

Knut Kielmann

LCCM Theory – A Protean Approach to Word Meaning

- Vyvyan Evans, *How Words Mean – Lexical Concepts, Cognitive Models, and Meaning Construction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009. XV, 377 p. [Price: EUR 39,90]. ISBN: 978-0-19-923467-7.

The book presents a new approach to the inherent variation in word meaning, the Theory of Lexical Concepts, Cognitive Models and Meaning Construction (LCCM). The author offers an interesting cognitive semantic theory of word meaning and interpretation that does not claim to replace existing theories it draws upon, but rather a complementing theory that provides a missing link in meaning construction (cf. 340).

According to Evans, the most conspicuous detail that differentiates LCCM theory from other cognitive approaches is a basic distinction between the linguistic and the conceptual system. The distinction is modeled in terms of theoretical constructs he calls ›lexical concept‹ and ›cognitive model‹. Lexical concepts are associated with linguistic forms and thus are a part of the user's individual mental grammar. Lexical concepts provide access sites at particular ›points‹ in conceptual knowledge. These points are non-linguistic knowledge structures he calls ›cognitive models‹ (similar to ›semantic frame‹,¹ ›frame‹² or ›base‹³). As in related theories, these consist of information from ›recorded‹ perceptual and subjective states derived from sensory-motor perception, proprioception, and introspection. The constant recording of new perceptual and subjective information results in continuously updated cognitive models. As such LCCM is closely related to ›grounded cognition‹ theories like Theory of Perceptual Symbol Systems.⁴ An interesting new feature is the ›intermediary‹ level of lexical concepts that facilitates access to different stored meanings of a word (the semantic potential of a word). Like other authors, he claims that semantic representations associated with words are not stable and relatively delimited (as Lakoff/Brugmans ›semantic networks‹⁵), but are rather a property of situated use. Words are not meaningful *per se*, the semantic representations of words are a function of the utterance.⁶ The constant interaction of linguistic and conceptual representations forms the ›protean nature of word meaning‹ (46). LCCM claims to provide an account for the variability in meaning representation, semantic composition and figurative language. By complementing several influential cognitive approaches to grammar (Cognitive Grammar⁷ and Cognitive Construction Grammar⁸), LCCM provides a unified account of cognitive semantics AND a cognitive approach to grammar.

The first chapters discuss the received view of word meaning, and the account of word meaning provided by LCCM theory. According to Evans, the standard account cannot deal with the problem of meaning variation across context. As is stated in the book, the distinction of context-independent meaning, namely semantics, and context-dependent meaning, pragmatics, is illusory. From the perspective of LCCM, word meaning is always a function of a situated interpretation (cf. 23). With its emphasis on the interaction of the linguistic and the conceptual system, the theory takes into account the role of the language input during meaning construction whereas others emphasize the role of language output.

The subsequent chapters of the book are devoted to reviews and exhaustive explanations of the theoretical apparatus and principles of cognitive linguistics. In a detailed treatment over several chapters Evans deals with numerous examples and tries to familiarize the reader with the theoretical constructs of LCCM. Certainly, the solution for the issue of meaning variation

across context and figurative language seems appealing. A lexical concept as an ›intermediary device‹ provides access to a large number of primary and secondary cognitive models that form the primary and secondary cognitive model profiles. The variable interpretation of word meaning results from a search through the primary cognitive model profile, whereas a figurative conception arises, if a clash in the primary cognitive model profile leads to a search in the secondary cognitive model profile.

The idea of an ›intermediary‹ level of lexical concepts seems sound for explaining several linguistic phenomena. Evans mentions some plausible evidence that supports the theory. On the other hand, for the limited amount of new and relevant information that is passed on to the reader the book sometimes is too digressive. Many chapters deal with the theoretical terms and principles which Evans describes exhaustively and over-detailed. This is one of the main reasons that make reading the book sometimes too exertive. For me as an empirically working psycholinguist, the book is too theory-driven. Evans overemphasizes theoretical mechanisms and does not try to support his approach with the help of empirical data. Despite many existing empirical studies that consider polysemy or figurative language, the author is not getting into debates about psychological data that concern some of the core issues the book addresses. As is claimed in the book, LCCM is not meant to be a psycholinguistic theory that makes specific predictions about details of language processing (cf. 217). On the other hand, Evans sees his theory as a framework for experimental psychologists that can be empirically verified (cf. 341). In my opinion, this is a contradictory notion. A theory that claims to be scientific must be able to generate hypotheses predicting the experimental outcome in a laboratory setting. If the predictions from a hypothesis are not empirically testable and verifiable, the theory remains unscientific and speculative to some degree. Evans, as the father of LCCM theory, should have the best understanding of his approach and provide some ideas how to empirically test the theoretical construct. Another point is the use of the terms lexical concept and conceptual structure. Whereas a lexical concept is associated with linguistic forms the conceptual structure is associated with cognitive models. That may wrongly imply that the two terms are associated and may have something in common although Evans draws a sharp distinction between linguistic and conceptual structure. I think using another term instead of lexical concept would cause less confusion. Another critical point is the distinction into primary and secondary cognitive models. What characterizes a prototypical primary or secondary cognitive model? As Evans states, cognitive models are multi-modal knowledge structures that consist of ›recorded‹ subjective and perceptual states. Accordingly, primary and secondary cognitive model profiles can never be identical among people, if we assume that all animate beings perceive the world in a different manner.

In conclusion, LCCM theory provides a valuable and insightful new approach of meaning variation in language comprehension and production as well as figurative language understanding. Although LCCM theory primarily is a semantic approach, it tries to incorporate key contributions from cognitive approaches to grammar into a unified framework. Evans emphasizes the influence of prominent theories like Cognitive Grammar and Cognitive Construction Grammar, and considers his theory to be a »semantically informed model of grammar« (338). At first glance it seems an adequate solution to implement lexical concepts as some kind of ›guiding device‹ to different word meanings. Although this assumption sounds like a good solution for many unsolved problems in meaning construction, it remains – from my perspective – difficult to get sufficient empirical evidences supporting that view.

Notes

¹ Cf. Charles J. Fillmore, Frame semantics, in: The Linguistic Society of Korea (ed.), *Linguistics in the Morning Calm*, Seoul 1982, 111–138.

² Cf. Lawrence W. Barsalou, Perceptual Symbol Systems, *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 22:4 (1999), 577–660.

³ Cf. Ronald W. Langacker, *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar: Volume I: Theoretical Prerequisites*, Stanford, CA 1987.

⁴ Cf. Lawrence W. Barsalou, Perceptual Symbol Systems, *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 22:4 (1999), 577–660.

⁵ Cf. Claudia Brugman/George Lakoff, Cognitive Topology and Lexical Networks, in: Steven L. Small/Garrison Cottrell/Michael Tannenhaus (eds.), *Lexical Ambiguity Resolution. Perspectives From Psycholinguistics, Neuropsychology, and Artificial Intelligence*, San Mateo, CA 1988, 477–507.

⁶ Cf. e.g. Lawrence W. Barsalou, Perceptual Symbol Systems, *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 22:4 (1999), 577–660.

⁷ Cf. Ronald W. Langacker, *Cognitive Grammar: A Basic Introduction*, Oxford 2008.

⁸ Cf. Adele E. Goldberg, *Constructions at Work: The Nature of Generalization in Language*, Oxford 2006.

2012-10-18

JLTONline ISSN 1862-8990

Copyright © by the author. All rights reserved.

This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and JLTONline.

For other permission, please contact [JLTONline](http://www.jltonline.de).

How to cite this item:

Knut Kielmann, LCCM Theory – A Protean Approach to Word Meaning. (Review of: Vyvyan Evans, *How Words Mean – Lexical Concepts, Cognitive Models, and Meaning Construction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009.)

In: JLTONline (18.10.2012)

Persistent Identifier: urn:nbn:de:0222-002360

Link: <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0222-002360>