What is a cognitive linguistics approach to grammar?

1 Schema–instance relations

A key claim associated with cognitive linguistics approaches to grammar is that our mental grammar is stored as an inventory of symbolic assemblies, or constructions. These constructions can be categorised as more or less schematic, and are related to one another in terms of schema–instance relations.

Based on the discussion of grammar as a network of schemas, in Chapter 21, as well as the discussion of schema–instance relations at earlier points in the book (for instance in section 2.4. of Chapter 5, and in section 3.1. of Chapter 17), consider the following sets of expressions:

(1) man, boy, woman, girl, human
(2) human, adult, child, woman, man, girl, boy

a. Make a diagram of schema–instance relations for the two sets of symbolic units in (1) and (2).
b. In what ways are the two diagrams similar?
c. How do they differ? What might this indicate about the way in which schemas and instances are related in the grammar?

2 The semantic basis of grammar

Another key claim associated with cognitive linguistics approaches to grammar is that grammar is inherently meaningful, whereby lexical (open-class) and grammatical (closed-class) elements form a lexicon–grammar continuum.

In light of this, consider the following sentence:

(1) Tommy has hidden Monica’s slippers under the bed.
a. Identify as many closed-class and open-class units as you can.
b. Divide them into two lists.
c. Provide a semantic representation for each.
d. What generalisations can you observe about the distinction in the nature of the semantic representations across the two lists?

3 Transformations

Consider the following example:

(1) Whom will Kate wed?

a. Based on the discussion of Transformational Grammar in Chapter 21, say how you think this approach might analyse the derivation of this sentence.
b. What is the semantic motivation for the transformational analysis?
c. Can you find any morphological evidence for a transformational approach?
d. How might the intuitions behind this analysis be captured in a cognitive linguistics analysis of the same sentence?

4 False dichotomies

Langacker (1987: 18) lists a number of what he dubs ‘false dichotomies’ assumed by formal linguistics, which are as follows:

(1) Synchrony versus diachrony
(2) Competence versus performance
(3) Grammar versus lexicon
(4) Semantics versus pragmatics
(5) Grammatical versus ungrammatical
(6) Derivational versus inflectional morphology

In the light of the comparison between cognitive linguistics and formal approaches to grammar in Chapter 21:

a. Discuss how and why you think the Transformational Grammar approach might uphold these dichotomies.
b. Discuss how and why the cognitive linguistics approach to grammar rejects them.