

**An Interview with Professor Dirk Geeraerts (part 1):
Psychological and Social Cognitive Linguistics;
Construction Grammar and Lexicology;
Cognitive Linguistics and Functional Linguistics**

Fatemeh Shahverdi Shahraki¹

PhD Student of Linguistics, Tarbiat Modares University, Tehran

Jing Du²

PhD Student of Linguistics, Beihang University, Beijing

Dirk Geeraerts is a professor of linguistics at the University of Leuven (KU Leuven), Belgium. His theoretical orientation is mainly that of cognitive linguistics with a special emphasis on empirical methods for linguistic analysis. His involvement in cognitive linguistics dates from the 1980s, when his PhD was one of the first in Europe to explore the possibilities of a prototype-theoretical model of categorization. He is a member of QLVL, a research group at the University of Leuven that focuses on empirical, corpus-linguistic studies of language variation with a specific emphasis on lexical variation. What follows is an interview with Professor Dirk Geeraerts which took place in November 2017, at KU Leuven.

[We entered the room. Dirk Geeraerts was sitting at a wide table. He welcomed us with a smile and let us sit at the table. We thanked him for giving us the time for interview. Here is what we talked about in the interview:]

1) Professor Geeraerts, what are the main subfields of Cognitive Linguistics? Are there any disagreements on the concept of cognition among cognitive linguists?

If you think about it historically, of course, Cognitive Linguistics emerged in

¹ E-mail: fatemeh.shaverdi@yahoo.com

² E-mail: millydu1019@buaa.edu.cn

California, but then was taken up very soon on the European Continent. To some extent, there being a certain distinction between those two groups, if you wish, I think we can also say those distinctions relate to the conception of cognition that plays a role in Cognitive Linguistics. So the Californian fathers of Cognitive Linguistics were primarily debating with Generative Grammar, but to some extent also shared the very psychological perspective of Generative Grammar. On the other hand, the European approach was more oriented towards language as it lived in a speech community rather than just in the mind. As such, the European scholars were also among the first to adopt corpus linguistic methods in Cognitive Linguistics. The theoretically different focus that goes along with this is that on the one hand you have people who take ‘cognitive’ in *Cognitive Linguistics* to mean that you are basically doing some kind of psychological or psycholinguistic research; Cognitive Linguistics is an approach that tries to describe grammar in the way that is in accordance with the way we know about the mind. On the other hand, in our approach we are much interested in variation, to some extent cultural variation, also historical variation, and take the ‘cognitive’ in *Cognitive Linguistics* to mean that you primarily look at language as an instrument for organizing cognition. And cognition can be individual but knowledge can also be socially distributed. So, from that point of view, there is a certain difference of emphasis between cognitive linguists who focus primarily on the psychological aspects of language and cognitive linguists who focus more on the social aspects of language.

2) Would you mind talking more about your understanding of the differences between the psychologically oriented Cognitive Linguistics popular in America represented by Lakoff and the socially oriented Cognitive Linguistics in Europe as proposed by you?

One thing I need to point out is that you should not exaggerate the difference, because clearly if you think of Lakoff’s work on political metaphors, for instance, then he also is interested in the social aspect of language and language use. If you think about people comparing different languages then clearly that is often from a cultural point of view. That is also something you find in both groups, so to speak. So it is not really the case you have a very strong distinction between the two. But given that nuance, what distinguishes them can be looked at from different perspectives. One of course, is the type of evidence that we

would use. I am coming to other aspects in a moment. But if you think about the evidence, one question that sometimes arises is to what extent we can use corpus data to say something about how language is organized in the mind. Then people would note that in the corpus data, the prototypical usage of an expression is different from what you would get if you look at it experimentally. And then the conclusion is sometimes made that you should be careful with using corpus data for what you are trying to find as a cognitive linguist. That step is going too far, however, because there is no reason at all to assume that what you find in the corpus data at aggregated level is directly reflected in the mind of language users. So, there is definitely, in a full model of language, a place for both perspectives. But you should really be careful with the way in which you see the relation between them. So that is one thing, so methodologically, the difference of focus. Given the methodological difference, one question that comes up that we need to think about more is what is the exact value of the different types of evidence that you get? How do they relate to each other? It is not always so easy as people tend to think.

Theoretically, we are still looking for good models to see precisely the relationship between the psychological aspects and the social aspects of language. That can be specifically difficult if you think about meaning (and meaning obviously is crucially essential to Cognitive Linguistics). If you take a psychological point of view, then you might say OK, meaning is in the head. If you take a social point of view, then meaning is not necessarily in the head of language users. Meaning might be something in the practices of a social group or whatever it is. That is a theoretical or even philosophical question about crucial notions in Cognitive Linguistics that people do not think about enough. Even the very definition of ‘meaning’ has not been sorted out entirely in Cognitive Linguistics.

3) A further question is, do you think there is any way to reconcile the tension between the two groups of Cognitive Linguistics? For instance, Langacker used to call for converging evidences.

The notion of converging evidence is interesting as long as it goes well. As long as you have converging evidence, then there is no problem. But what do you do if you have diverging evidence? Then there is no automatic way of solving the problem. If you have diverging evidence, for instance between experimental

data and corpus data, then that should be a starting point to scrutinize the concept that you are using and the methods that you are using. What is it exactly you are measuring? Because apparently it is not the same thing. So at one point, if you notice that what you measure with a psychological experiment is not the same thing as what you measure or observe on the basis of corpus data, then you can ask different questions. One such question would be “OK, maybe my measure is not right at the very specific level? Could there be an error in the measurement?” But there is of course a more general theoretical question, “Are we actually measuring the same thing with the two non-converging methods?” And that would lead to a refinement of the theoretical models that we are using. But to be honest, I do not think that we have enough of that methodologically comparative research yet where you systematically see what you can get with one method and what you can get with another method and how that combines into a theoretical framework. I would say that our thinking about the relationship between method and theory in Cognitive Linguistics is only emerging. It is in its infancy and needs to be developed.

4) Regarding Cognitive Linguistics as a usage-based theory, and that language is considered as dynamic, to what extent can we depend on quantitative corpus research in languages?

If you are particularly interested in the second position that we discussed a moment ago, then you will rely a lot on corpus data. Whereas, if you are more interested in the first position, the more psychological one, you will do more experimental research, like psycholinguists will do. If you do corpus analysis, corpus linguistic work, then there are two main reasons to move towards more quantitative approaches. One is the amount of data that you have, because we usually have very big amounts of corpus data to analyze. It is extremely relevant to do that in a quantitative way, as a matter of efficiency. On the other hand, as a second reason, there is also another type of methodological motivation for taking a quantitative approach which is that quantification and the way in which it is used in many sciences is a method for testing hypotheses. If you do statistical work, at least confirmatory statistics, you try to test a hypothesis. That of course is a way of improving the scientific quality of linguistic work. You could talk about the background here, in the sense that you should not forget that the experimental approach and the corpus linguistic approach both

distantiate themselves from the introspective method that was used in Generative Grammar and in formal grammars. In both cases, you try to provide better evidence for the theories or the statements that you have than what you can get through pure introspection.

5) Now we turn to the comparison between Construction Grammar and Lexicology. As a scholar specialized particularly in lexical semantics, what is your view on the emerging Construction Grammar? Is it appropriate to say that as construction is increasingly identified as the basic linguistic unit, lexical semantics is degrading in its linguistic status?

The first step in the answer has to do with the general view of language in Construction Grammar. Construction Grammar is to a very large extent a lexicalization of the grammar because what is happening is that each construction is being described, being analyzed as a specific sign, as a sign with formal aspect and semantic or functional aspects. From a more general perspective, we may note that the focus on formal syntax also discarded the lexicon as an uninteresting part of language. But now you actually also see in generative grammar that you cannot have serious syntax without studying the structure of the lexicon. So since the 1970s you have seen a growing incorporation of lexical issues and lexical phenomena in the grammatical description, both in formal and in functional types of grammar.

A Construction Grammar is in a sense the final stage of that development. What Construction Grammar does is the following, if think about it graphically. You used to have abstract syntactic rules. Then you have the level of the lexicon. Those were separated. And then people started thinking seriously about the way in which the lexicon and the rules combine. That is when you get for instance the interest of formal grammarians in verb classes with specific argument structure. That is a way of combining lexical studies and syntactic structures. Now what Construction Grammar does, is to say: OK, *between* those two levels, you have an intermediate level of constructions which is partly lexical and partly abstract syntactic. But the whole thing then is that from this middle level, you get in a sense an expansion in both directions, to the extent that people are now very often thinking that everything is a construction. A single lexeme is just a single-word construction, whereas an abstract rule, the traditional Chomskyan

syntactic patterns are just constructions with no specific lexical material. So what you see is so to speak an imperial strategy of constructions as a concept: the notion of ‘construction’ starts to encompass the original extremes ‘lexical item’ and ‘syntactic pattern’ as special cases of ‘construction’.

At the same time, constructions are treated as lexical items, and you can see in the terminology that is used that people now talk about a ‘construction’ like they used to talk about the lexicon. And also in another respect, if people describe the meaning of constructions, they will also take models coming from lexical semantics, for instance the use of prototype models to describe the meaning of constructions. So as you get into the development of construction grammar, you basically get a lexicalization of the grammar. Now I want to say two more things about that. One thing is that it is a very interesting development from a historical point of view, because if you look at the main stages in the development of linguistics, then you have structuralism, formal grammar, generativism, and cognitive functional approaches. Each has a specific leading theory, a model theory. For structuralism, the model of language is phonology, because what structuralism does, for instance, is trying to describe morphology on the model of phonology. Obviously, for generative grammar, the model discipline is syntax, and you describe everything as a tree. For Cognitive Linguistics, specifically also with the emergence of Construction Grammar, I think you can see that the leading discipline is basically lexicology. Many construction grammarians do not see that point, but I think Construction Grammar could learn a lot from a close look at certain lexical studies. For instance, when construction grammarians are worried about network structures, or when they think about the influence of constructions on each other, those phenomena are similar to what you would have in historical lexicology if you look at synonyms and near synonyms and the way their relationship evolves. I think it could be interesting for Construction Grammar to recognize its own lexical status and then have a closer look at a number of things that have been done in lexical studies.

6) In talking about lectal variation, you mentioned that “lectal variation is still understudied and when we study it we should maybe try to go even one step further and not just look at the correlations between lexical structures and social factors but we should also try to see how

the social forces or the sociosemantic forces determine or restrict the flexibility (Geeraerts, 2016)”. Would you mind explaining more on what you mean by ‘lectal variation’ and ‘sociosemantic forces’?

One of the understudied things in Cognitive Linguistics (but one that we have been trying to improve within cognitive sociolinguistics), is the study of language-internal variation from a Cognitive Linguistics point of view. If I describe Cognitive Linguistics as recontextualization of linguistic theory (Geeraerts, 2010), then it is interesting that different aspects of the recontextualizing movement are basically also the steps in the development of Cognitive Linguistics. So the reintroduction of meaning and lexicon came very early obviously, then the idea that Cognitive Linguistics is basically a usage-based approach came a bit later with all the methodological changes and advances that came along. But then the reintroduction of variation came as maybe not the final step, but one of the latest steps in the development of Cognitive Linguistics. And you still see a lot of scholars in Cognitive Linguistics who implicitly start from the idea that there is such a thing as *the* language: a linguistic system that is the same for all the speakers of the language. That is not the case. If you take a usage-based approach, it is very weird to say that the linguistic system is the same for all speakers of the language. Speakers belong to different subsystems or have their own or even individual knowledge and usage of the language. So that needs to be studied more: precisely what is the degree of variation that you have within a language, what is the degree of individual variation or variation within a language community? That is one basic aspect of what I refer to as an understudied area, so the entire cognitive sociolinguistics approach.

There is maybe also another aspect, and that is something you can see when you zoom in on the meaning, on semantics. Again it is a question of method: what is the best way to describe meaning in language? To what extent is a social dimension part of the very notion of meaning itself? Because if we think of meaning as something that is just in the head, something conceptual in the head, then we miss out on the fact that meaning is something shared. But at the same time, if you think meaning is something that is shared, then how exactly does that work? And how is meaning, how is knowledge, how is conceptual knowledge distributed in the community? You have different conceptual knowledge than I have, how does that work? You will know things about

Chinese cooking that I do not, for instance. But still, if necessary, we can exchange the knowledge. So how precisely does that intersubjective aspect of meaning combine with the notion that meaning is an idea that we have in our heads? We know very well that the meaning that is in our head cannot be simply transferred from one head to the other. That is not what happens. But then exactly what is happening? So there is a whole area of open questions about the role of intersubjectivity in meaning, to put it simply.

When you take the step of saying, meaning is not just something which is in the head but something that is present in social interaction, that is intersubjectively present in social interaction, then the next step is to say that that interaction can take different forms. Precisely, we often tend to think that the form of interaction is always positive. That interaction in using language is normally directed towards convergence and coordination. And of course language is a tool of coordination. But language is also a tool of conflict. You do have situations in which discussing the meaning of a word is the basis for social conflict. So the ‘socio-semiotic forces’ are essentially the forces of coordination and conflict that are present in social interaction. If I use a formulation like ‘socio-semantic forces’ as an influence on meaning, then I am thinking of the different forces that you would have in a community that regulate or structure language usage. And those forces are not only coordinating ones. They are also conflicting forces. Let me perhaps be a little bit more concrete. As you know, in a prototype model of language you have the natural tendency of linguistic concepts to expand. We know that we can use the concepts that are available in the language very flexibly. That is the driving force behind prototype models where you see expansion of meaning. That flexibility is something that contrasts with another tendency that we find in language usage which in some contexts it is precisely the other direction of usage of meaning that is relevant, namely trying to be more precise about the meaning. If you take scientific contexts, then you have to be more precise in the way you use language than natural language. If you take legal contexts, then you have to be more precise in defining what your words mean than in ordinary language. Then very often, even in ordinary language, you can have a tension between the possibilities for using categories flexibly and on the other hand a tendency to be more precise. That is the point where you get social debates that concern meaning and categorization, and that do not necessarily tend towards

coordination but that takes the form of conflict.

As a simple example, take something like ‘gay marriage’. Some socio-semiotic forces would say that is impossible because it is a contradiction, because marriage implies a different sex. Other groups would say “No, that is only a prototype of what we see as marriage, and the crucial thing of marriage is the lasting bond between two people not the gender of those people”. So what you have there is a conflict about meaning and it is a conflict which has to do with either a looser way of talking which you normally find in normal natural language, or a more restricted way of using language where you try to go towards more precise definitions. And in the latter case, the way it works here is through a reduction of the concept to the prototypical core, forgetting about the flexible usage of the prototype. If you can see that, then you can see that the way we categorize things is a social phenomenon. That also implies thinking about language not just as something psychological but also as something social.

7) Would you mind sharing your views on the relation between Cognitive Linguistics and Functional Linguistics, given the situation in the linguistic department of Leuven?

Let me take the general perspective first. The general perspective is that Cognitive Linguistics in the way we use the term now is part of a broader family of non-formalist approaches. At the same time, I think I would claim that Cognitive Linguistics is the most advanced of those approaches. It would be interesting to write a history of cognitive and functional approaches, but briefly, if you think of the different aspects of the recontextualization movement that I mentioned, I think Cognitive Linguistics embodies most of them or at least the highest number of them. So maybe history will prove me wrong, but my guess is that currently Cognitive Linguistics is the most advanced form of non-formalist linguistics. That is the first element in the answer. The second element in the answer is that one very important precursor of Cognitive Linguistics has been Systemic Functional Linguistics in the sense of Halliday. That is an approach which is very popular in certain countries, like Australia and Spain, and to a considerable extent also in China. With regard to the research groups here in Leuven in this department, basically, there are three cognitively oriented groups: our group QLVL, which is the one doing statistical corpus research in the framework of cognitive sociolinguistics, the functional-cognitive group

FunC, and then the MIDI group doing multimodal research. A number of people in the functional-cognitive group have a background in Systemic Functional Grammar. The difference between their group and ours is that we tend to be methodologically more quantitative, more statistical than they usually do. Now, generally speaking, one can see people with a background in Systemic Functional Grammar taking over certain concepts that were developed in Cognitive Linguistics, like prototypicality and conceptual metaphors. As these concepts were not present in Systemic Functional Grammar, one can rightly say that Cognitive Linguistics is taking one step further in the development of functional, non-formalist approaches to language. Cognitive Linguistics brings new ideas to the entire field of functional linguistics.

8) Where is the place of syntax in Cognitive Linguistics?

About the actual absence of syntactic studies in Cognitive Linguistics: Historically speaking, it is correct that the first major achievements of Cognitive Linguistics are in the field of semantics. Probably what reaches people first is metaphor research and related things. But, on the other hand, a lot of Cognitive Linguistics is semantic-syntactic; and the study of syntax from a semantic point of view. And two of the important names from the regional inner-circle of Cognitive Linguistics are Ronald Langacker and Leonard Talmy. And specifically, Langacker is a pure syntactician or grammarian, if you wish. I think it is a question of what is actually being done in Cognitive Linguistics

9) Do you think that Cognitive Linguistics can solve the problems that Generative Grammarians discuss in such a vast area?

That is a difficult question, because there is not so much semantic comparison between generative description and Cognitive Linguistics description all in a given topic. So, in principle, you could say, “OK, you have two different frameworks and when they deal with the same problem, in principle, it should be possible to specify which description is the best one”. But that kind of systematic comparison of solution is not something that people systematically presume. It has something to do with the fact that, in general, there are not direct discussions about it. Each has their own interests and they do not go for direct debate. That is something that may have been different when Generative Grammar emerged. At that point, Generativists had a lot of debates, but at this

point, they do not interact a lot; they do not fight enough!

References

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