

## 2. Construal

---

There are many ways of presenting objects and events that we encounter in the world. A specific cat sitting on your lap can be described as

- |                         |  |
|-------------------------|--|
| (1)(a) <i>an animal</i> | (c) <i>my sweet little ball of fur</i> |
| (b) <i>the cat</i>      | (d) <i>a vicious bird killer</i>       |

The expressions in (1a)-(1d) depict one and the same cat differently. For one thing, (1a) is more general than (1b), (1b) is less emotionally charged than (1c) and (1d), while (1c) is more affectionate than (1d). Also, (1a) and (1d) present the creature as a somewhat unspecified member of broader classes ANIMAL and VICIOUS BIRD KILLER respectively, while in (1b) and (1c) the cat is specified to a certain degree; for instance, in (1c) it is identified as a pet belonging to the speaker. More technically, we could state that even though the sentences (1a)-(1d) refer to the same animal, they express different mental representations of the referent in the mind of the speaker.

### 2.1. What is construal?

In Cognitive Grammar, **construal** is an alternate way of presenting an object or an event. It should be emphasized that construal is not merely a different verbal description of the referent, but it is a way of “imagining” the referent in the mind of the speaker. The ability to produce various mental representations of objects and events is one of the most important cognitive capacities postulated by Cognitive Grammar and one that does a lot of “explanatory work” in the theory. In the CG framework, linguistic meanings are identified with construals, i.e. there is no “special” type of linguistic meaning independent of the mental representation. Put differently, the meaning of a word or an expression is the mental imagery evoked by the word or the expression. How do construals arise in our minds?

The knowledge that we have about the world is not a loose mass of disorganized and disconnected information. On the contrary, the information is organized in the so-called **domains**. A domain collects all the information that the speaker has about a particular subject matter. For example, the domain [CAT] gathers all information that a speaker has about cats. This means that domains are usually very rich in information. In order to recruit the knowledge for the purpose of producing a linguistic expression, some portion of the domain has to be selected and its content has to be “highlighted” in a certain way. Different construals of one referent arise when various portions of the relevant domain are highlighted in different ways. You can think about this “highlighting” as giving more attention to select aspects of the referent in order to “depict” it in a certain way in speaker’s mind. For example, the construal behind (1d) highlights the information that the cat in question kills birds in a vicious manner. In contrast, (1c) highlights the information that the cat curls up in a ball, has fur, and the speaker perceives the animal as “sweet.” To sum up, the term *construal* refers to the way in which various information in a domain is highlighted for the purpose of linguistic communication.

## 2.2. Dimensions of construal

In order to characterize a construal, we need to characterize several **dimensions**. One of them is the distinction between the **profile** and the **base**. The profile is a technical term for the already mentioned part of the domain that is highlighted. The portion of the domain against which the profile is highlighted is the base for this profile. The relation between the profile and the base can be understood metaphorically as the relation between the foreground and the background in a painting. While in most paintings certain elements are in the foreground, i.e. they are presented in a way that “stand out” and attract most of viewers’ attention, the elements are always viewed against a background. Elements in the background are less prominent almost by definition, but they nonetheless provide the context against which the elements in the foreground are interpreted. In a picture of a cat frolicking happily on a meadow, the cat may be the foregrounded element attracting most of viewer’s attention, but removing the meadow from the background would change the painting dramatically. Therefore, in order to fully characterize a construal, it is necessary to describe both the elements highlighted in the profile and the portion of the domain serving as the base.

Lets us take a more language-oriented example. As already mentioned, the meaning of the word *peninsula* is simply the mental representation of a peninsula in the mind of the speaker. The base for the representation is the domain [LANDMASS] collecting all knowledge the speaker has about landmasses. Some portion of the domain is highlighted and this portion functions as the profile. The construal is presented schematically in Figure 2.1. While the key meaning of *peninsula* is simply the profile, it should be borne in mind that in order to provide a complete description of the meaning, it is necessary to characterize not only the highlighted profile, but also its base. In other words, it is necessary to add that the profile stands out against speaker’s background knowledge about landmasses.

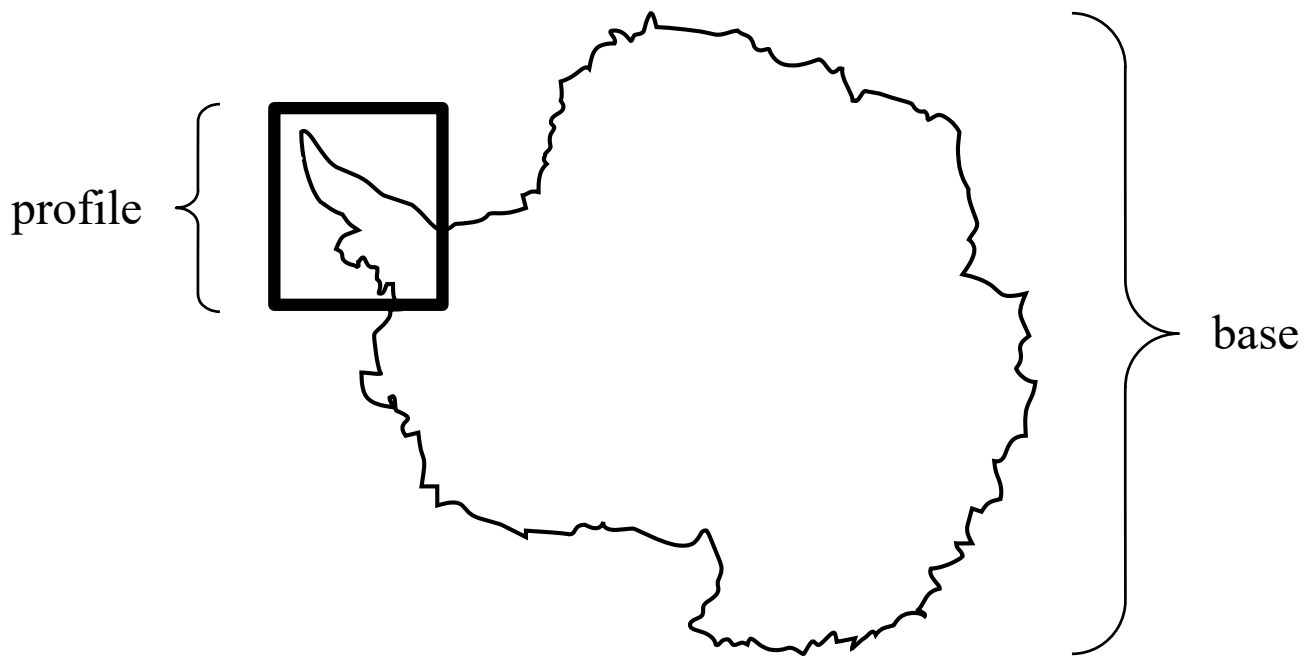


Figure 2.1: The construal behind *peninsula*

Multiple words may share the same base and differ only with respect to which portion of the domain is highlighted. Take, for example, the names of days of the week. All of them share the notion of the seven-day cycle that we use to organize our lives, which forms the domain [WEEK] and serves as the base for the profile. The key difference between the words like *Monday* and *Friday* lies in the part of the base that they highlight: the former profiles the first day of the cycle (Figure 2.2(a)) and the latter the fifth day (Figure 2.2(b)).

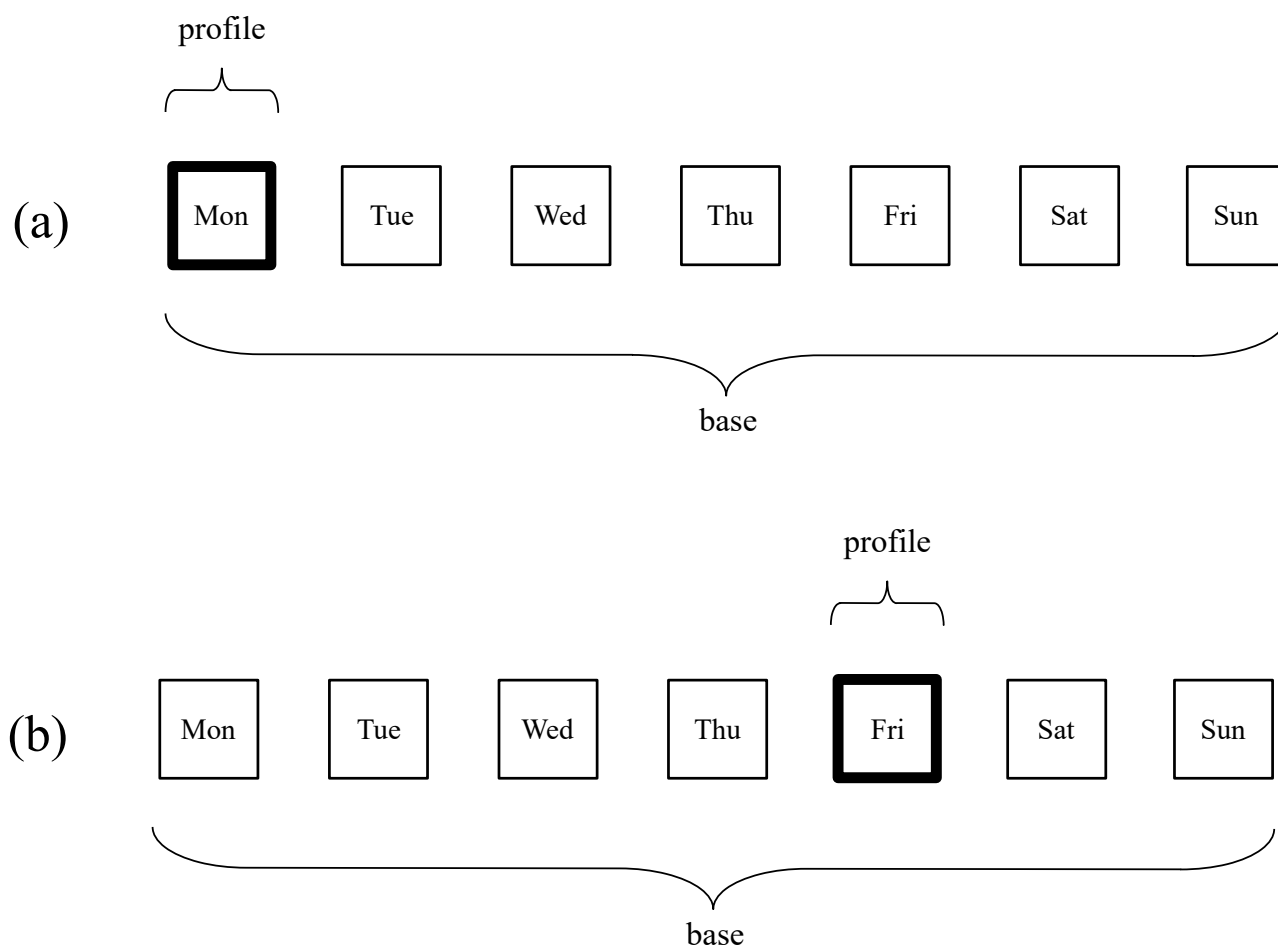


Figure 2.2: The construals behind *Monday* (a) and *Friday* (b)

The same logic holds for adjectives, like *heavy* and *light*. A more detailed characterization of the semantics of adjectives will be postponed to Chapter 3, but at this point we may accept that both of the words profile relations to a region on a weight scale. The scale serves as the base for the construal and has a region of “standard” weight, which is the normal and expected weight of an object (whatever this might be). Now, *heavy* profiles the region “above” the standard weight (Figure 2.3(a)), when the object is judged to be more massive than normal or expected, and *light* profiles the region “below” the standard, when the object is judged to be less massive than normal and expected. Once again the construals behind the two words use the same conceptual base and they differ only with respect to the part of the base that they highlight.

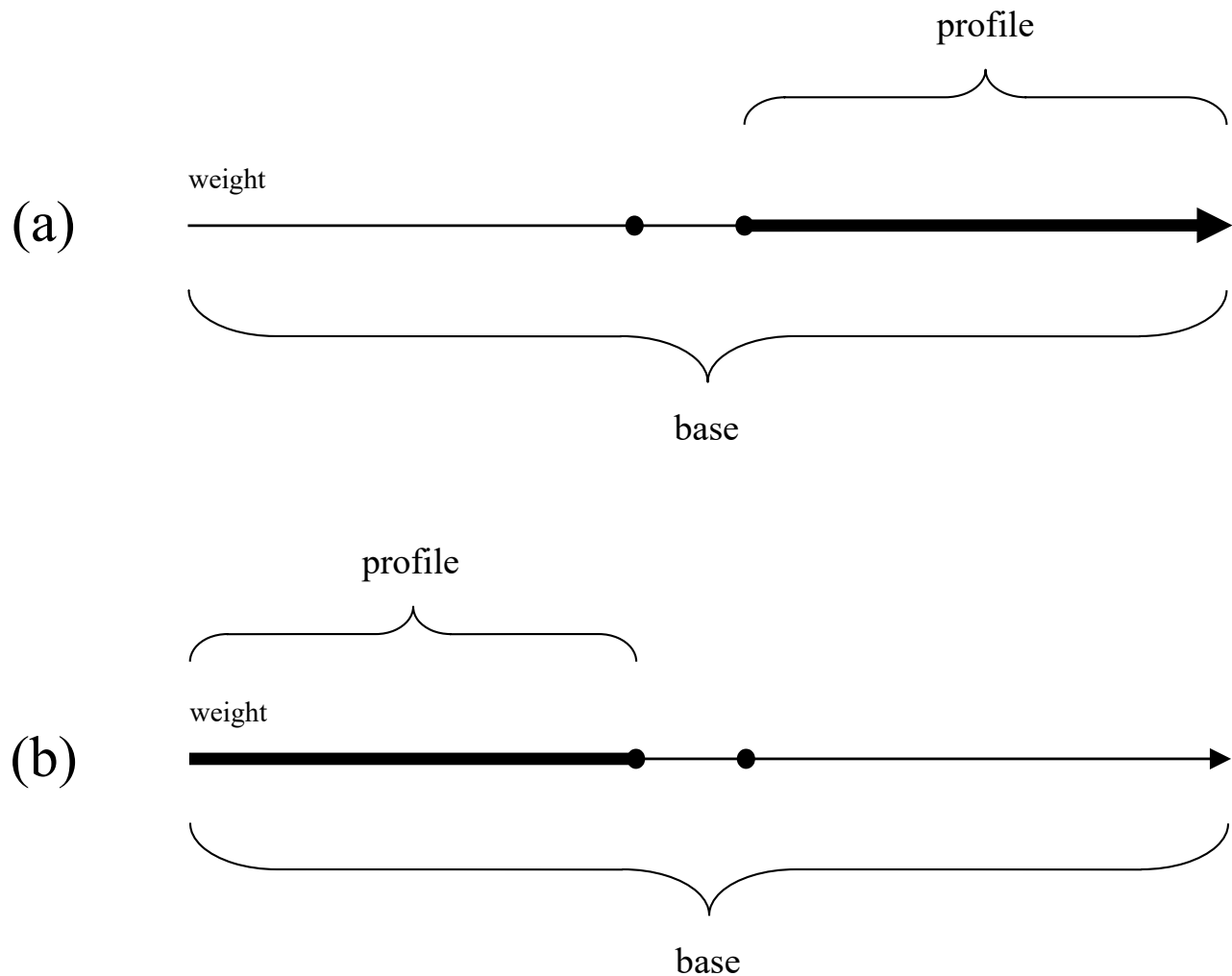


Figure 2.3: The construals behind *heavy* (a) and *light* (b)

Another dimension of construal is the **scope of domain** evoked to characterize the referent. During profiling it is not always necessary to activate all of the knowledge gathered in a domain; oftentimes only a limited portion of the domain is enough. More technically, it is useful to draw the distinction between the **maximal scope**, spanning across the entire domain and embracing effectively all knowledge about a certain topic, and the **immediate scope**, which is a smaller portion of the domain relevant for the purpose of conceptualization at hand. Langacker (2008, 64) illustrates the distinction with the way we think about certain part-whole relations. Consider the hierarchy of body parts (the symbol “>” stands for the relation “has part”): BODY > ARM > HAND > FINGER > KNUCKLE. Within this hierarchy, each element is most readily understood as a part of the adjacent element on the left; e.g. a knuckle is best described as a part of a finger. Ultimately, the entire hierarchy of elements is within the domain [HUMAN BODY], because all of the elements are understood as body parts. In Cognitive Grammar terms, we may say that for each body part concept, the element adjacent on the left side is the

immediate scope of conception. The domain [HUMAN BODY], in turn, is the maximal scope for all of the elements in the hierarchy. The distinction between the immediate and the maximal scope has consequences in language. Consider the expressions in (2).

- (2)(a) *The finger has knuckles 3 knuckle.*
- (b) *?The hand has 14 knuckles.*
- (c) *???The arm has 14 knuckles.*
- (d) *???The body has 28 knuckles.*

Strictly speaking, all the sentences in (2) are true, but (2c) and (2d) sound somewhat weird if no extra context is provided. This is because when we think about a body part, we naturally characterize the part in terms of a bigger whole within the immediate, but not necessarily in the maximal, scope of conception. Thus, a knuckle is most naturally described as a part of a finger (rather than a part of arm or the entire body), a finger is most naturally described as a part of a hand, etc. When the whole from beyond the immediate scope is evoked to characterize a part, the characterization becomes more and more unnatural. In sum, the immediate scope is a portion of domain that is the most relevant for the profile. The maximal scope, in turn, typically corresponds to the entire domain. The relation between the three are sketched in Figure 2.4.

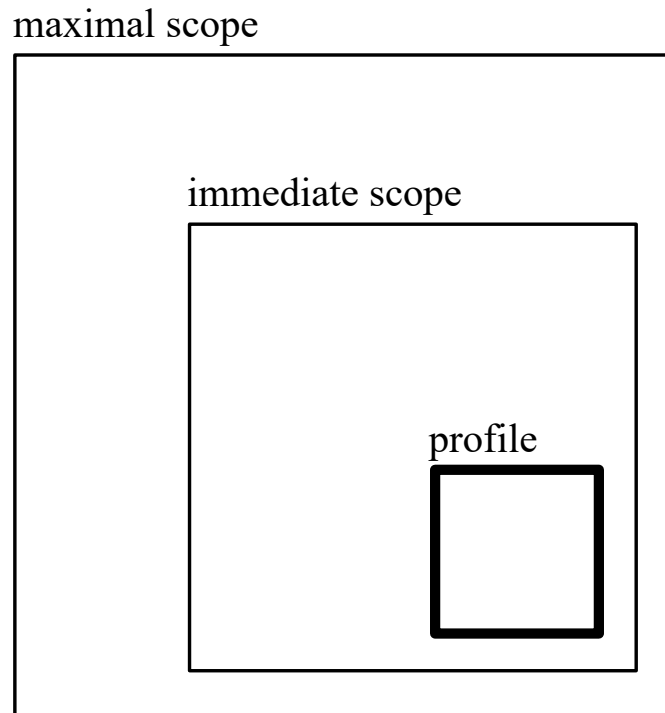
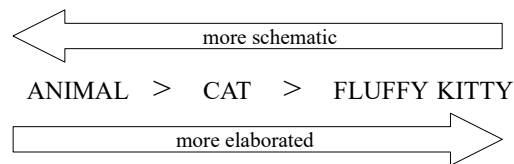


Figure 2.4: The relation between the profile, the immediate, and maximal scope

Yet another dimension of construal is **specificity**. One object can be described with various amount of details, as evident from the expressions from (1a) to (1c). To use more technical terminology, more general concepts are **schematic** relative to more specific concepts and more specific concepts **elaborate** more schematic concepts. For instance, the concept ANIMAL is schematic relative to the concept CAT, which in turn is more schematic relative to the concept FLUFFY KITTY, and so on. One may also say that the concept FLUFFY KITTY elaborates (i.e. specifies in more detail) the concept CAT, which in turn elaborates the concept ANIMAL. As we will see, schematic and elaborated concepts will play a big role in the description of many grammatical phenomena.



The final dimension of construal is **perspective**, which captures various aspects of the relation between the speaker and the content of the word or an expression. This includes the **vantage point** which is the location in time and space from which the conceptualizer apprehends the situation described in a sentence. For example, the expression *to the left* and *to the right* can be fully interpreted

only when the spatial location of the speaker is taken into account. More specifically, the latter expression usually means to the right relative to where the speaker is facing. By default, speaker's vantage point is the speaker's location at the moment of speaking, but we are able to imagine a situation from vantage points different from ours. When I say *My cat is the one the left*, it is implied that I am locating the cat relative to my own vantage point. Nonetheless, I may also assume the vantage point of the hearer and say *My cat is the one on your left*. In such a case, the animal is located in relation to the vantage point of the hearer, which may not coincide with the speaker's.

Construal is a central theoretical notion in Cognitive Grammar used to explain many grammatical and semantic behaviors of words and linguistic expressions. In the next chapter, construal will be instrumental for drawing some of the most fundamental grammatical distinctions between various types of words.

## Study questions

1. What is the typical domain against which the following nouns are construed?
 

|                |                   |                          |
|----------------|-------------------|--------------------------|
| a) <i>wall</i> | d) <i>glass</i>   | g) <i>democracy</i>      |
| b) <i>hand</i> | e) <i>wave</i>    | h) <i>claustrophobia</i> |
| c) <i>lid</i>  | f) <i>tension</i> | i) <i>espionage</i>      |
2. Choose two words from Question 1. What is the difference between the immediate and the maximal scope of construal for these words?
3. For each word below, provide one word or expression that construes the word with greater specificity and one that construes it with smaller specificity.
 

|                   |                      |                 |
|-------------------|----------------------|-----------------|
| a) <i>giraffe</i> | c) <i>(to) eat</i>   | e) <i>sweet</i> |
| b) <i>pirate</i>  | d) <i>(to) worry</i> | f) <i>blue</i>  |

## References

- Langacker, Ronald W. 2008. *Cognitive Grammar. A Basic Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.
  - Sections 3.1-3.4
- Langacker, Ronald W. 2013. *Essentials of Cognitive Grammar*. Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press.
  - Sections 3.1-3.4
- Taylor, John R. 2002. *Cognitive Grammar*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
  - Chapter 10