Conceptualisation and Construal

Introduction

Fundamental to cognition is how we can conceptualise the same series of events in different ways. This ability is reflected in both the lexis and grammar of language. Consider sentences (32) and (33):

(32) I adore Rome!
(33) I love Rome very much!

At first sight, ‘adore’ and ‘love very much’ seem to make these sentences almost synonymous. However, each construes the expressed emotion somewhat differently from the other. ‘Adoration’ abases the subject before their admired object. ‘Loving very much’ simply makes Rome into the object of an intense emotion. The use of ‘love’ and ‘adore’ represent the same scene differently. CL calls these different ways of conceptualising a scene, construal (Langacker 1987). In CL there is no such thing as true synonymy because a different selection of words will achieve a different construal. Construal affects the grammar of the language and accounts for why we may select one form over another. Consider the following two sentences:

(34) Now the plane was over the cars
(35) Now the cars were under the plane

These two different sentences also depict the same scene. However, there are central differences in the way the depiction is construed. First, to reflect this difference of meaning, different prepositions are selected. Second, sentence (34) is about the plane whilst sentence (35) is about
the cars. In sentence (34), the plane is perceived against the ground of the cars. In sentence (35) the opposite is the case.

Imagine if sentence (35) is said by somebody actually in the plane. It now represents a construal operation that Langacker (1987) calls objectification, because of how the subject observes themselves in their scene as if they were an objective entity and were situated among the cars or even were a car. In other words, they are objectified as if by an entity outside themselves and looking back. Construal operations are also the natural conclusion of an approach to meaning that is conceptual and enactive rather than perceptual and passive. They show the observer not as simply representing their world but as shaping an image of it, locating themselves in different vantage points and taking different perspectives.

In this chapter I will explore construal operations further, looking at how they make language reflect a given form of conceptualisation. I will show how, because construal operations often determine our selection of lexis and grammar, they can help teachers explain our use of a given form to their students whilst also structuring modes of practice in the same.

**Construal operations**

Until this point, my discussion of conceptualisation has chiefly focused on metaphor, metonymy or figure and ground. Metaphor and metonymy have been topics of immense interest in cognitive linguistics because of how they are immediately identifiable in language as an aberration that contradicts many of the assumptions of formal linguistics. They are implicated in the development of new meaning and even of all abstract meaning, typifying what we mean by an enactive cognition through how they show meaning as developed from conceptualisation rather than perception. However, there are many other types of conceptual operation used to construe scenes in different ways. Croft and Cruse (2004) provide a useful account of construal operations that I summarise as follows:

- **Attention/salience**: selection, scope, scalar adjustment, dynamic attention
- **Judgment/comparison**: categorisation, metaphor, figure, ground
- **Perspective/situatedness**: viewpoint, deixis, subjectivity, objectivity
- **Constitution/gestalt**: including most other image schemas
- **structural schematisation**: force dynamics: relationality