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Typology of crime constructions in the American TV series "Suits"

The article suggests the definition of construction and approaches to classifying constructions in modern English. This research is based on the theoretical foundations of a constructionist approach to language analysis postulating that any linguistic pattern consisting of morphemes, words, partially lexically filled phrases like testify against somebody are constructions. Being generally defined as symbolic entities in which a particular meaning or function is associated with a particular form, constructions some aspect(s) of its form and function which is not strictly predictable from its component parts. The results of the analysis demonstrate that constructions about people, actions and instruments are the most numerous groups in the American television series "Suits". The paper proves that the use of constructions is constrained by the type and genre of discourse.

Key words: construction, crime constructions, word, sign, detective film.

Crime, especially when it includes violence against a person, "has an enduring fascination" [7] and is presented in all kinds of texts ranging from reports on crime in the news to crime fiction in novels and films. Whatever a text is, crime is depicted with language means, i.e. words, phrases, idioms etc., referring to people, actions, objects and various phenomena. In studying these means, we take a constructionist approach to language analysis postulating that any linguistic pattern consisting of morphemes, words, partially lexically filled phrases like *testify against somebody* are constructions if they have a meaning paired with a particular form and some aspect(s) of its form and function is not strictly predictable from its component parts [6, p. 5]. This article aims at studying and classifying crime constructions in the American TV series "Suits". The material of the research is 44 episode scripts of the American TV series "Suits" from the first three seasons available on the site springfieldspringfield.co.uk. The paper is structured in the following way. First, it outlines theoretical foundations of studying constructions in English and defines the peculiarities of studying crime constructions in the American TV series "Suits". Secondly, it suggests a typology of crime-constructions in the American TV series "Suits".

Constructions are generally defined as symbolic entities in which a particular meaning or function is associated with a particular form [3], e.g. *a Harvard attorney, the witness' name*. The constructions mentioned consist of more than one word that agree grammatically and refer to a specific referent – the attorney who graduated from Harvard and the name of a particular person who witnessed the crime.

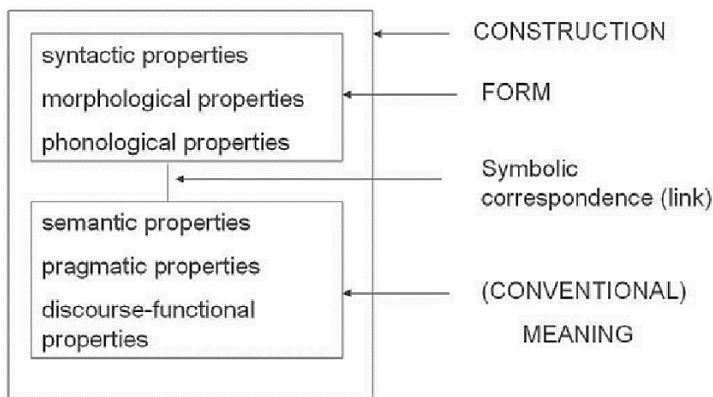
The term *construction* was first used by the Roman orator Cicero in the 1st century BC and implied the combination of at least two words "that agree (grammatically) and express the complete meaning" [6]. Up till now, that definition remains unchallenged; however, it was significantly extended. Today, the linguists recognize a continuum of meaningful constructions ranging from morphemes and words to phrases and syntactic assemblies [9].

Modern understanding of constructions is rooted in the Saussurean notion of the linguistic sign. The scholar treated the latter as an arbitrary and conventional pairing of form and meaning [8, p. 65–70]. Over seventy years after Saussure's death, the linguists started to explore explicitly the idea that arbitrary form-meaning pairings might not only be a useful concepts for describing words or morphemes but that perhaps all levels of grammatical description involve such conventionalized form-meaning pairings. This extended notion of the Saussurean sign has become known as a 'construction' (which includes morphemes, words, idioms, and abstract phrasal patterns).

Constructions may be of different levels of complexity, but the common feature of all them is that they are meaningful in basically the same way. Regardless of if constructions comprise concrete and particular items (such as in words and idioms), more abstract classes of items (as in word classes and abstract constructions), or complex combinations of concrete and abstract pieces of language (such as mixed constructions), the following tenet suggested by Croft is true throughout all levels: a construction has a form conventionally paired with a meaning [2, p. 18], as Figure 1 below illustrates.

Figure 1: The symbolic structure of constructions

Instead of aiming at a clear-cut division of lexicon and syntax, studying constructions is part of a lexicon-syntax continuum – Fillmore even created a word 'constructicon' which is a blend of *construction* and *lexicon* [5, p. 223]. The basic criterion of constructions was that they consisted of at least two words in which one word was said to 'govern' or 'require' the other word or words. This notion of construction must be both grammatically well-formed and express particular meaning. In this paper, we stick to the definition of constructions given by Goldberg, since she mentions the most appropriate and precise one.



Approaches to classification

Constructions may be variously classified according to the criterion we take into account. To understand how crime constructions are used in *Suits*, we classified them from two different approaches: according to their structure and meaning. Structurally, we single out predicative and nominal constructions. From semantic perspective, we involved the schema of a typical event suggested by V. Gak including people, actions, objects/ instruments, time, place, result/consequences.

Structural approach: Predicative and nominal constructions

Predicative and nominal constructions differ in their islands of reliability, i.e. the headword. The island of reliability can be expressed by different parts of speech and depending on it the type of construction may be defined as predicative or nominal.

If the island of reliability of a construction is expressed by a verb and functions as predicate in a sentence, the construction is called *predicative*. As a rule, the headword of a predicative construction performs the function of a predicate in a sentence, e.g. testify-construction:

No employee is going to testify against their own CEO.

And if the people who work for him now won't testify against him someone who used to work for him might.

There's no way I'm testifying at the hearing tomorrow.

In the sentences above the island of reliability is the verb *testify*. Since it is a verb and functions as predicate in the sentences, the construction is predicative.

In a *nominal* construction, the island of reliability is expressed by a nominal part of speech, i.e. a noun, an adjective, a numeral, etc. The headword of a nominal construction may function as subject or object in a sentence, e.g. case-construction:

Look, I closed the Dockery case, okay? You made a promise to me. My first day, Louis fired Gary Lipsky for screwing up a case. Because you screwed it up.

And I think he might even be interested in pursuing a case like this. They filed a motion to dismiss the case based on our lack of evidence.

What if they win the motion and the case gets dismissed?

You pawned off the case.

Your Honor, this case should be thrown out.

I need you to testify on Friday and keep this case alive.

Jessica, I've got higher profile cases.

Harvey, pro bono cases are how we as a firm show that we care about more than just ourselves. I was wondering how the pro bono was coming.

*Case-construction is considered nominal, since its island of reliability is expressed by the noun *case* and functions as the subject or the object in the above mentioned sentences.

To conclude, the understanding which constructions are predicative and which are nominal will help to single out and analyse constructions from the TV series *Suits*.

Semantic approach: Thematic groupings of constructions

From semantic perspective, we involve the schema of a typical event suggested by N. Gak including participants, actions, objects/instruments, time, place, result/consequences [1, p. 246]. Events are unique, but despite their ultimate uniqueness, there are elements that are in common. They are people, actions, objects, instruments, time, place, results/ consequences [ibid.].

'Participants' are usually designated with the help of nouns that denote people, e.g. *a lawyer*. They enter nominal constructions, e.g. *a lawyer appearing before a judge*.

'Actions' are expressed with the help of verbs which may embrace the meaning of activity (to walk, to speak, to play, to study); process (to sleep, to wait, to live); relation (to consist, to resemble, to lace); the like (to like, to love, to adore). Besides, the actions may be expressed with the help of abstract nouns and gerunds, e.g. *homicide*, *hit*. They enter the predicative constructions. Verbs in them typically appear with a wide array of complement configurations.

'Objects/ Instruments' can be expressed by a noun, the gerund, the infinitive, a pronoun, a noun phrase, a verbal phrase, an infinitive construction, a gerundial complex, a numeral or an object clause, e.g. *handcuffs*. The component 'time' may be expressed by a noun, an

adverb and by a numeral. The component 'place' is expressed by nouns that are divided into proper names, e.g. *in New York*, and common nouns, e.g. *at the firm, in the cab*, or by adverbs of place, e.g. *there*.

So any event is arranged by a selection of separate elements/components from the set of elements immanent to events.

Crime films are analyzed as discourse – a complex unity of language and extra-linguistic means influencing the language use [10, p. 14]. The discourse of film and television offer a *re-presentation* of our world. As such, telecinematic texts reorganise and recreate language (together with time and space) in their own way and with respect to specific socio-cultural conventions and media logic.

Crime constructions are important for structuring film discourse of particular genres, such as detective mystery films, classic film noir, crime thrillers, courtroom dramas and a variety of sub-genres – serial killer films, legal dramas, gangster films etc. [4].

"*Suits*" is an American legal drama television series created and written by Aaron Korsh. It is set at a fictional law firm in New York City. The focal point of the show follows talented college dropout Mike Ross (Patrick J. Adams), who initially works as a law associate for Harvey Specter (Gabriel Macht), despite never actually having attended law school. The show focuses on Harvey and Mike managing to close cases while maintaining Mike's secret. In these series, the speech of lawyers, detectives, police officers and the closers abounds in crime-constructions of different types – in some contexts they are often conversational and pertain to everyday use. At the other end of the spectrum, a plethora of crime-constructions are strictly professional and refer to the vocabulary for specific purposes. Therefore, it is important to analyze varying crime constructions in the speech of different film characters – lawyers, their associates, police officers, crime witnesses etc.

We have analyzed 44 episode scripts of the American TV series *Suits* from the first three seasons available on the site springfieldspringfield.co.uk and found dominant types of crime constructions. They are people, actions and instruments. The subsequent section accounts for our findings.

Constructions about people constitute the most numerous group. The film characters most often talk about lawyers, attorneys, researchers, investigators and witnesses. As for **lawyer/ attorney-constructions*, they are more frequently nominal throughout the film, e.g. *I would have assumed that a lawyer appearing before a judge would come on time, with his mouth shut, and prepared with a courtesy brief* (*Suits*, Season 1). In the underlined extended construction, the island of reliability is the noun lawyer and the attributive phrase *appearing before a judge* specifies its meaning.

The main character Harvey Specter is a good closer – the one who successfully closes the deals, though he is a paralegal – he dropped out from law school. That is why we single out two constructions to refer to the main character – **closer-construction* and **paralegal-construction*. As for the **closer-construction*, it is used in every episode throughout the film many times, but the construction is only one – *the best closer*.

* closer-constructions

Gerald, this is Harvey Specter. He's our best closer.

Well, if you're the best closer, where the hell have you been for the last three hours?

In fact, you are looking at the best closer this city has ever seen.

Closer, huh? Baseball? Attorney.

I guess, uh, you're not the best closer this city's ever seen.

They say he's the best closer there is.

We can make a generalization that a closer may be good or bad which indicates his/ her professionalism. In this film, we see Harvey Specter as a professional.

As for the **paralegal-construction*, the analyzed corpus indicates negative attitude to this status as the following examples demonstrate:

I've given dozens of these, and, without fail, whatever new hotshot it is thinks that because I'm just a paralegal that I will somehow be blown away by his dazzling degree.

It's also pretty clear that you think you're too smart to be a paralegal.

Remember when I said you thought you were too smart to be a paralegal?

In the underlined constructions, the words *just* and *too smart to be* indicate general assessment of paralegals as under qualified and not professional people. Though Harvey Specter, the main character, proves the opposite – he closes the cases professionally, the constructions in the film reveal the stereotyped attitude, so the meaning was entrenched before it appeared in these contexts.

The agency the main characters work at is rather big, so the lawyers have up to 50 associates, that is why **associate-construction* is represented in the film. Drawing on the analyzed material, we single out the following construction with *associate* as the island:

find/ get/ hire/ have/ oversee/ pay// a promising/ rookie/ new associate

As it is seen from the examples below, the verbs *find*, *get* and *have* are used with the noun *associate* prompting that an associate is something akin to the thing possessed:

Well, I would, Harvey, except all senior partners get an associate.

I'm emailing the firm we've just found our next associate.

If you're here in the morning, I'll know I still have an associate.

The verbs *hire* and *pay* focus on the professional performance of associates, since every good work is paid:

Why don't we just hire the Harvard summer associate douche?

See, I arranged for you to see that because we pay our associates very well and we provide the opportunity for unlimited advancement.

The verb *oversees* in the next sentence implies that professional skills of associates are not so good as those of the lawyers: *However, Louis Litt, he oversees all associates, so you'll also answer to him.*

The adjectives *promising/ rookie/ new* indicate various qualities of an associate – as any specialist, he/she may be start his career (new), he may start it successfully (promising) or he may underperform (rookie):

Gary's one of our most promising associates from last year.

What's so funny? You're a rookie associate.

That's how I let the new associates know what's expected of them.

Finally, associates may be counted as the next sentence demonstrates, e.g. *Um, out of the 50 associates that are under my purview, not one of them would have caught that.*

The lawyers and their associates are constantly in search of witnesses and deal with the police. As for the *witness-construction, it is mostly nominal, i.e. the noun witness is the island, e.g. *What's the witness' name?* It is the possessive construction which is rather often used in film, e.g. *Well, you go back to the witness' house and you get her to testify again.*

Other *witness-constructions include:

What happened with the witness?

I just talked a witness into testifying.

But witness tampering, that's a crime, and you will go to prison, where, I guarantee, you'll learn more about unwanted sexual advances than you can possibly imagine.

Even if this evidence was credible, who are you going to get to prosecute a small-time witness tampering charge, huh?

As for the *police-construction, in the film the police officers are variously referred to as the police or cops. In the official or neutral settings, the preference is given to the noun police, as the following sentences demonstrate:

Then why don't you go call the police?

How the hell did you know they were the police?

However, in the contexts about criminals, especially drug-dealers, gangsters and street muggers, the noun cop is preferable:

I mean, what kind of drug dealer asks a cop what time it is when he's got a briefcase full of pot, right?

In 24 hours, we'll know if this new buyer is a cop.

'Cause if these guys are cops, whoever is holding that weed is going to jail for a long time.

The differentiation between the nouns police and cop is important because, as Goldberg claims, "facts about the use of a construction such as register (formal or informal) or dialect variations are stated as part of the construction as well [6, p. 10].

In speaking about people trying to escape from police, the noun cop is again preferable:

Look, I'm just trying to ditch the cops, okay?

Well, I ditched it when I was running away from the cops that you sent me into.

Constructions about people include also *researcher/ investigator-constructions, since investigation is the main theme of the film. The noun researcher is most often appears in the constructions with the adjective the best throughout the film:

Because Donna says you're the best researcher in the firm.

How do you have an office and I have a cubicle? Like you said, I'm the best researcher in the firm.

The researchers are praised to advertise their company and promote themselves.

The researchers are also referred to as investigators and their high performance is usually evaluated with the adjective top, e.g. So, they told me to put my top investigator on it.

Moreover, the noun investigator is normally used with the verbs that nouns referring to other people are generally used, such as get, say, answer, go, etc.:

My investigator got these within a week.

The investigator and every person being interviewed answers to the CEO they're investigating.

So, constructions about people make the biggest group. It demonstrates that the film characters often talk about lawyers, attorneys, researchers, investigators and witnesses. The lawyers and their associates are constantly in search of witnesses and deal with the police.

Constructions about actions make up the second big group. They represent the activities which lawyers, police officers, investigators and witnesses are involved in. The constructions of this group are mostly predicative with verbs as islands, because the actions that lawyers, police officers and other participants of crime investigation make are represented mostly by verbs.

The most frequent is *testify-construction. On the one hand, *testify-construction refers to the activity of the witnesses or crime victims, and

on the other, they designate the actions of lawyers and investigators. Depending on who is the person presented by the subject/ object in a sentence, **testify-construction* is used differently with nouns referring to witnesses or crime victims and lawyers or investigators.

As for the witnesses and crime victims, the verb *testify* being the island of reliability is commonly used with preposition *against* (somebody):

And if the people who work for him now won't testify against him someone who used to work for him might.

No employee is going to testify against their own CEO.

Secondly, *testify* is used with the nouns indicating place:

There's no way I'm testifying at the hearing tomorrow.

Finally, it may be used generally without any specifications of time/ place or people: *This is why I didn't want to testify.*

On the part of the lawyers and researchers, *testify* is used to indicate the act of testifying itself:

I got her to testify.

Well, you go back to the witness' house and you get her to testify again.

I just talked a witness into testifying.

Also, in the speech of the lawyers the verb *testify* is used with time specifiers, e.g. *All right? I need you to testify on Friday and keep this case alive.*

Phone records with Joanna Webster prior to her testimony.

The verb *testify* may be modified by the adverbial *falsely*, e.g. *And an affidavit stating you paid Ms. Webster to falsely testify.*

Other constructions widely represented in film are **arrest-constructions*. They refer to the activity of the police. Usually the verb *arrest* is followed by the preposition *for* and a noun referring to a crime:

So, when you said earlier that you had never been arrested for a crime, you were, uh, speaking the truth?

So, in 1993, then, you were not arrested for stealing \$1,000 worth of jewelry from the Willow Grove Mall in Pennsylvania.

The verb *arrest* enters passive constructions as well. The subjects *you* in the sentences below indicate the person detained:

You were arrested in your past and you lied about it here under oath.

You never told me you were arrested.

Since Harvey Specter – one of the main characters – is "the best closer," **close-construction* is singled out from the corpus. There are three possible ways of using this construction:

First, with nouns *case*, *deal* or *situation*:

Look, I closed the Dockery case, okay? You made a promise to me.

Now, get your ass in there and close the goddamn deal.

I close situations.

Second, with nouns denoting people:

I want you to close him.

I'm going to approach every client I've ever closed, and I'm going to take them with me.

And third, it may be used elliptically, when the noun following the verb is omitted:

And now, you won't close until we take away the last shred of his dignity?

So *testify-, *arrest- and *close-constructions are the most widespread in the film.

Constructions about instruments are less frequent in comparison with those about people and actions. In this group of constructions, the most widespread are *gun-, *drug- and *subpoena-constructions which are represented throughout the film in the first, second and third seasons.

As for *gun-constructions, their frequency is very high – it is used in nearly every episode of the serial, but the structure of this construction is not much diversified:

He saw your gun.

They pulled a gun on me.

I feel like Michael Corleone in that scene where that fat guy teaches him how to shoot that gun.

As the examples above demonstrate, in the speech of the film characters the noun *gun* is usually preceded by the verbs *see*, *pull*, *shoot*. Such limited choice of verbs is explained by the fact that the plot of the film recounts investigations, and that is why when the noun *gun* typically collocates with more verbs including *buy*, *sell*, *have*, *keep*, *take* etc. [Merriam-Webster dictionary], this film does not portray situations of buying or keeping a gun. For investigations, it is important that a witness saw a gun, as the first sentence demonstrates. Usually *gun-constructions are employed in the speech of witnesses where they testify or in the speech of lawyers where they examine the witnesses or crime victims.

*Drug-constructions are always nominal, i.e. they have the noun *drug* as the island of reliability. The noun *drug* is used with the verbs *deal*, *take*, *do* and *kill* in the speech of the lawyers and the police officers:

Trevor, a person is more likely to die while dealing drugs than they would be on death row.

And everyone who is taking that drug is going to die, anyway.

I assume that's all the drugs you do.

His company's ALS wonder drug is killing people. ALS is incurable.

The noun *drug* enters the construction *drug test* and *getting drug tested*:

What? Drug test.

Um... Getting drug tested, actually.

The reason why *drug test* construction is singled out in our corpus is that throughout the film checking and discussing the results of the drug tests is the matter of much concern for the investigators.

Along with the noun *drug*, we have found two more words referring to drugs in the speech of the film characters – *pot* and *weed*. They are highly colloquial and represent the slang of drug dealers and drug users. However, in the film no drug dealers or drug addicts are shown on the screen. Instead, the researchers discuss the issues about them. The example below is the sentence from the lawyers' discussion: *I mean, what kind of drug dealer asks a cop what time it is when he's got a briefcase full of pot, right?*

The noun *pot* is used with the verbs *sell* and *smoke*, and with adverbs *much* and *more*:

You sell pot for a living.

First, no more pot. We drug test.

And pot-heads smoke pot.

The noun *weed* is used with the verbs *smoke* and *hold*:

You think that's not from smoking weed?

'Cause if these guys are cops, whoever is holding that weed is going to jail for a long time.

With **subpoena-constructions* it is rather diversified in its structure. First, it is used with the phrasal verb *fill out*:

I don't know how to fill out a subpoena.

Donna, can you show me how to fill out a subpoena? Absolutely.

Secondly, the verb *fight* enters the subpoena construction: *Um, Devlin McGreggor is fighting the subpoena.*

Thirdly, the noun *subpoena* makes up a structure with preposition *on*, e.g. *There's a hearing on my subpoena.*

Finally, *subpoena* is used as a verb:

You know what? I'd subpoena the personnel records of every woman who's left the firm during this guy's tenure.

So, constructions about objects/ instruments are mostly represented by **gun-*, **drug-* and **subpoena-constructions* that are widespread in the speech of lawyers and investigators.

The prospects of future research lie in the possibility to study crime-constructions in other films and compare crime-constructions in film discourse and fiction.

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Типологія конструкцій на позначення злочинів в американському телесеріалі "Позови"

Стаття пропонує визначення поняття конструкції та підходи до класифікації конструкцій в сучасній англійській мові. Результати аналізу особливостей функціонування конструкцій на позначення злочинів в американському телесеріалі "Позови" демонструють, що конструкції на позначення осіб, діяльності та інструментів є найчастотнішими групами. Доведено, що вживання конструкцій зумовлене типом і жанром дискурсу.

Ключові слова: конструкція, конструкції на позначення злочинів, слово, мовний знак, фільм-детектив.

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Типологія конструкцій, обозначающих преступления в американском телесериале "Форс-мажоры"

Статья предлагает определение понятия конструкции и подходы к классификации конструкций в современном английском языке. Результаты анализа особенностей функционирования конструкций обозначающих преступления в американском телесериале "Форс-мажоры" демонстрируют, что конструкции обозначающие людей, деятельность и инструменты являются наиболее частотными группами. Доказано, что употребление конструкций обусловлено типом и жанром дискурса.

Ключевые слова: конструкция, конструкции для обозначения преступлений, слово, языковой знак, фильм-детектив.