

Argument Structure Constructions: The Case of Assamese

*A thesis submitted for the partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy*

Reetom Borkotoky
Registration No. TZ188863



Department of Linguistics and Language Technology
School of Humanities and Social Sciences
Tezpur University
Tezpur, Assam, India - 784028,
February, 2025

Chapter 6

Conclusion

6. Introduction

The present study aimed at investigating the syntax of Assamese from a Cognitive Construction Grammar (CCG) theory. The rationale behind taking up the CCG theory was based on these the following four main reasons.

First, it takes a usage-based approach, i.e., how language is used in real-life situations. The theory does not subscribe to rule-based approach, thus the theory is a departure from the rule-based approach, where linguistic elements are subjected to a specific usage rule. However, in actual usage, language does not often follow strict rule-based approach, and linguistic elements can be used quite creatively.

Second, this approach holds that constructions are meaningful; thus, they are *form-meaning* pairs. Hence, the theory can explain why certain linguistic elements are used creatively, where the meaning is determined by the verb as well as the construction.

Third, the knowledge of language in this approach is seen as a continuum, forming a network of constructions across various levels of schematicity, connected to each other via different links.

Fourth, the CCG theory is compatible with the semantic theory of frame semantics, which can explain a wide range of meaning and interaction of verbs and constructions.

The thesis is divided into six chapters.

Chapter 1 provided a brief introduction to the Assamese language; a literature review along with a few research gaps which are relevant and within the scope of this current work. The second chapter dealt with the construction grammar theory, its emergences and the basic tenants of the CCG. The next three chapters, i.e., chapters 3, 4. And 5 were on the application of the CCG theory to analyze the basic sentence patterns of Assamese. The current chapter, i.e., chapter 6, deals with the major findings of the thesis.

Chapter 3 is titled as the ‘Intransitive constructions in Assamese’, which deals with a one central participant events. The chapter argues that Assamese has two Intransitive constructions. The first one is termed as the ‘simple Intransitive’, ‘S V’, and the second one is termed as the ‘agentive Intransitive’, ‘S-e V’, which is based on the Differential Subject Marking (DSM) or split-intransitivity. This distinction is syntactically based on the overt marking of the ergative case marker. Then, the thesis discusses the type of verb classes that are used in the two Intransitive constructions. The thesis argues that the interaction of verbs with the two constructions are based on the force-dynamic potential of the verbs or verb classes involved. That is, a verb with higher force dynamic potential is used with the ‘agentive Intransitive’, while verbs with lower force-dynamic potential are used with the ‘simple Intransitive’ construction.

The chapter also deals with the extensions of the Intransitive construction, which includes one salient participant and another less salient participant, marked by oblique cases. The first among the extended intransitives is the intransitive motion construction (IMC), syntactically manifested as ‘S Obl_(path) V’. The semantics associated with the IMC is ‘X moves to Y’ and typically motion verbs are used in this construction. The oblique phrases, denote the path of the motion event, and a less salient participant. The oblique phrases are divided into simple and complex paths based on the construal of the motion event. Then, the different types of verbs along with their associated path are discussed.

The next construction is the intransitive locative construction (ILC), which is similar to the IMC, but not identical. The syntactic manifestation of the ILC is ‘S Obl_(loc) V’ which encodes the semantics of ‘X is located at Y’. The type of verbs that are combined with the ILC are static verbs, in contrast to dynamic motion verbs, used in the case of IMC. However, a few motion verbs are combined with the ILC; in such cases, the nature of path is different than that of the typical path.

The next construction is the conative construction, which is almost similar to the ILC, but differs syntactically because of the subject marking. Here, the subject is marked with the ergative case. The syntactic manifestation of the conative construction is ‘S-e Obl_(loc) V’, which encodes the semantics ‘X intends to affect Y’. The verbs that are combined with the construction are typically force-dynamically high. The referent of the oblique phrase is always non-animate.

The next construction is the copula construction, which is a partially filled construction, i.e. only the verb ‘ha’ is used in this construction. The syntactic manifestation of the construction is ‘S Comp_s ha’. The thesis claims that the verb ‘ha’ as the true copula in Assamese.

All the constructions discussed above are based on the grammatical encoding of one salient participant, and the extensions of the two Intransitive constructions, which encode one salient participant and another less salient participant. The next section of Chapter 3 deals with the non-canonical intransitive constructions, where the only participant is less salient in the event and hence encoded via oblique case markers. There are two non-canonical intransitive constructions.

The first one is the genitive subject construction. Here, the only participant is encoded with the genitive case. The syntactic manifestation of the genitive subject construction is ‘S-*r* [Cj V]’, which encodes the semantics of ‘X experiences Y’. The only participant is less salient in the event, as the verbal agreement does not co-index with the subject, which is a typical feature of canonical constructions. The verbs that are combined with the construction are typically experiential verbs.

The next construction is the passive construction. Here the referent of the only participant is encoded as the object of a transitive construction, i.e., marked by the object marker, based on animacy and specificity. The syntactic manifestation of the construction is ‘S-(k) NMZ ha’, which encodes the semantics of ‘Y is affected’. Similar to the copula construction, this construction is also a partially filled construction, as the copula verb ‘ha’ is only used on this construction. The nominalized argument (verbs) that are used in this construction are force-dynamically high. The passive construction shows a case of coercion, i.e., the subject complement (Comp_s) is not a part of the verb, but is added by the construction.

Chapter 4, titled as ‘Transitive constructions in Assamese’, deals with the Transitive construction in the language, its extensions, and also the ditransitive construction, which is often called an extended transitive. The Transitive construction is syntactically encoded in Assamese as ‘S-e O(-k) V’. In its prototypical sense encodes the semantics of ‘X affects Y’. However, the verbs that occur in the Transitive constructions are different from its

their prototypical sense, which is not true of other constructions. That is, verbs of various related senses can be used in the Transitive construction. Thus, the Transitive construction exhibits the case of ‘constructional polysemy’. We have grouped the verbs that are used with the transitive construction according to their verb classes and a hierarchy is formed based on the force-dynamic potential of these verb classes.

The next construction is the caused-motion construction (CMC) which is an extension of the Transitive construction. The syntactic manifestation of the CMC is ‘S-e O(-k) Obl_(path) V’, which encodes the semantics of ‘X causes Y to move to Z’. There are two classes of verbs used in this construction. First, verbs that involve a cause + motion, i.e. an agent which causes a theme to change its location. Second verb class is force dynamic verbs of communicative acts, which is a case of ‘coercion’. The path is determined by the construal of the motion event, similar to the IMC.

The next construction is the resultative construction. The syntactic manifestation of the construction is ‘S-e O(-k) O_{comp} V’, which encodes the semantics of ‘X causes Y to become Z’. The verb classes that are used in this construction are typically high in their force dynamic potential. The instances of this construction are also a case of coercion, where the resultative phrase is added by the construction.

The next construction is the cause-transfer construction (CTC). The syntactic manifestation of the construction is ‘S-e Obl O(-k) V’, which encodes the semantics of ‘X intends Y for Z’. The construction is similar to the CMC, but differs in two ways. The first one is the position of the oblique phrase and the second is that the oblique phrase is only limited to the dative case. In the case of the CMC, the manifestation of the oblique phrase can differ based on the construal of the motion event, which is marked by different path markers. The verb class that is compatible with the CTC have a sense creation and a potential of transfer. They can be termed verbs of creation.

The next section deals with the non-canonical transitive constructions, where either of the two participants or both are less salient in the event, hence marked by oblique case marker(s).

The first is the transitive genitive subject construction. The syntactic manifestation of the construction is '*S-r O V*', which encodes the semantics of 'Y is possessed by X'. Here, the so-called subject is marked by the genitive case, while the object is similar to that of the transitive object, not marked, however, by the '-k' marker. Typically, the existential verb, 'as' is used with the construction, and the copula 'ha' is used only in the case of the future tense.

The next construction is the transitive genitive subject and dative object construction. The construction is similar to the earlier construction but differs in the object marking. In this construction, both the subject and the object are marked by oblique case markers. The syntactic manifestation of the construction is '*S-r O(-k)-loi [Cj V]*', which encodes the semantics of 'Y mentally affects X'. Verbs that are used in this construction are experiential verbs.

The next construction is the dative subject construction. In this construction, the subject is marked by the dative case, and the object is similar to that of the Transitive construction, however unmarked for the object. The syntactic manifestation of the construction is '*S-loi O ah*', which encodes the semantics of 'Y arrives for X'. This is a partially-filled construction.

The next construction is the locative subject construction. In this construction, the subject is marked by the locative case, while the object is similar to the Transitive object, however unmarked for '-k'. The syntactic manifestation of the construction is '*S-t O V*', which encodes the semantics of 'Y is located at X'. The verbs that are used in these constructions are typically static verbs.

The next construction is the object-subject construction. In this construction, the so-called subject is marked by the object marker, '-k', which is always animate, as the referent is always human. The syntactic manifestation of the construction is '*S-k O lag*', which encodes the semantics of 'Y affects X'. This is also a partially-filled construction.

The next section of chapter 3 shows the relationship among the different types of transitive constructions, across different levels of abstraction and the links that connect these constructions.

The next section deals with the Ditransitive construction. The syntactic manifestation of the construction is '*S-e O(k) O V*', which encodes the semantics of 'X causes Y to have Z'. Verbs that are used in this construction involve a sense of transfer. The thesis claims that there is a relation between the Ditransitive construction and the Cause transfer construction. The relation is 'allostructional' relation, which is based on 'semantic synonymy', that is, they share a similar semantics of transfer. However, they differ syntactically.

Chapter 5 is titled as 'Argument Structure Constructions and Event Schemas in Assamese', which deals with the types of events that each of the ASCs is associated with. The chapter deals with all the ASCs that have been established in the thesis. The chapter groups different ASCs based on the similarity of the events they are related to. Accordingly, 18 ASCs are grouped based on seven 7 (seven) different event schemas. Certain ASCs are associated with more than one event schema, and thus they overlap. The overlapping of ASCs with their associated event schemas are represented using Venn diagrams.

6.1. The network of the Argument Structure Constructions in Assamese.

As discussed, and represented in the earlier chapters, constructions, within the CCG approach, are related to each other via different links. This section summaries and attempts to establish a network of the ASCs that have been addressed in the current work. Each of the ASCs are organized in a hierarchical order, where the most schematic ones are positioned at a higher level, which represents core grammatical relations. Followed by their less schematic extensions, the partially filled constructions and non-canonical constructions.

The agentive intransitive construction, ‘S-e V’, also has three extensions, however, their level of semanticity varies. The three constructions are the conative construction, S-e Obl_(loc) V, the genitive subject construction, S-r [Cj V] and the passive construction, S(-k) NMZ *ho*. The conative construction is placed higher than the other two. This is because of the core grammatical marking and being more schematic, while the other two are marked by non-canonical markers and the passive being partially filled. The presence of the oblique phrase makes the conative construction an extension of the agentive intransitive construction, hence, connected via the metonymical link. The genitive subject construction and the passive construction is connected via the metaphorical link, due to absence of the ergative marker, which is replaced by the genitive case, in case of the genitive subject construction and the object marker in case of the passive construction.

The next construction is the Transitive construction, which has seven extensions, the subject of the three extensions is marked by the ergative case and the other four are marked by oblique cases. The seven extensions are placed at different levels of semanticity. The three constructions marked by the ergative case, which are the resultative construction, ‘S-e O-k O_{comp} V’, the caused-motion construction, ‘S-e O(-k) Obl V’, and the caused-transfer construction, ‘S-e Obl O V’. The three constructions are connected with the Transitive construction via the metonymical link, due to the presence of the oblique phrase. The other four constructions are the non-canonical constructions, which is connected to the Transitive construction via the metonymical link, as the core case markers are replaced by oblique case markers. The four non-canonical Transitive constructions are the transitive genitive subject construction, ‘S-r O V’, the transitive genitive subject and the dative object construction, ‘S-r O-loi V’, the transitive dative subject construction, ‘S-loi O V’, the locative subject construction, ‘S-t O V’, the object-subject construction, ‘S-k O V’.

As discussed in section 4.5.3, the caused-transfer and Ditransitive construction, S-e O-k O V, share an allostructional relation. This is denoted by the dotted line. The relation between all the constructions discussed till now is based on the vertical organizational structure, where the constructions are vertically placed above/below each other. This represents different levels or degrees or schematicity. However, another relation is established, here, the horizontal relation, which connects constructions within the same level of schematicity. The first horizontal relation is the relationship between the two Intransitives, the Transitive and the Ditransitive. The relation between the two Intransitive is that of a

metaphorical one, as the null marked subject is replaced by the ergative case, which differentiates the two constructions. The relation between the agentive Intransitive, the Transitive and the Ditransitive is that of a metonymical one, due to presence of an extra object.

The next horizontal relation is that of the intransitive motion construction and the caused-motion construction. The presence of a syntactical ergative subject (semantically a 'cause') differentiates the two constructions. However, the notion of motion connects the two.

The next two horizontal relation is based on the presence of an extra object, which relates the constructions via the metonymical link. The first pair of construction is the (intransitive) genitive subject construction and the transitive genitive subject construction. The second pair of construction is the passive construction and the object-subject construction.