COGNITIVE FOUNDATIONS
of GRAMMAR
(Review)
1. BIBLIOGRAPHICAL DESCRIPTION

Title: Cognitive Foundations of Grammar
Written By: Bernd Heine (University of Cologne)
Publication Year: 1997
Publisher: Oxford University Press

2. BOOK OVERVIEW

“The main function of language is to convey meaning. Therefore, argues Bernd Heine in these pages, the question of why language is structured the way it is must first of all be answered with reference to this function. Linguistic explanations offered in terms of other exponents of language structure (for example, syntax) are likely to highlight peripheral or epiphenomenal--rather than central--characteristics of language structure. Heine provides a solid introductory treatment of the ways in which language structure (that is, grammar) and language usage can be explained with reference to the processes underlying human conceptualization and communication. Exploring an area of linguistics that has developed only recently and is rapidly expanding, Cognitive Foundations of Grammar will appeal to students of linguistics, psychology, and anthropology, especially those interested in grammaticalization processes.” [LLIST]

A book that first of all observes the grammar as a historical product, which is subject to evolution. Heine derives the path of the evolution of the primitives and compounds in the language structure with his assumptions concerning the grammar with a universal point of view. His manner is more explanatory rather than descriptive.

3. THE BOOK

Chapter 1: The Framework

The first of the eight chapters begins with the writer's assumptions which constitute a base to his idea of cognition and grammar:

A. The main function of language is to convey meaning..
B. The forms used for expressing meaning are motivated rather than arbitrary..
C. .. external expressions of language are more powerful than internal ones.
D. Language is a historical product..
E. The synchrony/diachrony distinction derives from the perspective adopted, rather than from the facts considered.
F. Grammatical change is unidirectional, leading from lexical to grammatical..
   [HEI 3-4]

These assumptions, highly related to the opinions of the writer are discussed next. At this point writer concentrates on explaining the bases of the
assumptions which are not trivial, such as B and D. He proposes three kinds of motivations for B: structural, psychological and genetic. He also relates D directly to historical developments in languages, which gives us the clue that the writer has a special interest in the genetic motivations of the languages (as we see in the second, third and fourth chapters clearly).

A number of methodological observations follow these assumptions in order to construct a base for them. Writer begins his observations by indicating the conceptual transfers and the issue of polysemy. Here, what I do not accept is that the writer finds no relation between the words ‘two’ and ‘too’. However according to the theory of evolution we can find accordance in between. Hence, disagreeing with the writer, I believe that there is nothing called polysemy.

Writer concludes this entrance chapter with his words on a number of external (geographic) issues that shapes the languages and grammar.

**Chapter 2: Numerals**

Second chapter of the book is devoted to the roots of the numeral systems present in the languages. The fact that the systems’ roots are the main point here is not so unusual since we know that the writer has already mentioned about his interest in the evolutionary processes of languages. As he indicates externally, the chapter concerns with a number of questions. These questions are briefly about the universality of the bases like 5, 10 or 20 in the whole language set, the diversity of expressions for these bases in these languages and the structural characteristics of the numerals (whether they are more adjective like or noun like). His attitude is again more explanatory rather than descriptive.

The writers claim here is that the numeral systems are motivated. Moreover, to explain the similar bases of the numeral systems, he proposes a very common model: The body-part model. According to this model, human at first, needed the assistance of his body to (very basically) count. The number of the fingers a human has on his hands is definitely 5. So, he eventually takes it as a base for himself (5: a hand, 10: two hands, 20: hands and feet aka all body).

Writer has many examples from various languages that have these numbers as bases, in which most of the other numerals are expressed according to them (with seize, spare actions). However he also mentions about some irregularities; some variances in expressing the numerals according to local issues and morphosyntactical structures. He points out some compound schemes that involve these variations which, in my opinion, is meaningless since no absolute formula or explanation exists in linguistics we surely cannot expect the body-part model covers the numeral systems at once.

To summarize, writer mostly proves that the numerals are motivated genetically with the help of the examples present in the literature.
Chapter 3: Spatial Orientation

In this chapter writer seeks for the origins of the terms related with spatial orientation (basically deictic and cardinal orientation).

Considering deictic orientation, writer points out the usage of the body-parts as indicators. He writes down the results of researches done in a number of African and Oceanic languages and underlines some common usages. He involves the usages of landmarks also (heaven, earth etc.). Here the writer proposes two body-part models which constitute origins for these associations. There are obviously not too much generalizations since the minor differences in these models are specific to the cultures and folklores maybe.

Cardinal orientations are his second major topic in this chapter. However there is not much to say about it. Generally speaking the terms here comes from the sources such as sun, winds, deictic orientations and landmarks. However, it can easily be deduced that the terms east and west are oriented from sunrise and sunset. I agree with the writer that he says the variances of north and south concepts exist since the geographical conditions of the societies differ from each other. Moreover, east & west concepts even confuse in northern societies such as Eskimos.

The chapter concludes with a self-explanatory summary, that it accepts its content is full of nothing but observations.

Chapter 4: Indefinite Articles

Chapter 4 discusses the evolution of indefinite articles. It includes a comparison of definite and indefinite articles, evolutionary processes of these articles and discussions of results.

Writer begins with the similarities of these articles with referencing Moravcsik [MORA]. Then he raises questions against them. These questions relate with the asymmetry, plural behavior and phonetic properties of articles. Next, he tries to identify the stages of the evolution that the indefinite articles are (were) subject to. He draws a path beginning from numerals, ending at indefinite articles.

After drawing the path of evolution, writer continues with giving answers to his questions presented before. In the discussion part of these answers he admits that the root of these articles is the word ‘one’. He also suggests that most of the languages are still evolving considering this subject.
Chapter 5: Possession

Chapter 5 is devoted to the possession concept present in the languages. Writer claims that this concept is universal but culture specific. According to him there are two kinds of possessions generally: alienable and inalienable. This is a discrimination that separates the possessees that ve inhere and not. Here again it is obvious that this discrimination differs from culture to culture.

The second discrimination is about the possessive constructions: Attributive ones (Ron’s dog) and predicative ones (Ron has a dog [HEI 87]). Moreover, writer mentions about other discriminations such as physical possessions, temporary possessions, permanent possessions, etc. Then he raises questions based on these discriminations just as he did in the previous chapter. The main point in these questions is the structural place of possession.

In order to answer the questions proposed, the writer mentions schemas, which can be grouped under the name “event schemas”. The schemas presented are action, location, companion, genitive, goal, source, topic and equation schemas. These can be taken as different domains of possession constructions and according to the writer they cover the universal domain. However location and goal schemas contain morphosyntactical variances, which are discussed separately right after. The problem here is the exception that raise when constructing the possessor – possessee relationship, which is an irregularity obviously.

The questions proposed at the beginning of the chapter are answered next. The schema concept is used here widely. Writer here maps the questions with the properties of the corresponding schemas. However there are still untouched points such as the relations between the schemas and alienability / inalienability distinction and at the end (in the summary part) he accepts these points and relates them with the irregularities present in the languages (which should still be taken as evolving).

Chapter 6: Comparison

In this chapter, writer discusses comparisons. The structure of the chapter is highly similar to the previous one because comparisons are very similar in context with the possession concept. Just as possessions, comparisons require event schemas at first glance. Also both of them are compounds more than primitives of the language i.e., they require more than one primitive to be constructed.

Writer begins the chapter by pointing out his main sub-group of comparisons which is superior comparatives. He then explains its main structure and minor variances according to different languages and cultures.

Just as the previous chapter he defines schemas here again. These are action, location, source, goal, polarity, sequence, similarity and topic schemas. He
also mentions about some schema blends which are combinations of more than one schema.

Next and just before the summary of the chapter, writer talks about the superlatives; especially the relation of the superlatives with the comparatives. However, in my opinion, neither this part nor the schemas are complete since the writer seizes his investigation to only superior comparatives.

**Chapter 7: Beyond Grammar**

Excluding the last chapter of ‘outlook’ this chapter can be accounted as a summary and a generalization of the previous ones. Grouping them in a single category dealing with grammaticalization theory, he defines this chapter to deal with lexicon; which he believes the key to semantics.

First he examines the path from objects to body-parts by giving examples. Second he glances at the conceptual transfers between the body-parts. Here he explains two common strategies; one is top-down and the second is part-to-whole strategy. Third, and the last, he discusses the transfers from body-parts to inanimate objects. The transfers exampled here are not generalized as they have been in the third chapter. Here the discussion is on the objects and the characterizations of transfer such as their unidirectionality and diachrony rather than the whole structure (for example ending in deictic orientations).

A discussion of the mentality of these transfers follows the examples. Writer here mentions about different thoughts and methodologies (“internal geometry” of asymmetry [LEVI] or metaphor) that tries to explain the main path of the evolution. Then he talks about his observations based on these thoughts and concludes by admitting the transfer concept as metaphors.

**Chapter 8: Outlook**

The final chapter is an overview of the previous chapter with the guidance of the first chapter. Writer again mentions that his goal is to make external explanations to the language structure rather than internal methods including speech and interaction concepts. He enumerates some characteristics (subject to himself) of the language in order to construct a base for these explanations.

Finally he admits that there are many irregularities due to the differences between cultures and their local geographic conditions. He drives different conclusions from this point. However, on the other hand this point is where I, as a reviewer begin my arguments. What I observe is that there are no serious validations of the assumptions B, C and F introduced in chapter 1. Examples given are quite local and highly culture specific that do not allow generalizations. To summarize very shortly, I find it a book without a base or origin which goes nowhere with its generalizations and assumptions because of it.
References


4. REVIEWER

Kemal Taşkın Research Engineer in Information Security & Software Development Group TÜBİTAK – METU BİLTEN

Past Affiliation:
• M.S. in Cognitive Sciences Program, Institute of Informatics, METU (2003-)

kemal.taskin@bilten.metu.edu.tr
mail@kemaltaskin.net
http://www.kemaltaskin.net/