

## Is the pattern ‘that’s Adj’ a construction?

### The relevance of individual variation.

Hans-Jörg Schmid (LMU Munich, Germany)

Sequences of the type *that’s right*, *that’s nice* or *that’s okay* occur fairly frequently in spontaneous spoken conversation. The analysis of spoken corpus data from the BNC suggests that in spite of its formal regularity and semantic compositionality the pattern ‘that’s Adj’ can be considered a construction according to the criteria established by Hilpert (2014: 14-22). In addition to being recurrent, the pattern is marked by collocational preferences and restrictions indicating three overlapping semantico-pragmatic clusters:

1. *that’s right/ true /correct* etc. for the expression of epistemic stance
2. *that’s nice/ cool /lovely* etc. for the expression of evaluative stance
3. *that’s alright/ fine /okay* etc. for signalling agreement or uptake of what was said before.

These clusters could be regarded as more specific variants of the general ‘that’s Adj’ construction on a meso-level in the constructional hierarchy.

However, going beyond the level of aggregate corpus data by looking into the conversational contributions by individual speakers one finds that speakers vary considerably in their preferences regarding the use of the pattern ‘that’s Adj’. Some speakers strongly favour the third variant of the potential construction, while hardly ever using the second one, others show the converse distribution. These findings indicate that what seems to be one construction with several variants from the perspective of conventionalization may well be represented in different ways in the minds of individual speakers.

This raises interesting questions related to the definition and status of the notion of *construction* as a “*conventionalized form-meaning pairing*” (Croft 2001: 19) or a “*stored form-meaning pairing*” (Goldberg 2003: 219; my emphases). On the one hand, it can be argued that such individual differences do not fall within the remit of linguistic analysis, whose task it is to describe conventional structures rather than individual representations. On the other hand, individual cognitive variation is an important source of social variation and language change and should therefore not be neglected. In my talk I will plead for a clear theoretical and methodological separation of collective conventionality and individual entrenchment and propose a dynamic model integrating both aspects of language (Schmid in print).

### References

- Croft, William. 2001. *Radical construction grammar: Syntactic theory in typological perspective*. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press.
- Goldberg, Adele E. 2003. ‘Constructions: A new theoretical approach to language’, *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 7(5): 219-224.
- Hilpert, Martin. 2014. *Construction grammar and its application to English*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Schmid, Hans-Jörg. In print. *The dynamics of the linguistic system. Usage, conventionalization, and entrenchment*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.