Lakoff, George. 1987. **Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind.** Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. Pp. xvii + 614. US$29.95.

Reviewed by David M. Snyder, Summer Institute of Linguistics

Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things is an excellent book. It is not only well written—I would recommend it as a textbook—it discusses a topic that is crucial to virtually any linguist, philosopher or even theologian. As Lakoff himself says, "There is nothing more basic than categorization to our thought, perception, action and speech. Every time we see something as a kind of thing, for example, a tree, we are categorizing. Whenever we reason about kinds of things—chairs, nations, illnesses, emotions, any *kind* of thing at all—we are employing categories...An understanding of how we categorize is central to any understanding of how we think and how we function, and therefore central to an understanding of what makes us human."

Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things deals with knowledge. Lakoff addresses the question "How do we humans categorize and understand our world?" Although this may sound quite theoretical, it has very practical applications for people working in fields from lexicography to artificial intelligence, from translation to law.

Lakoff begins his book by discussing how specific cultures categorize specific objects. For example, he looks at the color studies of Brent Berlin who worked with the Tzeltal people, and at the work of Paul Ekman who did cross cultural studies in emotions. From examples such as these he demonstrates that the "classical" western objectivist model of semantic categories is inadequate. Lakoff continues during the first 250 pages to show specifically where the "classical view" is weak. Yet as he says, "My purposes (sic) in discussing the inadequacies of objectivist semantics is constructive, rather than destructive." He shows that there are different types of categories, and that members of those categories are defined and behave in different ways.

The "classical" western view of categories of the mind claims that there is only one kind of category, that "categories are based (only) on shared properties". Lakoff demonstrates that there are actually several different kinds of categories that we work with, and that these categories are much more complex than the "classical" western view permits. Lakoff calls this new theory of categorization "prototype theory."

The "classical" view also holds that knowledge, the way facts are organized, is something that exists outside of humans, and that humans perceive this as external knowledge and model their organization of facts on it. Lakoff demonstrates that our knowledge is shaped by our senses, our thinking is determined by who and what we are. Human reason is known only to humans.

In **Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things**, Lakoff is actually trying to convince the reader to adopt a new and radical way of looking at the world. In order to really understand what Lakoff is saying, the reader needs to break free from years of thinking patterned on "classical" assumptions.

Lakoff is careful to consider as many arguments as possible. I find his attitude to be excellent: He is seeking to understand and explain, not just promote his own views. He is ready to show where his arguments are weak, and where other arguments have strength. More than once Lakoff admits that his prior understanding was inadequate, but that interaction with his colleagues has enabled him to better explain the facts that lay before him.

The book is well written by a good teacher. The material becomes technical at times, but Lakoff must present the material in this way in order to adequately answer the questions that other leading thinkers have raised. Yet Lakoff is careful to present his material one step at a time.

I unequivocally recommend this book to anyone who has the strength to reassess his or her world view. It is not a task easily undertaken, but one which may be quite fruitful.