THE FIGURE-GROUND PRINCIPLE IN COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS

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Doi: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21429377

Annotation: This article analyzes the figure-ground principle, one of the fundamental theoretical concepts of cognitive linguistics, from a linguistic perspective. The study examines the transition of this principle from Gestalt psychology to cognitive linguistics and demonstrates the relationship between figure-ground organization, sentence semantics, and grammatical means using examples from the Uzbek language. The findings substantiate the universal cognitive basis of the figure-ground principle and show that linguistic structures are directly grounded in human cognitive processes.

Key words: cognitive linguistics, figure-ground principle, Gestalt psychology, sentence semantics, category.

Annotatsiya: Mazkur maqolada kognitiv tilshunoslikning asosiy nazariy tushunchalaridan biri bo‘lgan figura-fon prinsipi lingvistik nuqtayi nazardan tahlil qilinadi. Tadqiqotda ushbu tamoyilning geshtalt psixologiyasidan kognitiv tilshunoslikka o‘tish jarayoni ko‘rib chiqilib, figura-fon munosabatining gap semantikasi va grammatik vositalar bilan bog‘liqligi o‘zbek tili materiallari misolida ko‘rsatib o‘tiladi. Tahlil natijasida figura-fon tamoyilining universal kognitiv asos kasb etishi va til tuzilmalarining bevosita inson bilish faoliyatiga tayanishi asoslab beriladi.

Kalit so‘zlar: kognitiv tilshunoslik, figura-fon tamoyili, geshtalt psixologiyasi, gap semantikasi, kategoriya.

Аннотация: В данной статье с лингвистической точки зрения анализируется принцип «фигура-фон», являющийся одним из основных теоретических понятий когнитивной лингвистики. В исследовании рассматривается процесс перехода данного принципа из гештальт-психологии в когнитивную лингвистику, а также на материале узбекского языка показана взаимосвязь отношений «фигура-фон» с семантикой предложения и грамматическими средствами. В результате анализа обосновывается универсальная когнитивная природа принципа «фигура-фон» и доказывается, что языковые структуры непосредственно опираются на познавательную деятельность человека.

Ключевые слова: когнитивная лингвистика, принцип «фигура-фон», гештальт-психология, семантика предложения, категория.

Introduction

The development of cognitive linguistics, a field that integrates linguistics and cognitive science, has introduced a new approach to the study of language. Like any other scientific discipline, cognitive linguistics possesses its own specialized terminology, which facilitates a deeper understanding and investigation of the field. One of these fundamental concepts is the figure–ground principle.

The figure–ground principle is one of the core theoretical concepts of cognitive linguistics and plays a significant role in explaining the mechanisms through which humans perceive reality and conceptualize it by means of language. The theoretical foundations of this principle can be traced back

to Gestalt psychology, which emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Representatives of this school, including Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Köhler, and Kurt Koffka, argued that human perception operates by recognizing holistic structures rather than isolated elements. According to Gestalt theory, the process of perception naturally establishes a figure–ground relationship between an object and its surrounding environment.

Literature Review

In cognitive linguistics, the figure–ground principle is employed to explain how reality is conceptualized through linguistic units. According to this approach, when individuals perceive a particular situation, they identify certain elements as the primary, attention-attracting entities, which function as the figure. The remaining elements constitute the ground, providing the conceptual framework necessary for perceiving the figure. Thus, figure and ground are not independent phenomena but rather interrelated cognitive categories that presuppose one another. The figure–ground principle serves as a cognitive mechanism that enables individuals to distinguish between primary and secondary information in discourse[1]. Human cognition is naturally inclined to organize incoming information into figure and ground. The figure represents the dominant element of the perceived information, whereas the ground refers to the background against which the figure is interpreted. For example, in the sentence "The bicycle is next to the house," the bicycle functions as the figure, while the house serves as the ground[2]. If the sentence is reformulated as "The house is next to the bicycle," the conceptual clarity is weakened because the relationship between figure and ground is altered. Human perception interprets the figure in relation to the ground; therefore, any change in the ground also influences the overall interpretation of the figure. For instance, compare the sentences "The flower-patterned door opened, revealing an elegant woman, a little girl, and a dog" and "A dog was wandering among the ruins of the city." In these examples, the general perception of the dog differs depending on the ground. In the first sentence, readers are likely to imagine a friendly and gentle pet, whereas in the second sentence they are more likely to envision a stray or feral dog. The interaction between figure and ground forms a Gestalt, and the perceptual phenomenon of figure and ground within Gestalt theory was extensively studied by Wolfgang Köhler and Kurt Koffka[3].

Research Methodology

This study is based on the theoretical framework of cognitive linguistics and employs descriptive and cognitive-semantic methods of analysis. The figure–ground principle is examined through the analysis of linguistic examples and relevant theoretical literature in cognitive linguistics and Gestalt psychology. The study also applies conceptual analysis to explain how figure–ground relationships are reflected in semantic structures and language use.

Results and Discussion

In cognitive linguistics, figure–ground relationships are manifested at different levels of language. In sentence semantics, for example, participants in an event, as well as spatial and temporal relations, are organized according to the figure–ground principle. In particular, in expressions denoting spatial relations, the smaller, movable, or communicatively more prominent entity functions as the figure, whereas the relatively larger, more stable entity serves as the ground. In this respect, the concepts of trajector and landmark, which are widely used in cognitive linguistics, closely correspond to the categories of figure and ground, respectively. The communicative function of linguistic units is also closely associated with the figure–ground principle. Within a text or discourse, certain pieces of information are foregrounded and become the communicative focus, while other information forms the

[1] Qurbonova K. Kognitiv tilshunoslikka oid atamalarning izohli lug'ati. – Namangan: Mashrab, 2026. – B. 10

[2] Osmańska-Lipka I. Elements of Gestalt Psychology in American Cognitive Linguistics// Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska. Sectio FF, Philologiae. Vol. 30, 2, 2012. – P.66

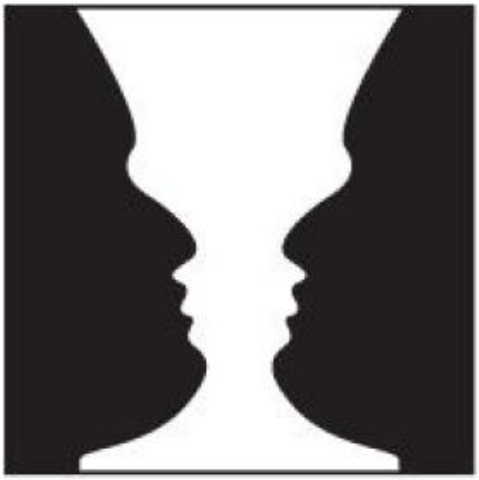
[3] Kwiatkowska A. Gestalt principles in linguistics//Acta Universitatis Lodziensis. Folia Linguistica 36, 1997. – P.185

background. Therefore, in cognitive stylistics, figure–ground relations are closely connected with the phenomenon of foregrounding. In this framework, the figure carries the primary semantic load of the text, whereas the ground functions as the context that complements and facilitates the interpretation of meaning.

During the formation of conceptual structures, human attention is directed toward a particular object or feature, while the remaining elements are perceived as the ground. Consequently, the processes of conceptualization and categorization are carried out on the basis of the figure–ground principle. Evidence from the Uzbek language also confirms the universality of this principle. In particular, figure–ground relationships are clearly observed in syntactic constructions expressing spatial and motion relations, predicative structures, as well as in the theme–rheme organization of texts. The element occupying the communicative center of a sentence functions as the figure, whereas the remaining components constitute the ground, providing the semantic and pragmatic framework for its interpretation. This demonstrates that human cognitive experience plays a crucial role in the formation and use of linguistic units.

Thus, the figure–ground principle is one of the essential methodological tools of cognitive linguistics. It reveals the close interrelationship between human perception, conceptualization, categorization, and the semantic and pragmatic properties of language. This principle makes it possible to interpret linguistic phenomena not merely as formal structures but as products of human cognition, thereby serving as one of the fundamental theoretical foundations of contemporary cognitive linguistic research.

A clear illustration of the figure–ground principle can be seen in the following figure:



This illustration, known as the Rubin vase, incorporates both figure and ground elements. When a person's attention is directed toward the vase, the two human profiles become the ground. Conversely, when attention is focused on the profiles, the vase functions as the ground. Human perception cannot simultaneously focus on both objects; consequently, one element is perceived as the figure while the other serves as the ground.

The aspect of the figure–ground principle that is specifically related to linguistic phenomena is reflected in the concept of profile–base. According to Domain Theory, the cognitive structure of profile–base describes the organization of conceptual knowledge. The profile of a linguistic unit refers to the aspect of its semantic structure that is highlighted and directly encoded through language. The base, in contrast, represents the semantic background that is not in the focus of attention but is essential for understanding the profile. For example, the lexeme teacher profiles a particular individual whose role is to provide knowledge to others. The meaning of the word teacher can only be understood within

the conceptual context of the activity of teaching. Thus, the process of teaching constitutes the base, while the concept of teacher is the profiled element derived from that conceptual foundation.

It should be emphasized that the figure–ground relationship is always reciprocal and relative. An entity that functions as the figure in one context may become the ground in another. This demonstrates that the semantic structure of linguistic expressions is not static but rather a dynamic phenomenon shaped by context. From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, this supports the view that language is inseparable from human cognition and that linguistic structures are fundamentally grounded in cognitive mechanisms.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the figure–ground principle is one of the fundamental theoretical concepts of cognitive linguistics, serving to explain the mechanisms through which human beings perceive reality and represent it through language. Based on the principles of Gestalt psychology, this concept provides a cognitive framework for interpreting the semantic and pragmatic properties of linguistic units. The analysis demonstrates that figure–ground relations play a crucial role in sentence semantics, text organization, and the processes of conceptualization. Therefore, the figure–ground principle represents one of the most effective theoretical foundations for investigating the relationship between language and cognition in cognitive linguistics.

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