

A Construction Grammar Account of *V the Hell Out of* Constructions in Present-Day English*

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Abstract: Idiomatic expressions (or idiomaticity) have long been a focus of semantics (Bolinger 1971, 1977; Langacker 1987; Nunberg et al. 1994; etc.). The previous studies mainly deal with verb phrases such as *pull strings* “to exploit connections.” Recent constructional works investigate idiomatic expressions in the level of construction such as Caused-Motion Constructions (e.g. *They laughed the poor guy out of the room*) and Resultative Constructions (e.g. *John hammered the metal flat*) (Goldberg 1995; Jackendoff 1997, 2002; etc.), which have been regarded as minor exceptions in generative syntax. As one of them, *V the Hell Out of* Constructions (VHOCs), e.g. *John beat the hell out of Sam*, have become a recent focus of construction grammar (Hoeksema and Napoli 2008; Yoshikawa and Igarashi 2011; etc.). This expression usually describes the intensity or furiousness of action denoted by verbs, e.g. “John beat Sam furiously.” This paper carefully examines their interpretations, based on the research conducted by Hoeksema and Napoli (2008). Furthermore, I consider the relationship among VHOCs and other related constructions from the viewpoint of construction grammar.

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to investigate the constructional characteristics of *V the Hell Out of* Constructions (henceforth VHOCs), exemplified by (1), from the viewpoint of construction grammar:

- (1) a. They beat the {hell/fuck/shit/bejesus} out of him.
 - b. The police kicked the {hell/fuck/shit/bejesus} out of them.
- (Hoeksema and Napoli 2008:359)

At first glance, this expression looks similar to Resultative Constructions (henceforth RCs), which have been analyzed from various points of view (Simpson 1983; Jackendoff 1990; Levin and Rappaport Hovav 1995; Wechsler 2005; and so many others), as shown in (2):

* Parts of this paper were presented at Florida Linguistic Yearly Meeting 2 (FLYM 2). I would like to thank the audience for helpful and fruitful questions and comments. I am also grateful to members of the editorial board for suggesting stylistic improvements. All remaining errors and inadequacies are entirely my own.

- (2) a. Pauline hammered the metal flat.
b. Jasmine pushed the door open. (Levin 1993:100)

The salient similarity between VHOCs and RCs is their form: [NP V NP XP].¹ This formal parallelism leads us to predict that these constructions also share the same meaning.

Now, let us briefly look at the meaning of RCs. In previous studies (Goldberg 1995; Jackendoff 1997; Miyata 2004; etc.), their meaning has often been noted as “X CAUSES Y to BECOME Z.” For example, sentence (2a) expresses a situation where the hammering action by Pauline caused the metal to become flat. The same explanation holds for (2b).

One might think that VHOCs also describe the resultant state of action denoted by verbs, like “the beating action by Pauline caused an object referent described by *hell* etc. to come out of him” in (1a). However, this is not the case. They do not have such resultative meaning as RCs, but rather have intensifying interpretation like “they beat him furiously” in (1a), and “the police kicked them madly” in (1b).

Besides, VHOCs have often been regarded as “idiomatic expressions” in previous studies, because the lexical meaning of *the hell/fuck/shit/bejesus* does not seem to be reflected at all in the whole meaning of this expression. Therefore, they are often called figurative or non-literal expressions.

Given the idiosyncratic construal, this paper further investigates the interpretation of VHOCs and the constructional relationship with other expressions from the viewpoint of construction grammar. The issues on which I shed light in the following discussion are thus mainly twofold:

- (3) (i) to investigate the variety of VHOC interpretations
(ii) to investigate the relationship between VHOCs and other constructions

The following sections are comprised as follows: in section 2, I examine a suggestion proposed by Hoeksema and Napoli (2008). In section 3, I investigate types of VHOC construals in Present-Day English, based on Hoeksema and Napoli’s proposal. Section 4 proposes the constructional relationship between some types of VHOCs from the viewpoint of construction grammar. In section 5, I propose the constructional network among VHOCs and other constructions. Section 6 is dedicated to concluding remarks.

2. Hoeksema and Napoli (2008)

Hoeksema and Napoli (2008) explore the origin of VHOCs from the diachronic point of view. They claim that this expression is derived from exorcism. In its earliest stage, the expression *beat the devil out of X* described either a real exorcism or a beating action:

¹ In this paper, I tentatively stipulate that XP includes APs, PPs, and particles.

- (4) *beat the devil out of X* $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{a real exorcism} \\ \text{a beating action} \end{array} \right.$

However, they cannot identify exactly when this expression started to be in use, because it is difficult to distinguish the earlier exorcism interpretation from the later intensifier reading.

According to their research (as found in Google Books), the first appearance of VHOCs was in 1895. In the earliest stage, the word in object position was not *hell* or *shit* but *devil* or related words, as shown in (5) (italics mine):

- (5) Yes, *Loubitza will beat the devil out of her* when she gets her home –
her and her broken jar! (Hoeksema and Napoli 2008:371)

In the context of exorcism, we can literally interpret these sentences: “the beating action by Loubitza caused the devil to come out of her body.” As time passed, however, the meaning of exorcism faded, and taboo terms came to function as mere intensifiers.

Hoeksema and Napoli also explore why *the hell* has been substituted for *the devil*. It was greatly influenced by the transition of ‘*wh*-words + intensifier.’ To be more specific, the expression *what the hell* came to be used instead of *what the devil* in an earlier change in English. This shift started in the late 18th or early 19th century, long before the first appearance of VHOCs:

- (6) $\begin{array}{ccc} \textit{the devil} & & \textit{what the devil} \\ \downarrow \longleftarrow \text{INFLUENCED} \longrightarrow \downarrow & & \text{(in the late 18th or early 19th century)} \\ \textit{the hell} & & \textit{what the hell} \end{array}$

Let us look at examples that include *what the hell* and which were found in the earliest stage:

- (7) a. I wonder what the hell brings us here again?
b. Him! Why what the hell is he but a priest?
(Hoeksema and Napoli 2008:372)

In these cases, *what the hell* does not have any meaning and functions as an intensifier. These examples imply that the intensifier use of *what the hell* already became widely accepted in the early 19th century. From these examples, we can assume that the shift from *the devil* to *the hell* has been highly influenced by the earlier change from *what the devil* to *what the hell*.

Hoeksema and Napoli also state that this historical substitution accounts for the reason why *hell* is preceded by the definite article *the*. Their research revealed that until about the 1920s, the typical variant of VHOCs was *beat hell out of X*, in which the definite article is absent. Observe the following examples (italics mine):

- (8) a. Sheridan...used some rather strong language and said that *he would 'knock hell out of Stuart* if he could get at him.'
b. Tom Tarkington also testified that Goodman told him during the day that *he was going to whip hell out of the appellant*.
c. One of them mots that do be in the packets of fags Stoer smokes that *his old fellow welted hell out of him* for one time he found out.

(Hoeksema and Napoli 2008:372)

Putting the definite article in front of *hell* was presumably influenced by the expression *the hell* in *wh*-questions in earlier stages. In fact, even in Present-Day English, although *hell* must typically follow the definite article as in (9a), it is the case that the omission of the definite article is permitted only when *hell* occurs with the preposition in *wh*-questions, as shown in (9b):

- (9) a. What *(the) hell are you doing?
b. What in hell are you driving at?

(Hoeksema and Napoli 2008:372)

They note, however, that the number of examples like (9b) is very small in Present-Day English. In this way, *hell* without the definite article has chronologically been shifted to *the hell*.

- (10) *hell*
↓
the hell ← INFLUENCED — *what *(the) hell*

So far, we have looked at Hoeksema and Napoli's investigation. From their research, the historical background of VHOCs has been revealed. However, even if we consider VHOCs chronologically, it is the case that VHOCs containing the word *devil* or *Satan* are still used even in Present-Day English, although they are very rare. Then, the following should be asked:

- (11) How do we treat VHOCs in Present-Day English?

To give an answer to the question above, the following sections focus on the interpretational distribution of VHOCs in Present-Day English, and then reconsider this expression in terms of construction grammar.

3. VHOC Interpretations

3.1. Interpretational Distribution

In this subsection, I take a look at the interpretational distribution of VHOCs in Present-Day English. Consider the following pairs of interpretations:

- (12) a. * beat the hell out of him (Literal Interpretation)
b. ^{OK} beat the {devil/Satan} out of him (Literal Interpretation)
“to beat the devil and it actually came out of him”
- (13) a. ^{OK} beat the hell out of him (Intensifying Interpretation)
b. ^{OK} beat the {devil/Satan} out of him (Intensifying Interpretation)
“to beat him furiously”

When the word *devil* or *Satan* occurs in object position, both literal and figurative interpretations are allowed. In other words, VHOCs including the word *devil* or *Satan* can be interpreted in two ways: “the beating action caused the devil or Satan to come out of one’s body” or “beating someone furiously.” On the other hand, if the word *hell* occurs in object position, VHOCs only permit figurative interpretation.

3.2. The Status of Intensifying Words

Considering the interpretational distribution observed in 3.1, we can then predict that the object status of *hell* and *devil* is different. To clarify the difference, I will introduce a syntactic operation to these constructions: i.e. passivization. It has long been a traditional and well-known diagnostic of patienthood in the theory of grammar. (Bolinger 1975; Rice 1987; Takami 1992; etc.). In the literature, it has been argued that a subject in passives must be categorized as a patient:

- (14) a. John was hit by Mike.
b. * John is resembled by Mike. (Bolinger 1975:68)

In (14a), for example, the subject referent *John* is obviously affected by the hitting action, and he could get injured or get angry at Mike. So the subject referent *John* is thought of as a patient of the hitting action. On the other hand, in (14b), even if Mike looks like John, Mike does not intend to look like John. In this case, of course, John is not physically and mentally affected at all. Therefore, the subject referent *John* is not a patient.²

Now, let us get back to VHOCs. Consider the following examples of VHOCs to which passivization is applied:

- (15) a. The {devil/Satan} was beaten, and it literally came out of Mary.
b. * The {hell/fuck/shit/bejesus} was beaten, and it literally came out of him.

In (15a), *devil* or *Satan* is considered a specific creature, though it does not exist in the real world. On the other hand, *hell* or *shit* in (15b) doesn’t have any shape. Shapeless objects cannot

² Since space does not permit a detailed investigation of the status of the subject referent *John*, I will not discuss it any further here.

be physically beaten, of course. Therefore, we can conclude that the object *devil* is the beaten object and it should be categorized as a patient, while *hell* is not.

When we consider the interpretational distribution, as shown in (12) and (13), and the contrast of their object status in VHOCs, as in (15), it may be safely assumed that there exist literally interpreted VHOCs and figuratively interpreted VHOCs even in Present-Day English. For simplicity, in what follows, I shall call the former Literally Construed VHOCs (hereafter L-VHOCs) and the latter Figuratively Construed VHOCs (hereafter F-VHOCs):

Figure 1: Literally Construed VHOCs
(L-VHOCs)

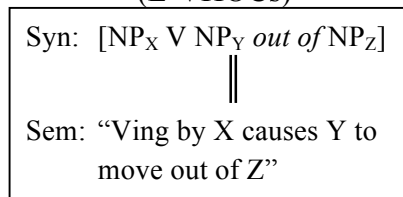
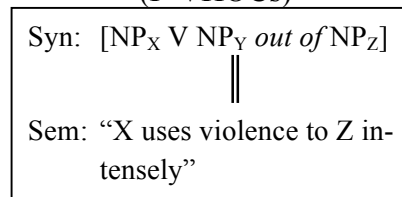


Figure 2: Figuratively Construed VHOCs
(F-VHOCs)



If we assume the two types of VHOCs as above, then the following question will come up:

(16) What is the relationship between L- and F-VHOCs in Present-Day English?

The next section tackles this question from the viewpoint of construction grammar.

4. The Constructional Relation between L-VHOCs and F-VHOCs

This section aims to answer the question in (16), which is raised by assuming L- and F-VHOCs, in the framework of construction grammar.

It seems that we have already got some clue to answer the question from the historical observation by Hoeksema and Napoli (2008). As they argue, the intensifying meaning of VHOCs, i.e. F-VHOCs, appeared later than the exorcism one, i.e. L-VHOCs. From the chronological transition of constructional construals, we can predict that there is some relationship between the beating action in exorcism and intensifying meaning.

In this regard, Espinal and Mateu’s (2010) argumentation is suggestive. They carried out a study on Body Part *Off* Constructions (henceforth BPOCs), as shown below, in terms of cognitive linguistics:

- (17) a. Susan worked her head off last night.
 “Susan worked hard as if her head came off.”
 b. Sam yelled his heart out.
 “Sam yelled as if his heart came out.”

(Jackendoff 1997:551)

As is the case with F-VHOCs, these expressions are often regarded as hyperbolic expressions. For instance, sentence (17a) describes a situation where Susan worked hard as if her head came off, not where Susan's hard working caused her head to come off.³ To explain the relationship between literal and hyperbolic meaning, they offer the metaphor in (18):

- (18) (AN EXTREME) INTENSITY IS (AN EXCESSIVE) CHANGE OF LOCATION
(Espinal and Mateu 2010:1406)

Metaphor (18) captures the relationship between unrealistic movement and excessiveness. In (17a) for example, the postverbal sequence *her head off* doesn't describe an actual detachment of her head, but it functions as a mere intensifier. Here, the above metaphor, which relates (extreme) change of location to (extreme) intensity, is activated. Hence, the intensifying interpretation is generated:

- (19) BPOCs denoting the actual detachment of one's body parts
↓ ← (AN EXTREME) INTENSITY IS (AN EXTREME) CHANGE OF LOCATION
BPOCs denoting the intensity of one's action

Now, let us see that this metaphor can be applied to VHOCs. Originally, L-VHOCs expressed demons' supernatural *movement*, as we have observed above. In contrast, F-VHOCs describe the *intensity* or *furiousness* of action denoted by verbs. Here, the crucial difference is whether they describe movement or intensity. Hence, the metaphor in (18), which relates change of location to intensity, is suitable to capture the relationship between L- and F-VHOCs.

It can be concluded, therefore, that the property of F-VHOCs in Present-Day English is inherited from L-VHOCs through the metaphor in (18) (Metaphorical Inheritance, I_M):

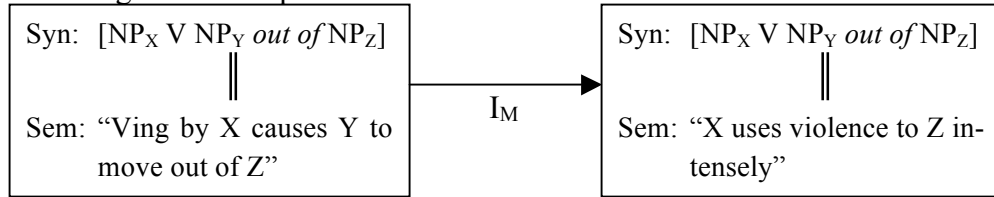
³ Given a proper context, however, BPOCs may permit literal reading:

- (i) a. The android {worked/danced/laughed} its head off, and it fell to the ground.
b. The robot talked its {butt/ass} off, and the people around it were very surprised.
c. The robot pitched its arm off, and finally it broke down.
d. The android danced its feet off, and finally it broke down.

(Kudo 2014:117)

Although there are several differences other than their interpretations between literally and figuratively construed BPOCs, for reasons of space, I will not discuss the interpretation of BPOCs any further here. For more details about BPOC construals, see Kudo (2014).

Figure 3: Metaphorical Inheritance from L-VHOCs to F-VHOCs



In this section, I have argued that L- and F-VHOCs in Present-Day English are constructionally linked by the metaphor that Espinal and Mateu (2010) proposed. In the following section, I propose that this construction grammar approach reveals not only the relationship between L- and F-VHOCs but also between L-VHOCs and other related constructions.

5. L-VHOCs and Other Constructions

In the previous section, we observed the constructional relationship between L- and F-VHOCs. This section suggests that a closer look would reveal that they are related to other expressions that have been a focus of construction grammar.

5.1. Form, Meaning, and Passivization of L-VHOCs and RCs

To begin with, recall that L-VHOCs appear to be similar to RCs in their form and meaning, discussed in section 1. Compare the constructional characteristics between them in (20) and (21) and reconsider the examples of RCs in (22):

- (20) L-VHOCs
 Form: NP V NP *out of* NP
 Meaning: Ving by X causes Y to move out of Z
- (21) RCs
 Form: Subj V Obj Xcomp
 Meaning: X causes Y to become Z
- (22) a. Pauline hammered the metal flat.
 b. Jasmine pushed the door open. (Goldberg 1995:3) (= (2))

Other than the formal and semantic resemblances, their argument property is also parallel. That is, object elements in both constructions are categorized as patients, which is conveyed by passivization:

- (23) a. The metal was hammered flat.
 b. The door was pushed open. (Levin 1993:100)
- (24) The {devil/Satan} was beaten, and it literally came out of Mary.

From the parallel syntactic behavior, together with their form and meaning, we can safely say that the two constructions are closely related somehow.

5.2. RCs and Caused-Motion Constructions

It would be premature, however, to investigate the relationship between L-VHOCs and RCs in more detail in terms of construction grammar, since we have to indulge in the constructional characteristics of RCs themselves. According to Goldberg (1995), RCs are originally inherited from Caused-Motion Constructions (henceforth CMCs), as exemplified by (25):

- (25) a. They laughed the poor guy out of the room.
 b. Frank sneezed the tissue off the table. (Goldberg 1995:152)

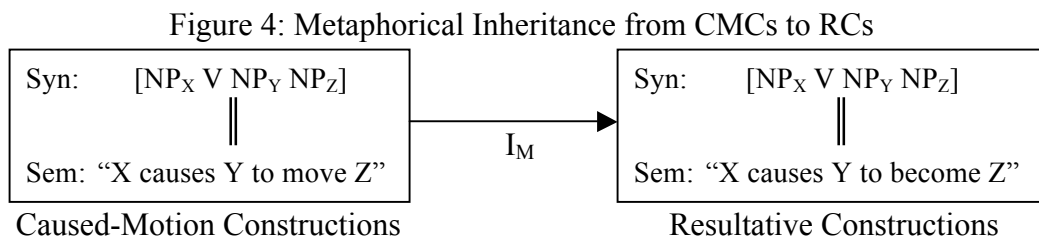
The constructional meaning of CMCs can often be represented by “X causes Y to move from/to Z” (cf. Goldberg 1995:3). For instance, sentence (25a) describes a situation where their laughing action caused the poor guy to move out of the room. So, the only difference between RCs and CMCs is whether they describe change of *state* or *location*:

- (26) RCs: change of *state*
 CMCs: change of *location*

Goldberg further suggests that the traditional metaphor in (27), originally introduced by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), is concerned with the difference between these constructions:

- (27) STATES ARE LOCATIONS

Therefore, the constructional relationship between these two is illustrated as follows:



In the rest of the subsections in this section, we will consider the constructional relationships between L-VHOCs and CMCs, and between L-VHOCs and RCs.

5.3. L-VHOCs and CMCs

Let us first consider L-VHOCs together with CMCs. As we have already observed above, L-VHOCs describe change of location, as is obvious from the examples of CMCs and L-VHOCs below:

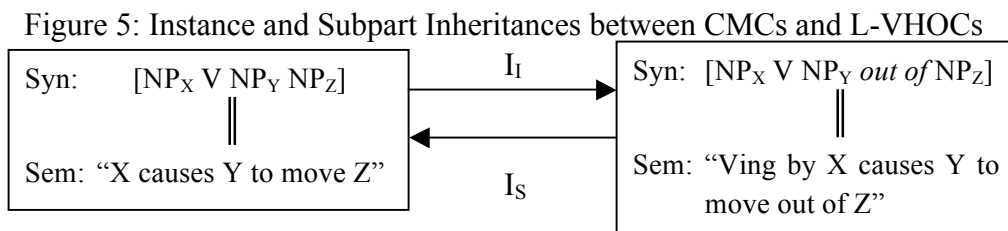
- (28) a. They laughed the poor guy out of the room.
 b. Frank sneezed the tissue off the table.
- (= (25))
- (29) a. To beat the devil out of them... (BNC:K60)
 b. When ‘*Charlie’s Angels*’ beat the *Beelzebub* out of Adam Sandler’s ‘*Little Nicky*’...

All the examples in (28) and (29) describe the movement of the object referents caused by the actions expressed by the verbs. The constructional meaning of CMCs and RCs is contrastive to that of RCs, as RCs don’t describe any movement, as exemplified by the ill-formed paraphrases:

- (30) a. He {pounded/hammered} the metal flat.
 * “The metal actually moved.”
 b. I shot the bear dead.
 * “The bear actually moved.”

In addition, I would like to consider the type of relationship between L-VHOCs and CMCs. In section 4, we observed that the metaphorical extension is involved in the inheritance between L- and F-VHOCs. In contrast to their way of inheritance, the type of relationship between L-VHOCs and RCs is somewhat different.

Here, I would like to focus on their object characteristics. In L-VHOCs, object entity is restricted to *devil* or *Satan*, so that literal interpretation is obtained. On the other hand, the object entity in CMCs is not limited. Given the selectional difference of object entity, then L-VHOCs can be thought of as an instance of CMCs (Instance Inheritance, I_I). At the same time, it also follows that they are linked by subpart links (Subpart Inheritance, I_S):⁴



5.4. L-VHOCs and RCs

The previous subsection revealed the relationship between L-VHOCs and CMCs. However, remember that L-VHOCs and RCs also share the similarity: both of their objects are considered patients, as we have observed in 5.1. This is because verbs that occur in L-VHOCs and RCs are largely verbs of contact (e.g. beat, hammer, etc.). Reconsider the following passivized sentences:

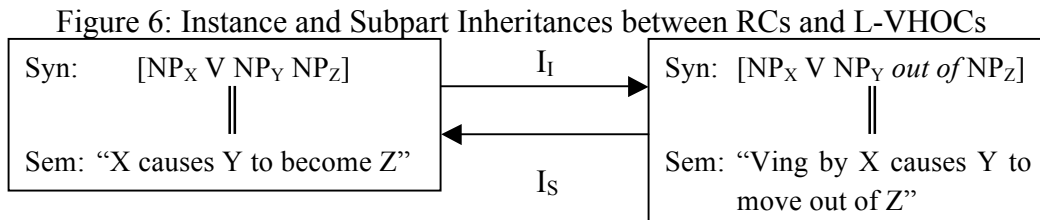
⁴ For more details on the relationship between Instance and Subpart Inheritance, see Goldberg (1995:78–81).

(31) The metal was hammered flat. (= (23a))

(32) The {devil/Satan} was beaten, and it literally came out of Mary. (= (24))

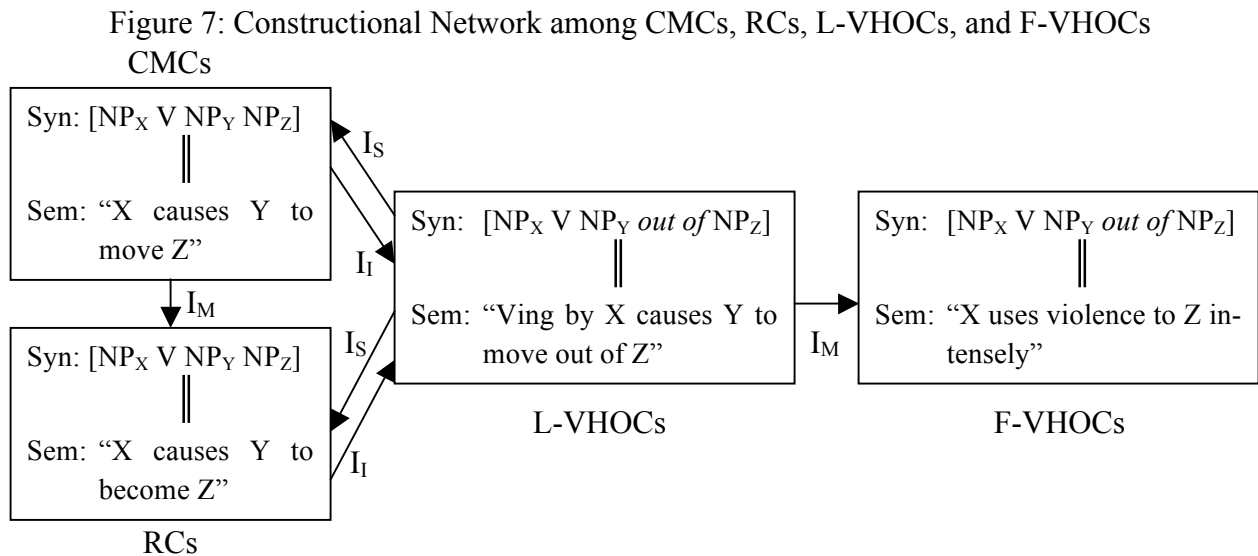
Both of the subject elements *the metal* and *the devil/Satan* are regarded as affected entities by hammering and beating actions.

Then, let us finally consider the type of their relationship. As is the case with L-VHOCs and CMCs, while the object entity of L-VHOCs is restricted to the words denoting demon, that of RCs is not limited. Hence, L-VHOCs can also be an instance of RCs, as is the case with L-VHOC-CMC inheritance. Conversely, RCs constitute a proper subpart of L-VHOCs:



6. Concluding Remarks

To sum up, the constructional relationship among CMCs, RCs, L-VHOCs, and F-VHOCs in Present-Day English can be illustrated as follows:



In this paper, we have observed the characteristics of VHOCs from the viewpoint of construction grammar. The constructional approach revealed that VHOCs can be divided into two subtypes: L-VHOCs and F-VHOCs, and they are linked by the metaphor that is originally suggested to explain the construal of BPOCs. Furthermore, this approach allows us to convey the re-

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relationship among VHOCs and other related constructions, as shown in Figure 7. This paper advocated a new approach to peripheral constructions like VHOCs.

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