Cognitive grammar

By John R. Taylor


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Cognitive grammar (CG) is a term that many of us have encountered, but perhaps it is not one that has much content for some of us. So where does one go to find out more about CG? And how useful is CG? CG is a theoretical framework for representing linguistic structure and meaning pioneered by Ronald Langacker (1987, 1990, 1991, 2008, etc.) and others.

Taylor’s book is a good, detailed introduction to Cognitive Grammar. It points out the important basic tenets of CG and explains them in clear, non-technical language with many examples, most of which are taken from English. These English examples are helpful for non-native speakers of English wanting to understand some of the whys behind English constructions, and for linguistics students who are new to the cognitive approach. This book is a good place for a reader to start before moving on to Langacker’s books, which explain many of the basic theoretical concepts and the cognitive approach to language.

CG is one grammatical approach within a broader field of cognitive linguistics. Basically, cognitive linguists believe that language is not merely a separate system independent of the rest of cognition, but it is closely related to the basic cognitive capacities that support and shape our shared experiences. CG is an approach to language that is based on our experience of the world and the ways we perceive and conceptualize it.

The author clearly explains that the symbolic thesis, the central concept of CG, “actually amounts to little more than the claim that language is in essence a means for relating sound and meaning” (p. 21). According to the symbolic thesis, any linguistic expression is represented by precisely three elements: a phonological structure related to a semantic structure by a symbolic relation:

    Phonological Structure ← Symbolic Relation → Semantic Structure

After a brief description of the symbolic thesis in Ch. 2 (pp. 20-27), Taylor devotes two chapters to refining the reader’s understanding of that thesis (Ch. 3, pp. 38-60 and Ch. 4, pp. 61-77).
Language, from a CG perspective, allows conceptualizations to be symbolized by means of sounds (and gestures). Language is inherently symbolic. It is this symbolic system, the means of human communication, that allows us to communicate our thoughts to others and to ourselves. Grammar, as one facet of language, is itself inherently symbolic and is therefore meaningful as well. The cognitive approach thus postulates a Grammar that has no autonomous existence at all, and it is inseparable from meaning. This approach gives us an alternate way to go beyond a mere description of the linguistic facts and to arrive at a more insightful explanation of the facts.

This book is formatted well and includes illustrations and diagrams which help the reader to visualize and digest abstract cognitive notions. The contents are organized into seven parts. The author clearly explains his purpose for each part. Part 1 is related to methodological issues. Part 2 provides basic concepts. Morphology is discussed in Part 3. Part 4 is about grammatical categories: nouns, verbs, and clauses. Approaches to meaning are addressed in Part 5. Approaches to metaphor and idioms are dealt with in Part 6 and constructions in Part 7. The reader, therefore, can easily go straight to any topic of interest. Indexes of Names (4 pages) and Subjects (Topics) (5 pages) are helpful in this regard too.

One slight problem with the book is that some issues are introduced in a cursory manner early on in the discussion, but then need to be developed later in the book. The author, however, often just mentions that a given issue will become clearer in due course. It would be helpful if references were provided for where the topic development would be continued. For instance, ‘pragmatic aspects of meaning’ is introduced in a discussion on semantic structure on page 21; later pragmatics is distinguished from semantics on page 30. (See discussion below.) Pragmatics can be found in the index. However, a footnote at the earlier instance could be helpful here instead of asking the reader to just wait or to thumb her way through the indexes.

Helpful study questions are found at the end of each chapter. The author, however, does not include answers to most of the questions, since they are intended as suggestions for further investigation. (Answers to three study questions are found in the Appendix). Still, it would be helpful if the reader could find at least some guidelines to evaluate her responses to the Study Questions; perhaps suggested answers and further thoughts could be made available on the internet. (By the way, many additional resources can be identified by searching for ‘Cognitive Grammar John R. Taylor’ on the internet, although I couldn’t find a site that had suggested answers for Taylor’s study questions.)

The book contains informative discussions on classification hierarchies, prototypes, ambiguity, mental spaces, and many issues associated with verbs and verb phrases, among many other interesting topics discussed in the book. Also attention should be drawn to the last few chapters, which include a worthwhile debate about George Lakoff’s theories on metaphor and discussion of some criticism and development by other CG researchers.

Another interesting topic that Taylor develops is pragmatics. The semantic focus of CG is obvious throughout the book. But what is pragmatics from a CG standpoint? After stating that CG blurs many traditional distinctions in linguistics (e.g. syntax vs. morphology, lexicon vs. syntax-morphology), Taylor elaborates:
“Another distinction that gets blurred is that between semantics and pragmatics. Semantics is traditionally concerned with the linguistically determined meaning of an expression, pragmatics with the contextually conditioned interpretation of an expression. Pragmatic aspects can, however, be incorporated into the conventionalized meaning of an expression. Because conventionalization is a matter of degree, the distinction is a graded one, with no clear cut-off point between the entrenched [i.e. conventionalized] meaning of an expression and its context-dependent interpretation” (p. 30).

CG concepts can lead to examining many aspects of linguistic investigation. Because of my interest in Discourse (Textual) Analysis (DA), I asked myself how CG can help me gain some insights into DA. Trying to utilize all of CG and investigate all of DA is too much to tackle at this time. So I would like to develop a few thoughts about the connections that come mind when CG is used to examine some elements that DA deals with regularly: Segmentation (Boundaries, Internal Unity), Cohesion/Coherence, Genre/Typology, and Storyline/Salience scheme.

**Segmentation (Boundaries, Internal Unity):** This general area of investigation seems perhaps the easiest to relate to the breadth of CG theory. In experiencing a discourse, the audience encounters a series of markers that allows them to tie together things (events, concepts, etc.) that should go together, and identify boundaries between minor or major segments. A phonological input is taken in context as a signal, e.g. English *also, then, the next time, and that* signal activates symbolic schemas in the audience’s brain. For instance, at the beginning of a sentence, *also* often indicates that the next item goes with the previous one. All of the past encounters with *also* have helped to shape the semantic structure (schema) associated with *also*. The whole schema in our brain includes not only sentence syntax and semantic association, but also discourse-oriented associations allowing the audience to group together elements and build the flow of the discourse. Cognitive linguistics’ emphasis on the encyclopedic aspects of semantic structural knowledge reminds us that narrow definitions will under-represent what we have associated with the phonological shape represented by *also*, and other discourse markers.

**Cohesion:** Cohesive elements, which have overt phonological expression, also naturally fall into this same area. Many connectors that are boundary markers and signals of internal unity can also be discussed from the perspective of cohesive elements.

**Coherence:** However, underlying coherence (sometimes viewed as the deep structure that represents the flow of a discourse) seems a little less straightforward. For instance, imagine a story about a person who goes into a grocery store to buy things. As soon as the audience recognizes what is happening, then a ‘going to a store and buying things’ script (semantic structure) is activated and helps to tie a segment together. We expect the person to enter the store, walk among the merchandise, examine and select items, proceed to a check-out counter, pay for the items selected, and finally leave the store. So in cognitive linguistics terms, how does this script get activated? To be consistent with CG theory, it must be hung on some phonological structure? If so what? Could it all connected to a *grocery store* schema? I know it must be attached to certain neurons that are networked together in the brain, and these get activated. But that is not a Phonological Structure. Is the *grocery store* schema activated when the words *store* and *shop* are heard? I haven’t sorted this out yet, but I’m still not comfortable connecting coherence in texts to Phonological Structures.
**Genre/Typology:** Similarly how can CG help me to understand the issues associated with the type of discourse I am encountering. The symbolic thesis would propose that if I have a semantic discourse structure in my brain (e.g. fairy tales begin with ‘once upon a time’ and have many more encyclopedic associated elements such as witches, forests, patterns of three, talking animals, etc.), then it is in relationship with a brain-stored phonological pattern, perhaps ‘once upon a time’. When ‘once upon a time’ is actually spoken and processed in my mind, then the whole fairy tale schema is awoken and I have the expectations associated with the fairy tale genre. So an entire discourse is a linguistic expression of what? A genre, perhaps.

CG concepts suggest thinking of a genre as a semantic schema that is stored as a prototype, a set of characteristics that strongly or weakly apply. If I have a general semantic structure in my brain for fairy tale, then it can be activated by actually encountering a fairy tale discourse. This actual discourse that is produced would then be an instance of the fairy tale genre prototype (see page 74 and chapter 7). As we encounter the instance, then the fairy tale schema is activated and all of the associations associated with the schema are there for the story teller to hook into. So an entire discourse is a linguistic instantiation of perhaps a genre. A set of characteristics organized around a prototype. The fairy tale genre could be activated when certain sounds are said, e.g. “once upon a time” or “this is a fairy tale” or “once there was a man who.” But I still puzzle about what Phonological Structure this schema is related to, because we can recognize a fairy tale without any of these prototypical introductory phrases.

**Storyline:** Concepts associated with Storyline are hard for me to put into certain aspects of CG and easy for other aspects. For instance, in English narrative we would have a prototype that the main events of a story would be expressed in a series of volitional actions encoded by simple past verbs. Imagine a very short narrative: “Bill went, he saw, he ate (while looking around), and then he left.” Each italicized clause would be on the main storyline. So that would be an instantiation of the narrative prototype. But is there a phonological structure that it is tied to? Not one that I can imagine. I could tie it to ‘once upon a time’, but that would only give me fairy-tale storyline. I couldn’t tie it to then because all storylines don’t use the word then. I don’t see how I can tie it to grammatical English past tense, because it certainly does not have one phonological shape. This is another example of my gaining insights from CG but not being able to answer some basic questions.

There’s much more to explore about DA: salience scheme, participant analysis, conversation analysis, quotations, embedded discourses, prominence, information management—the topics are endless. You’ll just have to explore those for yourself as you work your way through *Cognitive Grammar* and apply the concepts and techniques to the aspects of language you know most about.

There is no doubt this is an excellent book for a student of linguistics (whether mother-tongue speaker of English or not) to study for insights into both language and Cognitive Linguistics. The book provides enough practical detail to allow the reader to develop a good description of any language, and the book is comprehensive enough that it could be used in courses introducing grammatical analysis or Cognitive Grammar.
References


