

PROF. DR. LOTTE SOMMERER

FAU ERLANGEN-NÜRNBERG

**OF OUTLAWS AND ODDBALLS:
NON-CANONICAL CONSTRUCTIONS IN LANGUAGE CHANGE**

14.05.2025, 18 c.t.

Construction grammarians have a reputation for being particularly fascinated by idiosyncratic, quirky, constructions on the lower and fully-specified level of the constructional network (e.g. Diessel 2019; Cappelle 2022; Ungerer & Hartmann 2023). We have even been called ‘butterfly collectors’ who love to chase exotic constructions which deviate from the canonical, default structures of the language (Hilferty 2003; Hilpert 2014; Desagulier 2017).

This begs the question what – in a cognitive-functional, usage-based approach – is meant by ‘canonical’ vs. ‘non-canonical’ and if we want to keep up this dichotomy at all. The answer clearly depends on how these notions are defined in the first place. To decide on a construction’s quirkiness, we can take into account its frequency, transparency, compositionality, idiomaticity, regularity, prototypicality, paradigmatic relations, extravagance, etc?!? The question what exactly defines a constructional ‘outlaw’ becomes even more interesting through a diachronic lens. After all, diachronic research has long been aware that what looks like an outlaw (i.e. an exception to a regularity/a deviation from the majority pattern) is often a ‘laggard’ in the sense of being a remnant of an older language stage where the specific linguistic code was more motivated, more regular (e.g. Lass 1997; Traugott & Trousdale 2013).

In this talk, I will discuss non-canonical, odd constructions in the history of English. Most of my examples will come from my own work on nominals and NPs. Especially, I will report on a study on PPs with bare location nouns (*go to church; die in prison; stay in bed*), but will also briefly revisit BIG MESS constructions (*how big of a mess; that great a guy*) and NPNs (*day after day; brick upon brick*). Next to pragmatically enriched idiomatic meanings, these constructions are famous for their deviant word order, their lack of overt definiteness marking or their reduplication pattern (Sommerer & Zehentner 2025; Sommerer & Baumann 2021; Sommerer 2022, 2023, in prep).

Among other things, I will argue that being wrongfully perceived as an outlaw often happens, if a) the researcher ignores the possibility that the observed linguistic oddity is only a (one off) construct sanctioned via multiple inheritance (Sommerer 2020) or b) exclusively focuses on one constructional family or one language only, not looking for functionally similar behavior in other constructional families or languages. Ultimately, I will argue that not everything that looks like an exotic butterfly really is one. For instance,

leaving out an overt determiner to background referentiality of a nominal is a frequent functional technique – not only in some PPs but also in many Light Verb Constructions (LVC) and nominal incorporations. Similarly, BIG MESS constructions apply a fronting technique which we find in elsewhere. Finally, the reduplication observable in NPNs is used in many constructions and languages to express quantification, annoyance/indifference or prototypicality (e.g. *bla bla bla*; Sommerer 2023; also see Ghomeshi et al.'s *salad salad* paper).

At the same time, I will argue that true outlaws can be identified and deserve independent constructional status as independent nodes in the network. I will discuss the cognitive and functional competing motivations and mechanisms (e.g. analogical thinking, frequency effects, lexical bootstrapping, extravagance, creativity) which make them develop their idiosyncrasies and even make them resist regularization or analogical levelling later.

References:

- Cappelle, Bert. 2022. *Only collect? How construction grammarians also link it all up*. Abralin Talk <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hSQ1FWcxdFE>.
- Desagulier, Guillaume. 2021. *Corpus linguistics and statistics with R: Introduction to quantitative methods in linguistics*. Springer International Publishing.
- Diessel, Holger. 2019. *The grammar network. How linguistic structure is shaped by language use*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ghomeshi, Jila, Jackendoff, Ray, Rosen, Nicole & Russell, Kevin. (2004). Contrastive focus reduplication in English (the Salad-Salad paper). *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory* 22 (2), 307–357.
- Hilferty, Joseph. 2003. *In defense of grammatical constructions*. Ph.D thesis University of Barcelona.
- Hilpert, Martin. 2014. *Construction Grammar and its application to English*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh Press.
- Lass, Roger. 1997. *Historical linguistics and language change*. Cambridge. CUP.
- Sommerer, Lotte & Baumann, Andreas. 2021. Of absent mothers, strong sisters and peculiar daughters: The constructional network of English NPN constructions. *Cognitive Linguistics*, 32(1), 97–131.
- Sommerer, Lotte & Zehentner, Eva. 2025. *go to church or die in prison: Tracing V-PP combinations with bare institutional nouns in the history of English*. *Folia Linguistica Historica* 46(1).
- Sommerer, Lotte. 2020. Why we avoid the 'Multiple Inheritance' issue in Usage-based Cognitive Construction Grammar. *Belgian Journal of Linguistics*, 34, 320–331.
- Sommerer, Lotte. 2022. 'So great a desire': investigating the BIG MESS construction in Early Modern English'. *Journal of Historical Syntax*, 6(2), 1–34.
- Sommerer, Lotte. 2023. 'If that's what she said, then that's what she said': a usage-based constructional analysis of pleonastic conditionals in English'. *Corpus Pragmatics* 7, 345–376.
- Sommerer, Lotte. in prep. *English Noun Phrases: A Constructional Network Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Traugott, Elizabeth & Trousdale, Graeme. 2023. *Constructionalization and constructional changes*. Oxford: OUP.
- Ungerer, Tobias & Hartmann, Stefan. 2023. *Constructionist approaches: Past, present, future*. [Cambridge Elements in Construction Grammar]. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.