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Interview with Dirk Geeraerts: Challenges and Perspectives in Cognitive Linguistics

Entrevista com Dirk Geeraerts: desafios e perspectivas na linguística cognitiva

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Not applicable.

Dirk Geeraerts is Emeritus Professor of Theoretical Linguistics at the University of Leuven (KU Leuven). He has published extensively in the field of Cognitive Linguistics, with a particular focus on lexical semantics, prototype theory, cognitive sociolinguistics, and corpus linguistics. His work is widely regarded as foundational for research in these areas and their intersections.

Some of his most influential books include:

- Diachronic Prototype Semantics (1997)
- Words and Other Wonders (2006)
- Theories of Lexical Semantics (2010)
- Ten Lectures on Cognitive Sociolinguistics (2018)
- Lexical Variation and Change: A Distributional Semantic Approach (2024)

Professor Geeraerts has also edited important collective volumes, such as *Cognitive Linguistics: Basic Readings* and *The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics* (with Hubert Cuyckens). These works have contributed significantly to establishing Cognitive Linguistics as a major international field of study by bringing together key theories on metaphor, categorization, embodiment, and conceptual structure.

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Dirk Geeraerts kindly granted us this interview, in which he discusses central issues in Cognitive Linguistics, particularly the challenges and prospects of a research area that seeks to integrate the sociocognitive dimension with the semantic and lexical aspects of language.

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Solange Vereza (SV): In your now-classic metaphor, Cognitive Linguistics is envisioned as an archipelago whose distinct islands are underpinned by a shared set of principles forming a unifying “submarine ridge.” In your view, has this archipelago continued to expand, with new islands joining this increasingly compelling intellectual landscape?

Dirk Geeraerts (DG): Absolutely. But before I get more specific allow me to thank you for the opportunity to express my thoughts. It’s an honour and a pleasure to address the lively community of cognitive linguists in Brazil. Now, with regard to your question, if I restrict myself to core developments, there are two islands that I would recognise as crucial additions to the archipelago: multimodality and corpus linguistic methodology.

Multimodality teaches us that the linguistic sign is much broader than we traditionally think. Meaning is not just represented in the verbal sign, whether in auditory or in written form, but meaning in most kinds of communicative settings, meaning is also present in gestures, in facial expressions, in bodily postures that constantly interact with verbal expression. In the context of cognitive linguistics this means that embodiment not only applies to meaning (in the sense for instance in which an up/down direction in metaphors corresponds with our bodily posture) but that embodiment also applies to the formal side of the linguistic sign.

The corpus linguistic island is a logistic one; it hosts the techniques (specifically, the quantitative techniques) that allow us to make the most of the available corpus data for the languages that we study. In 2006, when I formulated the ‘archipelago’ idea, the ‘quantitative turn’ in cognitive linguistics (as Laura Janda has dubbed it) was only beginning to emerge, but it is now clearly a staple of the cognitive linguistic approach. The cause of that expansion of the methodological toolkit is clear: if cognitive linguistics is a usage-based approach (as you will remember, ‘usage based’ is one of the original islands), studying actual usage as it appears in corpus data is essential, but for an adequate investigation of the available data, a quantitative approach is optimal.

SV: In one of your articles, you emphasize the importance of a social-semiotic commitment within Cognitive Linguistics research. Do you consider the critical approach to metaphor studies—particularly its focus on metaphor in political discourse and on the role of ideology in shaping metaphorical thought and language—to constitute a practical contribution to this commitment?

DG: Ah yes, that's an interesting point. Let me first say that in general I believe that we should try to maintain a distinction between research and activism. A researcher is trying to understand the world and an activist is trying to change it: these are two different roles, with different rules, even if one person combines them. To make that explicit, if as a linguist you achieve a better understanding of how language works in society, it's part of your job as a researcher to make that understanding available to society. Scientific knowledge is a common good, and it's an aspect of the researcher's role to disseminate his or her results. But arguing how that knowledge should be used – how, for instance, it could influence social practices – does not I think follow directly from the linguistic analysis, because it will implicitly or explicitly involve a reference to values that are not as such specifically linguistic. Arguing about linguistic rights, for instance, relies on general (and possibly contested) assumptions about individual and collective rights, but these do not follow from the linguistic description. That does not mean that as a linguist you should stay away from the debate about rights, on the contrary, but if you do, it's important to distinguish between your linguistic and your philosophical (or social) arguments.

I am formulating this caveat because in the case of critical metaphor studies, I do often feel that people are jumping too enthusiastically to social conclusions. One aspect of this is the danger of reading things into metaphors, for instance by privileging an etymological reading of metaphors over a conventional one. (Gerard Steen's theory of 'deliberate metaphor' is a welcome antidote in this respect.) Another aspect is selective reading. To give you an anecdotal example, some time ago I witnessed a talk on news reports about Ukrainian refugees. The talk referenced the often cited 'liquid metaphors' for refugees, as when saying '*waves* of refugees are *pouring* in' dehumanises the people in question. But the texts under consideration also contained sentences stating that the refugees left Ukraine while 'bombs were raining down'. When challenged, the presenter was reluctant to agree that the latter formulation could be read as normalising bombing (as a natural weather phenomenon). But that's inconsistent: without further clear criteria for accepting one case as an ideological metaphor and not the other, the analysis is selective.

So, in short, a linguistic approach informed by a 'sociosemiotic commitment' should definitely not shy away from ideological issues and contested concepts, but maintaining uncompromising (self-)critical standards is crucial.

SV: Continuing with the topic of the social-semiotic commitment in Cognitive Linguistics, it appears that the field is undergoing a social turn, with areas such as Cognitive Sociolinguistics, Cognitive Anthropology, Cognitive Pragmatics, and even Cognitive Discourse

Analysis emerging as significant contributors. To what extent are these approaches compatible with the foundational notion of embodiment in Cognitive Linguistics? And what, in fact, is “cognitive” in the guiding principles of these socially oriented perspectives?

DG: Again, a pertinent question. For the historical record, both perspectives are ‘foundational’ in the sense that both a more psycholinguistic and a more sociolinguistic perspective were present from the very beginnings of cognitive linguistics. You can for instance find them next to each other in my editorial introduction to the very first issue of *Cognitive Linguistics*, the journal. Although terminologically, the word *cognitive* seems to suggest the primacy of a psychological perspective, there was an awareness from the very start that cognition is embedded in the cultural environment, i.e. that it is socially shared and transmitted. That is actually an insight that has been gaining ground in Cognitive science at large. Cognitive science as it emerged in the 1950s was very much a psychologically oriented endeavour, but recent developments such as the emergence of the ‘4E cognition’ paradigm have clearly shifted it in the direction of a broader, contextualised conception of cognition, in the same way in which the psychological orientation of Chomskyan grammar was shifted in cognitive linguistics towards a more balanced view.

That being said, it is also true that an awareness of the foundational nature of the social (and therefore also historical) aspects of language was not always equally shared in cognitive linguistic circles. In the early 1990s, for instance, when Stef Grondelaers and I drew the attention to the role of the theory of humours in the lexicalisation of emotions there was quite some resistance from the quarters of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, who favoured a universalist physiological explanation for anger metaphors and others. Gradually, of course, Kövecses has wholeheartedly embraced a cultural perspective.

That is not the case everywhere however, and I do believe that the relevance of a socio- historical perspective on language needs to be emphasised more. One reason is that even our experiences of the body, including such typically ‘psychological’ phenomena like emotions, have a cultural aspect to them, as shown for instance by cross-cultural emotion studies. Another reason is that our individual language never emerges from scratch. Our linguistic categories are based on experience (as a major tenet of cognitive linguistics has it), but it’s not only our personal experience that shapes those categories. They are handed down to us through a historical line and they reflect historical experience. Our use of language is implicitly a conversation with the past, and a linguistic analysis should be permeated by that recognition.

SV: Some cognitive linguists place strong emphasis on the experiential and embodied foundations of meaning. How do you envision integrating

neuroscientific or psychological evidence to further substantiate this position? And how do you combine embodied import with the sociocultural dimensions explored by Cognitive Sociolinguistics and Cultural Linguistics, of which you are one of the most prominent scholars?

DG: When people say that something is an excellent question, they often just mean ‘It’s a question to which I have a ready answer’. Well, your question is excellent – but my answer is tentative at most. In line with my answer to the previous question, I would first like to warn against physicalist reductionism. The conceptual link between embodiment and the sociocultural nature of language is experience. Cognitive linguistics insists that language is experientially grounded, and that experience is both bodily and cultural (and sometimes the two cannot be separated). Philosophically speaking, that experiential grounding is also what explains the affinity between cognitive linguistics and phenomenology – but perhaps I should leave that topic for a different occasion. The grounding of language in lived experience means that if we want to use, for instance, neurophysiological evidence to understand the workings of language, we will have to understand the evidence in terms of that experience, and that means that an independent understanding of that experience has methodological primacy.

I realise this is abstract, but let me try to explain with the ‘raining bombs’ example mentioned above. Suppose you can establish that when ‘bombs were raining down’ is uttered, the brain region containing weather concepts (supposing it exists) is activated in the hearer’s brain. Would that be enough evidence to say that the speaker was indeed naturalising bombing by categorising it as a weather phenomenon, even if the speaker denies that was the intention? Probably not: what decides on the interpretation is rather that there is an existing convention (a social phenomenon) for using *rain* in the sense ‘to bestow incessantly and in large quantities’. On top of that, even if you think that the neurophysiological evidence could be decisive, establishing to begin with that a particular brain region corresponds with weather concepts requires a preliminary interpretation of the neurophysiological activation patterns in terms of everyday word senses, i.e. a recourse to the experiential level.

So, I wouldn’t say that our experiential understanding of language can be reduced to neurophysiological data. But that doesn’t mean that such data are irrelevant, or for that matter, that ‘our experiential understanding of language’ is unproblematic. For me, the hermeneutic notion of interpretation still defines the methodological core question of semantics: how do we ascribe meaning? How for instance do we distinguish between different senses of the same word? On the one hand, I have always insisted that a simplistic answer to such questions is not adequate. But on the other hand I have also always argued that to answer

the question all available evidence should be taken into consideration, and that includes neurophysiological and psychological data.

SV: Cognitive Grammar/Construction Grammar and Cognitive Semantics are often regarded as two of the most influential domains within Cognitive Linguistics. In some university programs in Brazil, they are typically taught as distinct modules. Given that Cognitive Linguistics presupposes a non-dichotomized view of semantics and grammar, would it be possible—or even desirable—to systematically integrate these domains into a single instructional unit? And how do you see the relationship between Cognitive Grammar and Construction Grammar, the latter being very popular in Brazil?

DG: A superficial answer could be that both construction grammar and cognitive semantics are very rich traditions, with a vast amount of ideas and literature to cover, so it doesn't make a lot of sense to try to bring them together into a single course. But the real underlying question of course is how theoretically unified the two are: is there enough theoretical unity to present them as a single framework, regardless of how many modules or courses or teaching hours are needed to introduce students to the framework?

Now, I would argue that the conceptual link between construction grammar and cognitive semantics has a lot to do with applying features of prototype theory (a cornerstone of a cognitive linguistic conception of categorisation) to grammar. A first relevant prototype feature is the fuzziness of category boundaries – in particular, the boundary between 'lexicon' and 'grammar' is seen as permeable, and constructions are seen as hybrid entities combining lexical and schematic material. A further relevant feature is the role of typical exemplars, i.e. constructions are instantiated by highly frequent typical cases alongside peripheral ones. From this point of view, construction grammar is a way of lexicalising the grammar (and this is implicitly reflected by the terminology, like in the term *construction*). In other words, the 'lexical' nature of constructions is a conceptual bridge between construction grammar and cognitive semantics, and this is what should be emphasised when you bring them together under the umbrella of cognitive linguistics.

At the same time, recognising this link may be a stimulus for further research, in the sense that certain aspects of lexical analysis have not been completely integrated into construction grammar. I'm thinking now primarily of an onomasiological perspective on categorisation, which has gotten more and more important in lexical studies but which is still only moderately represented in construction grammar.

SV: In your recent book *Lexical Variation and Change: A Distributional Semantic Approach*, you suggest that the extraordinary development of distributional semantics and usage-based methodology thanks to LLMs

and other advanced AI systems may eclipse the task of interpretation and Cognitive Linguistics' original interest in meaning. How do you see the future of Cognitive Linguistics and linguistics in general?

DG: That is a wide-ranging question, and I think I can hardly do more than indicate a number of factors that may be relevant for further developments; actual predictions will be difficult. But let me try to be systematic about this. With a focus on Cognitive Linguistics, I would say we should distinguish between internal and external factors, and with regard to the former also between intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Internal factors involve the current state of Cognitive Linguistics as such; external factors involve the pressure coming from the outside, like the technological advances that you mention. What I mean by 'intrinsic' factors is everything that has to do with the theoretical and descriptive work that is being done: the actual content of research. 'Extrinsic' factors (the terminology is a little bit ad hoc, my apologies for that) have to do with the sociology of science, the fact that linguistics, like all scholarly activity, has a specific social structure in terms of who interacts with whom, where are the leading voices, what are the channels of communication and so on.

So, internal intrinsic factors are basically the ones that you have very adequately raised in your questions: the conceptual tensions that may exist between an embodied and a more cultural and historical conception of Cognitive Linguistics, between a psychological and a sociocultural perspective, and more generally between the various islands in the archipelago. There is a lot of conceptual and theoretical work to be done to integrate the various strands of work within Cognitive Linguistics, and so an important question for the future will be to what extent that challenge will be taken up, or rather, whether people will prefer the safety of their own island (which, admittedly, is often busy enough as it is). In some cases, that could also mean that the link between a specific 'island' and cognitive linguistics is loosened. It may be observed, for instance, that usage-based linguistics as covered by the *Wiley Handbook of Usage-based Linguistics* (Díaz-Campos and Balasch 2023) presents itself independently, and not as a branch or an offshoot of cognitive linguistics.

In that respect, an internal extrinsic factor to take into account is that the first generation of cognitive linguists – roughly, the Californian founding fathers – are becoming less prominent in a sociological sense. They are all retired, and they are becoming less visible in the organisational practice of Cognitive Linguistics, say, the international conferences. Fortunately, Cognitive Linguistics was never dominated by a single figure (like Chomsky for generative grammar or Halliday for Systemic Functional Linguistics), but even so, Lakoff and Langacker and a few others were a focalising point for Cognitive Linguistics as a sociological entity. A point to consider then is what will happen when those voices become silent. Sociologically speaking, what will be the

common ground? Practically speaking, you can translate that in terms of conferences: what is the attractivity going to be of the International Cognitive Linguistics Conference compared to specific conferences like for instance those devoted to construction grammar or metaphor and so on?

Finally, the prominent external factor is indeed the rise of computational distributional semantics. It is a development that comes from the outside, from the field of natural language processing, and it is an ambivalent one. On one hand, computational semantics as realized in LLMs and LLM-based applications epitomises distributional semantics – and distributional semantics is a usage-based methodology *par excellence*. As such, computational distributional semantics is congenial to cognitive linguistics. But on the other hand, there is a danger in the facility with which LLM-based semantic information can be incorporated in linguistic analyses, viz. the danger that the vector representation of meaning will be straightforwardly *equated* with meaning. If LLM-based information is simply taken for granted, the critical step of interpreting the information, of confronting the results with an experiential understanding of language might be omitted, and we would then truly have a ‘semantics without meaning’, as we say in the 2024 book.

It occurs to me now that most of the factors I have mentioned may seem to suggest a fragmentation of Cognitive Linguistics. But that is not a prediction I want to make. On the contrary, I have only wanted to enumerate these factors as indicating challenges that constitute an agenda for the further development of Cognitive Linguistics. It’s more like what you do with a SWOT analysis, if you like: it’s only if you identify threats and weaknesses that you can develop a strategy to deal with them. The LLM-challenge in particular needs attention, I would say: I advocate that cognitive linguistics will not simply adopt current computational semantics, but will develop a program for systematically and comprehensively probing how LLM-based distributional information relates to an experiential understanding of language.

SV: Would you like to offer a few words of encouragement to researchers or graduate students who are considering directing their work toward some of the areas within Cognitive Linguistics?

DG: There are many uncharted areas in the archipelago, but if you want to explore them, you cannot have a feeling of adventure and discovery unless you accept the confusion and doubt and disorientation that will come your way. Do not fear uncertainty, embrace it!

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