Universals of Construal
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If we ask in what ways and to what extent semantic structure might be universal, the answer will clearly depend on our position concerning the nature of linguistic meaning. The most basic decision in this regard is whether to view meaning as first and foremost a psychological phenomenon, or whether to seek its locus elsewhere. I have always maintained that meaning is primarily a matter of *conceptualization*, in the broadest sense of that term (i.e. any kind of *mental experience*). While this may seem obvious, it is worth recalling that well known semantics textbooks of fairly recent vintage either fail to even acknowledge the conceptualist view of meaning (e.g. Cruse 1986) or else denounce it as being not only misguided but beyond the pale of scientific inquiry (e.g. Kempson 1977: 2.2-3; Palmer 1981: 2.2). Nevertheless, conceptualist semantics has gained a measure of respectability in recent years and is becoming sufficiently widespread among theorists of diverse outlooks that it threatens to establish itself as the default assumption.

Equating meaning with conceptualization does not, of course, either resolve the issue of universality or render self-evident the optimal way of characterizing semantic structure. The decision to allow active, conceptualizing minds into the loop of meaning and semantic description affords a plausible basis for predicting either extreme diversity or strong universal tendencies. On the one hand, it frees linguistic meaning from the control of objective circumstances, so that it can float untethered wherever the whims and vagaries of human imagination might carry it. On the other hand, it might be argued that conceptualization is so highly constrained by the commonalities inherent in both our biological endowment and the world around us that a substantial degree of universality should be expected. Adherence to conceptualist semantics is likewise compatible with widely divergent views about the specific nature of semantic structure and how to describe it. For instance, the umbrella is broad enough to shelter what might loosely be called an 'imagistic' approach emphasizing metaphor and image schemas (e.g. Lakoff 1987; Johnson 1987; Sweetser 1990; Talmy 1983), as well as multiple theories—themselves quite different—which posit semantic representations comprising syntactically structured strings of discrete elements drawn from a fixed vocabulary (cf. Jackendoff 1983, 1990; Wierzbicka 1984, 1985, 1988, 1989).

While I greatly appreciate the descriptive insight of these latter accounts, it seems to me rather unlikely that the concatenation of discrete elements directly reflects the format assumed by conceptual structure in actual cognitive processing. One reason to be dubious is that a concatenative format offers no intrinsic basis for anticipating (and no obviously natural means of capturing) the critical role of **construal** in conceptualization and linguistic semantics. The term construal is used in opposition to **content** (though I would not claim that the two are sharply distinct). Expressions which evoke essentially the same conceptual content can nonetheless be semantically distinct because they construe that content in alternate ways—with respect to the *perspective* adopted, for example, or the relative *prominence* of various substructures. In numerous publications (e.g. 1986b, 1987a, 1988, 1990, *to appear*) I have documented certain 'aspects' or 'dimensions' of construal which are needed for an explicit account of semantic and grammatical phenomena. These aspects of construal would appear to be strong candidates for the status of language universals. After a brief survey, I will speculate on the

source of their universality. We will then consider how these same factors contribute to linguistic diversity.

If only for expository purposes, I generally arrange the dimensions of construal under five broad headings: **specificity**, **scope**, **prominence**, **background**, and **perspective**. By *specificity* I simply mean the degree of precision and detail with which a situation is characterized. We have the conceptual and linguistic resources to portray a situation in however much rich, fine-grained detail we care to provide, or conversely, to abstract away from specifics and present it at any level of **schematicity**. For example, the sentences in (1) could all be used to describe the same event; each **elaborates** (or **instantiates**) the more schematic expression that follows it.

(1) *The tall, surly waiter viciously kicked an elderly woman's yelping poodle.* > *The waiter kicked a woman's dog.* > *The man struck a canine.* > *Someone did something.* > *Something happened.*

Exhibiting the same kind of relationship are series of expressions such as *poodle* > *dog* > *canine* > *mammal* > *animal* > *creature* > *thing*, generally discussed under the rubric of *hyponymy* or *taxonomic hierarchies.*

As the basis for its meaning, an expression evokes a set of **cognitive domains**, which range from **basic domains** (irreducible dimensions of human experience, such as space, time, pitch, and color) through concepts and conceptual assemblies of indefinite complexity (thus including *frames* (Fillmore 1982) and *ICM*s (Lakoff 1987)). The domains an expression evokes provide its conceptual content. One aspect of how an expression construes that content consists in selecting certain portions of each domain as being relevant to its value. Those portions of active domains that a particular expression selects and exploits as the basis for its meaning will be referred to as its **scope**. Since there are limits on the amount of conceptual content we can actively entertain at any one time, scope is always *bounded* in some fashion (though any specific line of demarcation might well be arbitrary). For instance, a word like *poodle* requires a spatial scope of sufficient expanse to support the conception of the referent's shape, but it need not encompass the entire universe. Likewise, the verb *kick* evokes a temporal scope that is long enough for the designated event to run its course, yet considerably less than all eternity. The conception of a network of kinship relations serves as one cognitive domain for terms like *mother*, *grandson*, *aunt*, and *cousin*, and such a network extends indefinitely far in any direction. However, only a limited portion of a kinship network is directly relevant for the characterization of any one term: for *mother*, a parent-child configuration; for *aunt*, a larger assembly including a parent's sibling; and so on.

Scope represents an important descriptive construct needed for the explicit characterization of many linguistic phenomena (Langacker *to appear*). For example, it has a pivotal role in the 'nested-locative' construction:

(2) *I left your book outside, in the back yard, beside the pool, on the yellow chair, under the towel.*

The characteristic feature of this construction is that the successive locative expressions confine the object being located (in this case the book) to smaller and smaller areas, each nested within the one previously established. More technically,

the **search domain** of one locative—the region to which it confines the object in question (Hawkins 1984)—constitutes the spatial scope of immediate relevance for interpreting the next locative in the sequence: the full locative relationship it designates is manifested within the **immediate scope** thus defined. I have also argued (1987b) that scope is critical to describing the *count/mass* distinction for nouns, as well as the precisely analogous *perfective/imperfective* (or *active/stative*) contrast for verbs. A necessary feature of a count noun is that the boundary of the designated entity fall within its scope in the relevant domain (typically space). Similarly, a perfective verb designates a bounded process whose endpoints are included in its temporal scope, whereas such bounding is not intrinsic to the characterization of an imperfective. I have further analyzed the progressive construction as having an *imperfectivizing* function by virtue of imposing, on the bounded process designated by a perfective verb, a restricted *immediate* temporal scope which excludes its endpoints. These aspectual notions are sketched in Figure 1.

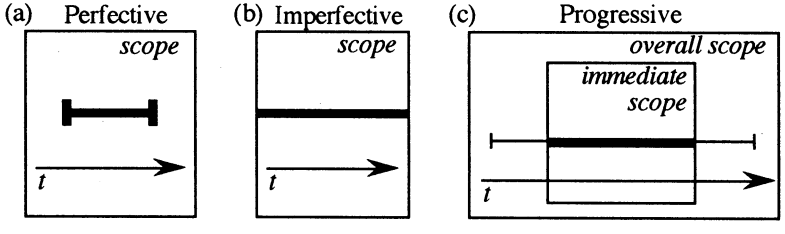

Figure 1

An element can be *prominent* (or *salient*) with respect to others in numerous ways. A prototype is salient within its category, and a basic level category within a taxonomic hierarchy (Rosch 1978). There are multiple kinds of discourse prominence. Linguistic evidence suggests the greater intrinsic prominence of entities that are *concrete* rather than *abstract*, *human* vs. *non-human*, *visible* vs. *non-visible*, etc. For anaphoric purposes, an element mentioned explicitly is more salient than one introduced only sublexically; hence the contrast in (3), with *them* understood in both examples as referring to the parents (cf. Postal 1969):

(3)(a) *The child that lost **its parents** misses **them** badly.*
(b) **The orphan misses **them** badly.*

The various sorts of prominence have to be carefully distinguished, as they differ in both their cognitive motivation and their linguistic function.

We will focus here on two other kinds of prominence that are central to grammar. The first is what I call **profiling**. Within the conceptual **base** subsumed by its (immediate) scope, every expression **profiles**—i.e. *designates*—some substructure. The conception of an eye, for example, serves as the base for words like *iris*, *pupil*, and *cornea*, which profile different subparts. The base for *orphan* is a scenario involving mating, birth, nurturance, death, and survival, and its profile is the survivor. An expression's profile is its *referent*—not its referent in the world, but within the conceptualization it evokes. To say that an element is mentioned explicitly is thus equivalent to saying that it is profiled at some level of

organization, as the parents are in (3)(a) but not in (3)(b). Two expressions may evoke essentially the same conceptual content yet contrast semantically because they profile different facets of it (e.g. *iris* vs. *pupil*). In regard to its role in grammar, I will only mention that profiling determines an expression's grammatical class. For example, both *complain* and *complainer* evoke the same essential content: that of a person engaging in a certain activity. The former is a verb and the latter a noun because, from this common base, they respectively select for profiling the activity and the actor.

There is both semantic and grammatical motivation for claiming that expressions can profile not only *things* but also *relationships* (each term being understood in an abstract, inclusive sense discussed in Langacker 1987b). Nominal expressions (including nouns, pronouns, determiners, and noun phrases) are those which profile things. Such classes as adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, and verbs (as well as higher-order structures like prepositional phrases and finite clauses) profile various kinds of relationships. Like nouns, relational expressions often have the same content yet exhibit a semantic (and also a grammatical) contrast attributable to the alternate profiles they impose on it. The verb *crack* and the stative-adjectival *cracked* evoke the same content, involving a change through time and a resultant final state; the difference is that the verb designates the entire temporally evolving relationship, while only the resultant state is profiled by the adjectival participle. A difference in profiling also figures in the contrast between a perfective verb (e.g. *complain*) and its progressive counterpart (*be complaining*). Whereas the verb profiles a full, bounded event, as in Figure 1(a), the progressive designates only the portion delimited by the immediate scope, as shown in 1(c).

However, profiling is not always sufficient to distinguish relational expressions that have the same content but different meanings. We can see this most clearly from pairs of opposing terms like *above* vs. *below*, *in front of* vs. *in back of*, and *before* vs. *after*. A situation which manifests one of these relationships also manifests its converse—if *X is above Y*, then it must also be the case that *Y is below X*. Moreover, the paired expressions have the same profile, there being no *referential* difference between the two relations. At the clausal level, I would argue that the same is true of an active and its corresponding passive (*Iraq invaded Kuwait* vs. *Kuwait was invaded by Iraq*). I think the contrasts can only be attributed to a kind of salience involving the relational *participants*. In virtually every profiled relationship, some entity stands out as the one the expression is concerned with locating, characterizing, or somehow assessing in relation to others. I refer to this entity as the relational **trajector**, and to another salient entity—with respect to which the trajector is located or evaluated—as a **landmark**. For instance, *X is above Y* takes *Y* as a landmark for purposes of locating the trajector, *X*, whereas *Y is below X* does the opposite. The two expressions would thus be felicitous in response to different questions (*Where is X?* vs. *Where is Y?*).

Like *prominence*, the term *background* subsumes a variety of distinguishable phenomena. What they seem to share is an ability to conceptualize two distinct structures in relation to one another, to entertain them simultaneously but asymmetrically, so that one is the object of immediate or primary interest. An obvious case is metaphor, in which the *source domain* provides a background used for construing the *target domain* (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Lakoff and Turner 1989). In discourse, the current utterance is assessed against the background of those which have gone before; an example is *focus*, where unreduced stress signals the introduction of something new or noteworthy relative to what has already been established:

(4) ***A:*** *What did the customer want?*
B: *She wanted THAT NEW VEGETARIAN LIPSTICK.*

Standard presupposition represents a kind of background, as do assumptions and expectations in general. I have analyzed negation as portraying a situation which lacks some entity against the background of a conception in which it is present (1991: 3.3.3; cf. Givón 1979: ch. 3). Under this rubric we can also cite the effect of how a complex expression is put together, i.e. its **compositional path**: expressions with the same composite semantic value may nevertheless have slightly different meanings reflecting the course of their assembly out of smaller components. Despite evoking the same conceived entity, for example, the descriptions *triangle*, *three-sided polygon*, and *three-angled polygon* are semantically non-equivalent because they portray it against the background of distinct compositional histories.

The last general heading, *perspective*, also encompasses numerous aspects of construal. The terms *left* and *right* exemplify two such factors, namely **vantage point** and **orientation**. Clearly, the meaning of a sentence like (5)(a) is not limited to the profiled relationship between the two overtly mentioned participants; its scope must also include an implicit observer in terms of which left and right are assessed.

(5)(a) *Jack is to the right of Jill.*
(b) *When Charles walked into the room, Jack was to the left of Jill.*

Another aspect of perspective is **mental transfer**, in which the conceptualizer imagines (or at least takes into account) how the scene appears to some other observer. In (5)(b), for instance, the assessment that Jack is to the *left* rather than the *right* can be made relative to the vantage point and orientation of the speaker (the default observer), of *Jill*, of *Charles*, or even some other viewer apparent from the discourse context. An additional factor is the **direction of mental scanning**. It seems evident that the sentences in (6) have different meanings, and that the distinction hinges on the opposite directionality expressed by the prepositional phrases:

(6)(a) *The scar extends from his ankle to his knee.*
(b) *The scar extends from his knee to his ankle.*

Objectively, these sentences describe the same situation, a static one where nothing actually moves. I attribute the semantic contrast to the alternate directions in which the *conceptualizer*, in building up his conception of the scene, traces a mental path along the scar's extension.

Several other facets of perspective should be mentioned. I say that an entity is construed **subjectively** or **objectively** to the extent that it functions exclusively as the **subject** vs. the **object** of conception (Langacker 1985, 1986a, 1990). Maximal objectivity therefore attaches to an explicitly mentioned entity, e.g. the scar in (6), that is salient, well-delimited, and the specific focus of attention. Conversely, maximal subjectivity characterizes an implicit conceptualizer whose attention is directed elsewhere and who thus loses all self-awareness. In (6), for example, the conceptualizer receives a subjective construal despite the semantic import of the mental path he traces. We, as outside observers, can describe the

conceptualizer as scanning through the scene in one direction or the other, but he certainly does not conceive of himself as doing so—from his own perspective only the scar and leg are evident.

Sentence (7), taken from Talmy 1988, illustrates a distinct but related phenomenon:

(7) *There is a house every now and then through the valley.*

A house does not flash in and out of existence, as suggested by the adverb *every now and then*, nor does it move *through the valley*. The sentence is nonetheless natural and readily understood. It is perfectly coherent relative to the special circumstance in which the conceptualizer imagines what an observer sees when moving through the valley, rather than describing what it looks like from a fixed vantage point. From the perspective of a moving observer, whose field of view comprises only a limited portion of the valley at any one instant, the sentence correctly describes what is actually perceived: within the *immediate scope* defined by the moving field of view, a house does indeed appear *every now and then*. This example resembles the previous one in that the motion of an implicit, subjectively construed conceptualizer figures crucially in its meaning. The difference is that the expressions in (6) involve a single vantage point and describe a configuration fully manifested in the field of view at a single moment—scanning occurs *within* the field of view, which may itself be static.

A final aspect of perspective resides in our tendency to organize a conceived situation in terms of a stable, inclusive **setting** within which smaller **participants** occur and engage in relationships. Participants *interact* with one another—typically in force-dynamic fashion (Talmy 1985a)—but merely *occupy* some portion of a setting (a **location**). Though flexibly applied and often covert, the distinction between participants on the one hand and settings/locations on the other has extensive ramifications in grammar (Langacker 1987c, *to appear*). These notions figure in the prototypical semantic values of certain grammatical constructs pertaining to clause structure. As shown in (8), for instance, it is usual for temporal and spatial settings to be coded by clause-external adverbs, locations by clause-internal adverbs, and participants by subjects and direct objects.

(8) *This morning on the golf course, my ball hit a squirrel on the thirteenth green.*

(9)(a) *The last few years have witnessed amazing political changes.*
(b) **Amazing political changes have been witnessed by the last few years.*

There are however departures from this canonical arrangement. In particular, it is not unusual for the subject to be construed as a setting or location rather than a participant. I propose that sentences like (9)(a) be analyzed in this fashion. The ungrammaticality of (9)(b) then follows as a consequence of two independently supported claims: that passivizability is a symptom of *transitivity*; and that transitivity is based on the *interaction of participants* (cf. Rice 1987).

Though it is doubtless incomplete, the foregoing survey may at least indicate the importance and ubiquity of construal. It does not reside in any specific conceptual content, but rather in ways of structuring, packaging, and portraying such content that are applicable to essentially any cognitive domain. I have tried to indicate, if only very briefly, how each dimension of construal plays a role in

meaning and grammar. Let me now offer the conjecture that *these varied aspects of construal all represent semantic universals*. This position is not based on any systematic cross-linguistic survey; the most I can presently say is that the need to posit these factors has for the most part either been suggested or reinforced by attempts to describe otherwise problematic data in diverse languages.

In a way, of course, this claim of universality may be obvious and fairly uncontroversial. With few if any exceptions, it is hard to imagine the factors cited not being universally available. Could we imagine a language, for instance, that did not enable its speakers to portray situations at varying levels of specificity? Would we ever expect to find a language that did not employ metaphor? Or one where previous discourse was irrelevant, there was no perspective, and all elements were equal in prominence? The question, then, is not really *whether* such factors are universal, but rather *why*. Caution and ignorance prevent me from offering a comprehensive and definitive answer. I will however make some general comments and then examine one facet of the problem in some detail.

If it is granted that many aspects of construal are indeed robust language universals, we can rule out sheer coincidence as a viable explanation. We can likewise eliminate an imaginable position, combining innateness and a strong form of modularity, which I doubt that anyone would actually entertain. According to this straw-man account, aspects of construal are universal because they are innately specified as part of a language module; moreover, they are arbitrary in the sense of not being grounded in human experience, as well as being unrelated to other facets of cognition. This imagined view can safely be discarded because the relationship of construal to general experience and non-linguistic cognition is manifestly evident. The particular angle I will explore is the extensive parallelism between construal and visual perception.

Minimally, then, I assume that construal is universal in many respects because it is grounded in universal aspects of human experience and represents the linguistic manifestation of more general cognitive abilities. Beyond that the issues become more difficult to formulate, let alone adjudicate with any confidence, as they involve such classic conundrums as innateness vs. learning, the domain-specificity of inborn structures, and the privileged status of vision. Further complicating matters is the lack of any assurance that construal factors constitute a homogeneous class in regard to such questions, or that they are clearly distinguishable from other cognitive phenomena. Here I cannot address these issues in any serious way. I will however briefly indicate how I incline to think about them.

We are highly structured organisms who have evolved to cope with a particular structured environment. Our biological endowment enables, shapes, and constrains our experience (if we did not have eyes we could not see), but that endowment has itself been shaped by the environment it evolved in (if there were no light we would not have developed eyes). Our common biological make-up imposes a large measure of universality on human experience, providing its basic organizational features and confining it to a small field within the full space of experiences that appropriately designed creatures might conceivably undergo. It is only inside this narrow range that individual experience unfolds and learning occurs. Of course, to our own eyes this field of possibilities is immensely rich and infinitely variable. We are not aware of its limitations because we have no way of imagining alternatives. Moreover, we are unaware of the organizational features which determine it, for although they shape our experience, they do not *constitute* it.

I am therefore comfortable with the notion that aspects of construal might be universal because they stem from facets of our common biological make-up. Though they might be *triggered* or *refined* by experience, they are not actually *learned* or experientially *acquired*, but are rather part of the endowment which makes it possible for structured experience to emerge in the first place. (I would say the same about *image schemas*—cf. Johnson 1987; Lakoff 1987; Langacker 1993.) It is however important to recognize that a construal factor might be said to stem from our common biological make-up even if it is not specifically coded for genetically. For example, the fact that expressions have a restricted *scope* follows almost trivially from inherent limits on the representational capacity of a finite organism. Another possibility is for a certain aspect of construal to be *derivative* in nature. It might, for instance, constitute the projection at the conceptual level of a visual phenomenon whose specific biological determination resides at the level of perception.

Since the relation between meaning and visual perception is a topic that lends itself to misinterpretation as well as sweeping but unsubstantiated proposals, it is essential to make clear just what is and is not being claimed. For one thing, I have never said or believed that meaning reduces to visual imagery or that all conceptual structure is visuo-spatial in nature, nor should my frequent heuristic use of spatial diagrams be so interpreted. I do believe that space and vision are central if not pre-eminent in cognition, exerting a strong formative influence and serving as the basis for metaphorical projection to other domains. The extent to which such projection is *constitutive* of other domains (as opposed to merely providing a supplementary dimension of understanding) is, I think, yet to be determined. I am going to suggest that numerous properties of visual perception have general conceptual analogs reflected in construal. I take no position, however, on the issue of whether these properties have a visual *origin* (either phylogenetically or ontogenetically) or just a visual *manifestation.* Thus, while space and vision must be accorded some kind of primacy, the exact nature of that primacy remains an open question.

Certain basic constructs pertaining to visual perception are represented in Figure 2. Vision presupposes a **viewer** (*V*), the *subject* of perception. Vision has **extensionality**, which provides a way of dealing with the extensionality of our spatial surroundings. At any one time, of course, the visual field subtends only a limited portion of those surroundings. The full expanse of what a viewer can see at a given moment—primarily determined by the direction in which he is facing—can be called the **maximal field of view** (*MF*). This maximal field is organized into a dimly perceived *periphery*, where the viewer is located, and a *center* with greater perceptual acuity. I call this center the **viewing frame** (*VF*), since it comprises the area within which acuity renders focused observation possible. Alternatively, I invoke a theater metaphor and refer to it as the **onstage region**, i.e. the *general locus* of viewing attention. Somewhere within this region lies the specific **focus** (*F*) of viewing attention, also describable as the *target* or *object* of perception. A dashed arrow indicates the **perceptual relationship** between the viewer and the viewing target. Finally, the specific configuration assumed by these various elements constitutes a **viewing arrangement**.

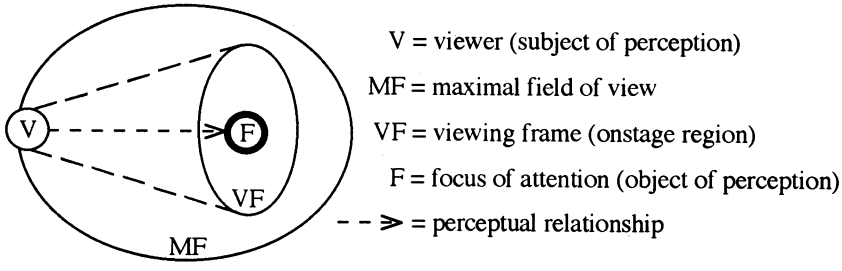

Figure 2

All these constructs have direct analogs in general conception, and hence in those conceptual structures which function as the meanings of linguistic expressions. Corresponding to the viewer is the **conceptualizer**, who for linguistic purposes can primarily be identified with the **speaker**. Corresponding to the perceptual relationship is what I call the **construal relationship**, wherein the conceptualizer entertains a certain conceptualization and construes it in some particular fashion. Three semantic constructs that I have introduced and justified on linguistic grounds (cf. Figure 1(c)) can reasonably be regarded as the general conceptual analogs of the remaining elements in Figure 2: an expression's *overall scope* (the full expanse of its content) is comparable to the maximal field of view; its *immediate scope*, to the viewing frame (onstage region); and its *profile* (conceptual referent), to the focus of viewing attention. We can further say that any specific configuration assumed by these various elements constitutes a **conceptual arrangement**.

Certain aspects of construal lend themselves very naturally to characterization as abstract conceptual counterparts of well-known visual phenomena. Consider trajector/landmark alignment, the asymmetry in the prominence of relational participants responsible for the semantic contrast between an active and a passive, or between pairs of expressions like *X is above Y* vs. *Y is below X*. I see this as being directly analogous to *figure/ground organization*, known from studies of perception in gestalt psychology. The active/passive contrast and the *above/below* distinction are not implausibly analyzed as instances of *figure/ground reversal*. It is suggestive in this regard that the unmarked member of opposing pairs like *above* vs. *below*, *in front of* vs. *in back of*, and *over* vs. *under* is the one in which the trajector is more likely to be readily visible under normal circumstances. Such considerations have led me to hypothesize that a trajector is properly characterized as the *primary figure* in a profiled relationship, and a salient landmark as a *secondary figure*. Of course, *figure* must then be understood in a generalized sense, not in narrowly perceptual terms.

Profiling and trajector/landmark alignment are two kinds of conceptual prominence that are especially important for grammar. I have suggested that they are properly described as the respective analogs of two kinds of perceptual prominence, namely focus of attention and figure/ground organization. While there are other sorts of conceptual and perceptual salience, it is not obvious to me whether they can or should be identified. I do not know, for instance, whether it would be accurate or merely fanciful to equate the prominence that comes with being explicitly mentioned (as opposed to being introduced sublexically—recall the

examples in (3)) with the perceptual salience of an entity that has at some point been seen in isolation (not just as a subpart of a larger object).

Similar questions arise in regard to background. Inspired by the visual experience of seeing one object while others are visible behind it, linguists have spoken metaphorically of foreground vs. background with respect to multiple distinct phenomena. Here I am using *background* as a cover term for an even wider assortment. It is hard to know which of these phenomena are best considered direct conceptual analogs of the visual one, and which aspects of the latter should count most heavily in the comparison. Two basic aspects of the visual experience are the relative proximity of the foreground vis-à-vis the background, and the selective visual focus involved in seeing one object against the background of another. While they tend to correlate, these factors can be dissociated, since the objects we focus attention on are not always the nearest ones. Both factors are reflected at the conceptual level when we construe the current expression against the background of previous discourse: the current utterance has temporal immediacy to the speaker and addressee, whereas previous expressions lie at some remove; and the current expression is the focus of primary interest (the one we are now attending to). For certain other dimensions of construal subsumed under background, only the second factor has an obvious conceptual analog. It is not clear whether or in what sense we would want to say that the source and target domains of a metaphor lie at different 'distances' from the conceptualizer, yet the target domain is the focus of concern, the one we are trying to describe or understand. Similarly, in a complex expression it is the composite structure (the meaning of the whole) that is of primary interest in the sense of directly representing the situation to be encoded, whereas the compositional path (the meanings of its parts) is only subsidiary. For this reason complex expressions vary in their degree of **analyzability** (cf. Langacker 1987a: 12.1).

Other analogies between conception and vision seem more straightforward. A basic aspect of construal is our capacity to conceive and portray a situation at any level of *specificity* (or conversely, *schematicity*). This is directly comparable to the visual notion of *granularity* (or *resolution*). The degree of such acuity depends on distance: the closer we are to an object, the better we can see it, in the sense of detecting and resolving fine-grained details. Thus a series of progressively more specific terms like *thing* < *animal* < *dog* < *poodle* reflects the successive descriptions one might offer, based on visual evidence alone, in walking up to a distant object.

While acuity and viewing distance are inversely related, the latter shows a positive correlation with the size of the field of view. When the focus of visual attention is on a distant object, both the maximal field of view and the viewing frame (i.e. the general locus of attention) subtend large portions of the surrounding world. But if I look at something very close—e.g. the palm of my hand—my visual horizons shrink drastically and I see but a limited portion of my immediate environment. This correlation is mirrored in general conception. In contemplating events that occurred in the distant past, for instance, my thoughts tend to encompass a greater span of time than when I think about events occurring now or quite recently. I believe the correlation also has linguistic manifestations. The semantic constructs that I have equated with the maximal field of view, the viewing frame, and the focus of viewing attention are, respectively, an expression's *overall scope*, its *immediate scope*, and its *profile*. Their interaction with distance may have observable linguistic consequences.

Some examples emerged from Eugene Casad's work on Cora, a Uto-Aztecan language of Mexico (see Casad and Langacker 1985). One such case involves locative expressions like (10)(a). They consist of a postpositional phrase, e.g. *čí'i-ta* 'in [the] house', preceded by an adverbial particle comprising a deictic marker of distance (proximal, medial, or distal) as well as either *u* 'inside' or *a* 'outside'.

(10)(a) *mú čí'i-ta* (MED-inside house-in) 'there inside the house'
(b) *ú čah-ta'a* (DIST-inside town-in) 'off there in town'
(c) **mú čah-ta'a* (MED-inside town-in) 'there in town'
(d) **íiyu čáh-ta'a* (PROX-inside town-in) 'right here in town'
(e) *má čah-ta'a* (MED-outside town-in) 'there in town'
(f) *íiya čáh-ta'a* (PROX-outside town-in) 'right here in town'

Although this pattern is basically regular and productive, certain combinations surprisingly turn out to be unacceptable. In particular, with *u* 'inside' and *čah* 'town' only the distal marking (zero) is permitted, as in (10)(b). The 'outside' marker *a* is required for medial and proximal distance, despite the fact that the postposition specifies an 'inside' relationship. We thus find expressions like (10)(e)-(f) in lieu of the expected (10)(c)-(d).

Why should things work this way? The apparent explanation hinges on the correlation between distance and scope. It is not unreasonable to suppose that the immediate scope for *u* is determined by the deictic element it fuses with. Thus, in accordance with whether the deictic specification is proximal, medial, or distal, the area subtended by the viewing frame it imposes can be quite small or indefinitely large. (Being an independent phrase, the postpositional locution has its own scope, which is not determined by the deictic element.) We can then explain the data in terms of an incompatibility between the immediate scope imposed by the adverbial particle and the massive size of a town (as compared to a house). From other examples, it appears that *u* is used only when a clear instance of an 'inside' relationship appears onstage within the viewing frame (otherwise *a* occurs by default). For such an instance to be discernible, the boundaries which delineate the 'inside' and 'outside' regions must themselves fall within this frame. The distribution observed in (10)(b)-(f) then results from the size of a town, whose boundaries can only be accommodated by the expansive viewing frame associated with a distal perspective.

The interaction of distance with scope and acuity has further linguistic ramifications. In vision, greater distance generally correlates with greater scope (i.e. a larger field of view) and lesser acuity. Lakoff has invoked the inverse correlation between distance and acuity as the experiential basis for the linguistic similarities between plurals and mass nouns: 'The relationship between multiplex entities and masses is a natural visual relationship. Imagine a large herd of cows up close—close enough to pick out the individual cows. Now imagine yourself moving back until you can no longer pick out the individual cows. What you perceive is a mass. There is a point at which you cease making out the individuals and start perceiving a mass. It is this perceptual experience upon which the relationship between multiplex entities and masses rests' (1987: 428). We might note, however, that a decrease in distance does not invariably enhance perception. As we approach an object, there is a point beyond which any further approximation actually makes it harder to observe—we are just too close to see it well. This happens, for example, when the defining boundaries of the object fall outside the

viewing frame and even the maximal field of view. Suppose you see a cow and decide to walk up to it and press your nose against its side. At this minimal distance you will no longer be able see the bovine contours—the familiar configuration of head, legs, body, tail, and udder—that normally allow you to perceive and recognize a cow from its shape. You may know that you are nuzzling a cow, but since its spatial boundaries overflow the limits of your field of view, all you actually *see* is a small expanse of cowhide.

I suggest that a conceptual analog of this visual phenomenon figures in the semantic value of the progressive construction. As shown in Figure 1, the progressive converts a perfective verb—defined as one that profiles a bounded process whose endpoints fall within its temporal scope—into a special kind of imperfective. It does so by imposing a restricted immediate scope (or temporal viewing frame) which excludes those endpoints. As the general locus of attention, an expression's immediate scope has to contain its profile. Thus, whereas (11)(a) designates an entire bounded event of boot-polishing, its progressive counterpart (11)(b) profiles only that segment of the overall event subtended by the temporal viewing frame.

(11)(a) *Jack polished his boots.*
(b) *Jack was polishing his boots.*

Granted this analysis, two additional properties of progressives can be seen as grounded in the relationship among scope, distance, and acuity. First, the progressive conveys a sense of *immediacy*, one symptom of which is the enhanced likelihood of the speaker adopting the subject's vantage point. For instance, (11)(b) lends itself more easily than (11)(a) to the continuation *Tomorrow was the big dance*, where *tomorrow* is reckoned from the vantage point of the subject, not the speaker. (This observation stems from a discussion with Aintzane Doiz-Bienzobas.) Immediacy is interpretable as the proximity associated with a viewing frame that subtends only a small portion of the relevant domain. Second, a progressive is imperfective, hence its profile is internally homogeneous, even though the designated process is segmented from a perfective describing a change through time. Here I would like to say that the exclusion of the distinctive endpoints from focused observation removes the basis for attributing the profiled segment any specific identity within the structured whole. It is thus construed as a homogeneous mass in much the same way that, in nuzzling a cow, we perceive an unidentified expanse of cowhide rather than any particular cow part.

This discussion of scope and distance has already led us into matters of *perspective*. Here the parallels between vision and conception seem fairly obvious. That the conceptual notion *vantage point* is considered analogous to the spatial viewpoint in vision will hardly come as a revelation. In fact, the possibility of distinguishing them is only made evident by the use of vantage points in non-visuo-spatial domains (e.g. the temporal vantage point invoked by *tomorrow*). We can likewise identify *mental scanning* with *visual scanning*, whereby we direct our gaze along a spatial path. The two may not be distinguishable in examples like (6), where the directed mental scanning follows the spatial extension of a visible entity (a scar). There are however non-spatial examples like those in (12), where the conceptualizer traces oppositely directed mental paths through an abstract domain:

(12)(a) *As body size increases, there are fewer and fewer distinct species.*
(b) *As body size decreases, there are more and more distinct species.*

Of course, it is not precluded that spatial metaphor and visual imagery play a role in such cases. The point is merely that mental scanning represents a generalized ability not specifically tied to actual visual scenes.

Also under the heading of perspective, an entity is said to be construed *subjectively* or *objectively* to the extent that it functions exclusively as the *subject* vs. the *object* of conception. In (11)(a), for example, Jack and the boots are construed with maximal objectivity, being placed 'onstage' as explicitly mentioned focal participants. By contrast, the speaker receives a highly subjective construal: despite being the primary conceptualizer whose temporal vantage point anchors the past-tense marking, the speaker remains 'offstage' and unmentioned (an implicit 'viewing' presence). It should be evident that the speaker's implicit role is quite analogous to that of the viewer in visual perception. In the typical viewing arrangement, sketched in Figure 2, *V* is offstage, at the extreme periphery of the visual field, and is neither focused nor perceived with any acuity. *V* serves primarily as the subject rather than the object of *per*ception, just as the speaker is primarily the subject of *con*ception. Moreover, just as *V*'s offstage location is partially within the maximal field of view and determines the distance and appearance of the focused entity, so an implicit speaker figures peripherally in the overall scope of a finite clause and thus establishes a default-case spatio-temporal reference point.

Finally, the conceptual distinction drawn between *settings* and *participants* has an evident basis in visual perception. For the most part, the entities construed as participants are small, compact, and mobile. They move around and interact within a setting that—at least in relative terms—is large, stable, and inclusive. While this conceptual opposition is not limited to the visuo-spatial domain (note the temporal setting in (8)), we can plausibly relate it to what happens almost every time we open our eyes and look at something: within a large, inclusive spatial expanse, we focus attention on one of many objects that are small and compact by comparison. It is of course possible to view the scene in a different manner, for instance by looking at the entire room instead of any specific object it contains. This marked viewing perspective can be considered analogous to the conceptual inversion that results in sentences like (9)(a), where the subject designates the setting rather than a participant.

At this point a brief summary may be in order. I have argued that *construal* is as important as conceptual *content* to an account of semantic structure and semantic universals. Every lexical item, grammatical element, and grammatical construction imposes a particular construal on the specific or schematic conceptual content it evokes. Many if not all of the numerous dimensions of construal are strong candidates for the status of language universals. They appear to be grounded in universal aspects of human experience and to represent the linguistic manifestation of more general cognitive abilities, which in turn presumably stem—either directly or indirectly—from aspects of our common biological make-up. In particular, construal displays surprisingly many parallels with visual perception. This parallelism is of course subject to different interpretations. It may be that vision exerts a strong formative influence on general conception, including its manifestation in linguistic meanings. Alternatively, both construal and the analogous visual phenomena might be seen as instantiating basic cognitive abilities that are not specifically visual in origin. I suspect that each alternative has some degree of validity.

Assuming that construal is in fact universal, we must ask why languages vary so greatly in their semantic structure, even for describing similar situations. If speakers of every language have a common biological endowment entailing the same construal abilities, and live in a structured environment which ensures the essential commonality of fundamental human experience, what is the source of the semantic disparities that bedevil translation and lead bilinguals to say that their languages put them in different 'mental worlds'? One response is to argue that the differences are exaggerated, that we are more cognizant of the relatively modest discrepancies than with the far more extensive likenesses, precisely because we take the latter for granted. From Her outside perspective, God might tell us that we operate within an exceedingly narrow band in the full spectrum of divinely imaginable conceptual possibilities. But since our own imagination is confined to that band, we are unduly impressed by the actually very minor variation it encompasses.

I do think that is an accurate assessment. Still, the differences catch our interest and from our own narrow perspective are often striking. A good proportion of them are clearly attributable to the immense variation observable in the *detail* of human experience, even granted its fundamental commonality. Speakers of different languages may well live in vastly divergent physical environments, deal with inventories of artifacts having relatively few members in common, and participate in cultural systems that seem foreign and mysterious to outsiders. Of course, that cannot be the whole story, since two languages often express precisely the same situation in very different ways. Recall, for example, Whorf's comparison of English *I cleaned it with a ramrod* and the Shawnee equivalent, whose lexical elements he identified as meaning 'dry space', 'interior of hole', and 'by motion of an instrument' (1956: 208). Or compare the Cora expressions in (13) with their English translations:

(13)(a) *u-ká-kun* (inside-down-hollows) 'There is a small, deep well there.'
(b) *a-tʸá-kun* (outside-in:middle-hollows) 'There is a wide-mouthed well there.'

Whereas English uses the noun *well*, which saliently evokes the functional notion of providing a source of water, Cora employs the subjectless verb *kun* '(be) hollow/hollowness occur', which does not specifically pertain to wells or water, and emphasizes spatial configuration by means of verbal prefixes. Thus *ká-* in (13)(a) reflects the downward extension of the hollowness, while *u-* indicates restrictiveness (of the opening), depth of penetration, and inaccessibility (of the interior) to view. By contrast (a contrast easily ignored in English), the *tʸá-* in (13)(b) highlights the well's location in the middle of an extended area (the surface of the earth), while *a-* conveys expansiveness, shallowness of penetration, and accessibility to view (Casad and Langacker 1985).

In general terms, the source of the variation is reasonably apparent. It stems from the existence and the very nature of construal, which ensure that any given situation can be viewed in multiple if not infinitely many ways. Starting from the same basic conceptual content—e.g. the conception of a well with certain evident properties—we can form an endless variety of specific conceptions by making alternate choices in regard to the many dimensions of construal. We can opt to portray it in fine-grained detail or at any level of schematicity. We can render certain properties salient by coding them explicitly (as for spatial configuration in

(13)), leaving others unmentioned and hence less prominent. Any facet of the scene might be put in profile: the well, construed as a thing; the process of hollowness occurring; the activity of drawing water; the water itself; the depth of the shaft; and so on endlessly. There are countless possible ways of construing selected aspects of the scene metaphorically. It can further be viewed with any scope, from any perspective, and in relation to different assumptions, expectations, and discourse contexts. Thus, although these basic construal abilities are universal, applying them to any particular body of conceptual content presents indefinitely many options, each cognitively natural in its own way.

Of course, a speaker is not left entirely to his own devices in this regard. Particular ways of construing various kinds of situations become conventionalized in a speech community. As an inherent aspect of its meaning, every lexical and grammatical element imposes a certain construal on its own content or the content supplied by others, and in using such an element, we necessarily adopt its construal for immediate expressive purposes. Importantly, I do not claim that the influence of these conventional modes of construal is necessarily either strong or pervasive. I do not say, for example, that just because two languages construe a phenomenon differently, their speakers must conceptualize it differently. To me that makes no sense, for it presupposes that a given person or community is capable of conceptualizing a particular phenomenon in only one way, whereas the whole thrust of my discussion is precisely the opposite. To take just one example, speakers of English effortlessly shift back and forth between construing an argument metaphorically as a combat plane (*She shot down my argument*), as a building (*My argument collapsed*), and as a container for fluid (*That argument doesn't hold water*) (cf. Lakoff and Johnson 1980). The most one can say with any confidence a priori is that the conventions of a language facilitate the adoption of certain construals as opposed to others for purposes of convenient linguistic encoding. I myself tend to think of their influence as being limited and fairly superficial, though hardly trivial or negligible.

There is a greater likelihood that modes of construal might prove psychologically significant when they constitute general patterns rather than the idiosyncrasies of individual forms. Patterns of construal at any level of abstraction and generality are capable of being established in linguistic convention with the potential to exert broad influence on how things are said and how they are conceptualized for that purpose. For instance, an examination of Cora data leaves little doubt that spatial location and configuration are more prominently and systematically specified than in English (cf. Casad 1982, 1984). Beyond their inclusion in countless conventional constructions, we might postulate for the language a highly schematized expectation that such information will normally be expressed. A generalized expectation of this sort could be regarded as a linguistically embodied 'cognitive style' representing the coherence of numerous specific structural phenomena.

While investigation at this level of abstraction is difficult and raises serious methodological issues, I think it ought to be pursued for both its intrinsic linguistic interest and for what it might suggest concerning the relationship of language, cognition, and culture. Of existing work along these lines, one thinks immediately of Talmy's typological research on motion expressions (1975, 1985b, 1991), which demonstrates that languages have particular 'styles' or preferred patterns for the packaging of information regarding such factors as path, causation, and manner of locomotion. I am also intrigued by Ikegami's proposal (e.g. 1985, 1988, 1991), based on a variety of structural and textual phenomena, that Japanese contrasts with

English by placing lesser emphasis on agentivity, showing a lesser tendency toward individuation, and relying more heavily on context for crucial information. He further proposes that this cognitive style might be related to general characteristics of Japanese culture. At this stage, such ideas have to be considered speculative, but I for one would be surprised if they did not turn out to have some measure of validity. Language does not exist in a cultural vacuum, and it is time we began systematically exploring the existence, scope, and import of these higher-level correlations.

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