

Verb-Argument Constructions in Chinese EFL Learner's Oral Production

Yang Liu and Jiajin Xu (Beijing Foreign Studies University, China)

Ample evidence has shown that language is highly patterned or phraseological (e.g. Sinclair, 1991, 2004; Hunston & Francis, 2000). Construction grammarians hold that language consists of millions of constructions which are form-meaning mappings, conventionalised in the speech community and entrenched as language knowledge in the learner's mind (Robinson & Ellis, 2008; Ellis, 2013). The widespread recognition of usage-based approach to constructions or phraseologies has made Corpus Linguistics a most viable methodology to scrutinise such frequent constructions as verb-argument constructions (VACs) in learner language.

The present study attempts to examine the use of VACs in oral English production by Chinese EFL learners of different levels of proficiency. Our focus will be on the semantics of the verbal constructions in light of collostructional statistics as well as the comparisons of learner groups proficiency level. The corpus used in this study is SECCL (Spoken English Corpus of Chinese Learners), i.e. the spoken part of SWECCCL (Spoken and Written English Corpus of Chinese Learners). SECCL is a corpus of one million words in size, which consists of oral production of intermediate learners (Test for English Majors Band 4) and advanced learners (Test for English Majors Band 8), totaling 775, 151 and 286, 309 words respectively. The study focuses on learner's use of VACs, such as the "V *at* n construction (e.g., *she looked at the picture*). Three constructions have been chosen from *COBUILD Grammar Patterns 1: Verbs* (Francis, Hunston & Manning, 1996) for the present study, which are as follows: V *about* n, V *with* n, and V *in* n.

Firstly, we retrieved the three constructions from the two sub-corpora of SECCL, and manually checked the concordances to remove the noise. Thus, a list of verbs used in each construction were generated and lemmatised (e.g., walking, walked, walks → WALK), and then the semantic prototypicality of the VACs was measured and analysed according to the collocational strength of each word with the construction using an R script (<coll.analysis.r>) provided by Gries (2007). The results show that there is no difference between the number of VACs used by learners of different levels of proficiency, but the verbs generated in each construction are not quite the same. With regard to the collocational strength of each verb in the constructions, we found that the strength of most of the verbs produced by advanced learners is stronger than that of the intermediate learners, and that the order of verbs (ranked according to collocational strength) varies remarkably between different learner groups. After categorising these verbs according to Levin's (1993) classification of verb classes, still we found that the collostructional strength of most categories of verbs produced by advanced learners is stronger than that of the intermediate

learners, and the order of verb categories (ranked according to collocational strength) varies between advanced learners and intermediate learners. It is hoped that our findings would shed light on L2 learners' knowledge of VACs as well as the crosslinguistic influence that impacts verb semantics (cf. Talmy, 1985) of learners' spoken English.

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