Topics in Cognitive Linguistics

Edited by Brygida Rudzka-Ostyn

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COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS

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TOPICS IN COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS

To the memory of my mother

Preface

Recent years have witnessed a growing interest in cognitive linguistics, a framework aiming at an adequate account of the relationship between language and cognition and as such involving human psychology, interpersonal relations, culture, and a host of other domains. Our purpose has been to present the theoretical premises of this framework and to explore its descriptive and explanatory potential with respect to a wide range of language phenomena. In pursuing this goal, we have frequently relied on corpus analyses, intensive field work, and other means of empirical verification. Crossing the boundaries of particular languages or language families has lent additional support to the findings emerging from our research.

If one had to name a key notion of cognitive grammar, one would certainly point to the dependence of linguistic structure on conceptualization as well as the conceptualizer's perspective. Within this framework, meanings are defined relative to conceptual domains, particular linguistic choices are often found to hinge upon the vantage point from which a given situation is viewed, and category boundaries are seen as fluctuating and dependent on, among other things, the conceptualizer's experience or purpose. This relativism extends to the very structure of the framework. The reader will soon discover that not all contributors to the volume draw the same distinctions.Neither do they use identical descriptive tools. Their choice and nature vary with the purpose as well as perspective adopted.

This inherent flexibility renders the framework exceptionally receptive to findings in other disciplines. Only some of the current interdisciplinary crossovers could be signalled here; but they suffice to show the enormous potential of cognitive grammar in capturing various facets of language. As language is such a complex phenomenon, it can be adequately described only when approached from different angles. By relativizing its own methodology, cognitive linguistics can accommodate these different angles readily and naturally.

To place cognitive grammar against a broader background, we have explored some earlier linguistic theories. While adding another dimension to our research, this exploration has unveiled interesting links between present and past attempts at grasping the relation of language to cognition.

The project has materialized thanks to the help of several people. I am indebted to René Dirven who came up with the idea and suggested to me the role of editor. The conferences organized by him, first at the University of Trier and now in Duisburg, have allowed many of us to come together and discuss topics of common interest; and for this wonderful forum we remain grateful.

As editor, I wish to thank the authors for their contributions, but also for their good humor and the spirit of cooperation. Much of the present volume is the fruit of an intensive exchange of ideas and materials, and also numerous revisions. In this context, a special word of thanks is due to René Dirven, Dirk Geeraerts, Bruce Hawkins and Pierre Swiggers, all of whom offered to act as referees on several occasions. To Peter Kelly, I owe a particular debt of gratitude for sharing with me his native-speaker intuition.

Finally, I must record my great appreciation for my husband's encouragement and help at all stages of the project.

Brygida Rudzka-Ostyn

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TOWARD A COHERENT AND COMPREHENSIVE LINGUISTIC THEORY

An Overview of Cognitive Grammar

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Orientation

Cognitive grammar (formerly "space grammar") is a theory of linguistic structure that I have been developing and articulating since 1976. Though neither finished nor formalized, it has achieved a substantial measure of internal coherence and is being applied to an expanding array of languages and grammatical phenomena (see Langacker 1981, 1982a , 1984, 1985, *in press*; Casad 1982a; Casad and Langacker 1985; Hawkins 1984; Lindner 1981, 1982; Smith 1985; Tuggy 1981; Vandeloise 1984, 1985a). These efforts have been prompted by the feeling that established theories fail to come to grips in any sensible way with the real problems of language structure, as they are based on interlocking sets of concepts, attitudes, and assumptions that misconstrue the nature of linguistic phenomena and thus actually hinder our understanding of them. It is therefore necessary to start anew and erect a theory on very different conceptual foundations.

Cognitive grammar thus diverges quite radically from the mainstream of contemporary linguistic theory, particularly as represented in the generative tradition. The differences are not confined to matters of detail, but reach to the level of philosophy and organizing assumptions. I will succinctly sketch these differences as they pertain to the nature of linguistic investigation, the nature of a linguistic system, the nature of grammatical structure, and the nature of meaning. My presentation of the "orthodox" position is admittedly a caricature; I state it without the necessary qualifications for sake of brevity, and also to underscore the substantially different spirit of the two approaches.

With respect to the nature of linguistic investigation, orthodox theory holds that language (or at least grammar) is describable as an algorithmic system. Linguistics is thus a formal science akin to logic and certain branches of mathematics (e.g. automata theory). Of paramount importance is the construction of an all-embracing linguistic theory incorporating explanatory principles; ongoing description is considered most valuable when formulated in terms of current theory and directed towards the testing and refinement of its predictions. Discrete categories and absolute principles are sought, on the grounds that a theory should be maximally restrictive and make the strongest possible claims. Moreover, economy is a prime concern in formulating the grammar of a language: redundancy of statement implies the loss of significant generalizations.

The cognitive grammar "heresy" sees biology as providing a better metaphor for linguistic research than the formal sciences. While certain aspects of language may be discrete and "algebraic", in general a language is more accurately likened to a biological organism; our expectations concerning the nature of revealing analysis and viable description must be adjusted accordingly. For instance, absolute predictability is normally an unrealistic expectation for natural language: much is a matter of degree, and the role of convention is substantial. Considerations of economy must cede priority to psychological accuracy; redundancy is plausibly expected in the cognitive representation of linguistic structure, and does not in principle conflict with the capturing of significant generalizations. Further, linguistic theory should emerge organically from a solid descriptive foundation. Preoccupation with theory may be deleterious if premature, for it stifles the investigation of non-conforming phenomena and prevents them from being understood in their own terms.

In the orthodox view, the grammar of a language consists of a number of distinct "components". The grammar is conceived as a "generative" device which provides a fully explicit enumeration of "all and only the grammatical sentences" of the language. The linguistic system is self-contained, and hence describable without essential reference to broader cognitive concerns. Language may represent a separate "module" of psychological structure.

Cognitive grammar views the linguistic system in a very different fashion. It assumes that language evokes other cognitive systems and must be described as an integral facet of overall psychological organization. The grammar of a language is non-generative and non-constructive, for the

expressions of a language do not constitute a well-defined, algorithmically-computable set. The grammar of a language simply provides its speakers with an inventory of symbolic resources — using these resources to construct and evaluate appropriate expressions is something that speakers do (not grammars) by virtue of their general categorizing and problem-solving abilities. Only semantic, phonological, and symbolic units are posited, and the division of symbolic units into separate components is considered arbitrary.

Orthodox theory treats grammar (and syntax in particular) as an independent level or dimension of linguistic structure. Grammar (or at least syntax) is considered distinct from both lexicon and semantics, and describable as an autonomous system. The independence of grammatical structure is argued by claiming that grammatical categories are based on formal rather than semantic properties. Speakers are capable of ignoring meaning and making discrete well-formedness judgments based on grammatical structure alone.

By contrast, cognitive grammar claims that grammar is intrinsically symbolic, having no independent existence apart from semantic and phonological structure. Grammar is describable by means of symbolic units alone, with lexicon, morphology, and syntax forming a continuum of symbolic structures. Basic grammatical categories (e.g. noun and verb) are semantically definable, and the unpredictable membership of other classes (those defined by occurrence in particular morphological or syntactic constructions) does not itself establish the independence of grammatical structure. Well-formedness judgments are often matters of degree, and reflect the subtle interplay of semantic and contextual factors.

Finally, it is commonplace to reject a "conceptual" or "ideational" theory of meaning as being untenable for the scientific investigation of language. It is assumed instead that the meanings of linguistic expressions are describable in terms of truth conditions, and that some type of formal logic is appropriate for natural language. It is held that a principled distinction can be made between semantics and pragmatics (or between linguistic and extralinguistic knowledge), that semantic structure is fully compositional, and that such phenomena as metaphor and semantic extension lie outside the scope of linguistic description.

In the cognitive grammar heresy, meaning is equated with conceptualization (interpreted quite broadly), to be explicated in terms of cognitive processing. Formal logic is held to be inadequate for the description of

semantic structure, which is subjective in nature and incorporates conventional "imagery" — defined as alternate ways of construing or mentally portraying a conceived situation. Linguistic semantics is properly considered encyclopedic in scope: the distinction between semantics and pragmatics is arbitrary. Semantic structure is only partially compositional, and phenomena like metaphor and semantic extension are central to the proper analysis of lexicon and grammar.

Meaning and Semantic Structure

An "objectivist" view of meaning has long been predominant in semantic theory. Rigorous analysis, it is maintained, cannot be based on anything so mysterious and inaccessible as "concepts" or "ideas"; instead, the meaning of an expression is equated with the set of conditions under which it is true, and some type of formal logic is deemed appropriate for the description of natural language semantics. Without denying its accomplishments, I believe the objectivist program to be inherently limited and misguided in fundamental respects: standard objections to the ideational view are spurious, and a formal semantics based on truth conditions is attainable only by arbitrarily excluding from its domain numerous aspects of meaning that are of critical linguistic significance (cf. Chafe 1970: 73-75; Langacker *in press*: Part II; Hudson 1984).

Cognitive grammar explicitly equates meaning with "conceptualization" (or "mental experience"), this term being interpreted quite broadly. It is meant to include not just fixed concepts, but also novel conceptions and experiences, even as they occur. It includes not just abstract, "intellectual" conceptions, but also such phenomena as sensory, emotive, and kinesthetic sensations. It further embraces a person's awareness of the physical, social, and linguistic context of speech events. There is nothing inherently mysterious about conceptualization: it is simply cognitive processing (neurological activity). Entertaining a particular conceptualization, or having a certain mental experience, resides in the occurrence of some complex "cognitive event" (reducing ultimately to the coordinated firing of neurons). An established concept is simply a "cognitive routine", i.e. a cognitive event (or event type) sufficiently well "entrenched" to be elicited as an integral whole.

Cognitive grammar embraces a "subjectivist" view of meaning. The semantic value of an expression does not reside solely in the inherent prop-

erties of the entity or situation it describes, but crucially involves as well the way we choose to think about this entity or situation and mentally portray it. Expressions that are true under the same conditions, or which have the same reference or extension, often contrast in meaning nonetheless by virtue of representing alternate ways of mentally construing the same objective circumstances. I would argue, for example, that each pair of sentences in (1) embodies a semantic contrast that a viable linguistic analysis cannot ignore:

(1) (a) This is a triangle.
     (a') This is a three-sided polygon.

     (b) The glass is half-empty.
     (b') The glass is half-full.

     (c) This roof slopes upward.
     (c') This roof slopes downward.

     (d) Louise resembles Rebecca.
     (d') Rebecca resembles Louise.

     (e) Russia invaded Afghanistan.
     (e') Afghanistan was invaded by Russia.

     (f) I mailed a package to Bill.
     (f') I mailed Bill a package.

I use the term "imagery" to indicate our ability to mentally construe a conceived situation in alternate ways (hence the term does not refer specifically or exclusively to sensory or visual imagery (cf. Kosslyn 1980; Block 1981)). A pivotal claim of cognitive grammar is that linguistic expressions and grammatical constructions embody conventional imagery, which constitutes an essential aspect of their semantic value. In choosing a particular expression or construction, a speaker construes the conceived situation in a certain way, i.e. he selects one particular image (from a range of alternatives) to structure its conceptual content for expressive purposes. Despite the objective equivalence of the sentence pairs in (1), the members of each are semantically distinct because they impose contrasting images on the conceived situation.

At this point, I will confine my discussion of imagery to a single example, namely the semantic contrasts distinguishing the universal quantifiers of English. It is intuitively obvious that the sentences in (2) have subtly different meanings despite their truth-functional equivalence: