition between different steps or activities in a conversation.

ii. Matrix clause, discourse marker or both? The case of *I mean*

While it is nearly impossible to justify the drawing of boundaries around the different manifestations of *jetzt* (‘now’), this task is a little bit easier for *I mean*. It is possible here to argue for two prototypes around which the actual constructs are centered. On the one hand, there is the semantically full complement-taking predicate *to mean*, which can be used to form matrix clauses followed by a complement (e.g. *I mean that we should try, not simply give up*). On the other hand, *I mean* can also be semantically empty and not be used as part of a matrix clause at all. In the following example, taken from Imo (2006: 14), *I mean* is simply used to

mark the transition towards a side sequence, not to express an opinion: “i i TRY to be uh:m-sympaTHEtic i mean don’t we ALL;”. Nevertheless, in quite a lot of cases it is not possible to tell where the first mountain (*matrix clause*) stops and the second mountain (*discourse marker*) starts. Instead, the properties of both constructions overlap and are present at the same time, as can be illustrated by the example already cited above:

Example 5 Laporte: *Caller Mark-Michael*

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45     M      kuWAIT is a is a dictatorship .hh of a vEry few people.
46         wOmen are BOUGHT and SOLD in Kuwait,
47         there is NO religious freedom;
48         they NEver had an election,
49         (.) .hh
50         if you're hOmosexual you get HUNG. .h
51     → i mean it's NOT like a democratic cOUtry.
52         it's an Oligarchy.
53         it's a religious uh dele dicTAtorship.

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I mean can be analyzed as a discourse marker signaling the transition between the activity of listing towards that of concluding. Nevertheless, as is often the case when linguistic structures are the result of grammaticalization or pragmaticalization processes, the original forms remain activated to a certain degree. There is no reason why the “i mean” in line 51 should not be analyzed as a verb with a full semantic content that is realized as part of a matrix clause (*I mean that it is not a democratic country; My opinion is that it is not a democratic country*). Both readings – that of “i mean” as a discourse marker and as a matrix clause – make sense, and while, especially because of the sequential structure of switching from listing to evaluating in example 5, the gestalt features of the discourse marker seem to be slightly stronger, the gestalt features of a matrix clause are still present. How should a theory of grammar cope with this problem? Should we assume that two signs (constructions) are activated at the same time and overlap? Should we assume a third sign that is in-between the constructions *discourse marker* and *matrix clause*? The latter solution would lead to the same proliferation of constructions that would happen if one tried to do justice to every single instance of *jetzt* (‘now’).

4.2. One form – on meaning?

A second big problem when looking at everyday interaction is to decide which instances and patterns are to be taken as the results of an underlying construction (i.e. as more or less fixed combinations of meaning and form) and which are merely to be classified as ad hoc instances of language production (i.e. the result of the decidedly *on line* structure of spoken language, where it is not possible to insert something into the “right” place, once the moment has

passed). Traditional grammars are not much help in this field, because they usually ignore the structure and phenomena of spoken language.

One such example where it is unclear whether it is to be treated as a construction or not, is provided by sentences (or phrases) where an element is attached after the sentence but, canonically speaking, should have been placed within it. Structures of this type are related to right dislocations (cf. Altmann 1981 for a study of German right dislocations). In the cases I am interested in, though, there is no correlate (as in right dislocations) which could point to a preplanned structure. Instead, new material is simply added to the end of an utterance. These structures are usually called “increments” or “expansions” (e.g. Auer 1992, 1996, 2007 and Couper-Kuhlen/Ono 2007). As an example, Auer (2007: 653) cites the sentence “hier wird ORdentlich gegessen heute”. In English (‘Here we will eat properly today’; lit.: ‘Here will properly be eaten today’) the utterance-final ‘today’ is not marked at all. In German, it is different: After the so-called right verb bracket (the non-finite verb, in this case ‘be eaten’) only a few constructions are allowed to occur. Single adverbs are usually not among them. Auer (2007: 653) asks whether this sentence is really just a result of the process-oriented character of language (what Auer (2000, 2008) calls *on line syntax*). If that is the case, the adverb *today* would have been uttered at the end of the sentence simply because there is no way to rewind the utterance and overwrite it with the “correct” version. An alternative view would be to say that the character of an increment or expansion only occurs because we analyze the utterance through the glasses of traditional normative grammar: “It could be argued that they are constructions specific to German, i.e. that the ‘expansion’ looks like an expansion from the normative point of view of written language only.” (Auer 2007: 653). Nevertheless, Auer decides to stick to the incremental analysis in this case.

In the data I analyzed, I came across a pattern where it is much more difficult to keep up the incremental analysis. The pattern consists of an evaluation involving an adjective, which is then followed by an intensifying adjective, adverb or particle. Utterances of this type abound in spoken German:⁹

Example 6 Big Brother: *bun*

154 Adr und du hast heut morgen schon schön geFRÜHstückt?
 ‘and you already had a nice breakfast this morning?’
 155 Vero hähä (.),
 ‘hehe (.),’
 156 ach ja n BRÖT-
 ‘oh yes a bun- (breaks off in the middle of the word)’
 157 das war LECKER;
 ‘that was tasty;’
 158 → VOLL.

⁹ The example is taken from Imo (in prep. b).

'very.'
 159 Sbr so [WARM ne?]
 'so [warm, wasn't it?]'
 160 Vero [Echt ganz] WARM;
 '[really totally] warm;'

Andrea asks Verona, who only moved into the Big Brother Container the night before, whether she has already had breakfast (line 154). Verona says yes, tells what she had for breakfast and produces an evaluation (line 157: 'that was tasty'). The final pitch is falling and the phrase "das war LECKER;" carries a strong accent, suggesting that the utterance is finished. Yet, in line 158, Verona produces the "VOLL"¹⁰, stressed again and with a strongly falling pitch. According to Helbig (1999: 99) *voll* is a "degree-marking particle", which obligatorily has to be produced in front of the adjective it refers to. In Couper-Kuhlen/Ono's (2007: 515) terminology, Verona's "VOLL." would be called an "insertable": Insertables are increments that do not "fit the end of the prior unit but belong, canonically speaking, somewhere within it." (Couper-Kuhlen/Ono 2007: 515). The sheer amount of instances where intensifying adjectives or particles are produced in this fashion in spoken German suggests a different interpretation. There is some difference whether one says "das war voll lecker / 'that was very tasty'" or "das war lecker, voll / 'that was tasty, very'". In the second case the intensifier is focused and much more salient, the construction *post-positioned intensifier* therefore has a special meaning (namely, creating emphasis). It remains an open question so far what the status of process-oriented aspects of spoken language (such as *incrementation* or *expansion*) should be in relation to that of constructions. Is an increment an instance of a construction?

5. Some possible solutions to the problems

One very simple possible reaction to the problems connected to the sign-based reconceptualization of a theory of grammar would simply be to give up constructions (i.e. signs) and plead against the efforts of creating a unified theory. Hopper (1992, 2001, 2004) strongly favors such a course. In spoken language, he states, it is fragments of constructions at best that speakers use and loosely string together (Hopper 2001). Because of the complexity of language, he also sees no chance for a single theory but, instead, he rejects "totality in linguistics", which means "that the only new paradigm will be the absence of paradigms, a kind of disciplinary anarcho-syndicalism of numerous small groups working on limited problems from a variety of perspectives." (Hopper 1992: 236) This would imply giving up the quest of the search for a working theory of grammar.

¹⁰ The word *voll* literally means 'full' and is typical for youth language.

Linell (2006) is not quite as pessimistic as Hopper and even poses the question of how far one could go in formalizing “interactional language”. His answer is that if anything can be formalized at all, it is operations, not signs: “This leads to a conception of formalization as pertaining to operations rather than constituent structure. Operations are actions or methods by which the language user does something: x is made into y [...] in a given contextual matrix.” (Linell 2006: 60) Yet, in spite of some proposals of how such a formalization could look like, the concept stays extremely vague. The only fact Linell (2006: 63) is sure about is that a sign-based approach such as that of construction grammar will not work properly:

Instead, (a) situated meanings and functions emerge from the interplay between the utterance and its relevant contexts (and relevant contexts cannot be predicted by general rules), and (b) there is (usually) a specific semantic-functional potential tied to the individual construction (type). This second condition is in agreement with *Construction Grammar* (CxG), yet it seems that CxG is about to follow the usual pattern of dealing exclusively with compositionality.

A third approach would be to keep construction grammar and constructions, but change the definition of what constitutes a sign. Eco and Harris (1977, 2006) pointed out the openness and ambiguity of the meanings of signs. In the field of interactional linguistics, Linell (1998) and Norén/Linell (2007) take up this idea and introduce the concept of “meaning potentials” to take the place of fixed meanings. Fischer (2005, 2006), too, uses such an approach in her analyses of the use of particles in spoken language. She combines aspects of an “invariant meaning aspect” with co-textual and contextual factors to get at the realized meanings of particles in actual use. Deppermann/Elsternmann (2008: 128) use a similar argumentation in their analysis of constructions involving the verb *verstehen* (‘understand’, ‘see’): Lexical base meaning, grammatical constructional meaning, sequential constitution of meaning and background knowledge together (and only together!) provide the necessary information for the recipients to understand constructs with *verstehen*. This idea, too, implies a strong skepticism in the face of the sign-based concept of construction grammar:

With regard to the concept of *constructions*, our analysis indicates that a one-to-one correlation of form and function is empirically untenable. This even holds true for those cases of the data we looked at which actually allowed for a construction-specific interpretation, because in order to be realized, this interpretation still has to rely on contextual factors not lying within the construction. Once again, a corpus-based analysis shows that the hypostatization of clearly bounded constructions can not be founded empirically. (Deppermann/Elsternmann 2008: 130; my translation)¹¹

¹¹ See also Imo (2007 a, b) and Günthner (2008d: 28; my translation): “Instead of starting with fixed pairings of form and function that then are realized in actual discourse, it rather seems that constructions or fragments of constructions (Hopper 2004, 2005) work as patterns for orientation, leaving room for a certain flexibility and for dynamics in the process of their realization.”

A fourth option for coping with the problems of constructions might be to invest a theory of grammar with a means of choosing the degree of resolution according the purposes it is to be used for. Such a means might be the concept of granularity as sketched in Schegloff's (2000) paper "On Granularity". Schegloff describes how granularity operates in everyday life as well as in science and sees it as a method human beings use to cope with, catalogue and make sense of their experiences:¹²

So much for 'granularity,' and an initial gloss of the sorts of occurrences I mean to catch with it. Why is it important to understand better? What lines of inquiry does it provide for? [...] One is the access we may be able to exploit to the terms in which the world is observed, noticed, and experienced by members of a society in the range of settings in which they live their lives. (Schegloff 2000: 718)

Looking at granularity in this way, we have to draw the conclusion that granular operations must have the same central cognitive status as, for example, that of the holistic thesis of construction grammar. Whether granular perception really deserves a central status must be tested with a theory of granularity that is much more refined than the loose collection of ideas Schegloff (2000) presented in his article. One such sophisticated theory is the theory of granularity proposed by Bittner/Smith (2001 a, b; 2003).

6. The "theory of granularity"

The aim of the theory of granularity – according to Bittner/Smith (2001a: 1) – is to set up a "general framework within which we can understand the relation between vague terms and concepts and the corresponding crisp portions of reality." Their starting point is the hypothesis that in every judgment about reality two operations are involved: One of sorting the observed data according to features which are relevant and thus prominent to attention, and another of viewing the data in a granular fashion. The need for a granular perspective is grounded in the fact that it is impossible (and impracticable) to strive for a complete representation of an object. Instead, a lot of aspects have to be treated as irrelevant and be bracketed out. Furthermore, it is not just the objects which are treated in a granular fashion, the border that is drawn between two objects is granular, too:¹³

Our fundamental idea is that every use of language to make a judgment about reality brings about a certain *granular partition*. Already every act of singular reference and every act of perception effects a

¹² A parallel approach can be found in Mitchell's (2008) theory of an "integrative pluralism", which also relies on the operation of different levels of abstraction as the basis for scientific work.

¹³ "A granular partition is granular in virtue of the fact that it can recognize an object without recognizing all its parts. The theory of granular partitions can thus provide the basis for understanding the selective focus of our maps and classifications and above all their ability to trace over parts below a certain level. To impose a partition on a given domain of reality is to foreground certain objects and features in that domain and to trace over others." (Bittner/Smith 2001b: 34)

partition of reality into a *foreground* domain, within which the object of reference is located, and a *background* domain, which comprehends all the entities beyond. (Bittner/Smith 2001a: 6)

When using language – and, of course, even more so when analyzing language scientifically – the reasons for drawing borders, the nature of the borders and the strategies of sorting the facts into those that are in the foreground and those that form the background, play a central role. The features that are moved to the background are not lost, they are merely not relevant for the actual selection of a certain resolution, but one can still zoom in on them. Bittner/Smith (2001a: 6) call this process “ontological zooming” and illustrate it with the example of an empty glass of beer: For a guest who just emptied his glass it is empty – the residue of beer is of no importance. If the landlord put the glass into the cupboard, though, and a health inspector would then look at the glass, it would not be empty for him because the drops and dried foam of beer are important for his purposes. In other words, he uses a finer resolution in his ontological zooming, which treats any instance of beer as relevant, not just drinkable amounts. A similar example is given with towns: If one says one is going to London, the town as a whole is focused, not its parts (streets, trees, buildings etc.), which are not relevant in this context and thus are zoomed out: “For to say that partitions are granular is to say that they do not recognize parts beneath a certain size.” (Bittner/Smith 2001a: 6)

It is precisely this phenomenon of letting drop features when we form categories – no matter whether these categories are everyday ones (“I’m going to London.”) or scientific ones (“I call this construction *discourse marker*.”) – that is at the heart of the theory of granularity. Neither in science nor in everyday life do we come across many cases where the drawing of unambiguous and uncontested borders is possible. Usually, we have to operate using vague boundaries. This is particularly salient in the case of language, where boundaries are notoriously vague. For the “naïve partners in talk” (Bühler 1982/1934: 102) this poses no problem, though, and Bittner/Smith (2001a: 19) explain why:

Contexts where judging subjects have the authority and the need to bring a precise boundary into existence are, it must be admitted, very rare. Fortunately however there is in most contexts no need for the high degree of precision which such contexts represent. In most contexts, that is to say, we get along with a created boundary that is *just precise enough*. [...] In most cases, therefore, it will manifest a certain degree of vagueness, and the actual degree of vagueness (or the degree of precision) will depend on context. Where vagueness is involved, indeterminate cases threaten to arise.

The strategy of drawing boundaries and abstracting categories that are just precise enough to be used proves to be satisfying and effective enough in most cases of everyday situations. Only when people argue, for example, does it become obvious how much vagueness is usually tolerated in interaction. A typical practice in arguments is to exploit the vagueness of language to one’s own purposes. It could be shown, for example, that people can make use of

the temporal ambiguity of German *jetzt* ('now') in order to avoid complying with a request (Imo 2009a). This is a strong point in favor of the theory of granularity, because quite obviously everyday users of language are able to zoom in and out, using different sizes of granular partitioning and category-forming according to their purposes.

Bittner/Smith illustrate the problem of lines of demarcation by using a satellite photo of the Himalayas: It is easy to make out single mountains, but it is impossible to point out the exact place where the mountains stop. The finer the resolution, the more difficult and absurd the task of drawing a boundary gets: "As will [...] be clear, there is no generally applicable and context-independent stop condition that can be inferred from a general concept such as *mountain*." (Bittner/Smith 2001a: 18)

This non-existence of a stop condition Bittner/Smith illustrate by using a photo of the neighboring mountains "Lhotse" and "Mount Everest". At first glance, one sees that there are two mountains (i.e. two categories). One is tempted to draw a line around them (just as one is tempted to draw a line around the larger complex both mountains are embedded in, the Himalayas, for which the same problem of a non-existing stop condition holds, of course):

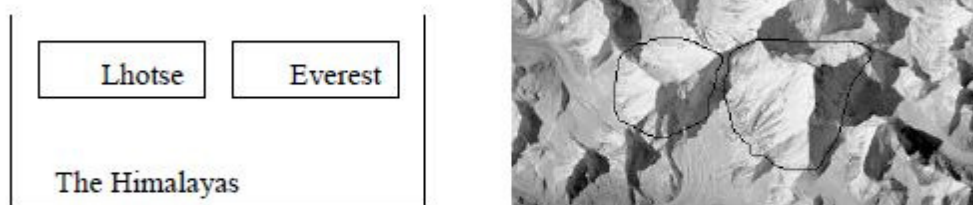
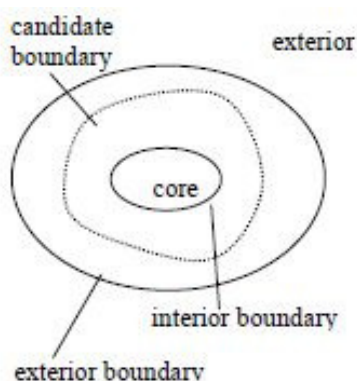


Figure 1: Left: a partition, with cells *Everest*, *Lhotse* and *The Himalayas*. Right: A part of the Himalayas seen from space, with Mount Lhotse (left) and Mount Everest (right).

Picture 1

An observer zooming closer and closer will first separate the whole collection of mountains that form the Himalayas from other cells containing the sea and flat country. Then, single mountains can be separated. Zooming even closer, the question of the exact location of the boundary of the newly formed cells "mountain 1" and "mountain 2" comes up. While it is possible to be sure about some dots which are unambiguously part of one or the other mountain (e.g. those on the top and the steep walls of the mountains), others are situated within a whole range of possible boundaries, as Bittner/Smith (2001a: 24) illustrate:



Picture 2

Between an exterior and an interior boundary (which themselves are not fixed, either), all candidates are possible ones and are as good or as bad as the others.

The only way out of this dilemma would be to collect all the possible candidates and map them onto the picture of the mountains. What happens, then, is that one does not get a sharp boundary, but a vague one:

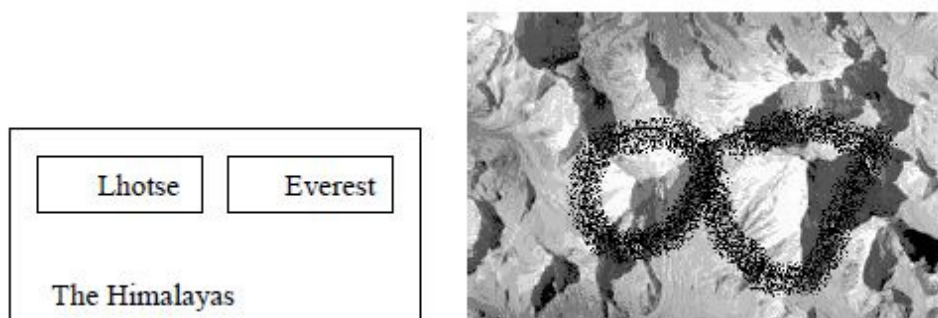


Figure 3: A vague partition of the Himalayas

Picture 3

Every dot marks a possible boundary and yet none of these dots is an actual boundary. A crisp portioning off is not just impossible, but even has the quality of a joke: If two mountaineers walked from Lhotse to Mount Everest, they might say that they are on the border between both mountains, but never that they are passing the border *at this very moment*. Such an utterance would sound absurd (and is only possible if artificial crisp demarcations such as latitudes and longitudes or political borders are imposed on the earth): “It is pragmatically impossible to invoke crisp partitions in contexts where both speaker and audience know that vague partitions are the best that can be achieved. Corresponding attempts to make judgments will not be taken seriously.” (Bittner/Smith 2001a: 22)

A somewhat different example from the drawing of boundaries in a chain of mountains is the man-made categorization and drawing of borders in a café which is equipped with a smoking and a non-smoking area. By drawing a red line on the floor of the café it is possible to draw a crisp boundary that makes it possible for someone to say “At this very moment I am crossing

from the smoking to the non-smoking area”. Even here, though, granularity is at work. The boundary is relevant for tables, chairs, waiters and guests, but not for single molecules of nicotine or oxygen. The granular partition of “smoking area” does not admit for such small objects, they fall through the grid of the category:

(A) judgment of the form ‘This nicotine molecule is part of the smoking zone’ cannot be uttered in the given context, since the unity condition U4 does not admit molecules as parts of smoking (or non-smoking) zones. A judgment of this form reflects an illegitimate mixing of granularities. If judgments of the given form are to be judgeable, then more precise specifications of the relevant boundaries would be needed to be made by those involved, and this would mean creating a new context. (Bittner/Smith 2001a: 20)¹⁴

Already, two aspects of the theory of granularity are identified: The first is the question of how borders can be drawn in the face of empirically given data (e.g. mountains or smoking and non-smoking areas), and as a solution Bittner/Smith (2001a: 20) suggest the choice of different granular resolutions – i.e. of zooming in and out. The second question is that of which statements are possible given a certain kind of border that creates a certain kind of partition, and which statements are absurd or pragmatically nonsensical: The crossing of the boundaries between mountains is absurd for human beings, just as the crossing of boundaries of smoking and non-smoking zones is absurd for nicotine molecules, because both fall below the chosen resolution that is needed to draw the boundaries and constitute the cells.

The following components are part of the theory of granularity:

- i. Partitioning: Partitioning empirically given, observable phenomena into units and classifying them (segmenting and classifying) is a basic trait of human beings and is given a cognitive foundation: “Partitions are the cognitive devices designed and built by human beings to fulfill these various listing, mapping and classifying purposes.” (Bittner/Smith 2003: 1)
- ii. Labeling: The mere act of partitioning automatically leads to a matrix of interrelated labeled cells (e.g. the larger cell “Himalayas” containing the smaller cells “Lhotse” and “Mount Everest”) and to a choice of granularity in making and justifying the partition: “Such a grid of labeled cells is an example of what we shall call a *granular partition*.” (Bittner/Smith 2003: 4)

¹⁴ “Consider a simple biological partition of the animal kingdom including a cell projecting on the species dog (*Canis familiaris*). Our definition of the domain of a partition and our constraint on functionality of projection implies that, besides the species dog also your dog Fido, and also Fido’s DNA-molecules, proteins, and atoms are parts of the domain of this partition. *But the latter are of course not recognized by the partition itself*. It is cases such as this which illustrate why mereology requires supplementation by a theory like the one presented here. Partition theory allows us to define a new, restricted notion of parthood that takes granularity into account [...]” (Bittner/Smith 2003: 19)

- iii. Choosing the amount of resolution: Embedding cells into cells, building patterns of cells and taking care of the relation of cells to the objects in reality leads to a justification of the amount of resolution that is used in each case:

Our formal theory has two orthogonal and independent parts: (A) a theory of the relations between cells, subcells, and the partitions in which they are contained; (B) a theory of the relations between partitions and objects in reality. [...] A cell is defined by its position within a partition and by its relations to other cells, and it is this which gives rise to the relations treated by theory (A). What objects in reality are located in a cell – the matter of theory (B) – is then a further question, which is answered in different ways from case to case. Briefly, we can think of cells as being projected onto objects in something like the way in which flashlights are projected upon the objects which fall within their purview. (Bittner/Smith 2003: 5)

A granular analysis offers great advantages if it is combined with the theory of construction grammar. One of the weaknesses of construction grammar so far has been that processes of embedding and relations between more abstract and more specific constructions have been analyzed mainly in relation to inheritance (e.g. Fillmore 1995 and Kay 2000). The relation of the constructions to each other has not received as much attention (besides the obligatory reference to the network structure of constructions), and neither have the connections of constructions and their corresponding objects in reality been analyzed in detail. The theory of granularity can turn out to be an important tool when tackling these questions.

7. Granularity – signs – constructions

Some first attempts to integrate a granular argumentation into a construction-based analysis of language can be made out, for example, in Traugott's (2008: 8) idea of macro constructions, which serve as abstract schemata and the highest level relevant for a theory of syntax. Below them are meso constructions, which are quantities of constructions that look or behave in a similar way. Zooming even closer, one comes across micro constructions, and when using the finest resolution, we get at the actual constructs with all their richness in information. This idea certainly points to the right direction, though the definition of meso constructions already implies that one knows what exactly the micro constructions are in order to group them together to form clusters of meso constructions. Yet, Traugott's (2008: 8; my translation) definition of macro constructions as the highest level "that is relevant for the given discussion" implies a granular argumentation, i.e. a choice of resolution that is tailored to a specified task at hand.

In his discussion of the many different meanings and functions the English verb *run* can have, Taylor (2002: 108) argues in a similar vein. He is against a proliferation of constructions, which would never solve the problem anyway, because complete representation is simply

impossible. Furthermore, no speaker ever takes the trouble of getting at full representation. Instead, speakers select “a few, salient aspects of the scene for linguistic encoding” which are deemed “sufficient to enable the hearer to derive the intended meaning.” (Taylor 2002: 108)

We observe a similar kind of accommodation between semantic units. [...] Although run, we might say, designates a rapid kind of motion on the part of a legged creature, the manner in which humans run is different from the manner in which horses run [...]. The process designated by the verb accommodates to the creature of which it is predicated. [...] If an entity A participates in a situation, often certain parts of A are more intimately involved in the situation than others. These constitute the active zone of A. (Taylor 2002: 110)

The choice of those aspects of a construction that are taken as relevant and foregrounded in a given situation and time depends on the given context, which quite often is nothing more than an indication of which granular resolution should be used (do I use the word *London* to mark a step in my journey or to refer to its nightlife, shopping facilities, sights etc.): “At a sufficiently fine-grained level of analysis, it could well turn out that every unit in a language has a distinct distribution with respect to the constructions in which it can occur.” (Taylor 2002: 565) In the remaining paper I will try to apply a granular re-analysis to the problematic cases discussed in paragraph 3.

i. A granular re-analysis of *jetzt* (‘now’)

Trying to re-interpret the cases of *jetzt* (‘now’) in a granular fashion, we first have to decide which steps of granular zooming are to be used. In the case of *jetzt* (‘now’) we can argue for three steps. First, one can view *jetzt* (‘now’) as an “Augenblicksmarke” (‘marker of the moment’), in the terms of Bühler (1982/1934: 102). With such a coarse resolution, a construction can be created that only contains the semantic or functional entry of *referring to the actual moment*, i.e. of moving the *temporal* structure of talk-in-interaction into the focus of the participants’ attention. Further information about the reasons for uttering *jetzt*, the exact span of time, the event or action that *jetzt* should serve to mark etc. fall below the resolution and are ignored – just as single molecules of nicotine are ignored when one uses the granular partition between smoking zone and non-smoking zone.¹⁵ Bühler (1982/1934: 102; my translation) argued that this extremely rough description of *jetzt* is grounded in actual use. In his words, *jetzt* simply says: “Look at me, the sound pattern, and take me as a marker of the moment” and the “naïve partners-in-talk” do exactly that: They usually do not problematize the content and functions of *jetzt*, but merely take it to refer to something that is happening at the moment.

¹⁵ Cf. Bittner/Smith (2001a), who view this ability to “ignore” certain features as one of the central aspects of the theory of granularity.

As a second step, a more fine-grained analysis is possible, too. If we zoom further in, we could see at least two smaller constructions emerging out of the “macro construction” described above: One is a *time-referring* and the other a *discourse-structure-referring* marker of the moment. The first one has a full temporal semantic content (this can easily be tested by paraphrasing utterances using expressions such as “it is happening at this moment” or “at this instance”), while the other one is semantically empty – Hennig (2000: 190; my translation) uses the term “semantic devaluation” – and functions like a discourse particle.

This more fine-grained analysis is very probably interactionally real, too. At least, the differences are so marked that they have to be taken into account by syntacticians:

Example 7 Car journey: *radiator fan*

1614 H kannschs noch mal verSUCHen;
'you can try again;'
1615 (1.5) ((Geräusche des Bedienfeldes des Autolüfters))
'((sounds of W operating the car ventilation system))'
1616 W was passIERT?
'what's happening?'
1617 H → jetzt geht's HIER raus.
'now it's blowing out here.'
1618 (0.5)
1619 W → jetzt ists grad ANgegangen.
'now it just started.'
1620 (0.5)

Example 8 Big Brother: *missed*

841 Jhn ick hab bis jetzt noch NICHTS vermisst außer n stift,
'so far I haven't missed anything except a pencil,'
842 WEIBte,
'you know,'
843 Ver ich also hab noch kein HANdy vermisst,
'well I haven't missed a mobile phone so far,'
844 Jhn mhm;
845 Ver FERNseher sowieso nicht,
'nor a tv,'
846 weil ich ja auch gar keinen GUCKe,
'because I don't watch tv,'
847 ne-
'do I-'
848 Jhn mhm;
849 Ver → jetzt auch keine (.) äh:m ESSenssachen;
'now also no erm food stuff;'
850 überHAU:PT nich.
'not at all.'
851 Jhn mhm;

Example 7 is taken from a conversation between two friends, who are driving in a car in winter. They are trying to activate the car radiator fan. Both of the instances of “jetzt” in lines 1617 and 1619 are used to refer directly to events such as the emission of the air (l. 1617) and the starting of the heater (l. 1619). Example 8 is taken from Big Brother. Verona and John are talking about the fact that life in the container is less depriving than they had feared before. In line 843, Verona starts with a list of things she does not miss, interrupts the enumeration in

line 846 with an explanatory side-sequence and marks the return to her list in line 849 with “jetzt”. One would be hard-pressed to tell what kind of temporal meaning might be left here. Verona does not say that she does not miss any food at this very moment, she simply uses “jetzt” as a general “marker of the moment” to structure the change of her current activities from *returning from a side sequence* to the *activity of listing*.

If one chooses an even more fine-grained analysis, more and more nuances of meaning and function can be included in an increasing number of separate sub-constructions. It becomes possible to specify whether *jetzt* (‘now’) is used to project, refer back, refer to the actual moment, structure a sequential activity, introduce the presentation of a narration etc. The closer the description gets, the more important do aspects of context and sequential positioning become. Questions such as “what are the tempus and mode of the verb of the utterance *jetzt* (‘now’) is placed in?”, “which activity is currently going on?”, “is *jetzt* (‘now’) uttered within a reactive or autonomous turn?” are necessary, because, for example, a verb in the conjunctive II can indicate a backwards-referring function of *jetzt* (‘now’). The choice of that fine factor of resolution will inevitably lead to the end of the scope of any grammatical theory. Instead, other approaches – such as conversation analysis – which are made to deal with language in all its complexity and are interested in the detailed description of single cases, have to take over. Just as the structure of a pointillist or impressionist picture gets lost in a wealth of seemingly chaotic details, grammar gets lost in the details and richness of language-in-use.

By including granularity into syntactic theory, the question of how much information a construction must contain is shifted to the question of which granular resolution should be used in which context. Linell’s (1998: 276) term of “decontextualization” points to the same direction. According to Linell, human language and perception are structured mainly along dialogistic principles. Nevertheless, strategies of forming abstractions and categories are central human components, too. Therefore, any grammar that wants to be realistic has to take into account *both* of these basic human traits of dialogistic orientation and decontextualization. What is important, then, is to lay open the practices of decontextualization that are used in creating a grammar:

It would also be foolish to argue simplistically that the world of human experience is characterized by a maximal degree of dialogicity and contextualization. That would, in my view, be a naïve dialogistic stance. Instead of plainly claiming that everything is thoroughly contextualized, it would amount to a more sophisticated dialogistic stance to maintain that many human practices are strongly decontextualizing and aim at creating ‘monologic’ positions. On the other hand, such decontextualizing practices are themselves context-bound. (Linell 1998: 276)

In other words: If a theory of grammar is expanded by the inclusion of a granular approach towards categories, the level of abstraction that is used for each and every construction has to be revealed. That would imply that, in the case of *jetzt* ('now'), construction grammar would have to provide a “case-to-case justification for every selection of a certain level of granularity” (Knoblauch: personal communication; my translation). It remains to be seen whether such a grammar can really work.

ii. A granular re-analysis of *I mean*

As has been mentioned above, the question of where the mountains *discourse marker* and *matrix clause* stop is particularly salient if the data actually yield prototype constructions around which the actual constructs cluster. The theory of granularity can very well be applied to such a situation: By choosing a coarser granular partition, it becomes possible to argue that grammars should indeed only focus on two constructions – *discourse marker* and *matrix clause* – and ignore all the “deviant” constructs. Only by choosing a fine-grained partition – which has to be used in qualitative analyses – do such questions gain relevance as “what are the exact activities that are separated by *I mean*?” or “which aspects of which constructions are (co)present in this actual construct involving *I mean*?”.

Mapped onto the example of Bittner/Smith (2001a: 16) concerning the boundaries of the mountains *Mount Everest* and *Lhotse*, which are separated by using a coarse partition (“vague partition”), matrix clauses, discourse markers and “unclear” or “mixed” cases can be displayed as follows:



Picture 4

The collection of dots marks the actual constructs, i.e. all the tokens collected in qualitative empirical analyses that are not unambiguous instances either of matrix clauses or discourse markers. This includes both the “mixed cases” lying on the indefinable border between the two mountains *matrix clause* and *discourse marker* as well as all the other uncertain cases that

occur, for example, after the breaking-off of an utterance. By using a coarse granular partition, all those cases together form a border that looks as if drawn by a thick felt tip pen. They fall out of the focus of the partitioning and labeling of the grammar, which can then focus on the clear cases and thus becomes manageable. The advantage of the theory of granularity is that the choice of resolution and coarseness – i.e. the actual process of decontextualization – is disclosed, which means that syntactic theories always have to lay open the abstracting strategies they use for drawing boundaries and postulating categories:

What we as partition theorists need to do now is to show how the use of terms and concepts can effect not only crisp demarcations of reality – as in the case of postal districts and census tracts – but also vague demarcations, as in the case of mountains and deserts and unregulated wetlands. (Bittner/Smith 2001a: 15)

The choice of a coarser or finer granular focus depends on the aims of the researcher and user of a grammar. For some purposes – i.e. implementing a (formalized) grammar in terms of a computer environment – a high level of abstraction (strong “decontextualization” according to Linell 1998: 276) can be chosen, for other purposes – i.e. a grammar needed for conversation analytic studies – a low level of abstraction can be used.

iii. Using a granular approach to establish (new) constructions

As I hoped to have shown, the granular approach is well equipped to cope with linguistic phenomena that show a great variety of meaning, by demanding the choice of different degrees of resolution (and a justification of each choice). Can the theory of granularity also help deciding which patterns of language qualify as constructions altogether? As an example, I will take up again the discussion of the post-positioned intensifiers mentioned above, which occur so often in spoken language and (quasi)synchronous computer-mediated communication. Rather than viewing these structures as increments and by-products of an *on line* syntax, it is to be asked whether they are not constructions in their own right. The involvement of temporality is not a criterion that automatically excludes an analysis of a structure as a construction: Discourse markers, too, heavily rely on temporality by projecting a unit to follow (Günthner 2008 a, b, c and Bückler 2008 even use the term “projector construction”), and one of the most central German syntactic constructions, the main clause, is temporally projecting due to its bracketing structure.

The first step in order to solve the problem would be to state that for the theory of granularity the naming and description of something like an increment or expansion already implies the use of a granular partition: “We shall argue that granular partitions are involved in all naming, listing, sorting, counting, cataloguing and mapping activities.” (Bittner/Smith 2003:18) Once

a partition is made – even if it is vague in the sense of partition theory – there automatically emerge “cells” and “domains”:

Each partition has a certain *domain*, which we can define as that portion of reality upon which its maximal cell is projected. This is a certain mereological sum: it is, as it were, the total mass of stuff upon which the partition sets to work: thus it is stuff as it exists independently of any of the divisions or demarcations effected by the partition itself through its constituent cells. (Bittner/Smith 2001a: 11)

The object upon which a cell is projected can be a collection of concrete units just as well as abstractions of concrete units (Bittner/Smith 2001: 11). If one applies this to the analysis of increments, the first result is the creation of a cell containing all of the concrete phenomena the cell is projected upon. This would be a very abstract “sign” of increments, simply referring to all post-positioned units. When we zoom in onto the phenomena, we can set up more and more partitions, as the picture becomes more and more fine-grained. In Couper-Kuhlen/Ono’s (2007) analysis such a zooming is already done by their classification of different subtypes of increments. The problem is that they stop at a certain level of their analysis: They do not go further than the level of “insertables” as a subtype of increments, projecting the cell upon all units that canonically belong into the preceding utterance. As I will argue here, the choice of a finer resolution is necessary – and will not “explode” grammar. A close look at insertables shows that a pattern of “post-positioned intensifier” (and, quite probably, even a subtype of “evaluation containing an adjective + *aber* (‘but’) + intensifier”¹⁶) emerges. What so far has been analyzed roughly under the heading of increments will have the potential to disclose a range of hitherto unnoticed constructions (in the strict sense of pairings of form and meaning), once the resolution has reached the point where it is neither too rough for the purpose of syntactic theory nor too fine-grained to yield only constructs and singular instances but no abstractions. By the use of the instruments of granularity and ontological zooming, syntactic argumentation may be very much improved.

8. Conclusion

In what ways can the theory of granularity help solve the dilemma of sign-based constructions? Can the concept of *constructions* be maintained or even improved with the help of a granular approach? Need construction grammar not capitulate in view of the wealth of information of language-in-interaction?

¹⁶ For example “Ich bin entsetzt aber WIRKlich” (‘I am shocked but really’). Some combinations are even completely fixed formulae, e.g. “aber HALlo” or “aber HAMmer” (lit.: ‘but hello’ and ‘but hammer’, both being used as idiomatic post-positioned intensifiers). Imo (in prep c).

At least for the latter question, an answer can be given. According to Bittner/Smith (2003: 18) representations can be incomplete and yet correct:¹⁷

A correct representation, as we see, is not necessarily a complete representation. Indeed, since partitions are cognitive devices, and cognition is not omniscient, it follows that no partition is such as to recognize all objects. [...] This feature of partiality is captured already by our terminology of *granular* partitions. Partitions characteristically do not recognize the proper parts of the whole objects which they recognize; for example they do not recognize parts which fall beneath a certain size. It is the cells of a partition which carry with them this feature of granularity. (Bittner/Smith 2003: 18)

What this means is that abstractions – which are elementary for the formation of categories and constructions – are possible, as long as a granular grounding of the processes underlying these abstractions is made. If that is possible, is still an open question. Knobloch (personal communication), for example, fears that integrating a mechanism for changing the focus might introduce an element of “unbearable capriciousness” into any theory of grammar, even when one lies open the justification for using focus X in situation Y. Bittner/Smith (2001a: 37) are less pessimistic. Because of the potentially unlimited possibilities of variation that are inherent in linguistic expressions used in concrete contexts, it is not the solution to argue for vague constructions but to improve syntactic theory with the method that interactants, too, use in order to cope with vagueness. Taking a granular view of constructions and including a means for zooming in and out is the solution:

We argued that it is insufficient to consider the vagueness of names and predicates in a context-free fashion. Rather vague names and predicates must be evaluated as they appear within judgments actually made in natural contexts. We then argued that judgments add context to sentences in a way that helps to resolve the dilemma posed by vagueness. Note that this does not mean that vagueness is somehow eliminated. Vague names and predicates are still as vague as they always were. Rather, we showed that the framework of granular partitions can provide the framework for understanding how, in real-world contexts, judgments with indeterminate truth-values are systematically avoided. (Bittner/Smith 2001a: 37)

What remains open, still, is the question of how in detail – for example, on a formalized level – granularity and granular zooming should be integrated into the theory of construction grammar.

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¹⁷ See also Diewald (2006: 87), who points out that from the point of view of diachronic analyses, a granular perspective is absolutely necessary, because many potentially relevant pieces of information (intonation, situation, pragmatics) of the constructions of earlier language states are simply not available to the researchers.

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