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Constructions and frames as interpretive clues

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Drawing attention to a rather neglected domain in Construction Grammar analyses, this paper examines the multi-layered nature of speakers' linguistic knowledge and its manifestation in the emergence of new linguistic structure. In particular, I show that the emergence of certain discourse-sensitive grammatical patterns can be systematically captured by appealing to an intricate interaction between fairly abstract constructional meanings based on metonymic transfer, lexical meanings of words ('semantic' frames), and particular discourse-pragmatic functions ('discourse' frames, understood as pragmatically grounded schematizations of communicative and discourse-structure conventions). It is the knowledge of all three dimensions that aids speakers in their interpretive tasks. The theoretical issues are demonstrated on a subset of discourse-functional and modal uses of the word *jestli* 'if/whether' in conversational Czech, as attested in the Czech National Corpus.

Keywords: constructional meaning, interactional meaning, context, discourse frame, cooperative principle

1. Introduction

The process of expressing thoughts by speakers and establishing interpretations by hearers is a fundamental part of language use and understanding. Hearers attempt to identify semantic and syntactic relationships when presented with a sequence of words in an utterance, and in doing so, they must rely on a certain amount of conventional linguistic knowledge that is shared within a speech community. Moreover, all of the expressive and interpretive work occurs in a particular context — linguistic, socio-cultural, physical — and speakers thus draw on their conventional understanding of various contextual clues as well. The question is what exactly constitutes this relatively stable shared knowledge: What kinds of grammatical, semantic, and pragmatic entities might be at work and how do these entities hold together as the complex symbolic system we call language?

The task of capturing the complexity calls for an approach that can treat linguistic knowledge as the result of a gradual conventionalization of patterns of understanding, in which morpho-semantic structure, syntactic function, communicative function, and lexical meaning form an integrated whole, i.e. constructions in the sense of Construction Grammar (esp. Fillmore 1989, Croft 2001, Fried & Östman 2004). However, the nature and details of the integration has remained largely unaddressed. It is clear that a construction grammarian must be concerned with incorporating, when necessary, the meanings of words, but also relevant features of various types of context(s) in which linguistic expressions are used. This dimension of linguistic analysis was recognized quite early in Fillmore's work on discourse-related issues (Fillmore 1974/1981), but as a distinct domain of analysis, the study of pragmatic knowledge that plays a role in sentence and text comprehension still awaits a systematic investigation.

The central concern of the present paper is to draw attention to this relatively neglected dimension of constructional analyses, by examining the role of constructions and frames (as conceived of in the Frame Semantic literature, e.g. Fillmore 1982, 1984, Fillmore & Atkins 1992, Fillmore et al. 2003, Fried & Östman 2003, Fried 2005, 2007, Iwata 2008) as sources of interpretive clues in spontaneous discourse. The general theoretical issues will be demonstrated on a small but representative subset of discourse-functional uses of the word *jestli* in conversational Czech, as attested in the *Czech National Corpus*. One of the functions of this word in standard language (written and spoken) is to introduce indirect polar questions (thus corresponding to the English 'if/whether'), such as exemplified in (1); the main predicate that requires the polar question as its complement is underlined, the word *jestli* and its communicative equivalent in the English translation will be in boldface throughout the paper:

- (1) a. ptala se naší mamky, **jestli** nechceme pět kilo [orall2006]
 'she asked my mom if we'd like [to take] five kilos'
 b. a nevěděla sem, **jestli** se tomu mám zasmát [orall2006]
 'and I didn't know if I was supposed to laugh at it'

In conversational language, though, the clauses introduced by *jestli* occur also without a main clause, i.e., independently of any semantically appropriate predicate whose complement they could be instantiating. Such free-standing *jestli*-clauses come in a number of functional and semantic variants, but in the limited space of this paper we will consider only two of them: assertions of the kind shown in (2), for which I will argue that the word *jestli* functions as a subjectivizing discourse connector; note also that the word can occur in various phonetically reduced forms (*jesli*, *jesi*, *esli*, *esi*).

- (2) a. *jesi se vopalovala, nebo co,* [oral2008]
 lit. 'if she'd been sunbathing or something'
- b. *jesi jim vláda uvolní peníze.* [oral2008]
 lit. 'if the government gives them [any] money'

Taken literally, the examples could be interpreted the way the English translations indicate, both in the same way. We will see, however, that in the actual discourse from which these examples are taken, each variant means something distinctly different: (2a) will be shown to mean something like 'I think she may've been sunbathing', while an idiomatic English rendition of (2b) will be along the lines of 'I don't think the government will give them any money'.

A closer look at the distribution and behavior of *jestli* in (2), partly also vis-à-vis (1), can help illuminate the general problem outlined at the beginning, by exploring a number of specific aspects of the patterning:

- The polyfunctional nature of the *grammatical* morpheme shows that the challenge of working out interpretive issues is not limited to polysemous structures associated with *content* words.
- The study of *jestli* broadens the domain for investigating the relationship between grammatical patterns and words that fill them, beyond issues of argument structure and verb semantics (which has been the prevalent focus so far in constructional literature).
- As a discourse connective, the word *jestli* and its usage can reveal something about the role of context in grammatical descriptions.
- Sorting out the relevant interpretive clues will suggest a new perspective on addressing the relationship (and difference?) between semantics and pragmatics.

The relationship between (1) and (2) as members of a polysemy network has been addressed in detail elsewhere (Fried 2009) and I will simply build on the existing findings about the usage-based development of the modally colored discourse-connective uses in (2) out of the syntactic function in (1). The main purpose here is to explore the connection between frames, constructions, and contextual clues by focusing on the two semantic variants shown in (2a) vs. (2b), and in doing so, I will also offer some thoughts on the emergence of constructional meaning from usage. Specifically, I will propose that a new constructional meaning can be conceptualized as a crystallization of certain preferences in 'transitional' contexts and that the interpretive process depends on 'instructions' provided simultaneously by constructions and two kinds of framing, semantic and interactional.

2. The emergence of constructional meaning in context

We must start from a brief overview of the standard indirect polar question and its manifestations in authentic usage. It is a bi-clausal syntactic unit, in which the polar question itself instantiates a Content argument of a predicate of uncertainty (not knowing, asking, deliberating, doubting, etc.). The function of this syntactic pattern as a whole is to report someone's lack of knowledge concerning a particular proposition, expressed by the polar question. In a typical configuration of this complex sentence, the main clause precedes the embedded question, as we see in (1) above. A constructional representation of this pattern is in Figure 1. Following the practice established in FrameNet for frame-semantic representations, cf. Fillmore et al. (2003), frame names will be shown in a distinct font in order to indicate that these labels represent abstract *concepts*, not concrete linguistic material. The italicized boldface marks features that differentiate this embedded question from a stand-alone polar question, which has a particular prosodic contour but no complementizer, i.e., no *jestli/zda*.

In addition to the formal requirements, this representation also provides clues for understanding the meaning and function of the whole structure: the main clause identifies the kind or mode of uncertainty (by reference to the eligible range of semantic frames associated with the main predicate) and leaves free the referent whose lack of knowledge is being reported (subject of the main clause), while the polar question expresses the object of uncertainty, including the implication that the validity of the proposition in question can either be confirmed, or denied. In this respect, the pattern is semantically quite transparent, compositional: it is clear what semantic element(s) each part of the sentence contributes.

However, in actual conversations, the construction is not always instantiated exactly as represented in Figure 1 and the apparent deviations or imperfect realizations provide us with clues toward accounting for the emergence of our target

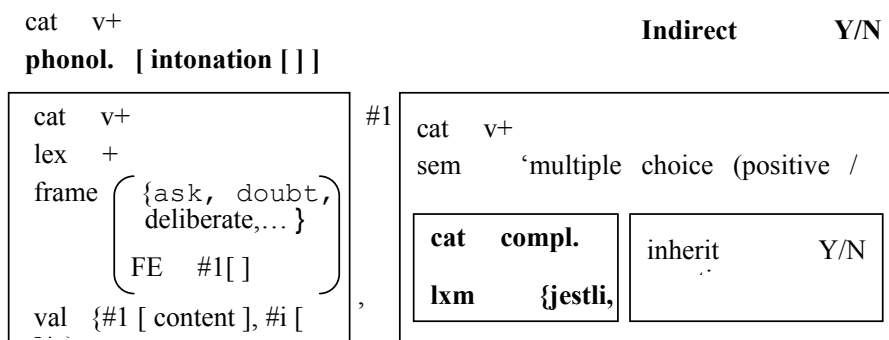


Figure 1. Constructional representation of the Czech embedded polar question

structures, i.e. the usage shown in (2). The conflict created by the imperfect match concerns not just formal differences but also interpretive shifts. To briefly illustrate, consider the example in (3):

- (3) A: *u nás, dyž deš na obvod to je vždycky tragédie, jo. tam jako sedí narvaná čekárna. nevím proč, jako jo.*
 B: *hmm.*
 A: *ale to sou všechno, jako v podstatě, důchodci. tak*
 < *jesi si tam dou pokecat s tou doktorkou*
 IF REFL there they.go to.chat with that doctor
 nebo> já nevím a vona tam každá dřepí půl
 or I NEG know.1sg
 hodiny, tři čtvrtě hodiny. jako co tam dělá u obvodního
 doktora takle dlouho.
 B: *hm. [oral2008]*
 A: ‘where we live, when you go to your doctor it’s always a disaster, y’know. it’s like the waiting room is packed. I don’t know why, like, y’know’
 B: ‘uhm’
 A: ‘but it’s all like basically retired folks. so if/I-guess they go there to have a chat with the doctor or I don’t know and each of them hangs out in there for half an hour, three quarters of an hour. I mean what are they doing in the family doctor’s office for so long.’
 B: ‘yeah’

The interlocutors discuss the question of whether the system of inviting patients to a doctor’s office should be changed, so that one does not spend inordinate amounts of time waiting for one’s turn. Speaker A first states that she does not know why there are always so many people in the waiting room. In her second turn, though, she proceeds to offer possible reasons for it and the *jestli*-clause thus, given the context, can be taken as her subjective guess about one potential explanation. This interpretation is facilitated by the fact that the expected main clause that would create the contextual setting for a polar question, does not materialize until after the *jestli*-clause. Thus from B’s perspective, two readings emerge as equally plausible: a normal, fully instantiated indirect question (‘I don’t know if they go there to have a chat with the doctor’), but also a reading suggestive of a subjective guess (‘maybe they go there to have a chat with the doctor, for all I know’). In the latter, the added *já nevím* ‘I don’t know’ signals that the speaker considers the proposition as no more than her subjective opinion and that it could be proven wrong (cf. Thompson’s 2002 observations concerning similar patterning in English conversations). The possibility of a shifted interpretation makes perfect communicative

sense: the material point of the conversation is not to determine what A does or does not know (in that case a canonical embedded polar question, as represented in Figure 1 would be a more natural choice), but to figure out why the waiting rooms are so crowded and how to get rid of the waiting. Consequently, an attempt to offer an acceptable explanation for the cause of the problem constitutes a communicatively much more co-operative contribution.

Previous research (Fried 2009) suggests that there are at least two factors that play a significant role in the development from (1) toward (2), via the ambivalent tokens of the type in (3). One is the preferred type of main clause that introduces the *jestli*-clause in actual discourse. The other is the emergence of constructional meaning that becomes conventionally associated with the polar question alone and is motivated by the low informativeness — and, thus, diminished discourse contribution — of the main clause. With respect to the former, corpus attestations show that there is a distinct prevalence of 1st pers. sg. subject in the main clause (with the frequency of 77% in the Bohemian Czech corpora, for example), thus casting the reported ignorance as attributed predominantly to the speaker; this is true regardless of the semantic class of the main verb. However, the main predicate is preferentially instantiated by the verb *nevědět* ‘not.know’ (depending on the corpus, the frequency is 58–65% of all predicates), while the remaining 42–35% cover a disproportionately large number of other lexical predicates (64 distinct roots or idiomatic phrases).

In combination, these two features give us a somewhat skewed instantiation of the template in Figure 1 in that the main predicate is more often than not lexically specific: the verb form *nevím* ‘I don’t know’. In addition, this predicate often occurs *after* the *jestli*-clause (in contrast to the canonical and informationally neutral order shown in Figure 1), thus leaving the addressee with an apparently detached *jesli*-clause, which may or may not be followed by a main clause. It is also worth noting that even if such a main clause does follow (often after additional material intervening), the postposed clause, as in (3), is invariably in the form *nevím* ‘I don’t know’. We may hypothesize that from the addressee’s perspective in the online interpretive task, the *jestli*-clause must be interpretable on its own, without the main predicate first setting up the local context for a dependent interrogative content clause. Moreover, if the main clause is predominantly instantiated by the semantically most generic verb for expressing lack of knowledge (not.knowing), its semantic contribution is so minimal that it can easily be dispensed with altogether, leaving us with a free-standing *jestli*-clause, such as in (2). At the same time, the meaning ‘lack of knowledge’ can be still invoked through a metonymic link between the *jestli*-clause and the full complex sentence in which it normally occurs as a constituent.

To summarize, the use of indirect polar questions in conversational language is biased toward reporting the fact that the speaker does not know something. In other words, what we find in corpus-attested authentic usage is a noticeable and quantifiable tendency toward a distinctly restricted variant of the Y/N questions, as compared to the broader semantic possibilities that follow from the most abstract generalization in Figure 1. The documented bias can be taken as evidence that there is discourse-motivated potential for shifting toward greater subjectification of the propositional content, since the speaker reports something about *himself* to begin with.

A schematic representation of intermediate instantiations such as shown in (3) would have to highlight several major properties that set them apart from the canonical variant (Figure 1) and that help capture the interpretive clues that appear to be at work. One is the diminished role of the main clause as a salient contributor to the understanding of the *jestli*-clause: it is reduced to the subjectively oriented predicate *nevím* ‘I don’t know’, is necessarily postposed relative to the *jestli*-clause, and from the online processing perspective, its presence is tentative to begin with. Consequently, the complex sentence is losing its status of a conventional bi-clausal syntactic unit, showing signs of disintegrating into its constituent parts. The disintegration, in turn, manifests itself in a kind of consolidation of the compositional, bi-clausal meaning as a non-compositional constructional meaning associated with the *jestli*-clause alone: the clause becomes an expression of the *speaker’s* uncertainty. These intermediate instantiations evidently pave the way toward a complete loss of the main clause, ultimately resulting in the target structures exemplified in (2).

However, acknowledging the disintegration of the complex embedded polar question does not, by itself, provide a full account of the free-standing *jestli*-clauses, let alone of the semantic difference between (2a) and (2b). On the one hand, the result of the disintegration leaves us with a stand-alone *jestli*-clause that carries over certain important features of the transitional tokens illustrated by (3). These persisting features, schematized in Figure 2, include the following. (i) The *jestli*-clause invokes, metonymically, the meaning of speaker’s not.knowing, without having to use the verb explicitly; this is indicated by including reference to the specific semantic frame and also by incorporating the pragmatic feature ‘involvement’, which captures the subjective nature of the pattern. (ii) The speech-act function of the clause is not unambiguously interrogative and is thus left ‘unspecified’, indicated by the empty brackets (it may be fading away in favor of a subjectively cast assertion). (iii) The word *jestli* can hardly be still considered a real syntactic complementizer; moreover, the preposed *jestli*-clause disallows the stylistically conditioned alternative *zda*, which would be possible in real embedded polar questions. (iv) This patterning is limited to conversational language (formally

indicated by the discourse-frame specifications for the pattern as a whole).⁴⁵ Finally, (v) the gray line around the *jestli*-clause is meant to capture the fact that the boundary between properties that come from the erstwhile complex sentence and the properties originally associated with the *jestli*-clause as its part are dissolving, and whatever is left from the full sentence or the main clause is now merging with the *jestli*-clause specifications into a single, complex constructional meaning.

On the other hand, the question remains whether the pattern in Figure 2 — i.e., what is left over after the backgrounded main clause disappears altogether — is really the end-result and an adequate representation of the conventional usage illustrated in (2) and, particularly, how it relates to the difference in interpretation I suggested for (2a) and (2b) in the introductory remarks. Let us now examine those examples more closely in actual discourse context.

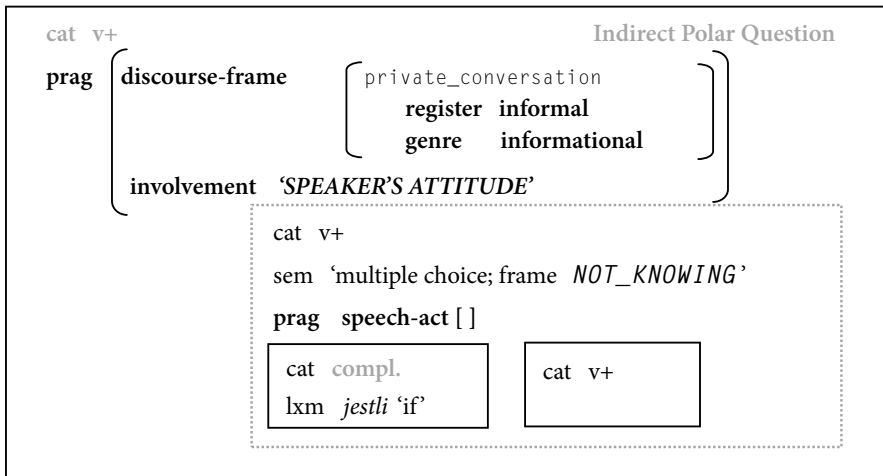


Figure 2. Emergence of the constructional meaning ‘speaker’s lack of factual knowledge’

3. From lack of knowledge to subjectively assessed potential knowledge

Our starting point is the fact that the free-standing *jestli*-assertions report something about the speaker’s uncertainty. Unlike embedded polar questions, though, these assertions cast the proposition as potential knowledge (‘maybe I know something’), which comes in two opposite flavors: something is assessed as likely (2a), or unlikely (2b). Such a development need not be a surprise: polar questions, by definition, present a given proposition as potentially either true or false and we can hypothesize that the speaker is motivated toward anticipating, however tentatively, one or the other alternative. I will return to this issue in Section 4, after first analyzing the specifics of the two variants, turning to the positive reading first.

3.1 Potential explanation

The example in (4) shows the full immediate context of the *jestli*-clause that was introduced in (2a). The excerpt is from a conversation involving four speakers, who are talking about breakfast, lunch, who made what kind of food etc. The sequence relevant to us takes place between two of the participants (A and D), when A introduces an independent subtopic: she relates a recent encounter with a mutual acquaintance and goes on about this person's looks. The free-standing *jestli*-clause is in Turn 4, shown with interlinear glosses; the slashes mark turn overlap.

- (4) Turn 1 A: *potkala sem teda NJ v krámě, že jo, a to ti řeknu, že teda vypadala pěkně blbě, /*
- 2 B: */co ste měli k vobědu?*
- 3 C: *ale koukej /*
- 4 A: */ pěkně v obličejí, jak dyž je vopařená, Jesi se vopalovala, nebo co, v pátek sem ji potkala*
 IF REFL sunbathed or what
nebo kdy /
- 5 D: */dyť vona je /*
- 6 A: */čoveče, vona ti vypadala,* [oral2006]
- Turn 1 A: 'so I ran into NJ in the store, right, and I'll tell you she looked pretty dreadful /
- 2 B: / what did you have for lunch?
- 3 C: well look /
- 4 A: /in her face, as if she got scalded,
I-guess
maybe she'd been sunbathing, or something, I saw her on Friday or whenever [it was] /
- 5 D: /well of course she's/
- 6 A: /man, I'll tell you [the way] she looked,'

It is evident that speaker A presents NJ's appearance as a newsworthy item and something of a mystery that calls for an explanation. And she also immediately offers one: the *jestli*-clause asserts that NJ may have stayed in the sun too long, at least according to the speaker's subjective reasoning. Neither A nor D have any factual knowledge of why NJ's face looked as if scalded, but A shifts the focus from their not.knowing to a communicatively more satisfying and useful state of maybe.knowing, and proposes a possible (and plausible) reason for the observed state of affairs. Which D accepts as such. (In subsequent turns, both speakers reveal shared

knowledge of NJ's medical condition and the fact that NJ cannot take any medication to treat any acute skin problems, such as the one A noted.)

An even clearer example of this usage is in the excerpt in (5). Again, the *jestli*-clause is not introduced by any main clause, nor followed by one, and the general context is of the same kind as in (4): a speaker's lack of exact knowledge of the facts is ameliorated by an attempt to make a reasonably good guess. Specifically, the speaker is trying to recall a point at which the event in question (canceling a contract) took place:

- (5) *řikám: "to jako si neudělal dobrou, dobrou, jako, smlouvu a to" no a von tu bábu ně*, ňák hned chytil a hned to zrušil.*
ty, jesi je to rok, nebo jak.
 you.VOC IF is it year.NOM or how
no, tak to kecám, to dva asi. eště sme prostě měli pevněj, pevněj, pevnou linku normálně. [oral2008]
 'I go: "you didn't make, like, a good contract 'n stuff ..." and so he somehow got hold of the woman and canceled it right away. Oh, I **think** it **may** be one year [ago] or something. Well no, I'm off there. Probably two [years]. Simply [at a time when] we still had a fixed phone line, like, y'know.'

Through the *jestli*-clause, the speaker guesses that it has been one year since the contract was cancelled. What makes this example particularly illustrative for our purposes is the speaker's follow-up: she immediately reconsiders and explicitly notes that the first guess is likely to be incorrect and proceeds to offer an alternative, which is still just an estimate but this time marked as such explicitly (*asi* 'probably'), until she finally gives a fully reliable relative frame of temporal reference (existence of a fixed line).

The tentative validity of the propositions in these *jestli*-clauses is confirmed by a formal feature that is regularly associated with this type of *jestli*-assertions. Notice that in both examples, the *jestli*-clause ends with a trailing *nebo*-phrase, which consists of the disjunctive *nebo* 'or', usually (though not necessarily, cf. ex. 3) followed by a pro-form, most commonly *co* 'what', as in (4), but we find other forms as well, such as *jak* 'how' in (5) (this one possibly being just the beginning of the phrase *jak dlouho* 'how long'), and other such possibilities in other tokens (*kdy* 'when', *kam* 'where.to', etc.). These phrases, which correspond to the English conversational 'or something', are not obligatory (they could be left out in both our excerpts without affecting the interpretation and function of the *jestli*-assertion) but they provide an additional formal link to true embedded polar questions, where this expression also occurs quite often. We can take it as an explicit signal of the multiple-choice meaning implied by the polar questions, which is still highlighted in the explicative usage of the independent *jestli*-clause. But instead of the standard

polar question meaning ‘ x wonders if p (or not p)’, the meaning illustrated by (4–5) is best glossed as ‘I think that probably p (although possibly something else)’.

We find this explicative meaning in a crystallized version in contexts where the *jestli*-clause is itself used as an answer to a direct question, as we see in (6); after A’s reply in the last turn, B returns to the original topic of the conversation (TV programs), having accepted A’s turn as a sufficiently acceptable answer to her question:

- (6) A: *kam deš?*
 B: *no jako kde je ta mamina?*
 A: *esi nečekala do sedmi na telefon* [BMK]
 A: ‘where are you going?’
 B: ‘well I mean where is mom?’
 A: ‘I-guess she **might**’ve waited for the phone call till seven’

To summarize, this usage of *jestli*-assertions is typically found in conversations in which the interlocutors are working out common ground, addressing some sort of uncertainty that has been introduced in the immediately preceding context. Speakers use the *jestli*-clause as a tentative answer to, or an explanation for, the mystery, i.e., as potential knowledge which, however, is understood as purely subjective and offered merely as one possibility which does not preclude other, better alternatives. It depends on particular discourse circumstances whether the speaker’s guess is accepted (4, 6) or rejected (5).

3.2 Counterargument

The above interpretation of the *jestli*-assertion is quite different from the usage exemplified by the following conversation, which contains the *jestli*-clause that was introduced in (2b).

- (7) Turn 1 A: *a tedka primátor prosadil, že pojedje z Dejvic metro až na letiště.*
 2 B: *to je správný. protože vono je to trapný, dyž někdo přiletí a musí se plácát těma autobusama.*
 3 A: *no. takže já si myslim, že voni s tim pohnou.*
 4 B: *hmm.*
 5 A: *protože pak...: voni teda budou ted' zpracovávat plány teprv, jo?*
 6 C: *ale jesi jim vláda uvolní peníze.*
 but IF to.them government releases money
 7 A: *na to peníze budou.* [oral2006]

- Turn 1 A: 'and now the Mayor pushed through [the idea] that there will be a subway line from Dejvice all the way to the airport'
- 2 B: 'that's good. 'cause it's embarrassing when people fly in and then they have to drag themselves on those buses'
- 3 A: 'right. so I think they'll get it going.'
- 4 B: 'uhm'
- 5 A: 'because then — well, they'll only be working on the plans at this point, right?'
- 6 C: 'but I-**think** the government **may not** provide money for it'
- 7 A: 'there **WILL** be money for this'

The conversation is quite straightforward, two speakers are discussing the state of affairs concerning new plans to extend the Prague subway all the way to the airport. Their confidence that the plan will indeed be implemented (Turns 3–4) contrasts with the skepticism of speaker C (Turn 6) who joins the conversation by expressing fear that the plans may not amount to anything because there may not be any public money for the project. He uses a free-standing *jestli*-clause and his contribution is best interpreted as a kind of counterargument to the preceding discussion: 'it is all fine but...'. The subsequent turn confirms that C's opinion is taken as a negative proposition ('maybe there will *not* be money') because speaker A, in her subsequent turn, emphasizes the positive verb as being in contrast to C's negative assertion and thus the focal point of A's utterance (Turn 7). The contrastive focus is marked by the sentence-final position of *budou* 'they.will' (in the English translation, this is indicated by the small caps), in contrast to the implied *nebudou* 'they.won't'.

The example in (8) may seem more subtle because the argument-counterargument sequence is contained inside the turn of a single speaker, rather than between two interlocutors, but the textual setting and the pragmatic force of the two tokens of *jestli*-clauses is again the same as in (7). Here the relevant parts are speaker A's deliberations whether or not someone A and B know will like what she plans to cook for them.

- (8) Turn 1 A: *a můžu takhle, a budou to jíst?*
- 2 B: *no, vo to de právě.*
- 3 A: (laughter) *no právě, jako, jako já to uvařit můžu — nebo jo, ale jako jesi to budou jíst jako.*
but like IF it they.will eat like
- 4 B: *no, to —*
- 5 A: *tak já nebudu jíst nějaký špagety jako s Peťou nebo s*, já nevim, štyry dny, ne, nebo — ne, jako jesi to budou like IF it they.will*

- jíst to jídlo jako.*
eat
- 6 B: *to záleží zase na rodině, no, prostě, jako jediný, co voni jedli normálního, byly palačinky, jinak jedli jinak jedli samý polotovary a hnusy, prostě . jako voni maj všechno před smažený* [oral2008]
- Turn 1 A: 'and can I [do it] this way, will they eat it?'
 2 B: 'well, that's exactly the thing'
 3 A: (laughter) 'exactly, I mean I can cook it — or, y'know, but I mean **I-think** they like **may not** eat it.'
 4 B: 'yeah, that — '
 5 A: 'so I'm not going to like end up eating some kind of spaghetti with Pete or with, I dunno, for four days, right, or — right? I mean **who-knows if** they'll eat it, like, the food'
 6 B: 'that again depends on the family, y'see, I mean the only thing they ever ate [that was] normal was crepes, otherwise they ate they ate all just processed stuff and junk, simply. like, they have all these pre-fried [things]'

Speaker A starts by posing a direct question (Turn 1), which is accepted by B as legitimate. And then A elaborates, twice. First (Turns 3) she expresses a general worry that she may cook something all right but the intended recipients may not want to eat it, while in Turn 5 she describes the unpleasant consequences of such a development (being stuck with a lot of unwanted food), before reiterating, somewhat abruptly, her original fear about the recipients' negative reaction. In both cases, she argues with herself as to the meaningfulness of her efforts, by using a *jestli*-clause with outwardly positive polarity, which, however, has a negative force, just like in (7). Unlike in (7), though, here the interlocutor (speaker B) proceeds by confirming A's counterargument as valid and consistent with what B also knows about the eating habits of the people in question.

The negative reading 'I think that probably not *p*' in both (7) and (8) is corroborated by the formal variant of this usage, shown in (9), in which the *jestli*-clause contains the particle *vůbec* 'at.all'. This particle is predominantly a negative polarity item and commonly found as a marker of augmented negation, with negative verbs (Greppl & Karlík 1998: 169), i.e. verbs that are explicitly marked as negative by the prefix *ne-* 'not', which is the standard form of verbal negation in Czech;⁴⁶ the particle could be added in the examples (7–8) as well, in all cases amplifying the negative force of the clause ('I think that probably not at all *p*):

- (9) *volal sem na tu Prahu čtyři že jó, tak tam to už na ten národní vejbor
tam to nikdo nebral. myslel sem, že třeba aspoň vrátnice,
ale **jesli** to vůbec měli přepojený do vrátnice.
but IF it at.all they.had forwarded.PASS into reception
prostě nikdo. [PMK]
‘I was calling Prague 4, right, and there, well, the city hall, and nobody was
answering. I thought that maybe at least the reception. but I-guess it wasn’t
even (lit. at all) forwarded to the receptionist. simply no answer’*

The expected form would be a combination of *vůbec* and the negative prefix *ne-* on the verb (*vůbec to neměli přepojený...* ‘it wasn’t at all forwarded...’), instead of the positive verb we find in (9) and in all the other tokens of this functional type of *jestli*-clauses. Its presence is thus a significant piece of evidence of implicit negation.

Finally, the semantic compatibility of this usage with argumentative contexts is consistent with its collocability with the adversative conjunction *ale* ‘but’, which frequently (though not necessarily) and naturally introduces this *jestli*-clause, as we see in (7), (9), and the first token in (8). By using *ale* ‘but’, the speaker signals explicitly that what follows is to be taken in opposition to what has just been said, whether by the same speaker (8–9), or an interlocutor (7). But as we see in the second token in (8), the adversative relation can be left implicit, supported merely by the argumentative nature of the discourse.

To summarize, the negative usage is associated with discourse contexts that could be characterized as cooperative arguments, in which the *jestli*-clause serves as a less direct, somewhat tentative expression of a counterargument to a concrete proposition in the immediately preceding context. Like the explicative usage, this one also has an idiosyncratic formal variant but in this case, the meaning shift, relative to the meaning of polar questions or the intermediate state captured in Figure 2, amounts to an assertion with the opposite polarity as compared to the explicative *jestli*. And crucially, the optional formal extensions are not interchangeable: the trailing *nebo* [pro-form] ‘or something’ cannot be inserted in the argumentative contexts (7–9), while the augmentative *vůbec* ‘[not].at.all’ or the initial adversative *ale* ‘but’, is incompatible with the explicative contexts (4–6). Either combination would lead to textual incoherence.

4. Constructions, frames, context

We can draw two conclusions from the data analysis. First, the tentative representation of free-standing *jestli*-clauses in Figure 2 is not adequate as a proper account of the attested patterns of usage. Which is to say, the emergence of an independent

either explicitly stated or at least assumed by the speaker to be implicitly present in the context. Under either reading, though, the speaker is able to cast lack of factual information as at least tentative actual knowledge.

The use of *jestli*-clauses discussed in this paper thus shows that interpretive clues speakers can rely on in understanding complex discourse come from various sources. At the level of grammatical organization, the notion of *grammatical construction* accounts for the fact that the linguistic patterns in question not only have specific formal properties but also their own constructional meaning, which cannot be predicted simply from adding up the meanings of the constituents. In the case of our two constructions, it concerns specifications of the speaker's subjective guess about the likelihood that the proposition is or is not true. At the lexical level, relevant information about the meaning of individual lexical items is supplied by *semantic frames*. It is worth noting that in our case, part of the lexically motivated contribution to the newly emerged constructional meaning is also the presence of the frame `NOT_KNOW`, as a conceptual left-over from the erstwhile main clause.⁴⁷ It must also be stressed, though, that this frame is invoked only through its incorporation into the constructional meaning of the *jestli*-clauses but is not directly instantiated by any linguistic element. This backgrounded presence lends the *jestli*-assertions their tentative flavor but, at the same time, ensures that the utterances are not primarily about not knowing something.

Finally, it is also important to recognize that the free-standing *jestli*-clauses display characteristic pragmatic meanings, which cannot be easily attributed to semantic frames as we normally conceive of them. This concerns not just a specific speech-act function common to both variants (assertion, rather than a question), but also a number of other kinds of conventionally expected contextual information, such as the type of text, genre, pragmatic force, etc., which appear to condition which of the two constructional possibilities (explicative vs. argumentative) is textually coherent and, hence, communicatively appropriate. I propose that this interpretive layer can be conceptualized in terms of *discourse frames*: cognitive entities that organize conventionally expected contextual information and that are grounded in speakers' shared knowledge of established interactional practices.

Positing this new conceptual object brings us to the issue of differentiating between semantics and pragmatics, whether we conceive of it as a discrete opposition, or a continuum (a more plausible alternative and one tacitly assumed here). I cannot address this question in its full complexity here, beyond noting that in order to capture the somewhat fluid relations and boundaries between the two domains, we need to integrate both with constructional descriptions, which serve as the linguistic 'glue'. My goal in this space is more modest, namely, to suggest a new direction of thinking about this distinction and what we may expect to be its content. The usual understanding associates the domain of semantics

with the conventional knowledge of 'coded' meaning, contained in the lexicon, while pragmatics is taken to be the domain of usage, concerned with online interpretations. The problematic part is the question if and to what degree pragmatic meanings may also involve a conventional status and, thus, be part of recurring grammatical patterns. I have shown on the example of the conversational usage of the *jestli*-assertions — and others have pointed out similar tendencies in other forms and languages (most recently in various papers in Bergs & Diewald 2009) — that realistic hypotheses about speakers' linguistic knowledge often must include reference to interactional constraints that regulate the usage of a particular grammatical structure and that apply regularly, systematically. Consequently, we need to entertain the possibility that there are two types of framing (originally hinted at by Fillmore's 1974/1981 observations about a pragmatic dimension of regular linguistic expressions and more recently advocated also by Cuyckens et al. 2003: 21, who refer to this layer as representations of complete "usage events", a notion originally introduced by Langacker 1987), which only together can serve as a sufficiently rich inferential basis for the speakers' encoding and decoding needs. The two types of frames reflect two types of meaning: lexical meaning and interactional meaning. Both can be highly conventional *and* at the same time open to modulations in usage, but each corresponds to a distinct dimension of speakers' linguistically relevant knowledge: semantic frames are schematizations of world knowledge associated with individual lexical units, and discourse frames are, then, schematizations of communicative and discourse-structure conventions, which is to say of the interactional habits of individual words or structures. And reference to both must be, to a lesser or greater degree, integrated in grammatical constructions, which are, by definition, conceived of as semantically and pragmatically enriched grammatical representations.

5. Conclusions

I attempted to chart a way toward an analysis that can be both descriptively adequate and cognitively plausible, while also remaining true to communicative reality. I argued that only close analysis of recurring semantic and pragmatic constraints that motivate grammatical patterning can lead toward richer and more plausible hypotheses about speakers' full linguistic knowledge and about the nature of verbal interaction.

The main concern of this paper was to examine the role of constructions and frames as conventionally established sources of interpretive clues in spontaneous conversational discourse, using a subset of modally colored discourse-functional uses of the polysemous Czech function word *jestli* as illustrative material. The

analysis shows that a proper account of the meaning and function of the word *jestli* cannot be determined outside of specific grammatical constructions, which integrate semantic, formal, and interactional features associated with each distinct function of the word in conversational language. Specifically, we can identify two subtypes of free-standing subjective assertions — Explanation and Counterargument — whose constructional meanings can be glossed, respectively, as ‘I think *p* is most plausible’ and ‘I don’t think *p* is true/likely’. Each is motivated by a different type of discourse environment (informational vs. argumentative, respectively), each develops out of one of the two a priori available implications contained in the meaning of the *jestli*-clause (embedded polar questions), and both preserve the semantic element of uncertainty.

The point of the analysis has been to demonstrate that the emergence of these discourse-sensitive patterns can be systematically captured by appealing to an intricate interaction between fairly abstract constructional meanings (developed through metonymic transfer), lexical meanings of words, and particular discourse-pragmatic functions. The latter two dimensions point toward acknowledging two types of frames: not just the more traditional and familiar variant that has been posited for capturing lexical meanings of words, but also ‘interactional’ frames, which are understood as pragmatically grounded schematizations of communicative and discourse-structure conventions. It is the conventional knowledge in all three domains that aids speakers in interpreting novel grammatical patterns. Such an approach, then, paves the way toward developing constructions as knowledge structures that can represent generalizations about ‘communicative competence’, rather than focusing on narrowly defined ‘grammatical competence’.

Notes

1. A typographical note: the gray color indicates that a feature is fading away; boldface indicates features that are not part of the canonical polar construction (Figure 1); italicized small caps indicate features originally associated with the (conversationally preferred) main clause.
2. Testing for negative polarity is problematic in Czech since the language has multiple negation, and thus also two distinct series of pro-forms, one positive and one negative, which are in complementary distribution: the former with formally positive verbs, the latter with formally negative verbs (*ne-V*) only. But the particle *vůbec* ‘at all’ is outside of these series and generally correlates with negative-polarity contexts, not just with negative verbs in declarative sentences but also with positive verb forms, e.g. in questions or conditional clauses. Its distribution is complicated and cannot be discussed here beyond noting its known affinity toward negative contexts.

3. The frame must be related to other (sub)frames having to do with lack of knowledge, collectively perhaps conceptualizable as instantiations of a more general background frame along the lines of search for information.

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