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"HE WORMED HIS WAY OUT OF TROUBLE" – A CONSTRUCTIONAL APPROACH

In her 1995 book, Adele Goldberg argues that a lexically based approach to language fails to account for the full range of data and advocates recognizing constructions as basic units of language. The present paper, premised upon this view, is an attempt at a more detailed analysis of an instantiation of [SUBJ_i[V[Poss_iway]OBL]] construction, namely [SUBJ_i [*worm* [Poss_i way]OBL]] as in "They wormed their way through the crowd" or "He wormed his way to success". More specifically, it will be argued below that there is a need to posit two separate semantic senses of [SUBJ_i [*worm* [Poss_i way] OBL]]. Furthermore, this distinction will be claimed crucial for the distribution of "by ..." phrase, seemingly optionally occurring following the construction, as in "He wormed his way out of trouble by saying...". Under the analysis pursued in the present paper, the syntactic realization of the construction, i.e. whether it appears in its broader scope including "by ..." phrase or without it, will be shown predictable, motivated by the semantics of the construction.

The first section of this paper will seek to outline in some detail

Goldberg's semantic analysis of the [SUBJ_i [V[Poss_i way]OBL]] construction as well as, marginally, some other previous studies of the issue, those by Jackendoff (1990), Levin and Rapoport (1988) and Jespersen (1949). Further, [SUBJ_i *worm* [Poss_i way OBL]] will be zoomed in on to see how well it adheres to the description proposed by Goldberg in *Construction Grammar* for the canonical [SUBJ_i [V [Poss_i way] OBL]] construction. The last section will focus on the semantics of the "by..." phrase.

Semantic properties of [SUB; [V [Poss; way]OBL]]¹

Instantiations of the construction such as the following:

(1) *Frank dug his way out of the prison*

(2) *Frank found his way to New York*

lead Goldberg to believe that the meaning of the phrase is not fully predictable from the semantics of its particular components. Given the ungrammaticality of (3) and (4) below:

(3)* *Frank dug his way out of prison, but he hasn't gone yet.*

(4)* *Frank found his way to New York, but he hasn't gone yet.*

one has to assume that "dig one's way out of the prison" and "find one's way to New York" necessarily entail MOTION on the part of the subject referent along the path designated by the prepositional phrase "out of the prison" and "to New York". Yet, none of the senses of the verbs involved normally posits motion along a path but just action, the contrast shown by Goldberg in the following set:

(5) *Frank dug his escape route out of prison*

(6) *Frank found a way to New York*

On constructional view, it is the 'way' construction that seems responsible for what differs (1) and (2) from (5) and (6).

Not all frameworks explain the newly acquired motion sense of the verb by means of its occurrence in a construction. The solution suggested by Levin and Rapoport (1988) favours the idea of a special lexical rule generating a motion sense to each verb prior to its entering the construction. Similar in its standpoint, one of Jackendoff's (1990) proposals stipulates that a verb which appears in the construction undergoes a lexical rule, turning it into a complex predicate [V[Poss way]].

Both analyses are persuasively argued against by Goldberg, the following examples, with motion senses of the verbs intuitively implausible outside the construction, lending her assistance:

(7) a. *Lord King craftily joked and blustered his way out of trouble at the meeting.*

b. *But he consummately ad-libbed his way through a largely secret press meeting.*

c. *... he'd bludgeoned his way through.*

On the constructional approach, examples (1) – (7) above instantiate **a construction**, constructions being defined as "form – meaning correspondences that exist independently of particular verbs" Goldberg (1995: 1). Jackendoff (1990), in his other proposal, also suggests "in a sense, the – way construction can be thought of as a kind of 'constructional idiom', a specialized syntactic form with an idiomatic meaning, marked by the noun way" (1990:

¹ All the examples cited in this section come from the selection made by A. Goldberg from the following corpora: Oxford University Press, Wall Street Journal 1989, Lund, United States Department of Agriculture.

221). The interpretation of "way" expressions is not fully predictable from the semantics of the particular lexical items, with the construction itself carrying meaning independently of the its component words. Hence, it would neither be appropriate or parsimonious to posit additional verb senses, rather it seems well justified to put those new meanings to the very construction itself.

As briefly noted before, the construction entails **motion**, either literal or metaphorical. See (8) and (9) below:

(8) *I made my way unto Rome*

(9) *He punched his way through the crowd.*

Second, it is stipulated that the motion must be through a literal or metaphorical **self-created path** – the condition claimed crucial in motivating the syntactic form of the construction – the point to be taken up later in the course of the analysis.

The idea of a path that is not pre-established but created by the subject referent, first conceived of by Jespersen (1949), conveys the message that the movement takes place despite some external **difficulty**, literal or metaphorical, like moving through a crowd, mass, or a social obstacle – the third component of the semantic make-up of the construction in the light of Goldberg's analysis. See the examples:

(10) *He pushed his way past the others*

(11) *He bribed his way into the meeting*

Thus, even if the effort is not so obviously coded by the verb itself, the construction forces the air of a barrier into the interpretation:

(12) *He talked his way into the meeting*

Similar verbs, referred to by Goldberg as vanilla motion verbs – since they do not typically imply any difficulty or indirect motion – are, therefore, normally unacceptable in the construction. Hence the ungrammaticality of the following:

(13)* *She went /walked /ran her way to New York*

(14)* *She travelled /covered /moved her way to New York*

Unless a context is provided that implies difficulty, as in the following selection of examples:

(15) a. *The novice skier walked her way down the ski slope*

b. *The old man walked his way across the country to earn money for charity*

To summarize, the meaning of the construction entails a motion sense of the verb, with the movement despite some external difficulty along the path that is not pre-established but rather created by the subject referent.

Furthermore, there are three semantic constraints on a class of verbs admitted into the construction, formulated by Goldberg as follows:

A : **The verb necessarily designates a repeated action or unbounded activity:**

Compare:

(16) a. *Firing widely, Jones shot his way through the crowd*

b. **With a single bullet, Jones shot his way through the crowd*

Hence, the sentence:

(17) *He hiccuped his way out of the room*

is interpreted to entail a series of hiccups over time and not a single hiccup.

B : *The motion must be self-propelled*

This condition rules out non-agentive, unaccusative verbs:

(18)* *The butter melted its way off the turkey.*

Finally,

C : *The motion must be directed – it cannot be aimless*

Hence the unacceptability of the following:

(19) a.* *She wandered her way over the field*

b.* *She meandered her way through the crowds*

c.* *She shoved his way among the crowd*

Now, once the semantic characteristics of the [SUBJ_i[V[Poss_i.way]OBL]] construction have been outlined an attempt will be made to cover the data for its [SUBJ_i[worm[Poss_i.way]OBL]] instance.

Semantic properties of [SUBJ_i[worm[Poss_i.way]OBL]]²

Essentially, two separate senses of the construction will be postulated, the relevant contrast displayed in the following:

(20) *They had to worm their way through the narrow tunnel (sense 1)*

(21) *...People who wormed their way upon old school connections (sense 2)*

Most obviously, the difference lies in the nature of **motion**, **literal** for **sense 1** and **metaphorical** for **sense 2**. However, it will be argued that such a distinction of senses is consistent with many more facts of usage, which indicate other substantial differences between the two senses.

It appears that, unlike "nose", "bribe", "marry" or most other verbs admitted into the construction, "worm" in its **sense 1**, directly codes the semantics of the construction. It entails movement, see (22), and (23) below:

(22) *He wormed his way through the crowd.*

(23) *He wormed his way forward.*

It implies **forging a path** by the subject referent:

(24) *I had to worm my way out sideways from the bench in a ridiculous, undignified fashion.*

Finally, it necessarily focuses on the **obstacles** in the movement, implying slow, gradual, patient and persisting efforts. Compare (20) above and, additionally, the following:

(25) *We wormed our way through the crack in the wall*

² The instances of [SubJ_i[worm[poss_i.way]OBL]] construction included in this section all come from a variety of English language dictionaries, some literary sources, or have been created by the author of the paper for the sake of the goodness – of – example rating test.

(26) *The kitten wormed its way through the just open door.*

There's, however, one more issue about the nature of the motion that needs to be addressed here. In contrast to Goldberg's analysis of the directionality of the action, compare constraint C above, it will be argued empirically insufficient to maintain that "the motion must be directed – it cannot be aimless" (1995: 214). Essentially, it will be claimed here, the motion must be **felicitous** – in the sense that the endpoint of the path is

known and reached, for both **sense 1** and **sense 2** of the construction. Consider the sentences below, all judged incorrect by the informants³ questioned about the construction for the sake of the present paper.

(27)* *Frank dug his way out of the prison but was caught half-way.*

(28)* *We wormed our way through the crack in the wall but stopped half-way.*

(29)* *He wormed his way out of the accusation and /but he was executed.*

Only one of the informants found (28) and (29) acceptable – still, providing a context which directly proves the point, namely, he argued that the endpoint of the path had been first successfully reached and only while taking a second go was the person stopped half-way (for 28), or for (29), the execution took place in spite of the fact that the person had been successfully cleared of the accusation.

Thus, under the analysis pursued so far, the construction appears to encode a particular vantage point, in Langacker's (1987, 1991) understanding of the term, the motion being viewed from the endpoint of the path, hence the grammaticality judgements following the contrast in the choice of preposition, also coding such vantage point:

(30) *He wormed his way through the crowd.*

(31)* *He wormed his way among the crowd.*

Sense₂ of the construction, as noted before, entails **metaphorical motion, self-propelled and directed** – it cannot be aimless or involuntary: example (32) below has been unanimously ruled out as ungrammatical by all the informants:

(32)* *Without really noticing how, he wormed out of the situation.*

Unlike **sense₁**, however, **sense₂** does not necessarily focus on difficulty or effort. Compare:

(33) *He wormed his way into her heart by just smiling at her.*

(34) *He easily wormed his way out of trouble.*

Asked if they find using this construction justified in particular situations, the informants all accepted the following:

(35) *The two girls urged him to choose the one he loved more.*

He wormed his way out of the situation by saying he adored them both.

(36) *He felt a little ill at ease in this situation. He wormed his way out of it.*

Much in the same vein, they found the situation involving serious trouble ill fitted for the construction:

(37) a.* *That was a death trap. He wormed his way out of it.*

b.* *He wormed his way out of trouble by killing ...*

Rather, in this sense, what is brought to the fore is the **skill** with which the end was achieved:

(38) *She used flattery to worm her way into his confidence.*

Thus, in sentence (39), clever action is highlighted rather than difficulty of the task.

(39) *It hadn't occurred to him that Kathy might worm her way so deep into his life.*

Additionally, it follows from the above examples that the path is skillfully **self-created** and not pre-established.

Connected to it, there emerges another, distinguishing component of **sense₂** – the subject referent uses some unsanctioned means to attain their goal. This **derogatory** evaluation is absent from **sense₁** of the construction. Recall (21) and (22) above.

Sense₂ seems to depart from the prototypical make-up of [SUB-J_i[V[**Poss way_i**]OBL]] in yet another respect. As pointed out in the preceding section, the verb admitted into the construction necessarily designates a repeated action or unbounded activity. This constraint certainly holds for **sense₁** – encoding gradual persistent effort. Yet, it is not necessarily so for **sense₂**. According to the informants' judgements, sentences (33) and (40) can be paraphrased both as a. and b. below:

(33) *He wormed his way into her heart by just smiling at her.*

a. *He smiled once.* b. *He smiled many times.*

(40) *He wormed his way out of trouble by saying...*

a. *He said it once.* b. *He necessarily said it many times.*

Thus, **sense₂** seems to allow for both **single** and **repeated action**.

As for **sense₁**, it will be argued that the action, if completed, must be **successful** also for **sense₂**:

(41) *He's wormed his way out of trouble. He is still at large.*

Importantly, on the present account, the most fundamental difference between the two senses, with far-reaching consequences on the syntactic realisation of the construction, is illustrated in the following:

(42) *He somehow wormed his way through the crowd.*

(43) *He somehow wormed his way out of trouble.*

It will be claimed that in (42) the verb straightforwardly codes the nature of motion – we know how he wormed his way through the crowd, e.g. by pushing or manouvering. Thus, the following means will come as a surprise and will have to be stated in an additional "by..." phrase.

(44)? *He wormed his way through the crowd by kissing everyone unconscious.*

Somehow in (42) merely stresses the idea of much difficulty, which is reflected in the informants' comments to (42): *They were so densely packed..., He managed to worm...*

In contrast, (43) gives us no idea of actually **how** he wormed his way out of trouble, the information will be relegated to the "by..." phrase, e.g. *by saying..., by persuasion*. Hence, *somehow* in (45) encouraged the following

comments from the informants: *by flattery, by being economical with the truth.*

Metaphorically speaking, the meaning of "worm" in sense₂, as in (43), is nearly empty and the verb becomes contentful only together with the "by..." phrase.

Simplifying, for the sake of convenience, let us label the aforementioned distinction between sense₁ and sense₂ of the construction as **contentful** and **empty** respectively.

Table 1. Two senses of [SUBJ_i[Poss_iway[OBL]]

sense ₁	sense ₂
literal motion self-created path difficulty motion-directed and successful action-repeated contentful	metaphorical motion self-created path no difficulty, skill derogatory evaluation motion-directed and successful actio – single and repeated empty

The semantics of the "by..." phrase³

As a consequence of the following grammaticality judgements:

(45) a. *He wormed his way out of trouble by saying...*

b.* *He wormed his way out of trouble, saying...*

"by..." phrase will be maintained to inherently belong to the construction for its **sense₂**. That it contributes to the whole to form a single coherent concept follows from its being unaccepted in an adjunct position, loosely related to the head, as in (45b). As a participant of the semantic make-up of the construction it can still be either lexically profiled or not:

46. a. *He wormed his way out of trouble.*

b. *He wormed his way out of trouble by saying...*

If not actually lexicalized in a particular utterance, the participant role specifying the means by which the motion is performed fails to be overtly expressed. In such case, the participant role is an **indefinite null argument** in Fillmore and Kay's (1993) understanding.

Like in the following:

(47) *After the operation to clear her esophagus, Pat ate and drank all evening.*

(48) *She ran for two hours,*

³ All the informants are native speakers of English residing in Olsztyn. They were asked to perform a variety of tasks following their first impression, judging the use of the construction acceptable or not in particular contexts.

where the objects of *eat* and *drink* in (47) are not expressed, or the path argument in (48) is left indefinite, sentence (46a.) does not lexically profile the participant role which designates specific means of performing the action. In this way, the message is conveyed that this role's identity is either unknown or irrelevant – nonsalient. To put it in other words, whether this participant role is profiled or not depends on the speaker's construal of the situation and their decision whether or not to withdraw the information from the recipient of the message. Hence, the syntactic distribution of the "by..." phrase for **sense₂** of the construction gains purely semantic motivation.

Concluding, limited as it is, the scope of the present article necessarily leaves out many important issues posed by constructional approach to language. The aim of the paper has been a modest one – to show constructional framework applied in the actual analysis of [SUBJ₁*worm*[Poss₁*way*]OBL]]. Two separate senses have been distinguished and an optional third argument for **sense₂** has been discussed. Though it is bound to leave many questions unanswered, the present paper hopes to be yet another voice in support of the view that constructions need to find their way into our conception of language.

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