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## Idioms, sentence types, and grammatical rules: how context becomes grammar

### 1 Background

The present volume focuses on the interplay of grammar and context. In what follows, I shall say something about both – or, more precisely, I shall look into some mechanisms whereby context turns into grammar.

My paper assumes the point of view of *Construction Grammar*, as presented by such scholars as Charles Fillmore, Paul Kay, and Adele Goldberg (e.g. Fillmore 1988; Fillmore & Kay 1995; Kay & Fillmore 1999; Goldberg 1995). According to this view, the primary building blocks of language are not such traditional notions as *part of speech* or *constituent structure*. Rather, the language system, or grammar, is composed of constructions, and only of constructions.

*Constructions* may be informally characterized as linguistic units which combine form and meaning, or, perhaps more adequately, structure and function. They may be either basic sentence types, or phrase structure formulae, or single morphemes or lexemes, or they may even be large templates which organize the discourse. But the main issue is that they are existing templates, pairings of linguistic form and meaning, which do not need to be put together from smaller parts.

Thus, the central idea is that linguistic description should focus on wider wholes than simply S, NP, VP, etc. Especially interesting are such somewhat vague notions of traditional grammar as *phrase type* and *basic sentence type* as wholes – not so much the question as to how they can be put together from as small ‘atomic particles’ as possible. On the other hand, it is also interesting to investigate how such often very different constructions, which seemingly belong to different levels, combine with one another and form new expressions.

The point of my paper is the question of where such constructions come from. However, I will only give a very partial answer, more of an *example* of where constructions may come from. The point that I wish to make is that context is, to say the very least, one of the primary sources of grammar. A notable source for new grammatical constructions is the conventionalization –

or, indeed, grammaticalization – of a given context where a given linguistic unit (word, morpheme, or the like) repeatedly occurs.

I shall set out the theoretical point with examples from the Finnish language. While the example phenomena are from Finnish, the mechanisms concerned work in languages very generally. The mechanisms – and the corresponding examples – also cover a wide variety of phenomena: the basic issue (the interaction of grammar and context with regard to language change) is relevant to grammatical constructions of all sizes, from single morphemes to discourse-level organizational templates.

## 2 Context that became grammar

As noted above, constructions can be of any size, large or small. However, Construction Grammar has mostly focused on relatively complex constructions, certain kinds of sentence types or phrase types, argument structures, and the like – to the extent that the ‘non-central’ or ‘peripheral’ aspects of grammar have been seen as the primary point of interest of Construction Grammar (e.g. Fillmore & Kay & O’Connor 1988).

Also, a lot of context-dependent or idiomatic phenomena have been studied within Construction Grammar, including proverbs, and sayings whose meanings often are strongly dependent on the context where the expressions are used. As it happens, idiomatic expressions, such as proverbs, are often specifically limited to certain pragmatic tasks and specific kinds of contexts.

### 2.1 Fixed phrases in the grammar

An example of an idiomatic expression that is contextually limited might be the following Finnish proverb:

- (1) Ei           ole   lahjahevosen           suuhun           katsomista  
      not-3SG   be   gift-horse-GEN       mouth-ILL       look-INF-PAR  
      roughly: ‘don’t look in the mouth of a horse that you’ve been given for  
      free’

This proverb serves a specific pragmatic point (i.e. ‘stop complaining, be thankful even if it is not perfect’), and can be appropriately used only in contexts where this meaning is adequate.

Another example might be the phrase *Olipa kerran*, which is used precisely like its English counterpart, *once upon a time*: it is a conventional fairy tale starter. Using it in any other context will create a peculiar effect.

Both of these examples can be seen as constructions. They are conventional units of the Finnish language, ones that a language learner will have to learn separately in order to be able to use and understand them correctly. Thereby

they are parts of the Finnish language system – indeed, the Finnish *grammar*. And, furthermore, the contextual limitations involved in these constructions are also coded in the Finnish grammar.

## 2.2 Sentence types and context

A somewhat different and more complex example of the interplay of grammar and context is the Finnish permissive construction, which I have studied in detail elsewhere (J. Leino 2001, 2003, 2005). It is not a strictly context-specific idiomatic expression like the previous examples, although both idiomaticity and context do play a role in a proper understanding of this construction, as we shall see.

Let us first take a few examples of this construction:

- (2) a. *Anna*                    *minun*            *olla*  
 let-2SG-IMP            I-ACC            be-1INF  
 ‘let me be’, ‘leave me alone’
- b. *Sallikaa*                    *minun*            *nauraa*  
 allow-2PL-IMP            I-ACC            laugh-1INF  
 ‘allow me to laugh’, ‘that is utterly ridiculous’
- c. *Käsketään*                *tuon*            *tyypin*            *olla*            *hiljaa*  
 order-2PL-IMP            that-ACC        type-ACC        be-1INF        silently  
 ‘tell that person to be silent’, ‘tell him/her to shut up’

The construction consists of four main parts: the main predicate (*antaa*, *käskää*, *sallia* or *suoda*), the subject of the main predicate (i.e. the person who allows, commands, etc.), the 1<sup>st</sup> infinitive, and the subject of the infinitive. A point to note here is that the subject of the infinitive is practically always in the genitive case.

The question is: where did this construction come from? Let us take another example:

- (3) Kalle            antaa            Villen            syödä            omenan  
 Charlie            give-3SG        Bill-GEN        eat-INF        apple-ACC  
 ‘Charlie lets Bill eat the/an apple’

This sentence clearly has a certain resemblance to the following sentence, which expresses an act of *giving*, although in the permissive construction, there is no allative argument:

- (3’) Kalle            antaa            Villelle            omenan  
 Charlie            give-3SG        Bill-ALL        apple-ACC  
 ‘Charlie gives Bill the/an apple’



But when the verb *antaa* is used in the permissive construction, it does not mean ‘give’; rather, it means ‘let’ or ‘permit’. Also, in the sentence above, the object of the verb *antaa* is no longer the apple, *omena*, but the infinitive construction *Villen syödä omenan*.

The connection between ‘giving’ and ‘permitting’ is not completely obvious. To make it more comprehensible, let us take a look at the giving event. According to John Newman, giving implies a later act which may, under suitable circumstances, be seen as a motivation for the giving event:

„often there is [in the ‘complex matrix’, i.e. base of ‘give’ verbs] a later act involving the RECIPIENT and the THING. That is to say, we normally give things to a RECIPIENT so that the RECIPIENT can make some use of the object.” (Newman 1996: 53)

The giving event and the Finnish construction that is most often used to express giving may be sketched out as follows:

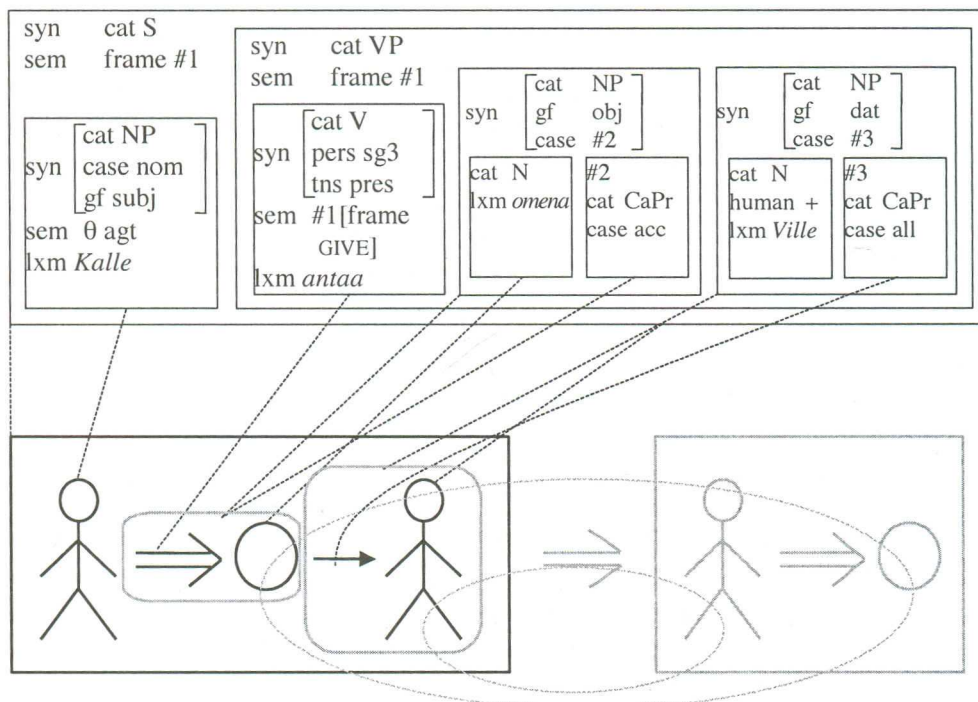


Figure 1: The giving frame and the GIVE construction.

The upper part of figure 1 corresponds to the formal aspects of the construction in question, while the lower part characterizes the meaning

structure of the construction. From left to right, the lower part includes the giver, the action directed by the giver towards the gift, the gift itself, and the recipient. Notably, the lower part of figure 1 also includes the *later act* which Newman refers to. This later act corresponds to the grey part of the figure, the rightmost part of the meaning structure characterization.

As it happens, the infinitive which is used in the permissive construction in modern Finnish is historically an adverbial of purpose, and it could, at some point in history, very well be used as the kind of thing that would ‘fill in the grey part’ of the figure.

The permissive construction is clearly linked to the giving construction historically. In fact, it used to be a very common subtype of the giving construction. At that time, the dative adverbial in such sentences, the one that carries the allative case today, was in the genitive case. Thus, if one was to say, at that time, that Charlie gave an apple for Bill to eat, the sentence would have been *Kalle antaa Villen omenan syödä* or *Kalle antaa omenan Villen syödä*.

Several changes took place, (the infinitive form was reanalyzed, allative took the place of the genitive, etc.), but by that time, the sentence type *Subject + antaa + Object + genitive + Infinitive* was pretty well conventionalized in the Finnish language. It had even acquired a meaning that was not the sum of its component parts, a meaning of enabling or permission. This is probably because the ‘grey process’ in the figure cannot be performed without the giving act; that is, Ville can not eat the apple unless Kalle gives it to him. Hence, the act of giving enables the process denoted by the infinitive.

Thus, the Finnish permissive construction serves as an example in which something from the context—in this case, the purposive infinitive—is taken into the grammatical construction whose *context* it was at first. Together they form a new construction.

### 2.3 Blurring the line between rules and idioms

The example case in section 2.2 has taken us a little distance away from idiomaticity. To get back to that topic, as we saw in section 2.1, we have at least *plain idioms* like *Ei ole lahjahevosen suuhun katsomista* or *once upon a time*, which have contextual restrictions. Such plain idioms also arise from context; a good example of this is the modern Finnish idiom *Minä juon nyt kahvia* (‘I’m drinking coffee now’), which arose some 15 years ago when the prime minister Harri Holkeri uttered that sentence in a very suitable context (speaking to a news reporter and meaning really something like ‘go away, I’m not going to give you any comment now’).

We also have *sentence types*, such as the permissive construction, which also turned out to have grown out of contextual phenomena. The permissive construction is by no means an exceptional phenomenon. Rather, languages

seem to be full of expression types of this nature, which combine a certain sentence structure with a certain semantic content, typically a situation type.

Furthermore, we might well speculate that what are often called 'grammatical rules' or 'regular syntax' also arise from contextual phenomena. Once we accept the existence of sentence type constructions (or argument structure constructions à la Goldberg 1995), it eventually becomes very difficult to draw indisputable lines between 'regular' syntax such as a simple transitive sentence, more 'idiomatic' sentence types such as the permissive construction, and completely 'idiomatic' expressions such as *Ei ole lahjahevosen suuhun katsomista*.

### 3 Theoretical implications and conclusions

The point that I wish to stress at this point is that idiomatic expressions and grammatical rules are not distinct things of different nature, but rather tools of linguistic expression of the same kind and essence. This point is central to Construction Grammar, and has been propagated since the very beginning on that theory.

Charles Fillmore, Paul Kay and Mary Catherine O'Connor published an article in the *Language* magazine (1988), titled *Regularity and idiomaticity in grammatical constructions: the case of let alone*. In that very influential article, they presented the distinction between *lexically filled* and *lexically open* idioms.

In *lexically filled idioms*, the lexical substance, that is words, is (more or less) specified. For example, most proverbs fall into this category, such as the following:

- (4) Mitä isot edellä, sitä pienet perässä  
 what-PAR big-NOM-PL in front it-PAR small-NOM-PL in back  
 'what the big ones do first, the small ones will do after them'

Other typical examples are such sayings as *potkaista tyhjää* 'kick the bucket, die' or *viilata linssiin* 'pull a fast one, cheat'.

*Lexically open idioms*, in contrast, are syntactic templates or formulae which are connected to such semantic or pragmatic tasks which cannot be predicted solely from the form of the template. Examples of lexically open idioms might be such templates or models of expressions as *mitä X:mpi, sitä Y:mpi* 'the Xer, the Yer', which may be exemplified with the following sentences:

- (5) a. mitä enemmän, sitä parempi  
 what-PAR much-COMP it-PAR good-COMP  
 'the more, the better'



b.	mitä	suurempi,	sitä	painavampi
	what-PAR	big-COMP	it-PAR	heavy-COMP
	'the bigger, the heavier'			

There is nothing in the form of this expression type that would inherently tell us that it expresses a correlation between two scalar properties. It only carries this meaning because this correlation or combination of form and meaning is conventionalized in the Finnish language.

However, the distinction proposed by Fillmore, Kay and O'Connor is not totally clear. Drawing the line between lexically filled and lexically open idioms is difficult: typically, even most of the time, idioms are partially lexically filled and partially open.

This will then lead us to a very fundamental question: what are the rules of grammar which produce the so-called 'regular' expressions of the language, if not lexically open idioms? Why would *mitä X:mpi, sitä Y:mpi* or *the Xer, the Yer* be an idiom, but for example the permissive construction would not? And if the permissive construction is indeed an idiom, is, the basic transitive sentence type also a completely lexically open idiom?

In fact, construction grammar states that constructions form a continuum from lexically open to lexically filled ones, or vice versa. One can, of course, also call this a continuum from 'regular' to 'idiomatic' or 'irregular' ones as well.

So, this brings us back to where we started: the grammar consists of construction *only*, and these constructions are of the same nature, although they can seem very different at first. And, as we have seen, such constructions have often grown out of certain kinds of contexts and contextual phenomena.

What I have presented above is, in the end, the combination of two ideas which have been made a long time ago. One of the ideas is that 'regularity' and 'idiomaticity' are not separate sections of the language system but, rather, form a continuum of essentially similar data structures in the grammar, namely constructions. The other idea is one propagated by grammaticalization theorists such as Östen Dahl, namely that grammaticalization consists of the conventionalization of conversational implicatures (cf. Dahl 1985; more broadly, see Willett 1988, Heine & Claudi & Hünemeyer 1991: 21–22). One example of this latter point is the infinitive of the permissive construction: initially, it corresponded to a conversational implicature ('there is a later act involving the recipient and the gift') which became conventionalized.

To summarize: Construction Grammar subscribes to a certain view of how the languages system, grammar, is built. This view is well compatible with the view that a lot of what *grammar* consists of has previously been *context*. And, to assume a futuristic point of view, one might claim that *today's context is*

*tomorrows grammar.*

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## Summary

This paper assumes the point of view of Construction Grammar (e.g. Fillmore 1988, Kay – Fillmore 1999, Goldberg 1995). According to this view, the primary building blocks of language are not such basic notions as part of speech or constituent structure. Rather, the system of language, grammar, is composed of constructions only. Constructions may be as well basic sentence types or phrase structure formulae as single morphemes and lexemes, or they may even be large templates which organize the discourse.

Thus, the central idea is that linguistic description should focus on wider wholes than just S, NP, VP and so forth. Especially interesting are such somewhat vague notions of traditional grammar as phrase and basic sentence type as wholes – no so much the question as to how they can be put together from as small „atomic particles” as possible. On the other hand, it is also interesting to investigate how such often very different constructions, which seemingly belong to different levels, combine with one another and form new expressions.

The starting point of my paper is the question of where such construction come from. This question will lead us to question the adequacy of the traditional distinction between „regularity” and „idiomaticity” (cf. Fillmore et al. 1988). It will also show that context is, to say the very least, one of the primary sources of grammar: a notable source for new grammatical constructions is the conventionalization (or, indeed, grammaticalization) of a given context where a given linguistic unit (word, morpheme, or the like) repeatedly occurs.

I set out the theoretical points of my paper with several different examples from the Finnish language. While the example phenomena are from Finnish, the mechanisms concerned work in languages very generally. The mechanisms – and the corresponding examples – also cover a wide variety of phenomena: the basic issue, the interaction of grammar and context with regard to language change, is relevant to grammatical constructions of all sizes, from single morphemes to discourse-level organizational templates.