

## Cognitive Linguistic Theory and the Biblical Languages

William A. Ross | IBR 2021 (Virtual)

Study of the Bible has always involved study of its languages. But the study of *language* has not always involved linguistic theory as such. It has only been over the past sixty years or so that biblical scholarship has begun to appropriate and apply insights from general linguistics to better understand the ancient texts. Over that time, the bulk of linguistically-informed biblical language research has adopted formalist linguistic theories, such as structuralism or generativism. This trend is due in part to the simple fact that formalist theories are older by comparison than the alternatives. But it is also due to the tendency of interdisciplinary research never to be truly up-to-date on all fronts. That being the case, it is only in the last twenty years that biblical scholarship has come into direct contact with Cognitive Linguistics, the theoretical framework that is in focus here.

### **1 A Brief History of Cognitive Linguistics**

It is important to understand at the outset that Cognitive Linguistics is not a unified field of research. It is, as Geeraerts (2006b, 2) puts it, “an archipelago rather than an island.” That archipelago began to emerge in the 1980s. But its appearance was possible only because of a great deal of earlier tectonic movement, complete with the requisite earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. Only a few words can go to describing those events here.

Linguistics emerged as a distinct academic discipline in the nineteenth century as it became distinct from the older and broader practices of philology. It was the era of comparative linguistics, in which most scholars viewed the study of language as concerned with communication and also as a corollary in some way to the study of the mind. Language was understood as essentially psychological and thus imbricated with human experience (Campbell 2003, 93-94; Geeraerts 2010, 9-16). But the study of language changed shape at the turn of the twentieth century. Perhaps the most important bellwether was the appearance in 1916 of the *Course in General Linguistics* by Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913). His thought was foundational for structuralism as it took root in America, especially in the work of Leonard Bloomfield (1887–1949). For Bloomfield, the human mind was completely irrelevant to linguistic inquiry and description. His anti-psychological approach instead focused on creating mechanisms to empirically verify linguistic descriptions of phonology and morphology. Ultimately, structuralism came to be entirely about the signifier but not at all about the signified; always the winter of grammar, but never the Christmas of meaning.

The face of linguistics changed again in the mid-twentieth century with the theoretical paradigm developed by Noam Chomsky (1923–), the father of generative grammar. With Chomsky, linguistics became rationalist once again. Attention turned back to the relationship between language and the mind, particularly in terms of the principles and parameters were understood as both innate and universal across all languages. But by the 1980s, some who were involved in debates over Generative Semantics had become increasingly dissatisfied with the level of abstractness and restrictiveness that generativism had reached. These linguists, some of whom would go on to lay the theoretical groundwork for Cognitive Linguistics, maintained that language is *not* an autonomous system, but is integrated with human cognition as a whole.

## **2 Theoretical Commitments and (Two) Core Concepts**

Cognitive Linguistics as it has developed over the last forty years is uniquely centered on the nature of linguistic meaning as part of human cognition. In this way, Cognitive Linguistics differs from generativism in its focus not only in knowledge *of* a language, but language as a *form* of knowledge (Janda 2015, 131). At the same time, Cognitive Linguistics also differs from functionalism in its focus on the *experiential* basis for the relationship between language and cognition. At a basic level, Cognitive Linguistics views language as “a repository of world knowledge, a structured collection of meaningful categories that help us deal with new experiences and store information about old ones” (Geeraerts and Cuyckens 2007a, 5). Four key theoretical commitments characterize the discipline as a whole and help bear out this view of language.

### **2.1 Theoretical Commitments**

The first theoretical commitment of Cognitive Linguistics is that language arises from embodied cognition. Cognitive Linguistics hypothesizes that the human mind has no autonomous or innate faculty of some kind where language processing occurs, separate from other cognitive processes, which is a basic assumption in Chomskyan generative grammar. Instead, Cognitive Linguistics maintains that linguistic knowledge is represented in the mind and processed in basically the same way as all other conceptual structures. Linguistic knowledge—the pairing of form/meaning—is therefore *conceptual*, an integral part of cognition in general, and organized and governed in the same ways as the cognitive abilities that are applied in other bodily tasks such as visual perception and sensorimotor activity. Language is *distinguishable* as a cognitive ability, but it is not *unique* in terms of the mental processes that make it possible. An important corollary of this view of

cognition is that linguistic meaning is also embodied—not purely rational—since it reflects human experience in the world (Croft and Cruse 2004, 2-3; Geeraerts 2006b, 4-5; Janda 2015, 132-133).

The second theoretical commitment is that language is perspectivized. Cognitive Linguistics maintains that conceptual structure—and thus also linguistic knowledge—is irreducible to mere truth-conditional correspondence to the external world. Rather, because it arises from embodied cognition, language bears meaning because it construes the world in a perspectivized way, *imposing* a structure upon it rather than just reflecting objective reality. So in CL, conceptual structure is likewise subject to construal in its organization and how categories are formed. To articulate this commitment another way, *grammar is conceptualization*. On this understanding, language provides various ways of portraying and profiling to the information being communicated (Croft and Cruse 2004, 1, 3; Geeraerts 2006b, 4; Evans and Green 2006, 40-43).

The third theoretical commitment is that language is symbolic. Cognitive Linguistics theory emphasizes the primacy of semantics in linguistic analysis by assuming that the basic function of language is to express thought and therefore involves meaning. The way language does this is by using symbols, which consist of forms—whether spoken, written, or even signed—and meanings with which the forms are paired by *convention*. Linguistic symbols bear meaning that is associated not with a particular referent in the external world, but rather with a *concept* or *mental representation* that is derived from categorization of our experience in the external world. Notably, because Cognitive Linguistics hypothesizes that linguistic cognition is indistinct from cognition in general, categorization occurs not only with physical entities but also with language itself. As a result, linguistic phenomena are not strictly distinguished into the ‘levels’ of phonology, morphology, syntax, and so on. Rather, language is viewed as a unified phenomenon for which such categories may serve as convenient labels but are in reality intertwined (Evans and Green 2006, 6-7, 28-30; Geeraerts and Cuyckens 2007a, 5).

The final theoretical commitment is that language is the conventions of use. In this respect, Cognitive Linguistics shares with other functionalist approaches a focus on language as a means of communication; actual usage events among speakers. In Cognitive Linguistics theory, knowledge language is understood to emerge from *use*, such that the abstraction of linguistic categories and structures by language learners and users occurs *inductively*. Consequently, a language is nothing more than the set of form/meaning pairs used by convention within a speech

community (Croft 2000, 26, 95-99). A corollary of this commitment is the unpredictability of language owing to variability in usage events over time, which lead to language change. This occurs not only because speakers themselves change, but because the external world does too (Croft 1990, 257). As such, Cognitive Linguistics is uninterested in discovering a set of linguistic universals, as in formalist theories, but rather seeks to understand how variations in linguistic behaviour give rise to a different model of grammatical representation (Croft and Cruse 2004, 3-4, 71-73; Geeraerts 2006b, 4, 5-6).

## **2.2 Core Concepts**

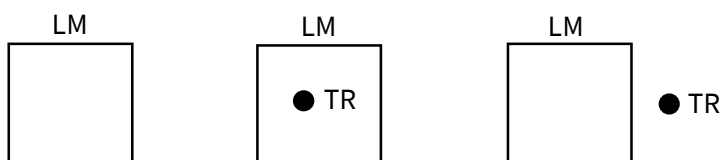
In addition to these four key theoretical commitments in Cognitive Linguistics theory, there are numerous concepts that flow from them. There are certainly more concepts than space allow for here—and in fact more than even the much longer published version of this paper will contain! We will focus here on explaining two of the core concepts in Cognitive Linguistic theory and providing illustrations of how they apply to the study of the biblical text.

### **2.2.1 Image Schemas**

Since Cognitive Linguistics understands conceptual structure to be grounded in embodiment, semantic structure is reckoned the same way. That is, part of what makes language meaningful is the embodied experience with which it is associated. One of the foundational concepts used to explain this association is the image schema, originally developed by Mark Johnson (1987). Image schemas arise directly from repeated sensory interactions with the world, including the visual, auditory, haptic, and vestibular systems of the body. In this sense, image schemas are pre-conceptual and often subconscious. They are not detailed ideas, but abstract or ‘schematic’ in nature and thus provide a foundation for richer conceptual and semantic structures.

To label and describe image schemas, Cognitive Linguistics uses SMALL CAPITALS and simple diagrams, respectively. For example, because the human body has a unidirectional visual apparatus, axial orientation is inherently part of embodied experience. This simple fact gives rise to a number of image schemas like FRONT-BACK, LEFT-RIGHT, and—given the reality of gravity and three-dimensional space—UP-DOWN and NEAR-FAR as well. These image schemas are interconnected in human experience, as are others. Figure 1 shows the CONTAINER image schema at the far left. The diagrams in the centre and at right involve the CONTAINER image schema as well, but as part of the related image schemas for IN and OUT, respectively.

Figure 1



Note too the use of ‘LM’ and ‘TR’ in Figure 1, which stand for ‘Landmark’ and ‘Trajector.’ These terms refer to elements that are related in the construal and profiled as either focal (Trajector/TR) or non-focal (Landmark/LM). For example, in the centre diagram, the TR is IN the CONTAINER LM, while in the right diagram it is OUT (Evans and Green 2006, 176-191; Gibbs and Colston 2006; Evans 2007, 106-108; Oakley 2007).

The notion of an image schema may seem simple, but it has significant explanatory power for linguistic structures. This is illustrated in the clauses in example (1).

- (1) (a) וַיֵּצֵא יוֹנָה מִן־הָעִיר  
Then Jonah went out of the city  
(b) וַיֵּשֶׁב מִקְדָּם לָעִיר  
and sat east of the city,  
(c) וַיַּעַשׂ לוֹ שָׁם סֹכָה  
and he made a booth there for himself.  
(d) וַיֵּשֶׁב תַּחְתֵּיהָ בַּצֵּל  
And he sat under it in the shade (Jon. 4:5a)

In (1a) Jonah is a TR portrayed as OUT of the boundaries of the city, construed as a CONTAINER LM, with the verbal event structured by the SOURCE-PATH image schema involving motion. Similarly, Jonah’s resting place מקדם ‘east’ of the city in (1b) involves a FRONT-BACK image schema and a semantic structure discussed in 2.2.5. below. In (1d), Jonah is again a TR, but now profiled against two LMs, one being the booth as an elevated SURFACE under which Jonah sits and the other being the shade produced by the booth as a CONTAINER in which Jonah is located.

### 2.2.2 Prototypes and Semantic Extension

The cognitive approach to lexical semantics understand words as lexical items associated with a complex but structured conceptual category. This view of categorization was originally posited by Eleanor Rosch (1978) and developed by George Lakoff (1987) and others. Cognitive Linguistics theory hypothesizes that conceptual categories form because humans gather as much information

about our environment as possible with the least possible cognitive effort. As such, the categories are radial, organized around a central prototype to include other, gradually more peripheral members (i.e., meanings) that are distinct but related by convention and held in the mental lexicon. This model of lexical semantics integrates other aspects of Cognitive Linguistics theory, especially image schemas, semantic frames, and conceptual metaphor theory. It is primarily by these cognitive mechanisms that Cognitive Linguistics has accounted for word meaning as a semantic network in which less prototypical senses derive from more prototypical senses through motivated (though not always predictable) meaning extension (Evans and Green 2006, 328-363, 445-467; Geeraerts 2006c; 2010, 182-272; 2015; Evans 2007, 175, 176-177; Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk 2007).

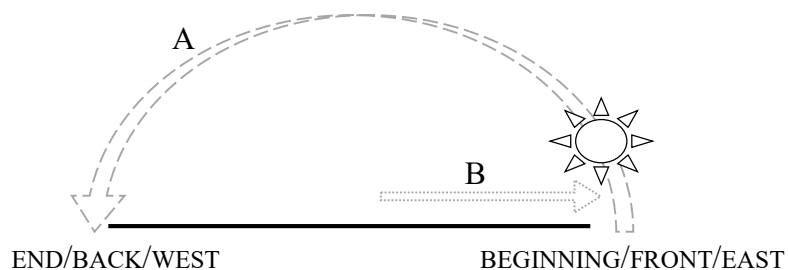
To illustrate prototype theory cognitive semantics and embodied cognition in a simple way, we will revisit מקדם from example (1b), above. Since this lexical item is a compound of the preposition מן ('from') and קדם, the latter comes into focus here first. The prototypical sense of this nominal is *front* as a spatial concept. This sense appears in some texts, as in the adverbial uses in (2) below:

- (2) (a) אַחֲזֹר וְקִדְמָם צִרְתָּנִי  
 You encircle me in back and in front (Ps. 139:5)
- (b) הֵן קִדְמָם אֶהְלֵךְ וְאֵינְנִי וְאֶחֱזֹר וְלֹא-אֲבִין לוֹ  
 Look, I go forwards and he is nowhere;  
 backwards, but I do not sense him (Job 23:8)

In the HB, however, the spatial concept *front* was conventionally expressed using prepositional constructions involving פנה ('face'), such as לפני ('before,' 'facing') or על-פני ('[at the] front of'). But the meaning of both פנה and קדם in this sense arose from the embodied construal of the human face as the front given the orientation of visual perception. The same construal underlies the verb קדם 'to meet, confront.'

Two other senses extend from the prototype, each of which is motivated by different metaphorical construals of SPACE and TIME as semantic domains. Owing to embodied experience, the period of time categorized as a DAY is associated with the light of the SUN, which—as depicted with the arrow labelled A in Figure 2—follows a consistent directional trajectory from its temporal BEGINNING to its END.

Figure 2



Those temporal parts of the DAY period may be metaphorically construed as its spatial FRONT and BACK through the cognitively routine conceptual metaphor TIME IS SPACE, or, more specifically in this instance, THE BEGINNING IS THE FRONT. The texts in (3) illustrate this sense.

- (3) (a) יהוה קנני ראשית דרכו קדם מפעליו מאז  
 YHWH possessed me at the beginning of his way,  
 before his deeds of old (Prov. 8:22)
- (b) והיו בניו כקדם ועדתו לפני תבון  
 Their children will be like before, and their  
 congregation will be established in my presence  
 (Jer. 30:20a)

Given the movement of the SUN across the sky during the DAY period, this metaphor entails gradedness, such that EARLIER IS MORE FRONTWARD. It is in this way that the prototypical spatial meaning of קדם *front* can extend metaphorically to the temporal sense *before*.

A second semantic extension occurs, however, when directional movement is added to the spatial construal of a DAY, as depicted with the arrow labelled B in Figure 2. The examples in (4) demonstrate this meaning, as does (1b) above.

- (4) (a) ויגרש את־האדם וישבן מקדם לגן־עדן את־הפרבים  
 So he drove out the man and positioned a cherubim  
 east of the garden of Eden (Gen. 3:24)
- (b) ויעל כבוד יהוה מעל תוך העיר ויעמד על־ההר אשר  
 מקדם לעיר  
 And the glory of YHWH went up from the middle  
 of the city and stood over the mountain that is east  
 of the city (Ezek. 11:23)

This conceptualization of  $\text{מִזְרָח}$  is also graded but involves geographical positionality of an entity relative to the SUN at the metaphorical FRONT of the DAY. In this way, the third sense *east* is motivated by the conceptual metaphor EASTWARDNESS IS PROXIMITY TO SUNRISE.

### **3 Contributions and Relevance to the Study of the Biblical Languages**

This paper has barely begun to describe Cognitive Linguistics, which is now widely recognized as one of the major frameworks in theoretical linguistics as a discipline, a framework that continues to grow in popularity and application in numerous venues around the world. One of those venues has certainly been biblical studies. It would be unwise to attempt to summarize or discuss contributions of Cognitive Linguistics in detail. Even so, section 4 below presents an attempt at a bibliography of Cognitive Linguistics research in biblical studies that has appeared over the last decade. Otherwise, brief comments are in order about the contours of how Cognitive Linguistics has influenced our field over the last thirty years, and how things might progress moving forward.

Because Cognitive Linguistic theory itself is not a single set of clearly defined procedures and approaches, as noted above, it is no surprise that its use within biblical scholarship is similarly variegated (Howe and Sweetser 2013, 122). The earliest application was the awareness of conceptual metaphor theory in a study of the Hebrew Bible by Marc Brettler (1989). This study is what first brought Cognitive Linguistics to the attention of biblical scholars in what Green and Howe (2014, 1) call a “first wave,” which led to a number of journal articles and conference papers in the 1990s and early 2000s, most of which focused on the Hebrew Bible. The “second wave” of influence they identify as the formation of “The Use of Cognitive Linguistics in Biblical Interpretation” consultation at the 2006 annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature. The first six years of activity in this group culminated in the publication of a volume of collected essays (Howe and Green 2014; see the overview in Howe and Sweetser 2013, 124-127). Since then the output has not ceased; my bibliography contains one hundred and two items and surely is not exhaustive. In general, it is true that much of the work in biblical languages using Cognitive Linguistics so far has focused on biblical Hebrew, but that is not exclusively the case. Almost sixty percent of the bibliography relates to Hebrew, with just under twenty percent to Greek. Hopefully in the coming years this imbalance will resolve to some extent; there is certainly no lack of potential applications of Cognitive Linguistics to post-classical Greek.



On that note, and in closing, then: What are the prospects of Cognitive Linguistics? They are many and promising. No doubt we will continue to see article-length studies of specific linguistic features and their related interpretive questions. Many of the book-length studies of a similar nature have and will continue to be published, often times as revised doctoral dissertations. These of course are welcome, particularly in venues like this one and others like it. So too are larger projects that apply Cognitive Linguistics to traditional categories of biblical language study. For example, Cognitive lexical semantics in the service of biblical lexicography has significant promise, already previewed in the ongoing Semantic Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew. Also welcome are further explorations into higher level areas of biblical studies, ‘above’ (yet reliant on) the nuts and bolts of language per se, such as hermeneutical applications of Cognitive Poetics and pedagogical applications using Cognitive Linguistic approaches to second language acquisition, whether in the classroom or the grammar textbook. All of these possible applications stand to offer biblical interpreters a more refined and robustly theoretically-grounded account of linguistic meaning that—in theory—was embedded in the daily experience and the very conceptual structure of ancient language users themselves.

### **3 Further Reading**

See the annotated bibliography in Howe and Sweetser (2013, 129-131). Note also the following resources:

#### **Handbooks, Companions, Glossaries**

1. Dąbrowska and Divjak (2015)
2. Evans (2007)
3. Geeraerts and Cuyckens (2007b)
4. John R. Taylor and Littlemore (2014)

#### **General Introductions**

1. Croft and Cruse (2004)
2. Dirven and Verspoor (2004)
3. Evans and Green (2006), now updated by Evans (2019)
4. Geeraerts (2006a)
5. Ungerer and Schmid (2006)

## Foundational Texts

1. Fauconnier (1994)
2. Fauconnier and Turner (2002)
3. Johnson (1987)
4. Langacker (1987, 1991)
5. Lakoff (1987)
6. Lakoff and Johnson (1980)
7. Talmy (1988)

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