

Variations on a Theme: English Filler-Gap Constructions

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This paper delineates the patterns of variation among English Filler-Gap constructions, arguing that an account of the variation is available within a framework based on the notion of ‘grammatical construction’. This account, which treats similarities and differences among topicalization, interrogatives, relatives, exclamatives, and comparative correlative clauses, is articulated within the framework of Sign-Based Construction Grammar (Sag 2007, available at: <http://lingo.stanford.edu/sag/papers/theo-syno.pdf>).

The “parameters” of variation in English FG clauses include the following:

1. Is there a distinguished wh-element in the filler daughter, and if so, what kind (interrogative, relative, exclamative, definite, none)? (*[*What a book*] do they like?)
2. What are the possible syntactic categories of the filler daughter (among NP, PP, AP, AdvP)? (*[*In what a mansion*] they were living!)
3. What are the possible syntactic categories of the head daughter (S, CP, VP)? (*Bagels, [that I like])
4. Can the head daughter be inverted? Must it be? (*The more do you see (the more (do) you suspect).)
5. Can the head daughter be infinitival? (*It’s amazing [how many people (for us) to talk to].)
6. What is the semantic and/or syntactic category of the mother (proposition, question, fact,...)?
7. What is the semantic and/or syntactic category of the head daughter (proposition, soa,...)?
8. Is the clause a filler-gap island? (*[How many of the visitors]_i did he say that [[bagels]_j, he would give ___j to ___i]?)
9. Must the clause be an ‘independent’ (‘main’) clause? (*We wondered about [who did he see].)

By organizing constructs via cross-classifying types, the appropriate generalizations are straightforwardly expressed as type constraints of varying grain. The results presented here stand as a challenge to any transformation-based analysis, including those developed within the ‘Minimalist Program’.