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## The Philosophical Dimension of Cognitive Semantics

### 1. Introduction

The aim of the paper is to discuss the relationship between cognitive semantics and philosophy, more specifically the philosophy of embodied realism (or experientialism) developed by Lakoff and Johnson. In the first part, the relationship between experientialism/embodied realism and other philosophical traditions will be sketched. Then, an outline of the philosophy of embodied realism will be presented. Finally, I will explore the relationship between the philosophy of embodied realism and cognitive semantics and show how the two influence each other and how the cooperation between them can contribute to their mutual development. Obviously, the paper cannot provide an exhaustive treatment of such a broad and complex topic and therefore will concentrate only on selected significant issues.

### 2. Embodied realism and other philosophical orientations

Lakoff and Johnson believe that their philosophy of embodied realism (which they initially called experientialism) can provide a kind of happy medium avoiding the pitfalls of two extreme positions: “objectivism” (the mainstream Western philosophical tradition, beginning with the philosophers of ancient Greece and culminating in contemporary Anglo-American analytic philosophy) on the one hand and “subjectivism” or “extreme relativism” (including the nineteenth century romantic tradition and contemporary postmodernism) on the other. In embodied realism, meaning and truth are neither purely objective and universal, as they involve hu-

man embodied experience and imaginative understanding, nor totally subjective and particular, as they are grounded in and constrained by the shared similar experience of human beings equipped with the same kind of bodies and functioning in the same physical, social, and cultural environment (cf. e.g. Johnson 1992: 346).

While Lakoff and Johnson devote much space to the criticism of their opponents, especially those labeled “objectivists” (cf. e.g. Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 185–228), little attention is paid to those philosophical traditions which are based on similar assumptions and pursue similar goals. For instance, even though Johnson (1987: xxxvii) explicitly calls his method “a form of descriptive or empirical phenomenology,” they do not discuss their relationship to the phenomenological tradition; only Merleau-Ponty is briefly mentioned in Lakoff and Johnson (1999). Geeraerts (1993) fills the gap to some extent, devoting part of his paper to the similarities between Merleau-Ponty and Lakoff and Johnson.

Moreover, Lakoff and Johnson’s attitude to phenomenology is inconsistent: in their first book alone, they admit that the experientialist approach shares a lot with phenomenology (e.g. Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 181), in another chapter they list Husserl, together with various other scholars, under the heading of “the objectivist tradition in Western philosophy” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 195), in yet another chapter, (a popular version of) phenomenology is presented as one of the representatives of “subjectivism” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 223–224).

However, such an ambivalent attitude to some other thinkers is quite common in their writings. For instance, Kant is usually classified and criticized by them as an “objectivist” (cf. e.g. Lakoff and Johnson 1999). On the other hand, Johnson (1987) acknowledges Kant’s contribution to the development of a theory of imagination, a central concern of Johnson’s (1987) own project, discussing it in detail, and even admitting that his idea of an “image schema” was actually inspired by Kant’s notion of a “schema” (Johnson 1987: 156). Other examples of such inconsistent treatment, observed by Haser (2005: 89), include e.g. Wittgenstein and Putnam.

It appears that such inconsistencies follow from the artificial model of Western philosophy constructed by Lakoff and Johnson. In fact, their treatment of theories other than their own seems to be the most problematic and the weakest part of their argumentation. Instead of seeking cooperation and mutual inspiration, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) introduce artificial divisions of philosophy into objectivism, subjectivism, and (their) experientialism. As Haser (2005: chapter 5) demonstrates, this division is questionable: instead of dealing with particular thinkers and their specific ideas separately, Lakoff and Johnson include all those different positions in one category labeled “objectivism” and attack them jointly, which leads to distorting and unjust sweeping generalizations. Similarly, as Haser points out, they usually avoid reference to those particular scholars who hold views similar to their own (e.g. Goodman’s theory of metaphor, cf. Haser 2005: 74–77).

Thus, Lakoff and Johnson portray everyone as their adversary and do not seek alliance with anyone. This impression is strengthened by the highly polemical tone and rhetorical strategies they adopt (cf. Haser 2005: chapter 3, entitled “ARGUMENT IS WAR and Cognitive Linguistics”). The same attitude can also be observed e.g. in Johnson and Lakoff’s (2002) reply to the criticism voiced by Rakova (2002), so different in tone from the other two replies by Krzeszowski (2002) and Sinha (2002).

As a result, Lakoff and Johnson’s mode of exposition creates an impression that they are almost solitary revolutionaries fighting against all the old traditions and providing a completely new theory in their place, a theory with far-reaching consequences in different areas, including not only linguistics and philosophy but also e.g. morality or politics.

### 3. The philosophy of embodied realism

What Lakoff and Johnson constantly emphasize in their writings is the importance of the bodily and experiential basis of our mind, our concepts, our ways of reasoning, and, consequently, our language, as well as their imaginative character. In other words, what determines the nature of our conceptual system to a large extent is the way we experience ourselves as human beings with the kind of bodies we have, as well as our everyday experience of the world around us and of our interactions with the physical, social, and cultural environment. Moreover, physical experience is imaginatively elaborated and metaphorically extended to structure other, more abstract kinds of experience and concepts connected with them.

Our embodied sensorimotor experience provides us with certain constant, recurring patterns, general and flexible schemas structuring our subsequent perception and interaction with the physical environment. These patterns, called “image schemas,” are then imaginatively extended by means of conceptual metaphors and applied to other, sometimes equally basic, but more abstract and less clearly defined domains of experience, e.g. emotional, social, political, economic, cultural, etc. These metaphorical ways of understanding one domain in terms of another, more concrete and tangible one, provide the target domain with basic structure borrowed from the source domain and enable us both to reason and to talk about the more abstract domain. Conceptual metaphor, then, can be seen as a bridge between bodily experience and abstract thought.

According to Lakoff and Johnson, no abstract concepts or abstract thought are possible without bodily experience, which shapes them to a large extent. Their writings concentrate on developing the relevant aspects of that relationship between experience, the conceptual system, and language. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) demonstrate the role of metaphor in thought and language, Johnson (1987) develops a theory of imagination and image schemas, Lakoff (1987) shows the influence of cognitive categories structured around a prototype.

Perhaps one of the most important features of the philosophy of embodied realism is that it bridges the supposed gap between our internal subjective experience and the external world by abandoning the traditional strict subject-object dichotomy (cf. Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 93). In fact, we are part of the world and are closely connected with it through our physical bodies and our embodied physical interactions with other objects. Our concepts and our understanding of the world fit reality just because they arise from our embodied experience and interactions with the world. As the authors put it:

The problem with classical disembodied scientific realism is that it takes two intertwined and inseparable dimensions of all experience – the awareness of the experiencing organism and the stable entities and structures it encounters – and erects them as separate and distinct entities called subjects and objects. [...] as embodied, imaginative creatures, *we never were separated or divorced from reality in the first place*. What has always made science possible is our embodiment, not our transcendence of it, and our imagination, not our avoidance of it. (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 93 [emphasis original])

Apart from the issues already elaborated in their previous books (the mind is embodied, thought is to a large extent metaphorical), Lakoff and Johnson (1999) emphasize the unconscious nature of most of our thought. They even introduce a new term, “the cognitive unconscious.” As Lakoff and Johnson (1999: 10) point out, most cognitive processes are not only unconscious in the sense of functioning without our being aware of them, but also inaccessible to conscious investigation, as they operate too fast to be observed. The “cognitive unconscious” consists of all the automatic cognitive operations and implicit knowledge and “shapes how we automatically and unconsciously comprehend what we experience” (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 13).

#### 4. Embodied realism and cognitive semantics

As most of our cognitive mechanisms and processes are unconscious and hence we have no direct access to them, we cannot discover or examine them by conscious introspection (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 12). As a result, we have to look for indirect clues in order to investigate how the “cognitive unconscious” works. A very rich source of such indirect evidence is offered by human language, which is shaped by and thus reflects the nature and structure of our largely unconscious cognitive system. Linguistic studies and linguistic evidence constitute a large and important part of the data supporting the theory of embodied realism. In all their books, Lakoff and Johnson provide extensive linguistic evidence to support their claims, which in many cases seems to be the main kind of evidence available. Moreover, linguistic data are not merely used to support their arguments but they actually inspire and determine their content in the first place, which is clearly visible e.g. in Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) theory of conceptual metaphor.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) appear to treat linguistic data as a primary source of evidence in their research into the nature of human understanding and believe that by studying linguistic expressions they can arrive at general cognitive principles:

We are concerned primarily with how people understand their experiences. We view language as providing data that can lead to general principles of understanding. The general principles involve whole systems of concepts rather than individual words or individual concepts. We have found that such principles are often metaphoric in nature. (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 116)

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) emphasize the significance and power of metaphor, which is not treated merely as a linguistic phenomenon, but is first of all a characteristic of thought and of the conceptual system. It is reflected not only in the way people speak but also in the way they act.

According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 157–158), each metaphor, conventional or new, forms “a coherent network of entailments that highlight some features of reality and hide others.” Thus, a metaphor suggests a particular way of viewing reality, i.e. paying attention to some aspects and ignoring others, and it constrains our reasoning about it. If we accept a given metaphor, we are likely not only to perceive, think, and talk about reality in terms of the metaphor but also, what is most important, the metaphor will guide our actions.

In their opinion, many human activities themselves are metaphorical, as they are structured by metaphorical concepts. As a result, when a new metaphor appears in a culture, it can change both people’s understanding and actions. “New metaphors have the power to create a new reality” because they “will alter that conceptual system and the perceptions and actions that the system gives rise to. Much of cultural change arises from the introduction of new metaphorical concepts and the loss of old ones” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 145).

Finally, Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 159) come to a conclusion that there is no objective, absolute, unconditional truth, as “truth is always relative to a conceptual system that is defined in large part by metaphor.” Moreover, they believe that “the idea that there is absolute objective truth is not only mistaken but socially and politically dangerous” (159).

Johnson (1992) in his article entitled “Philosophical implications of cognitive semantics” explicitly states: “Cognitive semantics is a philosophical, as well as linguistic, orientation” (345). As cognitive semantics reveals that human concepts, understanding, reasoning, and meaning have a bodily basis and are shaped by imagination, its discoveries have significant implications for some central philosophical issues:

It [cognitive semantics] gives us deep insight into how the mind works and thus into the way we understand and construct our worlds through interactions with our physical, interpersonal, and cultural environments. Moreover, cognitive semantics is providing converging empirical results concerning the nature of human understanding that challenge some of our most deeply-rooted philosophical dogmas about what it is to be human. (Johnson 1992: 345)

According to Johnson (1992: 346), since cognitive semantics helps us examine the nature of concepts, cognition, and the operations of the human mind, its discoveries are relevant for all those areas of our experience which are shaped by our conceptual system: not only for linguistics and the study of meaning but also for human understanding and knowledge, and even for such fields as art, morality, or politics. Cognitive semantics, by revealing the metaphorical character and bodily basis of our conceptual systems, demonstrates that fundamental philosophical concepts and reasoning are both embodied and imaginative (Johnson 1992: 362). Lakoff and Johnson (1999) provide an extensive cognitive analysis of such basic philosophical concepts and selected philosophical theories.

What is the role of a cognitive linguist, then? In Johnson's (1992) opinion, it is very significant. In his view, cognitive semantics is relevant not only for philosophical issues but it can even, for instance, perform a kind of "psychotherapeutic" function of curing us of "cultural neuroses":

Besides the important work of studying the lexicon and the grammar, cognitive linguistics recognizes a further reflective task. By examining not just the cognitive architecture, but also the content and inferential structure of our schemas, concepts, and metaphor systems, we can discern their nature and limits – to see how they work, what they make possible, what they entail for our lives, and what they hide. [...] Cognitive semantics, supported by other cognitive sciences, can reveal some of the sources of widespread cultural neuroses that have come to permeate all aspects of our society. Detailed semantic analyses can show us how such neurotic frames have arisen, why they have such a strong hold on us, and the ways in which they are harmful to our personal and communal well-being. (Johnson 1992: 363)

Cognitive semantic analyses, then, can serve as a valuable source of insight and inspiration for psychology, as well as philosophy.

Apart from the study of language, the role of cognitive semantics is increasing our knowledge and understanding of what it is to be human: the ways people experience, conceptualize, and understand the world. In other words, cognitive semantics investigates the ways people think about their experience through the ways they talk (or write) about it. As only the latter of these activities is directly accessible to us, the research must start with the analysis of language to discover the hidden layers of human thought and cognitive processes forming its basis.

There are several areas of semantic studies in which the interaction between language and general cognitive mechanisms is clearly manifested, including e.g. metaphor, spatial terms, semantic change, or polysemy. It is not surprising, then, that cognitive semantic studies in such areas are numerous. On the one hand, such phenomena were not and could not be adequately analyzed and explained within other linguistic frameworks; what is more, some were often ignored altogether. On the other hand, such studies can supply further evidence for the validity of the cognitive semantic theory and can contribute to its further development and refinement, as well as provide material for more general inquiry into the nature of human mind and understanding.



The interplay between such different cognitive mechanisms as categorization, metaphors, image schemas and their mental transformations can be observed for instance in the case of polysemy. Cognitive semantic studies demonstrate that the development of multiple meanings of a lexical item is not arbitrary and accidental but motivated and quite regular. In most cases, multiple meanings of a polysemous lexical item are not examples of homonymy, but are closely related to each other. They form a network of interrelated senses, a radial category with a central prototypical meaning and its more peripheral extensions. In the case of different spatial meanings, the extended senses can develop on the basis of image schema transformations, which allow us to apply the same lexical items referring to spatial relations (e.g. prepositions or verbs of movement) to the multitude of slightly different but generally similar spatial scenes encountered in our experience. The development of more abstract senses, in turn, is a consequence of metaphorical cross-domain extensions, resulting, for example, in new abstract meanings of lexical items originally referring to spatial relations. Thus, categorization, image schemas, and metaphors are all involved in the phenomenon of polysemy.

## 5. Conclusion

Cognitive semantics and the philosophy of embodied realism are closely interconnected. On the one hand, the development of Lakoff and Johnson's experientialism/embodied realism was inspired to a large extent by the investigation of language. At times, the reader may even have the impression that Lakoff and Johnson overestimate to some extent both the role of language (especially metaphors) and the role of cognitive semantics, especially when they try to use linguistic data and their semantic theory as a tool not only for investigating language and cognition but also for questioning and challenging views other than their own.

On the other hand, cognitive semantics, based on the philosophy of embodied realism, provides the linguist with effective tools for investigating linguistic meaning. Cognitive semantics offers a convincing and coherent interpretation and explanation of many semantic phenomena, such as metaphorical expressions, polysemy, or semantic change, which could not be effectively explained by any other linguistic theories so far. The growing number of such cognitive semantic analyses, in turn, provides further evidence for the plausibility of the philosophy of embodied realism.

Thus, both cognitive semantics and embodied realism benefit each other and could not exist or develop separately and independently of each other. The investigation into the nature of human language is both inspired by and inspiring for philosophy. Linguistics necessarily involves philosophical issues, just as philosophy involves, among other things, the study of human language.

By investigating language, we do not discover linguistic facts only, but these linguistic results can also give us insight into human cognitive mechanisms and into the ways humans conceptualize, understand, and reason about their experience in various areas of life. What cognitive semantics demonstrates is that the way we experience, think, and talk about the world is not objective, universal, transcendent, and disembodied, and that we unavoidably understand reality through our embodied experience and conceptual metaphors.

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