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Metaphorical and cultural
aspects of semantic structure

EVE E. SWEETSER

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FROM ETYMOLOGY TO PRAGMATICS

*Metaphorical and cultural aspects
of semantic structure*

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In reconstruction we must deal both with forms and with functions. To reconstruct forms alone, without attention to their functional position, is first and foremost to create a hopelessly unrealistic linguistic situation.

Calvert Watkins, *Indo-European origins of the Celtic verb, vol I.*
The sigmatic aorist

Most of the older morphemic splits – *that* and *that*, *it* and *it*, etc. – were perpetrated on relatively defenseless grammatical morphemes, in order to accommodate some hypothesis about syntax ... But with the advent of generative semantics, other parts of the lexicon have been exposed to attack.

Dwight Bolinger, *Meaning and form*

In our understanding of language in general, there seems to be a schema for lexicalization the sense of which is that the act of lexicalizing something is the act of presenting it as an established category of human thought. If a lexical item exists, in other words, it must exist as some part of a frame and must correspond to some part of a schema.

Charles Fillmore, *Topics in lexical semantics*

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Preface

This book owes an immense and obvious debt to the Berkeley linguistic community. The largest debt of all is to my thesis committee: Charles Fillmore, George Lakoff, and Paul Kay. As advisors, and since then as colleagues, they have constantly added to my understanding of language, and have also been frequent sources of moral support and constructive criticism. Among my other teachers at Berkeley, James Matisoff first developed my interest in historical semantics, and Yakov Malkiel and Johanna Nichols gave much insightful commentary on earlier versions of this work. I would also like to thank Elizabeth Closs Traugott for her encouragement, criticism, and the inspiration provided by her work.

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Nancy Wiegand, Vassiliki Nikiforidou, as my student and office-mate, has been a source of many invaluable insights; and Jane Espenson and Michele Emanatian have both contributed thoughtful commentary. Claudia Brugman and George Lakoff have been kind and astute critics of both content and style, through all the chapters and at all stages of revision: I am deeply grateful to them for this, and even more grateful for their own illuminating work. And Orin Gensler has been inextricably involved in many aspects of this work, as friend, linguistic colleague, stylistic consultant, source of Hebrew data, informant for a useful example, and long-suffering on-line editor of an earlier version.

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Abbreviations

Br.	Breton
Cl.	Classical
Dan.	Danish
Eng.	English
Fr.	French
Ger.	German
Gk	Greek
Goth.	Gothic
IE	Indo-European
Ir.	Irish
It.	Italian
Lat.	Latin
LGer.	Low German
lit.	literally
MIr.	Middle Irish
Mod.	Modern
NE	New English
OE	Old English
OFr.	Old French
OHG	Old High German
perf.	perfect
Rus.	Russian
Skt	Sanskrit
Sp.	Spanish
Wel.	Welsh

1 Introduction

Language is systematically grounded in human cognition, and cognitive linguistics seeks to show exactly how. The conceptual system that emerges from everyday human experience has been shown in recent research to be the basis for natural-language semantics in a wide range of areas.¹ This study will make use of such a cognitive approach to meaning, and show that it can account in a unified fashion for facts in three diverse areas: polysemy; lexical semantic change; and pragmatic ambiguity. All of these areas have in common the fact that they involve one form being used for more than one function. In semantic change, a form historically acquires a new function to replace or augment its old ones; a question which necessarily arises here is what relates the new sense to already extant senses – are there regularities to be observed about the addition of new senses to words, or the loss of older senses? In the case of polysemy (the synchronic linking of multiple related senses to a single form) a parallel question arises: what can we say about the possible groupings of senses to be observed in polysemous words or morphemes – what, for example, differentiates them from the cases of unrelated meanings which share a form (cases which are termed *homonymy* rather than *polysemy*)?² In the case of pragmatic ambiguity, a form's basic semantic function is extended pragmatically to cover other referents or meanings: for example, we might say this is the case with a phrase like “How are you?”, which arguably retains its original sense as an inquiry about wellbeing, but is also conventionally situationally *interpreted* as a greeting or opener for an encounter. The question in all cases is whether there are regularities to be observed about such mappings of form to multiple functions. I shall be claiming that there are, and that the regularities cannot be appropriately captured within an objectivist semantic theory, wherein meaning is thought of as basically a relationship between word and world – i.e., between a linguistic form and an object or state of affairs referred to or described by that form. However, the observed regularities are natural

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and readily motivated within a cognitively based theory which takes not the objective “real world,” but human perception and understanding of the world to be the basis for the structure of human language.

I shall not primarily be discussing or arguing against specific formal-semantic analyses of polysemy or of meaning change. This may seem surprising to some readers, but it is largely the case that semantic work within the formal-semantic tradition has neglected the study of individual morphemes’ meanings in favor of examination of the compositional-semantic structure of larger phrasal and sentential units. Earlier generative work concentrated on the extraction of relevant dimensions of a word’s meaning (sometimes called “semantic features”) with a view to the observation of what structural contrasts are represented by the vocabulary of a given language (see section 1.1). This approach did not focus on a full, rich understanding of lexical meaning *per se*, but on economical representation of the relevant contrasts. More recently, lexical meaning has been studied largely in the context of compositionality: for example, Dowty (1979), expanding on Vendler (1967), analyzes certain dimensions of the meaning of verb roots, and thereby succeeds in giving a motivated account of the different combinatorial possibilities of the verbs in question. There has also been significant interest in the combinatorial semantics of negation, quantifiers, and adverbs; again, the focus has been on the ways in which syntactic structure affects the relationship of these morphemes to compositional sentence-semantics,³ rather than on the description of full, rich lexical semantics.⁴ Part of the reason for this is probably that the researchers in question expected to find the interesting regularities in the area of compositional sentence-semantics or in the contrasts between word meanings, rather than in the structured interrelationships between senses or uses of a single morpheme.

Generative grammar has rigidly separated synchronic semantic structure from historical change: most formal-semantic analyses to date have thus treated meaning change as inherently irrelevant to analysis of the synchronic system (the latter being the relevant object of study). (Although some of the same attitude once prevailed in structuralist phonology, generative phonology has been more conscious of the need to deal with diachrony than has formal semantics: Kiparsky (1968) is a classic example.) Further, even in a synchronic context, there has, to my knowledge, been little or no attempt in generative grammar to give a principled explanation of polysemy structure. This is particularly odd in view of the fact that Katz and Fodor’s original (1963) layout of a plan for

feature-semantic analysis of lexical meaning included as a salient example an analysis of the relationship between the different senses of the polysemous word *bachelor* (e.g., “unmarried adult male human, holder of BA degree, junior knight serving another knight ...”). Bolinger’s (1965) critique of Katz and Fodor makes it clear that their analysis of *bachelor* has little systematic motivation for its choice of features and their hierarchy, and therefore elucidates little except the authors’ intuitions about how the senses might be related. Avoiding the difficulties of motivating one polysemy analysis rather than another, objectivist semantic-feature analyses within this framework have unhesitatingly posited separate lexical items to account for variation in a word’s syntactic or semantic behavior, tacitly assuming that these (homonymous?) entities were no more closely connected than if their phonological representations had been unrelated.⁵ Such analysts presumably trust that it will be possible to describe and explain meaning-changes or polysemy relations in any successful semantic theory; but the theory is nonetheless constructed without reference to diachrony or polysemy. Although few practicing etymologists would agree that these two areas are unconnected with each other, or that they are unimportant to semantic theory (imagine a theory of phonology which made no systematic effort to deal with the relationship between allophones or to account for observed trends of sound change), nonetheless there exists no fully adequate account either of meaning change or of its relation to polysemy. Recent research in both areas suggests that such an account is best sought for in terms of human cognitive structure.

What we would like to have is a motivated account of the relationships between senses of a single morpheme or word, and of the relationships between historically earlier and later senses of a morpheme or word. By “motivated,” I mean an account which appeals to something beyond the linguist’s intuition that these senses are related, or that these two senses are more closely related than either is to a third sense. For example, it is possible to crosslinguistically examine meaning changes and to observe what senses frequently historically give rise to what later senses. We would then argue that there is reason to posit a close semantic and cognitive link between two senses if one is regularly a historical source for the other. Or we can examine the polysemy structures of languages, and see what groupings of meanings are regularly found. If a language has (as does English) a *systematic* use of the same vocabulary for root and epistemic modality, we may conclude that, within the language’s system, these two

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classes of senses are closely linked. In section 1.2 I will discuss some of the relatively recent research which has adopted this methodology, and has shown us that it is possible to give serious, well-motivated accounts of the interrelationships of meanings. First I would like to briefly address the question of the cognitive reality of these semantic structural claims.

It should not be a controversial claim that relationships between linguistic form and function reflect human conceptual structure and general principles of cognitive organization. It becomes controversial only in the context of a particular philosophical tradition's understanding of language. Traditional truth-conditional semantic analysis focuses on logical relations such as inference virtually to the exclusion of such linguistic concerns as why the same word might be used to mean very different things. If the meaning of a word or a sentence reduces to a set of conditions which must be met (in the objective real world) for that word to be applicable or for that sentence to be true, then obviously inference (e.g., if these conditions are met, what other conditions do I know must also be met?) is a fruitful area of research, while polysemy is a nearly impenetrable area simply by virtue of the fact that multiple senses of polysemous forms just don't seem to share objective truth-conditions. (For example, there are no necessary *objective* truth-conditions shared between the *see* in *I see the cat on the mat* and *I see what you mean* – the latter can be said equally felicitously by someone wearing a blindfold preventing physical visual perception.) By viewing meaning as the relationship between words and the world, truth-conditional semantics eliminates cognitive organization from the linguistic system. And to a philosopher concerned with abstract truth, the important question is indeed perhaps whether the sort of thing we call “snow” has the color we call “white” in the real world (hence the sentence “Snow is white” will be true rather than false). For the truth of “Snow is white,” it may not seem to matter much whether “real world” means an objective world independent of human experience, or an experienced world where *snow* and *white* refer to our experiential classes of objects and colors: in either case, most people are likely to agree on the truth value of the sentence.

But suppose that, instead of *white*, I take Latin *candidus* as my sample word. *Candidus* meant, among other things, “white” and “bright”; but it also meant “open, honest” – as in its English descendent, *candid*. But it seems unlikely that there is any objective correlation in the real world between white things and honest things, or any larger objectively chosen category which includes just these and no others. The “real world,” if we

mean one which is outside of human cognitive organization, is not so constructed as to group the white with the honest. Rather, it is our cognitive structuring of the world which can create such an identification. And if language uses a word for our cognitive category, then language cannot be described in terms of pure fit between Word and World: unless, by World, we mean our experiential picture of the world.

The choice of which words express which concepts is arbitrary from a truth-conditional point of view. The so-called "arbitrariness of the sign" is a point on which structural linguistics in the Saussurean tradition converges with logical semantics in the Fregean tradition. If all uses of signs are taken as arbitrary, then multiple uses of the same sign must also be seen as arbitrary, and so the relationships between them might be assumed to be uninteresting. Saussure, who was interested in polysemy and in meaning-change, would not himself have taken this simplistic a view. However, it was probably necessary to firmly establish the arbitrary nature of linguistic convention, in order to liberate linguistics from futile attempts to see onomatopoeia at the root of all linguistic usage. We should now be ready to go back to the examination of iconicity and other motivating factors in the choice of linguistic forms, without any danger of losing our understanding of conventionality.

Saussure (1959 [1915]) was right, of course, that there is an essential arbitrary component in the association of words with what they mean. For example, in *I see the tree*, it is an arbitrary fact that the sequence of sounds which we spell *see* (as opposed to the sound sequence spelled *voir* in French) is used in English to refer to vision. But, *given this arbitrary fact*, it is by no means arbitrary that *see* can also mean "know" or "understand," as in *I see what you're getting at*. There is a very good reason why *see* rather than, say, *kick* or *sit*, or some other sensory verb such as *smell*, is used to express knowledge and understanding. Such motivated relationships between word meanings are as much a part of the study of semantics as inference. But the fact that *see* can also mean "know" has little to do with truth conditions; in any objective truth-conditional understanding of vision and knowledge, seeing is accomplished by visual neural response to physical data, while knowing (whatever it may be) has no particular dependence on the visual modality. One sees objects and events; one knows propositions, and not always because of past visual input.

Why then is *see* (as opposed to *kick* or *feel* or *smell*) used to mean knowledge? We are intuitively certain that the choice is not random, that