

ABSTRACT

The Constructionist approach, relatively a new approach in the linguistics literature, grew as an alternative to the mainstream generative approach, which was rule based and componential in nature. The theory initially developed by Fillmore, Kay and O'Connor (1988) aimed at explaining the idiomatic expressions in language, which was largely unexamined or treated as exceptional (peripheral) within the existing approach. This formed a basis for the Constructionist approaches towards linguistic study.

Goldberg's approach is known as the Cognitive Construction Grammar (1995), which is based on the Fillmore's approach, which treats the emergence of Argument Structure Constructions (see below) under the same leaning mechanism as idioms. Goldberg's approach is a syntactic analysis of argument structures, which claims that the verbs alone do not determine the arguments, but verbs and Argument Structure Constructions together determine the meaning in language. This approach can explain facts like why certain verbs can occur with multiple argument structures, for instance, the verb '*kick*', in English; can occur in at least 6 different argument structures. Moreover, the approach can also explain the creative use of verbs in certain context, for instance, the typical intransitive verb '*sneeze*' occurs with only one argument, i.e., the subject. However, there are instances where the verb '*sneeze*' occurs in a construction with a subject, object and oblique. This is what Goldberg terms as '*coercion*', i.e., a verb is coerced into a construction. The typical cases can be termed as '*fusion*'. Thus, the theory claims that verbs are used with different ASCs, instead of the fact that the verb determines the number of arguments.

Within the Goldberg's constructionist approach, ASC denote generalized events which has general '*argument roles*', whereas verbs denote specific events, which has specific '*participant role*' (thematic roles). The fusion of a verb with an ASCs is determined by two principles, the '*semantic coherence*' principle and the '*correspondence*' principle. The semantic coherence principle states that the '*participant role*' of the verb must be an instance of the '*argument role*' of the construction. Whereas, the correspondence principle states that if a verb consists of three participant roles, then one of them can be fused with a nonprofiled role, of the construction, i.e. the oblique.

'Frame Semantics' (Fillmore 1977, 1982, 1985) and construction grammar are regarded as sister theories. The frame semantic knowledge that is associated with a verb also plays

a major role in the combination of a verb's 'participant' role with the construction's 'argument' role. An event has various elements. Linguistically, only those elements which are prominent in the event are realized in terms of direct grammatical relation, in terms of core encoding, and those which are less prominent are encoded as obliques. This is called the 'syntactically relevant aspect of verb meaning'. Thus, the syntax is a representation of the event denoted by a verb.

The Cognitive Constructionist approach views that linguistics knowledge consists of constructions, i.e., "it's constructions all the way down" (Goldberg 2006:18). A construction is defined as 'an arbitrary pairing of (phonological/syntactic) MEANING that is stored in a speaker's mental lexicon" (Hoffman, 2022:4). Constructions are generalizations over 'frequently recurring patterns'. Thus, what subsumes as constructions, within this approach can range from simple word construction to complex syntactic construction, across various levels of semanticity, which has a form with a meaning, hence form-meaning pair. A speaker's knowledge of the language consists of a *network* of constructions, termed as 'Construct-i-con'.

The thesis takes a Cognitive Construction Grammar (Goldberg, 1995, 2006, 2019) approach to study the syntax of the Assamese language, an Indo-Aryan language spoken in the North-eastern state of Assam, India. The thesis looks into the Argument Structure Constructions (henceforth ASC), i.e., the basic sentence patterns, as encoding basic human experiences (c.f. the scene-encoding hypothesis). The ASCs are marked by different case markers (the form) which in turn determines the semantics (the meaning) associated with it, thus, investigating the 'form-meaning' pair of the ASCs. Thus, different types of ASCs are based on different encoding strategies in terms of case marking. An important aspect of the Constructionist approach is the verb classes that are used the different ASCs. Hence verb according to the nature of the ASCs with which they are used are investigated. Further, the thesis also aims to establish the network of the ASCs across various levels of semanticity. Lastly, the ASCs are grouped according to the event schemas with which they are associated with.

Objective:

- To establish the Argument Structure Constructions in Assamese
- To establish the network of the Argument Structure Construction
- To establish the universality of Event Schemas
- To establish that the relation between the conceptual and linguistic levels is to a large extent motivated.

To fulfill the above-mentioned objectives the thesis is divided into six chapters as following:

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter provides a brief introduction of the topic along with the motivation for the study undertaken. This section also includes the literature review about topic and the language that has been taken into account in the study. Further, a section is devoted to discuss about the linguistic features of the language under study.

Chapter 2: Construction Grammar

This chapter discusses the Construction Grammar theory, its evolution and its types. Also, the chapter deals with the reason for selecting this theory.

Chapter 3: The Intransitive constructions

This chapter deals with the Intransitive ASC and its types. The chapter also establishes the phenomena of Differential Subject Marking (or split-intransitive) in Assamese, and the verb classes that are used in the Intransitive construction. The chapter then deals with the extensions of the Intransitive constructions, which includes post-positional oblique phrase(s). Then the chapter deals with the non-canonical intransitive constructions, where the only participant is marked with non-core case, i.e. the oblique case markers.

Based on the Differential Subject Marking and the oblique phrases, a *network of construction* is formed for the different types of intransitive ASCs, with two different types of links among the constructions.

Chapter 4: The Transitive constructions

This chapter deals with the Transitive ASC and its types. The chapter establishes the fact that Assamese is an ergative language and the language lacks an accusative marker. The different types of verbs, ranging from high agentivity to low agentivity that are used in the Transitive construction are ranked accordingly. Then the chapter deals with the extensions of the basic transitive constructions, which includes oblique phrases of different *form* with different *meaning*. Then the chapter deals with the non-canonical transitive ASCs. Based on the different forms of the transitive constructions a network of constructions is formed with two different types of links among the constructions.

Further, the chapter also deals with the Ditransitive constructions, which is sometimes referred to as extended transitive or double object construction. Based on the semantics of the Ditransitive construction, the construction is related to another construction, and the relation between the two construction is termed as ‘allostruction’, in line with allophones and allomorphs.

Chapter 5: Argument Structure Constructions and Event schema

This chapter deals with the semantics of the ASCs that are found in the language and groups them according to the event schemas they are associated with, based on Dirven and Verspoor (2004). Here the primary focus is laid on the ASCs.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This chapter aims to discuss the major research findings in depth and establish the network of all the ASCs, thus, forming a syntactic ‘construct-i-con’ of the Assamese language. Further, the chapter also covers the future scope of research along the same lines.

Review of Literature

Although the Assamese literary heritage dates back to 14th-16th century found in Madhava Kandali and Sankardadeva. However, the modern linguistic tradition is of recent origin. The first traces of the Assamese grammatical sketch can be found in William Robinson’s (1838) ‘A Grammar of Assamese language’, during the British era. This was followed by the first Assamese-English dictionary by M. Bronson (1867) and Nathen Brown’s (1893) ‘Grammatical Notes on the Assamese’. Ananduram Dhekial Phukan’s contribution led to

the independent status of the Assamese language, which was then thought to similar to the Bangla language.

The ‘Assamese Grammar and Origin of the Assamese Language’ by Kaliram Medhi (1936) provides an historical account and the origin of the language. Banikanta Kakati’s (1941) work entitled ‘Assamese: Its Formation and Development’ describes the formation and the evolution of the Assamese language, along with descriptions of different morphemes and its etymological descriptions. The tradition was then carried forward in G.C Goswami’s (1982) ‘The Structure of Assamese’ which is still considered one of the comprehensive works on the language. ‘A Contrastive Study of Assamese and Hindi Verbs’ by Satyendra Narayan Goswami (1991) provides a comparative study of Assamese and Hindi verbs, from a morphological perspective. Chowdhary (2022) ‘The Assamese Verb’ also provides some comprehensive analysis of the language from a modern linguistic point of view.

From a Cognitive Linguistics framework, to the best of my knowledge no comprehensive grammatical work has been done, let alone from a Construction Grammar perspective.

The constructionist approach has recently gained popularity in the linguistic tradition from Goldberg’s (1995) ‘Constructions: A Construction Grammar Approach to Argument Structure’. The English language has been extensively investigated within this approach, some notable works includes ‘Construction Grammar and its Application to English’ by Martin Hilpert (2019), ‘Construction Grammar: The Structure of English’ by Thomas Hoffman (2022), ‘A Construction Grammar of the English Language: CASA- a constructionist approach to syntactic analysis’ by Thomas Herbst and Thomas Hoffman (forthcoming), among many other research papers and book chapters. Major research on other languages include Spanish, French, Hebrew, Swedish, Russian, German.

Methodology/approaches applied:

The thesis adopts a Construction Grammar framework to investigate the syntax of the Assamese language. The data cited in the thesis is primary data which primarily comes from the author himself, who happens to be the native speaker of the language. The data is further consulted with other native speaker for verification. Certain aspects of the data (the participant role or the thematic role) is taken from the FrameNet (<https://framenet.icsi.berkeley.edu>) project, in operation at the International Computer

Science Institute in Berkeley and the VerbNet project (verbs.colorado.edu) hosted at the University of Colorado Boulder, USA.

In general, the method taken is qualitative research and the nature is that of theoretical descriptive research. The research design is Exploratory.

Results/discussion

- The thesis established 18 Argument Structure Constructions:

Within the Constructionist approach the syntactic organizations with which different verbs are used are considered as schematic representations. Hence, ASCs are determined by their grammatical encoding and different verb classes that are used with it. The thesis found 18 different ASCs in the language, which are unique in their *form* and *meaning*.

- The thesis establishes that Assamese is a ergative language, contrary to what is claimed to be split-ergative language:

The core case markers in different language typically employ the Nominative-Accusative alignment, for instance the Bangla language, where the object is typically marked, or the Ergative-Absolutive alignment, for instance, the Assamese language, where the subjects are typically marked. Another alignment system is found where the subjects are marked differentially, known as Split-ergative language, for instance, Hindi.

The existing literature by Saha & Patgiri (2013) and Saikia & Camillari (2019) claims Assamese is a split-ergative language and Barbora (2016) claims Assamese has limited split-ergativity. Along the line of Næss (2007), the thesis claims that Assamese is purely an ergative language

- The thesis establishes that Assamese lacks an accusative case, contrary to the existing literature:

G.C Goswami (1982) and Chowdhary (2022) among many others claims that Assamese has an Accusative marker, however, the thesis claims that the so called “accusative” marker ‘-k’ is infact a differential object marker, found across Indo-Aryan languages also in Tibeto-Burman languages.

- The thesis establishes 9 types of non-canonical ASCs:

The typically sentence structure consists of the canonical subject and object, based on their core case marking patterns. However, oblique case markers are often regarded as adjuncts. The thesis claims that oblique case marked subjects and objects forms a major chunk of the language. Nine oblique case marked constructions, both intransitive and transitive, are found which has their own unique semantics.

- The thesis establishes the different types of verb classes and its corresponding ASC

A verb is always accompanied by arguments, i.e., verbs do not occur in isolation. The linguistic elements that occur with the verbs are arguments. Hence, verbs always occur with different arguments, hence ASCs. The thesis looks into different verbs classes that occur one or more than one ASCs.