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Language Across Cultures. An Introductory Series.

This series brings together authoritative, user-friendly accounts of various cross-disciplinary approaches to language across cultures. The practical guides that compose the series offer a pluralistic perspective on language and communication, rather than an in-depth analysis of specific issues or a collection of critical studies. They are meant to provide comprehensive, clear and accessible explanations of terms and concepts, as well as evaluations of a range of theoretical approaches. The series offers a well-rounded understanding of language as a social semiotic from a cross-disciplinary standpoint. It identifies the place of linguistic signs and linguistic communication within the broader domains of semiotics and communication in general. The target audience includes students taking introductory courses in disciplines dealing with communication, language and cultural studies, and issues of representation. The guides aim at familiarizing readers with a wide range of semantic and linguistic phenomena in preparation for more detailed study of a particular area, or as a background for other studies. In fact, these guides can be used as both reference works and textbooks. Emphasis is on practical application, with generous examples, selected readings and ideas for research. Advanced semiotic and linguistic concepts are presented in a basic, straightforward format. Each guide also contains an up-to-date resource bibliography, activities and suggestions for further reading.

Francesca Trusso
University of Rome "La Sapienza", February 2005

Marcel Danesi

The conceptual basis of syntax

AN INTRODUCTION
TO COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS



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Preface

What is a sentence? Is it a simple series of words put together in “formulaic” ways that reflect modalities of style and common usage? Or is it a unique phenomenon of language that reflects something fundamental about the human mind? The purpose of this book is to examine such questions from the standpoint of a relatively recent scientific approach to language known as *Cognitive Linguistics* (CL). CL emerged in the late 1970s as a strong challenge to the glib claim of generative linguists that the “deep structure” of language consisted of a small set of innate rule-making principles that manifest themselves in the grammars of particular languages and, thus, that the primary goal of linguistics was the study of those principles and their documentation in the grammars of the world’s languages. The counter-claim made by CL was, and continues to be, that grammar is a product of history and, thus, of human experience. The rules that generativists claim are part of the brain’s innate language faculty are really no more than artefacts of the linguists themselves, describing the end result of a more fundamental construction process. Those rules are the equivalent of the rules of harmony that musicologists have devised to describe the outer shell of musical form. But they tell us nothing about the underlying psychological forces that brought musical form into existence in the first place. Similarly, the rules linguists create describe the outer shell of language, but they tell us nothing about the experiential and emotional forces that brought grammar into existence.

This book is envisaged, above all else, as an introduction to CL. It is based on my own teaching experiences at the University of Toronto where, as an instructor of courses in anthropological linguistics, I have been preparing handouts on CL theory and method for over a decade, tailoring them to meet the backgrounds

and needs of students. This textbook constitutes a reworking of those materials into a systematic treatment. My objective is to show that language is much more than a system of rules devised by linguists, but rather, that it is a creative instrument that emerged in the human species as a means for expressing and encoding sensory and emotional experiences. It has been designed specifically for use by students taking introductory courses in linguistics. However, I believe that those studying cognate disciplines such as psychology, philosophy, semiotics, and anthropology will also find it useful. I have written it so that a broad audience can appreciate the fascinating work going on in CL, most of which has become, and continues to become, very technical for general consumption. Since the focus of this book is practical, I have kept the use of the normal critical apparatus of references to the technical literature to a minimum.

There are five chapters in this book. The first deals with the basic notions and techniques of linguistic analysis. The second looks at the overall model that CL makes available for studying language. The third looks at the relation between concepts and syntax. The fourth deals with the extension of language into the social order, claiming that culture and language are two sides of the same cognitive coin. And the fifth and final chapter constitutes an overview of the CL approach to the study of syntax and of its implications for the general study of language. I have also provided exercises and questions for discussion at the back, so that the book can be used as a text with pedagogical applications. A general bibliography is included.

The underlying premise that guides most of the work in CL is the idea that language structures reflect experiential–conceptual structures. This is not a discovery of CL, of course. One of the first in–depth articulations of this very premise can be found in a landmark treatise of 1725, *The New Science* (Bergin and Fisch 1984), written by the great Neapolitan philosopher Giambattista Vico (1688–1744). Vico maintained that we come to understand the world through the most imaginative of all linguistic products — *metaphor*. As remarkable as that insight was, it is really only today that

metaphor has finally started to attract the attention of a broad spectrum of psychologists and linguists. Serious scientific interest in metaphor can, in fact, be traced only as far back as the mid-1950s, when a group of psychologists and linguists started to conduct extensive research on the various manifestations of metaphor in language and discourse. Since then, however, the amount of research on metaphor, and figurative language generally, has reached mind-boggling proportions. For this reason, I have had to be highly selective in this book, in order to keep it to a manageable length. The knowledgeable reader will, thus, find various gaps in my treatment, from missing authors to missing data and theoretical notions. In a single volume, it is simply impossible to be comprehensive and overarching. Nevertheless, I have attempted to cast as wide a net as possible within the confines of a general introductory treatment.

Various parts of this text are based on previously-published material found in two of my books that came out in 2004: *A Basic Course in Anthropological Linguistics* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2004) and *Poetic Logic: The Role of Metaphor in Thought, Language, and Culture* (Madison, WI: Atwood Publishing, 2004). I am grateful to both Canadian Scholars' Press and Atwood Publishing for allowing me to use the material in a new format for a different purpose and for a different type of readership.

I wish to thank the many students I have taught over three and a half decades at the University of Toronto. Their enthusiasm has made my job simply wonderful. I am also thankful to Professor Francesca Trusso of the University of Rome for having made it possible to share my ideas on language with a larger audience, by inviting me to write them in book form for her prestigious coedition series published by Aracne Editrice in Rome and Legas Publishers in Ottawa. Finally, I really must thank my family for all the forbearance and tolerance they have had with me over the years. I dedicate this book to them: Alexander, Sarah, Danila, Chris, Lucy, and Danilo.

Marcel Danesi
University of Toronto, 2005

Chapter I

Linguistic Analysis

Introductory Remarks

When we put words together to express some thought or to convey some piece of information, we are doing something that is truly remarkable. We are using *syntax* to model the world. Syntax is, in essence, the study of how word combination allows us to express and encode thoughts and information. Each word taken in isolation can, of course, be studied on its own from several perspectives — in terms of the pronunciation patterns it manifests, in terms of the specific meanings it encompasses, and so on. In fact, a large portion of linguistic analysis has been, and continues to be, devoted to the study of words in isolation. Words are “mental models” that allow us to refer to the world directly and, thus, to categorize it *conceptually* in various ways. But the power of language as a connecting link between the human mind and reality does not lie just in its classificatory functions, but also (and especially) in the ways in which it allows us to model how the things of reality are interconnected to each other. Sentences are, in effect, miniature “theories” of the world which, like scientific theories (themselves dependent on linguistic syntax), attempt to model this “interconnectedness”.

As an example of the modeling function of syntax, consider a sentence such as *The boy is eating a slice of pizza*. The remarkable feature of this simple construction is the fact that it models in the order of its words the unfolding of an event in the real world. It does so in terms of an agent (*the boy*) who perpetrates an action

(*is eating*) on something (*a slice of pizza*). The order of the words in the sentence and the order of the constituents of the event in spatiotemporal terms are, clearly, “simulacra” of each other. Although the story of syntax as a modeling device is not as straightforward as this simple example makes it out to be, it nevertheless captures the spirit of inquiry that characterizes *Cognitive Linguistics* (CL) today. In a phrase, CL aims to study how linguistic structure models or simulates conceptual structure.

CL is a throwback to the ancient study of language as a manifestation of thought or *logos*. This is why in antiquity the study of language was considered to fall within the purview of philosophy. The ancient philosophers came up with a useful nomenclature for referring to the constituents of sentences — the agent was named *subject*, the action perpetrated by the agent was called the *verb*, and the receiver of the action was named the *object*. It is interesting to note that we continue to use these terms to this day unaltered in meaning. All other forms were then classified with reference to these basic categories. Nouns, for example, were defined as words that could be utilized as both subjects and objects. Until the eighteenth century, the study of language continued to be considered primarily as a task of philosophers. In 1786, however, the respected and highly influential English scholar Sir William Jones (1746–1794) suggested that there was another way to look at the phenomenon of language. Jones showed that by comparing individual languages one could establish evolutionary links among them and, thus, come to a better understanding of how languages originated in the human species. Shortly thereafter, the systematic study of language families started in earnest leading, in the subsequent nineteenth century, to the emergence of *linguistics* as a science, separate from its traditional collocation within philosophy. As linguistics blossomed into a fully-fledged science in the 1930s and 1940s, its practitioners started developing sophisticated methods for describing vocal sounds and for explaining how they coalesced structurally in the composition of words and phrases. The “end goal” of the linguists, however, was not unlike that of the ancient philosophers. Known as *structuralists*, they ultimately

sought to understand how linguistic structure influenced or mirrored human cognitive structure. Then, in 1957, this *forma mentis* of structural linguists was assailed dramatically by the American linguist Noam Chomsky, who claimed that the relation between language and cognition was not only an impossible one to study formally but that, in any case, it was a moot one, since the real goal of linguistics should be the study of the rules that underlie linguistic structure as psychological realities in and of themselves. His approach to the study of language came to be called *generative grammar* — an approach that caught on instantly with many linguists, influencing the development of linguistic theory to this day. It was in the late 1970s that CL emerged as a viable alternative to the generative paradigm, rekindling interest in the relation between linguistic and conceptual structure that had been virtually annihilated by the generative movement.

Before dealing with the main notions and methods developed by CL, it is useful to take a look at the study of language from a broader historical perspective. That is the purpose of this chapter, which will set the stage for a more detailed discussion of the intrinsic relation between language and cognition in subsequent chapters.

The Scientific Study of Language

The first attempt in history to describe a language scientifically can be traced to the fifth century BC, when the Indian scholar Panini compiled a grammar of the Sanskrit language based on an analysis of the elements that went into the constitution of words. For several centuries after, very little was written on language in any part of the world until the Greek scholar Dionysius Thrax, who lived between 170 and 90 BC, wrote a comprehensive grammar of Greek, that has remained a basic model to this day, showing how the parts of speech relate to each other in the formation of sentences.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the first surveys of the then-known languages were attempted in order to determine