How predictive are grammatical constructions in Italian? The case of the Caused-Motion Construction

Abtract

Differently from English, Italian has a rich morphological system and a relative free word-order. For these reasons, the suitability of a "full-scope" constructional approach to Italian, and typologically similar languages, is not immediately evident. One could even doubt that complex abstract syntactic constructions exist at all.

In Goldberg's (1995, 2006) version of Construction grammar (CxG hereafter), in fact, language is constructions all the way down (or all the way up) and morphemes are themselves considered to be constructions as they are form-meaning pairings. Still, one could argue that in Italian, i.e. a language rich in morphology, only morphemes (and multi-words and idioms) and very abstract and general argument structure constructions are to be considered as the fundamental Constructions. But, under this vision one would recreate the classical distinction between lexicon and grammar, which CxG rejects. So, if there are abstract and general constructions on the one end and "lexical" constructions on the other, the full range of in-between cases must be allowed too.

Furthermore, argument structure constructions (in English) have been found to be highly predictive of sentence/construction meaning (Goldberg et al. 2005), which provides an explanation, a motivation, for their early acquisition by children. Many of such evidences are still missing for Italian.

My contribution will describe an attempt to replicate on Italian the corpus-based analysis proposed by Goldberg et al. (2005) on English. While the original English study deals with two constructions: the ditransitive construction and the caused motion construction, the focus of my contribution will be the Italian caused motion construction that has a parallel syntax and semantics to the English one. The goal is to verify whether constructions are highly predictive of sentence meaning in Italian too.

Data is taken from the CHILDES database (MacWhinney 2000), from which all parent utterances of 28-months-old children are extracted and annotated according to constructional properties and verb meaning. The annotation is then used to calculate the Cue and Category Validity (Murphy 2002) of both the Construction and the main verbs, which measures their predictive power (i.e respectively their reliability and availability) in relation to overall sentence meaning.

Interestingly, we find out that the Italian caused motion construction is both more reliable than verbs as a predictor of overall sentence meaning, and is also more available. The category validity of the construction is in fact higher that the average category validity of verbs, and constructional cue validity is higher than weighted cue validity for verbs.

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