Ferdinand de Saussure in the Era of Cognitive Linguistics

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Abstract

Ferdinand de Saussure’s thoughts on language came to light in 1916 with the publication of *Cours de linguistique générale* by his students. A hundred years on, the influence of his thoughts on modern linguistics is still being pinpointed. This paper reviews Saussure’s influence on the cognitive approaches to meaning and grammar. The main objective is to demonstrate how Saussure planted the seeds of Cognitive Linguistics through his semiotic model of the “linguistic sign” (a sound-concept pairing) and how the influence of this model is growing in the era of Cognitive Linguistics. The study demonstrates that Saussure has had a greater impact on modern linguistics than pointed out in the literature, considering that his thought on language underlies cognitive linguistics theories which can be described as representing a return to the pre-Saussurean notion of the non-arbitrariness of the linguistic sign.

Keywords: Cognitive Grammar, Cognitive Semantics, Conceptual Blending Theory, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, linguistic category, linguistic sign, Prototype Theory

1. Introduction

It is well known that, in its infancy, modern linguistics was dominated by diachronic studies like the etymological inquiries which sought to establish word origins by consulting the historical hierarchy of languages. An example of this is depicting the word *côr* as the prototype of phonologically and semantically similar words in Romance languages (e.g. the French *cœur*, Italian *cuore*, Portuguese *côr*, Old Spanish *cuer*, and so forth) (see Asher & Simpson, 1994, p. 1169). Such a study rested on seeing the relationship between the form of a word and its meaning to be intrinsic. However, the
introduction of the Saussurean notion of “arbitrariness” into the study of form-meaning relationship in 1916 had had the effect of changing the face of linguistic inquiry. Linguists abandoned diachronic comparative linguistics and employed a synchronic (ahistorical) approach to language instead (i.e. an approach that considers the state of a language as it is constituted at one point in time). This turned the impact of the Saussurean model of the linguistic sign on modern linguistics theory to a major question that is continuously addressed (see, for example, Harris, 2001; Tagai, 2009). An important point about this Saussurean model is that it is semiotic; that is to say, it is based on viewing the word as a meaning-making tool that unites a sound image and a concept, not a name and a thing. Modern approaches to meaning certainly germinate from this view (see, for example, Ogden & Richards, 1923; Pierce, 1931), including the more recent cognitively oriented approaches. Nevertheless, only the cognitive approaches to grammar, where meaning is given a central status, have received attention as descendants of Saussure (see, for example, Harris, 1988; Evans, 2007). Cognitive Semantics, however, does not seem to have received this kind of attention. The reason for this is as follows. Cognitive Semantics views form-meaning/meaning-meaning relationship to be motivated (rather than arbitrary). In fact, the cognitive perspective developed as a reaction to the Saussurean view of language as an autonomous knowledge structure, arguing that linguistic knowledge and behaviour cannot be separated from other general cognitive abilities. Hence, the notion of motivation in Cognitive Semantics follows from the understanding, which emerged in 1980 with the publication of Lakoff and Johnson’s *Metaphors We Live By*, that language externalises thoughts and encodes knowledge structures that represent the language users’ experience of their physical and socio-cultural surroundings. For example, the expressions *He is boiling with anger* and *He is furious* encode the conceptualisation of the experience of “anger” as “heat” and of the “body” as a “container” for emotions. Other examples include expressions like *Can you spare me a minute* and *I cannot afford the time* which encode the conceptualisation of “time” as “money”, based on speakers’ socio-cultural experience with time as a valuable commodity. In this way, Cognitive Semantics may be described as representing a return to the pre-Saussurean notion of the non-arbitrariness of the linguistic sign. However, as demonstrated in this study, Saussure’s semiotic model of the linguistic sign as a psychological entity for meaning-making forms the basis on which the cognitive approaches to lexical and grammatical meanings are built.

The study begins by sketching Saussure’s view of language. It then considers the influence of this view on Cognitive Semantics, bringing into focus the contributions of the main theories that developed in the field, namely, Prototype Theory, Frame Semantics, Conceptual Domain Theory, Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Blending Theory. The part that follows explores the Saussurean influence on the cognitive approaches to grammar, adding to the elaboration of existing observations. All this is complemented by Evans’s theory of Lexical Concepts and Cognitive Models (LCCM Theory). This theory brings together insights from Cognitive Semantics and cognitive approaches to grammar, thus building an approach to meaning that deals with the two dimensions of
language identified by Saussure (i.e. “langue” and “parole”) as playing complementary roles in the process of meaning-making. It is pointed out that LCCM Theory also adopts a view in regard to form-meaning/meaning-meaning relationship that can be described as intermediate between the Saussurean and Cognitive Linguistics views (i.e. intermediate between the notions of arbitrariness and motivation). This was interpreted as a step back towards the Saussurean tradition. The study ends with a summary of the points discussed.

2. Saussure’s View of Language

Ferdinand de Saussure conceptualised language as a system of signs. The linguistic sign is a tool for making meaning (or encoding concepts) that unites a sound-image and a concept. For example, the sound image [kæt] forms an integral part of the concept ‘cat’ (a mental representation of an animal of certain characteristics). The sound image is referred to as the “signifier” and the concept as the “signified”. The relationship between the signifier and signified is conventional rather than intrinsic. In other words, it is arbitrary, based on social conventions. In addition, being arbitrary, the relationship between the signifier and signified is dynamic and can change or develop over time.

Saussure’s thought regarding the dynamic form-meaning relationship stems from his structuralist view of language. This means that word meaning (or value) is not seen as established through the signifier-signified relation, but through the relation between the signifier and other signifiers in the language system. Saussure also distinguished between the abstract knowledge of the language system (“langue”) and the concrete application of this system by speakers (“parole”). To him, linguistics should concern itself with the study of langue.

As shown in the section to follow, the cognitive approaches to meaning and grammar are developments of the Saussurean view of the linguistic sign in the sense that they 1) explore the internal structure and understanding of signifiers through their relation to other signifiers in the language system and 2) provide a dynamic model of language that focuses on meaning-making, taking into account the experiential basis of language, goals of the communicative exchange and context of use.

3. Saussure’s Linguistic Sign and Cognitive Semantics

3.1 Prototypes, domains and frames

Cognitive approaches to meaning can be said to be based on the Saussurean view that the meanings associated with words are concepts in the minds of speakers rather than objects in the external world. Cognitive Semantics, however, adds order to this view by showing that the linguistic signs are organised into conceptual areas. Prototype Theory concerns itself with the internal structure of such areas, demonstrating that related concepts form a radially structured category in which members are considered to be more or less prototypical relative to an exemplar. For the category of birds, for example, Rosch (1975)
found that some types of birds (e.g. robins and eagles) are considered as ‘birdier’ than other birds (e.g. ducks, peacocks, ostrichs, penguins), depending on the degree of their representativity of the central characteristics of “birdiness” (flying, perching in trees, etc.) (see also Taylor, 1989).

This finding suggests that the linguistic signs as groups of related words are understood against the background of a larger, or more schematic, knowledge structure. In prototype theory, the exemplar is this kind of knowledge structure because it functions as a schema into which related items are fitted. Langacker (1986) makes a similar point arguing that words provide “points of access” to large-scale encyclopaedic knowledge networks, or “domains”, and meaning is a matter of evoking a scene (domain, or “base”) and highlighting part of that scene (profile). The notion of profile-base organisation can be demonstrated by the meaning of Tip. This noun evokes an elongated object and profiles the end part of that object (see Langacker, 1986, p. 7). Langacker’s model of meaning implies that domains are hierarchically structured forming a domain matrix. In such a structure, specific concepts within a domain are treated as lower level concepts that are understood in relation to more general, or higher-level, concepts. For example, the understanding of the concept KNUCKLE is determined relative to the following hierarchically higher concepts: FINGER, HAND, ARM and BODY. This model of meaning understanding is at the heart of Saussure’s structuralist view of word meaning as determined through the relation between the signifier and other signifiers in the language system. Fillmore’s Frame Semantics runs in the same vein (see, for example, Fillmore, 1982). Fillmore discussed the understanding of related linguistic signs under the term “frame”. To him, the frame relates concepts in such a way that understanding any one concept requires access to the entire frame. For example, understanding the related words ‘buy’, ‘pay’, ‘sell’, ‘spend’, ‘cost’, ‘charge’, and so on requires access to the COMMERCIAL EVENT frame, whose elements include a buyer, a seller, goods and money. However, each of these words evokes different aspects of the frame. ‘Buy’ focuses on the buyer and the goods; ‘pay’ focuses on the buyer, the money, and the goods; and so on. Fillmore’s model pays special attention to the social dimension of conceptual areas. He defined a frame as a system of concepts associated with a particular culturally-embedded scene from human experience. Take as an example the marriage frame. The understanding of this frame entails associations related to the roles of man and woman in the institution that can vary not only from one society to another, but also from one social group to another. This kind of variance may result in different conceptualisations of concepts accessed via the marriage frame. The addition of a social dimension to a theory of understanding related linguistic signs can be claimed to draw on the Saussurean structuralist/sociolinguistic thought on language. The sociolinguistic thought is embedded in the Saussurean model of the linguistic sign since the model is based on viewing the relation between the signifier and the signified as a social convention.

Thus, Cognitive Semantics may be claimed to have emerged out of developing the Saussurean model of the linguistic sign as a psychological entity. The above-
mentioned frameworks added to this model the elements of organisational structure and understanding. Other frameworks, like the ones discussed in the section to follow, contributed to this development by exploring how linguistic signs are used as meaning-making tools.

3.2 Conceptual metaphor and conceptual blending
Conceptual Metaphor Theory explored the embodied nature of concepts. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) put forth the hypothesis that conceptual structure and, thus, semantic structure derive from a small number of knowledge structures, or image schemas, (such as CONTAINER, FULL-EMPTY, OBJECT, UP-DOWN, NEAR-FAR, PART-WHOLE, LINK, RESISTANCE, SOURCE-PATH-GOAL, and so on) that emerge in the human mind out of pre-conceptual bodily experience (i.e., sensory-perceptual experience preceding the formation of concepts). An example of how an image schema gives rise to conceptual representations/meanings is as follows. “We experience ourselves as entities, separate from the rest of the world—as containers with an inside and an outside” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 58). This bodily experience, which we extract and store as the CONTAINER schema, lies behind our conceptualization of physical and emotional states as entities within the body (e.g., *He hasn’t got an honest bone in his body*) (ibid., p. 50). Image schemas give rise to meaningful concepts because they derive from bodily experience, which is directly meaningful.

Conceptual Metaphor Theory also distinguished between two kinds of conceptual metaphors that generate concepts: primary and secondary. For instance, AFFECTION IS WARMTH (e.g. *We have a warm relationship*) is a primary metaphor which shows that the abstract concept AFFECTION is directly conceptualized in terms of the image-schematic concept WARMTH. This understanding is believed to arise naturally, considering that WARMTH and AFFECTION correlate in experiential terms (See Grady, 1997). However, LIFE IS A JOURNEY (e.g. *It is time to get on with your life*) is a compound metaphor that explains the structuring of the abstract concept LIFE in terms of the more concrete concept JOURNEY. This mapping in turn has an image-schematic basis because it involves the logic of PATH (See Lakoff, 1993). Lakoff (1989, p. 119) describes the basic logic of the PATH image schema as the understanding that going from a source to a destination along a path involves moving forward (in space and time), crossing distance, passing through intermediate points on the path, and facing obstacles. Hence, within Conceptual Metaphor Theory, words as psychological entities acquire meaning from direct or indirect embodiment. This process of meaning-making is demonstrated by Evans and Green (2006) as follows (Figure 1).
This process implies that semantic/conceptual structure is radial, consisting of concrete (basic) concepts that derive from physical experience and abstract ones (less basic) that are conceptualized in terms of more concrete concepts. This in turn suggests that a polysemous word has a radial structure that consists of a basic (concrete) sense and figurative extensions that are systematically motivated by knowledge structures like conceptual metaphors. A case in point is the metaphor KNOWING IS SEEING linking the literal and metaphorical senses of the verb ‘see’. Radden (2002, p. 42) notes that this metaphor, which underlies the verb development from literal to metaphorical senses, has its roots in the experienced relationship of correlation and complementarity between seeing and knowing (i.e. in the fact that seeing precedes knowing and may bring about it).

It is clear that Conceptual Metaphor Theory shows the meanings associated with linguistic signs to be built on the basis of stable conceptual structures deriving from human experiences. Conceptual Blending Theory complements this theory by examining the manipulation of conceptual structures in the process of making situated figurative meanings.

Conceptual Blending Theory shows that conceptual mapping does not rest on structuring one whole concept (e.g. LIFE) in terms of another (JOURNEY), as is the case in Conceptual Metaphor Theory, but rather on mapping mental spaces (i.e. partial sources and target concepts) that are related to a situated meaning (see Fauconnier, [1985] 1994, 1997). The process also involves conceptual integration such as when two mapped elements are fused into a third, unique concept (the blend). The blend is unique because it contains an emergent structure—a semantic element that is not projected from the two original concepts (or input spaces), but recruited from pre-existing familiar knowledge structure into the blend. The emergent structure supplies the central inference desired from the figure. For example, describing a surgeon as a butcher implies a negative assessment that arises from integrating the goal of the surgeon (healing) and the means of butchery. This negative assessment is not contained in either of the concepts associated with the THE
SURGEON IS A BUTCHER metaphor, considering that both the surgeon and butcher are skilled professionals (see Fauconnier & Turner, 2002).

Although these cognitive models of the linguistic sign imply a non-arbitrary form-meaning/meaning-meaning relationship, they can still be seen as based on the Saussurean view of the linguistic sign as a tool for meaning-making. In addition, the two theories may be claimed to represent the Saussurean dichotomy of langue and parole in the sense that Conceptual Metaphor Theory explores the conceptual structures that regulate meaning (langue) and Conceptual Blending Theory describes how these structures operate in speech (parole). Cognitive approaches to grammar, however, may be seen to focus on langue and parole as complementary dimensions of language analysis.

4. Saussure’s Linguistic Sign and Cognitive Approaches to Grammar

Evans (e.g. 2006, 2007) pointed out that the cognitive approaches to grammar (e.g. Langacker’s Cognitive Grammar, Fillmore and Kay’s Construction Grammar and Croft’s Embodied Construction Grammar) adopted Saussure’s view of the linguistic sign as a sound-concept pairing under the term “symbolic unit”. This involves considering the linguistic sign as the fundamental unit of language structure, which gives meaning a central status in the study of grammar. For instance, in Langacker’s Cognitive Grammar (see, for example, Langacker, 1986), language is seen as a system of symbolic units and the lexicon and grammar are conceptualisations belonging to the same module. That is, they form a continuum from very concrete symbols (e.g. cat) to very schematic symbols (subject, object, relative clause, transitive construction, etc.). This means that all symbolic units from simplex to complex and from concrete to abstract cannot be studied independently of meaning.

As mentioned above, the cognitive approaches to grammar can be described as involving the study of symbolic units along the two dimensions of langue and parole. In fact, within these approaches, the speakers’ knowledge of the linguistic system (langue) is depicted as an inventory formed by the abstraction of symbolic units from language use (parole). Within such an inventory, regularities abstracted from usage events, are related by way of categorizing relationships, which involves instantiation and elaboration of symbolic units/constructions. Langacker used the terms “conventions” and “variations” to refer to the two phenomena. The conventional repertoire of linguistic units that speakers use in various ways is represented by schemas (imagic representations of knowledge structures) rather than propositions. The reason for this is explained as follows:

Like lexicon, grammar provides for the structuring and symbolization of conceptual content, and is thus imagic in character. When we use a particular construction or grammatical morpheme, we thereby select a particular image to structure the conceived situation for communicative purposes. (Langacker, 1986, p. 13)
On this model, structuring a situation for communicative purposes is to be understood as construing it. Construal can be thought of as our ability to conceive and portray the same situation in various ways. In other words, meaning in Cognitive Grammar is a construal imposed by the speaker upon a scene. This involves viewing grammatical constructions as evoking a scene (base) and highlighting part of that scene (profile). Profiling involves elevating one of the participants in a scene to the status of trajectory (the most prominent component in a construction). Less prominent components are landmarks. For example, in a transitive construction, the AGENT (subject) is given the status of the trajectory, whereas the PATIENT (object) is given the status of the landmark. Passive constructions are transitive constructions in which the PATIENT is profiled, or construed as more prominent than the AGENT. Transitive constructions, in turn, are instantiations of the action chain schema (schematic representation of the experience) in Figure 2 (A stands for AGENT and P for PATIENT). In this schema, which serves the same purpose as a rule in traditional grammars, energy is transferred from AGENT to PATIENT, and results in a change of state for the PATIENT. The closer the component is to the energy source the more salient it is in a construction. The passive construction is a specific elaboration of this general (or prototypical) schema. Other elaborations are di-transitive constructions in which any of the two objects of the verb can be profiled by placing it closer to the energy source.

Figure 2. An adaptation of Langacker’s (2002) prototypical action chain model (Evans & Green, 2006, p. 545)

Langacker’s (2001) work on the relation between linguistic structure and discourse goes further than dealing with langue and parole as complementary facets of meaning-making to depict construals in terms of the Saussurean model of the linguistic sign (concept-sound pairing), showing how meaning is communicated through conceptualisation channels (grammatical structure and objective situation) and vocalisation channels (intonation and gesture).

Clearly, the above cognitively oriented approaches to grammar and meaning, which constitute major advances in the field of Cognitive Linguistics, could be explained through Saussure’s thoughts on language. A more recent theory, namely, Evans’s LCCM Theory, may be seen as an amalgam of these theories in the sense that it examines meaning composition and construction through the Saussurean lens, as demonstrated in the section to follow.

5. LCCM Theory

Evans’s LCCM Theory brings together insights from Cognitive Semantics and cognitive
approaches to grammar, building a protean approach to meaning; that is to say, an approach that treats the semantic values associated with words as extremely variable and highly dependent on the context in which they are embedded. What makes LCCM Theory different from other cognitive approaches to language is the distinction it makes between the linguistic and the conceptual systems, as demonstrated by Figure 3.

Figure 3. The conceptual and linguistic systems as different structures (Evans, 2010, p. 613)

LCCM Theory deals with the way the conceptual and linguistic systems interact in the process of meaning-making. This interaction is modelled in terms of the two theoretical constructs from which the theory derives its name, namely, lexical concepts and cognitive models. Lexical concepts refer to the concepts and other linguistic information encoded by a form and, thus, they constitute a part of speakers’ mental grammar. Cognitive models, however, refer to conceptual knowledge structures—a non-linguistic body of experience-based knowledge of any kind (things, events, conceptual metaphors, etc.). These structures form the semantic potential, or the “cognitive model profile”, that lexical concepts provide access to. However, like a “frame” or “domain”, a cognitive model is far richer than the sum of the lexical concepts which provide access sites to it. The cognitive model profile is divided into two parts: primary and secondary. Take as an example the lexical concept FRANCE. It provides access to a potentially large number of knowledge structures that individuals acquire through their interaction with the world around them. These structures are divided into primary and secondary cognitive models. The primary cognitive models may include among others: geographical landmass, nation state, and holiday destination. At the same time, these models provide access to a large number of secondary cognitive models. For example, the primary cognitive model nation state provides access to the secondary models which include national sports, political system and cuisine. In this way, the understanding of a linguistic utterance involves the selective activation and fusion of part(s) of the cognitive models accessible via the words involved in the interpretation in accordance with the syntactic constituency of the utterance (Evans, 2006). A literal conception, on the one hand, is the result of establishing a match between one or more cognitive models in the primary cognitive model profiles accessible via the lexical concepts used in a construction. A figurative conception (be it metaphorical or
metonymic), on the other hand, arises as the result of a clash in the primary cognitive model profiles subject to matching that is resolved by achieving a match in the secondary cognitive model profiles by activating the relevant cognitive models (Evans, 2006, 2010, 2013).

This view of meaning-making does not only deal with langue and parole as complementary phenomena, but also involves treating figurative instances of language as deriving from processes of meaning construction rather than through motivation by fixed, conceptual structures, as is the case in Conceptual Metaphor Theory. This in turn involves replacing the concept of motivation in meaning-making with conventions, which makes LCCM Theory more in line with the Saussurean thought on language. LCCM Theory views conceptual metaphor as playing a restricting rather than a motivating role in figurative language due to the following:

- a conceptual metaphor provides a stable link that allows aspects of conceptual content encoded by one cognitive model to be imported so as to form part of the permanent knowledge representation encoded by another. (Evans, 2013, p. 100)

Hence, the effect of the Saussurean tradition on LCCM Theory does not only relate to its employment of a semiotic approach that deals with langue and parole as complementary dimensions. The distinction that LCCM Theory makes between conceptual and linguistic knowledge structures brought the study of meaning from a cognitive perspective closer to the Saussurean thought on the linguistic sign as a convention.

6. Conclusion

This paper reviews the Saussurean impact on Cognitive Linguistics. It has been demonstrated that cognitive approaches to meaning and grammar are deeply rooted in Saussure’s model of language as a system of linguistic signs in the sense that they provided dynamic models of language in which words are meaning-making tools and meanings are construals. Cognitive Linguistics also contributes to a better understanding of the Saussurean view of language as it explores the organizational structure and understanding of the system of linguistic signs (langue) and the way this system is manipulated in language use (parole). Some approaches like Cognitive Grammar and LCCM Theory account for the variable nature of grammatical and lexical meanings in language use by focusing on the way langue and parole work together. Although in Cognitive Linguistics the signifier-signified relationship is motivated rather than arbitrary, LCCM Theory, which is more recent than the other theories, takes a middle-of-the-road position in which this relationship is conceptual as well as conventional. This may be seen as an attempt to add a Saussurean dimension to the Cognitive Linguistics hypothesis. Considering that Saussure’s thoughts on language came to light a hundred years ago, this is a proof that the Saussurean influence on modern linguistics is not only alive, but also active. However, such strong
insights into the study of language as Saussure’s are likely to remain influential for decades.

References


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