

Cognitive Grounding and Its Adaptability to Chinese Noun Studies

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Abstract—Cognitive Grammar is a linguistic theory represented by the symbolic thesis and the usage-based thesis. Cognitive grounding theory is a newly fledged theory in CG. Studies related to grounding have been in their infancy, exhibiting a typological vigor. There have been so far no systematic studies devoted to the grounding system of the Chinese language. Chinese grammar studies applying modern Western linguistic theories have long been the pursuit of scholars from generation to generation. This paper is devoted to introduce grounding theory and then focus on its adaptability to Chinese noun studies. It is concluded that (1) grounding is a cognitive process in which the construal of entities becomes more subjective, and in which a type concept is changed into instances that are singled out by the interlocutors; (2) grounding theory and Chinese noun studies have high adaptability, so Chinese noun studies can be approached from the perspective of Chinese nominal grounding.

Index Terms—cognitive grammar, grounding, adaptability, Chinese noun studies

I. INTRODUCTION

Cognitive Grammar (CG hereafter) is a linguistic theory developed by Ronald Langacker since the mid-1970s. It is held within CG that language is symbolic in nature, and that language is a usage-based model (Langacker, 1987, 1991). The symbolic thesis holds that linguistic expressions symbolize or stand for conceptualizations or construal of people's bodily experience. The usage-based model means that language knowledge is knowledge of how language is used. Cognitive Grounding (grounding hereafter) theory is a newly fledged core theory in CG (Langacker, 2013; Wan, 2009). The reason for its important position is that grounding reflects the key ideas of CG. On one hand, grounded nominals and clauses are symbolic in nature, symbolizing the two-way relationship between the semantic pole and phonological pole, and on the other hand, grounding process gives expression to the interaction function of language, which is what the usage-based model fundamentally means.

The present study is motivated by the following two factors. First, the previous studies related to grounding, home and abroad, have only been in their infancy (Nobuko, 2001; Achard, 2002; Kochańska, 2002; Mortelmans, 2002; Nuyts, 2002; Cornillie, 2005). It can be found that these researches are all devoted to typological endeavors, focusing on Japanese, French, Polish, German, Dutch and Spanish respectively. Second, as Langacker (2008, p. 272) put, "every language has its own grounding system". However, few systematic studies have so far approached the Chinese grounding system. Since the birth of *Mashi Wentong* in 1898, Chinese grammar studies applying modern Western linguistic theories have been the pursuit of the scholars from generation to generation. One common agreement over these efforts is that it is inadvisable to totally apply Western linguistic theories to Chinese grammar studies because Chinese differs greatly from most Western languages. In other words, there exists a question of adaptability. Then arises a question: what kind of adaptability does grounding theory show in comparison with Chinese grammar studies? Noun studies are one fundamental aspect of grammar studies, so this paper is devoted to the adaptability of grounding to Chinese noun studies, and the introduction to grounding theory proceeds first, because grounding theory is a newly fledged one in CG.

II. AN OVERVIEW OF COGNITIVE GROUNDING THEORY

Grounding Theory was established by Ronald W. Langacker and firstly appeared in his two volumes *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar* in 1987 and 1991. After that, Langacker began to use the term broadly in his later works like *Grammar and Conceptualization* (1999), *Cognitive Grammar: A Basic Introduction* (2008) and *Essentials of Cognitive Grammar* (2013). Grounding Theory comes out the efforts to explore grammatical phenomena from the perspective of

human beings' mental conception. The theory is closely related to construal, and it is, in a sense, a construal process in which the conceptualizer's conception of the conceptualized becomes more subjective. Grounding is also a process of type concepts turning into instance concepts. Grounding falls into two categories: nominal grounding and clausal grounding. The following sections focus on the three points above.

A. *Grounding and Construal*

Ground is actually developed from the figure-ground segregation initiated by the gestalt psychologist, Rubin, to study "the comprehensive framework of perceptual organization by the gestalt psychologist" (Ungerer & Schmid, 2008, p.157), and later Talmy (1975) introduced and incorporated the concept into the cognitive exploration of language as an attempt to explain the relationship between the main clause and the subordinate clauses. Langacker's contribution in question is to have realized the enormous potential of the gestalt-based approach to language and extended the notion of figure-ground alignment to all linguistic units. Accordingly, ground is given more references. Let's look at some representative definitions of ground:

a. Ground refers to the speech event, its participants, and its immediate circumstances (such as the time and place of speaking). (Langacker, 1990, p.318; 2008, p. 259)

b. Ground refers to the context of the speech event, comprising the participants in the event, its time and place, the situational context, previous discourse, shared knowledge of the speech-act participants, and such like. (Taylor, 2002, p.346)

c. Ground consists of place and time of speaking, the participants in the speech event and the shared knowledge between them. (Evans & Green, 2006, p.575)

It can be seen from the above definitions of ground that ground is concerned with the speech event or speech act. Roughly speaking, ground is composed of all the factors involved in a speech event. Grounding is a process which establishes a basic connection between an entity (either a thing evoked by a noun or a process evoked by an infinite clause) and the ground with the interlocutors being a usual appearance (Langacker, 1991, p.98, 2008, p.259, 2009, p.149; Taylor, 2002, p.346; Evans & Green, 2006, p.575). It can therefore be said that grounding involves two camps. One is the entity a nominal or finite clause designates, and the other is ground. For example, in a skeletal clause consisting of nothing more than the lexical units *girl*, *like*, and *boy*, *girl* elaborate the trajector (the focal participant) of *like*, and *boy* its landmark (the second participant), that is, *girl like boy*. It is true that this skeletal clause has no specific meaning in real life because of lacking ground and its value can be realized by associating with different situations. It figures, for instance, in all the following expressions: *the girl likes that boy*; *this girl may like that boy*; *a girl liked that boy*; *no girl liked that boy*, and so on. Though sharing the same lexical elements, these clauses have distinct meanings and refer to different things about the world. Langacker (2008) argues that "bridging the gap between *girl like boy* and the full sentences cited are grounding elements" (p.259). A grounding element specifies the ground of the thing profiled by a nominal or the process profiled by a finite clause.

Any expression's meaning depends on both the conceptual content it evokes and the way that content is construed. Construal is "our ability to conceive and portray the same situation in alternate ways" (Gao & Li, 2007, p. 41). When viewing a scene, what we actually see always depends on how closely we examine it, what we choose to look at, which elements we pay more or most attention to and where we see it from. It is apparent that the expression's grammatical class is determined by the nature of its profile instead of its overall content. That is, a noun profiles a thing and a verb profiles a process. As a matter of fact, grounding process is a process of construal because the grounding elements function as the bridge between the skeletal clause and the ground, and do help the participants construe the meanings and situations. A grounding element specifies the ground of the thing profiled by a nominal or the process profiled by a finite clause. Through nominal grounding (e.g. *the*, *this*, *that*, *some*, *a*, *each*, *every*, *no*, *any*), the speaker "directs the hearer's attention to the intended discourse referent, which may or may not correspond to an actual individual" (Langacker, 2008, p. 259). Clausal grounding (e.g. *-s*, *-ed*, *may*, *will*, *should*) situates the profiled relationship with respect to the speaker's current conception of reality. That is why the skeletal clause *girl like boy* can express different meanings by associating with different grounding elements. Figure 9, taken from (Langacker, 2008, p. 260) shows the main conception of the conceptualizing relationship.

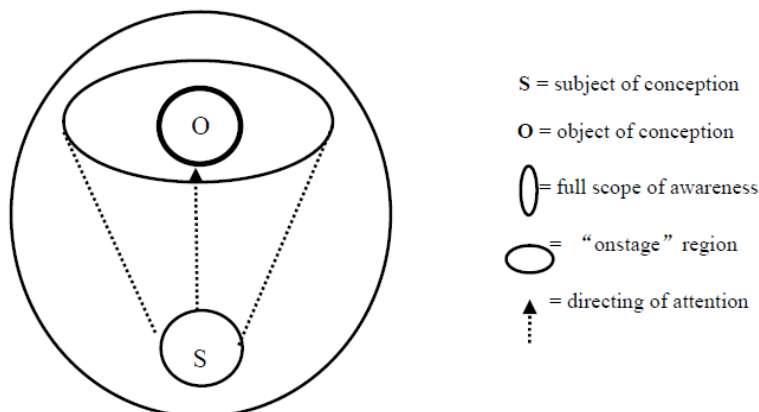


Figure 1 The conceptualizing relationship between the subject and object roles

Grounding reflects “the asymmetry between the subject and object of conception: that is, the conceptualizer and what is conceptualized” (Langacker, 2008, p. 260). The subject and the object here refer to the subject of conception and the object of conception respectively, which is not equivalent to the traditional grammatical terms—subject and object. In Figure 9, the subject and the object stand for two facets of a conceptualizing relationship. Both the speaker and the hearer function as the subjects of conception, which is the focus of the conceptual experience, but in its role as subject it is not itself conceived. The subject (S) directs its attention to the “onstage” region and then singles out some onstage element as the focus of attention which is the object of conception (O). In this situation, S is construed subjectively and O objectively. It should be pointed out that which element is the focus attention owes to the participant’s mental experience that is generally revealed by the grounding element.

All in all, grounding is a process of construal in which the construed are the entities that linguistic expressions profile and the construal factors are within the ground. Just as Radden and Dirven (2007) understand, “in grounding a situation, the speaker provides information about who or what he is talking about, and whether it really happened” (p.48).

B. Type and Instance

“Grounding is characteristic of the structures referred to in CG as nominals and finite clauses” (Langacker, 2008, p. 264). More specifically, a nominal profiles a grounded instance of a thing type and a finite clause profiles a grounded instance of a process type. Therefore, the concept of type and instance is one of the keys to understanding grounding.

A type carries a concept with temporal or spatial reference, so it has, in great measure, no communicative meaning. In other words, types are natural symbols which have to be connected to the ground so that they become instances to be referred to and identified by the interlocutors. That is to say, types become entitled to communication via grounding. For example, the difference between a noun like *book* and a nominal like *this book* lies in the fact that the former stands for a type specification whereas the latter singles out an instance of that type. The semantic content of a noun is the basis for distinguishing one entity from another of the same class, but it is just the general classification of entities, never referring to any instance of a type in terms of spatial references. When the grounding element *this* is added before *book*, the concept is given spatial reference and the speaker directs the hearer’s attention to a proximal referent, either in the real world or in the conceived reality, so that the hearer can identify it through their shared knowledge. In other words, the process of *book* to *this book* is a process of nominal grounding, and it is also a process of a type turning into an instance. Just like a noun and a nominal, a verb stands for a type and a finite clause profiles a grounded instance of this type. A skeletal clause *boy like girl*, for instance, has no reference to time and reality, so it just stands for a type of process or relation, because it applies to a couple of situations. If it becomes grounded, like *this boy may like that boy*, it can symbolize an instance in which the process or relation is a direct unreality. In other words, the grounded clause is qualified for its communicative status. The grounded process of a type changing into an instance to be referred to and identified can be shown in figure 2 as below.

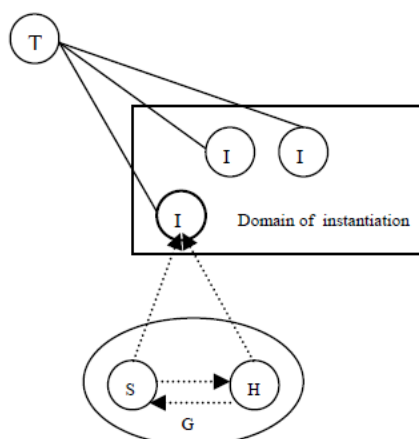


Figure 2 The grounding process of type into instances
(Adapted from Langacker, 2008, p. 282)

It can be seen from figure 2 that a type can be elaborated into more one instance, and the speaker use grounding element to direct the hearer's attention to a particular instance which is expected to be identified by the hearer through the interaction between the speaker and the hearer based on their shared knowledge within the ground.

According to the above analysis, the instances are different from the type and an abstract domain is provided for instantiation. It can be read as a type being instantiated in its special domain of instantiation. Any object in the domain of instantiation can be considered as an instance of the type in question. Hence the difference between a type and an instance is that "the former suppresses (or at least backgrounds) the thought of the profiled entity occupying a particular, distinguishing location" (Langacker, 2008, p. 268).

As the primary function of lexemes is classificatory, nominals and finite clauses "provide an established schema for apprehending the world in terms of culturally sanctioned categories of proven relevance and utility" (Langacker, 2008, p. 264), and namely the basic function of a nominal or a finite clause is referential. It is the grounding elements that help a noun or a verb direct attention to a particular thing or process and the profiled entity serves to distinguish it from other members of its category. In short, grounding is a process in which a type is changed into an instance to be referred and identified in the communicative activity.

C. Grounded Nominal and Grounded Clause

It can be seen from the definition of grounding and from the discussions above that grounding actually falls into two major categories: nominal grounding and clausal grounding. A nominal's grounding indicates that the reference is achieved, which implies that the interlocutors direct their attention to the same conceived entity. The nominal reference is to direct an interlocutor's attention to one particular thing out of a range of potential candidates that are usually open-ended. For example, a single noun *car* just stands for a type which may include thousands of such things like cars (instances). The car is selected from all those instances as the focus of attention and it also indicates that this instance can be recognized by both the speaker and the hearer. Maybe the car is what the speaker and the hearer talked about just now or it may be the car near them.

Like a nominal, a finite clause profiles a grounded instance of some type. A verb designates a type of process and a finite clause designates an instance of the type. For example, the verb *like* designate a type of process and *He liked her* is one of the instances of the type. Clausal grounding is mainly concerned with "the status of events with respect to their actual or potential occurrence" (Langacker, 2008, p. 296). The speaker's conception of reality and the ground function as the reference for the epistemic judgments expressed by grounding elements. These elements mainly include the marks of the two basic tenses, present and past, and five basic modals, *might*, *could*, *would*, *should* and *must*. Taylor (2002) points out that "grounding of a clause situates a process with respect to the circumstance of the speech event; grounding is marked by a cluster of features pertaining to the verb and its subject, namely tense inflection, number agreement of the verb with its subject, and the nominative case of the subject" (p.392). When the tense inflection is added to the verb, the finite clause or grounded clause depicts the situation in present time or past time, whereas when the modal are added to the verbs, the finite clause or grounded clause depicts the situation real or unreal. That is to say, tense is to indicate an event's location in time relative to the time of speaking, while modals pertain to its likelihood of occurring. Here are four examples to depict these relations.

- (1) He likes her.
- (2) He liked her.
- (3) He may like her.
- (4) He might like her.

It is apparent that (1) designates the present tense, which shows the process has a direct relationship with the speaker, that is, the situation is a direct reality. The past-tense mark is added to the verb of (2), which means the process is an indirect reality. The modal *may* in (3) shows the process is a direct unreality and the past-tense form *might* in (4) shows

an indirect unreality. Just as taking the determiner as the head of a nominal, the tense inflection is considered as the head of a finite clause. The tense inflection designates a grounded instance of schematic process and “the clause inherits the profile of the tense inflection” (Taylor, 2002, p. 395).

In summary, grounding is a cognitive process in which the construal of things or relations becomes more subjective. Grounding a cognitive process in which a type is changed into an instance and the speaker directs the hearer’s attention to the intended thing or relationship within the same mental space. Grounding basically falls into two categories: nominal grounding and clausal grounding.

III. ADAPTABILITY OF COGNITIVE GROUNDING THEORY TO CHINESE NOUN STUDIES

As is mentioned above, linguistic theories based on Indo-European language family do not always apply to Chinese, a member in the Sino-Tibetan language family. The following sections focus on what adaptability that grounding theory demonstrates in its application to Chinese noun studies. It is argued in this paper that grounding theory has a high adaptability with Chinese grammar studies, which can be explained from the two senses as below.

A. *In Its Broad Sense*

The broad sense here means that we attempt to approach the adaptability of grounding theory to the Chinese noun studies from their higher levels of categories. To be more specific, we examine the adaptability of Cognitive Linguistics (CL hereafter) and CG, the broader labels of grounding theory, to Chinese grammar studies, which include noun studies. The high adaptability in this sense can be discussed from the following aspects.

First, the function-oriented approach of CL is consistent with the need of Chinese grammar studies. On one hand, CL is a modern school of linguistic thought that originally emerged out of dissatisfaction with formal approaches to language. It sees language ability as the demonstration of human general abilities in language, and therefore attaches great importance to cognition between language and the world. On the other hand, one top pressing matter in Chinese grammar studies is “to release themselves from the influences of the dominant Indo-European grammar analysis models which are fundamentally formalism oriented” (Zhang, 1998, p. 198). CL is in a good position to meet this need in that the founders of CL are mostly the “betrayers” of the formalism camp, and therefore are against the traditional Indo-European grammar analysis models. Here it is necessary to quote some sayings of Shen (2011, preface): CL is very close to Chinese which is typically not form oriented, so the clothes of CL fits well the body of Chinese, and in China CL enjoys better momentum of development than formalism approaches. All the quotes above can be boiled down to one conclusion that CL has high adaptability with Chinese grammar studies.

Second, both CG and Chinese grammar studies lay emphasis on language use. For one thing, it is held under the framework of CG that grammar is a usage-based model (Langacker, 1988, 2004; Croft & Cruse, 2004; Evans & Green, 2006). This model holds that language knowledge comes from language use, and therefore CG does not separate competence and performance as believed by Chomsky. In addition, the usage-based model sees language knowledge as language specific, which on one hand defaults the minimalist, reductive and top-down approach held by formalists, and offers an open access for Chinese on the other. For another thing, “Chinese grammar resides, in great measure, in its actual use, so there would be little to say if we talk about Chinese grammar without taking its uses into account” (Shen, 2011, p.15). Accordingly it can be said that the principles and assumptions of CG and the characteristics of Chinese make it a feasible approach to study Chinese grammar in reference to CG, and to CL at large.

Third, the introduction of CL to China is “not intended to criticize formalism as mostly in Western world, but to seek a new approach to Chinese language description and explanation” (Shu, 2009, p. 248). In practice, this intention of approaching Chinese grammar studies has indeed brought about substantial achievements (Tai, 1985; Zhang, 1998; Yuan, 2004; Shen, 2006; Wen, 2007, 2008; Shu, 2009; Liu, 2008; Wu, 2011), which all proves factually the feasibility and effectiveness of CG, or CL at large, approach to Chinese grammar studies.

B. *In Its Narrow Sense*

It is meant by the narrow sense that grounding theory in CG has a high adaptability with noun studies in Chinese grammar studies at large. This is to be elaborated as follows.

First, grounding theory occupies a core position in CG, and accordingly embodies the underlying theses of CG: the symbolic and usage-based nature. CG is driven by the idea that language is inherently symbolic in nature, and therefore grammar is also symbolic (Langacker, 1987, pp. 11-12, 2013, p. 14; Taylor, 2002, p. 20). It follows that linguistic expressions symbolize or stand for conceptualizations. CG makes the strong claim that grammatical units can be exhaustively described in terms of the following units: phonological structures, semantic structures and symbolic structures (Langacker, 1987, p. 16, 2013, p.15; Taylor, 2002, pp. 20-21). Phonological structures are the overt manifestations of language, which is a linguistic expression in its material or perceptual aspects. It is believed to have a wide coverage of both the sound and the written forms. Semantic structures refer to conceptualizations exploited for linguistic purposes, notably the meaning of an expression conveys. An expression’s meaning is “not just the conceptual content it evokes—equally important is how that content is construed” (Langacker, 2008, p.55). Symbolic structures are not distinct from phonological and semantic structures, but reside in a two-way relation between them. It can be seen that symbolic structures are the pairing of form and meaning, each invoking the other. To put it simply, “grammar is a

means of linking form and meaning in a conventionalized manner” (Shen, 1994, p. 16).

The symbolic structure is shown as [[SEM]/[PHON]]. CG reduces all the grammatical units into two categories: thing and process. Their symbolic structures are indicated as [[THING]/[X]] and [[PROCESS]/[Y]] respectively. For instance, *dissertation* can be symbolized as [[DISSERTATION]/[dissertation]], and *advise* as [[ADVISE]/[advise]]. It is noted that different symbolic units can be composed into large ones using a hyphen, and the symbolic complexity is called symbolic assembly. For example, *dissertation advisor* can be shown as [[[DISSERTATION]/ [dissertation]]-[[[ADVISE]/[advise]]- [[OR]/[or]]]], which is a symbolic assembly.

In form, English nominal grounding is a process from bare nouns to nominal phrases such as *book* to *this book*. Both bare nouns and grounded nouns are symbolic involving a two-direction link between the phonological pole and the semantic pole. In other words, the symbolic nature of language, particularly find its way well in nominal grounding.

As far as meaning is concerned, nominal grounding involves a process of a bare noun realizing its communicative function. In order to carry communicative function, natural languages have to be connected to the ground covering the whole speech event, notably the speaker and the hearer. For example, an ungrounded bare noun *book* just expresses a type in concept, and the interlocutors have no verbal access to the specific references, so the ungrounded noun *book* has not gained its communicative status. By adding a grounding element, the demonstrative *this* for example, the speaker directs the hearer’s attention to the intended target, and based on their shared knowledge, the interlocutors realize their communication. Communication via language is another way of saying the instances of language use. That is why we say grounding reflects the usage-based nature of language, one key thesis of language held in CG.

Second, Chinese nouns involve the key ideas of nominal grounding. Grounding falls into two categories: nominal grounding and clausal grounding. Nouns and verbs are universal and grammatically fundamental across all languages, and Chinese has no exceptions. Therefore it can theoretically be said that grounding can find its expression in Chinese nouns. In fact, just as Langacker (2008) mentioned, “every language has its own grounding system, which must be described in its own terms (p. 272). So far very few studies have touched upon the grounding system of Chinese nouns. Lu (2012) discussed the semantics of Chinese bare nouns from the grounding perspective. It is argued in her research that Chinese bare nouns are chiefly grounded through covert means. However, one thing that does not receive due attention is that Chinese also has overt grounding strategies despite the fact that Chinese bare nouns alone can sometimes realize definite reference. Grounding is not a grammatical category. Grounding is in nature a process in which the interlocutors realize their referring and identifying the intended entity. Therefore, any modifiers that are helpful in referring to and identifying nominal referents are grounding elements. It can be seen that high adaptability of grounding theory to Chinese noun studies does not mean that grounding theory can be directly borrowed to study Chinese nouns. Rather, Chinese nominal grounding has its own typological demonstrations. As is argued above, for example, Chinese nominal grounding, compared with English nominal grounding, at least has the following characteristics. Therefore, it is advisable to figure out, in reference to English grounding system, the model or framework of the Chinese nominal grounding system so as to approach Chinese noun studies.

IV. CONCLUSION

This paper introduced grounding theory, a newly fledged component in CG, and discussed its adaptability to Chinese noun studies from the broad sense and the narrow sense. Grounding is a construal process and a type-instance changing process. Roughly speaking, grounding consists of two categories: nominal grounding and clausal grounding. It is argued in this paper that grounding theory has a high adaptability to Chinese noun studies. In the broad sense, the function-oriented approach and emphasis on language use of CL and CG is consistent with the need of Chinese grammar studies. In practice, since CL is introduced into China as an attempt to seek a new approach to Chinese language description and explanation, a lot of achievements have been made. In the narrow sense, grounding theory occupies a core position in CG on one hand, and Chinese nouns involve the key ideas of nominal grounding on the other hand.

It has to be pointed out that high adaptability of grounding theory to Chinese noun studies does not mean that grounding theory can be directly borrowed to study Chinese nouns. Rather, Chinese nominal grounding has its own typological demonstrations, which need to be figured out so as to be applied in Chinese noun studies. The present study is expected to make some contributions to the typological development of grounding theory, provide a new approach to Chinese noun studies, and shed some light on the tense and aspect studies from the grounding perspective.

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