

# AAUSC Issues in Language Program Direction 2010

## Critical and Intercultural Theory and Language Pedagogy

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Editors



**AAUSC Issues in Language  
Program Direction 2010:  
Critical and Intercultural Theory  
and Language Pedagogy**

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2010937494

ISBN-13: 978-0-495-80007-1

ISBN-10: 0-495-80007-4

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## Chapter 13

# Cognitive Grammar and Its Applicability in the Foreign Language Classroom

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### Abstract

The theory of Cognitive Grammar (CG), despite its compatibility with preferred theories of instruction and teaching methodologies, has yet to make its way into the foreign language classroom. This chapter introduces CG, outlining the basic principles that are most useful in the language classroom: cognitive domains, which function well as instructional tools in a communicative classroom, and the concept of schemas and prototypes, which help students examine the relationships between syntax and meaning. A lesson plan illustrates how one applies the principles of CG to explicit grammar instruction, supplementing students' grammatical metalanguage and establishing a cognitive domain the instructor can use for future grammar lessons. CG, because it encourages experimentation and interpretation, complements communicative language teaching and speaks to the goals of the report from the Modern Language Association (MLA) Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages (MLA, 2007), which calls for teaching students translingual and transcultural competence at the secondary and postsecondary level.

### Introduction

While Cognitive Grammar (CG) has existed as a theory since the 1970s, some foreign language instructors have yet to hear of it, while others are familiar with it but still find the core concepts somewhat obtuse.<sup>1</sup> This chapter serves to introduce the reader to CG, providing concrete examples to illustrate some of the key pillars of the theory. In addition, the chapter also explores how CG, though similar to prevailing theories of grammar, distinguishes itself from them, particularly in the area of transitivity, and how it can complement foreign language instruction, not only facilitating student comprehension of grammar but also promoting translingual and transcultural competence, a priority identified in the MLA Report (MLA, 2007).

In our brief review of the theory of CG, we focus primarily on two core concepts that can be applied to foreign language instruction: cognitive domains, or schemas, and semantic/syntactic prototypes, two elements that differ significantly from other approaches to grammar. An explanation then follows of how these two elements can be applied directly to the explicit grammar instruction that takes place in the language classroom. The last section of the chapter then presents a lesson plan that applies the principles of CG, activating a cognitive domain and then using that cognitive domain to introduce particular syntactic/semantic prototypes, anchoring the

students in the CG metalanguage that will inform the explicit grammar instruction that will take place throughout the quarter or semester.

Our CG approach to teaching grammar is not a rejection of current teaching methodologies that enjoy success in the foreign language classroom, nor do we claim that CG is a panacea for all the challenges instructors and students face in language instruction. CG is a theory of grammar; as such, it cannot serve without modification as a pedagogical grammar. However, CG can provide instructors with a perspective and tool that is compatible with existing theories of instruction and teaching methodologies. As CG is a usage-based theory and can be applied at almost all levels of instruction, it can help both instructor and student.

## Cognitive Grammar

CG is a usage-based theory<sup>2</sup> that emerged from the exploration of the relationship between language and cognitive principles, moving away from the tendency to regard linguistic patterns as finite structures internal to and specific to language. CG instead examines the relationship of language structure to elements outside language, such as principles of human categorization and pragmatic and interactional principles. CG distances itself from the various forms of generative grammar known under the blanket moniker of universal grammar, which presuppose that language is innate and will be acquired in its own time with adequate exposure to input and that the patterns and structures of language already exists in the learner and must be activated. By contrast, CG asserts that not language but the processes of learning are innate and that language learning is at its core no different from any other type of learning. Language acquisition requires not just input but experimentation and feedback as well. In this regard, CG is a fundamentally *social* perspective of learning and knowledge, with a focus on language in use; this is a point of overlap or intersection with the sociocultural and ecological frameworks presented in the other chapters in this volume.

CG, along with other functional theories of syntax (Foley & Van Valin, 1984), rejects the notion that language is an autonomous system. Rather, syntax and semantics are inextricably linked; meaning is so central to language that it must be a primary focus of study. The theory of CG, developed by Langacker (1982, 1986, 1987, 1991), posits that grammatical structure is almost entirely present at the level of the clause; there are no derivations of a clause, which is the fundamental claim of generative grammar (Chomsky 1965, 1988). For example, the German *Die Krankenschwester wurde von dem Physiker erwürgt*,<sup>3</sup> “The nurse was strangled by the physicist,” is not a derivative of the sentence *Der Physiker hat die Krankenschwester erwürgt*, “The physicist strangled the nurse.” The statements highlight different participants in the event, the former statement placing emphasis on the nurse and the latter statement on the physicist.

CG does not view syntactic and semantic structures as finite autonomous levels of language; rather, semantic structure is “conventionalized conceptual structure, and grammar is the conventional symbolization of semantic structure” (Langacker, 1982, p. 23). Semantic structure depends on the conceptual imagery established in a speech community. Speakers learn semantic and

syntactic structures through exposure to the conventional patterns of their language, extracting the “rules” of the language from the patterns. Langacker (1982) claims that semantic and syntactic structure is language specific and as such can vary across languages and dialects. Moreover, semantic and syntactic structure can also vary within speech communities, within speakers, and within learners.

According to CG, conventional patterns acquired as part of membership in a speech community are stored in the mind as schemas. Speakers extract schemas from specific expressions that actually occur, and these are used to construct and understand new expressions (Tomasello, 2000). For example, a schema in German is *haben*, “to have,” + “physical or mental condition,” represented by a noun. The schema expresses a number of conditions: *Hunger haben*, “to be hungry”; *Durst haben*, “to be thirsty”; *Bauchschmerzen haben*, “to have a stomachache”; *Kopfschmerzen haben*, “to have a headache”; and *Lust auf etwas haben*, “to feel like doing something.” All these expressions are products of the same schema, as they all are composed of the verb *haben* and a noun.

An expression derives its meaning from the conception it activates in the speaker’s mind (cf. Chafe, 1970; Jackendoff, 1983; Lakoff, 1987). Processing an expression involves a speaker activating knowledge structures, or cognitive domains (Langacker, 1987). Any concept of experience can be the cognitive domain for an expression. For example, the concept *das Internet*, “Internet,” would be the cognitive domain for *der Computer*, “computer”; *die Email-Adresse*, “e-mail address”; *die Webseite*, “Web site”; *surfen*, “to surf”; and so forth. In order for a speaker to understand the expression *ich surfe im Internet*, “I’m surfing the Internet,” the speaker must activate the cognitive domain *das Internet* first.

In addition, an expression’s meaning contains both content and construal, content being the activated cognitive domain and construal the way content is represented in language. Content can be expressed in a variety of ways, such as “The physicist murdered the nurse” or “the physicist’s murder of the nurse.” What is relevant is the degree of prominence assigned to the elements that make up the content. Thus, semantics is conceptual rather than truth conditional. Langacker (1991, p. 37) refers to the expression “The road winds through the mountains” as an example of this phenomenon. He points out that the road does not literally wind its way through the mountains but is presented conceptually, or metaphorically.<sup>4</sup> Let’s look again at the statement *Ich surfe im Internet*. The speaker is not literally surfing the Internet. There is no truth to the literal statement. Instead, the act of looking at different Web pages is presented metaphorically.

The schemas or conventional conceptual patterns that are activated can be characterized as semantic prototypes. Since syntax in CG has meaning, this model of semantic prototypes can be extended to include syntactic structures. For the purposes of this chapter, we refer from now on to syntactic/semantic prototypes. Prototypes are a key component of the theory of CG (Lakoff, 1987; Rosche, 1973, 1974, 1975a, 1975b; Taylor, 1989). Syntactic/semantic prototypes associate a syntactic structure with a prelinguistic concept or image.<sup>5</sup> Speakers are able to judge the degree to which a syntactic structure matches the prototype. Membership in the category or schema is determined by approximation to the best member, or prototype, rather than a set of discrete and necessary features

(Fillmore, 1975; Lakoff, 1972, 1987). The schema *haben* + “condition” is a prototype associated with a prelinguistic concept—a state of being—and the examples above fit the prototype well.

Additionally, the members of the category have some of the characteristic features of the prototype, but they do not need to have all of its features (van Oosten, 1986). In the context of our example prototype, consider the following exchange between an elderly husband and wife returning home after an afternoon walk. The husband says, *Ich habe Hunger*, “I am hungry,” and sits down, with the intention that his wife make him something to eat. The wife replies, *Ich habe müde*, “I am tired,” and also sits down in a chair. This exchange demonstrates two principles of CG. First, the husband’s expression is an example of an association of a syntactic structure with a nonverbal cue (his statement in concert with his sitting down instead of going into the kitchen). This is a perfect instance of the prototype *haben* + “condition.” Second, although the wife’s condition, *müde*, is an adjective instead of a noun, which is typical of the prototype, the husband understands the wife’s meaning because her utterance meets one important criterion: being tired is a condition. Her sentence is an extension of the prototype inasmuch as we subscribe to the notion that the best instance of the prototype is *haben* + “condition,” represented by a noun. The wife’s use of a nonverbal cue—sitting down—to convey her meaning also reflects the constant relationship between language and contextual information.

To condense this discussion of prototype schema into a short list of criteria, the prototype schema can be defined as follows (Coleman & Kay, 1981):

It contains a finite list of properties.

Individual properties are scalar or gradient.

Membership in the category is a gradient phenomenon.

Membership in the category is a matter of degree because the satisfaction of each individual property does not contribute equally to overall membership in the category. One must keep in mind that the prototype is the *best* instance of a category. Categorization takes place by comparison with the prototype or schema, and varying degrees of deviance are tolerated. Instances that deviate from the prototype are extensions of the prototype. In the case of *Ich habe müde*, the statement deviates from the prototype because the speaker employs an adjective instead of a noun. However, because it shares a number of the properties of the prototype, it remains a member of that category; it is an extension.

A famous example from German pop culture, soccer coach Giovanni Trapattoni’s famous expression *Ich habe fertig!*, further illustrates the notion of extensions of prototype. Trapattoni’s expression—literally translated as “I have ready/finished” and understood as “I’m through!”—made an indelible mark on the German imaginary. When working as the FC Bayern soccer coach in 1998, Trapattoni held a press conference in which he grammatically incorrectly—but incredibly emotionally—declared his dissatisfaction and frustration with the efforts of some of the players on the team. Among other expressions that, bizarre and incorrect as they were, communicated his displeasure was *Ich habe fertig!*

He obviously learned the prototype *haben* + “condition,” as he uses it, and he explicitly understands that he is expressing a condition, but the expression is not at all considered a common one. However, because his expression is an extension of the prototype (*haben* + adjective to express a state of being or condition), he was understood. Although metaphorical snickers did initially fill the media, the expression has since become widely recognized, understood, and *used*,<sup>6</sup> particularly within the context of extreme frustration. It helps that Trapattoni, as a soccer coach in Germany, has cultural capital that enables him not only to introduce this expression into the language but also to ensure its endurance, another aspect of the relationship between elements outside language.

Additionally, the example of transitivity can be used to show how CG distinguishes itself from other syntactic theories in significant ways. In the CG view, transitivity is a property of a clause and not of a verb. According to Langacker (1991), “transitivity is not definable just in terms of nominals occurring in a particular structural configuration. It is instead a matter of degree and depends on the meaning of the clause as a whole” (p. 302). Lakoff (1987), Hopper and Thompson (1980), and Rice (1987) have shown that various factors determine the transitivity of a certain clause: (1) a transitive clause must have two participants expressed by overt nominals, which function as subject and object; (2) the clause describes an event (not a situation); (3) the event is energetic and relatively brief and has a clearly defined ending point; (4) the subject and object represent discrete, highly individuated physical entities; (5) these entities already exist when the event takes place, and they are not products of the event; (6) the subject and object are fully distinct and participate in a strongly asymmetrical relationship; (7) the subject participates volitionally, while the object’s participation is nonvolitional; (8) the subject is the energy source, and the object is its target; and (9) the object is absolutely affected by the action of the subject. Any transitive clause can have some—but need not have all—of these factors in order to be transitive. Furthermore, these factors do not contribute equally to the transitivity of the clause.

Consider again the example *Der Physiker hat die Krankenschwester erwürgt*. This is an example of prototypical transitivity. The first participant, or agent, is volitional and causes change in the second participant, or patient. The two participants are distinct from each other and are in an asymmetrical relationship. The event and the speaker’s construal of it determine which of the nine factors are relevant. These parameters affect all aspects of the German grammar that are characterized by transitivity, such as auxiliary selection (Shannon, 1990, 1992, 1996), passivization (Arnett, 2004; Shannon, 1988), and the ability to form participial adjectives. In the CG view, these structures are not analyzed as separate, discrete structures but rather are described as part of the semantic network of transitivity.

Transitivity in view of CG is not binary but rather a matter of gradation (Sorace, 2000). It is the degree to which the subject/agent affects the direct object/patient<sup>7</sup> by means of its action. We can then speak of “high” or “low” transitivity. Auxiliary selection, passivization, and participial adjectives are best motivated by the transitivity parameters, most specifically one versus two participants, volitionality, and affectedness of the second participant (if present).

## CG and Explicit Grammar Instruction

In this section, we turn to the use of explicit grammar instruction in postsecondary or secondary language classrooms and how CG can enhance it. As CG focuses on the symbiosis of syntax and semantics, it can complement the theories of instruction and teaching methodologies that have enjoyed success in the language classroom, namely, focus on form, structured input, and communicative methodologies. Because of its compatibility, CG can enhance the explicit grammar instruction that already takes place in the classroom. Many first-year textbooks follow a grammar-driven syllabus that “seeks to isolate linguistic forms in order to teach and test them one at a time” (R. Ellis, 1997, p. 639). A grammar-driven syllabus in the first year is not necessarily undesirable, but it has the result of presenting each grammar point in isolation, and it is left to the instructor to show the students the coherence in the grammar. CG provides a tool for the instructor to reveal the network of form and function that underlies the grammar. For the purposes of this chapter, we define explicit grammar instruction as both providing students with a metalanguage to talk about grammatical structure as well as focusing student attention on grammatical form and function. In particular, this definition of explicit instruction is compatible with the teaching methodologies of focus on form (Doughty, 2003; Doughty & Williams, 1998; Long, 1991) and structured input (VanPatten, 1996).

There is still debate over how one defines implicit and explicit instruction and their effectiveness. R. Ellis’s (1994) definition of implicit instruction is the most widely accepted one; he defines implicit instruction as asking students to induce rules by looking at examples. Explicit instruction is defined as presenting a specific rule and then having the students practice it. Ellis then reviews the research on which form of instruction is most beneficial and when. However, the results are inconclusive. He states that,

on balance, the available evidence indicates that an explicit presentation of the rules supported by examples is the most effective way of presenting difficult new material. However, the effectiveness of an implicit or explicit instructional treatment may depend on the type of linguistic material being learnt and the characteristics of the individual learner. (p. 643)

Ellis concludes that both explicit and implicit instruction have their place in foreign language instruction but that it has yet to be determined what form of instruction is most useful, at what point in the process of learning, or why. But it is clear that learners can benefit from both types of instruction. Since CG is not a teaching methodology or a theory of second-language acquisition, there is nothing in CG’s view of grammar or its application in the classroom that prohibits the instructor from using both explicit and implicit instruction, though CG itself is not an implicit approach. CG can be used to explain a grammatical structure either before or after students have worked with examples.

With regard to the benefits or effectiveness of explicit instruction alone, research has yielded mixed results. Lightbown (1991), Pienemann (1984, 1989),

and White (1991) highlight the difficulty of pinpointing when explicit instruction has long-term benefits, or which structures can be taught and retained by students for an extended period of time. In short, it is hard to determine which structures the students will acquire and which ones they will learn only for brief manipulation in structured environments. The experienced classroom teacher often develops a keen sense of which structures these are and is aware that forms can be memorized and structures learned for short-term manipulation, but it does not mean that the structure has been acquired.

Further research is needed to know which grammatical structures are more easily understood at the metalinguistic level based on explicit or implicit instruction. Beyond the answer to that research question, studies are needed to show which approach yields the best results with respect to learning/acquisition for each particular grammatical structure. The research agenda is twofold. First, instructors should provide the students with a rubric for understanding grammar as a coherent whole that fosters their metalinguistic knowledge and that is an essential component of their translingual and transcultural competence and then test the rubric for its effectiveness. A second and parallel strand of research would be to study which structures are best taught explicitly and which are best taught implicitly and, as a corollary, when in the learning process the instructor should teach the structure. However, it is our assertion that CG presentations of the grammar will aid both types of research.

We are making the assumption in this chapter that structure can be taught at some point in the learning process. Pienemann (1989) proposes that language is teachable if the structure is taught close to the time when the student is ready to acquire it in the natural order of acquisition. The teachability hypothesis suggests that instruction does not impede the natural order of acquisition and that it may aid a learner's acquisition of certain structures. The challenge lies in teaching those grammatical structures that a student is ready to learn. Krashen (1985) has a similar hypothesis about how and when to direct student learning. Krashen has the notion of comprehensible input, which means that students receive and understand messages. They move ahead from  $i$  by being exposed to  $i + 1$ , which is the next level in the natural order of acquisition. This implies that the provider of comprehensible input or  $i + 1$  will have to know what is next in the natural order of acquisition for the learner.

VanPatten (1996) focuses on another concept: structured input. Structured input requires that the input should contain the target structure and that the students should notice it. The materials that are given to the students to practice the structure should also foster awareness and facilitate noticing. The students should work from recognizing the structure to more unrestricted production, that is, free speech or writing, as the lesson progresses. VanPatten (1996) shows that carefully selected input can prompt students to notice a syntactic structure, recognize it, and reproduce it in controlled environments. Properly designed materials taught at the appropriate time for students can lead to long-term and continued acquisition (R. Ellis, 1997). As mentioned above, research can show what types of structures are amenable to explicit or implicit modes of teaching and whether

students acquire a metaknowledge, the ability to manipulate forms in restricted environments (i.e., cloze tests and drills), or the ability to manipulate forms in unrestricted environments, such as free writing or speech.

The preceding discussion focused on whether students can learn and/or acquire structures the instructor teaches or exposes them to. We know that students cannot acquire all the rules of the grammar that they are exposed to, either implicitly or explicitly, in one year of instruction. It is possible, though, that teaching learners one structure will trigger or aid in the acquisition of others. Teaching a marked structure (i.e., one that differs from the more normative structures in a language such as the dative case in German) aids in the acquisition of the accusative and nominative functions (R. Ellis, 1997). This is why, in German at least, we should not stop teaching structures that we know students will not acquire until later in the process. We know that students will not acquire the dative case in the early stages of language learning, but the teaching of the dative case will aid in the acquisition of the accusative and nominative case functions.

Considering the multiple factors that influence acquisition, one may benefit from using a combined approach to grammar instruction, engaging in both implicit and explicit instruction (N. C. Ellis, 2005). In this respect, CG can be useful because it can be used to focus on specific linguistic forms in explicit instruction as well as facilitate induction in implicit instruction. Recently, articles have addressed the applicability of CG to the language classroom and its effectiveness for teaching grammar in the second-language and foreign language classroom (Archard, 2004; Cadierno, 2004; de Knop & de Rycker, 2008; Janda & Clancy, 2002; Lam, 2009; Lysinger, 2009; Masuda, 2005; Zyzik, 2006). Lysinger (2009) showed that a CG approach to case in first-year German and Russian produced statistically higher rates of accuracy on three measures (metaknowledge, cloze test of forms, and a free-written response to a prompt) than a control group who received no CG instruction. Both treatment and control groups received the same amount of instruction, but the control group's instruction was based solely on the textbook. To date, Lysinger (2009) and Lam (2005) are among the few studies that test the effectiveness of CG in a classroom environment.

Following Doughty and Williams (1998), R. Ellis (2001), Robinson (2001), and many others, we argue that a metalinguistic explanation of grammar has its place in classrooms teaching second-language acquisition, although not at the expense of language use. In the case of German, a metalinguistic explanation of grammar serves many purposes. It draws students' attention to the functions of the grammatical structures, which allows them to activate the internal cognitive processes involved in second-language acquisition (Anderson, 1983, 1985). Metalinguistic explanations show that the structure under consideration is important. In addition, it has been shown that novice learners benefit from explicit, metalinguistic explanations of errors (R. Ellis, Loewen, & Erlam, 2006). Given that students will be novices with respect to most aspects of German grammar until the advanced levels of instruction, a metalinguistic explanation is suited to the elementary, the intermediate, as well as the advanced classroom. CG can supplement these metalinguistic explanations.

## An Example of a CG Lesson Plan

We emphasize in this chapter that explicit grammar instruction is beneficial in the foreign language classroom and that foreign language programs generally favor communicative language teaching, as manifested in the many textbooks based on communicative methodologies. Many textbooks and syllabi strive for what Doughty and Varela (1998) call “communicative focus on form,” seeking a balance between explicit and implicit grammar instruction that centers on communicative tasks. CG, because it centers on prototypes rather than structures and the notion that meaning cannot be separated from form, creates an extra space in which students can experiment with concepts rather than words, relaxing the perceived division between language and meaning. This means that the instructor, when using a communicative focus on form syllabus, can use the metalanguage of CG to refine students’ perceptions of the explicit grammar explanations in their textbooks.

The following four-part lesson plan illustrates how CG’s metalanguage can complement explicit grammar instruction that may take place in the foreign language classroom. The lesson plan has two goals. First, it introduces students to the grammatical metalanguage they will use in class during explicit instruction, and, second, it provides a cognitive domain to which the instructor can return throughout the semester or quarter when explicitly presenting new grammatical structures or concepts. Because it is used during the first few days of instruction in an introductory language class, the lesson takes place in English. This will change as students become more proficient in the target language. It is also important to note that the lesson plan represents only part of what happens during the class hour; it is assumed that the instructor has other activities in addition to this focus on grammar.

The lesson plan uses a specific cognitive domain to which the instructor regularly returns when introducing new schemas and prototypes. The instructor chose an internationally famous pop singer, known here as Singer X, whose name, face, and voice have appeared in print media; on television, radio, and the Internet; and in many languages. Despite its ostensible simplicity and superficiality, this particular cognitive domain, as reflecting a pervasive cross-cultural discourse, is ideal for a number of reasons. First, Singer X’s international fame makes for an accessible cognitive domain that many students share or could at least relate to. In other words, aspects of Singer X’s music, career, and personal and public life are subject to ongoing, multiple, and differing interpretations in different cultures. In addition, this cognitive domain can easily be reactivated later to teach new structures. Finally, because of the figure’s celebrity status, the instructor can choose from a wide range of images, recordings, and videos to present various prototypes, from simple to complex. In short, far from being a superficial cognitive domain, Singer X is a rich resource for CG and other sorts of instruction and experimentation on a number of levels.

Typically, the instructor devotes the last 10 minutes of class of the first three to four class sessions to explicit grammar instruction. This lesson plan is divided into four segments. At the beginning of the first segment, the instructor tells the

students that she is going to introduce them to a new way of thinking about grammar. The instructor then projects on a screen an image of Singer X carrying her toddler son in her left arm and holding a baby bottle in her right hand. The image activates the cognitive domain before any discussion about grammar takes place.

After the instructor projects the image on the screen, she writes a series of questions on the board:

- 1. Who is that?                      2. What does she do?                      3. Who is that with her?**

The instructor then asks the students the questions. As the students answer, the instructor records the answers, adjusting slightly to suit instructional needs. The answers appear as follows:

- 1. That's [Singer X].                      2. She's a singer.                      3. That's her son.**

Once the instructor has recorded the responses, she returns to each statement and writes the corresponding CG symbols underneath each statement:

- 1. That's [Singer X].                      2. She's a singer/pop star.                      3. That's her son.**

- 1. ○    2. ○    3. ○**

Because CG asserts that grammar is present at the clausal level, the instructor does not treat "That's [Singer X]" as a derivative of "That is [Singer X]." Instead, the expression, because it is a product of different properties and functions outside language, stands on its own; the diagram illustrates the prototype. This prototype, though it needs to be explicitly presented, does not necessarily need a label; students can induce this structure.

The instructor then writes a fourth question on the board: "What is [Singer X] holding?" and asks the students. The instructor then records the answer underneath:

**[Singer X] is holding a bottle.**

The instructor then writes the prototype diagram next to the statement:

**[Singer X] is holding a bottle.                      ○                      →                      ●**

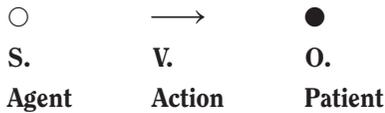
At this point, the instructor typically ends the lesson, as this suffices to introduce the prelinguistic concepts that the instructor will continue to use.

At the end of the next class session,<sup>8</sup> the instructor projects the same picture on the screen and writes the four corresponding sentences on the board again. The instructor then underlines "[Singer X]" and asks the students what part of speech the word is. Someone will identify it as the subject of the sentence. The instructor writes an S below "[Singer X]" and below the clear circle. Then the instructor underlines "is holding" and asks the students what part of speech that is. Someone will reply that it is a verb, and the instructor writes V under "is holding" and under the arrow. Then the instructor underlines "bottle" and asks the class what part of speech that is. Typically, at least one student will call this a direct object. The instructor writes O under "bottle" and under the opaque circle:

**[Singer X] is holding a bottle.                      ○                      →                      ●**  
**S.                      V.                      O.                      S.                      V.                      O.**

Here, the instructor raises two points. First, we agree that the elements in the sentence can be classified independently as things such as subject, verb, and object. However, the aim is that we begin to see expressions as more than the sum of grammatical elements; that is, students should start thinking in terms of prototypes or particular constellations of elements that express particular meanings. The prototype, as demonstrated by the diagram, shows us that there is a distinct relationship between the subject, verb, and object.

Now that the instructor has introduced the concept of semantic/syntactic prototypes, she can present the new terms that she will use to inform the students' grammatical metalanguage: agent, action, and patient. Underneath the CG diagram, the instructor writes these terms:



The instructor explains that the concepts of agent, action, and patient imply relationships between the elements in the sentence "An agent performs an action on a patient." This differs from "A subject is the part of the sentence or clause about which something is being said" or "A verb is the part of speech that expresses existence, action, or occurrence," which are explanations the students have likely heard before. The former statement about action, agent, and patient implies interdependence, whereas the latter statements about subject and verb imply that parts of speech are autonomous and arbitrarily linked together. The instructor may field questions and provide other sentences as examples if she so chooses but can also end the lesson for the day.

Some might object to the introduction of the terms "agent," "action," and "patient," arguing that this addition will ultimately create confusion rather than mitigate it. However, the CG metalanguage serves to provide students with a conceptual method of approaching the grammar, which may appeal to students with visual or spatial learning styles. As stated earlier, since it is difficult to determine what influences acquisition, a combined approach may benefit the instructor and student.

At the end of the third class session, the instructor projects the original image of Singer X on the screen, writes the four corresponding sentences on the board, and then projects a new image of Singer X next to the original, this time of her in a grocery store with her son. Her son sits in the child's seat of a shopping cart, and Singer X holds a box of cereal. The instructor then poses questions similar to the ones asked during the first lesson:

- 1. Who is that?**
- 2. What is she looking at?**
- 3. Who is the other person?<sup>9</sup>**

As the students answer, the instructor records the answers for the students to see and then asks them to work in pairs and draw the correct diagrams for each sentence. They should also determine what each statement has: agent, action, patient, and what those are in each sentence. Once the students are done working

together, the instructor can assign different pairs to put their diagrams on the board next to the corresponding sentences. The sentences should look something like the following:

1. **That's [Singer X].**

○  
**Agent**

2. **She's looking at some cereal.**

○            →            ●  
**Agent            Action            Patient**

3. **That's her son.**

○  
**Agent**

At this point, the students recognize and identify the syntactic/semantic prototypes. Once they have done this, the instructor asks them to find the same prototypes in a text.<sup>10</sup> The instructor assumes that the students will make some errors in recognizing the prototypes, as they do in other exercises in their textbooks, and she can intervene and correct the students.

At the end of the fourth class session, the instructor briefly reviews the prototypes with the students and then projects a third picture on the screen. The picture features Singer X, her husband, and her two sons. Singer X is pushing a stroller, and her husband is carrying one of his sons. The instructor then writes the two prototype diagrams on the board that the students are now familiar with and has them use the picture to construct as many sentences that match the prototype diagrams as possible. Possible sentences include "That's [Singer X]," "That's [Singer X]'s husband," "He's holding his son," and "[Singer X] has/is pushing a stroller." After reviewing the sentences, answering questions, and making any corrections that might be necessary, the instructor can end the lesson for the day.

Over the four class days, the instructor has managed to accomplish a number of things with this lesson plan. She has engaged in using a new metalanguage with the students that is both lingual and visual. She has encouraged the students to associate syntactic structures with prelinguistic concepts or images. She has asked students to recognize a structure, identify it, and then reproduce it. Finally, she has instructed the students in both implicit and explicit ways about grammar.

This extended lesson plan establishes the foundation on which further discussions of grammar can take place. The students were introduced to a new way of conceiving of and talking about grammar (i.e., the syntactic/semantic prototypes of "agent," "action," and "patient"). These concepts and terms, which will be expanded on as instruction progresses, will later complement the grammatical explanations that the students will hear from the instructor and see in their textbooks. Since the association has already been drawn between subject–verb–object and agent–action–patient, the instructor can provide a more refined explanation of grammar, one that focuses on meaning and thus is compatible with communicative language teaching.

## Summary

CG considers meaning central to language, focusing on the relationship between syntax and elements outside language, which we have called “prelinguistic” here. Unlike universal grammar, CG asserts that an expression is more than the sum of the syntactic elements that represent it, that semantics is conceptual rather than truth conditional. CG also argues that not language but rather the processes of learning are innate. Exposure to language does not activate it within the learner; rather, the learner acquires language through exposure, extracting the “rules” and patterns from examples received.

According to CG, learners store these patterns in the mind as schemas, such as *haben* + “condition.” These schemas have prototypes, a syntactic structure associated with a prelinguistic image or concept. *Ich habe Hunger*, for example, is a prototype of the schema *haben* + “condition.” Speakers can judge the degree to which an expression matches the prototype, which depends on a number of factors, including what cognitive domain has been activated in the speaker’s mind. Because an expression need not possess all the characteristics of a prototype in order to belong to a schema, deviations from the prototype are tolerated and are considered extensions of the prototype. The concept of prototype extensions, as well as CG’s view of transitivity, distinguishes it from other theories of grammar.

Because CG asserts the importance of the relationship between syntax and meaning, it complements foreign language instruction, specifically focus on form, structured input, and communicative teaching approaches, which emphasize communication over a structural approach. The lesson plan demonstrates how CG can be introduced into the foreign language classroom and used to inform students’ metaknowledge about grammar. Using a cognitive domain to activate schemas, the instructor explicitly presents a new grammatical concept, that of the prototype, and integrates the terms (“agent,” “action,” and “patient”) into the students’ grammatical metalanguage. More CG terms can be introduced to students as time progresses, but these three suffice as a beginning. The metalanguage of CG serves as a foundation on which other concepts can be placed, such as notions of transitivity, which complement explicit grammar instruction—of German case, for example.

Equally important, students might begin taking more risks in the classroom as well as outside it. For example, since the cognitive domain Singer X exists outside the textbook, it gives the instructor and the students the opportunity to experiment with the rules they learn in class and practice with exercises from the textbook. Unlike the topics that typically serve as the basis for the grammatical lessons in textbooks that employ a communicative approach, such as “Shopping,” “Family,” “Holidays,” “Leisure Time,” and so on, using the cognitive domain Singer X or other cognitive domains associated with pervasive cultural discourses, such as sports figures or other celebrities, significant historical events, or aspects of target-culture socialization, allows students to experiment with the language outside the scripted exercises that the students will first use. Once the students have become comfortable with the syntactic/semantic prototypes and have exhausted the exercises in the textbook, they can start experimenting with the prototypes,

using the cognitive domain Singer X—or any cognitive domain the instructor chooses—to engage with the target language and regard it as more than the sum of its individual parts of speech and in the process improve their proficiency.

In a larger context, CG offers another benefit, namely, the promotion of translangual and transcultural competence, goals identified by the MLA Report as essential to combating the crisis in foreign language education. The committee defines translangual and transcultural competence as

the ability to operate between languages. Students are educated to function as informed and capable interlocutors with educated native speakers in the target language. They are also trained to reflect on the world and themselves through the lens of another language and culture. They learn to comprehend speakers of the target language as members of foreign societies and to grasp themselves as Americans—that is, as members of a society that is foreign to others. They also learn to relate to fellow members of their own society who speak languages other than English. (MLA, 2007, p. 4)

In short, students should be able to comprehend and express themselves not only in the target language but also in the target *culture* and use that knowledge of the language and culture to deepen their understanding of their own language and culture, which then refines the manners in which they interact with members of other societies as well as their own. CG first assists this agenda by helping foreign language instructors conceive of transcultural elements that can be used in the classroom, particularly in the form of cognitive domains. On a material level, the instructor has the opportunity to seek and employ cognitive domains that reach across and exist between and among multiple cultures and languages. In this case, the instructor chose the cognitive domain Singer X because, though she is from the United States and part of U.S. mainstream pop culture, she is also a fixture in multiple communities and cultures around the world; almost everything about Singer X, from her music to her appearance to her behavior in public and private, is interpreted through various linguistic and cultural lenses. As the students become more proficient in the target language, the instructor can start investigating interpretations of the cognitive domain through the lens of the target culture and language. The instructor, if she so chooses, can use this cognitive domain to open a space for discourses of ethnicity, gender, socioeconomics, and cultural values.

On a linguistic level, CG provides another mode of analysis that prompts the kind of critical thinking that helps students become “capable and competent interlocutors,” fleshing out grammar instruction and prompting students to engage actively with the language. In CG-informed grammar instruction, students are asked to “extract the rules,” especially when working with the diagrams. Extracting the rules of a language implies many things. First, a pattern must be discerned and then repeatedly recognized. Second, the learner must induce, experiment, or inquire in order to extract the rules. “Extract” implies action, whereas prolonged exposure, a principle of universal grammar, implies passivity. Finally, if the discourse centers on “rules,” then it is also a discourse of plasticity,

the notion that rules can be amended, expanded, or eliminated when no longer current; new rules can also be added. This leads to the implication that CG deals not only with what is but also with what is possible.

## Notes

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1. The theory of CG focuses on phonology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, and discourse in their relation to teaching and learning. Although the word “cognitive” is in the name, CG is not solely a theory of first- or second-language acquisition. Its closest relative in theories of second-language acquisition would be the connectionist approach (cf. N. Ellis, 2003; Pienemann, 1998). CG is not the best rubric for discussions of noticing, awareness (cf. Bialystok, 1982, 1992; Golanka, 2006), and learner strategies, topics that commonly come to mind with the word “cognitive.”
2. Langacker (1991) defines the usage-based model as a nonreductive approach that views rules as schematizations of expressions. That means that the language that is analyzed is present at the level of the clause. CG does not seek to predict all and only the possible clauses that a language could produce. It seeks to analyze the structures that are produced.
3. These sentences, which draw on Friedrich Dürrenmatt’s drama *Die Physiker* (1961), are very typical and fitting examples of transitivity. The play is a satire, and as it opens, a nurse in a mental institution has been strangled, and the police are investigating. Three patients believe themselves to be famous physicists, and this is the second nurse who has been killed. This play is commonly read in second-year German or upper-division German courses. It serves the dual purpose of being prototypically transitive and amusing the teacher.
4. For more information on metaphors in everyday life, see Lakoff and Turner (1980, 1989).
5. “Prelinguistic” is used to refer to imagery or concepts that are cognitively possible without language (Call, 1980; Suffridge, 1973).
6. Postcards, greeting cards, posters, and T-shirts are available with the infamous expression. In addition, the SPD used *Ich habe fertig!* as a slogan in their unsuccessful campaign against Helmut Kohl and the CDU/CSU soon after.
7. The term “patient” is used to describe a semantic role of the recipient of an action. In some languages, the patient is encoded in the accusative case. “Patient” is used to describe a participant who is in an asymmetrical relationship to another participant in a clause (Fillmore, 1968).
8. The instructor is served best by continuing the CG lesson plan at the end of class rather than the beginning in order to minimize the amount of explicit grammar instruction that will take place at any time and thereby not privilege grammatical accuracy over communicative proficiency.
9. One should note here that not only the order of the questions but also the verb used in the subject–verb–object sentence has changed. The change in verb, though, does not exclude the statement from the category.
10. The text is as follows: “Singer X is an American pop singer. She was born in 1981 in Mississippi. She is the first female artist whose first four albums all made the number one slot on the pop charts. In less than 10 years, she sold

87 million albums. The RIAA places her among singers with the most sold albums in American history. She is the middle of three siblings and is the daughter of [mother's name] and [father's name]. She has a brother, whose name is [brother's name], and she has a sister, [sister's name]. As a child, she acted in commercials and was a Mouseketeer on the *New Mickey Mouse Club* show. She has two sons, [first son's name] and [second son's name].” Most students will identify the most basic structures: the first, third, and fourth sentences. Some students might identify more. Students will most likely make mistakes as well.

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