

Agent 'mystification' revisited, again: A Cognitive Grammar analysis

Critical Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) have both invested much stock in the 'mystificatory' properties of particular linguistic structures, including agentless passives, nominalizations and agent substituting metonymies (Hodge and Kress 1993; Reisigl and Wodak 2001). Recently, however, claims that these structures are mystifying have come into criticism (e.g. O'Halloran 2003; Widdowson 2004). Here it is argued that agency is always recoverable from context based on normal pragmatic principles such as relevance. Van Leeuwen therefore distinguishes between 'suppression' and 'backgrounding'. Agency is never totally suppressed but it can be backgrounded where agents are 'not so much excluded as de-emphasised' (Van Leeuwen 1996: 39). CDA is still guilty, though, of taking it for granted that agent mystification in text has any conceptual impact.

One strand of CDA which has addressed the conceptual impact of particular textual structures is the Cognitive Linguistic Approach. However, this approach has been concerned almost exclusively with the conceptual effects of metaphor rather than agent mystification (Charteris-Black 2004; Koller 2004; Musolff 2004). In this paper, I propose that by applying Langacker's theory of Cognitive Grammar (1987, 1991) the scope of the Cognitive Linguistic Approach can be broadened to analyse agent mystification.

A Cognitive Grammar analysis provides some suggestive evidence that agency is conceptually backgrounded by mystification devices. In this paper, then, I put forward a Langackerian analysis of agentless passives and agent substitution metonymies in immigration discourse. The illustrative analyses argue that, whilst agency always remains within the 'scope of the predication', it is conceptually backgrounded as a reflex of 'profiling' other elements in an 'action chain' (Langacker 1991).

References

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