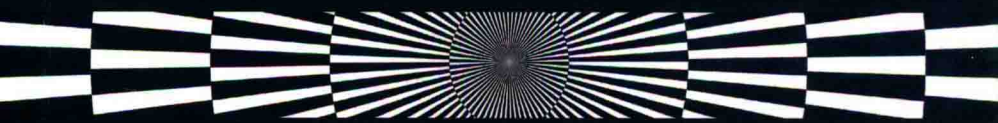
THE BLOOMSBURY COMPANION TO COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS



EDITED BY
JEANNETTE LITTLEMORE
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BLOOMSBURY

The Bloomsbury Companion to Cognitive Linguistics

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John R. Taylor

Bloomsbury Companions

Bloomsbury Academic
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

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LONDON • OXFORD • NEW YORK • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

Bloomsbury Academic
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

50 Bedford Square
London
WC1B 3DP
UK

1385 Broadway
New York
NY 10018
USA

www.bloomsbury.com

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First published in paperback 2015

First published 2014

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: PB: 978-1-4742-3732-1
HB: 978-1-4411-9509-8
ePub: 978-1-4411-3048-8
ePDF: 978-1-4411-5291-6

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

Typeset by Newgen Imaging Systems Pvt Ltd, Chennai, India
Printed and bound in Great Britain

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Contents

1 Introduction

John R. Taylor and Jeannette Littlemore

Chapter Overview

1 Defining and Positioning Cognitive Linguistics

Cognitive Linguistics began as an approach to the study of language, but it now has implications and applications far beyond language in any traditional sense of the word. It has its origins in the 1980s as a conscious reaction to Chomskyan linguistics, with its emphasis on formalistic syntactic analysis and its underlying assumption that language is independent from other forms of cognition. Increasingly, evidence was beginning to show that language is learned and processed much in the same way as other types of information about the world, and that the same cognitive processes are involved in language as are involved in other forms of thinking. For example, in our everyday lives, we look at things from different angles, we get up close to them or further away and see them from different vantage points and with different levels of granularity; we assess the relative features of our environment and decide which are important and need to be attended to and which are less important and need to be backgrounded; we lump information together, perceive and create patterns

in our environment, and look for these patterns in new environments when we encounter them. As we will see in this volume, all of these processes are at work in language too.

The two key figures who are associated with the inception of Cognitive Linguistics are George Lakoff and Ronald Langacker. Both, it should be remembered, started their careers as members of a group of young scholars associated with the radical new approach spearheaded by Noam Chomsky. By the 1980s, however, both Lakoff and Langacker were becoming increasingly disaffected with the formalistic approach to syntax associated with the Chomskyan school. Both scholars turned their attention, instead, to semantic issues, which had been relatively neglected within the Chomskyan framework. Lakoff raised fundamental questions with regard to 'objectivist' semantics – that is, theories which maintained that sentence meaning maps onto objectively verifiable states of affairs in the world. He argued, instead, that semantic content is mediated by how speakers construe and conceptualize the world. An important aspect of construal is how we categorize the things in our environment. Taking up the notion of prototype category developed by cognitive psychologist Eleanor Rosch, Lakoff argued that words do not name classically defined categories, that is, categories constituted by a set of necessary and sufficient conditions. Rather, entities can be good, or less good, members of a category. In a crucial and highly influential move, Lakoff then proposed that the different senses of a polysemous word, and even the different senses of a syntactic construction, might also be analysed in terms of a central, prototypical member, and a number of extended, or more peripheral senses. A noteworthy milestone here is the dissertation by one of Lakoff's students, Claudia Brugman, on the polysemy of the preposition *over* (Brugman, 1981). Brugman argued that the 'central', 'prototypical' sense combines the meanings of 'above' and 'across', as in *The bird flew over the yard*. Extended senses, related in virtue of some common shared features, include the 'above' sense, as in *The helicopter is hovering over the hill*, the 'across' sense, as in *Sam drove over the bridge*, the 'covering' sense, as in *She spread the tablecloth over the table*, the dispersal sense, as in *The guards were posted all over the hill*, and several more. Brugman's thesis (presented in Lakoff, 1987: Case Study 2) not only inspired a plethora of *over*-studies, it also provided a template for polysemy studies more generally.

Lakoff's second main contribution was to identify a number of 'conceptual metaphors' that underlie our abstract concepts and the way we think about the world and ourselves (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, 1999). For example, one of the most important conceptual metaphors is the idea that 'good' or 'active' things are 'up' whereas 'bad' or 'static' things are 'down', which allows us to say that we're 'feeling low' or having 'down time', that things are 'looking up', or that they are 'up and going'. This metaphor was taken to reflect our basic experience with the world that we have as children; when we fall over we feel bad; when

we lie down we are stationary, when we get up we are active and when we are feeling good, we literally 'stand tall'. As discussed in a later chapter, conceptual metaphor theory has come in for a good degree of criticism in recent years and the theory has been refined to take account of empirical psycholinguistic findings as well as more sociocultural approaches to language, but the basic tenets remain the same: language tends to reflect our physical interactions with the world and abstract concepts are linked to physical experiences through metaphor.

Langacker's contribution is perhaps more fundamental than Lakoff's. His Cognitive Grammar (Langacker, 1987, 1991, 2008) offers a radical rethink of basic issues concerning the nature of linguistic meaning and its relation to the surface form of utterances. He proposed a 'minimalist' approach, whereby the only elements in linguistic description are (a) phonological representations, concerning the overt form of an expression (whether spoken, written or signed), (b) semantic representations, roughly, meanings, broadly understood to include pragmatic, situational, and encyclopaedic aspects, and (c) symbolic relations between elements of (a) and elements of (b). On this basis, a language comes to be characterized, quite simply, as an inventory of phonological, semantic, and symbolic units, and language acquisition is a matter of a speaker's increasing command of these units. Importantly, the units differ along a number of dimensions. Thus some units are internally complex, while others are schematic to some degree or other. For example, the expression *can-opener* is internally complex, while the component unit *can* is an instance of the more schematic unit Noun, the whole expression being an instance of the complex schematic unit [N V-er] and its associated semantics (roughly: 'a device that can be used for V-ing Ns'). The schematic unit can sanction an open-ended set of instantiations; in this way, Cognitive Grammar is able to handle syntactic and morphological generalizations. It should also be noted that the unit has other semantic values (think of examples such as *dog-lover*, which denotes a person, not a thing, and *city-dweller*, where the initial noun designates the place where a person dwells); in other words, the unit is polysemous, just like the words of a language. The mechanics of Cognitive Grammar are discussed in more detail elsewhere in this volume. Three aspects, however, may be singled out for special mention here:

- The first concerns the way in which 'grammaticality' (or 'acceptability' – cognitive linguists see little reason to distinguish the two concepts) is to be understood. Grammaticality, namely, has to do with the extent to which an expression is sanctioned, or legitimized, by an already existing schematic unit, or possibly by several such units, in the language; the fit, needless to say, need not be perfect, neither will different speakers of the language always assess the matter in the same way.

- The second observation concerns the idea that syntactic organization is inherently symbolic and therefore meaningful, and that syntactic structures – just like individual words and morphemes – associate a form and meaning. An early indicative study addressed the passive construction in English (Langacker, 1982). Rather than being seen as the result of syntactic transformations, the construction and its various components, such as the verb *be*, the verbal participle, and the *by* phrase, were argued to have semantic content, which contribute cumulatively to the semantic and pragmatic value of the passive construction.
- Third, the Cognitive Grammar approach is sympathetic to the notion that linguistic knowledge, rather than residing in a small number of very broad, high-level abstractions, may actually be rather low-level and 'surface-oriented', consisting in multiple memories of already encountered usage and relatively shallow generalizations over these remembered instances. In practical terms, this means that linguistic knowledge will tend to be centred on individual lexical items and their idiosyncratic properties, concerning the syntactic environments in which they occur and their stylistic or pragmatic values. Similarly, the representation of syntactic and word-formation constructions will incorporate knowledge of the lexical items which typically occur in them, in addition, once again, to information about the kinds of situations in which they are likely to be used.

Although it represents a radical departure in some ways from many established ideas in linguistics (such as the formerly widely held view that syntax, semantics and pragmatics were largely independent of one another), the principles underlying Cognitive Linguistics resonated with many traditional concerns of European linguistics and philology. European work in semantics – one thinks of classics such as Gustav Stern's *Meaning and Change of Meaning* (1931), C. S. Lewis's *Studies in Words* (1960), and various works by Stephan Ullmann (e.g. Ullmann, 1964) – takes for granted that meaning is encyclopaedic in scope and is grounded in cultural beliefs and practices. Notions such as viewpoint and construal have long been studied in stylistics, in literary and cultural approaches to language study, and in translation studies. For example, the notion of 'cultural keywords' has been around for some time (see Wierzbicka, 1997, 2006) and these, by definition, involve encyclopaedic knowledge. Cultural keywords (and expressions) act as 'focal points' for complex sets of culturally specific values, distilling these values into a single word or expression, and are very hard, if not impossible to translate without a great deal of paraphrasing. English cultural keywords and expressions include things like 'pub', 'chav' and 'cream tea'. The problems that these sorts of words and expressions present to translators are well attested (Baker, 2010). Researchers working in the field of

translation are beginning to argue that metonymic thinking (an idea that has developed in Cognitive Linguistics) can be usefully employed by translators when faced with examples such as these (Denroche, 2013). Finally, the semantic relations between the senses of a polysemous word, and the mechanisms whereby words acquire new senses, have long been an important focus of work in lexicography and historical linguistics.

Concepts proposed in Cognitive Linguistics have also matched developments taking place in second language teaching research. In the 1980s and 1990s, there was an increasing interest among language teaching researchers in the role of authentic input and the importance of context and information exchange in language comprehension and teaching (Canale and Swain, 1980). Significantly less emphasis was placed on syntactic transformations and manipulations and grammar drills and there was an increasing awareness of the ubiquity of idioms and fixed expressions and of the importance of communicative intentions. All of this paralleled the increasing attention that was being paid in Cognitive Linguistics to usage-based language acquisition and construction grammars. In recent years, in language teaching research, there has been a small swing of the pendulum away from purely 'transactional' communication in the language classroom back towards more of a focus on form. It has been shown how learners often benefit from language play and experimentation with second language forms, rather than focusing exclusively on the language from a functional perspective (Cook, 1998). This has coincided felicitously with insights from Cognitive Linguistics concerning the motivated nature of a great many form-meaning connections and a deeper awareness of the mechanisms that allow language to be 'played with' (see Littlemore, 2009; Tyler, 2012).

It can probably be said that Cognitive Linguistics came of age in 1989 with the first conference of the International Cognitive Linguistics Association (ICLA) in Germany and the launch of the journal *Cognitive Linguistics* (Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin) in 1990, closely followed by the launch of the monograph series *Cognitive Linguistics Research* (Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin) in 1991. In the meantime, Chomskyan linguistics has lost its dominant position in linguistics and other approaches have attracted many followers. Even adherents of the Chomskyan programme have come close to endorsing some of the tenets of Cognitive Linguistics in some of their writings (see e.g. Culicover, 1999; Jackendoff, 2010; for discussion of these, see Taylor, 1999, 2011). Rivals to the Chomskyan paradigm include functional approaches, sociolinguistics, discourse, empirical studies of acquisition, typological studies and corpus studies. The assumptions underlying these approaches are compatible with those of Cognitive Linguistics in many ways. For instance, functional approaches to language and sociolinguistics focus on usage, embedding language in its social and communicative context. Studies of first language acquisition have always had a strong empirical component, and have been driven more by the data than by abstract theory.