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Cognitive Grammar Interpretation of the "X+Be+Being+Adj." Construction

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ABSTRACT
From the perspective of Cognitive Grammar and following the constructional approach, this paper analyzes the formal and semantic features of the "X+Be+Being+Adj." construction with the assistance of the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). It also explores the formation mechanism of the construction's meaning by integrating Langacker's profile-base prominence model. The findings show that "X+Be+Being+Adj." is a typical construction, and semantic coercion is the core factor for realizing its constructional meaning. Semantic coercion follows the prominence principle and is implemented through the perceptual organization pattern of figure-ground.

KEYWORDS
X+Be+Being+Adj.; Corpus; Construction; Semantic coercion; Profile-base

1 Introduction

The "X+Be+Being+Adj." construction has a long usage history, with unique formal structure and distinct semantic features attracting many scholars. Previous studies mainly focused on the types of adjectives in this structure and its pragmatic functions, but rarely conducted in-depth research on the semantic generation mechanism from a cognitive perspective. Moreover, the corpora used in related studies were often limited in scope or lacked scientific rigor. Against this background, this paper adopts a constructional approach, takes corpus data as supplementary evidence, and combines the profile-base prominence principle to provide an in-depth cognitive explanation for the formal features, semantic characteristics, and semantic formation mechanism of the "X+Be+Being+Adj." structure, expecting to offer valuable insights for the teaching of this specific syntactic pattern.

2 Literature review on the "X+Be+Being+Adj." structure and construction theory

With the increasing usage frequency of the "X+Be+Being+Adj." structure, scholars have studied it from different perspectives: Xiong [1] analyzed the types of adjectives in this structure; Ying [2] explored its implicature from a pragmatic perspective, arguing that the structure conveys two scenarios (the logical subject's intentional action driven by subjective will, and the logical subject's trait display in an immediate or specific context); Alexander [3] pointed out that this structure represents a temporary and intentional action; Wei and Gao [4] integrated Appraisal Theory with Cognitive Construction Grammar, used COCA as the corpus source and analyzed its evaluative meaning and pragmatic motivations.

A review of existing studies reveals three limitations: (1) Most studies focused on the components of the structure (e.g., classifying adjectives as static or dynamic) instead of regarding the structure as an integrated "form-meaning pairing" to explore its semantic features and formation mechanism; (2) The selection of corpora was flawed (e.g., using non-authentic data or incomplete examples), making it hard to fully capture the structural characteristics of "X+Be+Being+Adj."; (3) Most analyses stayed at the surface level of linguistic form, without delving into the underlying mechanism of its semantic formation.

Is In Construction Grammar, most scholars agree with Goldberg's [5] core view that a "construction" is a" pairing of form and meaning". Goldberg further emphasizes the unpredictability of a construction's form or meaning, i. e., the overall form or meaning of a construction cannot be accurately inferred from the form or meaning of its individual components. (e. g., the idiom "kick the bucket"). Although Goldberg highlights this unpredictability, she expanded "construction" to include morphemes, words, idioms and syntactic patterns. Ostman and Fried [6] clearly stated that constructions cover morphemes, phrases, sentences, and even discourses. Additionally, Bencini and Goldberg [7] proposed the "Construction-centered view", holding that the construction is the core determinant of sentence meaning, while the verb only contributes part of the meaning— challenging the traditional "Verb-centered view" that takes verbs as the main drivers of sentence meaning.

In summary, it is practically significant to treat "X+Be+Being+Adj." as an integrated form-meaning pairing (i. e., a construction) from the perspective of Cognitive Grammar, use COCA to explore its form and meaning, and apply Langacker's [8] profile-base prominence model to study the formation mechanism of its constructional meaning.

3 An analysis of the features of the "X+Be+Being+Adj." construction

Since a construction is defined as a "form-meaning pairing", the following sections analyze the formal and semantic features of "X+Be+Being+Adj." with the support of corpus data.

3.1 Formal features of the "X+Be+Being+Adj." construction

First, regarding the "X" (subject) and "Be" slots in the structure. A random sample of 100 instances from COCA shows that 90 cases have a human-referring noun or pronoun as the subject, and the remaining 10 cases use a non-human noun, pronoun, or subject clause (often personified). In addition, "Be" in this structure can be in the present or past tense, such as:

(1) Were the *neighbors* being noisy?

(2) The *Internet* is not being honest with you.

Second, the analysis of the collocational components of the structure shows that among the 100 sampled sentences, 29 cases have adverbs, prepositional phrases, or clauses as adverbials after "X+Be+Being+Adj." (e.g., temporal adverbials like "today, at this moment", locative adverbials like "in public, here", and purpose adverbials like "for good remarks, for high profit"), such as:

(3) Is the ECB being unfair *to Greece*?

(4) Sam is being harsh *on his housemate*.

3.2 Semantic features of the "X+Be+Being+Adj." construction

The AntConc 4.1.0 software was used to retrieve adjectives in the "Adj." slot from COCA to identify their semantic features. High-frequency adjectives are categorized into three groups:

Positive adjectives: *helpful, kind, careful, considerate, polite...*

Negative adjectives: *lazy, rude, late, careless, stupid, greedy...*

Neutral adjectives: *realistic, curious, anxious, playful, aggressive..*

It is obvious that these adjectives mainly describe human qualities, personalities, or mental states, tending to depict internal traits. However, as a construction "X+Be+Being+Adj." focuses on actions rather than fixed and enduring states, such as:

(5) He is being *careful* when he crosses the street

(6) Am I being *irrational*?

Case analysis shows that the core semantics of "X+Be+Being+Adj." is to express an "abnormal" action, which originates from three different contextual backgrounds:

A. Incidental context: The subject shows temporary "abnormal" behavior in a specific situation. It is a relatively objective description, where the pragmatic meaning is closely consistent with the structural meaning. For example:

(7) Jack: Chris, Look! The naughty boy is being punctual today. What a surprise! Chris: Yes, he never comes before the bell rings.

Here, "is being punctual" describes the boy's occasional behavior different from his usual habit.

B. Subjective will context: The subject intentionally shows certain traits for specific reasons. This "abnormality" results from the subject's subjective choice, implying "this is a temporary pretense, not the subject's usual state". For example:

(8) When the teacher came in, the students *were being very quiet*.

Here , "were being very quiet" implies that the students are usually noisy but pretended to be quiet.

C. Communicative needs context: The speaker uses this construction to express "abnormality" to meet communicative goals (often for mild criticism or explanation). The pragmatic meaning here is "this is only a temporary trait of the subject, not their norm". For example:

(9) a .I won't argue with you, but I think *you are being unfair* to the little girl; she is just seven years old.

(9) b. I won't argue with you, but I think you are unfair to the little girl…

The use of "you are being unfair" (9a) instead of "you are unfair" (9b) makes the criticism more objective and mild, conforming to the politeness principle and facilitating the addressee's acceptance of the speaker's view.

4 The formation mechanism of the "X+Be+Being+Adj." construction's meaning

4.1 Construction as a "form-meaning pairing"

Corpus analysis confirms the stability of the "X+Be+Being+Adj." structure and its core meaning of "abnormality" is inherent (not a simple sum of component meanings), proving it is a typical "form-meaning pairing" (construction).

Adjectives in the "Adj." slot usually denote stable qualities in the "Be+Adj." structure, while "Being+Adj." (with "-ing" conveying a progressive and immediate temporal meaning) creates a potential semantic conflict with the typical meaning of adjectives (stable qualities). However, semantic coercion resolves this conflict, enabling the construction to express an "abnormal" action as a whole: the coercion of constructional meaning over adjective lexical meaning is the motivation; the usability of dynamic adjectives in the progressive aspect is the syntactic basis; the activation of the temporal domain related to "-ing" (following cognitive principles like relevance and prominence) is the implementation pathway.

4.2 Prominence: profile-base

Langacker's "prominence" refines Talmy's [9] "figure-ground" relationship, including part-whole prominence (profile-base) and inter-entity prominence (trajector-landmark). Li [10] points out that "the figure-ground segregation principle not only reflects humans' basic cognitive ability to organize spatial information but also can be applied to the organization of linguistic information". Gestalt psychologists argue that "every mental phenomenon is a Gestalt (a unified whole); the sum of parts does not equal the whole, and the whole determines the nature and meaning of its parts". This aligns with the interpretation of constructional meaning, which confirms the explanatory power of prominence theory for the formation of constructional meaning.

The "X+Be+Being+Adj." construction involves two layers of profile-base relationships:

Layer1: The immediate context (base) and the "abnormal" action (profile). The immediate context (where the "abnormal" action occurs) is only represented by modifying elements such as temporal or locative adverbials, while the "abnormal" action itself is represented by the core component "Be+Being" in the construction. Grammatically, "Be+Being" often functions as the predicate, and its syntactic status gives it higher prominence than adverbials,which is a key means to express "abnormality" .

Layer 2: The subject's usual context (base) and the immediate context of the "abnormal" action (profile). This layer of prominence is implicit and realized through the construction. "Being" constructs an "immediate, progressive" space, while the adjectives denote "usual, stable qualitities" in "Be+Adj.", creating a semantic conflict.

Semantic coercion makes the immediate context prominent, and the immediate action contradicts the subject's usual qualities. For example:

(10) The students always talk loudly in the classroom. But when the teacher came in, they *were being quiet*.

The sharp contrast between the two layers of profile-base relationships makes the action perceived as highly "abnormal". Different linguistic expressions bring different cognitive burdens; different degrees of cognitive effort lead to different cognitive effects, and here the effect is a sharp contrast, making the "abnormal" action the focus of the entire cognitive domain.

In conclusion, profile-base prominence is a crucial cognitive mechanism for realizing semantic coercion in this construction. Figure-ground segregation highlights the "abnormality" of the action in the immediate context, while Gestalt psychology enables language receivers to form a comprehensive and integrated understanding of the contrast between the subject's immediate action (in the construction) and their usual behavior.

5 Conclusion

Using COCA and AntConc 4.1.0, this study finds that the "X+Be+Being+Adj." construction has following characteristics: (1) The subject is mostly a human-referring noun or pronoun(non-human subjects but are often personified); (2) "Be" can be in the present or past tense; (3) The adjectives mainly describe human internal traits; (4) It can be followed by adverbials. The core meaning of the construction is to express an "abnormal" action, which occurs in three contextual backgrounds (incidental context, subjective will context, and communicative needs context), among which, "abnormality driven by subjective will" is the most common, followed by "abnormality in incidental contexts" and "abnormality for communicative needs". These findings confirm that "X+Be+Being+Adj." is a typical construction. Semantic coercion(following the profile-base prominence principle and figure-ground organization) is the key factor to its constructional meaning. The analysis lays a foundation for its cognitive interpretation from the perspective of Cognitive Linguistics and provides practical implications for teaching— constructional theory and corpus tools can support the teaching of specific syntactic patterns.

About the Author

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