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# Learning Argument Structure Generalizations in a Foreign Language\* —

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## Abstract

Goldberg (1997: 385) proposes that constructions aid in the acquisition of verb meaning by determining the general scene that is being referred to. The results of an experiment (Bencini and Goldberg, 2000) proved that people recognize constructional meanings and suggests that constructions may be ‘natural’ linguistic categories easily recognized by speakers. Taking this idea as a starting point, two questions are addressed in this paper. Do constructions help in the acquisition of a second language? And, how do constructions work in languages like Spanish which, unlike English, have a rich morphology?

## Introduction

In most present theories of syntax the clause is viewed as a projection of the lexical properties of its predicator. However, the last decade has seen an increasing emphasis on the role of constructions in determining the semantics of the sentence. Goldberg (1995) proposes that constructions are independent form–meaning pairs with their own semantics, capable of contributing arguments. Thus, the non–subcategorised complements in the following sentences are viewed as licensed by the construction rather than by the verb:

- (1) The train screeched into the station.
- (2) Elena sneezed the foam off the cappuccino.
- (3) Pat smiled her appreciation.

One of the main advantages of this proposal is that implausible verb senses are avoided. An exclusively verb-centered perspective would have to posit a

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special sense of *screech*, “move by screeching”, another for *sneeze*, “cause to move by sneezing”, and include an entry of *smile* as a communicative verb.

Another argument for constructional meaning comes from a debate in the language acquisition literature. Experimental evidence has proved that English-speaking children pay attention to the syntactic frames. Goldberg proposes that constructions aid in the acquisition of verb meaning by determining the general scene that is being referred to. (1997: 385) In an example like *–Pat kicked Chris the ball–* the construction drives the child’s attention to a scene of transfer; the verb is used then to pick out a salient action within that scene (p. 386). Kicking will be the means of achieving the transfer. These constructions have also been explained as examples of metonymy (cause for result metonymy) and blends (cf. Fauconnier and Turner, 1996: 118).

### Constructional meaning in English

Goldberg, Casenhiser and Sethuraman (to appear) demonstrate that children (native speakers of English) begin to learn the associations between form and meaning on two-levels; first they produce verb-centered syntactic patterns, later on generalizations over particular verbs make them learn abstract argument structure constructions. The assumption is that the first and most frequent verbs (*do*, *make*, *put* and *go*) as used in particular argument structure patterns resemble the meanings posited for those argument structure constructions. The high frequency of occurrence of certain verbs in particular constructions would make the child see the association of the meaning of the verb with the pattern in which it appears, thus noting the form-meaning correspondence. This idea that at least some form-meaning correspondences are learnable by general categorization strategies detracts from those who claim that the association of meaning with certain forms is innate (Chomsky, 1982; Baker, 1988) since the input is not rich enough for children to learn such generalizations. This is known as the “poverty-of-the-stimulus” argument (cf. Goldberg, Casenhiser and Sethuraman).

In order to support the idea that constructions aid in the interpretation of sentence meaning, Bencini and Goldberg (2000) conducted an experiment where adult participants were asked to sort sentences according to their meaning. The examples used were sixteen English sentences obtained by crossing the verbs *throw*, *slice*, *get* and *take* and four constructions: *ditransitive*, *caused motion*, *resultative* and *transitive*.

(4) Anita threw the hammer Michelle got the book Barbara sliced the bread Audrey took the watch	transitive
Chris threw Linda the pencil Beth got Liz an invitation Jennifer sliced Terry an apple Paula took Sue a message	ditransitive
Pat threw the keys onto the roof Laura got the ball into the net Meg sliced the ham onto the plate Kim took the rose into the house	caused-motion
Lyn threw the box apart Dana got the mattress inflated Nancy sliced the tire open Rachel took the wall down	resultative

The subjects were asked to sort the sentences into four piles of four sentences each, based on the general meaning of the sentence. The results showed that participants recognized the meaning of constructions: 7 out of 17 sorted entirely by construction and the other 10 produced mixed sorts. This would prove that people recognize constructional meanings and suggests that constructions may be ‘natural’ linguistic categories easily recognized by speakers.

### **Constructional meaning in Spanish**

Goldberg, Casenhiser and Sethuraman state that constructions are more abstract categories than verb specific argument structure categories, but they link this property to a language-specific argument:

“Unlike verbs, argument structure constructions are very abstract; in languages like English, there is typically no overt morphological cue, and their existence can only be induced by a combination of argument types and word order facts. The answer seems to be that generalizing to the level of the construction is necessary because in many cases the construction provides a better predictor of overall meaning than the morphological form of the verb.” (Goldberg, Casenhiser and Sethuraman, p. 15)

Indeed Goldberg and Bencini's experiment proved that English speakers recognize constructional meaning. This is an argument that works for English, but what about Spanish, which is a language quite marked by overt morphology? Does constructional meaning work in the same way? In order to test it, a similar experiment with Spanish data was performed. I chose the following Spanish sentences, using the verbs *romper*, *doblar*, *acabar*, and *cortar*, in four types of constructions: the transitive, the ditransitive, the reflexive of unplanned events and the middle construction:

- (5) Carlos rompió el cristal ('Carlos broke the cristal')  
 Felipe dobló el periódico ('Felipe folded the paper')  
 Leonardo acabó su tesis ('Leonard finished his thesis')  
 Isidro cortó el pan ('Isidro cut the bread')

Alfonso le rompió las gafas a Pepe ('Alfonso 3sgCLITIC broke the glasses to Peter')

Pablo le dobló el brazo a Lucas ('Pablo 3sgCLITIC sprained the arm to Lucas')

Tomás le acabó la pasta de dientes a Santi ('Tomás 3sgCLITIC used up the toothpaste to S.')

Jorge le cortó el paso a Yago ('Jorge 3sgCLITIC barred the path to Yago')

A Juan se le rompieron los pantalones ('To John SE 3sgCLITIC tore the trousers')

A Pedro se le dobló el tobillo ('To Peter SE 3sgCLITIC sprained the ankle')

A Luis se le acabaron los cigarrillos ('To Luis SE 3sgCLITIC ran out of cigarettes')

A Ignacio se le cortó la conexión ('To Ignacio SE 3sgCLITIC broke the connection')

La porcelana se rompe con facilidad ('China SE breaks easily')

El aluminio se dobla bien ('Aluminium SE bends well')

Las carreras de 10 km se acaban sin problemas ('10 km races SE finish without problems')

Esta tela se corta muy bien ('This material SE cuts very well')

I asked a group of sixteen students of English Philology at the University of Huelva to sort the sentences into four piles of four sentences each, following semantic criteria. The participants were native speakers of Spanish and ranged from 19 to 23 years of age. They sorted the sentences almost equally by verbs and constructions: only two out of the 64 piles (16 participants making 4 piles each) were mixed sorts; the 62 others were either sorted by constructions (30), or entirely by verbs, (32).

The results prove that Spanish native speakers are also likely to sort out sentences in terms of argument structure constructions, besides considering the lexical semantics of the verb. Therefore, we may assume that constructions also exist as a psychological or cognitive reality for Spanish native speakers.

### Constructional meaning in a foreign language

The claim that constructions are easily recognized and aid in picking the right scene, made me wonder what happens in another type of language learning situation: the acquisition of a foreign language. The same sentences, under (5), were used with a similar group of sixteen students of English Philology at the University of Huelva, who were first asked to translate the sentences to make sure that they understood them well. Four out of the sixteen participants sorted entirely by constructions while only two sorted entirely by verbs. The rest made mixed sorts. In order to analyze the mixed piles in their experiment Bencini and Goldberg calculated a deviation score from an entirely verb classification to an entirely constructional classification. In my experiment the deviation score from an entirely verb-based sort was 6.0, which signals the average number of changes required to have a classification entirely by verbs; the constructional deviation score was 6.75, which shows the average number of changes needed for a constructional organization. The same experiment later performed with another group of eleven students gave similar results, this time with a slight preference for a constructional sorting: the verb deviation score was 6.9, while the constructional deviation score was 5.8.

Curiously enough, the subjects who sorted by verbs did not always understand them to be semantically equivalent, as we can see from the fact that they never used the same verb in Spanish as a translation for one English verb in the four sentences. So they seemed to have a bias towards sorting by verbs, i.e. following formal criteria, rather than by meaning. Consider –just to mention an example– participant 16, who sorted entirely by verbs. She never uses more than twice the same Spanish verb for the translation of a single English verb:

(5) Michelle got the book	Michelle <i>consiguíó</i> el libro
Beth got Liz an invitation	Beth le <i>consiguíó</i> una invitación a Liz
Laura got the ball into the net	Laura <i>encestó</i>
Dana got the mattress inflated	Dana <i>infló</i> la colchoneta
Audrey took the watch	Audrey <i>cogió</i> el reloj
Paula took Sue a message	Paula le <i>cogió</i> un recado a Sue
Kim took the rose into the house	Kim <i>llevó</i> la rosa a la casa
Rachel took the wall down	Rachel <i>tiró</i> el muro

Anita threw the hammer	Anita <i>tiró</i> el martillo
Chris threw Linda the pencil	Chris le <i>tiró</i> el lápiz a Linda
Pat threw the keys onto the roof	Pat <i>arrojó</i> las llaves al tejado
Lyn threw the box apart	!Lyn <i>apartó</i> la caja
Barbara sliced the bread	Barbara <i>cortó</i> el pan
Jennifer sliced Terry an apple	Jennifer le <i>peló</i> la manzana a Terry
Meg sliced the ham onto the plate	!Meg <i>cortó</i> el jamón en el plato
Nancy sliced the tire open	Nancy <i>abrió</i> la cubierta

Except the ditransitive construction, which is perceived, as shown in the translation, as an extension of the transitive, the rest of them are conceived as having different verb meanings, yet they are sorted together. This suggests that the participant is following formal criteria for sorting rather than grouping the sentences according to semantic similarity.

The analysis of translations reveals another interesting fact: the resultative and the caused motion constructions are difficult to recognize. These form-meaning correspondences are two of the most frequently cited constructions in the literature on Construction Grammar, which is mainly based on English. The English caused-motion construction is defined by Goldberg (1995: 152) as a pattern formed with a non-stative verb and a directional phrase, as in (6).

- (6) [SUBJ [V OBJ OBL]]  
 'X causes Y to MOVE Z'

The English resultative construction is represented as a metaphorical extension of the caused-motion construction: Change of State as Change of Location (1995: 88-89). Neither the resultative nor the caused-motion construction has a parallel in Spanish. These constructions, however, do not posit a problem for the Spanish learner with *get* and *take*. These verbs are semantically light verbs; they may imply many different things including transfer, result, or motion, depending on their lexical environment. When the students come to decode sentences with these verbs, they need to drive their attention towards their complements to get the right meaning:

- (7) **get into the net** = **enestar** ("to net")  
**get inflated** = **inflar** ("to inflate")

In fact, both are commonly included among the lists of the so called "phrasal verbs" or combinations of verbs and adverbial particles which are not always the result of the meaning of each separate lexical item. This means that they are learned as joined *lexical (i.e. stored) items*.

The verb *throw*, is also quite flexible, with many metaphorical meanings associated to it, but it basically expresses motion, a notion which is compatible with the main events implied in three constructions: the transitive, (*Anita threw the hammer*) the ditransitive (*Chris threw Linda the pencil*) and the caused motion construction (*Pat threw the keys onto the roof*). The only problematic example, where motion is not the main event of the construction is the resultative *Lyn threw the box apart*. Notice that nobody (none of the 27 students in both experiments) saw the resultative meaning of this construction.

A possible explanation for this failure to understand the constructional meaning is that *throw* does not imply result, therefore the meaning of the construction is not compatible with the meaning of the verb. The most common translation for the resultative construction with *throw* was *Lyn apartó la caja* (“Lyn put the box aside”). This mistranslation is the result of lack of equivalence in Spanish. Students understood *apart* in the sense of “to one side”, as in *to put/set apart*, instead of decoding it with the meaning of “to pieces”, as in *to fall apart*. The origin of this confusion might be lexical rather than constructional; since the word *apart* has a counterpart in Spanish, *apartar*, the students immediately rely on their knowledge of the Spanish term failing to see that the English word has a second meaning which is absent in the Spanish item. But, on the other hand, even if they knew this second meaning of the word, “into pieces”, they would have probably disregarded it since it would not match the meaning of the verb. This confusion would be of a constructional nature.

The more semantically salient of the four verbs is *slice*. Thus, whereas *get* is understood to be very vague and requires an analysis of its environment to be rightly decoded, the precise interpretation of *slice* comes from the verb itself without need of extra lexical information. Notice that in the Collins Cobuild Dictionary *get* shows 31 entries, *take* 76, *throw* 23, and *slice* only 6. The fact that the meaning of *slice* is more condensed may explain why it led to more verb-based sorts in our experiment than the other three, which were sometimes mixed among them. The verb *slice* does not entail or imply motion. As Fauconnier & Turner state:

“Many languages have a form analogous to NP V NP PP for verbs of caused motion like “throw”, but only some of those languages, like English, have developed a cause-motion construction to express the more general integration of a causal sequence of action and motion.” (1996: 118)

The sentence *Meg sliced the ham onto the plate* can only be interpreted as caused-motion because of the construction itself; the verb does not contribute towards this interpretation. The translations show that 7 out of 16 students did not perceive the caused-motion meaning of this sentence and gave translations

like *Meg cortó el jamón en el plato* (“on the plate”) failing to notice the motion sense which is contributed by the construction. The reason for this mistranslation is the lack of parallelism in L1. There is a general consensus about the fact that Spanish does not permit this conflation of manner and motion in the verb (cf. Talmy, 1985; Aske, 1989; Slobin, 1996; Jackendoff 1995, 1995; Mora, 1999, and Martínez Vázquez, 2001). While in English the construction may contribute a specific meaning to the interpretation of the sentence -directed motion- which is not implied by the verb itself, this does not seem to be possible in Spanish. In fact, Slobin’s analysis of translations shows that Spanish translators omit manner information half of the time, whereas a manner component is actually added by English translators (1996: 212). When both manner and motion are translated the result is either unnatural or emphatic, as in (8).

(8) She rustled out of the room...

Salió del cuarto, acompañada del susurro siseante de sus ropas... (Slobin 1996: 212)

The correct translations in our experiment agree with Slobin’s analysis; when translated into Spanish the caused-motion construction usually preserves the caused-motion sense in the verb and loses the manner information, as we can see in (9b). An alternative solution given by some participants is to use two verbs, as in (9c). In this case, the manner information is given more prominence than in the original English sentence. The seven students who translated only the manner information failed to see the constructional meaning, missing therefore the main event in the sentence, as in (9d).

(9) a. Meg sliced the ham onto the plate

b. Meg puso/colocó/dejó caer el jamón en el plato (motion)

c. Meg cortó el jamón y lo puso en el plato (**manner** + motion)

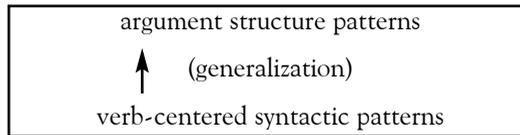
d. Meg cortó el jamón en el plato (manner)

A first conclusion can be drawn: lexical meaning is understood, but constructional meaning, which implies a higher level of abstraction, is not easily recognized, unless it is also contributed by the verb, or already known by the student by comparison with L1. The mismatches between the meaning of the verb and the meaning designated by the construction may lead to mistranslations.

As Goldberg, Casenhiser and Sethuraman suggest, the acquisition of constructional meaning implies a two level process by which the child

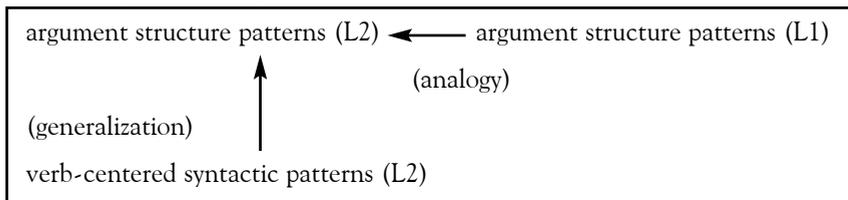
inductively goes from knowledge of specific verb usage to knowledge of argument structure patterns. The following diagram illustrates this process:

**Figure 1.** Acquisition of constructional meaning



However, when we deal with the acquisition of a second or foreign language, we cannot forget the role played by the native language. It has been shown that L2 learners make use of their native language to better understand the L2. Kern (1994) claims that some learners make use of “mental translation” as a cognitive strategy in the processing of L2 texts. (cf. Upton, Chun and Thompson, 2001, and references). Cook (1992:571) further argues that “the L2 user does not effectively switch off the L1 while processing the L2, but has it constantly available”. It seems, therefore, plausible to think that the learner of a foreign language decodes argument structure patterns also by analogy with L1, as represented below:

**Figure 1.** Interpretation of constructional meaning in L2



In order to prove the interference of L1 argument structures in L2, we have to focus on negative transference. The ditransitive construction, for example, which implies an idea of transfer, is present in both English and Spanish. The translations in the experiment showed that the students decoded the English ditransitive without problems. Since the Spanish learner of a foreign language has already stored in her grammar the association of the form ‘Subj V Obj Obj’ with the meaning ‘X CAUSES Y to RECEIVE Z’, she will recognize it easily in another language through analogy. But a good understanding of an English ditransitive construction would not prove that the student got the

constructional meaning by comparison with L1. The transference process reveals itself in the formation of sentences like (10), very commonly produced by Spanish learners of English. The ungrammatical sentence has to be faced as the result of transference of the constructional meaning of the Spanish ditransitive, which may imply both “transfer from” and “transfer to”, into English, which can only imply “transfer to”.

- (10 \*He bought me a house.  
 (“He bought a house from me”)

	“transfer to”	“transfer from”
Spanish ditransitive	✓	✓
English ditransitive	✓	✓

We have seen that Spanish native speakers encounter no problems when it comes to decoding constructions in their native language, just like English native speakers did in Goldberg and Bencini’s experiment. However, the interpretation of English constructional meaning by Spanish native speakers has been proved to be more problematical. These facts could lead to the conclusion that constructional meaning is easily acquired in L1 but that it turns to be more difficult to interpret in a second or foreign language. If this hypothesis were right, native speakers of English would also find problems acquiring constructional meaning in Spanish as a second language. In order to test this, another experiment was performed.

This time I wanted to check the interpretation of Spanish constructions by English speaking students learning Spanish as L2. A group of 19 American students learning Spanish during a semester at the University of Seville were asked to sort the Spanish sentences above, (5). They were all native speakers of English with ages ranging from 18 to 24. The results were very striking: 13 out of 19 students sorted entirely by constructions, 3 sorted entirely by verbs and 3 gave mixed sorts. The verbal deviation score was very high, 9.4, compared to the constructional deviation score, 2.8. The results clearly showed that they had no problems recognising constructions in Spanish as L2.

### The nature of constructions in English and Spanish

The different experiments reveal that there is a meaning component contributed by constructions in both languages, which speakers do recognize. Both the lexical and the constructional components have to be interpreted in

order to understand the sentence. Yet Spanish constructions are more easily recognized both by native and, especially, by English native speakers. An explanation for this fact has to be found in the different nature of constructions in both languages.

As Goldberg, Casenhiser and Sethuraman point out, in languages with a poor morphology like English the meaning of a sentence derives from “a combination of argument types and word order facts” (p. 15). Spanish constructions, in contrast, are formally heavily marked. Since constructions are form-meaning pairings, the meaning is more easily picked when there is a morphological (phonological) cue to it.

Another aspect which has been discussed is the influence of L1 in the interpretation of constructional meaning. From the sentences used in the experiment with Spanish students, two English constructions have a counterpart in Spanish, and were, therefore, easily recognized by analogy with L1. The other two do not have a counterpart in Spanish, the resultative and the caused motion constructions.

English transitive	parallel in Spanish
English ditransitive	parallel in Spanish
English caused-motion	no parallel in Spanish
English resultative	no parallel in Spanish

Besides the lack of equivalence in Spanish, the resultative and the caused motion constructions are more a matter of word order (argument organization) than morphology, and word order is not a meaningful element in Spanish.

As regards the processing of the Spanish constructions by American students, notice that three of them had an analogous pattern in English. Therefore, participants could easily recognize them by analogy with their native language.

Spanish transitive	parallel in English
Spanish ditransitive	parallel in English
Spanish reflexive for unplanned events	no parallel in English
Spanish middle	no parallel in English

The only construction which has no counterpart in English, the reflexive for unplanned events, is heavily marked: “se + IO clitic + V + subject”. The American students recognized this construction easily. This, however does not

necessarily mean that they are able to extend the constructional pattern for use with other verbs in a creative way, as native speakers of Spanish would do. In fact, it has been claimed that this construction is “especially difficult to internalize. Students tend to avoid them in their own speech, and frequently have difficulty understanding them” (Stockwell et al. 1965: 195).

Indeed, textbooks of Spanish as a foreign language and Contrastive Grammars supply a lot of information about this construction. Stockwell emphasizes the importance of practice: “a considerable amount of practice and drill is necessary to establish proper habits in English speaking students” (1965: 194). Examples quoted are *Se me cayó el plato* “The dish fell itself on me”; *Se me rompió la camisa* “My shirt tore itself on me”. Whitley (1986: 186-87) notes that this *se + IO + V* pattern, which is so relevant from a contrastive perspective, has not been given proper treatment in Spanish grammars:

“Yet *se + IO + V* has been singled out as quite distinct by many U.S. text writers, who see in it the expression of accidents, unplanned events, and escape from responsibility... Interestingly the Real Academia, Gili Gaya, and other Hispanic authorities have seen nothing of the sort in this construction, nor have they set it as a special category.” (1986: 186)

However, Bosque and Demonte’s (1999) *Gramática Descriptiva de la Lengua Española* (RAE) devote only the following three lines of their comprehensive grammar to this construction:

“Babock (1970: 52-53) señala la necesidad que tienen algunas construcciones reflejas de un elemento pronominal ‘humano’ que represente la ‘fuente’ o el ‘destino’, es decir un dativo no concordado” (1918) (*Se me cayó el libro/Se me ocurrió una idea*).

## Concluding remarks

Constructions are considered to be the result of integrating the verb with the construction. This abstraction process can be explained as a case of metonymy, and the grammaticalization of metonymy is a language-specific property (cf. Panther & Thornburg, 2000). As a result, what is effortless and helpful in first language acquisition may require a high cognitive effort for second/foreign language learners.

The experiments conducted show that Spanish-speaking students learning English as a foreign language do not always recognize the formal part of the construction, therefore they fail to get the right meaning. This is the case with

constructions which are not redundant with the verb meaning and which do not have an equivalent in Spanish.

American students encountered fewer problems recognizing constructions because they are used to paying more attention to the organization of arguments in the sentence as an influence of their L1, and because constructions in Spanish are heavily marked.

When we talk about form-meaning correspondences in English, *form* stands basically for word order and argument distribution, while in Spanish the form is as lexically marked as the verb itself, and can almost be taught/perceived in the same way verb centered constructions are. English constructions are more abstract and difficult to recognize. Notice, for example, that the resultative construction is viewed by Jackendoff as a lexical item without phonology:

“This lexical item has no phonology. It is just a pairing of a syntactic and semantic structure... a lexical item in its own right that undergoes free combination with verbs” (2002: 176).

Learners of English as a foreign language, in a non-language contact situation do not get as much input as to make the proper generalizations to learn abstract argument structure constructions. Thus, as the study has proved, constructions whose verb does not match the constructional meaning are extremely difficult to identify. Students may easily learn verb-centered constructions in a foreign-language classroom, but they do not seem to get so intuitively to the second level, whereby they learn abstract argument structure constructions.

A pedagogical conclusion can be drawn: more emphasis should be placed on teaching constructions in ESL/EFL courses for Spanish speakers. More specifically, word order and argument configuration should be emphasised in the teaching of English as a foreign language to Spanish native speakers.

A first step to achieve this goal involves assuming that constructions exist, as Goldberg and Bencini (2000: 649-50) claim as “psychologically real linguistic categories that speakers use in comprehension”. Once this is assumed, argument structure constructions should be introduced in descriptive grammars and textbooks of English as a foreign language.

A good way of practising constructional patterns is the use of drills, where students are given one pattern and have to replace part of it each time. This is an excellent way of simulating a first language learning situation where the learner is exposed to much more input, and from it is able to generalize to the

more abstract level of the construction (as illustrated in figure 1). The drills where one element is replaced in the sentence shows the analogy system by which constructions are formed. Starting from an argument structure construction with a verb that fits the constructional meaning, for example, the ditransitive with *give*, as in (11), and making the learner replace the verb with other verbs compatible with the constructional meaning, the learner will easily associate a stable meaning to the construction. Further replacements will introduce verbs which do not match the meaning of the constructions so that the learner will fuse both the verbal and the constructional meanings when decoding the sentence.

- (11) He *gave* me the ball  
*hand* → he handed me the ball  
*throw* → he threw me the ball  
*kick* → he kicked me the ball

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