

CHAPTER 3

Types and dimensions of meaning

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CHAPTER 3

Types and dimensions of meaning

3.1 Introduction

The purpose of the present chapter is to survey (albeit somewhat superficially) the range of possible varieties of meaning in language. Before we can do this, we need some idea of what is to count as meaning. There are many different opinions on this question, but the matter will not be argued in detail here, since many of the divergent views are simply a question of terminology—one is to some extent at least free to stipulate what is to count. In this book a broad characterization of meaning will be adopted: meaning is anything that affects the relative normality of grammatical expressions. This is an example of a **contextual** approach to meaning, because relative normality is a concept which applies only to combinations of elements; that is to say, it implies that meaning is to be studied by observing the interactions between elements and other elements, in larger constructions such as sentences. It follows from this characterization that if two expressions differ in meaning, then this will show up in the fact that a context can be found in which they differ in normality; conversely, two expressions with the same meaning will have the same normality in all contexts. So, for instance, we know that *dog* and *cat* differ in meaning (to take a crudely obvious case) because (for example) *Our cat has had kittens* is more normal than *?Our dog has just had kittens*. Likewise, we know that *pullover* and *sweater* are at least very close in meaning, because of the difficulty in finding contexts in which they differ in normality (for further discussion of synonymy, see Chapter 8). (Note that ‘mention’ contexts, such as *Pullover!?Sweater has eight letters*, do not count.) It also follows from the characterization adopted here that the **normality profile** of a linguistic item, that is to say, its pattern of normality and abnormality across the full range of possible contexts, gives in some sense a picture of its meaning. It does not, however, tell us what meaning *really is*. This is a deep and controversial question; it will be generally assumed in this book that meaning is in essence *conceptual* (see Chapter 6), but is most easily studied through language.

3.1.1 Semantic anomaly versus grammatical anomaly

For the characterization of meaning given above to work, we need to be able to separate semantic anomaly from grammatical anomaly. This is another contentious issue, but I believe it is possible to get some grip on it. The account given here largely follows that given in Cruse (1986).

The most commonly encountered criterion for separating the two types of anomaly is **corrigibility**: it is claimed that grammatical anomalies are typically corrigible in the sense that it is obvious what the 'correct' version should be, whereas semantic anomalies are typically not corrigible. Thus, **Me seed two mouses* can easily be corrected to *I saw two mice*, whereas there is no obvious way of amending **The noiseless typewriter-blasts squirmed faithfully*. However, while this may be generally true, it is not difficult to find easily correctable anomalies which intuitively are clearly semantic: ** TA& hole is too large for John to crawl through*.

There is a basic drawback with the notion of corrigibility, which is that it is presupposed that one knows what was originally intended. A better approach is to ask what is the minimum change to the sentence (or whatever) that will remove the anomaly. There are three possibilities (assuming that the anomaly has a single source):

- (i) The anomaly can only be cured by replacing one (or more) of the full lexical elements (i.e. a noun, verb, adjective, or adverb). In this case we can be reasonably certain that we are dealing with a semantic anomaly:
 - (1) John is too **small* to get through this hole.
 - ✓ big
 - (ii) The anomaly can only be cured by changing one or more grammatical elements (affixes, particles, determiners, etc.), but not by changing a full lexical item. In this case we can be sure that the anomaly is grammatical:
 - (2) Mary **be* going home.
 - ✓ is
 - (iii) The anomaly can be cured either by grammatical or by lexical adjustment. In this case we need to know whether the lexical possibilities form a natural semantic class or not: if they do, the anomaly can be taken as semantic. Compare (3) and (4):
 - (3) **Mary went home tomorrow./Mary will go home tomorrow.*
 - (grammatical adjustment)
 - Mary went home **tomorrow.*
 - yesterday.
 - last week.
 - etc.
 - (lexical adjustment)

Here the items which remove the anomaly share a component of meaning, namely, an indication of past time.

- (4) *Le livre est sur le table./Le livre est sur la table.

(grammatical adjustment)

Le livre est sur le *table.

fauteuil.

plancher.

buffet.

rocher.

frigo.

In this case the items which remove the anomaly have nothing in common semantically, and the anomaly of (4) can hence be diagnosed as grammatical.

There is one more possible diagnostic criterion: a semantic anomaly can often be **improved** by manipulating the context, whereas this is usually not possible with pure syntactic anomalies:

- (5) The chair saw Mary.

(Mary has a persecution mania. She believes all her accidents are due to malevolent forces. No doubt the chair saw her, computed her path across the room, and placed itself just where she would trip over it.)

No amount of contextual elaboration can reduce the anomaly of *The mans possess three car*.

3.1.2 Types of anomaly

We have so far treated anomaly as a unitary phenomenon, without trying to distinguish different sorts. It is quite a useful analytical tool, even without further refinement, as most speakers have sensitive intuitions regarding the normality or oddness of a bit of language. But it is sometimes useful to make a distinction between different types of anomaly. The following are the main varieties (they are only illustrated here: more detailed discussion will be found in Chapter 12).

3.1.2.1 Pleonasm

John chewed it with his teeth.

It was stolen illegally.

Mary deliberately made a speech.

These examples give a feeling of redundancy: how else can you chew something, if not with your teeth? How can anybody make a speech accidentally? We shall look further into the reasons for pleonasm in a later chapter: for the moment an intuitive grasp is sufficient.

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3.1.2.2 Dissonance

The balloon rose ever lower.
The hamster was only slightly dead.
Singing hypotenuses melted in every eye.

Here there is a sense of ill-matched meanings clashing, giving rise to paradox, contradiction, a need to look for figurative readings (interpretability varies).

3.1.2.3 Zeugma

Mary picked the roses she had planted the year before.
John expired on the same day as his TV licence.

A sense of punning is an unmistakable symptom of zeugma. The essence of zeugma is the attempt to make a single expression do two semantic jobs at the same time.

3.1.2.4 Improbability

The puppy finished off a whole bottle of whisky.
The throne was occupied by a gun-toting baboon.

In the last analysis, there is probably a continuum between improbability and dissonance. For present purposes, we shall distinguish improbability by the fact that *I don't believe it!*, *How fantastic!*, and *That's a lie!*, etc. are appropriate responses.

3.2 Descriptive and non-descriptive meaning

Several scholars have proposed ways of classifying meaning into types, and the various proposals by no means agree in their details. But there is one type of meaning on which there is substantial agreement, and we shall start by separating this type from all the rest, although, as we shall see, the division is not quite so clear-cut as it may at first seem. The type of meaning in question is variously labelled **ideational** (Halliday), **descriptive** (Lyons), **referential**, **logical** or **propositional** (many). These are characterized in different ways by different scholars, but there is substantial overlap in respect of the sort of meaning they are referring to; we shall adopt Lyons's term *descriptive* as being the best suited to our purposes. The prototypical characteristics of this type of meaning are as follows (these points are not necessarily independent):

- (i) It is this aspect of the meaning of a sentence which determines whether or not any proposition it expresses is true or false (see the discussion in Chapter 2). This property justifies the labels *logical* and *propositional* for this type of meaning.
- (ii) It is this aspect of the meaning of an expression which constrains what the expression can be used to refer to; from another point of view, it is

this type of meaning which guides the hearer in identifying the intended referent(s); this is the motivation for the label *referential*.

- (iii) It is **objective** in the sense that it interposes a kind of distance between the speaker and what he says. It is **displaced** in Hockett's sense of not being tied to the here-and-now of the current speech situation.
- (iv) It is fully conceptualized. That is to say, it provides a set of conceptual categories into which aspects of experience may be sorted. Such a categorization effectively 'describes' the experiences and licenses further inferences about their properties, and so on.
- (v) Descriptive aspects of the meaning of a sentence are 'exposed' in the sense that they can potentially be negated or questioned. A reply from an interlocutor such as *That's a lie* or *That's not true*, targets the descriptive meaning within a statement.

Let us see how these criteria operate with a sentence which contains both descriptive and non-descriptive meaning:

(6) A: What's the matter?

B: Somebody's turned the bloody lights off.

Taking point (i) first, in B's utterance, *bloody* makes no contribution to the truth or falsity of the statement. That is to say, *Somebody's turned the lights off* and *Somebody's turned the bloody lights off* are true and false in exactly the same range of situations. On the other hand, of course, in a situation where *Somebody's turned the lights off* is true, *Somebody's turned the lights on* would be false, therefore what *off* signifies is part of the descriptive meaning of the utterance.

With respect to points (ii) and (iv), it is clear that *Somebody's turned the lights off* functions to inform A what has happened: it describes an event, in terms of shared conceptual categories such as TURN off and LIGHTS. The word *bloody*, however, has no descriptive function: it does not specify a sub-category of lights, nor give any help to the hearer in identifying the lights in question. It has a function which is entirely non-descriptive, which we will come to later.

As far as point (iii) is concerned, the descriptive meaning of the sentence can be displaced in the sense that it can be used to refer to events distant in time and space from the speech event:

(7) Somebody will go there and turn the lights off.

Notice, however, that the exasperation expressed by *bloody* cannot be displaced. In fact, in B's utterance in (6), while the descriptive meaning designates a previous event, *bloody* expresses B's exasperation at the moment of utterance.

Finally, the meaning of *bloody* is not amenable to straightforward contradiction. If someone replies *That's a lie* to B's statement, that would mean, not

that B is not exasperated, but that the lights had not been turned off; that is to say, only the descriptive meaning would be denied. A reply such as *They are not bloody lights* cannot mean “You are misleading me by expressing exasperation”; such a reply would be, to say the least, unusual, but it could have a metalinguistic meaning such as “You shouldn’t have used the word *bloody*”.

We shall adopt the above criteria for our conception of descriptive meaning, with two modifications, or provisos. The first is that we shall not require descriptive meaning to be categorically determinant for truth values/conditions, but merely that it should be directly relevant to truth in the sense of rendering the truth of a proposition more or less likely. For instance, the truth of “Fido is an animal” may be said to be crucial to the truth of “Fido is a dog”, in that if Fido is not an animal, then he/it can in no wise be a dog. However, “Fido can bark” is not crucial in this way: it is quite conceivable that a particular dog may not be able to bark. But if “Fido can bark” is false, that makes it less likely that Fido is a dog. Of course, “Fido can bark” is part of a normal description of a normal dog, so the inclusion of such matters under the heading of descriptive meaning is not so perverse.

The second hedge is that we shall not require of descriptive meaning that it be within the normal scope of negation, questioning, etc., provided that it is of the type that can normally be negated, or whatever. In other words, we shall distinguish between descriptive meaning which is, as it were ‘ring-fenced’ against contradiction, and meaning which cannot be contradicted because it is the wrong type (usually because it does not present a proposition). For instance, *It’s a dog* will normally be taken to indicate that (the referent of) *it* is an animal, that is, its being an animal is part (in some sense) of the meaning of *It’s a dog*. But if someone points to a creature and says *Is that a dog?*, they are unlikely to be asking whether or not the referent of *that* is an animal.

With these provisos, let us proceed to an examination of a number of dimensions along which descriptive meaning may vary.

3.3 Dimensions of descriptive meaning

3.3.1 Intrinsic dimensions

Intrinsic dimensions are semantic properties an element possesses in and of itself, without (overt) reference to other elements.

3.3.1.1 Quality

What we shall call **quality** is at one and the same time the most obvious and important dimension of variation within descriptive meaning, and the one about which we shall say the least. It is this which constitutes the difference between *red* and *green*, *dog* and *cat*, *apple* and *orange*, *run* and *walk*, *hate* and

fear, here and there. Pure differences of quality are to be observed only between items which are equal on the scales of intensity and specificity (see below). A rough-and-ready check on difference of quality is whether one can say *not Xbut Y* and *not Ybut X* without oddness:

- (8) It's not here, it's there.
It's not there, it's here.
- (9) I didn't run, I walked.
I didn't walk, I ran.
- (10) Her dress is not red, it's green.
Her dress is not green, it's red.

These may be contrasted with the following, where there is a semantic difference, but not one of a descriptive nature:

- (11) TThat's not my father, that's my Dad.
?She didn't pass away, she kicked the bucket.

Notice that items which differ in specificity will pass only half of this test:

- (12) It's an animal, but it's not a dog,
*It's a dog, but it's not an animal.

Differences of quality can be observed at all levels of specificity. We may think of hierarchies of semantic domains of various scope, or, alternatively of different **ontological types**. A typical set of ontological types at the highest level of generality is the following:

*THING QUALITY QUANTITY PLACE TIME STATE PROCESS EVENT ACTION
RELATION MANNER*

These represent fundamental modes of conception that the human mind is presumably innately predisposed to adopt. At lower levels of generality, we find (among other types) hierarchically arranged sets of conceptual categories:

Living things: animals, fish, insects, reptiles . . .
Animals: dogs, cats, lions, elephants ...
Dogs: collies, alsatians, Pekinese, spaniels. ..

3.3.1.2 Intensity

Descriptive meaning may vary in intensity, without change of quality. For instance, one would not wish to say that *large* and *huge* differ in quality: they designate the same area of semantic quality space, but differ in intensity. It is characteristic of intensity differences that they yield normal results in the following test frame(s):

- (13) It wasn'tjustX, itwas Y.
I wouldn't go so far as to say it was Y, but it was X.

If these are normal, then Y is more intense than X:

(14) It wasn't just large, it was huge.

(cf. ?It wasn't just huge, it was large.)

I wouldn't go so far as to say it was huge, but it was large.

(15) I wasn't just scared of her, I was terrified of her.

I wouldn't go so far as to say I was terrified of her, but I was scared of her.

From (14) and (15) we can conclude that *huge* is more intense than *large*, and *terrified* than *scared*. (Note that virtually any pair of items can be made to seem normal in this frame, given a suitably elaborated context: the test is intended to work in a zero context.)

Variation in intensity is of course possible only in certain areas of quality space. But it is not confined to those areas designated by gradable adjectives (i.e., is not confined to the domain of QUALITIES). Examples from other areas are:

(16) It wasn't just a mist, it was a fog.

I wouldn't go so far as to say it was a fog, but it was a mist.

(17) He didn't just beat her, he thrashed her.

I wouldn't go so far as to say he thrashed her, but he did beat her.

3.3.1.3 Specificity

Differences of descriptive **specificity** show up in various logical properties. These differ according to the exact type of specificity involved (see below). For one major type of specificity, these properties include, for instance, unilateral entailment (in appropriate contexts):

(18) *It's a dog* unilaterally entails *It's an animal*.

It's not an animal unilaterally entails *It's not a dog*.

Note also that *dogs and other animals* is normal, but not *?animals and other dogs*.

From all this, we can conclude that *dog* is more specific than *animal* (alternatively, *animal* is more general than *dog*). Similarly, *slap* is more specific than *hit*, *scarlet* is more specific than *red*, *woman* is more specific than *person*. In all these cases one can say that one term (the more general one) designates a more extensive area of quality space than the other. Langacker (1993) likens difference of linguistic specificity to viewing something from different distances, the less specific the greater the distance. For instance, from a great distance, a dog may just look like an object; from closer in, one can see it is an animal, but not what kind of animal; closer still, and the fact that it is a dog becomes clear, but perhaps not what variety of dog, and so on.

It is possible to distinguish several types of specificity. All the cases illustrated above involve type-specificity, that is to say, the more specific term

denotes a subtype included within the more general type. But there is also part-specificity, illustrated by, for instance, *handfinger* (where *finger* is the more specific), *bicycle'wheel*, *universityfaculty*. *John injured his finger* is more specific than *John injured his hand*. The logical consequences of this type of specificity are different to those for type-specificity. Unilateral entailment appears (in general) only with locative expressions:

- (19) *The boil is on John 's elbow* unilaterally entails *The boil is on Johns 'arm*.
John lectures in the Arts Faculty unilaterally entails *John lectures in the university*.

A third type of specificity is intensity-specificity, where one range of degrees of some property is included in another range. For instance, one reading of *large* includes all ranges of intensity of “greater than average size”. Hence *It's huge* entails *It's large*, but *It's large* does not entail *It's huge*. The logical properties here are the same as for type-specificity.

3.3.1.4 Vagueness

We shall say that the meaning of a word is **vague** to the extent that the criteria governing its use are not precisely statable. Before examining this notion in greater detail, it is necessary to make as clear a distinction as possible between it and certain other notions with which it is often coupled in discussions, if not actually confused. The first of these is generality. Although someone who says *I saw a reptile* is not giving as much information as someone who says *I saw a snake*, they are not being any more vague. That is to say, the notion “reptile” is as clearly delimitable as the notion “snake”, it is just that it denotes a more inclusive class. Another notion which must be distinguished from vagueness is abstractness. For instance, the notion of “entailment” is abstract, but is relatively well defined, and therefore not vague.

Under the heading of vagueness we shall distinguish two different subdimensions. The first is **ill-definedness**, and the second is laxness. These can vary independently. Ill-definedness is well illustrated by terms which designate a region on a gradable scale such as *middle-aged*. Age varies continuously: *middle-aged* occupies a region on this scale. But at what age does someone begin to be middle-aged, and at what age does one cease to be middle-aged and become old? There is quite an overlap between *middle-aged* and *in their fifties*, but the latter is significantly better defined: we know in principle how to determine whether someone is in their fifties or not. General terms may be better defined than their subclasses. For instance, *vertebrate* and *mammal* are relatively well defined, whereas the everyday words *dog*, *cat*, and so on are much less easily definable.

The second subtype of vagueness is **laxness** (vs. **strictness**) of application. For some terms, their essence is easily defined, but they are habitually applied in a loose way. This seems to be a characteristic of individual words. For instance, the notion of a circle is capable of a clear definition, and everyone is

capable of grasping the strict notion, even if they cannot give a correct mathematical specification. But the word *circle* is habitually used very loosely, as in, for instance, *The mourners stood in a circle round the grave*. No one expects the people to form an exact circle here, yet there is no sense of metaphorical or extended use. Contrast this with *odd number*, which is not only clearly definable, but is always applied strictly, so that, for instance, it would not do to call 2.8 an odd number, on the grounds that it was 'near enough to 3'. A word like *dog* could be said to be relatively ill defined, but it is strictly applied, in that applying it to something which is known not to be a dog is felt to be metaphorical, even if the referent looks like a dog.

3.3.1.5 Basicness

Another dimension along which descriptive meanings can vary is that of **basicness**: some meanings are considered more basic than others. This is a complex topic and cannot be fully explored here. There are several different interpretations of the notion. We shall look at three broad ways of thinking of basicness.

In many, extremely varied, approaches to language and meaning a distinction is made between words or features which are close to concrete everyday experience, and those which, though in some way ultimately derived from these, are to various degrees remote from actual bodily experience. For instance, the meaning of *cold* can be directly experienced through the senses, but the meaning of *gradable* as applied to adjectives (e.g. *a little bit / slightly/ quite / rather / very / extremely cold*) cannot, though there is undoubtedly a connection of some sort between bodily experiences of coldness and the abstract notion of gradability. The distinction we are making here corresponds to one meaning of *concrete* (has spatio-temporal location) as opposed to *abstract* (does not have spatio-temporal location). A standard picture of meaning within the philosophy of language identifies a set of words, known as the **observation vocabulary**, whose meanings are fixed by their relations with observable properties of the environment. The meanings of words not belonging to this set are fixed by a network of inferential or other relations to the meanings of other words, including those belonging to the observation vocabulary. We can take observation vocabulary items to be the more basic. A general assumption is that the concrete/observable/basic terms will be the first learned, probably the first to arise in the evolution of human language, the most accessible in psycholinguistic terms, the most likely to be points of convergence between widely different languages, and so on. Cognitive linguists believe that cognition is built up as it were from concrete to abstract, and concrete domains function as source domains for metaphorical processes involved in creating abstract domains.

Another way of looking at more and less basic meanings is in terms of independence and dependence: one meaning may presuppose, or depend on, another. As an example of dependency, consider the case of *acceleration*. This

presupposes/depends on the notion of *speed*, which in turn presupposes the yet more basic notion of *movement*, down to the most basic notions of all: *physical object*, *location*, and *time*. Notice that *acceleration* is not more specific than *speed*, in the way that *dog* is more specific than *animal*, or *finger* than *hand*, but it is more complex, in that it builds on more basic meanings.

A natural way of thinking about this type of dependency is in terms of constituency: the dependent meanings, being more complex, are built up out of the more basic meanings. For instance, if we define *acceleration* as “rate of change of speed with time”, we incorporate the simpler notion “speed” into the definition. A similar definition of *speed* would not need to make any reference to a notion of “acceleration” (e.g. “rate of change of location with time”). In a similar way, the meaning of *stallion* is built out of the more basic meanings “male” and “horse”. On this view, the most basic meanings are the so-called semantic primes—elementary notions out of which all other meanings are built. There is no agreement on any set of primes. (This topic will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 13.)

Yet another interpretation of the notion of basicness is the cognitive psychologists’ concept of a **basic level category**. This is treated in more detail in Chapter 7. Briefly, basic level categories are easier to use than other categories: examples are *Apple*, *rose*, *Cow*, *Car*, *BUTterFLY*, as opposed to *frUIT*, *fLower*, *AnimAL*, *veHiCLe*, or *inseCT* on the one hand, or *rUSseT*, *HYBriD TeA*, *jerseY cow*, *HATCHBACk*, or *swALLowTAiL* on the other.

3.3.1.6 Viewpoint

A number of linguistic expressions encode as part of their meaning a particular **viewpoint** on the events or states of affairs designated. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is provided by deictic expressions (see Chapter 15 for more details), such as *this*, *that*, *here*, *there*, *now*, *then*, and so on, which are usually claimed to encode the viewpoint of the speaker at the moment of utterance. So, for instance, *the book on the table*, if it was valid for one speaker in a particular context, would be valid for anyone present; however, the validity of *this book here*, as a description of the same book, would clearly depend on the position of the speaker relative to the book in question.

There are less obvious encodings of viewpoint. Consider the difference between (20), (21), (22), and (23):

- (20) The village is on the north side of the hill.
- (21) The village is on the other side of the hill.
- (22) The village is over the hill.
- (23) The village is round the other side of the hill.

It is easy to envisage a situation in which all four sentences give the same information. But they differ in respect of implicit viewpoint: (20) gives what might be called a viewpoint-free description of the position of the village; (21) requires knowledge of a reference point to be interpretable (other side from

what?); (22) and (23) adopt (and encode) different viewpoints, but are similar in that they take the viewpoint of someone travelling to the village from the speaker's location, in the case of (22) a journey straight over the hill, in the case of (23) a less strenuous journey round the hill.

3.3.2 Relative dimensions

Under the next three headings, we shall look at parameters which relate not so much to complete meanings, but to semantic features which form part of a complete lexical sense. (The notion of decomposing meanings into features or components is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 13. Here we take a fairly naive view.)

3.3.2.1 Necessity and expectedness

The first parameter is necessity. The simple view of this parameter is to make a sharp dichotomy between necessary and contingent logical relationships, and use entailment to determine whether or not a feature is necessary. On the basis of the following we could say that "being an animal" is a necessary feature of *dog*, whereas "ability to bark" is not:

- (24) *X is a dog* entails *X is an animal*.
X is a dog does not entail *X can bark*.

As a first step towards moving away from a simple dichotomy, I would like to try to undermine the reader's confidence in the notion of entailment. How confident are we in our ability to say definitively whether some sentence A entails another sentence B? Consider the following putative entailments:

- (25) *X stopped singing* ?entails? *X did not continue singing*.
 (26) *X is a cat* ?entails? *X is an animal*.
 (27) *X is pregnant* ?entails? *X is female*.
 (28) *X is a physical object* ?entails? *X has weight*.
 (29) *X is a quadruped* ?entails? *X has 4 legs*.
 (30) *X is Y's wife* ?entails? *X is not Y's daughter*.

Presumably most speakers will have the greatest confidence in the entailment in (25): this seems to depend not on the structure of the world as we know it, but purely on the meanings of *stop* and *continue*, there is no conceivable world or universe in which the words mean what they mean in current English and this entailment does not hold. In (26)-(30), however, the solidity of the entailment is less certain.

Take (26), first. The well-known 'robot cat' argument is relevant here. It goes something like this. Suppose one day it was discovered that cats were not animals, as everyone has always thought, but highly sophisticated self-replicating robots. Other supposed animals retained their biological status.

Under such circumstances, would we be more ready to respond to the information with (31) or (32)?

(31) Aha! So there are no such things as cats, after all!

(32) Aha! So cats are not what we thought they were!

The vast majority of ordinary speakers unhesitatingly opt for (32), which at the very least suggests that animalhood is not a necessary criterion for cat-hood, since speakers are inclined to retain the name *cat*, but change their ideas about the referents.

This interpretation is strengthened by contrast with cases where speakers are not so accommodating. Suppose that it was discovered that there were no male horses; what we had been used to think of as stallions, actually belonged to a different species, and foals were produced parthenogenetically. Under these circumstances, would we be more ready to exclaim (33) or (34)?

(33) Aha! So there are no such things as stallions!

(34) Aha! So stallions are not what we thought they were!

This time, a majority of speakers is happier with (33), although less overwhelmingly than in the previous case, from which it appears that maleness and equinity are criterial to stallionhood (or, strictly, at least one of them is). It seems there are two different types of word, one with **referential stability** in the face of radical changes in the nature of the conceptual category, and the other without such stability. The first type are known as **natural kind terms**, and the latter, as **nominal kind terms**.

In the case of sentence (27) above, the argument against entailment is slightly different. Lyons points out that according to certain authorities, the biotechnology exists to implant a fertilized embryo into the body of a man, in such a way as to allow it to develop, and ultimately, be born. Would we be prepared to apply the term *pregnant* to such a man? (Most people are so prepared, even if reluctantly.) If so, the relationship in (27) is contingent on the way our world usually is—it is not a logical relationship.

People are less sure about examples like (28), which involve scientific truths of some fundamentality. Is it conceivable that the fundamental laws of physics might have been different? When faced with such a notion, the majority of people concede that they could, thus destroying the logical necessity of the relation.

Example (29) involves a different point. If a cat loses a leg in an accident, does it cease to be a quadruped? The majority view is that it does not, which is slightly disturbing in that “having four legs” is obviously part of the *definition* of a quadruped. However, the matter is fairly easily resolved (but it leaves the entailment in (29) in tatters): what the definition defines is not *any* quadruped, but a *well-formed* quadruped.

Example (30) is slightly dubious. In one sense it is not a logical relationship, but one contingent on particular social rules, which could well be different in

different societies. On the other hand, the relation arises from a legal definition (in one society). (One could perhaps say that for the logical relation to hold one would have to say:

(35) *X is Y's legal wife under English law entails X is not Y's daughter.*

Even then it is not certain that the relation is a logically watertight one. Suppose that neither X nor Y knew that X was Y's daughter, and they got married in good faith. Would it not be the case that X would be Y's legal wife unless and until it could be proved that she was his daughter?)

It seems clear that some of the relations illustrated in (26)-(30) are stronger than others, and that it would be more useful to recognize a scale of degrees of necessity. In fact we can go the whole hog and extend the scale to cover negative necessity, in other words, impossibility. A convenient and rough way of measuring degree of necessity is by means of the ftwr-test. It operates as follows:

- (36) It's a dog, but it's an animal, (tautology)
 It's a dog, but it's not an animal, (contradiction)
 ("is an animal" is a **necessary** feature of *dog*)
- (37) It's a dog, but it barks, (odd—tautology)
 It's a dog, but it doesn't bark, (normal)
 ("barks" is an **expected** feature of *dog*)
- (38) It's a dog, but it's brown, (odd)
 It's a dog, but it's not brown, (odd)
 ("brown" is a **possible** feature of *dog*).
- (39) It's a dog, but it sings, (normal description of an abnormal dog)
 It's a dog, but it doesn't sing, (odd—tautology)
 ("sings" is an **unexpected** feature of *dog*)
- (40) It's a dog, but it's a fish, (contradiction)
 It's a dog, but it's not a fish, (tautology)
 ("is a fish" is an **impossible** feature of *dog*)

Finer distinctions are possible (and worth while), especially in the upper reaches of the *expected* region of the scale of necessity. Lyons (1981) suggests **natural necessity** for expectations based on the nature of the physical universe, and **social necessity** for expectations based on human laws and social conventions. Cruse (1986) has **canonical necessity** for such cases as (29); this could conceivably be extended to include cases like (27), since a male pregnancy, although not a logical contradiction, would be some sort of aberration, that is, it would be non-canonical. Obviously if the process became more common, "female" would fall down the necessity scale to being a merely *expected* feature of *pregnant*.

33.2.2 Sufficiency

Sufficiency is a kind of converse of necessity. We normally speak of the **joint sufficiency** of a set of features (for instance, the features [MALE] and [HORSE] are jointly sufficient to guarantee that anything possessing them is a stallion). We may interpret the notion as it applies to a single feature in terms of **diagnosticity**, an obviously gradable notion. For instance, the feature [BREATHES] is not very diagnostic for BIRD, since many other creatures breathe. The feature [TWO LEGGED] is much better, but applies also to humans. A maximally diagnostic feature for BIRD is [FEATHERED], since no other creature has feathers. Notice that all of these have the same degree of necessity (i.e. canonical). The W-test can be made to give results for diagnosticity comparable to those for necessity. Thus [CANONICALLY FOUR LEGGED] is what might be called **logically diagnostic** for *quadruped*, since *X canonically has four legs, but it's a quadruped* is a tautology and *X canonically has four legs but it isn't a quadruped* is a contradiction.

[CANONICALLY FEATHERED] comes out as **naturally diagnostic** in that while there are no known creatures with feathers other than birds (i.e., that is a feature of the world as we know it), the idea of, say, a feathered mammal is not a logical contradiction (cf. Angela Carter's (1984) *Nights at the Circus*), so, *X has feathers but it's a bird* is an odd use of *but*, whereas *X has feathers but it isn't a bird* is normal.

33.2.3 Saliency

Things which are salient stand out from their background in some way, and have a superior power of commanding attention. This property may be shown by one linguistic element *vis-à-vis* other elements in a larger expression, or by one feature of the meaning of a word *vis-à-vis* other features of the same word. I would like to distinguish two types of saliency (without, however, wishing to deny their interrelationships).

One way of interpreting the notion of saliency is in terms of the ease of access of information. Obviously, features which are easy to get at are going to play a larger role in semantic processing in real time than those which are harder to get at. Certainly, many of the so-called prototype effects observable between items and categories seem to depend on ease of access, and it would be reasonable to expect the same to be true of features. When people are asked to list the characteristics of some entity, under time pressure, there is a strong tendency for certain features to be mentioned early in everyone's lists. This is presumably because they are the easiest features to access.

A type of saliency which is at least partly different from simple ease of access is degree of foregrounding or backgrounding. One reason for thinking it is different from simple ease of access is that it can be manipulated by speakers. This is most usually discussed in dichotomous terms as the **figure-ground effect**. For many purposes, this may be adequate, but I prefer to think in terms of continuously variable foregrounding vs. backgrounding. The effect

can be very easily illustrated by one use of verb aspect in English: the continuous aspect is regularly used to indicate a background against which information signalled by a simple tense verb is highlighted. Thus, in (41), the highlighted part of the message is “John watched the programme”, which is presented against the background of another activity of John’s, whereas in (42), the prominence relations are reversed:

(41) John watched the programme while he was having supper.

(42) John had his supper while he was watching the programme.

There are various syntactic devices which have the function of highlighting/backgrounding information. For instance, in (43) the spotlight is thrown back on to what was backgrounded in (41), without changing the aspect of the verbs:

(43) It was while he was having supper that John watched the programme.

One of the symptoms of backgrounding is that backgrounded information is not in the scope of, for instance, negation or questioning. In (44) and (45), for instance, the fact that John watched the programme is not questioned or negated, but is taken for granted, assumed by the speaker to be known as a fact to the hearer, or, as the technical term has it, **presupposed**:

(44) Was it while he was having supper that John watched the programme?

(45) It wasn’t while he was having supper that John watched the programme.

Differences of relative prominence can also be observed within a simple sentence. Consider the difference between *John resembles Bill* and *John is taller than Bill*, and between *Bill resembles John* and *Bill is shorter than John*. The sentences in each pair may be mutually entailing, but they do not mean the same thing. In each one, the less prominent direct object is presented as a kind of standard against which the more prominent subject is assessed.

Less obviously, there can be prominence differences in the features of the meaning of a single word. For instance, (*a*) *blonde*, *woman*, and *actor* all designate human beings, and this is part of their meaning, but it is backgrounded; what they highlight, respectively, is hair colour, sex, and profession. Hence, if some one says *It wasn’t a blonde that I saw*, the likeliest interpretation is that both [HUMAN BEING] and [FEMALE] are outside the scope of the negative, and only [FAIR-HAIRED] is being negated.

3.4 Non-descriptive dimensions

3.4.1 Expressive meaning

Consider the difference between (46) and (47):

(46) Gosh!

(47) I am surprised.

Sentence (46) is subjective, and does not present a conceptual category to the hearer: it **expresses** an emotional state in much the same way as a cat's purr or a baby's cry. Its validity is restricted to the current state of the speaker: it cannot be put into the past tense. No proposition is expressed: the hearer cannot reply *Are you?* or *That's a lie!* (which are perfectly possible responses to (47)). Sentence (46) is also **prosodically gradable**, in that greater surprise is expressed by both greater volume and greater pitch range. By contrast, (47) expresses a proposition, which can be questioned or denied, and can be expressed equally well by someone else or at a different place or time: *You are surprised* (said by hearer); *He was surprised* (said at a later time). It offers conceptual categories (CURRENT SPEAKER, SURPRISED), under which a given state of affairs can be subsumed. In a sense, of course, (46) and (47) 'mean the same thing', which suggests that the difference between descriptive and expressive meaning is a matter not of semantic quality (area of semantic space), but of mode of signification.

Some words possess only expressive and no descriptive meaning and to these we can assign the term **expletives**:

(48) It's freezing—shut the *bloody* window!

(49) Oh, *help!* *Wow!* *Oops!* *Ouch!*

Notice that expressive meaning does not contribute to propositional content, so the action requested in (48) would not change if *bloody* were omitted: a bloody window (in this sense) is not a special kind of window.

Some words have both descriptive and expressive meaning:

(50) It was *damn* cold. (cf. *extremely*, which has only descriptive meaning)

(51) Stop *blubbing*, (cf. *crying*)

Questions and negatives only operate on the descriptive meaning in such sentences, so, for instance *It wasn't all that cold* in reply to (50) would deny the degree of cold indicated, but would not call into question the speaker's expressed feelings. **Evaluative** meaning has a variable status: sometimes it seems to be propositional:

(52) A: Don't read that—it's a rag.

B: No, it isn't, it's a jolly good paper.

There is no doubt that *rag* expresses contempt for the newspaper in question, but B's reply is not at all odd, which suggests that there is also an element of objective conceptualization. In the set *horse*, *nag*, *steed*, my intuitions are that the difference between *horse* and *steed* is purely expressive (you can't say: *?It's not a steed, it's just a horse*), but the difference between *horse* and *nag* is propositional/descriptive.

The expressive words we have considered so far cannot be used unexpressively. However, some words seem to be potentially, but not necessarily

expressive. With one type of such words, the expressivity appears only when appropriate intonation and stress are added:

(53) *still, yet, already*

Does she still live in Manchester?

Has the postman been yet?

The railway station had already been closed when we came to live here.

These sentences all seem to be expressively neutral, but feeling can be added prosodically:

(54) Are you *still* here?

Surely she hasn't gone *already*!

You mean you haven't done it *yet*!

What in Chapter 9 are called *implicit superlatives* (such as *huge, tiny, beautiful, brilliant*) are expressively neutral if not stressed, but seem to be able to acquire an expressive element if stressed. They contrast remarkably in this respect with their non-superlative counterparts:

(55) It was absolutely *huge*.

?It was absolutely *large*.

(56) It was absolutely *tiny*.

?It was absolutely *small*.

Out of a set of near-synonyms, it sometimes happens that some but not others can be expressively stressed:

(57) *baby* vs. *infant, child, neonate*

Mother and baby are doing well.

Oh, look! It's a *baby*! Isn't he lovely?

?Oh, look! It's a *child!infant Ineonate*! Isn't he lovely?

Some words (called in Cruse 1986 **expressive amplifiers**) can be used with neutral expression, but can also pick up and amplify any expressiveness in their context without needing any prosodic assistance and in this respect they often contrast with synonyms (which frequently are Latinate). For instance, there is little or no difference between (58) and (59), whereas there is a more palpable difference between (60) and (61):

(58) I want you to go on with the treatment for a few more weeks.

(59) I want you to continue with the treatment for a few more weeks.

(60) They went on banging on the wall for ages.

(61) They continued banging on the wall for ages.

3.4.2 Dialect and register allegiance: evoked meaning

Put briefly (and simplistically), dialectal variation is variation in language use according to speaker, and register variation is variation within the speech of a

single community according to situation. Usages characteristic of a particular dialect or register have the power of evoking their home contexts, and in the case of register variants, of actually creating a situation. Such associations, which have no propositional content, are called **evoked meaning** in Cruse (1986). Evoked meaning may be very powerful. It would be almost unthinkable for publicity material for tourism in Scotland to refer to the geographical features through which rivers run as *valleys*, although that is precisely what they are: the Scottish dialect word *glen* is *de rigueur*, because of its rich evoked meaning.

Three main types of dialect can be distinguished: geographical, temporal, and social. The first type is self-explanatory; dialects of the second type vary according to the age of the speaker (who now speaks of the *wireless*, even though modem radios have far fewer wires than their forebears?); the third type vary according to the social class of the speaker.

A well-known division of **register** is into **field**, **mode**, and **style**. **Field** refers to the area of discourse: specialists in a particular field often employ technical vocabulary to refer to things which have everyday names. For instance, doctors, when talking to other doctors, will speak of a *pyrexia*, which in ordinary language would be called a *fever*, or just a *temperature*. Of course, the apparent sameness of meaning between an expert word and an everyday word is sometimes illusory, since the technical term may have a strict definition which makes it descriptively different from the everyday term. This is true, for instance, of our use of the term *utterance* in the last chapter, which can scarcely occur in everyday language without sounding pompous; its closest correspondent in ordinary language would probably be *what X said*, which is much more loosely defined.

Mode refers to the difference between language characteristic of different channels, such as spoken, written, in the old days, telegraphic, and perhaps nowadays, e-mail. For instance, *further to* is more or less exclusive to written language, whereas *like* (as in *I asked him, like, where he was going*) is definitely spoken. (Problems with the taxonomy show up in the fact that *further to* is probably also characteristic of business correspondence—a matter of *field*—and *like* is definitely informal, and is at least partly also a matter of the next sub-dimension, **style**.)

Style is a matter of the formality/informality of an utterance. So, for instance, *pass away* belongs to a higher (more formal) register than, say, *die*, and *kick the bucket* belongs to a lower register. But things are more complicated than that. Take the sexual domain. Looking at descriptively equivalent expressions, *have intercourse with* is relatively formal, *have sex with/go to bed with/sleep with* are fairly neutral, but while *bonk*, *do it with* and *fuck* are all informal, there are significant differences between them. *Did you do it with her?* might be described as ‘neutral informal’; however, *bonk* is humorous, whereas *fuck*, *screw*, and *shag* are somehow aggressively obscene (although perhaps to different degrees). In the same humorous-informal category as *bonk*, we find *willie* (cf. *penis*), *boobs* (cf. *breasts*), and perhaps *pussy* (cf. *vagina*).

Discussion questions and exercises

i. Types of anomaly

Attempt to identify the types of anomaly present in the following, noting any difficulties:

- (i) Your misfortune is better than mine.
- (ii) What happened tomorrow was a bad disaster.
- (iii) Someone's coming! Quickly, conceal in the wardrobe!
- (iv) Dogs, on average, are heavier than bitches, but are easier to breed than cats.
- (v) Two of the mice in the front row weren't in tune.

2. Degree of necessity

Given the truth of *X is a cat*, assign a 'degree of necessity*' (e.g. logically necessary, canonically necessary, expected, possible, etc.) to the following:

- (i) X likes classical music.
- (ii) X has a tail.
- (iii) X catches mice.
- (iv) X divides by 2 without remainder.
- (v) X is visible (i.e. reflects light).
- (vi) X is not a dog.
- (vii) X is ginger and white.
- (viii) X has whiskers.

3. What are the presuppositions of the following?

- (i) Lesley is a lesbian.
- (ii) Lesley plays the clarinet brilliantly.
- (iii) Lesley will graduate next year.
- (iv) Lesley is sorry for all the trouble she has caused.
- (v) It was Lesley who wrote the letter.
- (vi) When Lesley was ill, Jane deputized for her on the committee.

4. On what dimension of descriptive meaning do the following differ?

- (i) a. The prisoner was killed.
b. The prisoner was murdered.
- (ii) a. The prisoner was murdered.
b. The prisoner was executed.
- (iii) a. The shirt was not clean.
b. The shirt was filthy.
- (iv) a. Lesley is a young woman.
b. Lesley is in her twenties.
- (v) a. We're coming up to the exams.
b. The exams will soon be here.

5. On what dimension(s) of non-descriptive meaning do the following differ?

- (i) a. Are you leaving?
b. You're not leaving, surely?
- (ii) a. He's been dismissed.
b. He's got the sack.
- (iii) a. He has a fractured humerus.
b. He has a broken arm.
- (iv) a. Get lost!
b. Please go away.

(The sentence pairs in question 3, chapter 2, can also be examined from this point of view.)

Suggestions for further reading

For syntactic versus semantic anomaly, see Cruse (1986: ch. 1); for types and degrees of semantic anomaly, see Cruse (1986: ch. 4.12).

Lyons's categorization of meaning into descriptive and non-descriptive types can be found in Lyons (1977: ch. 2.4). Also worth looking at for classifications of meaning types are Halliday (1970) and Leech (1974). The account given here largely follows Cruse (1986: ch. 12.2) (this section describes allowable differences between propositional synonyms).

Presupposition is just touched on in this chapter; Cruse (1992d) gives a fuller, but still introductory, survey of different theoretical approaches; a much more detailed account can be found in Levinson (1983: 11.4).

Langacker (1991: ch. 1) discusses a variety of dimensions along which meaning can vary; see also Cruse (forthcoming c) for dimensions of descriptive meaning.