

From lexicon to discourse : principles of variation and stabilization of the words' meaning

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Semantics

- Specific organization in language: **two levels**
- **Semantics of units:** form/meaning pairing
- **Semantics of utterance**
- A complex articulation between the two levels:
 - Non strictly compositional
un bel imbécile lit. handsome idiot ‘a great fool’
 - Multiple factors at utterance level
 - ... acting upon the semantics of the units

Investigate interface between lexical semantics and discourse

A first semantic problem : form-meaning pairing

No one-to-one correspondance between form and meaning

- One unit, several meanings : **polysemy, polyreference**

Engl. *greens* :
- village commons
- leafy vegetables
- members of a political party

- Several units may refer to the same thing : **synonymy**

Engl. *roe* and *caviar*
hepatitis and *jaundice*

Plasticity of meaning

one of language's fundamental principals

Variation

- Within languages or **across languages**

Engl. *greens* : - village commons

- leafy vegetables

- members of a political party

Fr. *les verts* : - members of a political party

- set game pawns

- a national football team

First question

- How it is possible to say “the same thing” differently ?
- What is at stake in this variation ?

Communication remains possible

- because semantic variation of units is **regulated** in discourse
- leading to **stabilization** of the meaning in context
- ... most of the time but not always !
misunderstanding... or word play

The aim of this presentation

- a more comprehensive model of lexical semantics
- accounting for variability
- stabilization in discourse
- and possible misfires or playful semantic layering

The components of lexical semantics

Meaning in cognitive linguistics :

- Meaning is always mediated by the “**construal**” of the reference
- General property of language :
“its capacity to construe a particular situation in **alternate ways**” (Langacker 1990)

A first component of the construal of reference

- The referential pathway

Referential path

- 'strategy to gain access to reference' (Corbin & Temple 1994)
- **Alternate** ways to access the same referential values
- Source of '**synonymy**' inside languages

En. *record player* and *turn-table*

Fr. *électrophone* referring to the function (produce sound)

tourne-disque referring to the instrument's mechanical apparatus

En. *pork vs. pig meat* (compositional path)

- Part of the meaning
- NB. Different connotations, uses

Referential path

- Source of variation inside languages ('synonyms')
- Source of **crosslinguistics variation**

'a used car' En. *a second-hand car*

= previously owned by one other person

Fr. *une voiture d'occasion*

= bought under favorable financial conditions

'forefinger' Fr. *index*, Gr. *Zeigefinger* 'finger for pointing'

Anc.Gk. *likhanós* 'the one which is used to lick'

Referential path here : *Selection* of one of the *referent's* properties, conceived as more *salient*, to designate it

Selection of property and polyreference

- Different objects can present a common property

un bleu 'a blue (one)': 'a work suit', 'a beginner' or
'new recruit', 'a cheese', 'a bruise'

Evol. recently 'a draft of interdepartmental edict';
formerly 'a republican soldier' (for royalists)

- Different meaning in different paradigms

un bleu vs. *un blanc* 'a white one'

a republican vs. a royalist

un blanc vs. *un rouge* 'a red one': a white vs. red wine

Selection of property and metonymy

Metonymy: a derivational referential path based on the selection of a property

the blue helmets; the decisions of White house

- Source term expresses a property shared by the new/targeted referent (as a part of it)
- Property again selected as sufficiently salient

The architecture of meaning

(Talmy 1978, Fillmore 1982, Langacker 1991)

A hierarchical architecture including:

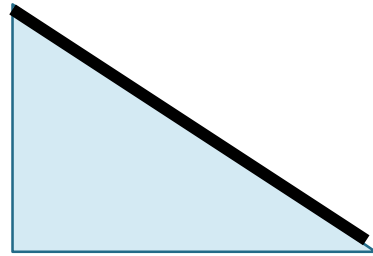
- a ground or background
- a figure : a salient sub-structure within the background

the “figure” represents the designated element

the “ground” the background on which it is profiled.

Figure and ground together = meaning

hypotenuse (Langacker 1991)



Meaning of *hypotenuse* : both the designated side of the triangle (figure) and the triangle in the background

Background is part of the meaning; cf. *tip, uncle...*

Languages may differ in the way they segment the world (different architectures in the background)

e.g. Kinship relations : Wol. *nijaay* 'maternal uncle'

Figure and ground

Useful for describing metaphor

Metaphor : transfer of properties from one domain to another to create a new referential value

A figure is abstracted and transferred to another ground

merchandise train → *train of thought*

Figure : organization in successive units

Transferred to a abstract domain (new background)

Enriching the background...

The components of lexical semantics (2)

Semantic universes: frames and scenarios

Words: linked to representational backdrops contributing to their meaning

weekend

- Part of the seven-day cycle (referential value)
- Related to a semantic and cultural frame :
 - 2 non-working days, associated with leisure, sport, etc.

Semantic frames and scenarios

“Frames” or “scenes” (Fillmore 1977, Goldberg 1995)

useful chunks of encyclopedic knowledge relevant to the usage of linguistic units

? *the Pope is a bachelor*

Synonyms may refer to different different frames

Engl. *roe* vs. *caviar* (Langacker 1987)

anatomical vs. *gastronomical* frame

Scenarios

- Frames vary across cultures (and history)

Ibo (Kwa, Nigeria) 18 terms for 'to buy' depending on :

- the nature and conditioning of the object,
- the circumstances of the sale,
- the particular gesture associated with it,
- the quantity or fractioning of the object,
- whether the seller is obliged to travel,
- if the person one asks to buy will pay or not, etc...

(Chukwe 1997)

Various scenarios encoded in the lexicon



The components of lexical semantics (3)

Connotations

Synonyms may also differ by their connotations

the heat / policeman

- includes a pejorative meaning in the word
- signals belonging to a certain age group and ideology

father / priest or clergyman

- signifies that the speaker is a practicing catholic

Another dimension of construal; part of the meaning;

Condition the context of use and the pragmatic effects

Going further... or deeper

A dynamic conception of semantics

“Instead of thinking in terms of words as expressing ‘concepts’, we should think of them as **tools** that cause **listeners** to activate certain areas of their **knowledge base**, with **different areas activated** to different degrees in different contexts of **use**.” (Lee 2001)

Opens up a functional interface with discourse

Proposal...

The semantic depth

The depth dimension of language (Robert 1999, 2008)

A generalization of the representations a word can activate:

- Beside the targeted referential value
- A network of relations, both language internal and external, semantic and formal, encoded and subjective....

Referential network

Structure of kinship relations
My two grand-mothers
A brand of jams
(*Bonne-Maman*)...

Associated universes, frames

Little Red Riding-Hood

My dearest grand-mother :
her blue eyes...

Personal experience

My grand-mother's
joyful character, our
trip together...

Grand-mère

Formal associations

(*paronyms*) :

grand-père

grammaire...

Connotations

old, wise, kind, fragile...

traditional, no chemical...

Former and present names of a French province

'Coasts of... ': <i>Côtes of...</i>	<i>Côtes du Nord</i>	<i>Côtes d'Armor</i>
<i>Semantic associations</i>	the North	Armorica... Celtic legends
<i>Connotations</i>	cold, grey, rain...	kings, fairies...
<i>Formal associations</i>	≈ <i>côtes de porc</i> 'pig ribs'	<i>Armor</i> ≈ <i>Amor</i> 'love'

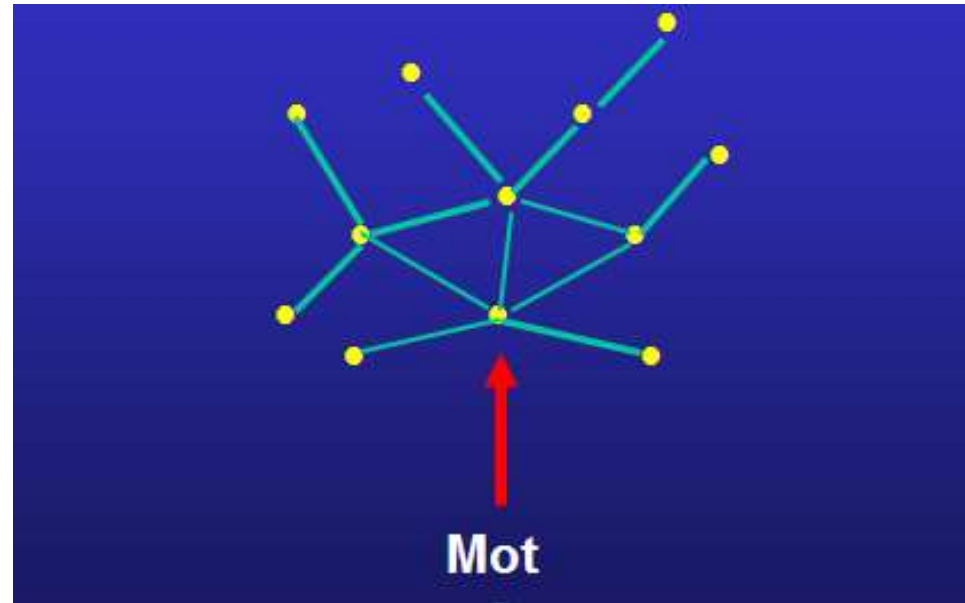
Same referential value but different semantic depth
 Strong effects (-/+) → change of the name

The semantic depth (summary)

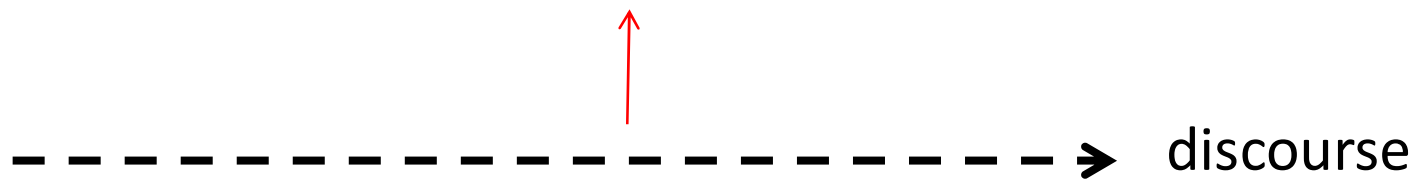
Linguistic units call up a complex network of relations

- Referential networks (polysemy)
- With various referential domains as a background
- scenarios and semantic universes
- connotations
- associations between linguistic and extralinguistic representations (personal experience)
- formal and semantic associations between terms

Words in utterance



Mot



Semantic depth :
A potential semantic overload

Stabilization in discourse

Units

potential semantic overload

Discourse

- Context acts on the meaning of units
- Specifying both meaning of units and of sentence
- Progressive building of 'verbal scene' (Victorri 1997)
relating mechanisms

Meaning construal in discourse : a dynamic process

Main mechanisms regulating activation of selected zones

Stabilization in discourse

Interaction with verbal context

i.e. words and syntactic constructions

- Lexical interaction (specifying application domain)

A floury hand / a floury pear

- Profiling active zones of the referent

He opened / cleaned the window

- Restructuring retroaction

pied-de-biche rouillé > 'rusty crowbar'

foot-of-doe rusted

Stabilization in discourse

Larger verbal context as anchoring point

'Setting'

- (a) *Your ring looks very old-fashioned
I'm going to change **the setting***
- (b) *This scenery doesn't seem quite right for
Shakespeare.
I'm going to change **the setting***

Context: - construe anchoring points (or landmarks)
 - **interpretative or meaning attractors**

Stabilization in discourse

Discourse situation : the default meaning attractor

Specifying the term's application domain (its background)

Fr. baguette

- at a concert : 'a conductor's baton'
- in a bakery: 'a loaf of bread'
- in a Chinese restaurant 'chopsticks'

Personal meaning attractors (subjective)

instrumental for a musician vs. a linguist

Stabilization in discourse

For disambiguation of a syntactic construction

je vous coupe la tête

Lit. 'I am going to cut you the head'

Depending on the discourse situation :

- at fishmonger's : 'I'm going to cut **the (fish's) head for you**'
(benefactive)
- under threat : 'I'm going to cut off **your head**'
(applicative)

cf. *Tintin and the blue lotus*

NB. Communication is possible because the reference points of the verbal context take precedence over the rest

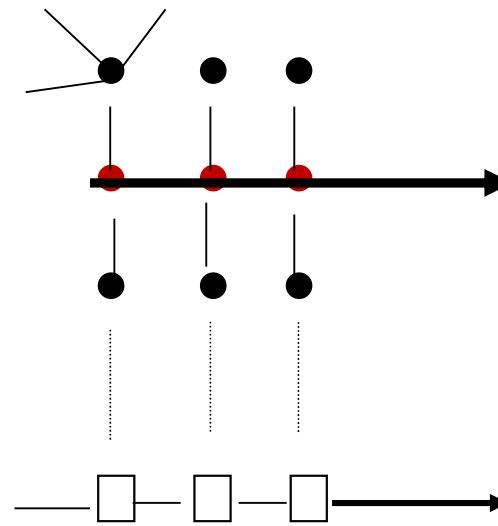
Excepted in particular situations like tiredness, worries or obsession or... because of a lack of precision (butcher)

A last very important process for the stabilization of meaning in discourse...

Semantic isotopics and language depth

■ *language depth*

■ *utterance*



isotopic
activation

(Robert 2008)

Playing with semantic depth

- Stabilization of words' meaning regulated in discourse
but
- Interferences between the different “meaning attractors” is always possible
cf. misunderstandings, slips of the tongue (paronyms)
- and also playful uses with the semantic depth:
Cf. Advertisements often rely on a double interpretation of utterance based on the polysemy of the words
→ deliberate “semantic layering”

Semantic layering

Mechanism : activation of two isotopics

Mainspring of rhetoric, puns, and also of advertising

Advertising for a car brand

Quand je vois du trafic, je sors mon automatique

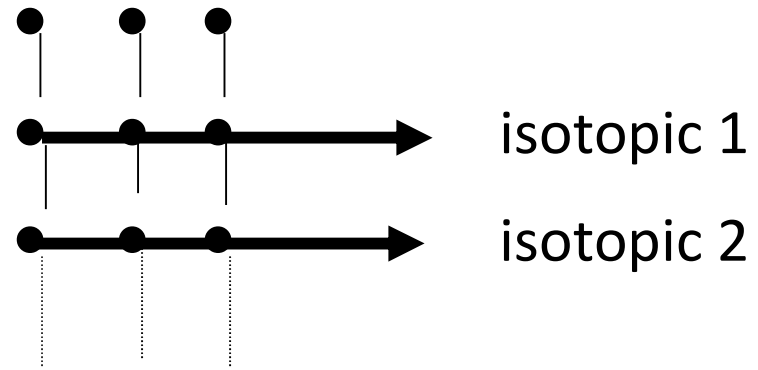
When I see traffic, I take out my automatic

Isotopic1	contraband	→	revolver
Isotopic2	traffic	→	automobile

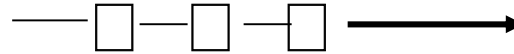
Activating two polysemic network in semantic depth

Activation of two paths in language depth

language depth



utterance



(Robert 2008)

Another kind of semantic layering

produced by replacing a word in a set expression

two sentences activated: the set expression (background)
: the intended meaning

Advertisement for cigarette brand:

Certains l'aime Kool

'Some like it Kool'

Some like it hot (background: title of the film)

Advertisement for a brand of mineral water (Contrex)

*Aide-toi et **Contrex** t'aidera* (background: proverb)

'Help yourself and **Contrex water** will help you'

Playing in semantic depth

by semantic shift

une riche et pauvre héritière

'a poor rich heiress'

(Balzac, *Eugénie Grandet*)

Contradiction between the two adjectives solved by:

- displacing the contradiction in time

she is potentially rich but currently poor

- displacing the adjective's meaning onto modal plane

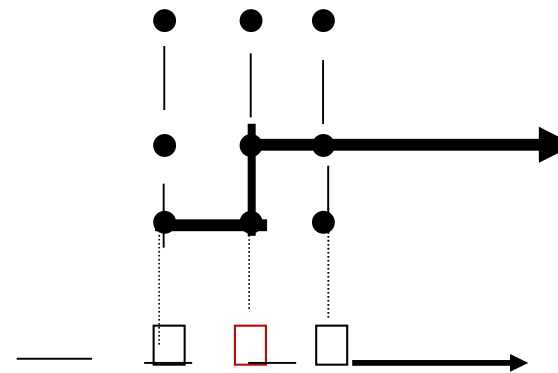
poor : subjective reading "unhappy"

= Semantic shift (Talmy 2000: 324)

Shift in semantic depth

language depth

utterance



rich poor heiress

shifting

(Robert 2008)

A last process activating selected zones in semantic depth

Diffusion of connotations

A politician commenting the reappearance of the defeated presidential candidate (after claiming temporary withdraw)

*En fait de traversée du **désert**, la traversée de Lionel Jospin a été celle d'un **bac à sable*** (Laurent Fabius)

‘More than **spending time in the wilderness**,

Lionel Jospin has been **spending time in a theme park**

i.e. "he could not keep away very long“

- Semantic isotopic set up by associating "**desert**" - "**sand**“
- the utterance ostensibly compares the time required to "cross" them.

Overt isotopic

'More than spending time in the wilderness_{1,2}

Lionel Jospin has been spending time in a theme park₂

... subverted by the transferred connotations from 'sandbox'

lit. **1** : crossing a **desert** **2** crossing a **sandbox**"

politician

universe of the children



diffusion of connotations

Semantic bomb !

The depth dimension of language

Words are caught up in a fabric of associations (semantic and formal, language internal and external...)

A functional property of language

Potential semantic overload: reduced or exploited !

Linguistic mechanisms at work in discourse

Selective **activation** of some associations in the utterance through semantic isotopics, shifts triggered by context, diffusion of connotations

Semantic depth allows semantic layering

... and possible misunderstanding

Plasticity of meaning : role and side-effects

- Optimization of linguistic systems
 - Functional optimality: referential power, adaptability
 - Cognitive optimization: memory storing economy

but also

- Ambiguity (hearer) → misunderstandings (communication)
- Possibility to play with semantic depth (speaker) :
 - semantic layering, diffusion of connotation (sem. bombs)

Speaker : driver or passenger of language's referential power