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# Cognitive Grammar

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## Introduction

Cognitive grammar (CG) is a relatively recent approach within the functional family of linguistic theories. It originated in the late 1970s but did not gather real momentum until the 1980s, with seminal publications such as Lakoff (1987) and Langacker (1987a), followed more recently by Talmy (2000), Croft and Cruse (2004), and Geeraerts and Cuyckens (2007). CG is not a static monolith but a vibrant enterprise constantly undergoing developments and improvement. However, all work within the theory relies on some foundational assumptions shared by the members of the community. CG describes language as a structured collection of meaningful categories, which are formed on the basis of our experiences of the world and which help us store and manage information: “a way of organizing knowledge that reflects the needs, interests and experiences of individuals and cultures” (Geeraerts & Cuyckens, 2007, p. 5). From this overall characterization, Geeraerts and Cuyckens identify three main tenets: (a) the primacy of semantics in linguistic analysis; (b) the encyclopedic nature of linguistic meaning; and (c) the perspectival nature of linguistic meaning, indicating that the world is not objectively reflected in language, but an image of the world is seen through the lenses of language users. This entry reflects these three tenets in order and concludes with some remarks on the notion of *usage-based*, which is central within the framework. The importance of the idea that linguistic categories, like most categories, are prototype continua with core and peripheral members is a recurring theme throughout. All these aspects make CG special and different from other approaches to linguistics, both within the functional school of thought and outside it.

## The Primacy of Meaning

Absolutely essential to the CG approach is the meaningful functioning of language in all its guises and all its uses in text and discourse. Such an approach promotes empirical methods which are geared to natural language usage. Language is a highly dynamic entity for which no absolute boundaries between the traditional areas of syntax, semantics, and pragmatics are assumed. Human language is shaped by the two main functions it serves: the *semiological function* and the *interactive function* (Langacker, 1998, p. 1). The semiological function is the mapping of meanings (conceptualizations) with linguistic forms in speech, writing, signs, and gestures. This is the symbolic nature of language from which the centrality of meaning for all linguistic concerns follows. In the literature, these symbolic structures are often referred to as form–meaning pairings. The interactive function, on the other hand, concerns the communicative side of language use as a social phenomenon, including aspects such as the function of providing information as well as expressing the speaker’s subjective stance and intersubjective awareness. Both the semiological and the interactive functions are crucial for the guiding idea that language use must be explained with reference to the underlying mental processes as well as with reference to the social and situational context.

More specifically, we can say that linguistic meaning is both fostered and constrained by a number of factors. The first factor is what we know about the world around, that is, encyclopedic knowledge. The second factor is the conventionalized symbolic links between lexical items and concepts in language, such as *dog*/DOG, *have a bath* /ACTIVITY(BATH), *the long and the short of it*/THE SUMMARY OF THE MATTER. Third, linguistic meaning hinges on

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human cognitive processes, such as attention and categorization, which pervade every level of language use. In example (1) such construal operations are the processes that allow us to interpret the circumstances described as an event that might have resulted in a goal, in which case the football player is the agent and also the most prominent figure, while (2) is more likely to describe an incident where the ball figures prominently. Example (3) is a case of metonymization which selects the most important part of the body for the description of a good academic. Through metaphorization in (4), we are able to understand a theory by comparison with a building, and in (5) a binary contrast between *chaos* and *calm* is set up and focalized (Paradis, 2004; 2005; 2011; Paradis, Willners, & Jones, 2009; Oakley, 2009).

- (1) *The football player* hit the ball.
- (2) *This ball* hit the football player.
- (3) There are *lots of good heads* at this university.
- (4) The theoretical *foundation* is solid.
- (5) I prefer *chaos* to *calm*.

All linguistic expressions are profiled according to “frames” or “domain matrices,” such as “on a hike” or “at a restaurant.” Frames or domain matrices are systems of concepts, which are related in such a way that in order to interpret the individual concepts we have to understand the structure of the whole (Fillmore, 1982, p. 111; Ungerer & Schmid, 1996, pp. 214–16; Goldberg, 2006). All such factors are available to speakers as presupposed information in communication.

Like most linguistic categories, lexicon and grammar are not discrete entities but form a continuum from more substantial (contentful) meaning structures such as PEOPLE, ARTIFACTS, and EVENTS, to more schematic structures (configurations), such as PATH, SCALE, PART/WHOLE, and BOUNDEDNESS. In contrast to “lexical meanings,” which are contentful and conceptually rich (e.g., “car,” “Africa,” “swim”), grammatical meanings rely mainly on highly schematic configurations such as “mass/count,” which is a BOUNDEDNESS configuration, and “temporality,” which may be viewed as PATH, that is, a timescale between past time and future time with “now” in the middle. The function of schematic categories also allow us to construe more complex expressions such as phrases and clauses and to ground them in the actual discourse situation. In between the two extremes are meanings such as negation, intensification, or meanings of prepositions, which are neither primarily contentful nor primarily configurational. Another important standpoint in some cognitive literature is that words and constructions do not “have” meanings (Cruse, 2002; Paradis, 2005; 2008). Meanings in language emerge from the contentful and configurational pre-meaning structures, which crystallize when they are used in human communication. The relation between pre-meanings and full discursive meanings is the same as that between the ingredients in a stew and the stew itself. They are two different substances. The pre-meaning stage can be illustrated using Figure 1. The way we see the human being in the picture can be compared to a certain pre-meaning stage. The ingredients that are present in the picture form the basis of the emergence of the stew. The full meaning becomes clear when the pre-meaning is eventually properly couched in its situational context, just as the human being would have been, had she been focalized and set off against the background and the event.



**Figure 1** A person heading somewhere © 2010 Olof Ekedahl. All rights reserved

### The Linguistic–Encyclopedic Continuum

The second tenet concerns the encyclopedic nature of meaning in CG. This position is in stark contrast to the commonly held view among linguists of different persuasions that it is possible to make a clear distinction between linguistic knowledge and nonlinguistic or encyclopedic knowledge. This position is questioned by cognitive linguists. That an interpretation of an expression comprises both linguistic and encyclopedic knowledge is not controversial in any linguistic framework. A more controversial question is what the knowledge is like that is needed for interpreting sentences (linguistic knowledge) and what the knowledge is like that is considered superfluous for that purpose (encyclopedic knowledge), and where the dividing line between the two is located. Instead, the two types of knowledge are considered to form a continuum. Consider examples (6), (7), and (8) from Paradis (2003) from the point of view of the alleged divide between linguistic meaning and encyclopedic meaning.

- (6) Pubs *open* at 11.  
Three hundred pubs *open* today.
- (7) We always make *fast* decisions.  
I dislike *fast* food.  
Angela is a *fast* writer.

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- (8) The *newspaper* is on the kitchen table.  
The *newspaper* made ten journalists redundant.

The claim in CG is that knowing the meaning of *open* in (6), *fast* in (7), or *newspaper* in (8) always involves knowing about the kinds of activities one performs when one “opens things” such as pubs, boxes, debates, computer files, or books, or how various time specifications, such as “at 11” or “today,” influence the interpretation of *open*. In (7) and (8), we may ask ourselves what entities can be “fast” and in what way, and whether “newspapers” are artifacts, companies, or even people who work for the newspaper (Taylor, 2000, p. 121; Paradis, 2004). As pointed out earlier, it is not possible to fully understand the meanings of those words without knowing about the “frames” or “domain matrices” which they form part of. It is not possible to strip off what would be encyclopedic meaning because there is no way that we can know where to start and where to stop.

Although meaning in CG is encyclopedic in the sense that there is no delimited linguistic meaning, not all aspects of meaning are considered to be of equal status. Langacker (1987a, pp. 158–61) deals with such matters as gradation in terms of four *centrality* factors. The centrality of a certain specification is a matter of its relative sociocognitive entrenchment and likelihood of activation. Centrality correlates with the degree to which a specification is *conventional*, *generic*, *intrinsic*, and *characteristic*. Langacker uses *banana* as an example. His knowledge of *banana* includes the fact that his sister put sliced bananas on her cereal for breakfast in the morning, but this fact cannot be an aspect that is in other people’s minds and cannot be on a par with essential properties such as ontological type, size, shape, smell, taste, and color. Some specifications are not possible to omit, while others are completely irrelevant for even the most exhaustive description. This entails that not all aspects of our knowledge of an entity should at all times be taken into consideration. Language users always select relevant parts and focus their attention on those parts. What is important to accept is that lexical meanings involve all kinds of specification that we use in different communicative situations. This position is provocatively formulated by Jackendoff, who is, strictly speaking, not a cognitive linguist but shares many ideas with them:

Recall again what a word is: a way of associating units from distinct levels of representation. Now consider what it takes to be able to look at food and know what it tastes like: a learned association between a visual and a gustatory representation. How many of those do we store? A lot, I should think. From a formal point of view these associations of representations are not unlike those between phonological and conceptual structures. And as far as learning goes, they’re almost as arbitrary as word–meaning associations. Mashed potatoes and French vanilla ice cream don’t look that different. (Jackendoff, 1997, p. 107)

#### Perspectives and Construals

The third tenet concerns the fundamental idea within CG that linguistic meaning is perspectival and reflects language users’ capacity for conceptualizing the same situation in different ways. There is no completely neutral or indeed objective way of seeing, describing, and understanding a situation. Meaning in language is grounded and constrained by how human beings perceive the world, and we express ourselves accordingly. In their introductory textbook, Radden and Dirven (2007, p. xi) give an expressive example of how language interacts with perception and attention. They say that if we see a bird flying above us, we focus on the bird with the sky as the backdrop and describe the situation



accordingly as *a bird in the sky*. We do not focus on the sky and describe the situation as *the sky around the bird*. If we play around with one of the examples in (6) *Pubs open at 11* and change it into *The pubs open at 11*, we create an image of a number of specific pubs, as opposed to pubs in general. For visualizations of the difference between the two types, see Radden and Dirven (2007, pp. 89, 106). Grammatical constructions are always semantically motivated. Linguistic meanings are also grounded in social interaction. Meaning is constantly negotiated by us as language users on the basis of our intentions and our assessment of our and other people's knowledge of the world. Language unavoidably shapes thought, which entails some level of linguistic relativity.

Ways-of-seeing are crucial in language use and meaning making, whether they concern more contentful meanings such as nominal or verbal meanings, or sentences and discourses, or more schematic grammatical meanings such as tense and aspect (e.g., parts of speech in Paradis, 2005; transitivity in sentences in Langacker, 2006, Davidse & Heyvaert, 2008, and Paradis, 2009; or discourse phenomena in Talmy, 2000, and Oakley, 2009). In what follows, two concrete examples are given to illustrate the understanding of grammatical notions such as parts of speech and degree in language within CG. Parts of speech are defined as notional categories in most linguistic approaches; that is, nouns denote entities, verbs denote actions, and adjectives denote qualities or properties in the world. This entails that category membership is unambiguous and based on necessary and sufficient features, and such categories do not have internal structure in terms of centrality. There are obvious problems with clear-cut categories both from the point of view of the nature of linguistic meaning and from a methodological perspective. Typological studies of word classes (Dixon, 1982; Givón, 1984; Thompson, 1988; Wierzbicka, 1986; Croft, 1990; 2001; Stassen, 1997; Aikhenvald, 2000; Dixon & Aikhenvald, 2009) reveal that the categorization of forms into grammatical classes such as parts of speech is not a trivial matter. There is considerable consensus among typologists that the category of noun is a universal category, while the category of adjective is not. Givón (1979, p. 13) says that "The category of adjective is a notorious swing-category in language." English adjectives are a case in point with members that are rich conceptualizations, such as *American*, *economic*, and *fruity*, and members that are mainly configurational single property concepts, such as *mere*, *only*, and *main* (Paradis, 2005, pp. 554–60).

Langacker (1987b) proposes a part-of-speech model where a noun is viewed as *THING*, construed as an atomic notion conceived as static and holistic. Nouns are summary scanned, which means that all aspects of the concept are available at the same time and together form a gestalt. Verbs are conceptually *PROCESSES*. They are relational and sequentially scanned over time. Adjectives are similar to both nouns and verbs. They are relational like verbs, but they differ from verbs in being atemporal instead of temporal and summary scanned like nouns instead of being sequentially scanned like verbs. Langacker (1999, p. 11) gives *yellow* as a concrete example to illustrate the crucial function of construal in the classification of parts of speech. The conceptual content of *yellow* in the color domain is kept constant over its various construals into different parts of speech. *Yellow* as a noun, as in *yellow is a warm color*, profiles a particular kind of *THING* in color space. *Yellow* as an adjective, as in *yellow paper*, profiles an *ATEMPORAL RELATION* of a color sensation to a *THING*. *Yellow* as a verb, as in *the paper yellowed*, profiles a *PROCESS* in which the color of the *THING* (*PAPER*) gradually changes. Furthermore, Langacker contrasts the verbal sense, which profiles a sequential *PROCESS*, with the stative-adjectival meaning of the participle *yellowed* (*the yellowed paper*). The verb and the participle evoke the same content. In fact, the process profiled by the verb serves as the base for the participle in that something can only be yellowed if it has undergone a process of yellowing. The participle profiles only the final state, which makes it atemporal and nonverbal. The upshot of this story, then, is that it is the speaker who construes some content in the act of communication, and parts

of speech are configuration construals. The speakers' choice of construal depends on how the message is best visualized.

Another, linguistic notion that is traditionally thought of as a grammatical notion is DEGREE. Most other linguistic frameworks would say that DEGREE is a grammatical notion related to the comparability of adjectives and adverbs and expressed through adverbs (*more, very*) and quantifiers (*much, all, a lot of*). However, there are also scholars who note that manifestations of DEGREE are, in fact, associated with more contentful categories such as nouns, verbs, and adjectives too (Sapir, 1949; Bolinger, 1972; Paradis, 1997; 2001). In particular, Paradis (2008) takes issue with the grammatical-class approach, which cannot account for the flexibility with which DEGREE is used and the apparent ease with which it is invoked in new contexts, and shows that it is first and foremost a configurational meaning structure that combines with structures pertaining to all kinds of knowledge: THINGS, EVENTS, and STATES.

Linguistic items that are primarily expressions of DEGREE, and linguistic items whose content has an underlying DEGREE configuration form a continuum. The notion of DEGREE may be foregrounded and construed as the most salient component of a meaning structure, or it may be construed as a backgrounded meaning structure. For instance, DEGREE modifiers such as *very, a bit, little, much, and totally* foreground DEGREE. In contrast to them, linguistic expressions, such as *bad, dead, adore, and beauty* foreground content structures such as MERIT, EXISTENCE, MENTAL STATE, and APPEARANCE respectively, while DEGREE resides in the background. For instance, while the meaning of *bad* is construed according to an UNBOUNDED SCALE configuration, *bad-good*, it primarily profiles the property of MERIT when it is used in language. There are many linguistic expressions that at first sight do not appear to be associated with grading, such as *man* or *book*, but may in many occurrences of use highlight properties that are gradable. For instance, the profiling of a *handsome man* involves the evaluation of a property of MAN along a gradable dimension of "beauty." Similarly, the profiling of a *marvelous book* involves a gradable dimension of BOOK as being "a good read" or "a beautiful artifact." The backgrounded DEGREE structures of such meanings provide the necessary condition for combination with degree modifiers, either directly as in *very nice, absolutely excellent, quite a man, and badly needed*, or as in *a very good book* through a gradable property of a BOOK (THING) bridged by "merit," as here specified by *good*. On a more creative note, there was a car advertisement in Sweden, *How WE are you? The new V70. Very WE*, where the personal pronoun *we* was used as something you can be more or less of. All this goes to show that DEGREE is not confined to the meanings of certain grammatical function words but is part of the use potential of a wide range of lexical items.

### A Usage-Based Approach

Finally, the notion of CG being a usage-based theory, mentioned in passing at the beginning of this entry, merits more attention and qualification, since the term is ambiguous and may refer to two different but related things, which are both central to the framework. First, research within the framework is usage-based in the sense that it makes use of both textual and behavioral data sources. CG encourages empirical investigations using data from "real" language (Gonzalez-Marquez, Mittelberg, Coulson & Spivey, 2007; Gilquin & Gries, 2009; Paradis et al., 2009). The other meaning of the notion of usage-based theory is with reference to how languages are acquired, how they develop, and how they change in the contexts where they are used in social communication (Tomasello, 2003; 2008; Traugott & Dasher, 2002). Motivations for linguistic development and language change are always functional and spring from language use and communicative needs in the



settings of the symbolic structures, that is, the conventionalized form–meaning pairings (Paradis, 2008; 2011). Different readings in different contexts emerge from the speaker's intention and the addressee's wish to interpret an expression in a relevant way in order to obtain socially viable mappings between words and concepts. Some of these uses lead to change while others are just contextualized shifts. Construal operations are the source of all readings, both conventional and ad hoc contextual ones, and possible lexical change takes place when new conventional, entrenched links between linguistic expressions and conceptual structures are formed. CG always seeks semantic motivations for grammatical construals. One major advantage of CG over other theories is that it has the tools to account for the dynamics of language use and meaning-making.

**SEE ALSO:** Corpus Linguistics: Quantitative Methods; Formal and Functional Approaches to Grammar; Generative Grammar; Systemic Functional Linguistics

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