

All roads lead to semantic frames: how Fillmore's frame theory became the quiet backbone of cognitive linguistics

Todos os caminhos levam aos frames semânticos: como a teoria fillmoriана se tornou o pilar silencioso da linguística cognitiva

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Abstract: This paper reflects on the centrality of Frame Semantics (Fillmore, 1982, 1985) within the Cognitive Linguistics movement. It argues that Fillmore's theory has become a conceptual bedrock for Cognitive Linguistic theories, especially due to its comprehensive and systematic account of embodied, encyclopedic semantics. First, it retraces the origins of Frame Semantics back to Case Grammar before shifting to a more cognitive and usage-based model. The article then revisits the trajectory of Fillmore's Frame Semantics, from its earliest formulations, showing how it has become a strong and influential model for investigating meaning in empirical research contexts. Finally, it provides examples of Frame Semantics' influence on other theoretical models, strongly shaping how linguists understand meaning, grammar, and conceptualization.

Keywords: Cognitive Linguistics. Frame Semantics. Encyclopedic semantics. Grammar.

Resumo: Este artigo reflete sobre a centralidade da Semântica de *Frames* (Fillmore, 1982, 1985) como parte do movimento da Linguística Cognitiva. Argumenta-se que a teoria de Fillmore tornou-se um alicerce conceitual para as teorias cognitivas da linguagem, sobretudo por oferecer uma abordagem abrangente e sistemática da semântica enciclopédica e corporificada. Inicialmente, o trabalho revisita as origens da Semântica de *Frames* na Gramática de Casos, antes de sua transição para um modelo mais cognitivo e baseado no uso. Em seguida, reconstrói a trajetória da teoria de Fillmore desde suas formulações iniciais, evidenciando como ela se consolidou como um modelo robusto e influente para a investigação do significado em contextos empíricos de pesquisa. Por fim, o artigo apresenta exemplos da influência da Semântica de *Frames* sobre outros modelos teóricos, demonstrando de que modo ela tem moldado de forma significativa a compreensão linguística sobre significado, gramática e conceptualização.

Palavras-chave: Linguística Cognitiva. Semântica de *Frames*. Semântica enciclopédica. Gramática.

1 Introduction

From its inception, Cognitive Linguistics has been characterized by its commitment to understanding language as an embodied, usage-based system grounded in human cognition. Defined as “[...] an archipelago rather than an island” (Geeraerts, 2008, p. 2) due to its nature as a movement rather than a single, unified theory, Cognitive Linguistics’ contributions spread across various branches of linguistic research, such as semantics, morphology, syntax, and pragmatics. Among the field’s foundational theories, Fillmore’s Frame Semantics stands out as one of the most influential – a theoretical framework that not only anticipated key insights of the cognitive turn but also continues to undergird some of the field’s most influential models.

This paper argues that Frame Semantics constitutes one of the conceptual bedrocks upon which much of Cognitive Linguistics has been built. Far from being merely one theory among many, frames provide the basic architecture for meaning construction that later approaches – from Construction Grammar to Conceptual Blending – would elaborate but never supersede. Where these descendant theories specialize (in grammatical patterning, metaphorical mappings, or conceptual integration), Frame Semantics offers something more fundamental: a comprehensive account of how language recruits encyclopedic knowledge and embodied experience to structure understanding (see Fillmore, 1982; 1985; Croft & Cruse, 2004).

The evidence for this claim is both historical and systematic. Tracing the development of Cognitive Linguistics from the 1980s onward reveals how Fillmore’s core beliefs – about the frame-dependent nature of meaning, the role of perspectivization in linguistic choice, and the essentially schematic character of semantic knowledge – have been woven into the field’s DNA. Construction Grammar’s form-meaning pairings, Conceptual Metaphor Theory’s cross-domain mappings, and even recent work in embodied simulation all inherit their basic operating

logic from Frame Semantics’ original vision (see Matsumoto, 2025; Neumair *et al.*, 2025).

The argument unfolds in three movements. Firstly, we examine how Frame Semantics emerged from Case Grammar as a response to the limitations imposed by formalist linguistic models, bringing semantic roles, conceptual structure, and cultural context into the core of linguistic analysis. Secondly, through close analysis of foundational texts, we trace how later theories preserved Frame Semantics’ core commitments while developing them in specialized directions. Finally, we argue that Frame Semantics remains one of the most comprehensive frameworks for understanding how meaning is constructed – deserving renewed attention not as a historical precursor, but as a cornerstone of Cognitive Linguistics.

2 Fillmore’s Journey from Case Grammar to Frame Semantics

The intellectual arc of Frame Semantics begins not with its christening in the 1970s, but with the theoretical groundwork laid by Fillmore in the late 1960s with the development of Case Grammar. This earlier model, though more syntactically oriented, already contained the germinal ideas that would blossom into Frame Semantics: that linguistic meaning cannot be reduced to formal combinatorics, but must account for the structured scenarios we evoke when using language.

The 1960s marked a period of rapid transformation in North American linguistics, dominated by the rise of Generative Grammar, developed by Noam Chomsky and collaborators. This model conceptualized language as an autonomous cognitive system, with syntax at its core. It advanced the view – known as the autonomy of syntax – that syntactic structures could be studied independently of meaning or communicative context (Duffley, 2020). While the Chomskyan framework was groundbreaking in its formalization of grammatical rules, its syntax-centric orientation kept semantics at bay. Meaning was typically treated as a secondary concern – something

inferred from structural configurations rather than examined as a central object of study. As a result, within Generative Linguistics, semantics became little more than a byproduct of deep syntactic structures, derived through formal rules rather than investigated as a domain of meaning in its own right. As a result, much of the linguistic work of the time operated within an abstract and idealized conception of language, largely disconnected from the complexities of real-world communication.

It was within this syntactically driven intellectual landscape that Fillmore introduced Case Grammar (Fillmore, 1968), offering a corrective to the abstraction of generative approaches. While not rejecting the postulates of Generative Grammar, Fillmore sought to reintroduce meaning into the heart of grammatical analysis. He was particularly interested in how verbs impose semantic expectations on their arguments – expectations that could not be captured by syntactic structure alone.

Therefore, Case Grammar emerged from this inquiry as a model that foregrounded the semantic roles participants play in events (Agent, Instrument, etc.), proposing that they are fundamental to the grammar of a sentence and that categories such as subject and objects are simply not sufficient. In doing so, Fillmore challenged the prevailing assumption that syntax could be fully explained without reference to meaning, marking an early and influential move toward a more semantically grounded theory of grammar.

Fillmore's Case Grammar, as introduced in his 1968 paper *The Case for Case*, proposed a shift in the understanding of grammatical relations by emphasizing the importance of semantic roles over purely syntactic functions. In this model, noun phrases are analyzed not simply as subjects or objects, but in terms of their deep semantic relationship to the verb – such as Agent, Experiencer, Instrument, or Patient. Each verb is associated with a particular case frame, a configuration of expected roles that reflect the conceptual structure of the event being described.

In the sentences "John broke the window" and "The hammer broke the window," the subjects differ in their semantic roles, despite occupying the same syntactic position. While "John" instantiates the

Agentive case – the typically animate, intentional initiator of the action denoted by the verb (Fillmore, 1968) –, *The hammer* illustrates the *Instrumental* case, where it functions as an inanimate entity causally involved in the event. This contrast demonstrates that purely syntactic categories can mask crucial semantic distinctions, reinforcing the need for a level of analysis that prioritizes conceptual structure over surface form.

For Fillmore, such cases were not interpretive byproducts of syntax but fundamental building blocks of grammatical structure. He argued that they precede and inform the syntactic realization of sentences, challenging the generative assumption that meaning can be derived post hoc from formal operations. In this way, Case Grammar introduced a radically more meaning-oriented model of grammar at a time when formalist approaches dominated linguistic theory.

The transition from Case Grammar to Frame Semantics can be seen as both a theoretical and methodological evolution. While Case Grammar offered a way to link syntactic positions with semantic roles, its fixed inventory of cases sometimes proved too rigid to capture the full range of meanings conveyed by verbs in natural language use. Fillmore began to see that the meaning of a word or construction could not be fully specified by listing its associated roles alone; instead, it required an understanding of the larger conceptual structure within which those roles made sense. For instance, the meaning of the verb *buy* presupposes the understanding of the whole social event in which it fits, which includes not just a *buyer* and a *seller*, but notions of *goods*, *money*, and *transfer* (Fillmore, 1982). This broader perspective led Fillmore to conclude that semantic interpretation is inseparable from background knowledge and situational context.

Frame Semantics emerged in the 1970s as a refinement and expansion of Case Grammar, extending its insights on participant roles by embedding them in rich conceptual structures. It retained the focus on event participants but situated them within structured scenes – such as motion, perception, or commerce – that reflect our everyday experience of the world. Instead of relying on fixed, universal role labels, Frame Semantics emphasizes

how words evoke frames: mental schemas that rely on encyclopedic knowledge and define the entities, relationships, and expectations relevant to a given situation (Fillmore, 1975; 1977, 1982).

This shift enabled linguists to account for subtle meaning contrasts among lexical items that share similar surface syntax but evoke different perspectival interpretations. Take, for instance, the sentences "Mary bought the car from John" and "John sold the car to Mary." Although they share the same syntactic structure – [NP] + [VP [V] + [NP] + [PP]] – and evoke the same *Commercial Transaction* frame, each profiles the event from a different participant's viewpoint. Such perspectival nuance would likely be missed by syntactic models that treat meaning as a secondary effect of structure, rather than as an organizing principle of language use.

Ultimately, the move from Case Grammar to Frame Semantics marked Fillmore's deepening commitment to a cognitive and usage-based model of meaning, one that acknowledges the complexity of linguistic interpretation as grounded in embodied experience and encyclopedic knowledge. While Case Grammar brought semantic roles into the grammar, Frame Semantics showed that these roles are meaningful only within the context of the broader conceptual structures they inhabit.

Despite its contributions to the study of semantic structure, Frame Semantics has not escaped criticism. One of the primary concerns raised by formal linguists is its lack of precise formalization. Critics argue that the theory, while rich in descriptive insight, often relies on intuitive or loosely defined notions of frames, roles, and background knowledge, which can make systematic, predictive analysis difficult (van Dijk, 2023). The same flexibility that makes Frame Semantics effective for capturing real-world meaning and language use is often viewed as a limitation by researchers who prioritize algorithmic precision and formal testability. Pennacchiotti *et al.* (2009), for instance, acknowledge the value of frame-based analysis for automated textual entailment tasks, but critique it for lacking the analytical rigor required for computational implementation.

It is also worth mentioning authors who reflect upon the cross-linguistic applicability of frame-based models (Bertoldi & Chishman, 2012; Baker & Lorenzi, 2020). Since many frames are culture-specific and grounded in particular sociocultural experiences, some linguists argue that Frame Semantics risks becoming overly tailored to English and Western languages. For instance, Bertoldi & Chishman (2012) showed that the *Arraignment* frame in American legal discourse lacks a direct equivalent in Brazilian Portuguese, while Boas & Dux (2013) highlight mismatches in friendship terminology and verb register across German and English. The culture-specific nature of frames is that encyclopedic semantic theories must grapple with cultural grounding.

Rather than assuming a universal and context-free semantics – as some formal models do – Frame Semantics acknowledges that meaning is shaped by human experience, which is inevitably influenced by culture. Far from being a limitation, this contextual sensitivity allows Frame Semantics to more accurately model how speakers across different languages and cultures conceptualize events, roles, and relationships. Moreover, comparative work using Frame Semantics has shown that many frames can be mapped across typologically diverse languages, as shown by recent research presented at the International FrameNet Workshop 2020 event (cf. Ohara, 2020; Giouli, Pilitsidou & Christopoulos, 2020; Baker & Lorenzi, 2020; and Gargett & Leung, 2020). This suggests that while frames are culturally inflected, they often capture shared cognitive structures that support meaningful cross-linguistic analysis.

Ironically, the very critiques directed at Frame Semantics – its sensitivity to culture, its reliance on background knowledge, and its departure from rigid formalism – are precisely what have made it so transformative within the establishment of Cognitive Linguistics. Unlike formal approaches that seek meaning in abstract, context-independent truth conditions, Frame Semantics posits that meaning is embodied, experience-based, and contextually situated. This view aligns perfectly with the central tenets of Cognitive Linguistics, which rejects the notion of an autonomous language faculty and instead sees

language as intertwined with perception, memory, and cultural understanding. By foregrounding the role of conceptual structures and real-world knowledge in meaning construction, Frame Semantics helped establish a paradigm where meaning is not encoded but evoked, and where linguistic forms are seen as cues to rich, encyclopedic representations of knowledge.

Furthermore, the theory's emphasis on cross-linguistic variability and cultural specificity has encouraged a more nuanced, empirically grounded approach to linguistic diversity. While formal models often treat variation as noise or exception (see Ponti *et al.*, 2019), Frame Semantics treats it as evidence of how language reflects human cognition shaped by cultural environments. This has inspired a generation of cognitive linguists to investigate how different languages profile events, categorize experience, and lexicalize frames differently, leading to deeper insights into linguistic relativity and universality. In this way, the challenges posed to Frame Semantics have not weakened its influence; rather, they have clarified its philosophical stance and solidified its role as a bridge between linguistic theory and psychology, anthropology, among other fields. The critique becomes a strength: by refusing to abstract away from context and culture, Frame Semantics has illuminated the cognitive and conceptual underpinnings of meaning in a way few other models have.

The influence of Frame Semantics extended well beyond Fillmore's own work, catalyzing a broader movement that reshaped how linguists understand meaning, grammar, and conceptualization. Scholars such as George Lakoff, Leonard Talmy, and Gilles Fauconnier drew on the foundational insight that linguistic expressions are tied to structured background knowledge, integrating frame-based thinking into theories of metaphor, spatial cognition, mental spaces, and conceptual blending. This convergence of ideas laid the groundwork for what would become Cognitive Linguistics – a field that views language as a reflection of general cognitive processes, grounded in perception, action, and cultural experience. Frame Semantics thus played a pivotal role in shifting the focus of linguistic inquiry from abstract formalisms to

richly contextualized models of meaning, and its legacy continues in contemporary research on lexicon, grammar, discourse, and even computational semantics. The knowledge encoded in frames is now recognized as essential not only to understanding how language works, but also to understanding how humans make sense of the world through language.

3 Frame Semantics: from 'suggestive Remarks' to a Highly Influential Theory of Meaning

In the previous section, we retraced Frame Semantics' origins back to Case Grammar, highlighting its commitment to a systematic, usage-based way to describe meaning. We now specifically retrace Fillmore's foundational texts, which elaborated the theoretical pillars of his frame theory as we know it today.

In the 1970's, Fillmore's articles started to establish his concept of semantic frame within Linguistics, explaining it, among other metaphors, through a process of representing scenes in a movie, so that a frame provides a set of instructions that can guide the understanding of words; thus frames have the role of film-makers who give directions to create a certain scene, organizing the possibilities of meaning construction:

The metaphor I am proposing is this: that we should think of the representation of the meaning of a word or text as a set of instructions addressed to a cartoonist or a film-maker, these instructions imposing constraints on how a comic strip or film strip or movie can be made which will display an image or situation representing what the word or text can 'mean'. (Fillmore, 1976, p. 9).

This definition enables us to understand the frame concept as a schematic structure through which we activate certain linguistic uses, outlining their context. It also linked to other theories which inspired Fillmore's proposal, such as Goffman's (1974) and Minsky's (1981[1974]).

In the 1980s, the scholar tells us in detail his "private history of the concept 'frame'" (Fillmore, 1982, p. 112), emphasizing, as mentioned in the previous section of this article, his structuralist perspective on

sentences, "as consisting of a frame and a substitution list (a syntagmatic frame and a paradigmatic set of mutually substitutable items)" (Fillmore, 1975, p. 130), which is directly related to his already discussed notion of case frame. When considering the relevance of semantic roles to explain the differences between sentences with the same valence structure, such as "give it to John" and "send it to Chicago" (Fillmore, 1987, p. 30), the author shows the need to go beyond syntactic rules, which imply the understanding of semantic roles and the meaning of these verbs.

Another comparison found in Fillmore's earlier works is the one that equates frames with *modules*, in such a way that the author even considered it a better term for the structure he was outlining, "[...] which, because of its association with, say, modular furniture, makes the process of assembling frames together to make larger frames easily visualizable" (Fillmore, 1975, p. 130). Nonetheless, the scholar concludes that the term frame conveyed more accurately the "idea of being *for* something" (Fillmore, 1975, p. 130), that is, not to be something restricted to its own internal structure, thus seeming a more appropriate word. Either way, the module example also helps us to understand the structure of frames as adaptable, buildable networks of meaning which can be arranged by users according to their intentions.

When firstly considering frames from a more abstract, schematic view, Fillmore proposed the so-called *case-frames*, defined as "[...] a small abstract 'scene' or 'situation', so that to understand the semantic structure of the verb it was necessary to understand the properties of such schematized scenes." (Fillmore, 1982, p. 115). This notion significantly changes when the author, in the article *An Alternative to Checklist Theories of Meaning*, decides to reflect on the connections between his approach and prototype theory (Rosch, 1973), which points that "[...] a concept is centred round a representation of an ideal example, or prototype. On this view, whether something belongs to a category and, if so, how central it is, are determined by its degree of resemblance to the prototype" (Cruse, 2006, p. 146). Fillmore explicitly inter-relates frames and prototypes in this article, an aspect that can lead us to understand prototype theory

as a gateway to Frame Semantics' affiliation to Cognitive Linguistics, even though the earlier works do not consider such affinity:

These two notions [frames and prototypes], used together, can offer us a new (possibly not altogether new) way of looking at a number of questions in linguistic semantics. One obvious way of linking them together is by claiming that in some cases the area of experience on which a linguistic frame imposes order is a prototype. For example, we know, without knowing how we know, the prototypic ways in which our bodies enable us to relate to our environment; this is knowledge we might speak of as part of our body image. (Fillmore, 1975, p. 123).

Fillmore's frame conception is then refined when he starts to associate it with prototypes, firstly separating it from the semantic frame and proposing a dual model, through the concept of scene. This is the reason why his first explicit definition of frame ends with a mention of prototypical scenes; in this citation, Fillmore (1975, p. 124) considers a frame as "[...] any system of linguistic choices – the easiest cases being collections of words, but also including choices of grammatical rules or linguistic categories – that can get associated with prototypical instances of scenes".

This distinction between frames (as linguistics structures at the time) and scenes (as conceptual structures beyond linguistic realization) is later abandoned by the author, but it makes itself relevant when it shows Fillmore's concern with connecting "linguistic uses to the cognitive and interactional processes that occur simultaneously, while also proposing an increasingly contextual semantic analysis" (Santos, 2016). A well-known example is the one related to the *widow* frame: it is associated with a prototypical scene in which a woman had lost her husband and did not remarry. This is why, according to Fillmore (1975), speakers would not evoke the same frame when referring to a woman who remarried after her loss. In other words, understanding a lexical item implies grasping how its meaning is anchored in a given reality with culturally specific characteristics (Fillmore, 1976).

Throughout its development, Frame Semantics benefited from Fillmore's acquaintance with the Yale AI lab, "[...] where he took notice of the lists of

slots and fillers used by early information extraction systems like DeJong (1982) and Schank and Abelson (1977)." (Jurafsky, 2014, p. 727). He then started to consider the way his theory could help humans and machines to identify interrelated concepts. For instance, the word *revenge* evokes a homonym frame with elements such as *offender*, *injured party* and *avenger* (Fillmore; Baker, 2010). Therefore, when we consider the best known definition of frame by the author, it is possible to understand why he states that Frame Semantics "offers a particular way of looking at word meanings, as well as a way of characterizing principles for creating new words and phrases, for adding new meanings to words, and for assembling the meanings of elements in a text into the total meaning of the text" (Fillmore, 1982, p. 111). He continues by saying:

By the term 'frame' I have in mind any system of concepts related in such a way that to understand any one of them you have to understand the whole structure in which it fits; when one of the things in such a structure is introduced into a text, or into a conversation, all of the others are automatically made available. (Fillmore, 1982, p. 111).

This revised formulation merges the cognitive and linguistic facets of the semantic frame, thus forsaking the distinction between scenes and frames.

From this seminal work onwards, it is possible to observe the way Frame Semantics embraces more explicitly an encyclopedic view of meaning, in consonance with the postulates of Cognitive Linguistics. According to Langacker (2008, p. 39), researchers from this field advocate an encyclopedic semantics, in which "a lexical meaning resides in a particular way of accessing an open-ended body of knowledge pertaining to a certain type of entity." Accordingly, Frame Semantics broadens its focus from linguistic grammar categories to the interrelations between language and experience (Fillmore, 1982), also considering our prototypical way of operating categories. One example brought by the author refers to semantic changes which can be understood as *reframing*, such as the usage of *boy/man* and *woman/girl* in the US, since boys were more swiftly

classified as men in comparison to girls being categorized as women. In a frame-semantic perspective, "[...] what changed (for some speakers) was the underlying schematization, the motivating circumstances of the category contrasts." (Fillmore, 1982, p. 126).

From productive partnerships with lexicographers such as Sue Atkins, Fillmore started to articulate Frame Semantics with applied, lexicographical works, showing the way a frame-based approach to dictionary building could enrich the organization of meaning in these resources, also describing lexico-syntactical patterns which interrelate words pertaining to the same scenario. This line of research, in addition to consolidating a corpus approach to frame description (Fillmore; Atkins, 1992), gave rise to FrameNet (Ruppenhofer *et al.*, 2010), a computational, frame-based, lexicographical resource which aims at describing linguistic properties of words, contributing to areas such as Natural Language Processing and Artificial Intelligence. Through this project, the robust methodological apparatus of Frame Semantics took form, defining, for example, frame evokers as *lexical units*, which are always paired with only one meaning or one frame, whether they are one-word or multiword constructions (Fillmore; Johnson; Petrucci, 2003). With this, Fillmore's theory was strengthened as "[...] the study of how, as a part of our knowledge of the language, we associate linguistic forms (words, fixed phrases, grammatical patterns) with the cognitive structures – the frames – which largely determine the process (and the result) of interpreting those forms" (Fillmore; Baker, 2010, p. 314).

In 1975, when outlining his first considerations on frame analysis, Charles Fillmore brought them as mere 'suggestive' remarks, even questioning its innovative nature: "[...] sometimes I fear that it is exactly what everybody has been talking about all along. If it is new, it is probably too commonsensical to be impressive, and will have to undergo some careful reformulation" (Fillmore, 1975). Half a century later, Fillmore's frame-based theory remains a cornerstone of Cognitive Linguistics and continues to inform the development of numerous contemporary models. To

demonstrate our standpoint, some examples are brought in the section below.

4 All Roads Lead to Frame Semantics: A Few Examples within Cognitive-Linguistic Approaches

As aforementioned, Frame Semantics has been consolidated as a theory whose objective is to study the frame-evoking process, from words to frames (Fillmore, 2010), having developed a robust methodological outline concerning the identification of language patterns and the sociocognitive structures they evoke. Despite its specificities and constrictions related to investigation purposes, the Fillmorian frame, beyond FrameNet's computational works, has been pervasive and fundamental to other theoretical frameworks within Cognitive Linguistics. A few examples are brought in this section.

The first approach to be mentioned is Construction Grammar, which owes much to Fillmore's work (Fillmore; Kay; O'Connor, 1988) and was further developed by Goldberg (1995), who defines a construction as follows: "C is a construction if and only if that construction is a form-meaning pair, such that some aspect of the form or some aspect of the meaning is not strictly predictable from the constructions' component parts or from other previously established constructions" (Goldberg, 1995, p. 4). Therefore, constructions are fundamental units of language and concern not only the word level, but also morphemes, verb phrases, and other elements from different grammar levels. In this perspective, the grammar of a language is "Conceived as a network of constructions built within culture through speakers' use and linguistic knowledge, it likewise consists of a network of symbols" (Miranda & Machado, 2014, p. 122).

When describing her Construction Grammar approach, Goldberg (1995) points to the need of establishing both a bottom-up and a top-down analysis of constructions; that is, the linguistic level alone might lead to wrong conclusions, since, according to a cognitive-linguistic approach, "words are prompts for meaning construction rather than 'containers' that

carry meaning" (Evans; Green, 2006, p. 214). On the basis of Frame Semantics, Goldberg (1995, p. 27) assumes that "Verbs, as well as nouns, involve frame-semantic meanings; that is, their designation must include reference to a background frame rich with world and cultural knowledge". According to the author, some lexical items in particular require "rich frame-semantic knowledge" (Goldberg, 1995, p. 28). For example, to understand the expression *Sam sneezed the napkin off the table*, it is necessary to infer the expulsion of air involved in the act of sneeze; this is why this verb can be used transitively. Therefore, the frame structure plays a key role as a pillar of Construction Grammar.

Likewise, the theory of Mental Spaces (Fauconnier 1997; Fauconnier; Turner 1998) proposes a theoretical model which includes a frame level. Mental spaces can be defined as "[...] very partial assemblies constructed as we think and talk for purposes of local understanding and action. They contain elements and are structured by frames and cognitive models" (Fauconnier, 2007, p. 351). For example, the sentence "You climbed Mount Rainier in 2001" presupposes a frame for walking, and the Space Builder "in 2001" sets the event in the past; similarly, in the sentence "Maybe Romeo is in love with Juliet", the adverb "maybe" "[...]" is a Space Builder: it sets up a possibility space relative to the discourse base space at that point" (Fauconnier, 1985, p. 5); and the conveyed possibility must be understood within the meaning (or the frame) of "to be in love with".

In other words, mental spaces are always framed, so that frames can be seen as structures that have already been entrenched in language use (Fauconnier, 1985). From another perspective, mental spaces are described as online, partial frames (Kövecses, 2006, p. 249), which are built in the course of communication – the discourse space. In addition, as explained by Ziem (2014, p. 28), frames and mental spaces share the same theoretical premises, but "The difference lies in the focus. While Fillmore's frame theory concentrates on lexical meaning, mental spaces take account of the cognitive operations that guide the construal of conceptual structures." Coulson (2001) also considers Frame Semantics and Mental Space

theory as compatible theories for analysis of various linguistic phenomena. The same can be applied for Conceptual Blending Theory (Fauconnier; Turner, 2002; Turner, 2007), which is focused on studying processes of conceptual integration between mental spaces.

The Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff; Johnson, 1980) is another example of an approach that can be related to semantic frame dynamics. From a cognitive-linguistic perspective, metaphors reflect the way humans think and therefore use language, on the assumption that "The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (Lakoff; Johnson, 1980, p. 188). Therefore, metaphors, from a conceptual point of view, are more than linguistic phenomena, since they consist in patterns of thought (Grady, 2007) which enable us to conceptualize abstract domains through concrete ones. For example, both in English and Portuguese, the more abstract *argument* domain is conceptualized in terms of the more concrete *war* domain (Lakoff; Johnson, 1980), which is reflected in expressions such as *to make indefensible claims, to win a discussion, to attack weak points of an argument*.

It is worth highlighting that *domains* are a central concept of Langacker's (1987) Cognitive Grammar; and, in this framework, also function similarly to frames: "They provide the background information that makes understanding a linguistic expression possible. Without reference to domains, linguistic meaning cannot be understood — not even in a rudimentary form" (Ziem, 2014, p. 24). According to Neumair *et al.* (2025, p. 2), "the source and the target domain of metaphors can be conceived as structured by frames". In this regard, Vereza's (2013, 2016) works investigate the sociocognitive-discursive dimension of conceptual metaphors, showing the way *frames* not only offer the background to conceptual metaphors (in an offline level), but also explain some creative, situated and deliberated metaphorical mappings; in this case, the author considers that *frames* can also have an online dimension, which enables one to observe the construction of discourse objects (Mondada; Dubois, 2003) through a sociocognitive perspective.

These examples have sought to show how Frame Semantics postulates are pervasive across other theoretical approaches within Cognitive Linguistics. Beyond proposing a robust methodology for semantic analysis, Fillmore's theory makes a significant contribution to consolidating some core sociocognitive principles, such as advocating an encyclopedic, prototypical view of meaning. This is why, according to Evans and Green (2006, p. 206-207), Frame Semantics is one of the pillars that constitute "a theory of encyclopaedic semantics" in this field.

5 Final Remarks

This paper set out to argue that Frame Semantics is not simply one among many theories within Cognitive Linguistics, but rather an essential part of its conceptual foundation – a *quiet backbone* that has silently supported, informed, and shaped the development of other theoretical frameworks. We began by revisiting the origins of Frame Semantics in Fillmore's Case Grammar, showing how it emerged in opposition to formalist models that separated syntax from meaning. Through this historical reconstruction, we demonstrated that Frame Semantics relied on key ideas – such as the centrality of encyclopedic knowledge, perspectivization, and culturally embedded meaning – that would later become defining features of the sociocognitive paradigm.

We then showed how these foundational insights were not only preserved but deeply integrated into other cognitive-linguistic models, including Construction Grammar, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Mental Spaces Theory, and Cognitive Grammar. Despite their methodological and terminological differences, these approaches all rely – either explicitly or implicitly – on the notion that linguistic meaning depends on background knowledge, schematic structure, and contextual salience. In that sense, they are all indebted to Fillmore's frame-based vision, even when they do not name it as such.

And yet, paradoxically, Frame Semantics often remains in the background – acknowledged but rarely

foregrounded, cited but not always expanded upon. This apparent marginality contrasts with its conceptual centrality. That is precisely why we have referred to it as a *quiet backbone*: it provides the underlying architecture for meaning construction in Cognitive Linguistics, while often remaining structurally unrecognized in the theoretical superstructures it supports.

We see several reasons why Frame Semantics has occupied this quiet position. First, its descriptive richness and openness to cultural variation contrast with the more formal ambitions of some subsequent models, which seek testability, generalization, and algorithmic precision. Even within Cognitive Linguistics itself, this tension is evident: certain strands of Construction Grammar, such as Sign-Based Construction Grammar (Sag, Boas & Kay, 2012), pursue formalization through unification-based grammar models designed to be computationally tractable – thus adopting a level of abstraction and formal rigor that diverges from the flexible, usage-based orientation of Frame Semantics.

Second, its close association with lexicographic projects such as FrameNet may have led some to see it as a methodological resource rather than a full-fledged theory of meaning. Because of its strong empirical orientation – focusing on the annotation of lexical units, frame evocation, and corpus-based patterning – Frame Semantics is sometimes perceived as an applied tool for lexical description rather than as a theoretical framework with broad explanatory power. As a result, Frame Semantics is often relegated to the domain of linguistic resources or computational applications, rather than being recognized as a foundational theory of how meaning is constructed and conceptualized.

Third, its foundational status may have rendered it almost invisible: when a theory becomes deeply integrated into the assumptions of a field, it can begin to seem self-evident – no longer in need of explicit articulation. In many cases, Frame Semantics' basic tenets – such as the dependence of meaning on background knowledge, the schematic nature of conceptual categories, and the perspectival structure of language – have been so thoroughly absorbed into

other theoretical models that they no longer require explicit citation. Ironically, the theory's success in shaping core ideas within Cognitive Linguistics may be one reason for its relative invisibility: its insights are everywhere, although not always labeled as such.

But this invisibility is precisely what calls for renewed attention. Recognizing Frame Semantics as this quiet backbone allows us to understand the field's internal coherence in a new light. It invites us to reconsider the theoretical genealogies we construct, the models we prioritize, and the ways in which foundational insights are preserved, sometimes silently, across generations of research.

Ultimately, Fillmore's contribution goes beyond providing a framework for semantic analysis. It offers a way of thinking about meaning that is deeply human: rooted in experience, shaped by culture, and enacted through language. In acknowledging the subtle yet pervasive influence of Frame Semantics, we are not merely paying homage to its past; we are recognizing its enduring presence and relevance in the ongoing effort to understand how language works – and how, through language, we make sense of the world.

While this article has taken a more essayistic stance – without presenting empirical data analysis or offering theoretical reformulations – it nonetheless aims to make a meaningful contribution to the field of cognitive linguistic studies. By revisiting the development of Frame Semantics and emphasizing its foundational role, we hope to draw attention to the fact that, despite its wide-reaching influence, Fillmore's theory is often underacknowledged or backgrounded in academic discourse. By highlighting its explanatory power and its integration across diverse cognitive linguistic theories, we reaffirm Frame Semantics not only as a historical cornerstone, but as a living and essential framework for understanding how meaning is structured and enacted in human language.

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