



HAL
open science

Review of Goldberg, Adele. 2019. Explain Me This: Creativity, Competition, and the Partial Productivity of Constructions. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 216 pp.

Cameron Morin

► **To cite this version:**

Cameron Morin. Review of Goldberg, Adele. 2019. Explain Me This: Creativity, Competition, and the Partial Productivity of Constructions. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 216 pp.. 2020. hal-03120236

HAL Id: hal-03120236

<https://hal.science/hal-03120236>

Submitted on 25 Jan 2021

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Morin, Cameron. 2020. Review of Goldberg, Adele. 2019. *Explain Me This: Creativity, Competition, and the Partial Productivity of Constructions*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 216 pp. *Cercles* 02/20.

Adele Goldberg's new book *Explain Me This* is an original contribution to the literature on Construction Grammar (CxG) in linguistics: it is relatively short (just over 200 pages), its intended audience is broader than the community of trained researchers by including students and teachers, and its structure is based on a narrative of puzzle-solving, focusing on what comes to be known as the "Explain-me-this puzzle". Overall, the book is conceived as an "accessible introduction" and an updated synthesis of usage-based CxG, sometimes known elsewhere as Cognitive Construction Grammar (CCG); although for the sake of unity and accessibility, the use of labels is wisely avoided by the author.

Given that several reviews focusing on the content of the book have already been published by specialists in the field, this review is specifically concerned with the novelty of its structure and its audience, from the perspective of a student in linguistics. In order to fully appreciate this book and benefit from reading it, it does seem to be the case that a background in theoretical linguistics is needed; an undergraduate level of familiarity will probably suffice. If this requirement is met, a fascinating journey awaits the prospective reader.

The premise of the book is both straightforward and enticing: how is it that in standard varieties of English, utterances such as *Explain me this* are syntactically well-formed, but systematically judged as unacceptable or at least odd by native speakers? As the author unpacks the problem, she shows that on the one hand, we are capable of being very inventive in our speech, while on the other, we constrain it in ways which may seem arbitrary at first sight: an apparent paradox that sets the scene for an investigation spanning eight chapters.

Following an introductory chapter, Goldberg takes us through foundational principles of Cognitive Linguistics, via the stepping stone of word meanings. She presents words as rich form-meaning pairs acquired by speakers through error-driven learning, which determines their range of application both in terms of extension and of restriction. The nature of language and cognition makes these characteristics also apply to the higher level of grammatical constructions, for instance Argument Structure Constructions (ASCs) such as *Explain me this*, the main case study at hand. ASCs can be identified through constraints relating to form (*e.g.* morphology and syntax) and to function (*e.g.* semantics and information structure), but these are not enough to solve the Explain-me-this puzzle. Although ASCs play the crucial role for human speech of expressing relations between concrete or abstract entities, they display significant variety across the languages of the world, which makes them even more interesting to study.

The following chapters, 4 & 5, gradually provide pieces helping us make sense of partial constructional productivity. The first piece is "coverage", the extent to which a creative utterance can be produced according to the emergent cluster of exemplars for the relevant construction, and the amount of type frequency, similarity, and variability that it features. The second piece, "statistical pre-emption", shows that simultaneously, the function of constructions is specified so that their territory cannot be easily taken over by a competing construction. Thus although the double object construction has a high degree of coverage, *Explain me this* is perceived as odd by native speakers of English, not only due to formal and semantic constraints, but most importantly because it is functionally "blocked" or "pre-empted" by the dative *Explain this to me*. Goldberg argues that the partial productivity of constructions thus described reveals important truths about

language and its integration in general cognition; one of them being that flexibility and rigidity are closely intertwined in language use.

Chapter 6 expands on these findings and discusses the differences between children and adults in the acquisition and comprehension / production of grammatical constructions. Children seem to take more time to master the subtle constraints on constructional productivity, but end up having more complete knowledge than an adult learning a second language, where “transfer effects” and related warping phenomena take up some of the cognitive efforts necessary to handle these subtle constraints. As in previous chapters, the author gives us accounts of various experiments from recent times designed to test these ideas, some of which she conducted herself; she thus grounds the discussion in evidence that makes the reading experience lively and stimulating.

Finally, chapter 7 makes an even stronger case for the usage-based constructional approach and the notion of statistical pre-emption by comparing it to other, more or less similar perspectives: Goldberg argues that the stance adopted in the book compensates several flaws identified in previous and contemporary analyses. This may be the least accessible part of the whole. A slight shift of audience towards more experienced readers seems to take place, and the style comes nearer to that found in a specialized article or book section. That being said, it is concise and rewarding if sufficiently grappled with. Chapter 8 concludes and expresses enthusiasm for a growing body of research in a framework that is still in its youth, with hopes that the reader will also be encouraged to contribute to the ambitious enterprise of CxG. One interesting line of research mentioned throughout the book is the social function of constructions, and the variability which can lead to the emergence of dialectal constructions.

Although it preaches to the choir in my case, *Explain Me This* is still likely to convince many students and language enthusiasts interested in the discipline of cognitive linguistics. It strikes a well-maintained balance between accessibility and precision, although it undoubtedly remains an academic reading. It is also a very useful reference for the current state of usage-based constructionist principles, while also being an entertaining and playful read. The format adopted here is refreshing and commendable, as it is more relaxed than in traditional handbooks, while keeping high standards of informativeness and argumentation. The short passages dealing with advanced probability theory and formal linguistic frameworks, which could have been spelled out in more detail for newcomers, are the only spots that may detract slightly from this otherwise successful presentation of Construction Grammar.