

Remarks on [J. Ross on [G. Lakoff on
Cognitive Grammar [and Metaphors]]]]⁰

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In preparing these remarks I will have reference to the published versions of Cognitive Grammar, to wit Lakoff and Thompson (1975a) and Lakoff and Thompson (1975b). There have been no further works explicitly using either the name 'Cognitive Grammar' or the analytical schema proposed in these works. This is not exactly a vast literature; Cognitive Grammar (hereinafter CG) cannot lay claim to the "battalions¹ of people coming after me who are going to work out all the details" that many theories depend on. As Ross's presentation makes clear, CG proper is only a steppingstone in a history of theoretical research which proceeds through 'Linguistic Gestalts' (Lakoff 1977), on which I will have nothing to say, to 'Unmetaphoring'² (Lakoff and Johnson 1979), which I will touch on in the second portion of these remarks. Interspersed here and there throughout will be remarks bearing on the purpose, conduct, and interpretation of the Conference^a which formed the context for their composition.

I. Cognitive Grammar

Since we have been charged to pay attention to similarities and differences among theories, I will begin by discussing several attractive differences that distinguish CG from other theories of grammar (to be more precise, they distinguish it from other theories that have as a historical and epistemological basis Transformational-Generative grammar).

First, to my knowledge, CG is the only grammatical theory represented at this conference which overtly and shamelessly takes the listener's point of view to be paramount. While this perspective on communication is not exactly ignored by others, I think it is fair to say that the problems of a listener understanding an utterance do not come in for their full share of concern outside CG. Of course, to the extent that CG or any other theory exalts one perspective, it errs in treating others; however, it is an open question (at least to me) whether the job of understanding utterances should involve the same mechanisms as the job of producing them, and CG at least offers (more exactly, offered) the prospect of fair and satisfying treatment of this perspective.

Second, a unique aspect of CG (again, unique only among theories derived historically from T-G grammar) is its introduction of real time into grammatical theory. This is a welcome and immediate result of its attention to the perspective of the listener. While it is obvious to the point of presupposition that people produce and understand utterances in real time, and that some, at least, of the processing necessary to understanding is complete before the utterance is complete, it is still true that syntacticians have persisted in treating sentences and other chunks of speech as objects without temporal extension, and in erecting theories which presuppose simultaneous perception of the object as the norm.³ CG happily avoided this counterfactual pitfall. If, as many believe, some of the kinky aspects of syntax and semantics are necessitated by the ways in which people habitually process linguistic material cognitively, then it seems axiomatic that these methods (and I believe CG's initial attempts at delineating these methods fall far short of their complexity and diversity) are legitimate concerns for syntacticians and deserve representation in their theories. The nature of such representation is, of course, very controversial, and it is unlikely that the representations used by CG, being first approximations, are appropriate or even very useful. Still, they're better than nothing.

Third, CG emphasized guesses, that is, tentative ideas about what the meaning and function of individual forms are. This is also a result of the temporal nature of the theory and its attention to the listener. These guesses were to be verified or corrected as more information was presented to the listener in the utterance, so that at the point when the sentence was complete, the listener would have formed a series of approximations which converged to a value.⁴ This is in contrast to other theories which attempt to state algorithms for processing the entire utterance once it has been perceived simultaneously, an unreal task since it depends on an unreal assumption.

The importance of such corrections in understanding cannot be overestimated. Understanding a sentence is learning what it means, and if we know anything about learning, it is that it cannot take place without mistakes. The addition of this dimension to grammatical theory has a fine humanizing effect, and has many implications.⁵

Fourth, I approve strongly of an idea that is presumed, but not developed much in CG, that of parallel processing, that is, the presumption that language processing goes on simultaneously with other (similar or identical) cognitive processes, and is not insulated from them; rather, language processing is interactive with potentially any other cognitive process. This idea is developed further in later work by Lakoff, most notably in his work with metaphors. In addition, this view does not see language processing as anything like the linear phenomenon that a 1965-style grammar⁶ (which is, after all, based on the structure of a 1965-style computer) would have us believe. This explicitly reopens⁷ the question of the autonomy of language competence as distinct from other human (or perhaps primate, or mammalian) cognitive processes.

All of these attractive differences that CG displays come from a realistic (and optimistic) assessment of what it takes to understand language. There are many presuppositions that more traditionally-based theories find unpalatable; but many of the more restrictive presuppositions of these theories are dispensed with as being counterfactual. In a situation like this, the arguments for or against a theory resolve down to what assumptions a linguist is willing to make, and which ones s/he is interested in testing. This is a personal dimension, and tastes differ, as do goals, interests,⁸ and understandings of the task of the linguist and the scientist. I personally found much of value in CG, and even went so far as to mention it favorably in print at one time.⁹ Others may differ.

While it is true that disputes in terms of tastes are not often resolvable logically, there is still something to be said against CG. These are also complaints that can be levelled against virtually all other syntactic theories, as well. First, the level and style of formalism in the published versions of CG is ludicrous. It is the worst type of linguistic formalism mutated by contact with the formalisms and practice of Artificial Intelligence; it is virtually impossible to follow the formalisms without a rudimentary computer. It may well be that linguistics will soon be a field in which no linguist is complete without a computer, but that time is not yet. In the meantime, clarity and a certain amount of grace in formalisms is still necessary.

Second, CG is not anywhere near elaborated enough (and it is difficult to see how it could be elaborated) to distinguish between prototype utterances and deviations from them, nor to take account of conventional deviations and their import. This is in principle what it is intended to do, but it is done much better in later work.

Third, a complaint that could be made (and has been made before by others) is that CG represents such a small body of work and requires such prodigious reworking of the assumptions of linguistic research that it is not attractive. I agree with this analysis, as (apparently) do the initial proposers, who have gone on to other things. Viewed without this social and historical commentary, however, CG in its own right represents a brave and worthy attempt to formulate a reasonable and usable theory of language perception, which was perhaps doomed to relative obscurity for irrelevant reasons. Its representation at this conference (albeit in the highly irregular form taken by Ross's presentation and these remarks) perhaps has some significance; it may be that this was the closest approach to a purely syntactic theory that can be made using the reasonable assumptions built into CG and its successors.

Which brings me to the second part of these remarks,

II. Metaphors

which represents the present terminus of the research that spawned CG. I would like to say a few words about metaphor, but there seems to be no such thing as a few words about metaphor. At the level of abstraction on which this conference is organized, a more useful process would be to employ a metaphor instead. I request the reader to take as a framing device for the remainder of these remarks the image that has been often mentioned, sometimes used, but rarely, I think, thought about seriously: that theories of syntax (and indeed of linguistics and communication generally), often called meta-theories or metalanguages (hyphens optional), are in fact languages.

And we are linguists. Now linguists are supposed to know what to do with languages; they have ideas about language and languages, they observe languages, think about them, play with them, and come up with interesting things to say about them. We love languages; no other description of the relationship between linguists and languages makes sense. A great deal of this is evident in this conference, and that is comforting. However, as Ross has mentioned, it is extremely important not to see this conference as a metalanguage tournament, with a prize for the most 'convincing' theory. We would be aghast if someone (surely not a linguist) were to hold a conference whose purpose ^{was} to pick the best natural language. This last image is valid, of course, only to the extent we are willing to accept the trope of metalanguages as languages, and then to apply our experience and common beliefs about languages to metalanguages.

The remainder of these remarks will be devoted to exploring the image of metalanguages as languages, projecting the unfamiliar on the familiar, which is what we do when we utilize metaphors. I rely, as usual, on the reader's willing suspension of disbelief, which I hope to be able to shore up somewhat by the end.

What can be said about CG, or about any metalanguage, if it is viewed as a language? First of all, CG is a dead metalanguage; perhaps 'stillborn' is a better term. The people who 'spoke' it once, using speak in a projectively analogous fashion, now speak other languages, and it does not look like the Miracle of Modern Hebrew will be repeated for CG. There are numerous dead metalanguages; the mortality rate is exceedingly high.

We have all learned metalanguages in our linguistic training; I am a native speaker of American Structuralism, for example, and I speak a fluent Generative Semantics. ¹¹ Actually, this is an overstatement, since I am a native speaker of English, and therefore my native metalanguage is English metalanguage, that is, the ways in which English speakers talk about talking and meaning. If you are not disposed to consider this as a metalanguage within the meaning of the speech act, I can recommend Michael J. Reddy's recent paper (Reddy 1979) in which, through careful study of vocabulary, idioms, collocations, construction types, etc., he shows that there is a consistent and pervasive metaphorical structure that serves as the underlying conceptual image for the vast majority (his count is between 75 and 80 percent) of English metalinguistic utterance types. He calls this structuring principle the 'conduit metaphor'. Briefly put, it goes like this:

- a) meaning is physical (sometimes a mass noun, sometimes count)
- b) linguistic expressions are containers for meaning(s)
- c) communication consists in transferring meaning-full expressions from the producer to the receiver, who unloads them and thereby understands. Hence the 'conduit' metaphor.

Such tropes as: I didn't get much out of that lecture, He sure packs a lot of meaning into a few words, It's hard to put into words, His words carry little meaning, etc., illustrate the metaphor nicely. This, then, is a native metalanguage for most of us (and similar things can be said about European languages, at least); being native, it is unconscious, at least most of the time, and, like most 'innate' theories, it is objectively false (as one might expect from a theory invented by a three-year-old¹²). The problem is that, false or not, it is firmly and

thoroughly embedded in our language competence(s); it is not an articulated theory, but a subliminal one, on a par with the debunkable notions about natural languages that structure so much of Introductory Linguistics courses, such as the natural superiority of one's own language, the existence of 'correct' speech, the identification of speech with writing, etc.

The metalanguages we have learned in our linguistic training are then second languages, and you all know how difficult it is to learn a second language fluently. It's a wonder we can do it at all, and it's no wonder it's confusing. This is the second point to note about the metalanguage-as-language metaphor: that metalanguages can be learned, but with difficulty, and imperfectly in most cases.

The third thing to note is that, even when we have succeeded in gaining communicative competence in a metalanguage, it changes so fast we have trouble keeping up. Metalanguage change is orders of magnitude faster than natural language change. Moreover, foreigners with funny metalanguages keep showing up and talking to us, and it's all we can do to understand them, especially when they insist (as they sometimes do) that they are speaking the correct version of our own metalanguage. A common reaction to this is what we might call prescriptive metalinguistics, in which one metalinguist tries to tell all the other metalanguage speakers how they should talk (so s/he can understand them, or, more likely, vice versa). Linguists are trained to abhor (quite rightly) prescriptive linguistics; it is odd that we do not likewise abhor prescriptive metalinguistics. The best reason for such an attitude is the same reason why prescriptive linguistics is avoided: it doesn't work. There is no possible way in which a prescriptive attitude towards natural language use can have any effect on the natural course of the history of the language (except for a few suggestible people in English classes here and there); it is an elitist premise based on unacceptable assumptions and it is ineffectual and has only negative results. Similarly, I think it is clear that no one metalanguage, however brilliant, is going to convince everyone; and attempts to judge such metalanguages independent of the purposes for which they were conceived, and to enjoin them as the 'Standard', are naive exercises in pointless arrogance. To illustrate this claim, one need only point to the result of purported proofs that one metalanguage is a 'notational variant' of another. Such proofs are rarely accepted at face value, of course, but even if they are accepted, they never result in a mass

conversion from one theory to another, though that is generally the attitude recommended by the proposer.¹⁴ The true significance of such a proof, if valid, would be almost irrelevant to our use of metalanguage to think and talk about language, just as the results of Gödel have had no effect on our use of numbers to cope with daily life.¹⁵ There is a vast difference between (as Lakoff and Johnson 1979 puts it) 'ideas we live by and ideas that we rationally believe and can, when the need arises, think in terms of'. Such a difference is not unbridgeable, but it cannot be done by fiat; we don't work that way. We think with these metalanguages, we talk with them, we communicate with them; and we are invested in them.

The genesis of the view which I have been calling prescriptive metalinguistics is apparently the same as the genesis of prescriptive linguistics: students must be taught grammar, and most of us are teachers. Similarly, people have to learn languages, and have always had to do so. In either case, mistakes are inevitable, and there must be some relatively consistent standard, however arbitrary, of correctness. We are thus led to another extension of the metaphor: the idea of applied metalinguistics, or what should we tell our students? This is a serious question with no easy answers (like applied linguistics). Numerous speculations can be delivered on the topic, but time and space forbid my considering them here.

I will also mention in passing the realms of historical metalinguistics and comparative metalinguistics, that is, the tracing of one school of grammar from its inception, sources, and influences through its schisms to its daughter metalanguages, which we all know about (and which probably represents what we are using to keep track of what is going on at this conference).

In addition, there is the study of sociometalinguistics; or, the languages of higher- and lower-status linguists, of in-groups and out-groups, of metalanguages meant to clarify and of metalanguages meant to confuse, and of the understandable attempts of people who speak relatively low-status metalanguages to either promote their own dialect to a more prestigious station or to learn to talk like the upper classes. As with natural languages, most of the promotion attempts come to nothing in the short run,¹⁶ and the language-learning attempts produce an anxious diglossia at best.

Metalinguistic typology and metalinguistic universals are also potential fields of interest; in fact, they are the ideas underlying

this conference. There is an optimistic belief (to which I subscribe) to the effect that statements about language made by one reasonable human being to another are not ipso facto incomprehensible. To make the task of translating this idealistic belief into practice easier, we are trying to discover the similarities and differences (a familiar phrase) among the various metalanguages so as to be able to generalize about the structure of metalanguage. Some things can already be said about this, though the results are far from all in. For example, it is apparent that virtually all 'scientifically'-based metalanguages are far more like pidgins than like full-grown natural languages. It may be that there are scattered cases of creolization, but I know of none. It makes sense, though, for linguists to have (and need) such languages for trade and contact (if not conquest). We should not expect too much of such metalanguages, though their structures can often yield invaluable insights into the nature of communication. Some typological analyses are possible, for example, by means of categorizing the structures of metalanguages in terms of their principal metaphors, as Reddy did for English. (Cf. Lawler 1979 for such a categorization.)

As I mentioned, our purpose here is to (begin to) come to understand metalanguages as we use them. Our methodology leads to a final extension of the initial metaphor: we are doing field methods on metalanguages. We have invited a number of speakers of more or less funny metalanguages, some classical, some vulgar, some related, some not, some prestigious, some established, some isolates, and the task set for us is to make sense of it all. Every once in a while one of us will come up with a typical field-methods question: 'How do you say _____ in _____?'. But it's going to take a lot of work to do with metalanguages what we've learned to do with natural languages, and there are several things we must do if we are to succeed:

- 1) we must not accede to the temptation to be prescriptive, and insist that everyone speak our favorite metalanguage;
- 2) we must (as Ross pointed out) listen as if our lives depended on it, just as we do in a field methods class; just as we do in the field. This is the field. We must make use of any understanding we can construct to grasp the meaning of a metatheory in a context.
- 3) there is often a wide, somewhat schizophrenic gap between what linguists say they do, or should do (or more often, what others should do), which we call theory, and what they actually do, which, when we

call it anything, we call practice. In a word, we need practice. Lots of it; and patience, and faith, and a high tolerance for mistakes and misunderstandings. A sense of humor couldn't hurt. And most importantly, respect for one another as fellow humans, fellow language users, fellow language lovers, fellow scientists, is indispensable.

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NOTES:

- ⁰ A title as convoluted and perverse as this deserves some explanation. These remarks were originally composed at the conference^a, due to the same circumstances which necessitated Ross's delivering the plenary address on CG, namely, the fact of George Lakoff's illness. Ross had originally been the designated commentor for CG. By virtue of the Relational Succession Law, he was promoted to proposer and I was promoted from an oblique role of innocent bystander to that of commentor. Since my remarks dealt with both the written versions of CG and the (largely extemporaneous) presentation of Ross, it is necessary to separate the levels of text somewhat, and I have chosen to represent this in the title. The present work is a minimally embellished version of what I said at the conference. I am grateful to Jessica Wirth for providing me with a tape of my speech, so that I could hear what I actually said, instead of what I thought I did. I am also grateful for the opportunity to make this presentation in the context of the conference.
- ¹ The words are David Antin's, discussing the generative account of semantics. I am grateful to Haj Ross for introducing me to them; unfortunately, I do not have a bibliographical citation for them, nor even know whether such exists.
- ² This term is Ross's, and is not used as such in Lakoff and Johnson (1979).
- ³ See Lawler (1979) for an extended discussion of the dangers of this view.
- ⁴ This notion of a time series converging on a meaning is a useful tool for investigating semantics under the assumption (see below) that meaning is not transmitted but constructed. It may be that some of the results from mathematics may be intuitively valuable here; for example, some series alternate between two limits, others diverge altogether, and some converge so slowly that it takes a large number of terms to approach the limit significantly. These may correspond to our intuitive notions of ambiguity, nonsense, and vagueness, respectively.
- ⁵ For example, a well-developed theory of Cognitive Grammar would lend itself to applied linguistics in the form of language teaching much better than any other linguistic theory, since mistakes and their avoidance are the core of language learning.
- ⁶ As we are all aware, the advances in hardware and software in computer science in the past 15 years have been phenomenal. Most of our linguistic theories, however, are based on theories of computer science long since outmoded and largely abandoned. In consequence, linguistic theory has not had the effect it should have had on (say) Artificial

Intelligence research, and has a distinct old-fashioned flavor when compared to such endeavors. We appear not to have kept up with the field we borrowed from.

- ⁷I have in mind here two separate counterfactual claims often assumed in linguistics: (1) the idea that there is such a thing as 'competence in English' (or any other language) which is predicable equally of any speaker of the language, and has the same nature in each case; and (2) the idea that such competence (sharable or not) represents a unique and independent cognitive capacity, a 'mental organ' which is not (strong form) related to or (weak form) interactive with other human cognitive capacities. I can see no reason for holding either of these beliefs, though they make splendidly testable null hypotheses. The problem seems to be that they have been disproved but not abandoned.
- ⁸These form, of course, the context for the evaluation of scientific theories. If we are under the illusion that there is only one understanding of this context, we are doomed to misunderstand our fellows and be misunderstood in return. A more reasonable and realistic interpretation is that there are many possible contexts, as many as there are linguists (in fact many more), and therefore an 'evaluation metric' is even more mythical than a unicorn (we can at least describe what a unicorn looks like).
- ⁹Also in 1975. Cf. Lawler (1975a, 1975b, 1975c).
- ¹⁰At least in the sense that, if I were a graduate student again, CG would not be my first choice of a theory to embrace. If a theory cannot reproduce by ensnaring followers, it dies, like a god does when the last worshipper dies, or (more relevantly) like a language does when its last speaker dies.
- ¹¹Since both of these are effectively dead metalanguages, that makes me a metaphilologist, I suppose. Probably any linguist as old as I am is in the same boat, given the rapidity of change in theories.
- ¹²Such false but pervasive theories (or metaphors) always have unpleasant implications. Under the interpretation presented by the conduit metaphor, for example, if you don't understand something, it must be the fault of the person who said it, since s/he didn't put enough meaning into it for you to take out. Such attitudes do not usually lead to profitable communication (or metacommunication).
- ¹³Or pointless exercises in naive arrogance.
- ¹⁴Such as the claim that 'Your theory is a notational variant of mine, and it's wrong'. Cf Whistler et al, unpublished at this conference.
- ¹⁵For a good example of some ways in which Gödel's results are applicable to more than numbers, see Hofstadter (1979). While some basic facts are not mentioned in this work, such as the indispensably basic role of sound in the form of phonetics and phonology (Hofstadter treats language and mathematics exclusively in typographical form) in understanding human thought and language, it is a brilliant summation and an exciting springboard for further thought.
- ¹⁶In the long run we're all dead, and hence incapable of enjoying the putative benefits of 'high' status anyway. Still, in the long run such attempts tend to lead in natural language to borrowing, 'decreolization', and dialect merger if the cultures are amenable; if not,

it generally leads to disintegration and pointless aggression. One can see similar results in metalanguage contact.

¹⁷George Miller's remark, cited in Ross's presentation, is worth repeating here: "In order to understand what someone says, we must first assume it is true, and then try to figure out what it could be true of."

¹⁸Cf. Gleason (1975) and also his remarks at this conference. I am indebted to Jim McCawley for bringing this to my attention. In addition, I cite here some remarks of McCawley on this trope (personal communication):

"The idea of treating metalanguages as languages probably opens up lots of possibilities that we haven't realized yet. One that I've just thought of is that our informants may occasionally make speech errors. For example, I think there is a fairly common spoonerism that speakers of certain metalanguages make, namely that of interchanging 'grammar of a fragment of English' with 'fragment of a grammar of English'. When we start looking for them, we'll probably find that there are quite a lot of metalinguistic tongue-twisters."

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