The Dynamic Focal Adjustments in Event Construal:
A Case Study on English WH- Dialogic Constructions

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According to Langacker (2007:17), construal is our ability to conceive and portray the same situation in different ways, and there are many aspects or dimensions of construal. In the early works on Cognitive Grammar contributed by Langacker (1987, 1991, 1993, 1999), construal is discerned in a broad sense from five aspects, namely, the level of specificity (or schematicity), prominence, scope, background, and perspective. Later on, Langacker (2007:17) particularly emphasizes three of them, which are level of specificity, prominence, and perspective. Along with the in-depth explorations on natural languages in the framework of Cognitive Grammar, the kernel concept of construal is re-elaborated but from only four aspects: focusing, specificity, prominence, perspective (Langacker 2008/2013:55). In his recent studies, Langacker (2015:120) further examines the nature of construal and also specifies it into five dimensions, which are perspective, selection, prominence, dynamicity, and imagination. This cognitive study on English WH-Dialogic constructions strongly evidences speakers’ employment of such dimension of construal as focusing, perspective, selection, prominence, dynamicity in dialogic interactions.

To begin with, in the framework of Cognitive Linguistic Studies, a WH-question construction and one of its answer constructions virtually indicate the different levels of schematicity of the same (simple or complex) event structure. To be more specific, a WH-question represents the schematic/type structure of an event, while its answer is the instantiation of this schematic/type structure. The Schema/Type-Instance relation between a WH-question and the answer suggests the dynamic grounding of the WH-word (e.g. what, when, who) that initiates a question. Then, according to the different consequences of grounding of WH-words initiating a question, we group the data of 5,051WH-dialogues collected from COCA into three semantic categories. They are: (1) Answers indicating direct instantiation of WH-words (77.53%); (2) Answers indicating indirect instantiation of WH-words (1.84%); (3) Answers indicating non-instantiation of WH-words (20.63%). Essentially, the different semantic categories of answers in WH-dialogues demonstrate the dynamic focal adjustments in WH-dialogues in the process of WH-word grounding, resulting in the cases of consistency or non-consistency of focal attention between speakers, revealing the facts that speakers have their own perspectives to interpret the same event, and their own focuses of attention that make certain elements of the event prominence. Additionally, the answerer answers the question by employing structures with various levels of complexity and abstractness, suggesting the different levels of specificity of the schematic event (viz.,WH-question ) at the syntactical level.

References