

THE COGNITIVE APPROACH TO THE ANALYSIS AND CLASSIFICATION OF PERCEPTION VERBS

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ABSTRACT. THE PRESENT PAPER INVESTIGATES THE SYNTAX AND SEMANTICS OF ENGLISH PERCEPTION VERBS, REFLECTING THE MULTIPLICITY OF THEIR LINGUISTIC FORMS BASED UPON A CORRELATION BETWEEN SOME EPISTEMOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES OF COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS AND DIFFERENT MODALITIES OF PERCEPTIVE EXPERIENCE. OUR APPROACH REMAINS ONE DEEPLY ANCHORED IN THE LANGUAGE STUDY, BUT IT ALSO MAKES USE OF INSIGHTS FROM A MULTITUDE OF OTHER FIELDS. OUR MAIN OBJECTIVE IS TO TRANSPOSE SOME OF THE THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES OF COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS INTO THE ANALYSIS AND CLASSIFICATION OF PERCEPTION VERBS.

KEY WORDS: COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS, PERCEPTION VERBS, LANGUAGE, SYNTAX, SEMANTICS.

With a view to temporally and contextually situate cognitive linguistics, we consider it important to briefly evoke some theoretical postulates outlined within the framework of the most important approaches of the modern linguistic stage. Structural linguistics represents a first significant theory, which appeared a hundred years ago, with Ferdinand de Saussure's (1859/1916) 'Cours de Linguistique Générale' and later enriched by the works of other researchers such as Jakobson, Hjelmslev, etc. This approach considers "languages to be self-contained entities that had either to be shaped into a rigorous structure or actually possessed a structure which was real and merely waiting to be discovered. In this structural model, the meaning of a word is determined by the language system itself, whereas people's perception, interaction and conceptualization are extra-linguistic factors". (Neagu, 2005: 1)

Another direction worth mentioning, associated with Chomsky, a very famous linguist, materializes in the so-called transformational grammar. His research highlights the idea that, in no matter what language, each sentence can be interpreted according to two levels of representation namely a deep structure and a surface one. The first one comprises the semantic features and is correlated with the surface structure, which corresponds to the phonetic form of the utterance, via transformations. "Transformational grammar represents the structure of a sentence at different levels, with a phonetic level representing its surface structure and phonological, syntactic, and semantics levels representing its underlying structure. This form of multiple representations enables the transformational grammarian to reveal the real logical

difference between sentences that are superficially similar in their surface structure”. (Katz, 1972: 5)

Structural and transformational linguistics may be both similar in that the language system is regarded as autonomous, but also different if we refer to the belief that there is no connection between language and the other mental capacities. Chomsky believes in the existence of a syntactic level of representation integrating semantic interpretation but this proved to be rather difficult to precisely determine this connection. Consequently, this hypothesis turned out unsuccessful, generative grammarians acknowledging that the relationship between syntax and semantics is far more complex than formerly thought.

Mention must also be made of functional linguistics, emphasizing the contextualized use of language and the communicative function as compared with formal approaches, particularly Chomsky’s generative grammar. “One of the hallmarks of functionalism is its refusal to recognize strict theoretical or methodological boundaries among syntax and the explanatory realms of semantics, pragmatics, and discourse (...)” (DeLancey, 2001: 6).

Unlike formalist theories undertaking only a synchronic (static) analysis of language, the functional approach envisages a full comprehension of language at any particular time by referring to the diachronic processes as well. It equally shows interest in “the functions of the language, i.e. ideational (the use we make of language to conceptualize the world), interpersonal (the use we make of language as a personal medium) and textual (the use we make of language to make texts, whether spoken or written)” (Neagu, 2005:1).

Towards the end of the 1970’s, researchers like Langacker and Lakoff were the pioneers of a new approach to the study of language called cognitive linguistics, which identified with functionalism and brought about a quite different perspective on language. The identification with functionalism is based on sharing the belief that language is organized according to the functions it serves but also a multitude of elements of various nature namely psychological, biological, historical, sociocultural, etc. Scholars in this field were mainly concerned with the analysis of the connection between linguistic meaning and human cognition following the refusal to explain linguistic matters in terms of the structural characteristics of language. “Rather than attempting to segregate syntax from the rest of language in a 'syntactic component' governed by a set of principles and elements specific to that component, the line of research followed instead was to examine the relation of language structure to things outside language: cognitive principles and mechanisms not specific to language, including principles of human categorization; pragmatic and interactional principles; and functional principles in general, such as iconicity and economy.” (Kemmer 2010). With regard to cognitive linguistics, Neagu (2005) states that this theory is far from being a homogenous field of research, and identifies three main directions:

- the experiential view:

This trend believes in the existence of a close connection between language and the experience derived from the way individuals perceive and interact with the surrounding world. Cognitive researchers (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) highlight the metaphorical dimension of everyday language given the frequency with which people express abstract notions via concrete terms and expressions. The main cognitive devices used in the creation of this metaphorical dimension of language are metaphor and metonymy.

- the prominence view:

This direction deals with the selection and organization of the expressed information. The main concepts used to differentiate and highlight an object from an entire class of objects are profiling and figure / ground dichotomy.

- the attentional view:

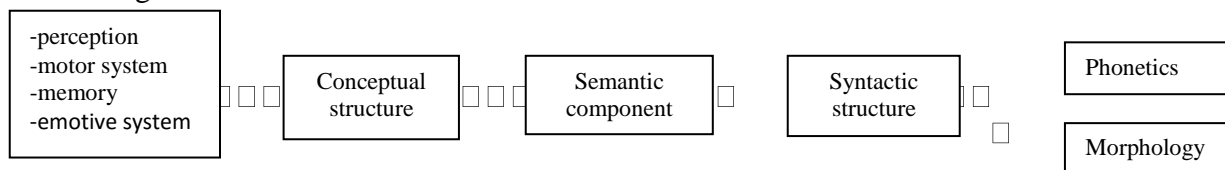
Researchers in this field state that individuals express only those aspects of an event that have attracted their attention. The concept they use is the frame which refers to the amount of information one has about a specific situation. “Depending on our cognitive ability to direct our attention, different aspects of this frame are highlighted, resulting in different linguistic expressions.” (Neagu 2005 qtd Talmy 1988, 2000: XIII)

Nevertheless, all three subdivisions have in common fundamental postulates of cognitive linguistics namely language is a constituent part of human cognition and mental faculties have an important role in the inquiry of linguistic phenomena.

The decision to choose cognitive linguistics as our theoretical framework mainly stems from the importance given to this new relationship between language and perception and other cognitive abilities. “Even if the blueprints for language are wired genetically into the human organism, their elaborations into a fully specified linguistic system during language acquisition, and their implementation in everyday language use, are clearly dependent on experiential factors and inextricably bound up with psychological phenomena that are not specifically linguistic in character. Thus we have no valid reason to anticipate a sharp dichotomy between linguistic ability and other aspects of cognitive processing. [...]” (Langacker, 1987: 13). Hence, language can only be deciphered with the aid of other cognitive processes such as our motor system, memory and perception in particular. Since every individual has its own way of perceiving words, it is logical to deal with different ways of talking about the universe.

The study of language may be considered a hypothesis regarding its cognitive representation within the human spirit. Jackendoff (1983: 16) acknowledges the importance of certain “levels of mental representation at which information conveyed by language is compatible with information from other peripheral systems such as vision, audition, smell, kinesthesia, and so forth.”

As opposed to Chomsky’s generative grammar, cognitive linguistics believes in the principle of an integrated grammar, founded on the experiential and cognitive processes. Gardner (1987: 6) views it as a contemporary attempt to provide an answer to a series of long standing epistemological questions – mostly those regarding the nature of knowledge, its components, its sources and its development. Semantics brings together the conceptual organization and the components of language such as syntax, phonetics, morphology. The table below (Enghels, 2005: 6) presents the relationship language / cognition of the above-mentioned components and the extra-linguistic human faculties:



Cognitive grammar investigates both the interaction of the syntactic and semantic dimensions and that of the semantic and pragmatic ones. An important postulate claims that the limits of the syntactic organization of a language are enforced by the semantic rules namely

syntactic categories are semantically motivated and grammatical constructions acquire significance.

The principle that no linguistic expression is independent of its discursive context also explains why cognitive grammar is considered to be a linguistic usage-based theory. “Usage-based theories hold that the essence of language is its symbolic dimension, with grammar being derivative. [...] in contrast to generative grammar and other formal approaches, in usage-based approaches the grammatical dimension is a product of a set of historical and ontogenetic processes referred to collectively as grammaticalization. When human beings use symbols to communicate with one another, stringing them together into sequences, patterns of use emerge and become consolidated into grammatical constructions [...]” (Tomasello, 2003: 5).

Cognitive grammar is a usage-based theory which takes into consideration the symbolic dimension of the human linguistic communication. The assimilation of linguistic symbols providing human beings with a format for cognitive representation constitutes a social process requiring speakers to master both the conventional form of the symbol and its communicative functions. The learning process is also inter-subjective in the sense that these conventions are shared by the whole community speaking the same language. The use of the linguistic symbols offers individuals the possibility to look at the world from the most convenient communicative point of view.

Due to this symbolic alternative, Cognitive Grammar proposes a larger perspective on semantics comparatively with previous formal theories. One of its main characteristics is that there are no fixed barriers between linguistic and encyclopaedic semantics, both being essentially conceptual in nature. Langacker (1987: 159) considers that “the multitude of specifications that figure in our encyclopaedic conception of an entity clearly form a gradation in terms of their centrality. Some are so central that they can hardly be omitted from even the sketchiest characterization, whereas others are so peripheral that they hold little significance even for the most exhaustive description.” He opposes the distinctive feature analysis specific to structuralist linguistics by putting forward the concept of a gradation of centrality, meaning that each category has a kernel and a periphery. Categorization is a very significant and inherent mental faculty of any individual, each speaker of no matter what language mentally ranging objects in distinct classes, clearly labelled. It becomes obvious that the information is placed at hierarchical levels, for instance, a particular object establishes a certain number of different categories representing different levels of abstraction. Categorization is thus a recurring theme of Cognitive Grammar. Two such levels of representation are identified: the prototype and the schema.

The prototype represents a typical instance of a category to which other elements are related according to their degree of resemblance to it. Therefore, we can talk about degrees of membership established on the basis of the similarity with the prototype. It serves as a reference to decide whether or not a member belongs to a category. As for the schema, it is an abstract pattern which reflects the common characteristics of structures, categorizing, developing or exemplifying it. It distinguishes from a list of criteria for it is itself an autonomous concept, but it is characterized with less specificity and detail as its exemplifications.

These concepts are not contradictory in nature because they are both situated on a scale of abstraction, and constitute primarily particular cases of a network of complex categories. It is not always easy to establish their degree of difference because we can say about a structure that it is schematic comparatively with another one when they are both perfectly equivalent. This

situation is qualified by Langacker (1987) as ‘full sanction’. The case where the equivalence is only partial corresponds to the so-called ‘partial sanction’, but we no longer speak of a schema, but of a prototype.

In addition to Langacker’s theory, another one quite famous, proposed by Rosch (1975) has made its way into the cognitive grammar. Prototypical concepts are envisaged as three-level structures like in the table below:

Superordinate level	Animal	Plant	Furniture
Basic level	Dog	Tree	Chair
Subordinate level	Boxer	Fir-tree	Folding chair

In our opinion, the semantic field of verbal forms denoting perception can be prototypically represented in terms of Rosch’s theory as follows:

Superordinate level	Perceive
Basic level	See
Subordinate level	look at, glimpse, gaze, etc.

We have chosen the verb see as the prototypical verbal form of perception because as we shall further notice, sensory modalities are viewed as having a varying degree of importance ranging from vision as the most important sense to taste as the least important one. Prototype theory is an essential one to our approach and it will be frequently used in the contrastive study of perception verbs.

Setting up categories is a very common and natural cognitive operation of the human mind, perception, speech and action. With regard to their salience, Cruse states that “the most significant level of a taxonomy from the point of view of the speakers of language is undoubtedly the generic level. This is the level of the ordinary everyday names for things and creatures: cat, oak, carnation, apple, car, church, cup.” (Neagu, 2005 qtd Cruse 1986: 36) The same idea is endorsed by Rosch, who considers it the level where conceptualization of things as perceptual and functional occurs. While basic terms are specific to neutral situations, those from the superordinate and subordinate levels are rather characteristic of contexts requiring some kind of technical knowledge.

Nonetheless, this model was also confronted with a wave of criticism on the part of researchers such as Kleiber (1991), who reproached it the identification of the prototype with a specific member of the category thus admitting the existence of fixed barriers between categories and levels. He considers this to be one of its weaknesses and advances the idea of the existence of at least one common trait with the other elements, establishing natural barriers between categories. We also adopt this point of view and insist upon the necessity of a common characteristic unifying the three levels of representation. In our case, the common trait consists of the type of perception i.e. visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory and gustatory reflected by all elements specific to each sense.

As we have already said, the analysis in terms of prototypical categories is an essential one to our approach and it will be frequently used in the contrastive study of perception verbs particularly due to the fact that it may be applied both on the semantic and syntactic levels. We recall that in Cognitive Grammar, syntactic constructions are also characterized as symbolic

units, linking a syntactic form to a meaning. Our investigation of perception verbs will demonstrate that semantically, polysemous words should be conceived as a complex category around a prototype and that the syntactic constructions are also associated with a prototype.

Metaphor as a cognitive mechanism is another important issue that has attracted the attention of researchers in this domain. Johnson (1992: 351) no longer views it as a figure of speech but as an element offering us the possibility “to ground our conceptual systems experientially and to reason in a constrained but creative fashion”. The metaphorical conceptual system allowing us to apprehend certain aspects of the reality derives from different concepts emerging from our direct interaction with the environment.

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