

"Exceptions rule! Lexical restrictions on grammatical structure."

By Dr. Eva van Lier, University of Amsterdam

Typologists are interested in linguistic diversity: how do languages differ and why is this so? While principles of human cognition and communication are regarded as key factors in shaping language variation, in most typological work cross-linguistic generalizations are not backed-up with experimental data on actual language processing.

On the other hand, psycholinguists, who look at actual language processing in experimental settings, typically do not take a lot of linguistic diversity into account: while a sea-change is definitely in progress, the bulk of psycholinguistic research still assesses only a tiny fraction of the approximately 7000 languages currently spoken in the world. Of course, this is largely due to practical challenges, especially lack of access to native speakers, to descriptive resources and corpora, and to culturally appropriate experimental methods.

A new NWO¹-funded research project (called "Exceptions rule! Lexical restrictions on grammatical structure"; see <https://www.nwo.nl/en/research-and-results/research-projects/i/42/33642.html>) tries to bring the fields of language typology and psycholinguistics closer together, with a focus on alternating verb-argument constructions. More specifically, it looks at alternations where the two possible constructions are semantically quite similar, yet speakers must choose between them during speech production, and, in fact, use one option more often than the other. A well-researched example concerns the dative alternation in Germanic (and many other languages). Speakers of English, for instance, have a clear preference for the so-called double-object construction with the verb *give* (*John gave Mary the book*), compared to the prepositional construction (*John gave the book to Mary*), even though it is hard to say what the difference in meaning is. Corpus research shows that these constructional preferences are different for individual lexical verbs, and co-dependent on various types of frequency effects.

The current project investigates similar kinds of alternations in a range of lesser-studied languages. It consists of a corpus-based typological study, carried out by Katherine Walker (PhD candidate) and Eva van Lier (Principal Investigator), as well as experimental case studies, designed by Pegah Faghiri (Postdoc) and to be set out at various field sites. In particular, based spoken language corpora, compiled in the context of language documentation and description, we assess constructional preferences and gather data on type and token frequency of specific verbs and constructions. These corpus data feed into the experimental design, in which speakers' knowledge and use of this information is tested. Currently, we are working on a case study of Kamang, a Papuan language spoken on the Indonesian island Alor, based on a corpus of spoken discourse, collected and annotated by Antoinette Schapper, George Saad, and Clemens Mayer.

Theoretically, the project is rooted in the Usage-Based framework, according to which verb-argument constructions are not formed by abstract, general rules operating on the entire verbal lexicon, but rather emerge from speakers' experience with specific verbs in communicative context. If verb-specific constructional preferences can be shown to exist in typologically very diverse languages, the empirical basis for this theory would be substantially strengthened.

In terms of possible applications, we expect our results to shed light on how (much) lexicon and syntax are intertwined in language production. This may have implications for language teaching: rather than learning vocabulary items separately from grammar rules (with their many concomitant

¹ NWO: Dutch national science foundation

exceptions), it may be more effective to offer both in an integrated way, so that one acquires the 'exceptional' behavior of a particular verb by hearing and eventually producing it in structurally appropriate ways.



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