

Regular and Irregular Aspects of Grammatical Constructions

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This study focuses on two grammatical forms, the Incredulity Response Construction and the je vidět / vidieť construction. By analyzing their form and usage, I intend to weigh in on the debate concerning the importance of regularity and unpredictability inherent in grammatical constructions. The debate, initiated by Chomsky's dismissal of idiosyncratic forms as peripheral, has gained momentum especially in recent years, with cognitive linguists uncovering more unpredictable aspects of language forms and claiming that language is primarily idiosyncratic, not regular. As a result, current cognitive linguistic descriptions of constructions highlight what is unpredictable and all but dismiss the regular aspects of constructions. The present study argues that the two sides—the predictable and the form-specific—coexist and thus have obvious implications for models of mental representations of language forms. By extrapolation, a recognition of a balance of the regular and irregular properties is relevant to our theorizing on how speakers learn and use constructions: just as the presence of idiosyncratic properties makes it necessary to memorize special cases of forms, the presence of regular properties can be assumed to ease the learning burden. An accurate description of any construction should attempt to detail both those aspects that can be predicted by rule and those that are endemic to a given construction and must be memorized.

Keywords: *grammatical construction, idiosyncrasy, regularity, IRC, je vidět / vidieť construction*

1. Introduction

The notions of irregularity, idiosyncrasy and unpredictability have received widely different treatments in major theoretical frameworks. They were not given much room in Chomsky's generative approach, interested as it was mainly in those phenomena—elegantly referred to as 'core'—that could be accounted for by means of a small number of general rules. Any idiosyncratic elements were famously dismissed as periphery, an area conceived to house "phenomena that result from historical accident, dialect mixture, personal idiosyncrasies, and the like" (Chomsky 1995: 20).

Cognitive linguistics, on the other hand, has taken the idiosyncratic and irregular as the essence of linguistic competence. First, peripheral phenomena have turned out to be too numerous to dismiss, and as Culicover and Jackendoff (2005: 25) put it, "'periphery' tends to become a tempting dumping ground for any irregularity one's theory cannot at the moment explain." There has been a growing realization that periphery is not just a minor appendage to an elegant core, but the very substance of what language really is. Authors working in cognitive linguistic frameworks have begun to seriously consider the hypothesis that a solid command of a language involves, first and foremost, knowing an immense number of unruly facts, idiomatic forms that cannot be accounted for by straightforward generalizations. As Taylor put it,

the idiomatic reaches into every nook and cranny of a language, so much so that it might not be outrageous to claim that just about everything in a language is idiomatic to a

greater or lesser degree and in some way or other. If anything, it is the fully regular, the fully compositional, that is exceptional (Taylor 2012: 71-72).

This new belief has also affected how the study of language is conducted. For example, in Construction Grammar (CxG), all language forms are treated as grammatical constructions defined as “learned pairings of form with semantic or discourse function, including morphemes or words, idioms, partially lexically filled and fully general phrasal patterns” (Goldberg 2006: 5). What cognitive linguists emphasize is that the form-meaning pairings have to be learned because of their inherent unpredictability. It is claimed that memorization from input is necessary even for those constructions that turn out to be “fully regular ... and thus predictable” (Goldberg 2006: 12-13).

These two approaches, Generative Grammar and Construction Grammar, are being singled out here because they represent two extreme opposites: while generative grammarians dismiss what is irregular, construction grammarians are not very interested in the regular. These opposing attitudes are illustrated below, first in the discussion of a construction (the Incredulity Response Construction, IRC) claimed by various constructionist authors to be predominantly irregular. I intend to demonstrate that an excessive emphasis on the idiosyncratic has the undesirable consequence of obscuring what are otherwise perfectly regular properties. I then turn to another construction (*je vidět / vidieť* construction), which has been claimed to be a fairly regular instantiation of common patterns found in a language. Here too, although its regular properties are evident, the construction exhibits unusual characteristics that cannot be accounted for by straightforward reference to general rules. Put another way, depending on how they are looked at, and crucially, who looks at them, the regularities and idiosyncrasies in question reveal themselves in different proportions: those interested in regularities predictably stress regularities and authors concerned with the idiomaticity of language focus their attention on why the constructions need to be learned.

In what follows, I attempt to balance the two approaches in analyzing the IRC and the *je vidět / vidieť* construction. The reason behind this choice is that these two forms represent examples of linguistic structures that, at first glance, elicit rather foreseeable reactions: they are held up as perfect examples of either extreme idiosyncrasy (the IRC by construction grammarians) or of forms built around regular patterns commonly found in a given language (*je vidět / vidieť*). However, upon closer reflection, both reveal properties inconsistent with the preliminary description. These properties are identified below based on examples of attested usage of the two constructions, most of which are sentences taken from works of fiction in a number of languages (English, Slovak, Czech, Ukrainian and Polish). Some examples used below are constructed but each has been verified by native speakers.

2. The Incredulity Response Construction (IRC)

2.1 Irregularities of form and meaning

In this section, I consider a grammatical construction studied by Akmajian (1984), who referred to its instantiations as *Mad Magazine Sentences*. Uses of the construction such as those in (172) have been held up as examples of idiosyncrasy of both form and meaning. They feature an oblique subject followed by a non-finite verb phrase, typically realized as an infinitive and, sometimes, as a present participle.

- (1) a. *What? Him, work? That's a good one!*
 b. *Me, mow the lawn? Yeah, right.*
 c. *Him, be mature? Good luck.*
 d. *Them, working together?*

As these examples illustrate, the construction is used to express emphatic incredulity. More specifically, the construction serves to question the validity of a comment made in preceding discourse:

- (2) -*You worry about yourself.*
 -*What? Me worry? (Stephen Coonts, *Deep Black: Biowar*)*

Taylor describes it as a means of dismissing a preceding proposition as “absurd, unrealistic, preposterous” (Taylor 2012: 86). In a pre-CxG study of the construction in French, Bally (1905: 8) characterizes the communicative content of the construction as that of surprise and indignation.

Not only is the meaning portrayed as being unique, but as Barðdal and Eythórssón (2012) argue,

...the semantics of the construction as a whole cannot be derived from either the semantics of the parts or from their form. This particular semantics of disbelief towards a proposition cannot in any way be derived from the fact that there is an oblique argument as a subject, a verb in the infinitive, and a complement, e.g. a noun phrase or a prepositional phrase (Barðdal & Eythórssón 2012: 277).

As far as the form is concerned, Michaelis remarks that the IRC “owes little or nothing to the ordinary English syntax of predication and subordination” (Michaelis 2010: 169). Similarly, Goldberg and Casenhiser (2008) say:

The form of the construction does not obey general rules of English. For one thing, there is no verb and yet the expression stands alone as a full utterance and conveys an entire proposition. In addition, the accusative case marking is normally used for objects, and yet the initial NP would seem to act as a subject or topic argument (cf. *He's a trapeze artist?!*) (Goldberg & Casenhiser 2008: 344).

Indeed, a glance at other languages shows that there too, the construction exhibits unpredictable properties. In Slovak¹ (3-4), although the subject is realized in nominative case (unlike the oblique subject in English), it is separated from the non-finite verb by means of the conjunction *a* (‘and’). This is also found in German (5).

- (3) “*Rosalie, Rosalie.*” *Pobavene krútil hlavou. “Tak začneš pracovať?”*
 “*Ja a pracovať?!?”* (*Kam čert nesmie, pošle Rosalie*, a fanfiction novel
<https://www.stmivani.eu/>)
 ‘Rosalie, Rosalie. He shook his head, amused. So you’ll start work?
 Me work?!’

¹ I wish to thank Livia Lakatošová for her help with data from Slovak.

- (4) *Ja a klamať?*
I and to-lie?
- (5) *Oh Gott, ich und arbeiten gehen?* (Hardy Manthe, *Die Zeitreisende*)
Oh God, I and to-work to-go?
'Oh God, me and go to work?'

There should be little doubt that in these cases the English IRC and its equivalents in other languages harbor elements of irregularity and that poses a challenge for the language user, who has to learn its form and use by attending to input. The structure to be mastered does not seem to follow straightforwardly from any obvious general rules specifiable in generative fashion. This, however, is not to say that *everything* about the surface form is hopelessly idiosyncratic and thus impossible to master by recourse to any general principles. Upon closer inspection, it is possible to spot aspects of the IRC that are in fact motivated by its function. Also, as I show below, one aspect of its form, though apparently idiosyncratic, actually does follow from the general principles of English grammar.

2.2 Regularities of form

2.2.1 Form of the verb

At first glance, the non-finite form of the verb appears rather extraordinary and not readily explainable. However, Szcześniak and Pachol (2015) show that this fairly unusual form of the verb makes sense if it is viewed as an iconic means of suggesting a disruption of the subject-predicate flow. As stressed before, the function of the IRC is to express incredulity, which can be taken to result from a sense of incongruence holding between the subject and the predicate. One way of indicating a syntacto-cognitive dissonance triggered by juxtaposing an agent and an implausible action is to suspend subject-verb agreement. For this argument to hold, it would have to be demonstrated that any uninflected form of the verb is possible in the construction. This is precisely the case: In English, the only real constraint is that the verb should be nonfinite.

- (6) a. *Him, cooking? Yeah, right.*
b. *Her, bungee jump? Are you out of your gourd?*

In Slovak (7a), Czech (7b) and Polish (7c), the verb can appear in gerundive form or even as a cognate noun:

- (7) a. *Oni a upratovať / upratovanie? To si robíte srandu!*
They and to-tidy up / tidying? Then si_{-REFL} do kidding!
'Them tidy up? You must be kidding'
- b. *Babička a lyžovať / lyžování / lyže?*
Granny and to-ski / skiing / ski_{S-NOUN}?
'Granny ski?'
- c. *Ja i grać / granie / gra w koszykówkę?*

I and to-play / playing / a game of basketball?
'Me play basketball?'

Another way to put it is that the nonfinite form of the verb is motivated by the need to express the activity in the abstract, not its particular instance performed by the subject. The speaker rejects the possibility of the subject being capable of the activity, hence the uninflected form. This way the subject and the activity considered in the abstract "are placed together in such a way that the connexion between them is at it were brushed aside at once as impossible" (Jespersen 1954: 372).

2.2.2 Oblique subject

The oblique argument in the subject position in the English IRC (*Me, remember passwords?*) has attracted much attention by researchers who held it up as a perfect example of idiosyncrasy. Yet the oblique subject turns out to be less bizarre when it is taken into account that it occurs without a finite predicate. When a finite predicate is missing, the accusative case is the default in English (Radford 2009: 216): Subjects with nonfinite predicates (8a) or stand-alone subjects (8b) do not appear in the nominative.

- (8) a. For her to say that is huge!
b. Who wants to go first? / Me!

Interestingly, the same is the case in Danish (9), where the same accusative default applies to subjects without finite predicates. Therefore, predictably, in Danish too, the subject in the IRC takes the accusative form:

- (9) *Hvad, mig, lave mad? Jeg kan ikke engang lave rørag!*
What, me, cook? I couldn't even make scrambled eggs!

On the other hand, languages that do not apply the accusative to subjects without tensed predicates do not do so in the IRC either. There is no record of nominative-default languages that would feature an oblique subject in their IRC. It is therefore safe to assume that the oblique subject is not a property of the construction itself, but a consequence of more general rules of the English syntax.

Additional evidence in favor of this view of the oblique subject comes, ironically enough, from English, whose accusative default nature is a relatively recent development. Jespersen shows that the shift from nominative to accusative default occurred after the 18th century and, predictably, uses of the construction from that period can be found in works of fiction with nominative subjects:

- (10) Defoe G 44: *Why, his grandfather was a tradesman! he a gentleman!*
Austen P 333: *She a beauty! I should as soon call her mother a wit.* (Jespersen 1954: 372)

An interesting example of a subject whose form can be taken to result from questioning its relation to the rest of the sentence comes from Japanese.² Here the function of a lexical item

² Example provided by Adrian Mitoraj and Ryoichi Kato.

(such as a pronoun) is signaled by a particle (such as *-wa* often used to mark the subject position), but in a Japanese equivalent (11) of the IRC, the pronoun *ore* ('I') would most naturally occur without a particle, as if to suggest that the speaker denies a link between the pronoun and what follows it (the link is normally obvious from verb inflections and argument positions, arranged to show who is doing what to whom).

- (11) *なんだって? 俺? 嘘つき?*
 Nan da-tte? Ore? Usotsuki?
 What da-COPULA-tte-PARTICLE I liar
 'What? Me, a liar?'

One final point is in order considering the form of English subjects in general. As one anonymous reviewer has pointed out, the range of subjects also includes possessive forms found with gerunds (*their smoking, his whining*, etc.). It must be noted that gerunds represent a phenomenon transitional between verbs and nouns. In terms of the external syntax of *-ing* nominalizations, they are "obviously and unambiguously nominal in character" (Taylor 1996: 270). They function as subjects and objects, they can take genitive heads (*The president's handling of the issue*), and they tend to be open to pluralization (*sightings, killings*). On the other hand, phrase internally, they are "rather more verbal in character" (Taylor 1996: 270), as they allow direct object complements (12).

- (12) *his handling the new Congress campaign* (Brian Stoddart, *A People's Collector*)

The main point is that such possessive subjects are not idiosyncratic, since event participants associated with nouns are normally realized in possessive form, as in *our existence, the bullet's trajectory, Lincoln's assassination* (Langacker 2008: 505). The choice of the form of a subject is a fairly direct consequence of general rules of syntax.

2.2.3 Conjunction

The use of the conjunction 'and' between the subject and the verb (in languages like Slovak or German) may appear to be an obvious irregularity, but it turns out to be much less idiosyncratic in light of the function that the construction is known to serve. That is, it can be argued to compound the separation between the subject and predicate. Below, the use of the conjunction is illustrated by examples from an additional three languages:

- (13) a. *Hij en lezen?* (Dutch)
 He and read?
 'Him, read?'
- b. *Mida? Mina ja varastan su rahakoti? Kuidas sa julged?* (Estonian)
 What? I and steal your wallet? How you dare?
 'What? Me steal your wallet? How dare you?'
- c. *Tak, jasne! On i pracować.* (Polish)
 Yes sure He and work
 'Yes, sure! Him, work.'

While *and* normally serves to conjoin, here its unusual position makes it look more like a wedge between the two parts of the construction. This counter-intuitive effect is due to the fact that the operation of conjunction should typically involve two elements of a comparable status (e.g. noun with noun, clause with clause, etc.), and here attempting to conjoin two conspicuously disparate elements results in juxtaposition, which highlights the contrast.

2.2.4 *Echoing*

One final trace of a linguistic preference for regularity normally overlooked in cognitive linguistic analyses of the IRC is echoing. As one anonymous reviewer pointed out, the wording of the construction is a reflection of an utterance made in the preceding discourse, either by the speaker or her interlocutor. Since the very purpose of the IRC is to question the validity of a proposition introduced earlier, sentences built around the construction do not normally appear abruptly, unprompted by any clear trigger. They are invited by overt statements or at the very least by implicatures deduced from utterances produced prior to an IRC reaction. In any case, whenever the construction is employed, there is a background proposition, a sort of foil on which an IRC sentence is modeled.

Additionally, as the reviewer pointed out, what is copied from a prior utterance is not necessarily a subject and its predicate, but in some cases it can be the predicate and its complement:

- (14) *Chytia ho ľahko. -Jeho a chytiť!*
 Catch-3RD.PL him easily him and to-catch
 ‘They (will) catch him easily. -Catch, him!?’

As example (14) shows, the formal match between a IRC sentence and its foil is not exact, but the differences can be explained in terms of general rules of Slovak grammar: The object of the verb appears sentence-initially (a position dictated perhaps by the IRC preference for event participants before verbs). This initial position accounts for the form *jeho* instead of *ho* (found in the foil sentence), but the form *ho* cannot occur in stressed positions. The sentence could echo its foil more closely (*Chytiť! Jeho!*), and here too the strong form of the pronoun *jeho* is selected for purposes of stress, which in itself is a regular and rather natural device used to highlight the logical contrast that the construction serves to convey. The general point is that some of the irregularities found in the construction are far from being completely intractable, and certainly not as idiosyncratic as they are claimed to be in cognitive linguistic accounts.

3. The form and use of the *je vidět / vidiet* construction

3.1 *Regular aspects of form*

This section turns to a construction found in Slavic languages, where it appears in comparable form, although it exhibits language-specific peculiarities in each. Perhaps the first mention of the construction under consideration focuses on its Czech variant analyzed in Bělič (1954, 1969), where it is referred to as a “construction of the type *je vidět Sněžka / je vidět Sněžku*” (Bělič 1969: 37). Here I use the name ‘*je vidět* construction’ for short.

Unlike the IRC, the *je vidět* construction appears regular enough. Its form 0 follows an otherwise common Czech pattern VERB + INFINITIVE found in expressions like *zůstat ležet*

‘remain lie-INF’ or *viděl ho utíkat* ‘saw him escape-INF’. This is how the construction is presented in Dušková (2004), where it is treated as a fairly regular and predictable example of Czech subject complement constructions.

- (15) *Je vidět štít.*
 Is to-see summit
 ‘The summit can be seen.’

Also regular is the tense flexibility of the copula *být* ‘to be’, such that sentences featuring the construction can appear in any tense or mood, just like any regular Czech sentence. The following are expressions of the proposition *The summit can be seen* and in (16e) *Let the ugly truth be seen*.

- (16) a. *Bylo vidět štít.* (Past)
 b. *Je vidět štít.* (Present)
 c. *Bude vidět štít.* (Future)
 d. *Bylo by vidět štít.* (Conditional)
 e. *Ať / nechť je vidět holá pravda.* (Imperative)

The form of the construction in Slovak is the same. Here too the verb *být* ‘to be’ is followed by the infinitive *vidieť* (17), and it is available in all the expected tense constructions.

- (17) ...*na brehu jazera bolo vidieť kríže* (János Gáspár, *Slovenská čítanka*)
 On bank-LOC lake-GEN was to-see crosses
 ‘On the bank of the lake one could see crosses’

3.2 Irregular aspects of form

However, upon closer examination, the form of the construction turns out to be rather idiosyncratic and not so predictable from more general rules of Czech grammar: The language user needs to learn that the fixed element *být* ‘to be’ is only allowed in third person:

- (18) a. *Na nebe je vidět mraky.*
 In sky is to-see clouds
 ‘In the sky clouds can be seen.’
 b. **Na nebe jsem / jsi / jsme / jste vidět mraky.*
 In sky am / are-2SG / ARE-1PL / ARE-2PL to-see clouds

Then it should be stressed that as Bělič’s name of the construction suggests, the verb can take an object in either nominative (*Sněžka*) or accusative (*Sněžku*). It is also interesting to stress the inclusion of fairly fixed perception verbs in the construction. Apart from the two most frequent *slyšet* and *vidět* ‘hear’ and ‘see’, the construction is also attested with *cítit* ‘feel’, *poznat* ‘recognize’ and *rozumět* ‘understand’. Crucially, many perception verbs are not found in use (e.g. *pozorovat* ‘observe’: **Je pozorovat Sněžku* ‘Sněžka can be observed’). The degree of unpredictability becomes more evident when data from other Slavic languages are

considered. At first glance, the Polish variant of the construction looks like a structural calque of the Czech and Slovak equivalents:

- (19) ...*ledwo go było widać*. (Stefan Żeromski, *Ludzie bezdomni*)
barely he-ACC was to-see
'...he was barely visible'

However, there is one striking difference, namely the fact that where Czech and Slovak use 'general purpose' *see* and *hear* verbs, Polish employs a specialized form *widać* related to the verb *widzieć* 'to see' (a cognate of the Czech / Slovak pair *vidět / vidieť*), but *widać* is not used in infinitive function outside this construction (and by the same token, the verb *widzieć* cannot be used in it).

Similarly, in Russian³, the copula is followed not by infinitives, but by the adverb *видно* (*vidno*, lit. 'clear, bright') or *слышно* (*slyshno*, roughly 'audibly') derived out of the verbs *видеть* (*videt'* 'to see') and *слышать* (*slyshat'* 'to hear'). In Ukrainian too, the adverbs *видно* (*vydno*) or *чутно* (*chutno*, roughly 'audibly') are used:

- (20) ...*було видно все дерева в садку*. (Taras Shevchenko, *Mykola Dzheria*)
...bulo vydno vse dereva v sadku
...was clear all trees in orchard
'All trees could be seen in the orchard'

- (21) ...*було чутно шум*. (Vladislav Ivchenko, *Khymery dykoho polya*)
...bulo chutno shum
...was audible noise
'Noise could be heard'

The Ukrainian construction comes with an extra twist in that sentences expressing audible perception are possible with either the adverb *чутно* or, like in Czech and Slovak, with the infinitive *чутти* (*chuty* 'to hear').

- (22) *Було видно, було чутти / Як реве ревучий*. (Taras Shevchenko, *Zapovit*)
Bulo vydno, bulo chuty / yak reve revuchy
Was clear, was to-hear / how roars roaring
'One could see, one could hear / how the roaring roared'

Similarly, in Slovak, apart from the form *vidieť* 'to see', the construction also features the adverbial *vidno*, but conspicuously not a corresponding adverbial for expressing auditory perception.

The discussion of this brief sample should conclude with the observation that the irregularities found in Polish, Russian and Ukrainian are not beyond any constraints. While the complements of the copula may seem exceptional, especially compared to the Czech and Slovak infinitives, they can be considered small pockets of regularity in themselves. As the examples presented here show, the *see-hear* complements (the most frequent complements of the copula) come in pairs of mutually related elements. Polish does not use Czech/Slovak-style

³ Russian and Ukrainian examples provided by Monika Halaś.

infinitives and instead employs special-purpose forms, but it does so consistently so the complements *widać / słychać* form a tandem sharing the same suffix. In the same vein, the Russian members of the pair *видно* and *слышно* both have adverbial suffixes, which is also true of Ukrainian (with the proviso that it allows an infinitive complement *чутти*, perhaps under the influence of Slovak).

4. A balance of the regular and irregular

The significance of the peculiarities of the constructions discussed above is that they can be expected to affect the learning process. The exceptional facts cannot be ‘figured out’ from the logic of Slovak or Czech grammar. An important point stressed by cognitive linguists (e.g. Bybee 2010, Goldberg 2006) is that language knowledge follows from language use (so called usage-based approach): a person has no choice but to closely attend to input, a rich source of details of form and meaning which are not always predictable from the general rules of grammar. Thus, in the last three decades or so, cognitive linguistic research has departed from the generative preoccupation with regularity and its hope of explaining how children learning their mother tongue may acquire more material than they can encounter in input. As a consequence, opinions like the one expressed by Pinker (1995) below are now treated as implausible, if not naïve:

...the child would set parameters on the basis of a few examples from the parental input, and the full complexity of a language will ensue when those parameterized rules interact with one another and with universal principles (Pinker 1995: 173).

This sentiment is evident in many cognitive linguistic discussions. For example, Taylor (2012: 68) looks at the usage patterns of a number of individual words and identifies unexpected usage patterns that he says “cannot be predicted from the categorization of the word as a noun, verb, or whatever, in association with syntactic rules operating over these categories.” He goes on to conclude that “knowledge of a language can *only* be attained through exposure to actual usage events, whose particularities are noted and laid down in memory” (ibid., my italics).

One important consequence of this conviction is the cognitive treatment of each construction separately and dismissal of any regular correspondences that were previously claimed to hold between constructions. Thus, while the active and the passive voice constructions were traditionally treated as related constructions, Hilpert (2014: 42) claims that it is “difficult to maintain the idea of a grammatical rule that systematically links both constructions,” and he goes on to stipulate that “the Passive is a construction in its own right, a generalisation that speakers have to learn as an independent unit of grammatical knowledge.” Similarly, in her critique of transformational approaches to diathesis alternations (e.g. *Mina sent Mel a book* being derived from *Mina sent a book to Mel*), Goldberg (2002: 327) expresses the view that “it is profitable to look beyond alternations and to consider each surface pattern on its own terms.” She also looks at the ditransitive alternation and explains that one should focus mainly on finding generalizations applying to each surface pattern separately, and not point out any correspondences between them. Perhaps the most extreme example of this ‘separationist’ approach to language forms is Taylor’s (2012) proposal that morphological derivations and any etymological relations between lexical items are, from the language user’s point of view, irrelevant. He argues that because “Not everyone is aware of the historical

development of the words of their language” (2012: 230), knowledge of relations between words has no bearing on the speaker’s ability to use them. He explains, “observing how a speaker uses a word would give us no clue as to how she judges the relatedness of its meanings. ... whether she perceives them to be related is immaterial” (ibid.).

Of course, putting too much faith in correspondences, regularity and predictability is a risk, and users most likely approach the learning challenge allowing for some potential unpredictability, remaining open and receptive to exceptions. Still, it makes sense to entertain predictions about how a construction like the *je vidět / vidiet’* may behave with ‘audible perception’ meanings, based on its behavior with the corresponding ‘visual perception’ function, even if such predictions have to be revised in some cases. Language users may need to confirm their expectations for each use individually, but that is more helpful than discovering all the details of their use in the two constructions completely from scratch, without any preconceived expectations. Learning new facts cannot happen without some reliance on one’s prior knowledge, based on input alone. Indeed, the dismissal of prior knowledge is baffling, given how diverse its kinds are. A good example of how much background knowledge is enlisted while handling novelty can be found in Štekauer (2005):

“the (degree of) acceptability/non-acceptability and, consequently, meaning predictability/unpredictability (conceived of as a cline) depend on the interaction of linguistic knowledge (knowledge of the meanings of morphemes, including affixes, knowledge of productive Onomasiological, Word-Formation, and Morphological Types, knowledge of acceptable Onomasiological Structure Rules, etc.) and extra-linguistic knowledge (including knowledge of real and unreal, tangible and intangible objects of extra-linguistic reality, and their place in the narrower and broader system of relations and interactions)” (Štekauer 2005: 60).

5. Conclusions

My goal here has been to show that in their opposing stances, both generative grammarians and construction grammarians could be said to be guilty of the same mistakes. While the former unfairly dismissed the irregular and the idiomatic, the latter underestimate the significance of regular aspects of language. The constructionist ambition to uncover peculiar aspects of constructions has prompted some authors not only to overemphasize the idiomatic, disregarding the regular, but also to misidentify what is regular as being idiosyncratic and unexplainable, as was the case of the oblique subject in the English IRC.

The mistake of extreme versions of the cognitive linguistic focus on idiosyncrasy and the consequent emphasis on learning from input is that little attention is paid to how language learners bring their knowledge of the system to the task of learning new language forms. It should not be too much of an exaggeration to claim that in their preoccupation with the peculiar minutia and dismissal of regularities, cognitive authors seem to be approaching language as a system with no rules, only exceptions.

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