Constructions and their collocates: What lexical semantics can teach us about the meaning of grammar

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One of the central tenets of Construction Grammar is that knowledge of language can be exhaustively described in terms of form-meaning pairings. This means that not only lexical elements, but also syntactic and morphological patterns are viewed as meaningful. Capturing and describing the meaning of grammatical constructions is however a major challenge, since grammatical meanings tend to be abstract, schematic, and fuzzy. Grammatical forms further tend to be highly polysemous. I will argue in this talk that lexical semantics holds important cues to the analysis of what grammatical constructions mean. Specifically, I will present evidence in order to defend three claims:

1. The meaning of grammatical constructions is reflected in the lexical elements that typically occur in these constructions.
2. Semantic change of grammatical constructions can be seen in collocational shifts that these constructions undergo.
3. Corpus-based, distributional methods can help to uncover the mutual associations between constructions and their lexical collocates.

I will provide evidence for these claims in the form of four corpus-based studies. The first study examines the collocational preferences of the English future marker will and how they have changed over time (Hilpert 2008). The second part of the talk will apply the approach of studying grammatical constructions via their lexical collocates to an analysis of the English modal system and the recent reorganization it has undergone (Hilpert 2013). In the third part I will discuss how the lexical collocates of English may can be modeled as a semantic vector space, and how quantitative changes in that semantic vector space can be studied (Hilpert 2016). Part four discusses a method that uses second-order collocates for the purpose of contrasting the near-synonymous grammatical elements may and might and must and have to (Hilpert & Flach 2020).

I will conclude that mutual associations between constructions and lexical items represent an important empirical source of information for the study of grammatical meanings.

References