Linguistic Approaches to Literature
17

Foreword

Ronald W. Langacker

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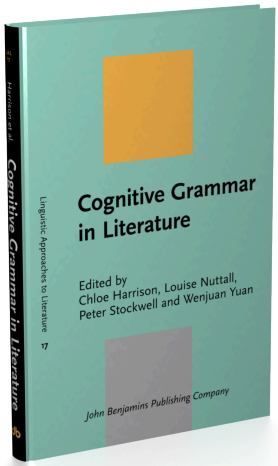

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Foreword

Ronald W. Langacker

A not uncommon criticism of Cognitive Grammar (CG) is that it lacks empirical support. It is an assessment that I strongly disagree with. Highly constrained in the kinds of structures it permits, CG has nonetheless been applied successfully to a wide array of phenomena in diverse languages, straightforwardly handling classic descriptive problems in a unified manner with reasonable claims to cognitive plausibility. It deploys a broad yet limited set of descriptive notions, each supported on a number of independent grounds. In being developed and justified primarily based on considerations of this kind, CG is like most any linguistic theory.

It goes without saying that other, more external sources of empirical validation are both welcome and (at least in the long term) necessary. There are numerous possibilities: psycholinguistic experiment, corpus investigation, neural imaging, computer modeling, acquisition studies, and practical applications (like language teaching). These are important and revealing, but while they all have their place, they also have their limitations. Certainly there is room in this arsenal for the application of CG notions to the study of literature. Does this enterprise count as 'empirical'? Perhaps not in the narrowest sense, but I believe it qualifies in a broader sense appropriate for language. Success in generating useful insights on the part of literary analysts can be taken as a significant source of validation.

The enterprise is daunting, for both me and those engaged in it. In my case it reflects the absence of any real expertise, with the consequence that applying CG to literature has never been central to my thought or method. However, I have always recognized its potential and applauded the fact that, in the broader movement of cognitive linguistics, literature has been a major concern for many scholars. To non-linguists, the enterprise is daunting for several reasons: the multiplicity of approaches even in cognitive linguistics, the complexity of their technical formulations, the often confusing and inconsistent terminology, and the sheer difficulty of applying even clearly formulated ideas to specific cases. The results are bound to be imperfect; but even imperfect efforts advance our understanding.

Especially compared to formalist approaches, cognitive linguistics has definite advantages for analyzing literature. Most obviously, it accords a central role to meaning, offering a well-developed conceptual semantics that bears directly on phenomena crucial for analyzing literary texts. The speaker (or writer) is seen as actively engaging in an elaborate process of meaning construction. An inherent

aspect of this process is construal, our multifaceted capacity for conceiving and portraying the same situation in alternate ways. Even for prosaic language, the meanings constructed are richly imaginative, with metaphor, metonymy, fictivity, and mental space configurations being both pervasive and fundamental. A key point (often missed) is that conception, instead of being insular, is a primary means of interacting with the world, including other minds. Based on our ability to simulate the experience of other conceptualizers, each with their own perspective, speaking (or writing) is an intersubjective process aimed at negotiating a shared contextual awareness.

The cognitive linguistic view of meaning implies that ordinary and literary language forms are continuous rather than dichotomous. Other notions, more specific to CG, are also relevant for literary scholars. At least in principle (practice, of course, is another matter) the framework is fully comprehensive, dealing in a unified manner with any aspect of language structure. In particular, it provides a unified account of lexicon and grammar, which form a gradation consisting solely in assemblies of symbolic structures (form-meaning pairings). Hence the central claim that grammar is inherently meaningful: by using a certain grammatical element one is always imposing a certain construal. Also, since conception is taken as encompassing anything we experience, and sounds are apprehended and mentally represented, phonological structure is included in conceptual structure. An expression's phonological shape is therefore a facet of its overall meaning. One consequence is that there are no true synonyms. Another is that CG-based analyses extend in seamless fashion even to the phonological aspects of poetry.

While I do not feel qualified to judge them from the purely literary standpoint, I have enjoyed and profited from the papers in this volume. I have been particularly impressed by how inventive the authors have been in finding ways of applying cognitive linguistic notions, some of which I would never have thought of myself. Despite their number and variety, I have been convinced that these applications are only scratching the surface of what is possible.

I can only agree with the comment by Pincombe that there are limits to what CG can offer literature. And he is certainly correct that typical CG diagrams, when worked out in careful detail, are too complex and cumbersome for large-scale practical use. I might note that such diagrams are merely heuristic, not formal representations, and not the only way CG descriptions might be presented. In any case they reflect (and even vastly underestimate) the actual complexity of the phenomena; as in any field, methods will have to be found for analysis on a larger scale. But in the foreseeable future, any description based on CG notions will have to be highly selective, like those in this volume. I also agree with Stockwell that the extensive CG application to literature will require and inspire significant elaboration of the framework. It is something I look forward to.