1. What is Cognitive Grammar?

Producing and understanding utterances in a given language is a skill. While linguists sometimes talk about linguistic knowledge, to know a language is not only to be familiar with the meanings of words that one can find in a dictionary. It is to know how to use them in sentences in specific circumstances, so that they sound natural to other speakers. The act of using a linguistic expression in particular circumstances is termed a **usage event**. You may memorize the dictionary of a language, but this does not mean that you are able to speak this language. Thus, if speaking a language involves knowledge, it is rather an "active" knowledge on how to use language rather than a "passive" knowledge of word meanings. Linguistic knowledge is tacit and intuitive; that is to say, fluent speakers of a language is able to use the language correctly, but they do not have conscious access to the mechanisms responsible to language production and comprehension. It can be compared to riding a bicycle. While cyclists are able to keep balance while riding, it would be very difficult for them to explain how they do it. By the same token, even though we are all capable of producing well-formed sentences in our mother tongues, we do not quite know how we do it. This is one of the reasons why even speakers of languages may still want to learn about the grammars of their native languages.

1.1. What is grammar?

In linguistics, the theories that attempt to uncover the mechanisms of language production and comprehension are called "grammars." **Cognitive Grammar** (CG for short), developed primarily by the American linguist Ronald W. Langacker, is a theory of this sort. It belongs to a branch of language studies called "cognitive linguistics." Theories within cognitive linguistics offer models of various linguistic phenomena and they all share several basic assumptions about the nature of language. The most important assumption is signaled in the very term *cognitive linguistics*: it is the belief that human language cannot be properly and fully understood in isolation from more general cognitive capacities. These capacities include, but are not limited to, categorization (the ability to group things, person, events, etc. into categories familiar to speakers), the perception of similarities and relations, the ability to focus attention on certain aspects of objects and situations, and the ability to form mental representations of things and events in the world. These cognitive abilities are not limited or specific to language; on the contrary, they are essential our survival in the world around us and most probably they pre-date the emergence of linguistic skills in our prehistoric ancestors. The ability to speak is just another way in which the capacities manifest themselves in our life. To sum up, Cognitive Grammar is a theory that describes the mechanisms of language production and comprehension largely by attempting to reveal the connections between language and cognition.

At this juncture, it is worth noting that the word *grammar* has several related meanings. Perhaps a more familiar meaning of the term is closer to "a set of rules governing the proper use of language." In linguistics, this is often referred to as **prescriptive grammar**. Strictly speaking, prescriptive grammar is not a theory of how language *is* used. Instead, it is a collection of rules and prescriptions about how language "should be" used, formulated by whoever feels that they have to authority to dictate speech

behaviors to others. Cognitive Grammar is *not* a prescriptive grammar in this sense. Rather, it is a so-called **descriptive grammar**, that is a theory of how and why people speak the way they do. Unlike prescriptive grammars, which attempt to propose the rules of "proper" use of language, most descriptive grammars attempts to propose the models of speakers' linguistic knowledge.

1.2. The symbolic nature of grammar

One of the fundamental assumptions of CG is the so-called **symbolic thesis**.[1] The thesis states that words and linguistic expressions are pairings of phonological forms and meanings. This is true for all meaningful linguistic structures on all levels of linguistic organization: morphemes (i.e. meaningful parts of words), words, phrases (i.e. groups of words smaller than sentences), sentences, and larger discourses comprising multiple sentences. One caveat is phonemes, roughly corresponding to single sounds. Since phonemes are not inherently meaningful, they cannot function as a pairing of a form and meaning and the symbolic thesis does not apply to them.

The term *phonological form* may be somewhat misleading, since it suggests that the form in question is a physical sound, i.e. actual vibrations of air produced while speaking. However, in Cognitive Grammar a phonological form is in fact a concept of sounds associated with words rather than actual sounds. Roughly speaking, the phonological form *cat* is what that you "hear" when you say the word in your mind, without engaging your speech organs and producing any physical sounds. The term may also refer to a concept of a written form of a word (but again: not to an actual words written on a physical surface). Moreover, the term is also used in cognitive studies on sign languages, once again with the proviso that it refers to the concept of a gesture used by a signer rather than an actual physical gesture produced in a usage event. In sum, the term *phonological form* should be taken as shorthand for a concept of a linguistic form used to express a meaning, regardless of whether the form has anything to do with actual physical sounds.

In a way, the symbolic thesis is a return to the view proposed by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure in his seminal 1916 book *Course in General Linguistics* (1966 [1916]).[2] For both de Saussure and Langacker words are associations between (conceptual) phonological forms and meanings. Yet there are crucial differences between the two linguists. Firstly, de Saussure was silent about whether structures smaller than words (like morphemes) and larger than words (like phrases and sentences are also pairings of phonological forms and meanings. Langacker, stipulates that this is, in fact, the case. Secondly, for de Saussure phonological forms and meanings were inseparably connected: one always evoked the other. To use his metaphor, the phonological form and the meaning or a word are like two sides of a sheet of paper – they could not be separated and could not exist without each other. Cognitive grammarians take a less radical position: in principle, the concepts we entertain in our minds are not so intimately tied to phonological forms and they could exist in more or less unchanged form even if we did not have any words to express them. Thirdly, de Saussure is famous for proposing the notion of arbitrariness of linguistic sign: the claim that phonological forms are associated with meanings exclusively by convention. For example, for the Swiss linguist, there are no good reason for associating

[1] The term has been proposed by John R. Taylor (2002, chap. 3).

[2] An influence acknowledged by Langacker (1987, 10–11) and discussed extensively by John Taylor (Taylor 2002, chap. 3).

the phonological form *cat* with the meowing domestic feline other than the fact that the community of English speakers agree that this is the word for the animal. However, cognitive linguists in general, and cognitive grammarians in particular, will argue that words and linguistic expressions are usually motivated, i.e. speakers often have some deeper reasons for saying things the way they do. Many of these reasons are intimately connected to cognition, i.e. the way we perceive and understand the world around us. In the next chapter we will discuss in more detail some cognitive mechanisms meaning-making and their consequences for language.

Study questions

1. Can you think of any other example of an "active" knowledge on how to do things, as opposed to a "passive" knowledge about the rules governing actions?
2. Do you think it is important to educate people about the correct use of language, as prescriptive grammarians do?
3. Can you think of types of signs consisting of pairings of form and meaning other than words and linguistic expressions?

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