

A CORPUS-BASED APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF PERMISSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS IN ENGLISH AND UKRAINIAN

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Abstract: This paper presents a corpus based contrastive study of permissive constructions in English and Ukrainian. Sentences with studied permissive constructions are viewed as sentences with secondary predication constructions expressed by a non-finite complement after the complement taking a predicate with the meaning of permission. In English the secondary predicate within the non-finite complement is expressed by the Infinitive, Participle I, Participle II and Nominals (adjective/noun). In Ukrainian the only type of permissive constructions available are with the Infinitive as secondary predicate. Permissive constructions present a network of constructions with partly schematic, partly substantive ‘meso-constructions’ playing an important role in the entrenchment process. Identification of ‘meso-constructions’ is helpful for shaping the correct search query. The research material is gathered from two corpora, namely COCA and General Regionally Annotated Corpus of Ukrainian (GRAC). The frequency analysis of data helps to draw conclusions within the Usage-based Construction Grammar approach.

Keywords: permissive construction, meso-construction, type frequency, corpus-based study, English/Ukrainian

1 INTRODUCTION

Corpus Linguistics has truly revolutionized the world of language study, spreading into many applied spheres such as language teaching and second language acquisition. Recent publications (Hunston 2022) reflect not only technological advances but also focus on methodological progress and the social impact of Corpus Linguistics, highlighting an extensive use of corpus data for research within linguistic frameworks.

The present paper is meant as a contribution to corpus-based contrastive studies, which can be considered a successful merger of Contrastive Linguistics with achievements within the field of Corpus Linguistics (Hasselgård 2020, p. 185). To be more precise, the research is a corpus-based contrastive grammar study (English-Ukrainian language pair), embedded in the framework of Usage-based Construction Grammar.

The English sentence with the permissive construction, as in (1), is a sentence with secondary predication that is expressed by the non-finite complement ‘*students to choose*’, licensed by the complement taking predicate ‘*allow*’, which is a primary predication predicate with the meaning of permission.

(1) *Most schools allow students to choose from a list of books.* (NEWS: Christian Science Monitor, 1997)

A secondary predication construction itself consists of a secondary subject, expressed by a pronoun in the objective case or a noun in the common case, and a secondary predicate, expressed by a non-finite. Consider example (1) with the syntactic roles described:

Most schools (S1) allow (P1) [students (S2) to choose (P2) from a list of books (adjunct)][object].

Ukrainian learners of English typically have difficulties with such sentences. Practical grammars of English for Ukrainian learners prevailingly advise rendering secondary predication constructions with the help of subordinate sentences with the tensed finite forms of the verb. However, our experience of working with different types of secondary predication constructions in English has shown that we do have equivalent non-finite complement constructions in Ukrainian. Here the merits of contrastive analysis come into play, since it helps pay more attention to some specific phenomena in a language that may otherwise go unnoticed.

This paper has the following structure: Section 1 introduces the research object and states the main research purpose and Section 2 gives a relevant theoretical background to the study. Section 3 outlines the material and methods used. The subsections of Section 3 present the analysis of data gathered from two corpora, describing the studied constructions in English and Ukrainian. Section 4 presents a discussion of the main findings, with some general concluding remarks.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Permissive constructions with non-finite complements

Permissive constructions are viewed in this research as constructions that contain a matrix verb encoding the act of permission and non-finite complementation that makes a secondary predication in addition to that of the main verb. The understanding of ‘construction’ is accepted in this paper as defined by Croft (2022, p. 17): “any pairing of form and function in a language [...] used to express a particular combination of semantic content and information packaging”. The packaging of the semantic content can be organized as predication. Events

prototypically function as predication. A complement clause construction is defined, according to Croft, in terms of encoding one event as the argument of a second event. Only certain predicates allow events as arguments; these predicates are called complement-taking predicates or CTPs (Noonan 2007, p. 53; Croft 2022, pp. 551–558). Noonan (2007, pp. 52–150) distinguishes among others such types of CTP events that can have a second event encoded by a complement construction: perception events, desiderative events, and manipulative events. Manipulatives include the closely related causative and permissive predicates, both involving an element of causation (Noonan 2007, p. 136). Manipulative predicates express a relation between an agent or a situation which functions as a cause, an affectee, and a resulting situation. The affectee must be a participant in the resulting situation. Moreover, manipulative predicates may in addition encode information about the manner of causation (compare, for example, causative ‘*force*’ and permissive ‘*let*’).

Permissive constructions, also called enablement constructions of the different-subject construction type (e.g. Egan 2008, pp. 13, 23), have been the focus of attention less often in comparison to their causative ‘*kins*’. Therefore, this case study is devoted to revealing the range of permissive constructions and CTPs they are used with with the help of corpus data.

2.2 Permissive constructions as a network of constructions

Following the constructionist approach, we describe permissive constructions as constructs with their form and meaning/function with the specific information packaging as structures with secondary predication embedded into the primary predication structure in the form of the non-finite complement, performing the function of object after the CTP (P1) with the specific meaning of “permission for performing some action”:

FORM: [X permits/allows Y Vnon-finite]

MEANING: X represents a manipulative force or agent, while Y represents a patient/an affectee who is permitted to perform an act (Vnon-finite): ‘an agent permits a patient to perform some action’.

Permissive constructions form a certain subnetwork within the network of non-finite complement constructions. Constructions as mental representations also vary according to the degree of their schematicity. Traugott and Trousdale (2013, p. 16) propose the following minimal set of constructional levels: schemas, subschemas, and micro-constructions. In the same vein Hoffmann et al. (2019, pp. 6, 26), also Horsch (2023a, p. 705–707) speak about ‘micro-constructions’ (specific, substantive instances of a construction), ‘macro-constructions’ (abstract schematic constructional templates) and ‘meso-constructions’ (semi-productive, partly substantive, partly schematic intermediate entities).

According to Diessel (2023, p. 29) we can speak not only about taxonomic relations of grammatical patterns in the constructicon as an inheritance network: “Every (schematic) construction includes at least one slot that is associated with a class of lexical and/or phrasal fillers”. Data extracted from corpora (Section 3) reveal that we have a larger range of permissive constructions in English in comparison to Ukrainian with more lexical fillers (in our case CTPs). Moreover, we have filler types: Infinitive, Participle I and II used as non-finites, as well as Nominal (adjective/noun), as a result of ‘to be’ deletion, treated as a separate type. In Ukrainian only the use of Infinitive is possible.

One of the basic assumptions of the usage-based approach is that constructions are entrenched as a consequence of input frequency. Evidence of the entrenchment of constructions can be found by employing two fundamental concepts of usage-based language study – ‘token’ and ‘type’ frequency. Whereas ‘token frequency’ is evidence for specific and substantive constructions, ‘type frequency’ “[...] plays a crucial role in identifying types, or meso-constructions” (Horsch 2023b, p. 291). Reflecting upon the advances in statistical analysis in recent decades, Gries (2023, p. 562) affirms that token frequency per corpus is supposed to be causally related to entrenchment whereas type frequency, by contrast, productivity, acquisition, and grammaticalization. Therefore, the study of grammatical constructions with the help of corpora is inevitably connected with analyzing their token and type frequencies.

3 CORPORA, DATA AND METHODS APPLIED

3.1 Methods

The present study is meant as a contribution to corpus-based contrastive grammar studies. Consequently, the main methods applied are contrastive analysis and frequency analysis.

The novelty of this research is that English permissive constructions are compared with Ukrainian ones, following claims that “[...] the notion of construction provides us with a valuable and useful concept for cross-linguistic comparison and analysis” (Boas 2010, p. 16) and that constructions, as the basic unit at all levels of analysis, can be found in Slavic as well (Fried 2017, pp. 243–244). In line with Boas’ suggestion that English should serve as “basis” (2010, p. 14) for contrastive CxG-based investigations, Horsch applied the methodology from a study on the English Comparative Correlative constructions in Slovak and in Spanish (Hoffmann et al. 2019; Horsch 2023a; Horsch 2024).

The collection of data from corpora in order to study the token and type frequency of permissive constructions in English and Ukrainian presupposes the application of frequency analysis in this research.

3.2 Corpora

Data extraction procedure from COCA. The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) was used to extract English permissive constructions.

Permissive constructions with non-finite complements follow the pattern: N1 V N2 non-f V (N3). This pattern can be regarded as a maximally abstract ‘constructional template’, reflecting the sequence of parts of speech used to express the primary predication as the main clause and the secondary predication as an embedded non-finite complement construction. To build a proper search query it was necessary to take into account: 1) the verb (P1) that serves as a permissive CTP, taking the non-finite complement; 2) the expression of N2/S2 (secondary subject or the semantic subject of the non-finite complementation), which is most often expressed by a pronoun in the objective case or less often a noun/noun phrase in the common case; 3) the expression of the P2 (secondary predicate) which is expressed by such non-finite forms as Infinitive (with and without ‘to’), Participle I and II as well as Nominal (adjective/noun/noun phrase), which has to be reflected in the choice of correct POS tags.

The set of tokens within the first 100 hits yielded the following most frequent verbs serving as CTPs: 1) VERB PRON _v?i (bare infinitive): *let, make, help, hear, see*; 2) VERB PRON TO _v?i (infinitive with ‘to’): *want, would like, expect, lead, find, need, ask, tell, allow, help, believe, invite*. This list remains practically unchanged up to 1000 hits and is topped by the CTP *‘let’* used with permissive constructions. Other CTPs are used with causative, desiderative, evaluative and perception subtypes of constructions with the non-finite complement in English. Therefore, the second stage of the search procedure was to use more specialized queries with specific verbs as CTPs. Consider Fig.1 (example with the verb ‘*let*’ as a CTP):



Fig. 1. A combination of screenshots, exemplifying a specialized query with the examples of sentences

Consequently, more specialized queries reflecting meso-constructions appeared to be more efficient.

Data extraction procedure from GRAC. The General Regionally Annotated Corpus of Ukrainian (GRAC; uacorpus.org) is a general-purpose reference corpus of Ukrainian and is the largest and the most representative corpus of Ukrainian by far. The corpus counts 1.781 billion tokens. One of the newest versions, Grac.v.17, was used. The search procedure with GRAC is more complicated since it requires a specialized CQL expression for producing a correct query (Fig. 2). The search with a maximally abstract ‘constructional template’, similar to the procedure with COCA, was not successful with GRAC. Only specialized queries, with CTPs included, yielded the necessary results. Similarly, separate queries should have been produced to search for constructions where S2 was expressed by a pronoun, or by a noun/nounphrase, e.g.: [lemma="дозволяти"] [tag=".*pron.*"] [tag=".*inf.*"], [lemma="дозволяти"] [tag=".*noun.*"] [tag=".*inf.*"]. The query with the noun tag contained samples of sentences intermixed with pronouns, which called for the manual sorting out of such cases. Therefore, a more specialized query for the search of permissive constructions with S2 expressed by a noun/noun phrase was applied: [lemma="дозволяти"] [tag=".*noun.*" & tag!=".*pron.*"] [tag=".*inf.*"]

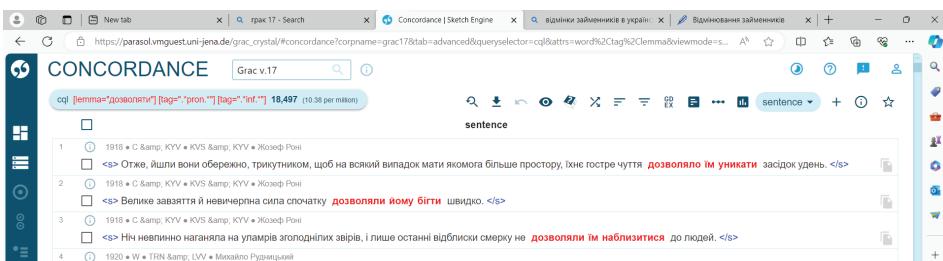


Fig. 2. A combination of screenshots, exemplifying a specialized query in GRAC with examples sentences

The appropriateness of the extracted examples was checked by looking through combinations of strings in order to ‘weed out’ the so called ‘false positives’, especially in COCA. There was a careful check of examples within 1000 hits. This procedure revealed a certain tendency: the more frequent the construction in the corpus is, the fewer incorrect matches are yielded. Subtypes of constructions, comparatively small in number, were checked in a full amount. Therefore, we believe that the arrangement of constructions with a certain CTP in order of descending frequency as well as the percentage correlation of data can be considered correct.

3.3 DATA

Types of English permissive constructions. The data obtained from COCA corroborates the availability of four subtypes of permissive constructions according to the filler type: Infinitive, Participle I and II, and Nominal (adjective/noun). The list of CTPs, triggering the subtype with the Infinitive, includes 6 verbs listed in order of their frequency: *let, help, allow to, enable to, permit to, leave to*. These CTPs were used to build two types of queries – with pronoun and noun as S2 correspondingly, e.g.: *LET PRON _V?I* and *LET NOUN _V?I* Consider example (2).

(2) *I don't let him have a Facebook account [...].* (BLOG: momfaze.com, 2012)

The list of CTPs triggering the subtype with Participle I includes 3 verbs listed in order of their frequency: *leave, let, allow*. Consider the query sample *LEAVE PRON _V?G* and example (3):

(3) *The river chill had left him feeling feverish and brittle.* (FIC: Dennis Mahoney. Bell weather: a novel, 2016)

The subtype with Participle II is triggered only by one CTP: *leave*. Consider the query sample *LEAVE PRON _V?N* and example (4):

(4) *They left him tied to the fence.* (NEWS: USA Today, 1998)

The list of CTPs triggering the subtype with Nominal includes 2 verbs: *leave*, *let*. Consider the query sample LET PRON ADJ and example (5):

(5) *He just wouldn't let me alone.* (FIC: O'Shaughnessy, Perri. Show no fear. New York: Pocket Books, 2008)

The type frequency of English permissive constructions is the following: with the Infinitive (413,488 tokens – 94.38%), with Participle I (5,269 tokens – 1.2%), with Participle II (739 tokens – 0.17%), with Nominal (18,648 tokens – 4.25%). It is obvious that the most prototypical representative of permissive constructions in English is the subtype with the infinitive, triggered by the largest number of CTPs (6) and containing the CTP ‘*let*’ with the highest number of tokens (221,627 tokens – 50.58% out of the total number of permissive constructions 438,144 tokens (100%)). This proves that the construction with ‘*let*’ has the highest degree of entrenchment and the subtype of permissive constructions with the Infinitive is a highly productive one.

Types of Ukrainian permissive constructions. Data obtained from GRAC corroborates the availability of permissive constructions but only with one filler type – the Infinitive. The number of CTPs, triggering this subtype, contains only three verbs given in order of their frequency: ‘*дозволяти*’ (*let, allow to*), ‘*допомагати*’ (*help*), ‘*залишати*’ (*leave to*). These CTPs were used in two queries – with a pronoun or a noun as S2 correspondingly. Consider example (6).

(6) Такі зустрічі [...] дозволяють нам оайнітися досвідом
Such meetings allow PRES PL us Pronoun DAT PL exchange NFINITIVE experience
(Онлайн-ЗМІ “Чернігівщина: події і коментарі”, 2013)
‘Such meetings [...] allow us to exchange experiences’ (Online media “Chernihiv Region: Events and Comments”, 2013)

The peculiar feature of Ukrainian permissive constructions is that S2 expressed by the personal pronoun takes the dative case with CTPs ‘*дозволяти*’ (*let, allow to*), ‘*допомагати*’ (*help*), and the accusative case with the CTP ‘*залишати*’ (*leave to*). Altogether, Ukrainian permissive constructions are less frequent, if we compare the subtype with the Infinitive, with the total number of tokens 54,757.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The present study relied on insights from Usage-based Construction Grammar. Corpus data play a crucial role in Usage-based CxG, based on the assumption that grammar is shaped by the frequency of use. The data harvested from two corpora,

COCA and GRAC, allows to state the availability of the following types of permissive constructions within the contrasted English-Ukrainian language pair (Tab. 1):

Permissive construction with	English (quantity of lexical fillers/CTP's)	Relative frequency per million	Ukrainian (quantity of lexical fillers/CTP's)	Relative frequency per million
Infinitive	6	413.488	3	30.72
Participle I	3	5.269	-	
Participle II	1	0.739	-	
Nominal (adjective/noun)	2	18.648	-	

Tab. 1. Subtypes of permissive constructions in English and Ukrainian with the CTPs used and their quantity given as relative frequency per million

The notion of ‘construction’ itself served as *tertium comparationis* to carry out the contrastive analysis of English and Ukrainian permissive constructions with non-finite complements as secondary predication constructions. The correct choice of *tertium comparationis* proved that ‘construction’ indeed is a viable instrument, serving as a comparative concept. It has to be remarked that meso-constructions (partly schematic, partly substantive constructions) play an important role in the taxonomic constructional network, being intermediate between micro-constructions (attested tokens) and macro-constructions (maximally abstract templates). Meso-constructions are also useful in building correct specialized queries for extracting the necessary data from corpora.

The analysis helped reveal that English permissive constructions can be truly regarded as a network of constructions within English constructions containing non-finite complements with four attested types of fillers as a secondary predicate: the Infinitive, Participle I and II, Nominal. The permissive construction with the Infinitive, triggered by the CTP ‘*let*’, has the highest degree of entrenchment and, therefore, the subtype with the Infinitive is highly productive in modern English. This cannot be said about the Ukrainian permissive constructions, which are used only with one filler type – the Infinitive. Nevertheless, the corpus-based contrastive analysis helped reveal a specific feature of Ukrainian constructions: the secondary subject expressed by a personal pronoun/noun is used not only in the accusative case but as well in the dative. This is a fact worth paying attention to since in English traditional grammars, non-finite complement constructions can be found under the terms ‘Accusativus cum Infinitivo/Partizipio’ and the English objective case of personal pronouns is considered to be equivalent to the accusative case. Therefore, the analysis can be useful for Ukrainian learners of English grammar in many respects. Consequently, the presented study makes an important contribution to the disciplines of corpus-based contrastive

studies, in particular Contrastive Grammar of English and Ukrainian Languages, as well as to Usage-based Construction Grammar.

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