

Ronald W. Langacker, *Cognitive Grammar:  
A Basic Introduction* (2008)

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Despite its modest title, Ronald W. Langacker's most recent book, a substantial volume of nearly six hundred pages entitled *Cognitive Grammar: A Basic Introduction* (2008), offers a fairly comprehensive statement of his linguistic theory of cognitive grammar at its current stage of development, some thirty years after it was initially conceived. While covering a similar range of topics at a comparable degree of specificity, the new book is much more approachable than either the carefully structured, but at times rather unwieldy volumes of *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar* (Langacker 1987, 1991a) or the more selective and, therefore, less comprehensive article collections published as *Concept, Image, Symbol* (Langacker 1991b) and *Grammar and Conceptualization* (Langacker 1999). Inasmuch as Langacker's latest presentation of his theoretical-descriptive framework is authoritative, current, comprehensive, and approachable, it is a likely candidate for the status of a model cognitive grammar textbook.<sup>1</sup>

The existing introductions to cognitive linguistics in general (e.g. Ungerer and Schmid 1996, Lee 2001, Croft and Cruse 2004, Evans and Green 2006), while factually quite accurate, are rarely authoritative, current, or comprehensive; typically they discuss selected proposals of Langacker's cognitive grammar in connection with more general issues undertaken by cognitivism (cf. Ungerer and Schmid's [1996: 156–200] discussion of cognitive-linguistic applications of the psychological distinction between figure and ground or Evans and Green's [2006: 471–774] general characterization of the key components of cognitive grammar under the heading "Cognitive Approaches to Grammar"). In turn, the only existing introductory textbook to cognitive grammar, in particular Taylor (2002),<sup>2</sup> is a sizable publication addressed to undergraduate students which, whilst highly approachable, cannot be considered either as particularly comprehensive<sup>3</sup> or as

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, by the author's own admission (Langacker 2008: viii) the book is primarily, albeit not exclusively, conceived as a textbook.

<sup>2</sup> The Polish translation of Taylor (2002) is available as Taylor (2007).

<sup>3</sup> In the words of Langacker (2008: viii), Taylor's (2002) cognitive grammar textbook "covers the basics quite well." Langacker goes on to say, however, that "[s]till lacking [...]"

authoritative as Langacker's own writings on cognitive grammar. It, therefore, seems clear that at this point Langacker (2008) appears to be the only up-to-date book devoted solely to the theory he developed and formulated that is advanced enough to satisfy the needs of graduate and postgraduate students as well as practitioners of other linguistic theories and researchers working in disciplines related to linguistics, such as psychology, sociology, philosophy, etc. How then does the book fare as an advanced cognitive grammar textbook?

To answer this question in reference to the contents of Langacker (2008), it is instructive to compare this publication with what remains the most comprehensive statement of Langacker's theory published to date: the massive, two-volume set of *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar* (Langacker 1987, 1991a). In some ways, Langacker (2008) can be considered an abridged version of *Foundations*, where the first volume, *Theoretical Prerequisites*, introduces the theory's organizing assumptions, its basic theoretical framework, and the constructs instrumental in describing linguistic structure in an optimal fashion, and the second volume, *Descriptive Application*, shows the analytical potential of cognitive grammar by demonstrating how these constructs could be used to characterize various aspects of nominal, clausal, and extraclausal structure. A cursory glance at the contents of *Cognitive Grammar: A Basic Introduction* (Langacker 2008) suffices to show that the new book follows the basic structure of Langacker's seminal two-volume publication (Langacker 1987, 1991a) quite closely. Parts I and II, respectively subtitled "Preliminaries" and "Fundamentals," discuss all of the major theoretical prerequisites introduced in Langacker (1987),<sup>4</sup> while parts III and IV, respectively subtitled "Structures" and "Frontiers," present a broad array of cognitive grammar's descriptive applications to the analyses of essential facets of nominals, clauses, complex sentences, and larger units of discourse.

On closer inspection, however, *Cognitive Grammar: A Basic Introduction* (Langacker 2008) turns out to offer more than just a textbook abridgement of *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar* (Langacker 1987, 1991a), mostly because it differs from the two-volume publication in the degree of emphasis laid on individual issues taken up by the book's author. While the first three chapters of Langacker (2008) discuss the same basic assumptions of cognitive grammar that are discussed in the first four chapters of Langacker (1987) – that grammar is a structured inventory of conventional linguistic units, that its nature is symbolic, that meaning resides not only in the conceptual content invoked by linguistic units,

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is an introduction that is less elementary and presented in greater depth and technical detail" (2008: viii).

<sup>4</sup> Langacker (2008: viii) himself points out that "[p]arts I and II can [...] stand alone as a basic introduction to the theory," adding that "[t]heir chapters are shorter and a bit less challenging." What he seems to suggest, in other words, is that part I and II of Langacker (2008) can be regarded jointly as an abridged counterpart of Langacker (1987) which is "more suitable for less advanced students" (Langacker 2008: viii).

but also in the ways this content is construed, etc. – the former differs from the latter in that Langacker (2008) no longer goes into the many technicalities involved in various cognitive operations underlying conceptual structure, but instead he adopts a textbook strategy which consists in further clarification of certain basic tenets of cognitive grammar that have time and time again been misconstrued by his critics: linguists of other (mostly formalist) theoretical persuasions. Among the many issues of this kind that Langacker (2008) revisits is the existence of syntax (Cognitive grammar does not deny the existence of syntax, but views it as overlapping with lexicon and morphology along a continuum of symbolic units, cf. Langacker 2008: 6–7), the existence of pragmatics (Cognitive grammar does not deny the existence of pragmatics, but rather claims that semantics and pragmatics form a gradation with no clear boundary between the two, cf. Langacker 2008: 40–41), the accusation that cognitive grammar cannot account for the dynamicity of actual language use (Cognitive grammar does not identify meaning with static concepts, but with the dynamic process of conceptualization, defined broadly to accommodate all facets of mental experience, cf. Langacker 2008: 30), and the numerous controversies surrounding the diagrammatic conventions of cognitive grammar (The quasi-pictorial diagrams of cognitive grammar are heuristic in nature; they are not considered formal representations of any kind; their use does not imply that semantic structure is considered visual or spatial in nature, etc., cf. Langacker 2008: 9–12).

The following five chapters of Langacker (2008) address the same range of theoretical issues that are taken up in chapters five to twelve of Langacker (1987): the specific proposals made by cognitive grammar for the semantic definition of basic grammatical categories (nouns and verbs in particular), the general approach to grammatical structure, the nature of grammatical constructions, and questions pertaining to well-formedness and distribution. In this part of the book, Langacker (2008) seems to place more emphasis than he used to on supporting his generalizations with detailed discussion of as many specific examples as possible and supplementing this discussion with sometimes highly elaborate, but always perfectly comprehensible, diagrams. This textbook strategy is visible most clearly in the sections of the book devoted to the characterization of schematic network representations of linguistic categories (cf. Langacker 2008: 215–255): lexical (cf. figure 8.11 on p. 239), morphological (cf. figures 8.18–8.23 on pp. 252–255) as well as syntactic (cf. figures 8.12–8.17 on pp. 242–250). Collectively, the strategies adopted by Langacker (2008) – the avoidance of overly technical passages, the reinforcement of the basic tenets of cognitive grammar, and the extensive use of detailed discussions of specific examples to illustrate a theoretical point – make *Cognitive Grammar: A Basic Introduction* much more approachable than any of his previous book publications. The book's said accessibility, an important dimension of a model textbook, is additionally increased by Langacker's specific style of writing.

Langacker's writing has always been extremely lucid and the new book is no exception in this respect: its structure is neat and tight; its arguments intuitively convincing, well-balanced and utterly compelling; its style very precise, but never overly technical. It seems, however, that what sets Langacker's style apart from that of his fellow-authors is the memorable character of the linguistic data he cites in support of any given theoretical point. These examples are memorable due to their jocularly; there is little doubt that the rate at which students of cognitive grammar master the theoretical prerequisites of the theory and become versed in its descriptive applications is exponentially increased by Langacker's (2008) mnemonic strategy of illustrating general points with such deliciously eccentric expressions as *kick my pet giraffe in the shin* (p. 21), *jar lid factory owner association list compiler* (p. 172–173), *Every hobbit who owns a unicorn believes he takes good care of it* (p. 271), *If she liked her Porsche, she would drive it to church* (p. 272), *If you swallow a spider you should wash it down with beer* (p. 413), or *The long series of rigorous experiments demonstrated that worms are colorblind* (p. 451). What is more, the fact that the style of Langacker (2008) is geared towards the target audience of textbooks, students, also shows in the author's occasional choice of such non-specialist subdivision titles as "Grammar and Life" (section 1.1, p. 1), "The Nature of the Beast" (section 1.2, p. 5), "An Outrageous Proposal" (section 1.2.1, p. 5), or "Those Diagrams" (section 1.2.3, p. 9). Lastly, the increased accessibility of *Cognitive Grammar: A Basic Introduction* has a reason in Langacker's undoubtedly conscious choice that is only loosely related to stylistic matters, even though its nature is linguistic; the choice of using exemplification primarily from English, and only secondarily from other languages. The second volume of *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar* (Langacker 1991a) made extensive use of non-English data in order to demonstrate the applicability of cognitive grammar to the analysis of a wide range of natural languages. While completely justified from the standpoint of linguistic methodology, this strategy sometimes made Langacker's (1991a) argument rather difficult to follow. It comes as no surprise then, that Langacker (2008) – conceived by its author primarily as a textbook (cf. Langacker 2008: viii) – cites data that is predominantly English.<sup>5</sup>

Another important factor that sets Langacker (2008) apart from the classic *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar* (Langacker 1987, 1991a) lies in its up-to-date character. As the author puts it, the new book "has been a chance to refine and clarify [...] thoughts on many issues, to present them more effectively, and to make their rationale more evident" (Langacker 2008: viii). The book's up-to-date character shows throughout the entire text, but seems most apparent in its

<sup>5</sup> This does not mean, of course, that the data from languages other than English is altogether missing from Langacker (2008), or that the range of languages Langacker (2008) draws from is limited. Quite the contrary, Langacker's (2008) supporting data comes from languages as diverse as Classical Nahuatl, Cora, Dyirbal, Eastern Pomo, French, German, Greenlandic Eskimo, Hopi, Italian, Khasi, Kinyarwanda, Lakhota, Luiseño, Mandarin, Modern Greek, Samoan, Spanish, Tagalog, and Thai.

second, descriptive half. While at first glance the descriptive part of Langacker (2008) closely follows the descriptive volume of *Foundations* (Langacker 1991a) in terms of contents – both discuss nominal, clausal, and sentential structure, discourse-related issues, etc. – the new book addresses certain points that have so far been neglected or altogether missing. Metonymy, for instance, belongs in the category of issues that were previously neglected by Langacker. It is rather significant that the index of the first volume of *Foundations* (Langacker 1987) does not feature the term metonymy at all, while the second volume (Langacker 1991a) handles metonymy in a single footnote (fn. 30, p. 456). In contrast, Langacker (2008) addresses metonymy more than once, defining this conceptual mechanism as “a shift of profile” (Langacker 2008: 69), which allows him to characterize such phenomena as nominalization in reference to metonymy (cf. Langacker 2008: 119–120). Langacker’s growing interest in metonymy<sup>6</sup> clearly reflects a general trend observable in cognitive linguistics, where the study of metonymy has for some time been one of the most dynamically developing areas.<sup>7</sup> In turn, amongst the issues that are entirely, or almost entirely, new in cognitive grammar is the idea of mental simulation, a kind of disengaged cognition which enables conceptualizers to create virtual, or fictive, conceptual representations of concepts originally created in acts of engaged cognition, as a result of direct interaction with the physical world (Langacker 2008: 535–536). Mental simulation, which is said to have a fundamental role in conceptualization and cognitive semantics (cf. Langacker 2008: 536), features prominently in Langacker’s (2008) characterization of the semantic structure of quantifiers, modals, generics, etc.

On the whole then, Langacker’s latest book publication, *Cognitive Grammar: A Basic Introduction* (2008), fares quite well as an advanced academic textbook. It is undoubtedly highly authoritative, comprehensive, approachable, and current. It is also the only cognitive grammar textbook that is advanced enough to be useful to graduate and post-graduate students, linguists of non-cognitive persuasions, and professionals working in related disciplines. If it is less than perfect, it is so, only because it lacks the many useful features that are typically found in academic textbooks, such as chapter summaries, further reading sections, exercise sections, or a glossary.<sup>8</sup> Slightly paradoxically, though, this lack of typical student-oriented book appendages makes for easier reading that is free of unnecessary distraction. There is no doubt that distraction is the last thing readers want when they follow

<sup>6</sup> One of Langacker’s upcoming articles is entirely devoted to the application of metonymy to the analysis of grammar (cf. Langacker [to appear]).

<sup>7</sup> The cognitive-linguistic literature devoted to various aspects of metonymy is vast (cf., for example, Kövecses and Radden 1998, Radden and Panther 1999, or Panther and Thornburg 2003), but even in the more specific area of cognitive grammar attempts have been made to characterize grammatical phenomena, such as nominalization (defined as a conceptual reification resulting in a shift of profile), in terms of metonymy (cf. Szawerna 2007).

<sup>8</sup> In this respect, Langacker (2008) resembles the eminent linguist’s collected lectures: Langacker (1995, 2005, 2007).

a coherent and stimulating argument constructed by somebody such as Langacker, who yet again has proved himself to be one of the most innovative and influential linguists of our time.

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