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*Peter Harder*

# MEANING IN MIND AND SOCIETY

## A FUNCTIONAL CONTRIBUTION TO THE SOCIAL TURN IN COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS

COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS RESEARCH

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## A Functional Contribution to the Social Turn in Cognitive Linguistics

*by*

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# Meaning in Mind and Society. A Functional Contribution to the Social Turn in Cognitive Linguistics

# Introduction

## 1. What this book tries to do

This book was undertaken with two purposes in mind, one academic and one 'civic'.

The academic purpose is to describe and contribute to the process whereby cognitive linguistics is expanding to include the social side of language and meaning. This development is one aspect of an even broader intellectual challenge for the 21st century: cognitive science successfully integrated a number of disciplines, including linguistics, in an umbrella discipline to study the human mind – but the very success of that endeavour has now carried it from a beginning where cognition was viewed as an autonomous domain (the 'brain in the vat') into the study of cognitive processes in society. Since there is no umbrella 'social science' – no 'soc-sci' that expanding 'cog-sci' can team up with – there is no easy blueprint for how to take this step. No matter what one's preferred approach may be, however, it will have to take the role of language into consideration – which makes it an exciting challenge for a language person.

Even more important than the academic motivation, however, is the civic purpose. Recently, a prominent spokesperson for 'critical Muslims' in Denmark opened a debate on immigration by saying 'everything begins with language' – and went on to argue that divisive ways of speaking were at the root of the problems. Cognitive linguists would tend to disagree with this statement, pointing instead to cognitive models in the mind. Most ordinary people (and politicians) would ignore both and point to social realities as they see them. The academic community can offer no obvious way of making these different perspectives cohere. The book tries to achieve its academic purpose in such a way that it can address this gap.

The specific focus of this book is expressed in the word *functional*. As I use the term, cf. also Harder (1996), it refers to relations between a dynamic object of description and the context – more specifically the type

of pattern in which feedback from the environment helps to shape, promote or undermine their continuing role. I try to show that a full understanding of meanings must include an account of such functional relations. This includes feedback from all relevant factors, including intersubjective understanding and non-mental aspects of the way the world works. In order to understand what for instance *security* means, ongoing feedback across the whole spectrum, from the individual experience of being under threat up to international relations, needs to be part of the framework.

The lengthy subtitle expresses the trajectory that the account follows: the subject is Cognitive Linguistics (= CL); it describes the ongoing development in CL that I describe as the 'social turn' – and it suggests that a functional approach can add an essential dimension to it.

The topic of meaning in society has become increasingly focal for many interconnected reasons – in linguistics, in cultural studies, in organization theory and management studies, and last but not least in politics, where professional operators in the form of spin doctors have proliferated in the last decade. It is becoming more and more important that those of us whose fields involve meaning equip students as well as we can to understand and engage with social processes of meaning creation and proliferation.

The problem is not that nothing is being done: there is a plethora of different approaches on offer, and Cognitive Linguistics has done its share – e.g. Chilton (1996, 2004); Lakoff (2004, 2006, 2008); Kristiansen and Dirven (2008). However, the book is based on the conviction that both the academic and the civic issue have a shared and unsolved problem in the present intellectual landscape, in that there is no clear answer to the question: how does the analyst manage to get a full and integrated picture of cognitive and social aspects of the topic of 'meaning in society'?

The words 'full and integrated' are crucial in relation to the academic analyst's civic obligations: if you go solely for those specific aspects that constitute your special interests (personally as well as professionally) and leave the rest to others, the field will be a prey to competing factions. This may be okay or inevitable from an academic point of view; active research never deals with more than a small part of the truth anyway. But the warring half truths on the academic side tend to team up with warring interests in society – leaving the field as a free-for-all.

This prevents the academic community from serving civil society as well as it should – as illustrated by the ethnic issue discussed in chapter 8.

An important factor is the influential academic approach that takes 'discourses' as the fundamental object of description. In this approach, the free-for-all has the final word: the world consists of a cauldron of ongoing processes of meaning creation that are caused by, and simultaneously caus-

ing, other social processes of the same kind. Since the distinguishing feature of this heterogeneous collection of approaches is that it operates with the plural form *discourses*, I use the plural attributively to avoid confusion with the uncontroversial non-count singular: a *discourses* approach is something much more specific and problematic than a *discourse* approach.

From an individual perspective, the 'discourses perspective' has the attraction that it allows you to be the founder and sole proprietor of your own local processes of meaning creation. Significantly, however, it is also attractive to power holders who want to make sure that such processes work so as to promote their interests. The claim that meaning is detached from all foundations beyond the immediate process was originally put forward by critical intellectuals, who wanted to tear the mask from established interests parading as ultimate reality. Now it has become common property, which means that those who have more power use it more effectively. The civic position does not stand much of a chance if the winner takes it all, also when it comes to meaning in society. That makes it worth while looking for a different approach.

The book tries to show that a social cognitive linguistics can serve the civic purposes I have described, and make the academic and the civic agenda go hand in hand. Two basic features of the CL approach are essential arguments for thinking so.

First of all, as pointed out by Geeraerts (2003b; 2007), CL is inherently oriented towards recontextualization. What created and continues to unite the whole CL enterprise is the movement of going behind language to set it in a wider cognitive context. What I call 'the social turn' can be understood as a new operation of the same kind: language-and-conceptualization needs to be set in the wider context of 'meaning-in-society'[1].

Secondly, in the context of CL, the issue of foundations has been recast in terms of *grounding*, which is an attractive way of thinking about the relation between a focal object of description and the context in which it belongs. In classic CL, the central form of grounding is *bodily* grounding (cf. Johnson 1992). This dimension retains its crucial role, but in a social cognitive linguistics, grounding also includes the anchoring of meaning in feedback from the environment, outside the individual's body. This is in keeping with the broader agenda in CL of *experiential* grounding.

Grounding contrasts on the one hand with dogmatic foundationalism, where everything is rigidly determined at some basic level, and on the other with the deconstructionist detachment of meaning from all founda-

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1 This is a continuation of the agenda of Harder (1999) and Sinha (1999).

tional moorings. Where exactly between these extremes the description ends up is an empirical matter. In this, it reflects the same point as the concept of 'partial autonomy': certain facts stand on the shoulders of other facts, which means that they depend on them without being reducible to them.

The scope of the book calls for a comment. It may appear that I am trying to tell everybody in the social sciences and the humanities how to do their jobs. But the academic purpose is actually quite specific: to show, from the point of view of cognitive linguistics, how meaning as a feature of individual minds is woven into the larger fabric of meaning in society. Unfortunately I cannot address this issue without having to make a considerable number of assumptions about meaning, language, human minds and societies. While it does not quite amount to 'the universe and other related matters', it may be a little too close for comfort.

One thing I clearly owe the reader is a definition, or an account (if *definition* sounds a little too Aristotelian!), of what I understand by meaning, so that it becomes clear how that entity can be both in mind and society. As I understand it, meaning presupposes conscious experience, but only experience understood as associated with a *vehicle* counts as meaning. The most basic vehicle (cf. Sinha & Rodriguez 2008: 364–68) is a material object, such as a cup or chair – which are meaningful entities to members of communities in which they are associated with certain types of experience. In this simplest case, meaning is a side effect of the object's role in a form of life.

With the rise of signs, meanings acquire independent status in relation to their vehicles. In human languages, this status gets its most sophisticated manifestation. With the development of languages, the human form of life becomes dependent on collective recognition of meaning, and that in turn brings about a proliferation of objects whose causal powers depend on what meanings they have (thus superimposing a new level of complexity on the issue of meaning).

Of special importance in this book is the functional perspective (cf. ch. 4). In the trajectory of meaning, it begins with the functions of objects and continues via the functions of linguistic expressions to functional relations between meanings and social structures (cf. also Zlatev 2001). But the perspective extends beyond linguistic meaning to the general issue of how the functional dimension interacts with the cognitive dimension in understanding what goes on in institutional, social and political processes. Functions work at all levels, not only those that involve meaning – and the specific role of meaning needs to be understood in this larger perspective.

The functional dimension of meaning-in-society constitutes the basis of the specific contribution this book has to offer. Thus the book does not pretend to give an equal and full account of all aspects of ongoing socially oriented work in the cognitive tradition (which would also take more than one book). It aims to describe the types of development that together constitute the social turn, and show what a functional approach has to contribute to it.

To sum up: this book tries to show how cognitive linguistics is expanding from the classic version predicated on conceptualization towards a social cognitive linguistics that grounds conceptualization in its social context, and to show how a functional approach can provide the extended foundation that this development requires. In doing so, it tries to show that this will provide an approach to meaning in society that can do justice simultaneously to the embodied experience of the individual and to social reality.

For obvious reasons, the book does not try to give all the answers that one might want such an approach to provide. What it does try is to show that the approach addresses the relevant questions. Hopefully, it gives readers a glimpse of what is missing in some of the partial answers, and prevent these from turning into reductive half-truths.

## 2. A summary of the argument

The overall question is: how should Cognitive Linguistics (= CL) expand in order to be an adequate framework for describing meaning as part of social reality?

Some of the central parts of the answer are introduced in list form below:

### 2.1. There is no such thing as 'conceptual frames' (But there's a whole social-cognitive world)

A very brief summary of this book is to say that what a cognitivist sees as conceptual frames is the tip of an iceberg that constitutes the whole social universe, and a frame-based theory of meaning needs to broaden out to encompass this perspective. In order to understand cognition-in-action, a social cognitive linguistics needs an account of the social grounding of meaning – including relations between cognitive and non-cognitive dimensions. This in turn involves the following issues:

(a) First of all, it requires *a format for describing social facts* as distinct from cognitive facts: the book therefore presents and argues for such a format.

(b) A central claim about that format is that it involves various forms of *interaction between meaning in the individual mind and meaning in the environment.*

This is less trivial than it might appear at first glance. To say that there is meaning in the environment, just as there is meaning inside the mind, is one of those ideas that are sort of obvious but have not been given a clear and consensual descriptive format. Cognitive Linguistics is basically predicated on putting meaning inside the head (cf. Gärdenfors 1998: 21), and two of the authors I build on in moving into social territory also locate the essential mental elements inside the mind of the individual. Searle's (1995: 26) definition of social facts is based on a 'we-intention' inside an individual mind; and Croft (2000: 111) defines meaning as something that "occurs in the interlocutors' heads".

In contrast, I place the individual agent in an interface position between meaning emerging from within the body and meaning impinging from outside. The approach that enables me to do so is entirely unmysterious and implies no assumptions about a collective mind existing independently of individuals. Basically, it is a matter of 'levels-of-analysis'. I do not dispute what Searle and Croft are claiming – the individual level just does not capture all there is to say (as they are the first to point out in other respects).

The rationale has two steps. The first can be illustrated with the properties of a traffic jam as opposed the properties of a car. Even if a traffic jam consists entirely of cars, it has not just additional but apparently contradictory properties; thus the location of a traffic jam that starts if two lanes out of three are suddenly closed will quickly get extended *backwards* on a congested freeway, although all the cars in it separately move *forward*. And if we identify a traffic jam with the individual cars it consists of, how can it be that the traffic jam persists while individual cars escape?

This issue reflects a basic ontological point that is related to Russell's theory of types (the implications of which were central to Bateson 1980). At the basic level where the issue is the existence of assemblies with properties that differ from those of the individual instances, meaning-in-society as understood in this book includes the 'traffic jams of meaning' in the human environment, an example being a rumour that arises and proliferates accidentally: it may have to be taken seriously while it lasts, but may also disappear without a trace. But although I will occasionally refer to

this level of collective meaning, the focus is on more specific and structured forms of collective, meaning-imbued phenomena. These depend on the uniquely human ability to engage in joint attention (cf. Tomasello 2008).

Joint attention (as part of joint activity) means that mental as opposed to merely behavioural properties of *others* acquire the status as parts of the world *I* live in. The most fundamental meaningful collective entity in the human world is 'we' – understood as a group of which human individuals are members, and which is not reducible to the sum of its parts. In other words, it is not the case that the 'we' inherits all its mental properties from properties of the individuals – there are also mental, cognitive properties that the individuals have because they are members of a 'we'. Evolutionarily speaking, human beings are adapted to a world where it is meaningful to be members of such collective 'we's – and all other forms of collective meaning are differentiated and specialized forms of the basic 'we'-type of experience. At this more advanced level, meaning enters into structured and constitutive relations with the social world (cf. especially ch. 7).

A special methodological difficulty is that when individuals relate to meaning in the social and cultural environment, they do so by means of representations in their individual minds – there is no other form of access. This means that much of the time it is difficult to know when you are dealing with the content of your own mind and when you are talking about meaning in society. But this problem has to be addressed rather than denied. Cognitive linguistics can only successfully expand from the mind into society, if it can tell the difference between what is going on in an individual mind and what is going on in the social world.

(c) An account of meaning in society involves the *causal interplay between mental and non-mental factors*. Not everything can be captured in terms of mental facts. In the social environment, part of the way meaning operates depends on causal patterns at the collective level.

An example is the proliferation of concepts across a community: the spreading awareness of this season's fashionable colours occurs outside the individual and is interwoven with the proliferation of non-mental objects such as this year's fashionable clothes. Also inside the individual, there is interaction between non-mental facts (including neural wiring) and mental representations (cf. colour-blindness). The two sides interact because impact from the environment affects both mental and non-mental aspects of the individual (cf. ch 5).

## 2.2. On-line vs. off-line features

An adequate account of meaning in a social perspective needs to provide a theory of the relation between the process (online) side and the product (offline) side. This calls for a difficult balancing act, based on the following two assumptions:

> (a) The process or flow dimension is the basic and fundamental aspect of social reality (as widely recognized after Wittgenstein, e.g. Tomasello (2008: 342–43), citing Searle (1995: 36).
>
> (b) There is more to social reality than facts about online processes – most obviously because there are constraints on the flow which are due to factors outside it.

In relation to point (b), it is significant that interest in the 'product' side of social structure has gone out of fashion since the Marxist 1970s. As part of resetting the political agenda, Margaret Thatcher once claimed that "there is no such thing as society" – and she is not the only one who thinks so. Believers in free enterprise have always emphasized the sovereign individual, and left-wing interest has by and large shifted to the issue of different discourses.

The difficulty of maintaining the balance between (a) and (b) is partly due to the fact that if you pursue what you think is the most interesting dimension of the topic, you can very easily slip into thinking (or saying things that presuppose) that this is the *only* dimension that needs to be pursued. This happened when structure was discovered, and structuralist pioneers went on to say that structure was the only thing that existed. At present, the same risk is observable in the movement towards the flow dimension. In linguistics, it takes the form of what I call 'usage fundamentalism', cf. the discussion in ch. 6. Elsewhere, it takes the form of the bottomless semiosis, cf. the discussion of Derrida in ch. 3.

The book makes a point of understanding offline features in the flow perspective, rather than in the traditional Platonic perspective where only eternal features are real and flow is ephemeral. In chs. 5 and 6 it shows what implications this has for understanding both linguistic meaning and linguistic structure – but in so doing, it also makes a point of showing that offline features still need to be taken into account.