LEXICAL PERSPECTIVES ON
TRANSITIVITY AND ERGATIVITY
AMSTERDAM STUDIES IN THE THEORY AND HISTORY OF LINGUISTIC SCIENCE

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Volume 166

Maarten Lemmens

Lexical Perspectives on Transitivity and Ergativity
Causative constructions in English
LEXICAL PERSPECTIVES ON TRANSITIVITY AND ERGATIVITY
CAUSATIVE CONSTRUCTIONS IN ENGLISH

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JOHN BENJAMINS PUBLISHING COMPANY
AMSTERDAM/PHILADELPHIA
To Hilde
Andreas, Joanna, Simon, and Jan-Willem
with love and apologies
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The present book is an extensive revision of my doctoral dissertation. While many of the analyses and observations go back to the original work, the present book can safely be said to be a complete rewrite of the original manuscript. The theoretical descriptions have been pruned to what is absolutely essential and the descriptive material has been restructured to better clarify my own cognitive lexical-paradigmatic approach to causative constructions in English, basically a synthesis of cognitive grammar and systemic-functional grammar.

It is my pleasant duty to thank the many people who, in one way or another, have contributed to both my doctoral dissertation and this book. It is impossible to list all these people, yet I would like to thank some of them explicitly.

I wish to thank Dirk Geeraerts, promotor of my Ph.D. dissertation, for having continually challenged and stimulated me with his methodological concerns and his persistently careful criticism. While less directly involved in the rewriting process, his comments on first drafts of this book have been much appreciated.

I am grateful to my Brygida Rudzka-Ostyn, co-promotor of my Ph.D. dissertation, for her elaborate comments on both the contents and the presentation of my work. Her extensive feedback, energy and enthusiasm have been a major impetus to my work.

I also thank Kristin Davidse for her careful comments on substantial parts of this work, which helped me considerably in the delineation of my own approach.

I am indebted to the department of Linguistics of the K.U. Leuven for offering me an assistantship during which I carried out most of the linguistic research reported on in this book. I thank Emma Vorlat for granting me the academic freedom for this research. The colleagues at the department provided a pleasant and stimulating atmosphere. The time for research granted by the Université Charles de Gaulle, Lille, France, where I work at present has been greatly appreciated. I thank my colleagues in the English department for their interest and support.

I am much obliged to Paul Bijens, Jan Ducaju, Fred Truyen and Ivo Jossart for their help with the computer-part of this work. I thank Dirk Speelman for providing me with citations from the OED on CD-ROM.

In the course of the years I have had the opportunity to meet several people and discuss my work with them. I particularly thank Eugene Casad, Seana
Coulson, Adele Goldberg, Louis Goossens, Ismael F. Hussain Al-Bajjari, Andreas Jucker, Dan Jurafsky, Robert Kirsner, Philip Miller, Peter Norvig, Mary-Ellen Ryder, David Tuggy and Dekai Wu for their constructive comments or their stimulating interest in my work. I thank my proofreaders Adrian Gebbett, Camilla Mryglod, Gert Troch and Arthur Gamble. Responsibility for the final product is, of course, mine.

I am much indebted to the two anonymous reviewers appointed by John Benjamins. Their constructive comments have helped me considerably in streamlining my work and rework it into the present book. I thank Anke de Looper from Benjamins for her help with the formatting of this book and other practical matters.

A special word of thanks I reserve for my best friend Kurt Feyaerts. He shared with me the ups and downs of both my Ph.D. and this book. With a faith in me often larger than my own, he never stopped encouraging me to continue with my work.

Great is my debt to my family. Warm thanks go to my parents and parents-in-law for their support and concern, and various kinds of practical help. To my wife Hilde I am most indebted for her love, her optimism and ability to put things in perspective. She moreover has the gift of performing miracles and making things work where nobody else could or would. Without her, this work would simply not have been possible. Andreas, Joanna, Simon, and Jan-Willem made an essential contribution by their heart-warming spontaneity, their overwhelming joy of life, and particularly by limiting their interest in this book to an inquiry into the number of pages and when it would be finished. I am glad I can tell them I am home again.
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PART I

THEORETICAL PREMISES
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Constructional variation with causative verbs
This work ultimately argues that in order to explain the variable behaviour of causative verbs in modern English, it is fundamental to consider not only the lexical properties of those verbs but also the interaction between those properties and the meanings of the constructions in which the verbs may appear. My corpus-based analysis of verbs of killing, verbs which in linguistic treatises are generally taken as causative verbs par excellence, reveals the complex conceptual networks of (related) meanings instantiated by these verbs. With respect to constructional meaning, I continue, and by doing so refine, the view defended in Davidse (1991, 1992) that the English grammar of causative constructions is governed by the transitive and ergative paradigms. Overall, my perspective on the relevant grammatical constructions remains a cognitively inspired lexical one, aiming at clarifying how lexical and constructional meaning interact dynamically.

The linguistic phenomena to be addressed in this book can best be identified via some seemingly puzzling questions related to expressions of killing:

- Why can one rephrase John choked Mary (a causative) as Mary choked (a non-causative), while one cannot rephrase John killed Mary as *Mary killed?

- The same type of rephrasing is acceptable for drown in the sentence The former government drowned hundreds of dissidents (vs. Hundreds of dissidents drowned after being dumped into the ocean from a plane). However, it is not acceptable in The protesters’ horns drowned out the bell (*The bell drowned out). Why?

- Why does murder allow an objectless construction with the agent in subject position, as in, They have the clear intention to murder, whereas in a comparable objectless construction with starve, e.g. They have the clear intention to starve, the subject cannot be interpreted as the agent causing someone else’s starvation but as the entity that is affected by it?
- Why is it that many causatives can occur in a medio-passive construction, e.g. *This book reads easily or *These glasses break easily whereas such constructions are at least awkward for verbs of killing, e.g. *Mary kills easily (with Mary being the victim).

- Why is it that *abort allows the causative/non-causative alternation in metaphorical uses (e.g. *the pilot aborted the takeoff vs. the takeoff aborted), but does not allow it for literal uses (e.g. *the woman aborted the child vs. the child aborted)?

While these questions are mere appetizers, they all relate to a verb’s constructional variability coupled with its distinct meanings. To adequately answer these and related questions concerning the interaction of verb meaning and constructional variability, it is necessary to characterize verbs of killing against the background of the transitive and ergative paradigms. In contrast to, for instance, some Asian or Amerindian languages, English does not formally mark the ergativity/transitivity distinction (cf. Dixon 1979, 1994; Comrie 1981 or DeLancey 1981, 1984a, 1990 for illustrations of such markings). As a result, many scholars have failed to observe it as a principle operative within the grammar of English.

However, can one claim at all that the English grammar of causation is structured by the ergative and transitive systems if the distinction between the two is not marked overtly, e.g. by case markers? Following Davidse (1991, 1992), I argue that the claim stands up to close examination, provided that one recognizes that overt markings are but one way in which the two systems manifest themselves in a language. I accept the Whorfian view that overt grammatical categories should be distinguished from covert ones which make themselves felt by the systematic relations that link all the paradigmatic correlates of a construction type. The semantics of a covert grammar can be arrived at by systematically examining the paradigmatically related constructions. This type of heuristics has been exploited insightfully within the framework of systemic-functional grammar as, for instance, in Davidse’s (1991) innovative work on transitivity and ergativity in the English grammar. Within mainstream linguistics Levin’s (1993) work on English verb classes is noteworthy. Levin effectively uses the alternation method to characterize a verb’s meaning. The major shortcoming of her work is that she sees the choice of constructions in which a verb may occur as wholly determined by the verb’s semantics and, as a result, fails to recognize that the constructions themselves are meaningful (see Chapter 2, section 2.2.3 for more explicit criticism).

That constructions have meaning independent of verbs is argued, for example, in Goldberg (1995). While she discusses construction types different from
the ones analysed in this work, her views are largely compatible with mine. Constructions are meaningful in and of themselves, but as Goldberg rightly insists, “it is clearly not the case that the grammar works entirely top-down, with constructions simply imposing their meaning on unsuspecting verbs” (1995:24). Rather, she says that “the meaning of constructions and verbs interact in non-trivial ways” (1995:24).

The interaction between verbal and constructional semantics is indeed a complex matter. Within the scope of the present work, it can be restated in terms of the following questions:

- How does the lexical content of a verb influence constructional variability?
- Conversely, how do the various constructions in which a verb may occur affect its meaning?
- What is the role of extension mechanisms like metaphor and metonymy with respect to the ergative-transitive interplay?
- How may lexical and constructional properties change over time and does this lead to prototype shifts?

My aim is to suggest some answers to these complex and far-reaching questions by analyzing a large corpus of verbs of killing.

1.2 Structual organization of this book
1.2.1 Part I: Theoretical Premises

The first part of this book consists of three chapters which present a more general and theoretical exploration into some issues that are immediately relevant to my overall argument. As the first of these three chapters, the present chapter has stated the purpose of this book as essentially involving an account of constructional variability with lexical causatives. It further clarifies the general theoretical assumptions underlying this work (section 1.3), which are in essence an innovative synthesis of (predominantly) Cognitive Grammar and Systemic-Functional Grammar. The chapter concludes with a clarification of the strong empirical basis of our analysis (section 1.4). The next two chapters of Part I deal more elaborately with the grammatical and lexical perspectives which form the backbone of my work.

Chapter 2 presents a careful description of causative constructions. First, I argue how lexical and analytical causatives, which have often been regarded as semantically equivalent, in fact involve quite different conceptualizations of an event (section 2.1). The second and most important part of Chapter 2, section 2.2, is concerned with a proper characterization of lexical causatives. It offers brief critical discussions of some views which have become accepted within
certain schools of thought and which in one way or another are relevant to the theoretical synthesis underlying the present work. This synthesis, a cognitive lexical-paradigmatic approach, is characterized briefly in the last section of Chapter 2 (section 2.2.5); its descriptive and explanatory adequacy is fleshed out to the fullest in the descriptive analyses in Part II of this book.

Chapter 3 takes up the other important pillar of my work, viz. the lexical semantic perspective on (causative) verbs. Clearly, the lexical perspective focuses on those aspects of verbal meaning that directly pertain to the verb's constructional potential. The chapter clarifies the cognitive view on semantic multiplicity, which I hold as the most appropriate to account for semantic variability both in lexis and in grammar. Following Langacker (see References), it is argued that conceptual categories are not rigidly and absolutely defined structures, but prototypically structured networks of interrelated meanings. It will be shown that this not only holds for lexical categories as for example instantiated by individual verbs of killing (section 3.1), but also for lexical fields, such as that designated by the group of verbs of killing (section 3.2). The next section in the chapter offers a preliminary clarification of the relationship between constructional variability and lexical meaning relatedness. The concluding section in Chapter 3 is in fact the conclusion to the whole of Part I (note that neither Chapter 1 nor Chapter 2 have a conclusion) and is at the same time an opener into the descriptive analyses in Part II.

1.2.2 Part II: Case Studies

Part II of this book, comprising the actual descriptive work, contains four chapters which have been set up to cogently describe the complexities of the transitive and ergative models and their dynamic interaction with verbal meaning.

Chapter 4 focuses on how the lexical structure of verbs may either constrain or encourage constructional extensions. Following a brief introduction, the first analysis (section 4.2) deals with lexically determined constraints on the middle or medio-passive construction in present-day English. Ironically perhaps, the insights on the middle construction originated in the need to account for the unmistakable absence of this construction for verbs of killing. The description augments Langacker's cognitive analysis by a paradigmatic perspective, yet at the same time remedies some shortcomings of Davidse's paradigmatic views on this construction. The second description offered in Chapter 4 (section 4.3) is a diachronic perspective on different types of paradigmatic shifts within the field of killing. It shows how over a considerable time span, the lexical evolution of some verbs, e.g. starve or throttle, has taken the verbs into new constructional possibilities.
Chapter 5 deals with the Agent-centredness of the transitive paradigm, and explores this characteristic from different perspectives. First, it considers the prototype structure of the Agent-category and shows how agentivity is experientially motivated (section 5.1). Next, reviewing the individual MURDER verbs, it reveals how the Agent-centredness of this most salient (and prototypically transitive) subset of the field of killing is lexically determined (section 5.2). In a lexical-paradigmatic analysis of agentive nominals in -er (e.g. *killer*), section 5.3 explores the Agent-centredness of the transitive paradigm from a morphological perspective. Finally, our analysis of the transitive construction with omitted object further elucidates, from a constructional point of view, the fundamental hook-up with agentivity that characterizes the transitive paradigm.

As a logical complement to Agent-centredness of the transitive paradigm, Chapter 6 shows how the ergative paradigm is primarily concerned with the participant *affected* by a process. By discussing a group of predominantly ergative verbs, the SUFFOCATE verbs, the chapter further reveals the experiential basis of ergativity for these verbs, yet it also shows how the opposition between transitive and ergative SUFFOCATE verbs is experientially motivated as well. The rest of the chapter reviews the enormously rich semantic and constructional coverage of the SUFFOCATE verbs. Section 6.2 elaborates the brief diachronic description of Chapter 4, section 4.3.2, and further substantiates the lexical and constructional overlapping that characterizes the history of these verbs. Next, section 6.3 (which forms the logical counterpart to section 5.2 in Chapter 5) describes the reorientation towards more differentiated lexical and constructional prototypes underlying the evolution to the present-day situation. The final section of the chapter discusses specific cases of transitivization of ergative *choke* and *drown* triggered by particles.

Chapter 7 provides a maximal focus on the complexities of the interplay between the transitive and ergative paradigms, elaborating on the paradigmatically mixed character of the verb *abort*. By tracing the complex etymological evolution of this verb, we can account for the verb’s constructional complexity in present-day English. It finds a logical explanation in view of the symbiosis of lexical and constructional meaning.

By looking at grammatical structures from the lexical end, the different chapters in Part II clarify how transitivity and ergativity operate within the field of killing and as such may provide a useful basis for extrapolations to other types of causative verbs in the English lexicon. Starting from a general overview of my findings, the final conclusions to this work further reflect on the nature of verbal and constructional interaction and sketches some avenues for further research.
To facilitate the comprehension of the text, an index and a glossary of terms are added at the end of this book. The glossary briefly defines the terminology used in this work and presents a list of corpus references used (see also section 1.4 below).

1.3 Theoretical framework

As to its underlying assumptions, the present work adheres primarily to the principles of Cognitive Grammar as developed by Langacker (see References), especially in its treatment of lexical meaning. In addition, this study draws considerably on Systemic-Functional Grammar as developed by Halliday and others (especially Davidse 1991) whose views are in many respects strikingly compatible with those of Cognitive Grammar. At the same time, this work incorporates some descriptive insights from work in the framework of Generative Grammar and Relational Grammar and their derivatives (e.g. Keyser & Roeper 1984, Levin 1993; Levin & Rappaport Hovav 1995). As such, the theoretical underpinnings of this work offer what I believe to be an innovative synthesis of these frameworks. While the result may no longer be fully compatible with rigid formulations of any of these, it offers insights which can be pertinent to all.

The following sections briefly map out the major assumptions of these frameworks. The discussion, necessarily very brief, starts with Cognitive Grammar, the theoretical homeground of this book. Next, it discusses some notions of Systemic-Functional Grammar from which the insights concerning the paradigmatic opposition between transitivity and ergativity are borrowed. Finally, some aspects of Generative and Relational Grammar deserve some attention. It should be stressed that these descriptions serve to situate the present work in the linguistic tradition and do not aspire to be a full-fledged evaluation of these models. More critical evaluations occur at various places in this book, when specific views (e.g. on analytical versus lexical causatives or on agentivity) are at issue.

1.3.1 Cognitive Grammar

Within the framework of Cognitive Grammar, there is no principled distinction between lexicon and grammar, both of which form a continuum of symbolic structures. More precisely, grammar is defined as a structured inventory of conventional linguistic units, i.e. structures which “the speaker has mastered thoroughly to the extent that he can employ [them] in largely automatic fashion, without having to focus his attention specifically on [their] individual parts or their arrangement” (Langacker 1987a:57). Three types of units are distinguished: semantic, phonological, and symbolic. The latter are bipolar and as such associate a phonological structure with a semantic structure.
To say that lexical and grammatical structures form a continuum does not mean that they are identical; grammatical structures are more schematic than lexical ones. A sentence like The dog / bit / the postman combines three meaningful units into a larger structure which itself is also meaningful as it represents the sequence AGENT-PROCESS-AFFECTED. What this grammatical structure means is that some Agent acts upon another entity, the Affected. In this particular example, the identity of the Agent and the Affected are specified by the lexical items dog and postman, and the action by bite. The definite articles and the tense and voice of the verb are also regarded as meaningful.

Langacker's symbolic units are equivalent to the constructions in Construction Grammar (see e.g. Fillmore 1986, 1988; Fillmore et al. 1988; Kay 1990 or Goldberg 1992, 1995). Like Cognitive Grammar, Construction grammar does not assume a strict division of lexicon and syntax. As Goldberg puts it, "both lexical and grammatical constructions are essentially the same type of declarative data structure: both pair form with meaning" (1995:7). I will be using the term 'construction' more restrictively, viz. in reference to the grammatical frames in which a verb may occur. For instance, the government starved its own children realizes an ergative effective construction (INSTIGATOR-PROCESS-MEDIUM), whereas the Ethiopians starved realizes the ergative non-effective construction (MEDIUM-PROCESS). These two constructions are formally and semantically different: the effective one overtly codes the entity that initiated the given event, while the non-effective remains neutral as to whether it was externally or internally instigated (see Chapter 2, sections 2.2.4 and 2.2.5, for more details).

Returning to Cognitive Grammar, symbolic units are seen as providing the means for expressing conceptualizations in linguistic form. Cognitive grammar thus equates meaning with conceptualization. That is, semantic structure is defined as conceptualization "tailored to the specifications of linguistic convention" (Langacker 1987a:99). The meaning of a linguistic expression is a cognitive structure characterized relative to cognitive domains, "where a domain can be any sort of conceptualization: a perceptual experience, a concept, a conceptual complex, an elaborate knowledge system, etc."

(Langacker 1991a:3). As Lakoff (1987) has shown, most of these are idealized cognitive models (ICMs). Such models are similar to Fillmore's frames, defined as "unified frameworks of knowledge, or coherent schematizations of experience" (Fillmore 1985:223).

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1 In fact, the nominals the dog and the postman are themselves already complex units, but I decide to ignore this here.
In this view, linguistic semantics is encyclopedic in nature, involving specifications in many cognitive domains. The traditional distinction (cf. Lyons 1977) between linguistic knowledge and encyclopedic knowledge is thus untenable. As Haiman (1980:331) states it, "dictionaries are encyclopedias" (cf. also Langacker 1987a:154ff, Croft 1993). The relevant background information for the characterization of meaning constitutes "a network of shared, conventionalized, to some extent perhaps idealized knowledge, embedded in a pattern of cultural beliefs and practices" (Taylor 1989:23).

Against the background of such larger conceptual structures, called the 'base', linguistic structures impose their own specifications, which brings us to one of the pivotal claims of Cognitive Grammar, viz. that "linguistic expressions and grammatical constructions embody conventional imagery" (Langacker 1988a:7). Meaning thus relies on our ability to conceptualize the same object or situation in different ways. As Casad summarizes it: "the speaker's ability to conceptualize situations in a variety of ways is, in fact, the foundations of cognitive semantics" (1995:23). The following chapters will provide ample illustration of different dimensions of imagery; by way of illustration, I elaborate here only one, viz. 'figure/ground' alignment.

This dimension involves a basic principle of cognitive and perceptual experience by virtue of which humans perceive (or cognize) entities as standing out against others. The meaning of linguistic units can also be seen in terms of figure/ground alignment, viz. as the imposition of a profile on some relevant base. The profile is "a substructure that is elevated to a special level of prominence within the base" (Langacker 1991a:5). Different predications can be characterized relative to one and the same domain, yet as they normally diverge in their figure/ground alignment, they are semantically non-equivalent. As an example, consider the relationship between the verb kill and its nominalization killing in the following examples:

(1) Yusef Hawkins was killed last week ... (WSJ)

---

2 See Lakoff (1987:75ff) for an illustration of the complexity of conceptual matrices (or in his terms, Idealized Cognitive Models or ICMs).

3 Gruber (1985) insists on the distinction between linguistic and encyclopedic meaning, and in fact complicates matters by adding yet another, viz. 'conceptual meaning'. In his opinion, "lexical and conceptual meaning are essential parts of the meaning of a word or the criteria for its use [...] Encyclopedic meaning is knowledge or beliefs merely associated with a word or category, i.e. inessential for its use" (1985:255; my emph.). Gruber introduces these distinctions to explain degrees of semantic acceptability (or anomaly). These gradiences find a more natural account within an encyclopedic view on meaning as advocated here (see the cited works by Croft, Haiman, Lakoff, Langacker and Taylor.)

4 The reference serves to identify the source of the example. See section 1.4 below for details.
Both examples refer to the same event, and from a truth-conditional perspective they would be considered semantically equivalent. The difference would be merely one of form. Within the framework of cognitive grammar, however, the verbal and nominal forms do not have the same meaning since they impose different profiles. They have the same conceptual base but differ with respect to how this base is treated. (I ignore some additional differences (e.g. the semantic import of the *by* and *of*-periphrasis) since they are not essential to the present discussion.) To appreciate the differences, it may be useful to take a closer look at profiles imposed by verbs and nouns.

Verbs are *relational* predications that profile a temporal sequence of interconnections between entities. Langacker identifies such a state-by-state profile as sequential scanning. This ‘close-up’ view stands in polar opposition to the holistic view an episodic noun imposes on the same base. Such a noun is characterized by summary scanning. It profiles the component states collectively as a *thing*, i.e. as “a region in some domain, where a region is characterized abstractly as a set of interconnected entities” (Langacker 1987a:214). In the case of an episodic noun, the process functions as the base for the predication: the temporal and relational dimensions are still present but are not in profile. Figure 1, based on Langacker (1987a:247), contrasts the profiles that define the two grammatical categories (where profile is indicated via the thickness of the lines).

![Fig. 1: Process (a) and reified process (b)](image)

As is obvious, the term ‘thing’ is by no means limited to physical objects, although the latter are probably typical instantiations of the category. The term is used as an abstract technical term to refer to the product of any conceptual reification. See Langacker (1987a) on the difference between sequential and summary scanning.
Figure 1(a) represents a processual expression which profiles the relationship between the participants (represented by the two circles) in its evolution through conceived time (indicated by the heavy-line segment of the time arrow). Figure 1(b) represents a nominalization as a “conceptual reification of an event conception” (Langacker 1992:497). It profiles the abstract region of interconnected states. To keep things manageable, the simplified representation shows only three states of what in fact is an indefinite succession of states.

Relational predications, central to this book, are more complex than nouns since they have a complex profile that also manifests figure/ground (‘trajector/landmark’) alignment. Within the relationship represented by Figure 1(a), the trajector (tr) is identified as the primary participant, the landmark (lm), as the secondary participant. The passive construction is thus characterizable as a figure/ground reversal — “the switching of what is foregrounded in a given scene with what is backgrounded” (Emanatian 1993; cf. also Langacker 1987a:120ff).

To return to the basic assumptions of Cognitive Grammar, the grammar of a language is, as said, a “structured inventory of conventionalized linguistic units” (Langacker 1991b:511). All grammatical structures, be they morphological, lexical or syntactic, emerge as inherently meaningful. For example, while many grammars regard particles as meaningless, the description of *choke* {back/down/off/up/out} and *drown out* in Chapter 6, section 6.4, demonstrates their semantic contribution to the clause meaning and their impact on the verb’s constructional possibilities. The constructions themselves are inherently meaningful too. Constructionally related pairs like *John killed Mary* versus *John killed or Burglars murdered Jill* versus *Jill was murdered by burglars* are semantically non-equivalent because they serve to conceptualize the event differently. In plain terms, the cognitive dictum is that any difference in form entails a difference in meaning (cf. e.g. Wierzbicka 1988 or Langacker 1985, 1990b). Naturally, a given reality can be conceptualized in different ways. Chapter 6 argues that the lexical and constructional overlapping in the group of *SUFFOCATE* verbs is in fact largely due to subtle variations in the conceptualization of what is ontologically quite similar.

An important characteristic of Cognitive Grammar is the view on (semantic) categories as not always well-delineated and structured around a prototype, the conceptual centre of the category. A category may have peripheral members, which are defective in one way or another; often these peripheral members lie in the blurred transition area between two categories. Langacker analyzes the members of a category as “nodes in a networks, linked to one another by various sorts of categorizing relationships” (1991a:266). Of these relationships, ‘instantiation’ and ‘schematization’ are particularly relevant, as it allows one to unite under one more abstract and general structure, called a ‘schema’, various
structurally more varied lower-level constructions, the instantiations. A more elaborate discussion of Langacker’s model of categories is offered in Chapter 3, section 3.1.

1.3.2 Systemic Functional Grammar

In many ways cognitive grammar is compatible with Halliday’s systemic-functional grammar. “A language”, Halliday says, “is a system for making meanings” (1985:xvii). As in Cognitive Grammar, the term ‘semantic’ is not reserved for the lexicon, but pertains “to the entire system of meanings of a language, expressed by grammar as well as by vocabulary” (1985:xvii). As also observed by Wierzbicka, in language, “everything ‘conspires’ to convey meaning” (1988:2).

Parallel to the cognitive grammar views on the conceptualization of reality, Halliday emphasizes that the semantic structures of a language “enable us to ‘think about’ our experience—that is to interpret it constructively” (1985:xviii). Semantic structures being lexical and syntactical, Halliday thus commits himself to the view that syntax is motivated by meaning. However, an important difference with cognitive grammar (and other frameworks) is that Halliday sees the motivation as a ‘natural’ (i.e. symbolic) relation between meaning and lexicogrammar (lexis and syntax) and that is why language is learnable: “[children] can make the link between the categories of the grammar and the reality that is around them and inside their heads” (1985:xviii). This ‘plausibility’ is for instance reflected in the fact that English has verbs and nouns, “to match the analysis of experience into processes and participants” (1985:xviii). This congruence with experience can, however, be overturned by a process of grammatical metaphor, via which categories can be cross-coded (e.g. a process represented by a nominal phrase). Against the background of the previous discussion of Cognitive Grammar, the compatibility between Halliday’s and Langacker’s view will be appreciated. Instead of ‘congruence’, Cognitive Grammar uses the notion ‘canonical conception’ which, too, is seen as having a strong experiential basis.

While the difference between Halliday’s tri-stratal view of the linguistic sign (meaning - lexicogrammar - phonology) and the bipolar symbolic units of Cognitive Grammar calls for more careful analysis, it will not be elaborated in the present work, as it does not hamper the successful integration of the descriptive merits of the two models.

Following Hjelmslev, Halliday characterizes language as “system and process” (1985:xxii). The system is to be seen as a highly complex network of interrelated choices: “it is a paradigmatic, non-linear meaning potential” (Davidse 1987:46). With the notion “language as process”, Halliday refers to actual instances of language use (which he calls ‘text’), which is “linear and
syntagmatic” (1987:46). The paradigmatic nature of systemic grammar means that “describing something consists in relating it to everything else” (Halliday 1985:xxvii; his emph.). It is precisely by tracing the paradigmatic organization of language (e.g. via the alternation method) that relevant insights can be obtained regarding the grammar of actions and events. Up to the present, linguistic analyses in Cognitive Grammar have continued to focus primarily on the syntagmatic side and neglected the paradigmatic; this work expands Cognitive Grammar to include the latter into its analyses. Clearly, the paradigmatic options are constrained, “not only from the grammar itself, but also from the context and the culture” (Davidse 1987:46). This view is quite compatible with the cognitive view on linguistic construal.

Next to language as ‘system’, equal weight is given within Systemic-Functional Grammar to language as process, where process is seen as ‘text’, i.e. any actual instance of language use in context. As Halliday points out, one must carefully consider how the system engenders text and at the same time, text should be related to the system behind it, “since anyone understanding the text does so only because they know the system” (1985:xxii). The present work will also have a strong empirical basis (cf. section 1.4 below), which allows us to come to nuanced judgments on how the paradigmatic contrast between transitivity and ergativity operates within English. A strong concern with data (language in context), as opposed to idealized language systems, is also a feature of Cognitive Grammar, characterized by Langacker as a usage-based model. In such a model, next to a concern for general rules and principles, “we must also give substantial weight to their arrays of conventional instantiations, investigating the actual extension of the patterns in question and the factors that influence it” (Langacker 1991a:265).

All in all, despite some fundamental differences between systemic and cognitive linguistics—notably, Halliday’s multi-layered approach to language structure and his emphasis on the ‘interpersonal’ dimension of grammar—and differences of perspective or terminology, there is considerable affinity between the Systemic-Functional Grammar and Cognitive Grammar. Exploring the metalinguistic divergencies and similarities between Systemic-Functional Grammar and Cognitive Grammar will surely be a profitable enterprise; however, as these are not directly relevant to the present work, they will be disregarded. The present study tries to break through the metalinguistic shells of different frameworks and distil from them their descriptive value.

1.3.3 Generative and Relational Grammar

The theoretical assumptions of Generative and Relational Grammar (and their derivatives) are radically different from those of Cognitive Grammar and Systemic-Functional Grammar. A major criticism against Generative and Rela-
tional Grammar is that they assume syntax to be autonomous from semantics. Hence, they often claim relationships between structures (e.g. active and passive or nominal and verbal constructions), but see these as semantically equivalent. In both Cognitive Grammar and Systemic-Functional Grammar, in contrast, semantics forms the basis for grammar. Langacker stresses that “grammatical structure reduces to patterns for the structuring and symbolization of conceptual content, and that all valid grammatical constructs have some kind of conceptual import” (1991a:338-9). Similarly, Halliday points out that paradigmatic grammars “take semantics as the foundation” (1985:xxviii). In this view, any structure is meaningful and consequently, the notion of meaningless structures (dummies or ‘chômeurs’) is rejected. As has already been emphasized above, the basic view is that any difference in form entails a difference in meaning. Logically, then, the division between syntax, morphology and lexicon is not strict, as all consist of meaningful units, admittedly of different ‘levels of schematization’ (Cognitive Grammar) or ‘scales of delicacy’ (Systemic-Functional Grammar).

A systemic inspired point of criticism is that the Generative and Relational models are exclusively syntagmatic in orientation; they regard language as a list of structures between which relations may exist (hence the transformations or strata). Mostly, however, they fail to see the deeper system at work in the grammar and thus often make incorrect distinctions (if at all). With respect to the issues central to this book, they mostly miss the awareness of the transitivity/ergativity distinction. More specifically, they generally do not observe the distinction between a transitive two-participant construction (e.g. John killed Mary) and an ergative one (e.g. John suffocated Mary) nor do they distinguish between transitive and ergative one-participant constructions, e.g. Mary died vs. Mary suffocated (see Chapter 2, sections 2.2.4 and 2.2.5 on these distinctions).

Another problematic issue is the view on language in terms of the distinction between competence and performance, which especially in the Chomskyan model figures prominently. Instead of positing a model which presupposes a hypothetical ideal speaker and which imposes the abstract structures of this ideal language onto language itself, Cognitive Grammar and Systemic-Functional Grammar start by observing language use itself, which they see as the analytic way to capture generalizations concerning the underlying semantics (cf. above). From the earliest formulations of his theory, Halliday has

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6 The generative quest for general, preferably even universal, principles of grammar has tended to discourage the analysis of ‘real life’ data. As Gross (1976:861) observes, within the generative tradition, “motivated by a desire to treat linguistics at an abstract level, work based
incorporated the social dimension into his model, stressing that “language is not a self-sufficient entity, but that it has an essentially instrumental character: it is used in—and indeed evolved to serve—human interaction” (Davidse 1987:40). Cognitive Grammar, too, defends such a position.

Despite these (fundamental) theoretical conflicts, much valuable research has been carried out within the Generative and Relational Grammar models. For example, the Unaccusative Hypothesis, as first introduced by Perlmutter (1978) and later taken over (and silently extended) by Government and Binding theory (e.g. Burzio 1986, Marantz 1984) has been concerned especially with different types of intransitives and drawn attention to certain differences, yet it is still flawed in many respects. Other work that has contributed to the insights of the present book are Horn (1980), Keyser & Roeper (1984), Levin (1993), Levin & Rappaport (1995). Levin’s (1993) work is particularly interesting in two respects: (1) she explicitly couples a verb’s constructional behaviour with its meaning and (2) she uses the heuristic of alternation to arrive at a proper characterization of the verb’s constructional potential. As will be shown (Chapter 2, section 2.2.3), there are still some problems with her approach, one of them being her too rigid view on categories. Levin & Rappaport (1995) offer a more nuanced view which is considerably more compatible with those defended in this book. A brief evaluation is presented in the final conclusions of this book.

In short, the present work wants to offer a synthesis of especially Cognitive Grammar and Systemic Functional Grammar and I believe that both models can greatly benefit from this synthesis. Although the tide is turning, Cognitive Grammar has had, since its earliest formulations in the late 70s, some bias towards lexical semantics (think only of the numerous preposition and metaphor studies, e.g. Lakoff & Johnson 1980, Brugman 1983, Hawkins 1984). This work hopes not only to emphasize that constructions themselves are meaningful units (a concern also central to e.g. Goldberg 1995), but also to offer new insights concerning the transitivity/ergativity distinction as operative in English grammar. Systemic-Functional Grammar, in turn, can profit from the lexical orientation of this work. In my view, too little attention has been paid within Systemic-Functional Grammar to the influence of the verbs’ lexical structure on paradigmatic choices. It is in my emphasis on the lexically determined structural variability that my cognitive homeground manifests itself most clearly.

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on sentences […] has almost entirely vanished”. In essence, what the generativists were after was an abstract linguistic theory, not a model of language usage.