Some notes on the concept of cognitive linguistics

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Abstract

In this contribution, I argue that the cognitive sciences are troubled by some internal contradictions that seem to me difficult to resolve. Cognitive linguistics is the part of the cognitive sciences dealing with language, and the philosophy of mind provides its theoretical underpinnings. Its goal is to describe the language system as a mechanism that processes thoughts into utterances and utterances into thoughts. While thoughts involve intentionality, the processing mechanism is thought to operate without our awareness. But what do we actually know about this mechanism? Is there really a language of thought, and how innate and how universal would it be? What do we know about the mind as the locus where cognition is processed? How dependable is the computational model of the mind? Do the various factions of cognitive linguistics offer scientific evidence or just possible models of how the mind, if there is one, might work? In the end, cognitive linguistics cannot account for meaning. We do not have access to our own or anyone else's mental concepts. Meaning and knowledge, on the other hand, is public; it is what is exchanged, negotiated, and shared in the discourse. Whatever cognitive linguists may be able to find out about our mental representations, to the extent that it is effable it can never be more than a duplication of what we find in the discourse.

1. What is meaning?

Many linguists have such a respect for meaning that they are careful to avoid the issue wherever possible. Traditionally, language study has a strong focus on grammar. Grammar is, if one keeps sorting the elements that make up language long enough, a land of apparent law and order, in which every part and parcel finds, in the end, its pigeonhole. The meanings of words, however, behave disorderly. Words are ambiguous and fuzzy. This is why it always has seemed prudent to leave them to the poor cousins of linguists, to the lexicographers. However, whenever the makers of our dictionaries try to make sense of them it is the linguists who habitually criticise them for all the inconsistencies abounding in even the best dictionaries.

For two schools of linguistics, this is picture is true no longer. Corpus linguistics and cognitive linguistics share the fascination for meaning, though not for much else. Yet they look for meaning in different places. For corpus linguists, the meaning of a lexical item can only be studied in real language data, in the texts in which they occur, in the contexts in which they are embedded. Here miraculously all ambiguity and fuzziness seems to fade. If we read a text we rarely have the problem of not knowing what the words are supposed to mean. Only if we look at these strings of alphabetic characters, with a space in front of
them and behind them, in isolation, we start to wonder whether *bank* means 'river edge' or 'financial institution'.

Michael Stubbs' publications have made corpus linguistics popular almost all over the world. *Tout le monde* now uses corpus evidence. By itself, however, working with corpus data does not make one a corpus linguist. More and more linguists, including cognitive linguists, may underpin their investigations with examples discovered in corpora. But corpus linguistics is more. As Mike Stubbs has demonstrated time and again, most convincingly, I believe, in his magisterial *Words and Phrases* (2001), corpus linguistics opens a new perspective on language. It replaces the traditional practice of analysing and categorising linguistic phenomena in the sterile conditions of a post-mortem autopsy, by interpreting these phenomena *in vivo*, in their contexts and with their implicit and explicit links to other discourse events. For this task corpus linguists use corpora, principled samples of the discourse, and computers. They correlate the statistical analysis of lexical correspondences over the corpus to their semantic relevance. Corpus linguistics understands language in terms of open choice and co-selection, as John Sinclair has pointed out repeatedly. The discourse, this entirety of texts that have been and are constantly being exchanged between the members of a discourse community, is a network of intertextual references. Whenever something is said, it is said as a reaction to what has been said in other, previous texts. Only rarely we say something new. Instead, we re-use the phrases and expressions that we find. Now and then we may add our own touch. What a phrase, an expression means is how it has been used and paraphrased in its previous history. Meaning, therefore, is in the discourse. Language has to be viewed as a social phenomenon. That these ideas are now increasingly accepted is largely to the credit of Mike Stubbs. He has been untiring in his efforts to develop a consistent theoretical framework that will let us make sense of the findings the methodology of corpus research is supplying, always sticking to his characteristic lucid, straightforward and unpretentious style that is so typical of this great scholar.

For cognitive linguists, meaning is not in the discourse; rather, it is in people's heads. They view traditional linguists, the philologists for instance, as sitting in a dark cave looking in one direction only, toward the back wall of the cave. Behind them is an open fire providing light, and between the fire and where they are sitting there is a catwalk on which the mental concepts move, casting lexical shadows on the wall. Shadows are all the traditional linguists see. As long as they stay in this position they take the shadowy words for the stuff meaning consists of. If they only turned around, they would be confronted with something more real, with mental concepts or cognitive representations. Regardless whether these things are metaphysical Platonic forms, i.e. what Plato calls *eidos* or *idea*; or whether they are only models of the 'real' things, accepting them in lieu of words would be a step in the right direction, a step taken by cognitive linguists. Once it is taken, they can start working on the last obstacle to truth, the division between brain sciences and mind sciences. Eventually, cognitive linguistics