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Cognitive Linguistics: An Introduction

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Introduction

Welcome to the world of construal!

No human being perceives Absolute Reality in its totality. Instead we see a kind of reality limited by the time and space we experience; we interpret and reconstruct that experience into schema, or patterns, in our own minds. Beyond this we add whatever limitations or natural structures that our own minds bring to our limited experiences, and we have the insights and limitations of the way we express or describe our experience. In all of this we ‘construe’ the world; we view the world individually, we have a worldview. Additionally, the language we use is a major factor in our construal of the world—it strongly influences the way we see things, and the way that we see things is a major factor in how we have shaped our language. Once we have reasoned this far, we have reasoned very closely to the basic premises of Cognitive Linguistics.

Chapters and sections in Lee’s book introduce important topics in Cognitive Linguistics (CL), covering topics such as metaphor, radial categories, mental spaces, semantic anomalies, language change, discourse analysis, creativity and the nature of meaning. CL maintains that meaning and construal (the ways we perceive and process data) are central to descriptive linguistics.

The book introduces many topics quickly, but the discussion of syntax and morphology is more suggestive than exhaustive. This book is also content to let phonetics and phonology stand without CL-specific input. In addition, there is very little discussion about non-Indo-European languages. The semantic structure and lexical systems are where CL shines. Parts of the grammar system are illuminated in sparkling detail by CL as presented in this book.

Intended audience

The book’s intended audience is those unfamiliar with formal linguistic terms, including scholars from other disciplines because CL “will add a useful dimension to their perspective on language” (Lee:xi). The author wants the book to be useful to students of language who are not familiar
with CL “without sacrificing some of the subtleties of the approach”. The book grew out of a
survey introduction course in CL for undergraduates (Lee:xi).

Lee’s first interest in the analysis of texts led him to study the relationship between language and
perspective (Lee:xii). He tried to apply structuralist linguistic theory and found that it didn’t help
him very much. Then he found CL and the notion of construal to be much more useful.

The book is not an introduction to Linguistics, but more an introduction to Cognitive Linguistics
for someone curious to know how cognitive linguists think or for someone who knows some
linguistics and would like to know how Cognitive Linguistics compares to other approaches to
linguistics.

Who would benefit from reading the book? Someone looking for an approachable book
introducing Cognitive Linguistics—the basic notions and some of the areas that CL seems to
illuminate rather well. It is a wonderful book with which to start an investigation in CL, being
very readable and explaining the concepts well. However, the book is not intended to give the
reader what she needs to know in building a complete CL approach to language, or in presenting
a rather complete overall description of a language. For that, one would have to move up from
this short 200-page book to Taylor’s 621 pages and on to the volumes that Ronald W. Langacker
has written (e.g. 1987, 1990, 1991, 2008).³

**Organization of the book**

The book begins with a Preface describing Lee’s motivations for writing the book and an
explanation of the book’s organization, followed by a short Acknowledgments paragraph. There
Lee thanks Ronald Langacker for his influence on his (Lee’s) thought, as is evidenced in the
references throughout. Next follow the 13 chapters of the book (the first ten chapters discuss the
relationship between form and meaning in their various aspects):

1. Basic concepts such as construal, perspective, foregrounding, metaphor and frame
2. Encoding spatial relationships
3. Extended and metaphorical uses of spatial expressions
4. Radial categorization
5. The nature of construction
6. Mental spaces
7. Language change
8. Count and mass nouns
9. Perfective and imperfective verb usage
10. Causation and agency
11. Discourse analysis of a family argument
12. Constructivist processes in discourse
13. Creativity and the nature of meaning

Chapters have between six and ten subsections (the last one in each chapter is always a
summary/conclusion), followed by a section of exercises to stimulate deeper thought and a
section of further reading.
The Appendix has a six-page transcript of the family argument text used in chapter 11. Next is a ‘Further Reading’ section for each chapter, as well as a five-page ‘References’ section at the end. Books in each chapter’s ‘Further Reading’ section are not always included in the ‘References’. A two-page index lists both topics and people.

Many of the topics are rather standard in CL. However, I especially appreciated the chapter that explored the relationship between CL and language change. I also found the two chapters that explored the relationship between CL and discourse analysis to be stimulating. Lee contends that the investigation of construal “should be a major focus of discourse analysis” because a “communication will be successful to the extent that participants succeed in aligning their construals” (p. 170). He finds applications for the CL notions of frame, radial categories, prototype theory and construction in his study of an example text.

**The main message**

Linguistics must explore the interrelationships between thought, meaning and linguistic structure. So the focus of the book is on “notions of construal, perspective, foregrounding, metaphor and frame” (p. 1).

The first couple of chapters investigate several English pronouns looking for the prototypical usage and how the various senses relate in a radial network of senses. Lee works through these relationships, presenting a good example with plenty of details that someone could apply in studying the pronouns of another language. Figuring out all the senses of the limited number of a language’s pronouns is daunting. Lee gives a good method and example to map out relationships among those senses and the various pronouns. After thinking through the pronouns in another language, a linguist might very well find himself well on the way to thinking like a cognitive linguist in approaching the lexicon.

There is a good discussion (pp. 74–84) contrasting the transformational/generative approach with the cognitive approach in syntax.

**Conclusion**

As an introduction to Linguistics this book is not complete in its scope, but it can serve as an introduction to the usefulness of CL. Its fullest discussion centers around semantics and the lexicon. However, Lee does well at introducing foundational concepts that form a basis for cognitive linguistics, and Lee’s book would be a good addition to an introductory course, if the purpose would be to begin to think about language with a cognitive approach.

The book could also be useful as an introduction to others’ books on Cognitive Linguistics. Rene Dirven and Marjolijn Verspoor (1998) is a more comprehensive book, but it is not so succinct in laying out the basic assumptions of CL and how cognitive linguists construe the world, language and linguistics. John Taylor 2002 is a much more thorough book in discussing enough details to proceed through a rather thorough grammatical description of a language. Langacker (2008) seems promising as a comprehensive introduction to CL.
But most of all, the book is a great place for a linguist to start if she has ever wondered what Cognitive Linguistics really is.

Notes

1 Taylor’s (2002) Part 3 “Morphology”, comprising chapters 14 through 17, has much more to say on the subject.


3 As a side note, Ronald Langacker (2008:vii), who has been a key figure in CL for decades, offers his own perspective on opportunities to explore CL in more depth. “To appreciate the full scope of the enterprise, you need only peruse the many volumes of Cognitive Linguistics (Journal of the International Cognitive Linguistics Association) and the monograph series Cognitive Linguistics Research (Mouton de Gruyter). And these are just the tip of the iceberg. [Several] introductory textbooks … now exist for cognitive linguistics in general—Ungerer and Schmid 2007, Lee 2001, Croft and Cruse 2004, Evans and Green 2006—as well as two collections of readings (Geeraerts 2006; Evans, Bergen, and Zinken 2006) and a glossary (Evans 2007). For CG [Cognitive Grammar] in particular, the only current option is Taylor 2002, which covers the basics quite well.”

References


