

## Why a Construction—That is the Question! \*

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While idioms and idiomatic patterns constitute a large part of our linguistic knowledge, they nevertheless present special difficulties because their meanings are not predictable merely from the combination of their constituents. Recently, as studies of construction grammar (CG hereafter) has suggested, the syntactic, semantic and pragmatic unpredictability of the so-called constructional idioms should be resorted to Construction itself. Based on the CG assumption, this paper aims to suggest that the existence of Constructions such as the Chinese *X-lai* (come)-*X/Y-qu* (go) (XLXQ or XLYQ), *bu* (not)-*X-bu* (not)-*Y* (BXBY), and *bu* (not)-*X-er* (yet)-*Y* (BXEY) stands for a certain format of mental representation, i.e., the conceptual structure. The difference in terms of their degree of productivity hints at their different stage in the grammaticalization process. The comparison of the linguistic features and constructional meanings of these three combinations will show that one does not interpret the idiomatic expression solely on the lexicon. Levels beyond syntax, semantics and even pragmatics should be incorporated in linguistic analysis so that a speaker may grasp meaning of “non-lexically filled elements” that are not in the lexicon. For this reason, a constructional idiom is taken as “a match of syntactic and conceptual structure” which cannot be derived compositionally.

Key words: cognitive linguistics, construction grammar, idiomatic expression

### 1. Introduction

My goal in this paper is to present, by means of the detailed analysis of some Chinese four-character, four-syllable constructional idioms, some of the principal commitments and mechanisms of a grammatical theory that assigns a central role to the notion of grammatical construction.

I will employ in our analysis the framework of construction grammar (CG), a monostratal, unification-based syntactic theory (Goldberg 1995). A CG approach holds that the syntactic, semantic, or even pragmatic functions of highly idiomatic

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\* This paper should have been written years ago. It started with a small question prompted by my then 7th-grade daughter, and was shaped by many stimulating discussions with several of my close friends who are linguists. A student in our MA program benefited first from the original idea, but I feel obliged to write this paper to show my true appreciation for all this. I am grateful to the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable and constructive comments, some of which are incorporated into the paper presented here. The paper is far from satisfactory, and I alone am responsible for all the mistakes it may contain.

patterns are not predictable merely from the combinations of their constituents (Jackendoff 1997). Instead, the syntactic, semantic, or pragmatic uniqueness of idioms or idiomatic expressions is attributed directly to the whole construction. In CG, the grammar represents an inventory of form-meaning-function complexes, in which words are distinguished from grammatical constructions only with regard to their internal complexity. There is no need to posit an additional underlying structure in CG to explain some complex linguistic phenomenon<sup>1</sup>.

A CG approach saves extra efforts required to process various idiomatic expressions bearing the same syntactic structure and semantic properties, a generative viewpoint termed “semantic parsimony” (Goldberg 1995). According to this view, the argument of grammar being projected from lexicon is no longer necessary. A verb has different senses based on the various argument structures it holds. With CG, the process of positing different verb senses can be replaced by attributing additional semantic constraint to the construction. Generalizations made possible via a constructional account are thus in fact a matter of semantic parsimony.

## 2. Some Related Notions

A number of analyses and suggestions for the development of the CG framework have appeared<sup>2</sup>. Although diverse in detail, these proposals are all concerned with developing an explicit, nonderivational (constraint-based) grammar, based on the notion of a grammatical construction as a conventional association of linguistic form and content.

By grammatical construction I mean any syntactic pattern that is assigned one or more conventional functions in a language, together with whatever is linguistically conventionalized about its contribution to the meaning or the use of structures containing it (Fillmore 1988). On a constructional approach, semantics is attributed directly to the construction itself: constructions are units in the lexicon which are paired

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<sup>1</sup> See Michaelis (1994) for a detailed discussion on this notion, containing more or less general patterns. Different constructions in the language are generalized via their inheritance relationship (Kay 1997), and a network can eventually be built up based on inheritance relations of this sort. The inventory of construction is not unstructured, and its elements are related through INHERITANCE HIERARCHIES.

<sup>2</sup> Among the works developing the CG approach which have influenced our thinking are Chung 1999, Goldberg 1995, Koenig 1994, Lambrecht 1997, 1995, Michaelis 1994, Michaelis and Lambrecht 1996, Ohara 1994, and Zwicky 1994.

with meaning, and can be either lexical items, partially filled constructions, or non-lexically filled constructions.

In order to argue for the existence of a construction, I must first demonstrate that its syntax and semantics are unique, and do not just follow from the meanings of the lexical items that occur in these constructions. The three patterns identified here have been argued as constructional idioms by Chen (2001), and I do not plan to repeat such an effort here. However, I will define first what I mean by “constructional” idioms in the following.

### 2.1. Constructional Idioms

The issue of idiomacity is mostly left out of the so-called “core grammar,” for the reason that no general rule or principle can explain its idiosyncrasy. However, a large part of our linguistic knowledge is made up by constituents that are idiom-like or idiomatic in their nature, and a linguistic theory has an obligation to explain them (Chafe 1986).

In other words, constructional idioms are a special construction type whose syntactic configurations allow semantic content beyond what is contained in the lexical constituents. The so-called idiom phrases or idiomatic expressions refer to those whose meanings or functions are non-compositional, i.e., unpredictable and “arbitrary” (Gibbs 1995), and are not included in the so-called “core” constructions. They are considered peripheral because no formal syntactic or semantic rules can be composed to explain their idiosyncrasy.

Nunberg, Sag and Wasow (1994) argue, however, against the idea of treating all idioms as non-compositional. They propose instead to distinguish idioms into two types: expressions that are idiomatically combined and idiomatic phrases. Idioms of the first type usually derive their meaning from their literal sense in a conventionalized, non-arbitrary way, and it is this type that is considered compositional. The second type is, on the other hand, an idiosyncratic subtype of phrasal construction that assigns its own idiomatic meaning. The constructional idioms examined here tend to be more non-compositional than compositional<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> “Compositional” here is defined in the sense as stated by Nunberg, Sag and Wasow (1994: 504). To say that an idiom is an idiomatically combined expression is to say that the conventioned mapping from

In this paper, I begin by introducing the notion of grammatical construction and locating it within constraint-based, non-derivational theories of grammar. I will introduce some of the central ideas and mechanisms of the construction grammar (CG) framework as background to the analysis that follows. I will then introduce the three constructions I have studied for the present paper. This will be followed by a detailed account of the representation of the constructions discussed. The main points I would like to make are discussed in section 4. This section addresses some of the key questions in relation to cognitive linguistics. Section 5 is a brief conclusion of the paper.

## 2.2. Data

My data come mainly from three different sources: the Academia Sinica Corpus, the Spoken Chinese Corpora and dictionaries. I rely first on the Academic Sinica Corpus, a corpus of 5 million lexical items that is usually deemed rather balanced in its distribution between spoken and written data. The Spoken Chinese Corpora are the major sources we used to tabulate the statistical distribution given in the discussion below. The corpora include the Taida Spoken Chinese Corpus and another spoken corpus established by the author over the years. The Taida Corpus consists of eight hours of conversational Chinese, which includes roughly 24,000 intonation units from 53 discrete conversations. My corpus also lasts around 8 hours, and consists of transcribed conversational Chinese data. Several dictionaries were consulted as the third source of data – general dictionaries or specialized dictionaries of idioms. The dictionaries offer quite a number of examples, many of which are from classical Chinese, and are not found in the corpora. Being a Chinese native speaker, I resort as well to my own intuition regarding the provision and the judgment of the data given.

## 3. Sketches of Three Constructional Idioms

Three constructional idioms, namely *X-lai(come)-X/Y-qu(go)* (XLXQ or XLYQ), *bu(not)-X-bu(not)-Y* (BXBY), *bu(not)-X-er(yet)-Y* (BXEY), will be discussed in this

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literal to idiomatic interpretation is homomorphic with respect to certain properties of the interpretations of the idiom's components." I am indebted to one of the reviewers for pointing this out to facilitate my discussion on this issue.

paper. The reason for choosing these three for a study of this nature is well justified in Chen (2001) and will not be repeated here<sup>4</sup>. Each construction is stored as one single entry for its language users, and I will simply highlight the linguistic features and special restrictions associated with each of the three.

### 3.1. X-lai(come)-X/Y-qu(go) (XLXQ or XLYQ):

#### 3.1.1. Linguistic features

The X/Y slots in XLXQ/XLYQ are typically filled by monosyllabic verbs of activity, as in *suan(count)-lai(come)-suan(count)-qu(go)*, 算來算去, “to count over and over again”, *fan(turn)-lai(come)-fu(turnover)-qu(go)*, 翻來覆去, “to turn over and over again”, where X and Y are near synonyms. The expression as a whole denotes an action of repetitive nature, and may last for a certain duration. These properties of being repetitive, iterative, and durative lead in turn to specific semantic constraints on the verb selected for X/Y. For example, *\*si(die)-lai(come)-si(die)-qu(go)*, 死來死去, “to die again and again” would not be a possible instance out of this construction because the act of dying cannot be repeated. Semantic constraints posed by the construction also impose verbhood on the lexical items occupying the X/Y positions. A newly-coined expression *gao(high)-lai(come)-gao(high)-qu(go)*, 高來高去, “to move back and forth on a high plane/space”, eliminates the stative nature of the verb *gao* “high”. *Gao* here will be taken instead as a verb, “the action of (climbing/flying) high,” and also an action that is to be repeated.

#### 3.1.2. Constructional meanings

With the two verbs of direction *lai*來 “come” and *qu*去 “go”, the literal meaning of XLXQ/XLYQ actually refers to some actions that move “back and forth” in two implied or explicit fixed points, as in the following examples:

(1) 他 每天 在 家裡 晃來晃去 的  
*ta meitian zai jia-li huang-lai-huang-qu de*

<sup>4</sup> In the process of supervising Chen’s master thesis (Chen 2001), I found the three constructional idioms chosen for the present study here differ in terms of their productivity. This is a finding that begs further explanation, which might lead to interesting conclusions cognitively.

He everyday Existence-V house-inside stroll-come-stroll-go PAR  
 “He strolls around in the house everyday”.

(2) 他 每天 在 這 兩個 站牌 之間 晃來晃去 的  
*ta maitian zai zhe liangge zhan-pai zhi-jian huang-lai-huang-qu de*  
 He everyday Ex-V this two-Clas stops between stroll-come-stroll-go PAR  
 “He strolls between these two stops everyday”.

In (1), the action of strolling occurs at home, and it will be taken as happening between two points implicitly understood as long as they are within the walls of the house. In (2), the two points are the two explicitly stated bus stops.

When an action occurs back and forth, it is done more than once, i.e., repeatedly. This brings about the first meaning extension – a repetitive action of X/Y. Our experience with the world tells us that a repetitive action involves certainly a stretch of time. Thus, the durative aspect is also understood as part of the constructional meaning.

Up to this point, only concrete actions are used to illustrate the XLXQ/XLYQ construction. These concrete actions take place in a bounded space. With the emergence and the high frequency of the corpora extended meaning (62.6%) associated with this construction, the corpora contains numerous examples where abstract activities in time are involved instead of concrete actions occurring in bounded space e.g., *xiang(think)-lai(come)-xiang(think)-qu(go)*, 想來想去, “to think over.” That is, more and more expressions of this construction are used to denote somewhat abstract occurrences that get repeated.

### 3.2. *bu(not)-X-bu(not)-Y* (BXBY):

#### 3.2.1 Linguistic features

The X and Y of BXBY are monosyllabic verbs of two different pair-types. First of all, X and Y may be verbs of near synonyms as in *bu(not)-chu(stoop)-bu(not)-nao(yield)*, 不屈不撓, “neither surrendering nor yielding”, where verbs denoting similar concepts as in *bu(not)-wen(hear)-bu(not)-wen(ask)*, 不聞不問, “not paying attention to something/someone” when *wen* 聞 (hear) and *wen* 問 (ask) are two verbs of the same semantic field concerning functions related to some of our five senses; they may

also be two syllables that form a disyllabic verb as in *bu* (not)-*ming* (apparent)-*bu* (not)-*bai* (clear), 不明不白, “not clear for one to understand”, in which *ming-bai* 明白 means “to understand.” Secondly, X and Y can also be antonyms denoting opposite concepts, as in *bu* (not)-*zhong* (Chinese)-*bu* (not)-*xi* (western), 不中不西, “neither Chinese-like nor western-like.” X and Y are verbs zero-derived from the two opposite nouns *zhong* 中 “Chinese” and *xi* 西 “western.” Each zero-derived verb represents the typical X and Y of the second type BXBY.

### 3.2.2. Constructional meanings

Since X and Y in BXBY can be either synonyms or antonyms, in the broad senses of the two terms, the meanings of this construction vary accordingly. If X and Y are synonyms, the construction roughly means not X (or not XY, where XY together form a lexical verb). If X and Y are antonyms, the construction denotes a meaning of neither X nor Y. The constructional meanings of BXBY are, however, more complicated and intricate than the simple account given above. When X and Y are synonyms, the construction as a whole intensifies the degree to which the single lexical item of either X or Y expresses itself. For example, *bu-ming-bu-bai* 不明不白 “not clear for one to understand” is not simply *bu-mingbai* 不明白 “not understand.” Rather, it emphasizes the degree of being vague or unclear.

When X and Y are antonyms, the construction carries with it a meaning of more than “neither ... nor...” – it usually has a negative connotation associated with the construction itself. To comment on someone’s behavior as *bu-zhong-bu-xi* 不中不西, “neither Chinese-like nor western-like” is to impose a negative evaluation of the person. In addition, contexts play a significant role in the interpretation of the constructional idioms. An expression like *bu* (not)-*ji* (hasty)-*bu* (not)-*xu* (gentle), 不疾不徐, “not hastily” can either emphasize the degree to which one is not panicked, the degree to which one’s stays put and is in control as in (3), or be used in contexts where a negative connotation may be required as in (4).

(3) 不管 事情 多麼 緊急，他 處理 起來 總是 不疾不徐 地  
buguan shi-qing duome jin-ji, ta chu-li qi-lai zonshi bu-ji-bu-shu de

In spite of thing how urgent, he deal with ASP always not-fast-not-slow PAR  
 “No matter how urgent the situation is, he always deals with it calmly.”

(4) 都 已經 失火 了，他 走起路來 還是 不疾不徐 地  
 dou yijing shi-huo le, ta zuo-qi-lu-lai haishi bu-ji-bu-shu de  
 Already on fire ASP, he walk-ASP still not-hasty-not-gentle PAR  
 “Though the house is on fire, he still walks slowly and gently as if nothing had happened.”

The above serves as a good case to show that only syntactic and semantic properties alone cannot be sufficient to interpret the meaning associated with a constructional expression. Pragmatics or meaning in use also comes into play.

### 3.3. *bu(not)-X-er(yet)-Y* (BXEY):

#### 3.3.1. Linguistic features

The X and Y in the construction BXEY are monosyllabic verbs where X is taken as the normal condition under which the result of the action Y is brought about. In other words, the construction as a whole means, literally, “achieving Y without satisfying the condition X.” The occurrences of this constructional idiom are relatively few, which might have a lot to do with the non-colloquial nature of this expression. It reads more like classical Chinese than the everyday Chinese spoken or used nowadays.

#### 3.3.2. Constructional meanings

The construction BXEY nevertheless conveys an additional reading not derivable from the combination of its individual components alone. It carries with it an implied sense: it emphasizes the unexpectedness of Y’s being achieved. It is unexpected because the result is not within the speaker’s expectation, given the condition of X alone. To say someone *bu (not)-lao (work)-er (yet)-huo (gain)*, 不勞而獲, “to gain without working hard” is to express in a way the surprise one’s getting something done without making an effort is counter to one’s expectation, and an outcome as such is not to be taken for granted.

## 4. Cognitive Issues



How does the constructional meaning come about? What instills the meaning not inherent in the physically existing parts into the speaker's awareness? How does one grasp the "non-lexically filled elements" (Fillmore, Kay, O'Connor 1988) that are not already in the lexicon? What constitutes these non-lexically filled items? All these are questions to be addressed in the study of construction. These questions suggest indirectly that there should be something beyond the linguistic levels of syntax, semantics and pragmatics.

#### 4.1. Extended Meaning and Conceptualization

Even though we can locate the most prototypical meaning of the constructional idioms by uncovering their distribution and frequency in use, we realize that it is often the case that the frequently used sense cannot be derived compositionally.

Let me illustrate the point by the XLXQ/XLXQ construction. With the literal meaning of moving back and forth via the action of X or Y, we may conceptually view such actions as the happening of Xs or Ys within a certain bounded space, in which the "landmarks" (Lakoff 1987), specified or not, may be the starting and the ending points of such iterated movements. When the extended meaning of "repetitive actions" is at work, their occurrences are not limited to a bounded space. The focus is now shifted, via metaphor, from space to time. Because the same action happens in two opposite directions, "coming" *lai* 來 and "going" *qu* 去 over a period of time, the repetitive sense arises. Conceptualization makes it possible to "visualize" the actions from taking place within concrete bounded space to some abstract temporal frame. It is the process of conceptualization that renders possible all the constructional meanings.

So, regarding the question of why and how a speaker of the language derives the extended meanings associated with the construction, Jackendoff (1997) probably provided, via the discussion of the English *way*-construction, a likely answer. He considered an idiom involving the *way*-construction as listed in the lexicon with the conceptual structure "Subject goes along the Path designated" by its linguistic structure. The constructional idiom as a whole is viewed as equal to all the other lexical items or other ordinary idioms listed in the lexicon. In other words, a constructional idiom is taken as "a match of syntactic and conceptual structure that is not determined by the head verb" (Jackendoff 1997:173).

The meaning of any grammatical construction, like the semantic content of the lexicon or sentences, stands for a certain format of mental representation, namely the conceptual structure. Constructional idioms are productive because there are open slots in their conceptual structures – it is these slots that license variations on the construction and allow a number of examples out of fixed syntactic patterns to be generated. Jackendoff (1997) maintains that such productivity differentiates a constructional idiom from other idioms with fixed terminal elements.

#### 4.2. Extended Meaning and Co-occurrence Restriction

It is often the case that the constructional idioms may be highly grammaticalized, and are only used in the figurative sense. In my survey of the spoken corpus, *bu* (not)-*yi* (wing)-*er* (yet)-*fei* (fly), 不翼而飛, “to disappear without a trace” is seldom used in its literal sense of “to be able to fly without wings.” It is rather used to mean something is lost without an obvious reason, and therefore, unexpected. The thing that is lost is usually an object of one’s possession, an object that is impossible to have wings, not to mention its ability to fly. Consider (5):

- (5) 我的      皮包      居然      不翼而飛  
       *wode*    *pibao*    *juran*    *bu-yi-er-fei*  
       My      purse    should   not-wing-yet-fly  
       “My wallet should have been gone unknowingly.”

It is obvious that one’s purse cannot possibly have wings, thus the impossibility of the literal meaning expressed by *bu* (not)-*yi* (wing)-*er* (yet)-*fei* (fly), 不翼而飛. To put it differently, I maintain the view that there is a kind of co-occurrence restriction between the construction BXEY and its argument, an important characteristic of idiomatic expressions identified in Lien (1989). Some idiomatic expressions always co-occur with some fixed words or sets of lexical items.

What is worth noting is that the co-occurrence restriction only applies to the extended meanings of the construction. What implication this might have on our mental lexicon is an issue worth exploring. The forming of a construction dictates the construction to be stored in the speaker’s mental lexicon as one single unit. The more grammaticalized it becomes, the less likely it will be understood and processed in its

literal sense. The fact that the expression *bu* (not)-*yi* (wing)-*er* (yet)-*fei* (fly), 不翼而飛 is now used in contexts where no wings or the action of flying will be even applied is one typical example demonstrating this point. Syntactic behavior of the construction also serves as an additional piece of evidence toward the constructional claim. It seems to suggest that after a construction is formed, it is stored as one single unit – one single lexical item. This seems to explain the syntactic behavior of the following:

Let's illustrate this point via the XLXQ/XLYQ construction. XLXQ/XLYQ is used intransitively in spite of the transitivity of the X and Y, as in (6).

- (6) 錢            算來算去            還是            算            不            清楚  
*Qian suan-lai-suan-qu hai shi suan bu qingchu*  
 Money count-come-count-go still count not clear  
 “The amount of money is not right though we count it over and over again”.

(7) is, however, not grammatical; neither is (8):

- (7) \*算錢來算錢去  
 \**suan-qian-lai-sua-qian-qu*  
 count-money-come-count-money-go  
 "to count the money over and over again"

- (8) \*算來算去            錢  
 \**suan-lai-suan-qu qian*  
 count-come-count-go money  
 "to count the money over and over again"

Even though *qian* 錢 “money” is the object of the action “to count”, it is impossible to place it right after the occurrence of *suan* 算 “to count” now that *suan-lai-suan-qu* 算來算去 “to count it again and again” forms a constructional idiom<sup>5</sup>. Similarly, the

<sup>5</sup> Similarly, even though the *jie-guo* 結果 “outcome” may be the object of the verb *huo* 獲 “to gain” in *bu(not)-lau(work)-er(yet)-huo(gain)* 不勞而獲 “to gain without working hard,” the example \**bu-lau-er-huo-jie-guo* 不勞而獲結果 “to gain without working hard” is not a grammatical one. I can however make the construction *bu-lau-er-huo* 不勞而獲 into an adjectival, and say *bu-lau-er-huo de jie-guo* 不勞而獲的結果 “the outcome gained without working hard.” This may serve as additional evidence to illustrate the point that *bu-lau-er-huo* 不勞而獲 is grammaticalized as one single syntactic unit

object *qian* 錢 “money” cannot be placed right after the construction, as in (8) because the construction is used as an intransitive verb, as shown in (6). Furthermore, the cooccurrence restriction of *qian* 錢 to the construction *suan-lai-suan-qu* 算來算去 makes *qian* 錢 an implicit but understood object in the sense that (8) is not possible, but a topicalized “*qian, suan-lai-suan-qu de*” 錢, 算來算去的 is all right.

#### 4.3. Grammaticalization as Continuum

Recent works have suggested the idea that idioms differ in the extent to which they are compositional or analyzable (Nunberg, Sag & Wasow 1994; Gibbs 1995). Most of the linguistic models fail to maintain the fact that idiomaticity itself is in fact a matter of degree. It is likely that some idioms or idiomatic expressions carry rather conventionalized meanings whereas others are noncompositional.

The three constructional idioms discussed above represent different types of form-function relationship – a relationship differing in terms of the degree to which they are grammaticalized. This continuum view of constructional idioms implies on one end we have idioms whose meanings are quite fixed and whose occurrences are rare. For instance, for the BXEY construction only 65 tokens (or 24 types) are retrieved from the databases. And on the other end of the continuum, we have constructional idioms that are productive and display great diversity in their constituent composition. The XLXQ/XLYQ construction is a good case in point: 115 tokens (or 56 types). The third type, BXBY, falls somewhere in the middle of this continuum (114 tokens or 22 types)<sup>6</sup>.

In other words, constructional idioms differ from one another in terms of their degree of productivity. One can easily improvise, subject to their specific semantic

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<sup>6</sup> These statistics are taken from Chen (2001). The calculation was done under my supervision during the time when she wrote her MA thesis. This statistics provides additional evidence for the compositional vs. non-compositional distribution. And following Nunberg, Sage and Wasow’s definition (1994), such cases in my paper as 算來算去 *suan* (count)-*lai* (come)-*suan* (count)-*qu* (go) “to count repeatedly” are more compositional than 高來高去 *gao* (high)-*lai* (come)-*gao* (high)-*qu* (go) “to move back and forth on a high plane/space.” By the same token, cases such as 不聞不問 *bu* (not)-*wen* (hear)-*bu* (not)-*wen* (ask) “not to pay attention to someone/something” and 不勞而獲 *bu* (not)-*lao* (work)-*er* (yet)-*huo* (gain) “to gain without working hard” are more compositional than 不中不西 *bu* (not)-*zhong* (Chinese)-*bu* (not)-*xi* (western) “neither Chinese-like nor western-like.”

restrictions, examples of the more productive constructions and come up with examples that are more acceptable to the speakers of the language. For example, one can say (9):

- (9) 他 老是 錢來錢去 的， 真 叫 人 討厭。  
*ta laushi qian-come-qian-gu de, zhen jiau ren tau-yan*  
 He always money-come-money-go PAR, very make people disgust  
 “He always talks about money, which really disgusts us”.

On the other hand, examples of the less productive, or more frozen types of construction are harder to make up. In fact, the syntactic patterning of a given constructional idiom might even impose an extra load on the processing of relevant linguistic examples. An interesting case in point is the expression *bu* (not)-*de* (get)-*er* (yet)-*zhi* (know), 不得而知, “not able to know.” If the BXEY is stored in one’s mental lexicon as one single entry, then the action denoted by X, acquiring “*de*”得 “to get”, in this case, should be visualized as the condition for the result of the action of knowing “*zhi*” 知 “to know.” Interestingly, not a single instance of *bu-de-er-zhi* 不得而知 from the databases expresses the meaning as such. Rather, it is used to mean “still unknown” as in:

- (10) 這個 工程 到底 需要 多少 錢 外界 不得而知  
*zhe-ge gung-chen daudi shuyiau duoshau qian wai-jie bu-de-er-zhi*  
 This project actually need how-much money outsiders not-get-yet-know  
 “Outsiders are not able to know how much money this project actually needs.”

One can omit the character *er* 而 “yet” from the construction and get the correct interpretation by simply processing it as *bude zhi* 不得知. In the case of “*bude zhi*” 不得知, *bude* 不得 should be taken as one lexical item, with the meaning of “not able to; cannot.” This seems to suggest a good piece of evidence in which BXEY is already grammaticalized as one single construction. Being a construction, it assigns automatically the constructional constituent *er* 而 “yet” into the phrase that partially meets the required pattern of its structural description.

This continuum view of the constructional idioms coincides with our

understanding of grammar. That is, grammar is emergent from language use, determined in a way by the usage patterns and by how frequent it is used (Hopper 2001). In other words, syntax is simply a result of “frozen pragmatics” (DuBois 2000).

## 5. Conclusion

I have shown in this paper that a satisfactory account of the structure, meaning, and use of linguistic patterns requires recourse to construction-particular semantic, pragmatic and syntactic properties. I conclude that the data validate the CG approach, in which the grammar includes as minimal symbolic units syntactically complex forms having idiosyncratic meanings and highly specialized communicative functions.

While constructions are repositories of idiomatic information, a constructional analysis of the sort provided above acknowledges a great deal of regularity: constructions of the type described are highly productive, and their formal and semantic properties are strongly motivated. In accordance with Goldberg (1995), I presume that a constructional account is indicated in situations where gestalt-like properties attributable to sentence structures obviate reductionist accounts based on the possible realizations of underspecified verbal subcategorization frames. Among these gestaltlike properties are conditions on use. Constructions are therefore an irreplaceable component of grammatical organization.

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## 從結構語法的角度看中文四字詞

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雖然語言中有絕大部分來自於慣用語句，但慣用語在語言學上是個棘手的議題--我們無法僅由字面上得知其真實的意涵。近來由於結構語法學的興起，我們漸漸意識到，慣用語在語法、語意及語用上的非預測性應求諸於結構本身。基於這樣的理念，本篇文章以中文四字詞“X-來-X/Y-去”(XLXQ or XLYQ), “不-X-不-Y”(BXBY), 及“不-X-而-Y”(BXEY) 為研究題材，提出四字詞的存在代表了語言中某種心理的呈現，亦即認知結構的理念。這三種四字詞反映出不同程度的語法化現象。經由研究這三種四字詞的語言特性及結構意涵，得知其意義不僅來自於其組成的詞素。句法，語意甚至語用層次的知識都須納入語言分析中，以求得字面之外，得自於“非字詞成分”的語意來源。

關鍵詞: 認知語言學，結構語法，慣用語句