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AN INTRODUCTION

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COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS

To Sheila, Vicky, Debbie, and Cathy

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PREFACE

A major problem with many contemporary linguistic theories is that they confront the outsider with a difficult, arcane formalism. It will probably come as a welcome surprise to most readers of this book that Cognitive Linguistics is an exception to this rule. This is not to say that the model lacks a complex theoretical apparatus. On the contrary, some advanced readings in the theory pose a major intellectual challenge and are based on subtle arguments invoking a wide range of concepts interacting with each other in intricate ways. But, at least, the nature of the theory is such that it poses no major formal hurdles to those outside the field who wish to gain some familiarity with the approach in the hope that it will add a useful dimension to their perspective on language.

In this book I have attempted to make the theory accessible to a wide audience without sacrificing some of the subtleties of the approach. As it happens, this has been an inevitable consequence of the fact that the project emerged from teaching a course in Cognitive Linguistics for undergraduates in the early stages of their studies. Consequently, the book assumes no prior knowledge of the field, though it is hoped that those who do have some knowledge—particularly those who have some familiarity with generative grammar—will be able to appreciate some of the special characteristics of the approach. To a certain extent Cognitive Linguistics has tended to define itself historically with respect to generative grammar and thus set itself up as a rival to that theory. However, the model does not have to be seen in this way and, as the theory matures, it is becoming less appropriate to do so. In any event, it seems most unlikely that any one theory will be able to deal adequately with every aspect of a phenomenon as complex as human language.

One of the most attractive features of Cognitive Linguistics is its focus on meaning. The relatively impoverished treatment of meaning in some theories of language must be a source of puzzlement to many non-linguists. But it is the nature of the cognitive treatment of the area that makes it particularly attractive in these postmodern times. In particular, the centrality of the notion of *construal* in the model makes it refreshingly different from earlier approaches to meaning. In emphasising the role of construal, cognitive linguists have moved away from earlier treatments of semantics in linguistics, based on the assumption that meaning is independent of human perceptions and human cognition and that it can therefore be objectified and potentially formalised. What unites cognitive linguists (no matter how much they may differ in other ways) is a commitment to the principle that linguistic expressions code a particular way of perceiving the relevant scene. This means that linguistic coding involves such factors as selectivity, perspective, focus, backgrounding, framing, modes of categorisation, and so on. Clearly, this puts the approach much more in tune with current trends in neighbouring disciplines—particularly Literary Theory and Cultural Studies Theory—than

many other theories of language. For this reason, if for no other, the cognitive model deserves to be made accessible to scholars in other disciplines.

One of my own enduring areas of interest has been the analysis of texts (both spoken and written) with reference to the question of the relationship between language and perspective. From the outset of my career I have attempted to apply linguistic theory to discourse analysis, even when the nature of the theory did not lend itself particularly well to this task. From my point of view, therefore, the advent of Cognitive Linguistics was a most welcome development. The importance of the notion of construal in the model makes it a tool with enormous potential for analysing the ways in which human beings use language in everyday social interactions, given that these are characterised by ongoing adjustments by participants to each other's moves and given the occasional communication difficulties and (sometimes subtle) misunderstandings that arise in these settings. This interest of mine surfaces explicitly in the later sections of the book, particularly in the last three chapters, though it is a thread that runs through the book as a whole.

In the first instance, however, a linguistic theory must justify itself in terms of its ability to deal with the nature of the relationship between form and meaning. The first ten chapters of this book are therefore devoted to various aspects of this topic. Chapter 1 introduces basic concepts in Cognitive Linguistics: construal, perspective, foregrounding, metaphor, and frame. Chapter 2 investigates the coding of spatial relationships, and chapter 3 discusses extended and metaphorical uses of spatial expressions. Issues concerned with the nature of categorisation arising out of this discussion are dealt with in chapter 4. The following five chapters cover a range of topics that are of crucial interest to all linguists: the nature of constructions (chapter 5), mental spaces (chapter 6), language change (chapter 7), aspects of nominal and verbal structure (chapters 8 and 9), agentivity and causation (chapter 10). I then turn to my own special areas of interest. In chapter 11 I invoke most of the concepts discussed in earlier chapters in the analysis of family argument, and in chapter 12 I consider constructivism in language, focusing in particular on the way in which speakers use categorisation creatively to support their rhetorical stance and construct their social world.

The concluding chapter discusses some general issues arising out of the cognitive approach, including creativity in language and the nature of meaning.

David Lee
May 2001

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BASIC CONCEPTS

1.1 Introduction

Over the past two decades the Cognitive Linguistics enterprise has developed to the point where a university linguistics program is now arguably incomplete without a significant component devoted to this model. In the early years cognitive grammarians tended to define their model in opposition to what was then the dominant paradigm in the discipline—the theory of generative grammar, associated with Noam Chomsky. This is no doubt because the leading scholars in the movement were themselves trained as generative grammarians and elaborated the cognitive model out of what they perceived to be shortcomings of generative theory. However, Cognitive Linguistics has now developed to the point where it can be considered a mature, autonomous theory of language in its own right.

The main feature that distinguishes Cognitive Linguistics from generative grammar has to do with the place of meaning in the theory. In the generative model the structure of linguistic expressions is deemed to be determined by a formal rule system that is largely independent of meaning. By contrast cognitivists argue that linguistic structure is a direct reflex of cognition in the sense that a particular linguistic expression is associated with a particular way of conceptualising a given situation. This leads to a quite different view of the relationship between language and cognition in general. Whereas generative grammarians claim that there exists a rich set of principles of language design (Universal Grammar) that are specific to language, the cognitivists believe that, although universal principles governing the design of all languages may well exist, they will eventually be found to be rooted in cognition. This leads cognitivists to be sceptical about the view current in generative grammar that there is a specific 'organ' in the human brain devoted exclusively to language.

In this chapter I will attempt to elaborate on the claim that there is an interrelationship between thought, meaning, and linguistic structure by examining the major concepts in the theory. I will focus on the notions of construal, perspective, foregrounding, metaphor, and frame.

1.2 Construal

There is a long tradition in linguistics encapsulating the belief that the role of language is to map elements of the external world onto linguistic form. According to this view, situations can be dissected into a number of component parts, each of which corresponds to some element of language, so that mapping from the external world to language is a relatively straightforward operation. Essentially, it involves a one-to-one encoding of the elements of the situation into linguistic structure, this process being governed by formal rules of grammar.

In contrast, cognitive linguists argue that there is no such direct mapping. Instead, they claim, a particular situation can be 'construed' in different ways, and that different ways of encoding a situation constitute different conceptualisations. Consider, for example, the contrast between (1) and (2).

(1) *John gave the book to Mary.*

(2) *John gave Mary the book.*

The traditional view is that these sentences express the same meaning—that the syntactic (structural) difference has no correspondence in semantics. One reflex of this view is the fact that in some variants of generative grammar the two sentences are 'derived' (by formal rules) from the same underlying structure, implying that the difference between them is one of form rather than substance. However, there are a number of indications that this view is incorrect. One such piece of evidence has to do with the fact that in some cases only one of these constructions is natural. For example, although *John gave the fence a new coat of paint* is unremarkable, it would be odd to say ?*John gave a new coat of paint to the fence* (Langacker 1990: 14). Conversely, whereas *He brought the wine to the table* is fine, the sentence ?*He brought the table the wine* is strange.[1] These differences suggest that the two constructions illustrated in (1) and (2) involve different ways of construing 'the same situation' and that in certain cases only one mode of construal is appropriate or natural. These examples and others illustrating the same point will be discussed in detail in chapter 5.

1.3 Perspective

One factor involved in alternative construals has to do with perspective. Consider:

(3) *The path falls steeply into the valley.*

(4) *The path climbs steeply out of the valley.*

Although these sentences could be used to describe the same scene, we would hardly want to say that they express the same meaning. The difference between them has to do with perspective. In (3) the viewpoint is that of

someone looking down into the valley, whereas in (4) it is that of someone looking up from the valley floor.

Interestingly, the actual position of the speaker in cases of this kind is irrelevant. One does not have to be looking down to say (3), nor is one necessarily looking up when uttering (4); one might be looking at a painting, viewing the scene sideways-on. Another illustration of this point is the fact that, if I am talking to someone on the phone, I would normally say *I'll come over and see you tomorrow* in preference to *I'll go over and see you tomorrow*, even though the verb *come* is oriented to the perspective of the addressee rather than to that of the speaker. In other words, in cases such as (3) and (4) a particular viewing position is **constructed** as part of the process of producing meaning through language. Each sentence involves a particular construal of the scene in question, with contrasting perspectives producing distinct interpretations.

As a second example, consider the contrast between (5) and (6).

(5) *John bought the car from Mary.*

(6) *Mary sold the car to John.*

Here too we have a pair of sentences which refer to 'the same event' but they could hardly be said to express the same meaning. Again the contrast has to do with perspective (in a rather more abstract sense than in (3) and (4)). Sentence (5) construes the situation from John's point of view, whereas (6) is an expression of Mary's viewpoint. As a small piece of evidence that this is so, consider:

(7) *John bought the car from Mary for a good price.*

(8) *Mary sold the car to John for a good price.*

In (7) we infer that the price was relatively low, whereas (8) suggests that it was high. This must mean that (5) and (7) are oriented to the buyer's point of view, whereas (6) and (8) are oriented to that of the seller.

One important aspect of perspective concerns the question of what we take as the reference point in a given scene. Consider, for example, the contrast between:

(9) *The lamp is above the table.*

(10) *The table is below the lamp.*

In (9) we take the table as the reference point and relate the position of the lamp with respect to it, whereas the reverse is the case in (10). Following Langacker (1988b: 75–9, 1990: 9–10), I will use the term 'landmark' to refer to the entity that is construed as the reference point, and 'trajector' to refer to the element that is located with respect to it. In many cases pragmatic factors impinge on the choice of trajector and landmark, as illustrated in (11) and (12).

(11) *The pen is on the table.*

(12) ?*The table is under the pen.*

Whereas both of these are possible ways of describing the same situation, the fact that pens are normally placed with respect to tables rather than tables with respect to pens makes (11) the more natural way of coding this particular scene. In situations such as those described in (9) and (10), however, there are no such inherent pragmatic factors at work, so that either the table or the lamp can be construed as the landmark, with the other as trajector.

1.4 Foregrounding

A second factor involved in contrasting construals has to do with the relative prominence of the various components of the situation. For example, suppose when I am mowing the lawn, one of the blades strikes a stone, causing it to fly into the air and break a window. I could use either (13a) or (13b) to refer to this event.

(13) (a) *I've broken the window.*
(b) *A stone has broken the window.*

Again, these codings involve different construals. Example (13a) foregrounds my role in the event, whereas (13b) foregrounds that of the stone, thereby backgrounding my involvement in the scenario. The following examples illustrate a similar point.

(14) (a) *You won't be able to open this door with that key.*
(b) *That key won't open this door.*

Either of these examples could be used in a situation where the addressee is about to try to open a door with a particular key, but (14a) gives slightly greater prominence to the involvement of the addressee than does (14b). Here are some further illustrations of the point.

(15) (a) *I'm standing on the street.*
(b) *I'm standing in the street.*

(16) (a) *The fish is in the water.*
(b) *The fish is under the water.*

(17) (a) *The cloth is on the table.*
(b) *The cloth is over the table.*

The members of each pair can be used to refer to the same situation, but they highlight different aspects of it. For example, in (15a) the street is conceptualised as a roadway (and therefore as a supporting surface), whereas

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