What is a cognitive linguistics approach to semantic structure?

1 Meaning construction
Consider the following exchange at a dinner party, and answer the questions that follow.

Guest: Where shall I sit?
Host: Can you sit in the apple juice seat?

a. If you were the guest what would you make of this? Make a list of all the possible interpretations of ‘apple juice seat’.
b. What is the most likely meaning, from those you’ve listed, given the context of a dinner party?
c. Now imagine that the guest is teetotal and the rest of the guests are drinking wine with their dinner. What does this tell you about the meaning of ‘apple juice seat’?
d. Finally, what does this example illustrate in light of the two guiding principles of a cognitive linguistics approach to semantic structure?

2 Semantic structure
Consider the following examples. Each of these uses of fast means something slightly different.

(1) That parked BMW over there is a fast car.
(2) They were travelling in the fast lane on the motorway.
(3) That car is travelling fast.
(4) He can think through a problem fast.
(5) Christmas went by fast this year.
a. Identify the meaning of *fast* in each sentence.

b. In light of the discussion of the guiding principles of a cognitive linguistics approach to semantic structure in Chapter 14, what do these different readings reveal about the nature of word meaning?

3 Propositions versus construals

One of the key distinctions between formal and cognitive linguistics approaches to semantic structure relates to their different views about grammatical structure. Cognitive linguistics views grammatical structure as independently meaningful while formal linguistics approaches do not. An important idea that was introduced in Chapter 14 relates to the notion of *construal*: the idea that different grammatical forms, such as different words, give rise to distinct construals or ‘ways of seeing’. Consider the following examples.

(1) John kicked the ball.
(2) The ball was kicked by John.

From the perspective of truth-conditional semantics, these sentences both encode the same proposition and therefore express the same ‘meaning’.

a. Based on what you have learned in Chapter 14 about cognitive linguistics, say what the difference in meaning is between these two sentences.

b. Explain how these two different meanings are encoded linguistically.

c. How might these differences be accounted for within the Formal Semantics approach?

d. Comment on what these examples reveal in terms of differing assumptions between cognitive linguistics and Formal Semantics.