# Interview with Ronald W. Langacker

*by Diogo Pinheiro[1]*

Over thirty years ago, the first volume of Ronald Langacker's *Foundations of cognitive grammar* presented the linguistic community with a highly innovative and equally controversial framework for linguistic analysis. It took some time, however, for Cognitive Grammar to be perceived as a construction grammar model – maybe because "the word 'construction' rarely appears there" (Croft and Cruse 2004: 278), maybe because the semantic apparatus and heavy use of diagrams seemed so overwhelming at first that the construction grammar side of the framework faded into the background.

Whatever the cause, this initial misunderstanding is now a thing of the past. In fact, since the publication of Langacker's seminal volume, Cognitive Grammar has come to be recognized as a particularly successful, and in many ways unique, version of (usage-based) construction grammar. In this interview, Professor Emeritus Ronald W. Langacker revisits the history of Cognitive Grammar, discusses a number of key theoretical issues – often in comparison to other strands of construction grammar –, and considers the model's potential for practical appplication.

**Linguíſtica:** Thank you very much for accepting my invitation for this interview – as I said before, it is really an honor to me. Besides, I should say it was great fun to try to come up with some interesting and hopefully thought-provoking questions.

But now we should get started. And, since this is an issue on construction grammar, my first question has to do with the anatomy of a grammatical construction. You have mentioned a couple

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of times that Charles Fillmore asked you long ago whether we should describe grammar in terms of constituency or dependency relations. I'm also aware that your current answer is that both kinds of relations should be jointly represented, and that this is precisely what Cognitive Grammar (CG) achieves. Could you further elaborate on that?

**Ronald W. Langacker:** Constituency is a matter of part-whole relations, while dependency consists in relations between a "main" part and "subsidiary" parts. Obviously, both have an important role in linguistic structure. In a phrase like *in the room*, the overall constituent *in the room* has *in* and *the room* as subconstituents. But in terms of dependency, *in* is the main part in the sense that it determines the reference and grammatical category of the whole; *in* is termed the **head**, while *the room* is a **dependent** with respect to it.

Both sorts of relations are commonly represented by tree-like diagrams (with either the overall constituent or the head at the top). However, either sort of tree represents only one type of relation, so it does not per se represent the other type. From its very inception (Langacker 1987), the CG account of grammatical constructions includes them both. Thus CG diagrams have typically shown constituency, with larger parts (constituents) broken down into smaller parts (subconstituents) at any number of levels. This hierarchical arrangement tends to obscure the fact that the diagrams also incorporate the relationships represented in dependency trees. In particular, they indicate the **profile determinant** in a given construction: the component structure whose profile (conceptual referent) is inherited by the composite whole; this is equivalent to the **head** in dependency representations. CG diagrams also indicate **correspondences**: how the component structures are connected, through conceptual overlap, to one another as well as to the composite structure. Those connections capture dependency relations.

For many years, it has been recognized in CG that constituency is less essential than the semantic relations reflected in dependency diagrams (Langacker 1997). So instead of trees based on constituency, grammatical structure is characterized more generally as residing in **assemblies** of connected elements. The same assembly harbors both constituency relations and dependency relations; whether it is shown as a constituency tree or a dependency tree is just a matter of which sorts of connections one wants to represent in a single diagram. A typical CG diagram showing both constituency and dependency can be converted into a dependency diagram by a simple mechanical procedure (Langacker To appear). And since constituency is less essential (often variable if not indeterminate), that sort of representation is more perspicuous for many purposes.

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**Linguíſtica:** My second question has to do with one important point in which Cognitive Grammar differs from other versions of construction grammar: the definition of construction. While everyone takes constructions to be form-meaning pairings, you specifically take form to mean *phonological* form. Given this rather crucial difference, my second question splits into three different – albeit related – ones.

(a) If I were to guess, I'd say your position is probably due to the fact that you take grammatical relations and parts of speech to be ultimately semantic notions, which means they wouldn't count as *form* after all. Is this interpretation correct?

(b) Assuming that a general construction – say, the nominal construction – is abstracted away by the speaker from actual instances of usage, and considering that there is no phonological commonality between things such as "my pen" and "this sofa", what exactly does it mean to say that the form of the construction is, say, XY? OK, it means that the construction is entirely unspecified in regard to its form – but doesn't it imply that the construction has *no form* whatsoever? And, if so, doesn't it affect the very definition of construction?

(c) The third question is directly related to the second one. If we tried to figure out which formal generalizations a speaker would be able to make over dozens of instances of any given nominal construction, we could presumably suggest that s/he understands that the abstract pattern is made up of (at least?) two elements, and that the first somehow depends on – or forms a higher-level constituent with – the second. Such generalizations cannot likely be said to be phonological or prosodic in nature, but neither do they suffer from the inconvenience of evoking "pseudo-syntactic" entities such as "noun" or "subject". So, wouldn't it be useful, or even necessary, to include this kind of syntactic information in the formal pole of grammatical constructions?

**Ronald W. Langacker:**

(a) Most discussions of these matters are noteworthy for their failure to clarify what is meant by "form". Normally it is tacitly assumed that form includes not only phonological structure but also grammatical category, or grammar more generally. But in what sense is the categorization of, say, *sofa* as a noun a matter of "form"? It is not directly observable, like the spatial form of a sculpture. The closest analog to that in language would be the

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visual form of a gesture, and the next closest thing—its counterpart in another modality— would be the auditory form of sounds or sound sequences. I understand "form" in this fairly restrictive sense, at least in locutions like "form-meaning pairing". Grammatical category membership (or grammar more generally) is not directly observable in the way that sounds and gestures are. Thus it does not have a symbolizing function, but is rather an aspect of meaning. Symbolization is the essential feature of form-meaning pairings, and the characterization of grammar as assemblies of symbolic structures is a central claim of CG. Subsuming grammar under "form" is incoherent on this view and a source of confusion in thinking about how language serves its symbolic function.

(b) Being unspecified in regard to (phonological) form is not the same as having no form. You can think of it as a matter of the form being maximally schematic—there is the notion of phonological content (or sound structure) without any further specification that would narrow it down to any particular sound experience. It is not a vacuous notion: the schematic conception of sound is not the same as the schematic conception of smell or color. In fact, the need to recognize schematic conceptions of this sort is shown by the very existence, and semantic distinctness, of words like *sound*, *smell*, and *color*. And when linguists talk about constructions as consisting in form-meaning pairings, they use the terms *form* and *meaning* with comparable schematicity.

(c) A symbolic structure is still symbolic even if it is maximally schematic at either pole or at both. The same holds for a grammatical construction, i.e. an assembly of symbolic structures connected in particular ways. Suppose we say that, as its schematic meaning, a noun profiles a THING. A noun is nonetheless a symbolic structure, not just a meaning. Its schematic characterization might thus be given as [THING/...], where "..." indicates that its phonological pole is maximally schematic: some sound sequence, but (as a general characterization) no particular sound sequence. For nominals with overt grounding, we can likewise posit the highly schematic structure [[GROUNDING/...]-[[THING/...]]. It specifies that the nominal consists of two component elements, and that the grounding element precedes the noun in the phonological sequence. We can go even further. The highly schematic structure [[... /...]-[... /...]] generalizes over constructions (of any sort) comprising two symbolic elements. A linguist who says that constructions consist in form-meaning pairings is invoking a schema that we can represent as [... [... /...] ...]. That is, it abstracts away from the number of such pairings ("some number of symbolic elements").

**Linguíſtica:** The third question is linked to letter (c) above. To my mind, Cognitive Grammar sometimes seems to have a somewhat derivational flavor. Received wisdom has it that one thing which distinguishes construction grammar from traditional generative models is the absence of derivations – the idea that one does not need to compositionally *create* syntactic structure because it is already there, specified in the formal pole of grammatical constructions. Cognitive Grammar, on the other hand, sometimes seems to place an emphasis on the process of creating increasingly larger and more complex units by means of joining words and simpler units together. Would that be a major difference between your approach and other strands of construction grammar?

**Ronald W. Langacker:** You are missing the point. CG is non-derivational in the same way that other versions of construction grammar are.

It is important here to distinguish **composition**, in the sense of forming larger and larger structures, from **derivation** in the classic generative sense, where it refers to deriving **surface structures** from **underlying structures** (which are different in nature but not necessarily in size). CG has always denied the reality of derivation in this latter sense.

As for composition, early discussions of CG tended to present it as moving from "bottom to top" by combination at successive levels. And for ease of discussion, I often still describe it—informally— in that way. It is important, however, not to confuse the informal, metaphorical presentation of a theoretical notion with what is actually being claimed about the phenomenon in question (Langacker 2016a). I have long insisted that the standard metaphor of "composition" or "creation" (including the "building-block" metaphor) is just that: a convenient metaphor, not to be taken literally (Langacker 1991: 5-6, To appear). Instead, constructions reside in assemblies of symbolic structures linked by correspondences (i.e. overlap) and categorizing relations. Taken as wholes, these assemblies have no inherent or exclusive directionality.

A basic CG notion, however, is that linguistic structure resides in **activity** (at the neural, processing, interactive, and discursive levels). So viewing it holistically, though unavoidable and valid for many purposes, oversimplifies matters by ignoring this intrinsic dynamicity. While there is no overall directionality, the structures comprising an assembly are connected in myriad ways involving asymmetries reasonably taken as having a temporal basis on some time scale. Most obvious, of course, is word order—or more generally, the sequence of presentation for structures at any level (e.g. syllables, phrases, clauses, sentences). But there are many other natural paths through a complex

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structure that no doubt have some role in language processing, irrespective of the order of symbolic expression: sequence of causation, paths of access through mental spaces, the apprehension of scalar organization, and so on. So I see a holistic view as abstracting away from the dynamicity that will ultimately be revealed in finer-grained accounts, where structure consists in processing activity.

**Linguíʃtica:** Fourth question, and we are still in the realm of the differences between cognitive grammar and other constructionist approaches. Now we go back to the issue of how to define lexical categories. In your comment on Goldberg's *Constructions at work* (*Cognitive Linguistics*, volume 20, issue 1), you note that your conceptual definitions for basic grammatical units do not imply an essentialist view. Now, if by "essentialist" it is meant that your definitions are intrinsic, it seems to me that this would be a fairly appropriate label. In fact, this way of approaching lexical categories seems to contrast sharply with Croft's, as well as Goldberg's, suggestion that categories are to be seen as construction-induced generalizations – a view in which complex constructions as structured wholes clearly take precedence over lexical categories. Could you please comment on this difference? (And once more: do you take that to be a major disagreement?)

**Ronald W. Langacker:** Whether it is a disagreement depends on whether Croft and/or Goldberg are willing to accept the CG claim that nouns and verbs all instantiate the schematic meanings I have proposed for these categories (respectively, the profiling of a **thing** or a **process**, abstractly characterized). I think they probably would not—at least I have never heard them admit it. For me the claim is a key factor in the central CG notion that grammar is symbolic in nature, residing solely in configurations of semantic structures, phonological structures, and symbolic relations between the two.

In rejecting the label "essentialist" for my characterization of nouns and verbs, I did not make my intent sufficiently clear. If the proposed schematic meanings are universally valid, they are indeed essential for expressions to qualify as category members. I was resisting the label "essentialist" because it suggested that the schematic meanings were all that needed to be said about the categories. But in the CG view, nouns and verbs resemble most other categories in being **complex**, with prototypes, extensions from the prototypes, cross-cutting subclasses, and so on. In particular, one basis for categorization is participation in grammatical constructions. So as in other kinds of construction grammar, we can perfectly well describe categories as construction-induced generalizations. The point of difference is that CG makes the further claim that certain fundamental categories (like noun and verb, also subject and object) have that status because they are characterized in terms

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of both salient **conceptual archetypes** (object and event, agent and patient) and basic **cognitive abilities** allowing their apprehension (e.g. grouping in the case of nouns). The archetypes function as category prototypes. The abilities are first manifested in the archetypes and constitute the schematic characterizations.

Linguistic elements are categorized on the basis of intrinsic properties (semantic and/or phonological) as well as extrinsic ones (occurrence in constructions). Categories differ as to their relative importance. At one extreme are purely distributional categories, e.g. a class of nouns that take a particular irregular plural ending, with no semantic or phonological coherence to the set of members. At the opposite extreme are basic categories like noun and verb, which exist precisely because of their intrinsic semantic values, and may not have any fully general distributional characterization (even in a single language). Most categories lie somewhere in between.

I am not aware of any valid arguments against the schematic characterizations proposed in CG for fundamental and universal notions like noun, verb, subject, object, and possessive. In various places (e.g. Langacker 2015), I have shown that the standard arguments are based on false assumptions, and have tried to dispel the confusion that has clouded discussions of the issue. More importantly, the proposed meanings allow the explicit and principled description of numerous grammatical phenomena (generally treated in purely formal terms) as having a conceptual basis.

**Linguíſtica:** You have already suggested that the Baseline / Elaboration organization represents a preferable alternative to positing zero elements. Whereas I generally agree with construction grammar's overall rejection of empty categories and underlying levels of representation, I tend to think that the zero metaphor could still be useful. This is because it is probably true that the speaker is able to compare two different but related constructions – say, "dog" and "dogs" – and thus conclude that the idea of singular is associated with the absence of a certain morpheme that can be found somewhere else. So my question is: is it possible that we might be throwing the baby out with the bathwater? If the process of mentally comparing constructions turns out to be psychologically real, wouldn't we need a zero element to apprehend – or represent – the speaker's knowledge that something is missing?

**Ronald W. Langacker:** I agree that speakers are able to associate the idea of singular with the absence of a plural morpheme. However, as described in my article (2016b: 431-432), the account in terms of baseline and elaboration allows this without requiring the postulation of a zero element. It

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throws out the bathwater but keeps the baby.

What is rejected is the characterization of a singular form as bimorphemic, e.g. *dog* + Ø. Instead, *dog* (*tout court*) is the baseline form, with respect to which *dogs* constitutes a semantic and morphological elaboration. In terms of layers of complexity, *dog* represents the initial stratum, $S_0$, and *dogs* a higher stratum, $S_1$, invoking additional resources and allowing a wider range of options. Note that my diagram shows a still higher stratum, $S_2$, where the commonality of *dog* and *dogs* gives rise to a more schematic structure *dog...*, which neutralizes the number distinction (i.e. presence vs. absence of plurality). However, this schematic structure is derivative rather than fundamental, as it is if one analyzes the singular *dog* as bimorphemic.

Now a baseline structure like *dog* can be apprehended in and of itself, i.e. in the context of $S_0$. But it can also be interpreted in the context of $S_1$, where it stands in systemic opposition to *dogs*. The context of interpretation results in *dog* having slightly different meanings: 'dog' *tout court* vs. 'dog' as opposed to 'dogs'. The latter amounts to the recognition that the absence of a plural marker indicates singular. It does so without positing Ø as a structural element. That is, the comparison of *dog* and *dogs*, so that the plural –*s* contrasts with its absence, arises as a higher-order phenomenon. It is not the case that *dog* is bimorphemic (*dog* + Ø) as its fundamental characterization.

**Linguíʃtica:** In an interview published in 2005 in *Acta Linguistica Hungarica*, you describe what seems to be a very nuanced view on controversial issues such as innateness and modularity: while you claim to be "uncomfortable with any modular view of language", you also argue that "we don't learn languages just on the basis of general abilities". While we know this is not an actual contradiction, it certainly might sound like one. Could you please clarify this position?

**Ronald W. Langacker:** In rejecting the strong modular view of language (an innate "universal grammar" basically separate from other aspects of cognition), cognitive linguists perhaps tend to go too far and "throw the baby out with the bathwater". We are clearly born to learn language, and general abilities (memory, attention, perception, etc.) are obviously involved. The question is whether anything specific to language is also involved. I believe so, based on both the strength of the drive to acquire language and the degree of universality it exhibits (which is not to deny or minimize the extent of its diversity). For guidance we can look to the physical organs of speech (like the lips, tongue, glottis, and numerous muscles), all of which have non-linguistic functions. However, the organs and their configuration have been adapted and adjusted for speech—despite having the same

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organs, chimpanzees cannot produce the full range of human speech sounds. I suggest that the same holds for other facets of language: they depend on specialized adaptations of abilities we have for other reasons. Language is not a separate module, but neither is it learned "just" on the basis of general capacities.

**Linguíʃtica:** In the same interview mentioned in the previous question, you briefly underline the need for a cognitive lexicography, "along the lines of the constructs suggested in cognitive grammar". That sounds like a fascinating enterprise to me – I would definitely love to understand how words mean, and the CG apparatus for semantic description is obviously very compelling. So my question is: have you or someone else actually attempted to systematically describe a number of lexical items using Cognitive Grammar analytical tools? If so, what have you found? If not, would that still be on the agenda?

**Ronald W. Langacker:** I regret to say that I am not aware of any serious efforts along these lines. I have thought about undertaking such a project, and would enjoy it, but have too much appreciation for the complexity and immensity of serious lexicographic research to believe I could accomplish very much in the time available. There are of course many partial lexical descriptions in the CG literature (perhaps the most extensive being a treatment of predicates of propositional attitude [Langacker 2009: ch. 10]), but being devised for particular analytical purposes, these are quite selective in what they cover. This literature does at least offer extensive discussion about the nature of lexical meaning.

There is first the recognition that linguistic meaning is not a matter of truth, logic, or objective reality, but a conceptual phenomenon occurring in a cultural, social, and interactive context. Rather than being based on specifically linguistic "primitives", it consists in processing activity and is grounded in social and bodily experience. It thus seems reasonable for attempts at semantic description to look toward basic aspects of cognition (such as activation, entrenchment, priming, simulation, contextual adaptation), general cognitive abilities (like grouping, perspective, categorization, focusing of attention), and conceptual archetypes (e.g. object, event, location, property, force, causation, part/ whole relations).

A number of other basic aspects of lexical meaning are quite explicit in discussions of CG. A central point is that an expression's meaning is not just a matter of the conceptual content invoked, but is crucially dependent how that content is **construed**. Moreover, the content is neither clearly delimited nor specifically linguistic; instead, lexical meanings draw upon an open-ended array of

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non-linguistic knowledge, whose relative salience and accessibility is part of their conventional value. Also, most lexemes are polysemous, comprising a network of semantic variants, some of which are schematic or prototypical relative to others. But rather than being a fixed or rigid structure, this "network" is flexible and dynamic, since a variant's manifestation is always adapted to the linguistic and interactive context. So when examined in fine-grained detail, every use is unique and has some impact on the network's configuration.

Even in a limited domain, serious lexicographic description in CG terms would therefore be an open-ended task requiring the combination of conceptual analysis with a corpus based approach.

**Linguíſtica:** Now, a little less theory and a little more informal sociology: this question has to do with the impact of Cognitive Grammar on the field of linguistics as a whole. Now, I haven't done any research on that, but I have this impression that at least some linguists are now less eager to quickly dismiss semantic characterizations of the parts of speech – and, coherently, more sensitive to construal. So, I know this is wildly speculative, but how – and to what extent – do you feel Cognitive Grammar might have contributed to change hegemonic linguistic thought in the last 35 years or so? And, perhaps even more importantly, how do you feel that the assessment of CG's central claims and the evaluation of the framework as a whole have changed over all these years?

**Ronald W. Langacker:** CG has had a substantial impact on the field as a whole if only indirectly, by virtue of figuring prominently in the development of cognitive linguistics, which is steadily growing and gaining influence on a world-wide scale. At least in many places, it is now regarded as a serious (if not a preferred) alternative to generative approaches.

As for CG itself, the generative movement has largely succeeded in ignoring it. That however represents just one segment of the scholarly community concerned with language. A substantial and increasing number of other individuals, in linguistics and other disciplines, find CG to be natural, revelatory, and helpful in their own research. Within cognitive linguistics, basic ideas of CG are, if not fully accepted, at least sufficiently familiar to be mentioned or utilized without the need for extensive explanation or justification. In recent years I have observed that CG terms and notions are being presented with greater accuracy and employed more appropriately than used to be the case.

As for the parts of speech, it is still unusual—but no longer rare—for linguists (especially younger cognitive linguists) to accept my conceptual characterizations as plausible if not well

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established. Usually, though, they are still just ignored, even in cognitive linguistics. The reasons are obvious: that basic categories cannot be semantically defined is a fundamental doctrine, and the very possibility of principled conceptual description is still not generally recognized. So a scholar who accepts the conceptual characterizations runs the risk of not being considered "scientific" or "empirical". I completely disagree. On the one hand I have argued that the standard arguments against conceptual definitions for basic categories rest on false assumptions and are simply invalid (Langacker 2015). On the other hand, I hope to have shown through decades of CG research that conceptual analysis can perfectly well be principled and empirically responsible (Langacker 2016d).

**Linguíſtica:** I have come across a few interesting attempts to apply Cognitive Grammar to second language teaching. As far as I know, you do not take a personal interest in pedagogical grammars. Still, I believe it is worth asking the founder of Cognitive Grammar whether he thinks that the kind of conceptual characterizations provided by the framework can help foreign students grasp the meaning and usage of particular constructions. So, do you think Cognitive Grammar has a pegagogical potential? (If so, did you consider that potential when you were in the process of building the foundations of the theory?)

**Ronald W. Langacker:** I have always considered the potential for practical applications to be a source of validation for the framework, and have been interested from the outset in how it might apply to language pedagogy. Unfortunately I have virtually no experience in language teaching. But since I do have some appreciation of how hard it is and the problems involved, I have offered only very general comments (Langacker 2008a, 2008b), leaving serious investigation to those with appropriate expertise.

You have pointed to the most obvious way of applying CG: "the kind of conceptual characterizations provided by the framework can help foreign students grasp the meaning and usage of particular constructions". There are endless possibilities for achieving this, and numerous people have attempted it, generally with some success. If CG helps in that respect, this itself can be a substantial contribution to language teaching. A broader question is whether an entire program of language instruction can be based on descriptions inspired by CG or cognitive linguistics more generally. While I can certainly envisage it, a curriculum along these lines is not a realistic goal in the foreseeable future, if only due to the sheer number of constructions that would have to be described even in a basic course. One might however anticipate that cognitive linguistic notions and descriptions will gradually permeate language pedagogy over the course of many years.

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**Linguíſtica:** Finally, I believe everyone is eager to know what you have been working on recently and, most importantly, what you think the next steps are for CG as a theory of grammar. What is still missing? Which theoretical challenges would you be willing to take up in the near future?

**Ronald W. Langacker:** In the early years (Langacker 1987, 1991), CG research was aimed at a unified account of lexicon, morphology, and syntax. More recently (with Langacker 2008c marking the transition), the emphasis has shifted to achieving a unified account of structure, processing, and discourse (Langacker 2016b, 2016c, To appear). Obviously, the objective of a truly comprehensive account along these lines is far too ambitious to be realistic. Still, the broad outlines of a basic synthesis have gradually been emerging.

What I would ideally like to do and what I can realistically hope to do are of course very different matters. In terms of core areas, I would ideally like to work toward systematic treatments of phonology and lexical semantics. Ideally, I would make sustained efforts in all the following areas (to name just some): gesture, acquisition, sociolinguistics, neurolinguistics, language change, grammaticization, typology and universals, and the description of myriad other languages. But realistically, I know that not all of this is going to happen.

Instead, I expect to continue developing the descriptive and theoretical basis of CG by working in areas which have thus far been central to my research. Every topic I have examined deserves to be analyzed in much greater depth and breadth than before. One particular objective is a more systematic presentation of the conceptual foundations of semantic structure. I also want to explore the great diversity of constructions, as well as the dynamic nature of assemblies; these can be accessed in different ways, affording a unified treatment of seemingly very different phenomena. Whatever the specific topic, unification will remain a basic goal.

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