Subject-Auxiliary Inversion

Ronald W. Langacker
University of California, San Diego

The treatment of English auxiliary verbs epitomizes the stark contrast between the original generative view of syntax as an autonomous formal system and the envisaged cognitive linguistic alternative based on meaning and function. Central to an alternative account is a revealing analysis of subject-auxiliary inversion (e.g. *Have they finished?*). The analysis proposed is based on established descriptive notions of Cognitive Grammar as well as their elaboration to deal with phenomena essential for its future development. Among the matters discussed are: (i) the dynamicity and flexibility of symbolic assemblies; (ii) the characterization of structure in terms of strata, each serving as a baseline for the next; (iii) the nature and role of semantic function; (iv) dimensions of functional organization (expressive, interactive, descriptive, discursive); and (v) aspects of function and structure along the discursive axis (word order, information structure, topic-like phenomena). A fundamental notion is that a finite clause predicates the "existence" of a relationship (its occurrence or temporal instantiation) and specifies its status vis-à-vis the speaker-hearer interaction. English clause structure pivots on the relation, at multiple strata, between an "existential core" and a discursive "anchor" with topic-like function. On this account subject-auxiliary "inversion" represents nothing more than a non-default choice of anchor.