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**Ronald W. Langacker**, *Cognitive Grammar: A basic introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. Pp. x + 562.

Reviewed by TORE NESSET, University of Tromsø

This book presents a thorough overview of Cognitive Grammar, the framework Ronald Langacker has been developing since the 1970s within the broader tradition of cognitive linguistics. Cognitive Grammar's most fundamental claim is that 'grammar is symbolic in nature', which Langacker ironically refers to as an 'outrageous proposal' (5). Cognitive Grammar may seem unorthodox from the perspective of American structuralism and generative grammar, and follows more closely in the European linguistic tradition of Saussure, to whom Langacker curiously does not refer. I suspect that scholars trained in this tradition, especially in eastern parts of Europe, will find Langacker's focus on grammar as symbolic signs both natural and persuasive, considering the epithet 'outrageous' more appropriate for proposals in contemporary generative grammar.

Although Cognitive Grammar is radically different from Chomskyan generative linguistics in many important respects, both frameworks are mentalist in orientation, insofar as they focus on language as a cognitive phenomenon. However, whereas in the Chomskyan tradition it has been customary to consider language an autonomous module of the mind, Cognitive Grammar and cognitive linguistics in general seek to describe language as an 'integral facet of cognition' (8). Langacker is nevertheless careful to point out that intermediate positions are possible and indeed compatible with Cognitive Grammar. He suggests that to the extent that 'our genetic endowment makes specific provisions for language', these provisions are likely to be 'adaptations of more basic cognitive phenomena' (8).

It is important to note that Langacker's position on the autonomy issue has profound methodological consequences and involves a number of empirical claims. Langacker's methodology is to characterize linguistic phenomena in terms of well-attested mental capacities that are not unique to language. For instance, in Cognitive Grammar 'grammatical subject' is defined in terms of the notion 'trajector', which is based on our ability to focus and shift attention. Analyzing a wide range of phenomena in this way, Langacker makes a persuasive case for Cognitive Grammar.

At first sight, Cognitive Grammar may appear unconstrained since Langacker's focus is not on imposing arbitrary constraints on representations. However, an important restriction in Cognitive



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Grammar is the 'content requirement', the thrust of which is explained as follows:

> [T]he linguistic knowledge we ascribe to speakers should be limited to elements of form and meaning found in actually occurring expressions, or which derive from such elements via the basic psychological phenomena … association, automatization, schematization, and categorization. (25)

Cognitive Grammar is therefore constrained in the sense that it is based on a parsimonious set of theoretical principles which place restrictions on the analysis. For instance, the 'content requirement' rules out constructs such as derivations from underlying representations with divergent properties, and 'filters' stating what cannot occur in well-formed expressions (26).

The book under review is most naturally compared to Langacker's (1987) two-volume monograph *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar* and can in many ways be read as an updated and much shorter version of *Foundations*. The structure of the two works is very similar. After presenting fundamental concepts, Langacker discusses nouns and verbs, noun phrases, clauses and complex sentences in great detail. Thus, both works focus on grammar in the narrow sense, i.e. morphology and syntax to the exclusion of phonology. In both books, examples are mostly drawn from English, although other languages are invoked where necessary.

However, apart from the fact that the book under review here is only half as long as *Foundations*, there are a number of interesting differences between the two publications. One such difference is the inclusion of a chapter on 'Discourse' (chapter 13), which is a very welcome addition. Ignoring discourse would be problematic, since Cognitive Grammar is a usage-based model and therefore takes usage events (i.e. discourse) as its starting point for making generalizations. Although Langacker's chapter perhaps does not bring much that is new to the field of discourse analysis, it demonstrates that the theoretical apparatus of Cognitive Grammar can be easily applied to structures larger than sentences.

Another difference between *Foundations* and the book reviewed here is the latter's stronger emphasis on constructions. Langacker devotes two chapters to this topic, 'Constructions: General characterization' (chapter 6) and 'Constructions: Descriptive factors' (chapter 7), although the greater prominence of the term 'construction' in the book apparently does not involve any major changes in the content of his analyses. The reason for Langacker's more frequent use of the term is most likely the popularity of Construction Grammar (Goldberg 1995, 2006) in recent years. Since Cognitive Grammar and Construction Grammar are closely related, it is surprising that Langacker does not include a more detailed comparison of the two frameworks. Such comparison would no doubt have made the book more reader-friendly, and perhaps more useful as a textbook. However,



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readers who are interested in comparing Cognitive Grammar with Construction Grammar may consult Langacker (2005) and (2009).

As suggested by the epithet 'cognitive', Langacker's framework focuses on the minds of individual speakers. Therefore, readers and critics of Langacker's earlier works have asked how the role of social interaction is accommodated in Cognitive Grammar. Langacker addresses this issue in this book and convincingly argues that there is no conflict between analyzing language as a cognitive phenomenon and studying it in terms of social interaction. The theory of mind that forms the basis for Langacker's framework certainly does not suffer from solipsism. On the contrary, cognition is non-insular; it is grounded in social interaction through perception and bodily experience. As Langacker points out, mental skills develop through social interaction, so 'conceptualization should be seen as a primary means of engaging the world' (29). Later in the book, Langacker sums up the issue by stating that it 'is pointless to ask whether language is cognitive or sociocultural in nature, for it is obviously both' (218).

The volume under review must be commended for its style and language. This is especially true of the three brilliant introductory chapters in part 1 ('Preliminaries'). Langacker's dry humor, which was not one of the main attractions in *Foundations*, surfaces on the pages of every chapter in the new book – for example, in the preface, where Langacker states that 'there are more opportunities for reading about C[ognitive] G[rammar] than you probably care to know about' (vii), or in the introduction to the second chapter on constructions, where he points out that their phonological properties will mostly be ignored, adding in parentheses 'doubtless to your relief' (183). Discussing 'grounding', which establishes the connection between the interlocutors and the content of a nominal expression or a finite clause, Langacker describes ungrounded content as follows: '[i]t simply floats unattached as an object of idle contemplation' (259). Whether the more vivid and humorous style reflects a change in the author's attitude to his topic, or whether it is simply due to the fact that this book is designed as a textbook for students, is hard to say. In any case, reading it is a very enjoyable experience. This being said, however, the book under review is far from an easy read. The book contains numerous diagrams that Langacker discusses in great detail – discussions that not every reader will find easy to follow.

What kind of readership is the book suitable for? In the preface, Langacker states that the book is 'aimed at the advanced undergraduate and beginning graduate levels' (viii). He furthermore describes the book as 'ideally suited for a two-semester graduate course' (viii). However, not many universities are likely to offer two-semester courses in Cognitive Grammar, and as a whole the book is too ambitious to be accommodated in a broader survey course. However, the first three chapters offer an excellent introduction to cognitive linguistics that would be very suitable as part of a graduate



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course in cognitive linguistics. As a whole, the book will be an extremely valuable reference work for scholars in cognitive linguistics, and it will prove equally relevant for linguists of other persuasions who want to know more about Cognitive Grammar and cognitive linguistics in general. Langacker's solid scholarship and independent thinking about language and linguistics represent a thought-provoking alternative to current mainstream linguistic theory. The book under review is much more than a basic introduction. It is a 'must read' for anybody who wants to be up to date in Cognitive Grammar and cognitive linguistics.

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**John J. McCarthy**, *Doing Optimality Theory: Applying theory to data*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2008. Pp. xi + 310.

Reviewed by SAM HELLMUTH, University of York

*Doing Optimality Theory* is intended to equip student (and more advanced) practitioners with key tools and concepts needed to construct an analysis within Optimality Theory (OT). After a concise introduction, the structure of the book reflects its practical intent, with a full one-third of its 310 pages devoted to a step-by-step guide to formulation of an OT analysis, in chapter 2. This is immediately followed by a (rather personal) treatise on how to write up an analysis. Subsequent chapters then return to the theory itself. The basic strategy of each chapter is to provide a pithy review of relevant prior literature on the constraint or technique under discussion, mixed with practical advice, openly acknowledged to be the personal opinions of the author. In this review I give a brief overview of the content



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