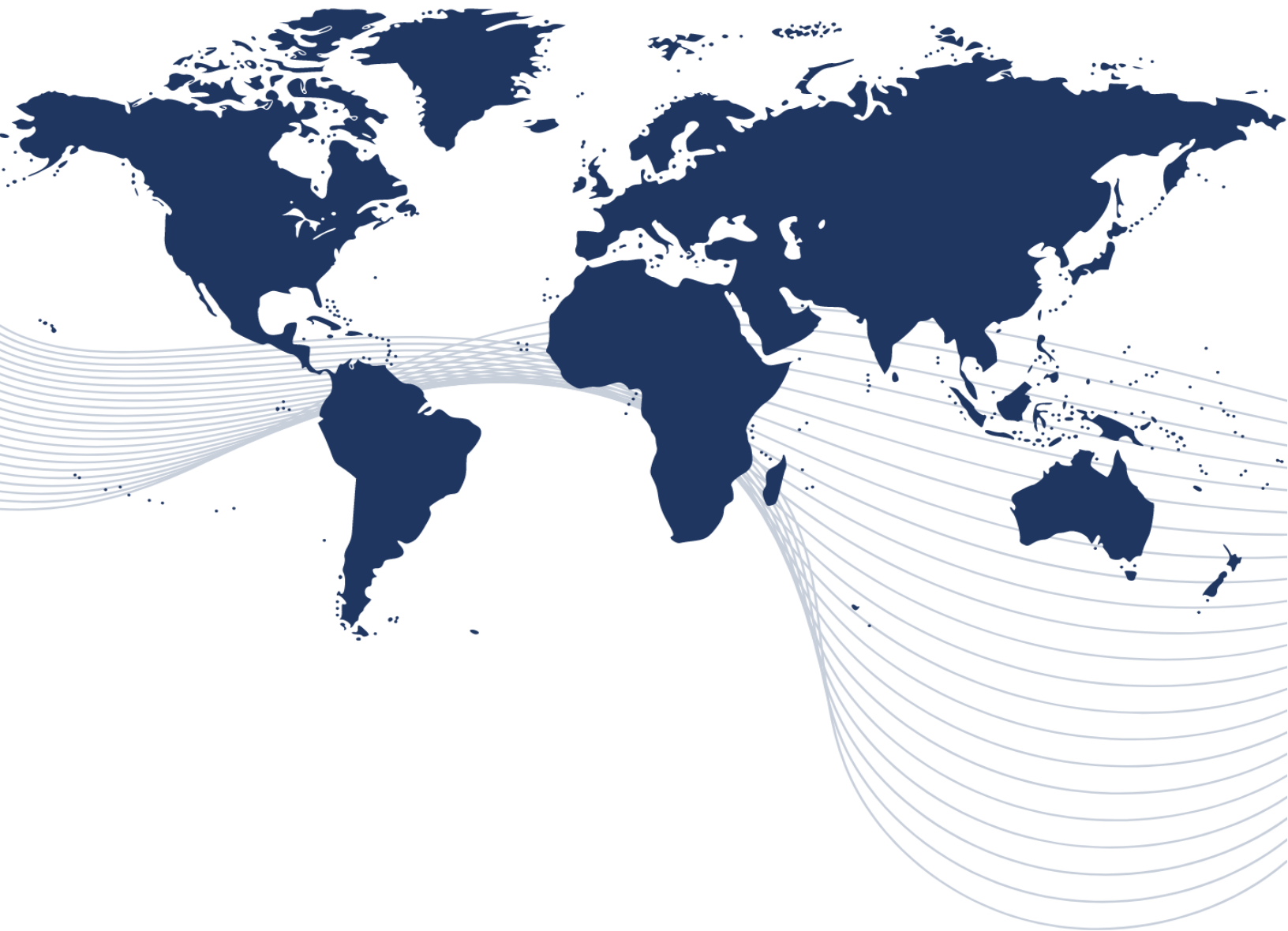


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## Construal Theory: A Review and Future Prospects

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### Abstract

**Background of the problem:** Construal refers to human's cognitive ability of using different perspectives and ways to view and describe the same situation. **Purpose:** This study aims to review the application of construal theory to see potential prospects. **Method:** This study uses a narrative review research design. The literature used as data in this study is scientific literature published indexed in various databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, PubMed, and WOS. The data were synthesized and analyzed based on their relevance to the research topics. **Result:** Many scholars have defined the concept of construal from several angles and explained it from different dimensions. As a theoretical concept with high significance in Cognitive Grammar, construal also plays an irreplaceable role in meaning understanding. **Implication:** This paper introduces the current situation of the study of construal in three parts: from image to construal, the main branches and dimensions of construal, and the subjectivity and objectivity of construal.

**Keyword:** Construal; Cognitive Linguistics; Image; Cognitive Grammar; Review

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## INTRODUCTION

### *Background of the Problem*

When construal theory comes to construing, we have to mention Langacker's Cognitive Grammar (Croft & Wood, 2000). To be precise, this is a theory in the field of cognitive linguistics (Neset, 2009). Cognitive Grammar was founded in the mid-1970s. After 10 years of exploration and repeated research, it gradually completed in the 1980s (Urunbaevna, 2023). The formative period was represented by "space grammar" proposed by Langacker and gradually matured in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It is represented by the two-volume "Foundations of Cognitive Grammar" written by Langacker. As a result, Langacker is recognized as one of the most significant founders in the field of cognitive language. As an indispensable theory in Cognitive Grammar, Construal Theory is defined by Langacker (2008) as "a kind of human's ability to describe the same situation through different perspectives". Construal Theory in cognitive linguistics mainly studies how human beings perceive, understand and describe the world from different perspectives and ways. It is a topic which is not only concerned by linguistics and cognitive scientists, but also philosophers and psychologists (Dosoudilová & Bednaříková, 2020).

### *From Schema to Construal*

All the theories in all fields need process of development and improvement. Cognitive Grammar in cognitive linguistics also need to be improved and developed gradually. Initially, Construal Theory was called "image/imagery". The former one (imagery) is the collection of all images, which is an abstract concept, while the latter one refers to the individual concrete images formed in human brain when people is observing and perceiving the outside environment. Thus, imagery is the collection of images. (Abrams & Harpham, 2009).

The study of Cognitive Grammar is divided into two parts by Langacker's two-volume Foundations of Cognitive Grammar. In the two stages, Langacker used the concept of imagery and the concept of construal to describe and discuss human's cognitive ability respectively. At first, in 1979, Langacker proposed the idea of "Spatial Grammar". He believes that language expression is related to imagery and perspective at every level (Langacker, 1979). In 1984 and 1985 he used the term "Cognitive Grammar" instead of "Spatial Grammar". He pointed out that "image" in Cognitive Grammar is not a simple image in the visual or perceptual sense but refers to different ways of conceptualizing and organizing the same scene (Langacker, 1985). The concept of image gradually became matured and completed after exploring and continuous developing. In the two-volume Foundations of Cognitive Grammar, Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 of Volume 1 discussed the concept of image. Langacker pointed out that imagery refers to human's cognitive ability to interpret the same situation through different ways and perspectives. In Chapter 3 Cognitive Ability, he showed that the concept of image in Cognitive Grammar is different from conceptual metaphor, as well as auditory, visual and perceptual images. Image refers to human's cognitive ability of understanding and interpreting a certain situation from different specific images. It includes five aspects: selection, prominence, degree of abstraction, level of specificity and perspective. In addition, images used to describe the same situation will change according to the number of parameters. This kind of change is called focal adjustment. Focal adjustment includes selection, perspective and abstraction. Selection determines several aspects of the situation.

Perspective determines the position of the observer. And abstraction determines the level of specificity in the description of the situation.

In the process of developing and improving Cognitive Grammar, Langacker changed "image" by using the word "construal" in order to avoid confusion, representing that the concept of image was replaced by construal. In the article "Contextual Foundations of Cognitive Semantics", Langacker explained the reason why he used "construal" to take place of "image" for the first time. He said that construal is the human ability to understand and construct the same situation in different ways, and the use of the word image often causes confusion. As mentioned above, the two volumes of the Foundations of Cognitive Grammar which exist as a whole item is the division between Langacker's discussion of the concepts of image and construal. However, Langacker's article "subjectivization" was published earlier than the second volume of Foundations of Cognitive Grammar. Thus, it is accepted that Langacker's article "subjectivization" was the first document in which Langacker used the term "construal" instead of "image" as a specific term. (Zhang Keding, 2014)

## **METHOD**

This study used a narrative review research design. This method was applied because this type of approach can review the literature precisely to answer this research question. The strength of this kind of review lies in its aim to evaluate or conceptualize the new by integrating studies that have different topics or methodologies (Greenhalgh, Robert, Macfarlane, Bate, Kyriakidou, & Peacock, 2005).

These narrative reviews can be complementary and systematic as they are tailored to the purpose, methods and context (Hakala, O'shea, Farny, & Luoto, 2020). Therefore, the narrative review can be classified as a type of systematic review for qualitative information in this study (Greenhalgh, Thorne, & Malterud, 2018). As this review assessed studies with diverse methodologies and topics to try to answer the key research questions that required a more interpretive and discursive synthesis of the existing literature, a narrative review may serve as the most appropriate approach.

The literature used as data in this study is scientific literature published indexed in various databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, PubMed, and WOS. The search was conducted based on words that correlate with this research such as "construal", "cognitive linguistics", "image". Data was collected from the above-mentioned indexing databases. Data were synthesized and analyzed based on their relevance to the research typology.

## **FINDING AND DISCUSSION**

Many scholars have defined the concept of construal from several angles and explained it from different dimensions. As a theoretical concept with high significance in Cognitive Grammar, construal also plays an irreplaceable role in meaning understanding. This paper introduces the current situation of the study of construal in three parts: from image to construal, the main branches and dimensions of construal, and the subjectivity and objectivity of construal.

### ***Mainstream analytical dimensions of construal***

There are four relevant elements of construal: level of specificity, prominence, perspective, and scope. Level of specificity means that we humans can give a detailed or rough description

of the same item or situation. At the lexical level, hyponymy is a good example. For example, living>animal>bird>cuckoo. When people want to describe something roughly for some reason, they would use a wider range of words. On the contrary, when a more detailed statement is desired, a hyponym with more specific features will be chose.

Secondly, prominence is the cognitive ability that allows us to focus our attention on a particular place in something, and because of the iconicity of language, this cognitive ability is reflected in the form of our language. For example, the words "invasion/incursion" are often used to describe a war (Yan Wei, Rui Yanping, 2014). While both of these words can be used to describe a war, it is obvious that the former one stress more about the invasive act during a war. The latter one would simply state the fact of the war without bringing any emotional factor, i.e., "an attack from a foreign army," thus also downplaying the aggressiveness.

The perspective is similar to the "立足点" mentioned by Chinese linguist Mr. Lu Shuxiang, which refers to the orientation and position of the speaker to observe the whole event and scene.

For example:

- (1) The path creeps into the valley.
- (2) The path climbs out of the valley.

In the above two sentences, through the comparison of the expressions of the two groups of words "creep into" and "climb out of", it can be inferred that the speaker is in different positions. The word "into" means that in this sentence the speaker is placing his point of view above the whole situation, so that for him the path winds its way deep into the valley. And "out of" means that in this sentence the speaker is going down, putting his point of view in the valley. So, for him, the path climbs out of the valley. From this, we can see that when the speaker chooses different perspectives or reference objects when observing things, he or she will generate different cognition of the same thing, which will be reflected through different forms of language.

In Langacker's view, the process of construing expression involves the initial selection of the conceptual content of linguistic expression. This involves the selection of specific cognitive domains, parts of which are evoked and serve as the basis for meaning expression. In short, an expression will evoke one or more cognitive domains as its scope, and its content is the basis for understanding and organizing meaning. Scope is such a knowledge network system composed of multiple cognitive domains. It includes background and encyclopedic information needed to understand the expression. In the process of communicating, some expressions will activate the background knowledge and encyclopedic knowledge that the communicators already know.

In addition to the level of specificity, background, perspective, prominence, and scope, Langacker has also mentioned other dimensions, such as mental scanning direction, observation arrangement, metaphor, and dynamics. Since the publication of Langacker's Cognitive Grammar a Basic Introduction in 2008, Langacker has used the concept of construal directly in most situations. As scholars have perfected the definition of the concept of construal, the dimensions of construal have been basically determined. Construal has thus become a widely used concept in cognitive linguistics (Taylor, 2019).

### *Other analytical dimensions of construal*

Apart from Langacker, many scholars have also defined construal according to their own understanding. For example, according to Taylor, the lexical choice we make when encoding a situation through language depends on how the situation is psychologically constructed by us, and this construction process is the process of construal (Taylor, 2002). Wen Xu, a domestic scholar, believes that the same situation can be interpreted in different ways. Thus construal refers to the different conceptualization processes generated by these situations (Wen Xu, 2007). Croft and Cruse view the process of construal as a fundamental cognitive ability. Evans and Green define construal as the way in which the speaker packages and presents conceptual representations that have an impact on the conceptual representations that these utterances evoke in the listener's mind. It is not difficult to see that although domestic and foreign scholars have different definitions of the concept of construal, the key contents covered tend to be the same. Scholars all believe that construal refers to the different ways of understanding and expressing the same situation. In the process of construing, scholars have different dimensions to consider.

The concept of construal proposed by Talmy includes four dimensions: structure schematization, perspective system, attention system and force dynamics. If the function of vocabulary is to provide conceptual content, then the function of structural schema is to provide a framework for the conceptual content contained in vocabulary. The attention system includes attention intensity, level, mapping and attention window. Talmy's perspective dimension is similar to Langacker, which refers to the position of a certain situation when observing psychologically, including perspective location, perspective distance, perspective mode and direction. Force dynamics refers to the relationship between the observed object and the force it is subjected to, including the application, overcoming, blocking, and the obstruction of the force and its elimination. Croft and Cruse argue that neither Langacker nor Talmy's classification of construal is comprehensive enough because it does not include Fillmore's framing and Lakoff and Johnson's metaphors. In order to categorize all of the cognitive linguists' approaches, and to show that there is a close relationship between the processes of construing and psychological processes, Croft and Cruse propose a new categorization of construal: attention/salience; judgment/contrast; perspective/situational; composition/gestalt.

According to Lee, construal can be divided into four dimensions: perspective, foregrounding, metaphor and context. His definition of perspective is very similar to Langacker's, both of which refer to the position of human beings when observing and describing a scene. Foregrounding is the process of highlighting an element of a scene within a scene. Metaphor is similar to conceptual metaphor. When people understand a certain concept, they will rely on other concepts with similar characteristics, so as to realize the process of conversion and connection between the two cognitive domains from the source domain to the target domain. Background refers to the need for structural framework knowledge related to an expression when people try to understand something. For example, when we trying to understand the concept of "uncle", it is necessary to understand the series of concepts like child, mother, brother, and mother's brother.



### *Subjectivity and objectivity of construal*

Construal Theory in Cognitive Grammar has both subjectivity and objectivity. Its subjectivity is reflected in the individual's understanding and interpretation of information, which will be affected by individual experience, education background and so on. In other words, people's understanding of the same specific scene, no matter what different dimensions or ways of interpretation are adopted, is the understanding and choice made by a certain cognitive subject, so it is bound to be more or less subjective. Secondly, the process of human interpretation of a situation is generated on the basis of that situation, so there will be objectivity. Objectivity emphasizes the influence of language structure and context on understanding, which is relatively independent of individual subjective views. But all in all, the objectivity and subjectivity of construals are presented based on human beings as subjects, of which human agency is the most important (Zhang Keding, 2019). In Cognitive Grammar, the subjectivity and objectivity of construals are interwoven to form a deep and comprehensive cognition of linguistic phenomena.

In the several dimensions of construal, the subjectivity of prominence is very salient. As mentioned above, prominence refers to the cognitive ability of allowing us to focus our attention on a particular point in something. Because of the iconicity of language, this kind of cognitive ability is reflected through our language. The prominent subjectivity is reflected by the fact that human beings, as cognitive subjects, choose the objects they want to emphasize in the process of interpretation. We label the members of a situation as trajectors or landmarks, depending on the objects we want to highlight.

For example:

(3) The cat is under the blanket.

(4) Blanket over the cat.

It is not difficult to see that when the speaker wants to emphasize the cat's position, he or she will use the blanket as a reference to highlight the cat; When the speaker wants to emphasize the spatial position of the blanket, the cat is chosen as a reference to show the position of blanket. Under the same situation, choosing expression depends on the speaker's subjective judgment and the item that he wants to highlight, which is highly subjective.

The subjectivity and objectivity of construals are relative, that is, there is not a complete absolute relationship between them (Zhang Keding, 2019). Construal has both a certain degree of subjectivity and a certain degree of objectivity. Taking the dimension of prominence as an example, examples (3) and (4) generate different forms of language expression by highlighting the spatial relationship between cats and blankets from different angles. The former takes the blanket as a reference point, which is called the landmark, thus highlighting the position of the cat which is called the trajector; The latter highlights the position of the blanket by taking the cat as the reference, which shows the subjectivity of the speaker in choosing the object he wants to highlight in the process of understanding a specific situation. However, these two different expressions are realized on the basis of the realistic spatial relationship between the cat and the blanket. That is to say, whatever the role of subjectivity, the basis of the objective entity in the situation is still.

### **CONCLUSION**

The cognitive ability that language users must possess in order to understand language. In the past few decades, more and more scholars have conducted research and discussion on

construal. However, there are also some problems need to be solved which needs further analysis and research. In addition, it is necessary to explore the relationship between the Construal Theory and other related theories, and how to apply these theories to more fields. Only in this way can the Construal Theory become better developed and improved in the future.

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