Cognitive Linguistics

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Context and orientation

Cognitive linguistics is best viewed as a coalition or “movement” in linguistics whose main unifying ideas are to put meaning (= conceptualization) at the center of language description and to make language description realistic from a cognitive point of view. In its formative period in the 1980–1990s, cognitive linguistics was influenced by cognitive anthropology and cognitive psychology, and more recently it has drawn on work in psychological anthropology and psycholinguistics. Though there are many strains of cognitive linguistics, they all stand in opposition to generative linguistics, which is chiefly focused on formal aspects of language, i.e. syntax and phonology, rather than on meaning and conceptualization.

Cognitive linguistics rejects several dichotomies accepted by both traditional linguistics and generative linguistics, including between lexicon and grammar, and between linguistic and encyclopedic knowledge. Many cognitive linguists deny that there is any dedicated language faculty or module, as posited in generative linguistics, contending that grammar emerges from general human cognitive and communicative capacities playing out in social action; in a common formulation: grammar is shaped by usage.

Work published under the banner of cognitive linguistics is very diverse. The online Cognitive Linguistics Bibliography (CogBib), associated with the flagship journal *Cognitive Linguistics*, currently lists over 7000 entries. Other important journals are *Review of Cognitive Linguistics* and *International Journal of Language and Culture*. Handbooks include Geeraerts and Cuyckens (2007), Dąbrowska and Divjak (2015), and Dancygier (2017). Much cognitive linguistics research is not explicitly focused on cultural aspects of language, or even on differences between languages, but a significant proportion is and this will be the focus of the remainder of this entry.

Leading ideas

Several leading ideas of cognitive linguistics can be sketched as follows. First, “meaning” is essentially conceptualization, rather than correspondence with a presumed real world. In other words, meaning is a matter of construal. It is subjective, often anthropomorphic, and subject to variation according to culture, subculture, discourse community, or even on an individual basis. Most cognitive linguists adhere to a prototype approach to meaning.

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Second, people in a given linguaculture or discourse community share certain cognitive models, schemas, or scripts, which help them organize their experience and guide their evaluations, expectations, and action plans. Such models, schemas, or scripts often operate below the level of conscious awareness, but they show themselves in (and are scaffolded and perpetuated by) language and discourse patterns.

Third, metaphor is a powerful force in everyday thinking and in the structuring of everyday experience. This idea has been greatly elaborated and debated under the banner of Conceptual Metaphor Theory. It stands in contrast to the traditional notion that metaphor and other “figures of speech” are merely superficial features of speech. Some conceptual metaphors are regarded as universal, while others are culture-specific.

A fourth leading idea is that of cultural “key words,” i.e. the notion that certain important words function as focal points in culturally shaped ways, thinking, acting, feeling, and speaking. Key words can be culture-specific to a greater or lesser extent. In some cases, they rise to public attention and may become iconic of whole cultures but they often remain below conscious awareness, even as entire cultural discourses are built around them.

Major approaches

Despite the common ideas enumerated above, cognitive linguists do not agree on standardized procedures for describing cultural models, cognitive metaphors, or the meanings of key words, nor on the “building blocks” from which they are constructed. Additionally, they tend to use the word “meaning” with greater or lesser inclusiveness – from “purely linguistic” (what is encoded in the language) to broader sociocultural, historical, or even evolutionary significance. This means that the different strands of cognitive linguistics are arguably more different from one another than is usually recognized. There is also divergence in the range of evidence and methodology used, including ethnographic studies, classic linguistic analysis, traditional discourse analysis, micro-analysis of conversational interaction, and experimental methods.

Among the different approaches or schools of cognitive linguistics are the following: (i) cognitive grammar in the style of Ronald Langacker; (ii) conceptual metaphor theory descending from Lakoff and Johnson’s influential *Metaphors We Live By*; (iii) extensionalist approaches following Stephen Levinson; (iv) European “empirical” cognitive linguistics, generally based on corpus or experimental data, as advocated by Dirk Geeraerts, Ewa Dąbrowska, and others; (v) the natural semantic metalanguage (NSM) approach originated by Anna Wierzbicka (Goddard and Wierzbicka 2014); and (vi) cultural linguistics as conceived by Farzad Sharifian (2017). Though not usually designated as cultural linguistics, European ethnolinguistics, e.g. the Lublin (Poland) school of Jerzy Bartmiński, has much in common with the latter two approaches. Other prominent cognitive linguistic approaches include construction grammar and frame semantics, but to date these have been less focused on cultural aspects of language and discourse.

Examples

We look briefly at three examples. Other areas that have been intensively researched across languages include classifiers and categorization (see Nominal Classification Systems), body part metaphors (see Body, Embodiment), and folk taxonomy (see Folk Taxonomies).

Grammars of space and practices of spatial orientation

This line of research has virtually become a subfield in its own right, propelled initially by the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, Nijmegen, under Stephen Levinson (see Levinson and Wilkins 2009). Researchers use standardized stimulus materials or tasks to marshal comparable data sets across different languages and settings. A surprising degree of cross-linguistic diversity has been discovered in spatial frames of reference; for example, is the location of something nearby described relative to one's body (using "right" and "left"), or in absolute terms (e.g. using compass points)? Is its relative elevation, i.e. whether it is above or below the speaker, linguistically coded? Having established how the semantic domain of space is structured differently in different languages, it can be then investigated how this affects spatial reasoning, navigation practices, etc. (see Linguistic Relativity).

Talking and thinking about time in terms of space

In most European languages, there is a linear model whereby the past is spoken about as "behind" us, and the future as "in front" or "ahead" of us. Some languages, in contrast, use an "up-down" way of speaking, and even more puzzlingly, in some languages the past is said to be "in front" of us and the future behind. Cognitive linguistic research has sought to make conceptual sense of these and other metaphorical mappings between space and time; proposing, for example, that the rationale for seeing the past as "in front" of us is that the past can be known – metaphorically, it can be "seen," whereas the future is out of sight. Other research has used experimental and observational methods to determine whether the different ways of speaking truly influence people's real-world thinking; and, if so, how extensive and how robust the effect is (see Linguistic Relativity).

Emotions, values, and the makeup of the human person

Emotions have been a rich vein for studies in culture-related meaning, especially in NSM studies and cultural linguistics. One major finding is that although some universal themes can be identified, there are no words for "universal emotions," i.e. emotion words which are present in all languages with exactly the same meanings (see Language and Archeology). Classic studies have examined English "happiness" and German *Angst* "fear, anxiety." Cultural values and ideals have also proven to be fertile terrain, especially when they implicate sociality and relationship thinking, as with Chinese *xiào* "filial piety," Japanese *wa* "harmony, unity," Danish *hygge* "cosy sociality." Somewhat related are models of the makeup of the human person, especially concerning the non-bodily

aspects of a person, i.e. concepts comparable to “mind,” “spirit,” and “soul”; e.g. English *heart*, Russian *duša*, Persian *del* “stomach/heart.”

Looking forward

The future looks bright for cognitive linguistics as a “brand,” partly because there is strong appetite for its core proposition of reinstating meaning at the center of language description, and partly because cognitive linguistics presents as more outward-looking and interdisciplinary than functional linguistics, the traditional rival of generative linguistics.

Challenges and issues remain. First, given the proliferation of representational devices used across the gamut of approaches, increased efforts toward standardization would be welcome. Second, in seeking to model the cognitive reality of speakers and communities, cognitive linguists would do well to be more attentive to the danger that their descriptions will be tainted by Anglocentricism, and hence inauthentic, if framed in English-specific words which lack equivalents in the languages of the people concerned. Third, there is debate surrounding how the “shared-ness” of mental models is achieved and maintained, and about how mental models vary across individuals and change across time.

Looking forward, one can predict that digital technologies will continue to impact on cognitive linguistics. Digital techniques for recording and analyzing interactional data in microscopic detail, capturing not only speech but gesture, gaze, and other nonverbal signaling, have already re-energized interactional analysis, and may be contributing to a “social turn” in cognitive linguistics (Enfield and Levinson 2016). Digitally enabled analysis of very large corpora is suggesting new models for how language is represented in the mind.

SEE ALSO: Body, Embodiment; Folk Taxonomies; Language and Archeology; Linguistic Relativity; Nominal Classification Systems; Prototype Semantics and Cross-linguistic Comparison

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