Ronald Langacker: A visit to Cognitive Grammar

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INTERVIEW

Ronald Langacker

A visit to Cognitive Grammar

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R.M. The idea that Cognitive Grammar emerged as a reaction against the traditional paradigm may be a gross oversimplification of the actual motives for the emergence of an alternative approach to language. There must have been enough knowledge about language and cognition that prompted the emergence of Cognitive Grammar. What type of knowledge was that and where did it come from?

R.L. Actually, the oversimplification is not all that gross. I could not claim any extensive knowledge of psychology, philosophy, or other related disciplines that would have prompted a rethinking of basic issues. My training and early career were pretty much focused on languages and linguistics. Nor was the array of languages I had studied in any depth all that broad. It is not irrelevant, however, that over the previous ten years I had been deeply involved with the Uto-Aztecan family of Native American languages, especially from the comparative-historical standpoint. The diachronic and cross-linguistic perspective this afforded has been very useful.

R.M. If I am not wrong you started working on what is now known now as Cognitive Grammar over 30 years ago. From the first ideas of Space Grammar to current Cognitive Grammar there have been important changes in the theory. One that I am curious about is how much of the "localist" interpretation of Space Grammar is still valid in your view?

R.L. I would like to deny the basis for your question. I take some pride and comfort in the fact that (except for the name) the framework has not changed to any significant extent. The work started in the spring of 1976 (so it has been a bit less than 30 years). Within the next couple years the central ideas were in place, and they have not really been modified at all. The changes that have come have rather been in the nature of refinement, further articulation, and continuing expansion in terms of breadth and depth of analysis. There have been some terminological adjustments, such as construal in lieu of the potentially misleading imagery. I have also narrowed the range of application of the term landmark. Originally I spoke of a trajector and a landmark of some kind for every profiled relationship. However, eventually I decided it would be more perspicuous to reserve these terms for focal participants, with the consequence that many relational expressions are no longer said to have a landmark. Still, this is a matter of terminology rather than substance.

I would also deny the presupposition, conveyed by "still" in your question, that CG was originally a localist theory. I never intended the label Space Grammar to be interpreted that way (although I should have anticipated that it would be). Indeed, in volume 1 of *Foundations* I explicitly denied taking a localist stance: "My position that semantic structure is based on conventional imagery ... does not imply any necessary commitment to sensory imagery as an exclusive or essential facet of the meaning of linguistic expressions. Nor should my frequent use of quasi-pictorial diagrams be construed as an implicit claim that all meaning is based on visual imagery. How and to what extent sensory imagery figures in conceptual and semantic structure is an empirical question, the answer to which is by no means pivotal to the formulation or evaluation of the cognitive-grammar model" (p. 111). If anything, over the years I have come to see space and vision as having a greater role in cognition than I originally did. Still, nothing in the CG framework hinges on the empirical outcome of this issue.

R.M. I totally agree with you that CG cannot simply be reduced to a "localist" model. My question aimed at finding out what spatial and – now after your answer – what visual notions you have found as fundamental for linguistic analysis in CG.

R.L. It is so tempting to draw connections between space and vision on the one hand, and conceptualization in general on the other hand, that I have always felt it necessary to be very cautious in this regard. We would not be served

by sweeping or simplistic claims along these lines, or by a methodology that essentially just presupposed a spatialist account of conception. We need to find specific linguistic motivation for whatever connections we establish, and to be aware of the limitations of a spatialist view.

For me, the most compelling basis for drawing connections pertains to some central descriptive constructs of CG: notions like profiling, trajector, and scope. Such constructs have strong linguistic motivation, being adopted for particular descriptive purposes. They offer a precise and principled means of describing essential aspects of linguistic meanings, showing just how expressions with very much the same conceptual content can nonetheless be semantically distinct. The same few constructs apply to extremely varied data in a single language and across languages, and the resulting semantic descriptions support a symbolic account of grammar.

Constructs like these are justified linguistically quite independently of any claims about the role of space and vision. Irrespective of their nature, we need profiling to distinguish the meanings of *complain* and *complainer* (which essentially have the same content), and the notion trajector to distinguish *like* and *please*, etc. With this independently established basis, we can better appreciate the possible significance of the evident parallels they exhibit with visual perception. In vision, at any one moment we have a maximal field of view, within which we direct attention to a general area (like looking at a stage), and within that we focus attention on some specific entity. These constructs seem directly analogous to the linguistic constructs of maximal scope (the full range of content evoked), immediate scope (the "onstage" region), and profile (the specific focus of attention within the immediate scope). When we focus on a relationship, alternate choices of trajector (e.g. active vs. passive) seem quite analogous to figure/ground reversal in visual perception. Other parallels emerge as well. How to interpret them is a difficult matter that is probably not resolvable by linguistic methods alone. My own concern is to be as clear as possible about their linguistic basis.

R.M. Among these constructs the notion of subjectivity has attracted considerable attention in the field. The degree to which the conceptualizer may be incorporated into the event has proven a particularly strong tool to understand a variety of linguistic issues that had not received enough attention. What do you think are the crucial findings of subjectification in CG?

R.L. You have to phrase that very carefully. What do you mean by "the event"? And what does it mean for "the conceptualizer" to "be incorporated into the event"? We first have to distinguish between the speech event and the event (or situation) described. Ideally, I would say that both figure in the overall meaning of every expression. This meaning includes not only the speaker's and hearer's apprehension of the event described (in the manner determined by the expression), but also their apprehension of one another, their interaction, and how the event so portrayed fits into the ongoing discourse and the context of speech. The interlocutors are always "incorporated" in the speech event, since they carry it out, and always incorporated in the event described in the sense of apprehending it in a certain manner in producing or understanding an expression.

What varies is how the speech event and the event described relate to one another. At one extreme, they could be entirely disjoint (i.e. the expression pertains to something totally outside the speech event and the speech situation). In this case the speaker and hearer figure in the event described only in the sense that they apprehend it, describe it, and anchor the deictic center with respect to which it is characterized. They function only as "subjects of conception" in regard to the event portrayed, as well as implicit deictic anchors. They are not "onstage" as "objects of conception". In this polarized "viewing arrangement", I say that the interlocutors are "subjectively construed", and the onstage event "objectively construed".

But there are many ways in which the viewing arrangement can depart from this polarized situation. For instance, the event described may involve the interlocutors themselves (hence the use of first- and second-person pronouns). At the extreme, it can even be identified with the speech event itself (yielding a "performative"). The event described may be a mental or social one, inhering in the thoughts or interaction of the interlocutors. The event description can include some indication of the speaker's attitude toward the occurrence itself or its participants. The speech event may involve more than simple description (e.g. it might constitute an act of ordering or promising). And so on. In these less polarized circumstances, where aspects of the ground assume a greater role as objects of conception, they are accordingly construed less subjectively and more objectively.

I originally described "subjectification" in terms of a conceptual component – some facet of an expression's meaning – changing from being objectively construed to being subjectively construed. For instance, in virtual motion (e.g. "The path rises quickly") objectively construed motion on the part of an objec-

tively construed participant (the subject) is replaced by subjectively construed motion (mental scanning) on the part of a subjectively construed participant (the conceptualizer). I later came to realize that the subjectively construed elements were there all along, "immanent" in the very act of conceptualizing the objectively construed entities. In conceptualizing someone moving objectively along a path, for instance, the conceptualizer scans mentally along that path. So I now view subjectification as the development wherein mental operations inherent in the conception of objectively construed entities remain behind, and themselves constitute an expression's meaning, when those objectively construed entities (e.g. an onstage mover physically moving through space) fade from the picture. The conceptualizer and the conceptualizing activity are still subjectively construed (they do not go onstage – "The path rises quickly" does not explicitly describe the speaker as moving mentally along a path), but their role is a bit more evident because the objective entities originally supporting them have been stripped away.

I am becoming more and more aware of how prevalent this phenomenon is. It is a recurring feature of grammaticization, as I have argued in the case of modals, the "gonna" future, etc. In the case of possessives, the schematic characterization in terms of our reference point ability (mentally accessing one conceived entity via another) can be seen as the subjective counterpart of the various kinds of objective control and access functioning as possessive prototypes. Definiteness can be seen as the subjective counterpart of the physical pointing that often accompanies demonstrative use. I would characterize the quantifiers "each" and "any" as fictively invoking the subjective mental operations manifested physically and objectively in acts of sequential examination and random choice, respectively. In locative prepositions I see the subjective analogs of physical or perceptual events of searching and finding. As I have described it, subjectification has a close affinity to mental simulation, sensory imagery, and image schemas (viewed dynamically, as Johnson has always maintained). I expect a unified view of these phenomena to emerge, providing a coherent basis for conceptual semantics and the experiential grounding of grammatical meaning.

R.M. Regarding subjectification Trauggot and Dasher have paid special attention to linguistic data involving pragmatic strengthening and intersubjectivity phenomena. In fact, they claim that the CG theory of subjectification analysis has no principled way of accounting for the fact that intersubjectification arises out of subjectification. Do you agree with this point of view?

R.L. I do not even understand this claim or its basis, let alone agree with it. Intersubjectivity does not "arise" from subjectification, but is there from the very start as the basis for language and linguistic meaning. All linguistic units arise by abstraction from usage events, and those events reside in intersubjective activity by the interlocutors, who apprehend the full situation, including an assessment by each of how the other is apprehending it. Even the most objectively construed entities are apprehended intersubjectively when they figure in linguistic meanings. The word "pencil", for example, constitutes an instruction by the speaker for the addressee to direct attention to an instance of a certain type of thing. This directing of attention is what profiling amounts to. Though subjectively construed, this speaker-hearer interaction is part of the noun's conventional meaning, activated whenever the noun is used. A fortiori, the intersubjective aspects of meaning remain as subjectification occurs, and perhaps become more evident as the objective content fades away.

R.M. That's right. I can see Trauggot and Dasher's interest in stressing the fact that in the *gonna* future, for instance, there is a pragmatic issue by which *gonna* reflects the commitment of the speaker with respect to the validity of the assertion. Now what may be problematic is to make the pragmatic reading develop form the subjective construal of the event. We could probably show that the speaker commitment about the likelihood of something may develop not only from the subjective construal but, for example, from the lexical source from which a construction develops. I suppose *seem* would be more speaker based than *turn out* and the *gonna* future would imply a stronger speaker hearer consensus about the event likelihood to take place.

R.L. OK, let's consider "gonna". In the source expression "X is going to V", X moves objectively through space with the intention of doing V when reaching the endpoint of the spatial path. This motion through space unfolds through time. Thus, in conceptualizing "X is going to V" in this original sense, the conceptualizer necessarily scans along a path through time in apprehending the objective spatial motion, and V lies at the endpoint of this temporal path of scanning. When the conception of objective motion fades away, as part of the grammaticization process, the conceptualizer's mental scanning through time remains as a subjectively construed relationship, hence "gonna" situates V downstream in time relative to the reference time.

There is however another aspect to this process of subjectification and grammaticization. Namely, in the source expression X has the INTENTION

to carry out V. Thus, in apprehending the source expression the speaker must also apprehend X's intention. What kind of mental operation is implied in the conceptualization of X intending to V? Let us suppose (in line with much current thinking) that this involves the mental simulation of intending (just as conceptualizing an action involves the mental simulation of carrying out that action). This aspect of the conceptualization is also subject to subjectification, like the conception of movement through space and time. What would be the result of subjectification applied to the conception of X intending to V? The mental operations inherent in conceptualizing X intending to V would remain behind even as the objectively construed relationship fades from the picture. These mental operations amount to a subjectively construed relationship between the speaker and the future event V, one immanent in the speaker's conception of the original, objectively construed relationship between the onstage subject and this event. This subjectively construed relationship, I suggest, or at least something closely related to it, constitutes what is vaguely referred to as the speaker's "commitment" to V's future occurrence.

I would not deny that this account is also vague and needs to be sharpened and supported in the context of a broader account of intention and related notions. I also suggest, however, that this aspect of the construction's meaning can never be properly understood in the absence of a reasonably explicit characterization of the conceptual structures and mental operations involved at each stage of the grammaticization process.

R.M. The relationship between CG and other cognitive approaches to language is undoubtedly dynamic and here there are several questions that may be of interest for anybody working in cognitive linguistics. The first one is quite general: what is your view of the 'cognitive enterprise' after about 25 years of very intense work?

R.L. A general assessment of the enterprise, focusing on formalism vs. functionalism, was given in Langacker (1999).

Obviously, your question has to be addressed at various levels. Maybe I can best consider three, each seen in the perspective of developments over the last quarter century: external standing, internal cohesiveness, and analytic success.

With respect to external standing, it is clear that in many parts of the world formalist approaches still predominate, even to the point where cognitive and functional approaches are basically ignored if not actively suppressed. But taking a broad perspective, one must realize that the latter have not had very much

time to emerge, crystallize, propagate, and thus mount a serious challenge to the entrenched institutional control of the former. From this standpoint, the extent to which cognitive-functional ideas are spreading and extending their influence, both in linguistics and increasingly in neighboring disciplines, is actually rather amazing. This is evident not only in publications, but also in the size and prevalence of conferences, as well as expressions of serious interest from scholars all over the world. This is especially so outside the United States, historically in Europe but now increasingly in other regions, most notably in Asia. In contrast to the isolation entailed by doing cognitive linguistics in the early years, it now appears to be the definite wave of the future. Of course, we are dealing with trends unfolding over many intellectual generations, and predicting the future is always hazardous.

With respect to internal cohesiveness, one's initial assessment might be less positive. After all, the cognitive-functional landscape encompasses so many approaches of diverse nature, and scholars with seemingly incommensurate outlooks, that it is hard to see any overall coherence. Certainly oue can point to some fundamental disagreements and a lack of cousensus on many basic principles. Nor are the multitudinous insights and empirical findings integrated into a single, overarching theoretical framework that everyone subscribes to. I suspect, however, that few disciplines could not be characterized in this manner. There is at best a difference in degree, owing to the relatively early stage (as I see it) of linguistic investigation as a science, as well as the comparative newness (and consequent immaturity) of cognitive linguistics. In fact, despite many differences in emphasis and detail, I see considerable agreement ou a wide range of basic issues among the various major approaches. And with some notable exceptions, the disagreements do not rise to the level of fundamental incompatibility.

As for analytic success, I think cognitive linguistics has been very successful. It is not that we have very much by way of truly definitive analyses, or have seriously dealt with more than just a small (and not necessarily representative) sample of the kinds of descriptive problems posed by the world's languages. But the same could be said for formal approaches, which have engaged large numbers of able people for a much longer period of time. The analytic success is rather to be seen in radically new ways developed by cognitive liuguists for looking at linguistic structure, thereby reconceptualizing what the problems are and the very questions we need to ask about linguistic phenomeua. In particular, I suggest quite seriously that most of what we currently know to be relevant in describing linguistic meanings (e.g. metaphor, mental spaces, fictiv-

ity, the various dimensions of construal) have only become apparent in the last quarter century through work in cognitive semantics. It will take a long time to learn how to properly apply and exploit all the new descriptive notions now at our disposal. However, a vast array of classic and totally new problems now seem quite tractable in principle.

R.M. In the big picture of cognitive linguistics where does CG stand, i.e. what are the endeavors of CG as compared to other cognitive approaches?

R.L. I have made fairly detailed comparisons with certain other frameworks in a number of works: for Tesnière's structural syntax (1995), the Columbia school (To appear a), and construction grammar (To appear bc).

But to answer your question in general terms, I would like to regard CG as being at the center, with some chance of supporting the future development of a comprehensive framework addressing the various interests of cognitive and functional linguistics in an integrated way. The foundation for such a framework, I believe, is an overall view of linguistic organization that naturally allows such integration, as well as a battery of descriptive tools adequate in principle for the explicit description of any linguistic structures we might encounter. Most basically, my work has been directed at laying such a foundation.

A central endeavor of CG is thus descriptive – showing in some detail how it affords adequate and hopefully revealing characterizations of varied structural phenomena in diverse languages (e.g. the middle construction in Spanish, to take one at random). Another sort of endeavor is to show how CG accommodates other concerns and articulates with the findings of other areas and other approaches. In some cases this is quite straightforward, even if it hasn't been generally evident. For instance, all the findings of metaphor theory, mental space theory, and blending theory are directly accommodated in CG via the notion that expressions derive their meanings by flexibly evoking open-ended sets of overlapping and interconnected cognitive domains. In a very preliminary way, I have tried to show (2001a) how CG articulates with discourse studies. This is one facet of a broader enterprise of indicating how the notions and descriptions of CG are rooted in, and naturally accommodate, the social and interactive basis of language. Here one can also cite, inter alia, the usage-based nature of CG and well as its focus on grounding. In a related vein one can note how well CG meshes with Tomasello's strongly supported account of language acquisition (2003). And so on.

tensive lexicographic analysis, spelling out particular conceptual meanings in explicit detail for substantial numbers of lexical items in different languages. That is, something comparable to what Wierzbicka and colleagues have done in her NSM approach, but based instead on the kind of conceptual semantics embraced in CG.

I should further mention some major themes emerging from research in recent years. Though a lot has already been written about them, we have only begun to examine them in depth and appreciate their fundamental implications. One such theme is dynamicity, the temporal dimension of meaning and grammar. This ties into basic issues like constituency and how grammatical description meshes with a model of language processing. Another theme is virtuality (or fictivity), which is proving to be extremely pervasive and basic. This ties into fundamental issues about the nature of linguistic meaning and how we conceptualize and talk about the world. Both these themes are intertwined with another, namely the relation of language and discourse. An essential long-term challenge is to find a coherent synthesis embracing all the concerns in these areas.

R.M. Dynamicity is undoubtedly a crucial notion. The contrast with absolute construals has been fundamental in accounting for apparently aberrant behavior in different languages where an expected energetic form is coded as absolute with no energy being profiled. Likewise apparent absolutes can be conceptualized in a dynamic manner to let energy be in profile. Spanish middle intransitives like *morir* 'die' *morirse* 'die unexpectedly', for example, can only be understood based on that contrast. Now people wonder if dynamicity somehow overlaps with Talmy's notion of Force Dynamics.

R.L. Once more, we have to be careful here to distinguish between similar and related notions that are not quite equivalent. I was using the term "dynamicity" in the sense of my 2001b paper. The point there was the very general one that a conceptualization is not instantaneous but has a time course, developing or being built up through a span of processing time, and that this time course is an essential aspect of linguistic meaning. It is responsible, say, for the semantic distinction between "a scar extends from his elbow to his wrist" and "a scar extends from his wrist to his elbow". These describe the same objective situation, which is static, but differ in meaning by virtue of how the conception of this scene is built up in processing time by mentally scanning along the scar's

extension. Dynamicity in this sense is a factor in all linguistic meanings. The only thing special about the examples cited is its relative visibility.

So I was not referring to force dynamics or the distinction between dynamic/energetic vs. absolute construals. These are however very important semantic notions, and there is a connection. Dynamicity in my sense is quite compatible with the idea, now gaining currency in cognitive linguistics, that a major component of linguistic meaning resides in the "mental simulation" of actions and experiences. The dynamicity of a simulation, i.e. its time course, would seem to be especially important in the case of force-dynamic actions. Apprehending the meaning of "throw", for example, would involve a mental simulation (or motor image) of what we feel in throwing something, which has to develop through processing time.

Now if we go back to subjectification, there is a way to connect this with your observation (Maldonado 1988) that the Spanish middle treats certain instances of "unexpectedness" as being force dynamic or energetic (as opposed to being construed in absolute fashion). What is force dynamic about something running counter to expectations? One aspect of the mental simulation of a force-dynamic action is a simulation of experiencing difficulty (or needing to exert force) in carrying it out. This subjectively construed force or effort may be the same as (or at least related to) the semantic nuance we label as "unexpectedness". It is the effortful "feel" of mentally simulating a force-dynamic action (vicariously experiencing the effort), but occurs independently of such an action, instead accompanying the conception of an uncontrolled event like dying. There is a feel of effort in conceptualizing such an event to the extent that it runs counter to expectations, desires, or the "normal course of events". To be sure, this is vague and speculative, but it fits the pattern I was describing earlier.

R.M. There are lots of topics I would want to discuss with you since they must be of general interest for the cognitive linguistics community and yet space limits force me to ask you a last general question. When I learned that you were retiring I was afraid about the future of CG. Now that you have retired it is obvious that the game is only starting. What are your plans for the future regarding the development of CG?

R.L. My immediate plans center on turning my beginning CG graduate course into a basic textbook. That should be done sometime in 2005. Beyond that my personal plans are not too specific. Obviously I will be quite interested in pursuing the major themes mentioned earlier, dynamicity and fictivity, as well as

discourse, looking for the kind of synthesis indicated. But as need or opportunity dictates, I expect to deal with a wide variety of topics, as in the past. Of course, I would also hope and expect that the future development of CG will depend progressively less on me and more on the efforts of growing numbers of other scholars.

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Ricardo Maldonado is Professor of Syntax, Semantics and Cognitive Linguistics at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México and he is a guest professor at the Universidad Autónoma de Querétaro (Mexico). Quite early in his carrier Maldonado came across Ronald Langacker's writing and he found not only a crucial critique showing the limitations of previous syntactic theories but also a usage-based approach to grammatical structure that was both rigorous and flexible. Maldonado did his Ph.D. work on Spanish Reflexives and Middle Voice under the supervision of Ronald Langacker. He has published a variety of papers on Spanish reflexive, middle, impersonal and causative constructions, as well as assorted language acquisition papers of the Spanish reflexive and middle markers (with Donna Jackson and Donna Thal) and a book on Spanish middle voice (1999). His work on Tarascan focuses on middle voice and causatives (with Fernando Nava). He has also done research on the objectivity-subjectivity continuum in datives and possessives of Huastec and Spanish as well several papers addressing the development discourse markers form adverbs (with María Jesús Gonzalez) and quantifiers (with Alejandra Vigueras). Finally he has devoted considerable attention to the study category formation in two areas of Spanish language acquisition: agentive nouns (with Alejandra Auza) and tense-aspect verbal morphology (with Donna Jackson). Maldonado is the editor of *Estudios Cognoscitivos del Español,* the first volume of cognitive linguistics studies in Spanish. His most recent book *Dimensiones del aspecto en español* (in press coedited with Margaret Lubbers) compiles a collection of cognitive/functional papers on Spanish aspect. His current field of interest is the study of crosslinguistic syntactic voice patterns with special attention to Tarascan and Huastec. Contact: msoto@servidor.unam.mx.