How words mean: Lexical concepts, cognitive models, and meaning construction

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How is it that a single word in a language can be used to mean so many different things, and that listeners/readers are so often successful in figuring out what speakers/hearers intend to convey with the words they use, and that on the other hand we sometimes get it wrong? Basic questions for exegetes, translators, linguists, arbitrators, and ordinary people just trying to understand and be understood! This book (HWM) aims to answer these questions about the “construction of meaning” by presenting the Theory of Lexical Concepts and Cognitive Models, or LCCM Theory, a theory that draws on other cognitive approaches to language and communication—mostly from linguistics (e.g., Lakoff and Johnson 1999, Talmy 2000, Fauconnier and Turner 2002, Langacker 2008), but to a lesser extent also from cognitive science (especially Barsalou 1991 and several later works by that author). A summary of HWM is available in Crombach 2010 and in Taylor 2010, while I recommend Murphy 2011 for its critique by a psychologist, including relevant experimental data not referred to by Evans. Rather than offering yet another summary of HWM, I focus here on some specific components of LCCM Theory as presented in the book, relating them to other approaches to meaning construction, in particular Relevance Theory.

Perhaps the central principle of LCCM Theory is that “meaning is not a property of words, or even language, per se. Rather…meaning arises as a function of the way words (and language) are deployed by language users in socioculturally, temporally, and physically contextualized communicative events, which is to say utterances, due to a complex battery of linguistic and non-linguistic processes, in service of the expression of situated communicative intentions” (22).

To say that “meaning is not a property of words” is not to say that “words do not have stable semantic representations associated with them….they do” (23), representations Evans calls “lexical concepts,” as in the name of his theory. These lexical concepts play an initial role in the “complex battery of linguistic and non-linguistic processes” called into play in interpreting an utterance, the role of providing access to encyclopaedic knowledge, knowledge which is organized into “cognitive models,” the other half of the theory’s name.
Lexical concepts are linguistic, associated with linguistic forms (“vehicles”) such as words, affixes, and constructions. Their representation of meaning is “schematic,” limited to “representations that are specialized for being encoded by language” (42). They provide access to the much richer “representations associated with the conceptual system, [which] are not directly encoded by language—although language facilitates access to this level” (43). What happens when we try to understand what someone is saying is that the words (and other linguistic forms) allow us to access some of our cognitive models, among which we select one (or more) that matches our encyclopaedic knowledge of the way things are, including the context of the utterance, what we already believe about the speaker/writer, and what has already been said.

Some vehicles, such as polysemous words, trigger access to a greater number of cognitive models than others, but the same non-linguistic processes of selection just mentioned apply. Similarly, non-literal use of words or other expressions are processed in the same way, not in some way different from how we process expressions used literally: “the same set of compositional mechanisms are responsible for literal and figurative understanding. Hence, figurative language does not involve a distinct module or set of processes. Rather, it is continuous with literal understanding” (301).

With its notion of lexical concepts, claims Evans, “LCCM Theory gives back to cognitive linguists the importance of language in meaning-construction processes” (338), correcting what he sees as some other cognitive linguists’ tendency to “downplay the significance of language itself in meaning construction” (ibid.). Nevertheless, Evans himself, while seeking to restore a balance between the linguistic and non-linguistic processes in the construction of meaning, often emphasizes the latter. For example, in explicating why some previous approaches to word meaning fall short, he claims “they make no serious attempt to relate their theoretical claims to the nature of situated meaning,” and goes on to say, “We need a theoretical account of context, and the role of the language user as an intentional agent who employs language, in part, in service of the expression of situated communicative intentions” (69), referring to, among others, Sperber and Wilson 1995.

I mention the reference to Sperber and Wilson to draw attention to what I see as a great deal in common between S&W’s Relevance Theory and Evans’s approach to meaning construction. The quote just given stresses speaker intention, a concept important in RT (as well as in the philosophy of language of John Searle—e.g., Searle 1983—and, in a very different way, in the account of child language acquisition propounded in Bloom 2002). More generally, both LCCM Theory and RT rightly insist that linguistic forms alone do not fully determine the meaning of an utterance—far from it! And more specifically, the above-mentioned position that there is no principled distinction between interpreting literal and figurative language use also meshes with the explication within RT of figurative language use as just another example of “loose talk” (see, e.g., Sperber and Wilson 2008).

With so much in common between LCCM Theory and Relevance Theory, it is perhaps unfortunate, although not altogether surprising in the context of how academic communities are constituted these days, that there is not more collaboration and building on each other’s work between the two approaches. Evans does mention RT occasionally, as we have seen, but sometimes fails to represent it clearly. For example, he adduces Carston 2002 in support of his
position that “the principled separation of context-independent and context-dependent meaning (the semantics/pragmatics distinction) is illusory” (8–9), yet Carston (2002:11) clearly distinguishes semantics and pragmatics as two different kinds of cognitive processes: decoding and inference.) For a broader sample of the degree that cognitive linguistics takes work in RT into account, Geeraerts and Cuyckens 2007, for all its nearly 1300 pages, has no entries in its Index for well-known RT proponents Diane Blakemore, Robyn Carston, Dan Sperber, or Deirdre Wilson—or, for that matter, another contextualist often cited by RT writers, François Recanati. Similarly, the Index to Carston 2002 has no entries for René Dirven, Giles Fauconnier, Dirk Geeraerts, George Lakoff, Ronald Langacker, or Leonard Talmy (though its references include three works of Fauconnier’s).

These observations about two schools of thought operating with little obvious interaction with each other’s ideas on their shared interest—communication and understanding—are intended not so much as criticisms as a programmatic statement: while scholars well established in their respective subfields understandably have enough to do in developing their own theoretical directions, perhaps some younger reader will take up the challenge to explore how the overlapping insights of LCCM Theory and RT can enhance each other. A good specific place to start would be the understanding of figurative language use.

References


