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HOW MUCH TIRED ARE YOU?
APPROACHES TO VOCABULARY COMPREHENSION

This paper presents one radically semantic and one radically pragmatic approach to vocabulary comprehension. As a means of illustrating the workings of the respective approaches – the Natural Semantic Metalanguage and Relevance Theory – one lexical field has been selected for analysis.

The aim is to provide an objective assessment of the different approaches to lexical meaning in use by encouraging the reader to derive his/her own implications regarding potential merits and demerits of the theories. Most of all, the reader is prompted to engage in the contemporary discussion of the semantics/pragmatics interface, especially at the level of lexis, by understanding the rationale behind the two extreme positions.

Key words: Natural Semantic Metalanguage, Relevance Theory, vocabulary comprehension, *tiredness*

1. INTRODUCTION

The paper discusses two opposing views of the subject of vocabulary comprehension: one radically semantic and the other radically pragmatic.

The view of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage is radically semantic because it explains all meaning in terms of a small set of concepts, the so-called "semantic primitives/primes", which have painstakingly been ascertained in a vast number of languages, and are, therefore, considered to be the universal machinery deployed in vocabulary comprehension. The main advantage of this approach lies in descriptive representations of meaning of culturally specific concepts (which may be lexicalised, grammaticalised or non-existent in particular languages).[2]

The relevance-theoretic view rests on the assumption that humans are cognitively able to use the linguistically encoded meaning of a word as a starting point in inferential comprehension of the use of that word on a particular occasion of the speaker's utterance. The lexical-pragmatic process

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2 Although this paper does not take sides in the presented radically semantic vs. radically pragmatic debate on understanding lexical meaning, a passing remark might be in order. NSM explications (cf. examples (1)-(8)) conflate encoded and inferred meaning. From the perspective of the traditional speech-act approach to meaning (see Austin 1962), for instance, locution, illocution and perlocution are all subsumed under the rubric of semantics. This, in turn, obfuscates the distinction between word meaning and word use, which is crucial in the radically pragmatic approach advocated by Relevance Theory.

is constrained by a powerful pragmatic principle – the addressee's search for the optimal relevance of the speaker's utterance. The main advantage of this approach is generality and flexibility because the same descriptive and explanatory machinery is used to account for various aspects of modulated meaning in use.

The paper is organised around the following sections: section 2 gives a brief overview of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage and provides a semantic analysis of the synonyms encoding the concept TIREDNESS; section 3 introduces the relevance-theoretic postulates which govern a pragmatic analysis of the word *tired* as the central member of the selected lexical field; the final section summarises the main points of this paper.

2. GOING RADICALLY SEMANTIC

2.1. The Natural Semantic Metalanguage

The Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) has a twofold aim: to provide a coherent semantic theory and a rigorous semantic methodology. Partly as a response to the failures of generative and formal semantics and partly in opposition to some radically pragmatic trends in linguistics, NSM has posited the existence of innate and universal lexicon and syntax of human thoughts – *lingua mentalis* as the shared lexical and grammatical core of all natural languages (Wierzbicka 1996).

According to this approach, cross-cultural communication provides strong evidence for the assumption that fundamental concepts are innate. The basic goal is then formulated as search for universal semantic primitives which would represent culture-specific configurations of various semantic systems embodied in different languages. The underlying hypothesis is that meanings are determinate and that they can be described in terms of discrete semantic features:

> To find the truth about the meaning of a word means to find the invariant concept which is part of the native speakers' tacit knowledge about their language and which guides them in their use of that word […] "[M]eaning" has to do with the constant, not with the variable, aspects of a word's use.
>
> (Wierzbicka 1996: 264, 297)

To that purpose NSM has developed a specific notational system which is based on natural language: a "small" set of "truly indispensable and truly universal" semantic primitives (Wierzbicka 1996: 111).

The following example illustrates an NSM representation of the meaning of the adjective *courageous* (Wierzbicka 1996: 241):

(1) X is courageous. =
     X can do very good things when other people can't
     because when other people think something like this:
         I don't want bad things to happen to me

X thinks something like this:
    it is good if I do this
    it is bad if I don't do it
    I want to do it because of this
  this is good

The NSM explication in (1) is based on the semantic primitives and the rules for their combination. The formula is conceived of as a unit consisting of clauses and sentences: the parts in separate lines count as distinct semantic components and the groups of components which are identically indented are the subcomponents.[3]

2.2. *Case study:* tiredness

In this section I discuss some implications of the NSM approach to vocabulary comprehension by examining the lexical field around the concept TIREDNESS. The central member is taken to be the word *tired* while the selected synonymous expressions include the words *fatigued*, *exhausted*, *weary*, *overworked* and *dead beat*. All the expressions refer to a specific physical or mental state which may be described with the evaluator BAD, the metapredicate CAN, the action and event predicates DO and HAPPEN and the mental predicates FEEL, KNOW, WANT and THINK. The expressions are similar in that they involve references to something "bad", "happening now", to "diswant", and involve personal states of being (and therefore of emotions) that result from some prior "doing". But they also differ in certain points.

The NSM explications (3)-(8) are approximations which aim at capturing these similarities and differences. They reflect the basic semantic structure (2) of emotion concepts (Wierzbicka 1996: 182):

(2)   X feels something
    sometimes a person thinks something like this:

      .   .   .   .
      .   .   .   .
      .   .   .   .

    because of this, this person feels something
    X feels something like this

(3)   *Tired* (e.g. X is tired / X feels tired)
    X feels something
  sometimes a person thinks something like this:
    I did something before now
    because of this, something is happening to me
    I don't want this

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3 NSM proponents, however, need not adhere to strict observance of the syntactic rules "as long as all the departures from the NSM rules can be regarded as convenient abbreviations, that is, as long as we have a clear idea of how the 'ungrammatical' or 'semi-grammatical' segments of the explications could be replaced with fully 'grammatical' ones" (Wierzbicka 1996: 113).

    I know: I don't want to do more of this thing
        I don't want to do more of all things
    I know: I don't want to think more
    I can say this to people
because of this, this person feels something
X feels something like this

(4)   *Fatigued* (e.g. X is fatigued / X feels fatigued)
    X feels something
    sometimes a person thinks something like this:
       I did something before now
       because of this, something is happening to me
       I don't want this
       (sometimes people think: maybe this is good)
       I know: I can't do more
       I know: I can't think more
       I can say this to people
    because of this, this person feels something
    X feels something like this

(5)   *Exhausted* (e.g. X is exhausted / X feels exhausted)
    X feels something
    sometimes a person thinks something like this:
       I did something before now
       because of this, something bad is happening to me
       if I didn't know that it happened
         I would say: I don't want it to happen
       I don't say this now
       because I know: I can't do anything
       I know: I can't do more
       I know: I can't think more
       I can say this to people
    because of this, this person feels something
    X feels something like this

(6)   *Weary* (e.g. X is weary / X feels weary)
    X feels something
    sometimes a person thinks something like this:
       I did something for a long time before now
       because of this, something bad happened to me for a long time now
       I don't want this
       I know: if I could I would not want to do this
       I know: I can't do more
       I say: I don't want to do more of this thing
       I can say this to people
    because of this, this person feels something
    X feels something like this

(7)   *Overworked* (e.g. X is overworked / X feels overworked)
        X feels something
        sometimes a person thinks something like this:
            I did the same thing for a long time before now
            because of this, something bad is happening to me
            I don't want this thing now
            I know: I can't do more of the same thing
            I can say this to people
        because of this, this person feels something
        X feels something like this

(8)   *Dead beat* (e.g. X is dead beat / X feels dead beat)
        X feels something
        sometimes a person thinks something like this:
            I did something before now
            because of this, something bad is happening to me
            if I didn't know that it happened
                I would say: I don't want it to happen
            I don't say this now
            because I know: I can't do anything
            I know: I can't do more
            I know: I can't think more
            I can say this to you
                because you and I are of the same kind
        because of this, this person feels something
        X feels something like this

All the words have as part of their meaning the component *I did something before now* except *weary* and *overworked*, which additionally have the part *for a long time* to account for the duration of the action. (The two words, however, differ in that with *overworked* it is the "sameness" of the action that is particularly salient.)

Exhausted and *dead beat* are identical in all other respects save for the respective components which relate to the addressee: *I can say this to people* (stylistically unmarked) vs. *I can say this to you* (stylistically marked, i.e. informal).

Tired and *fatigued* crucially differ in one point: *don't want* vs. *can't*. Moreover, it is only with *tired* that the *don't want* part is posited in the KNOW component to account for the difference in degree – all the other explications convey that the strength is used up. In this respect, however, *overworked* differs because it combines the degree with the sameness of the action. A different type of "sameness" is also reflected in the explication of *weary*, namely, in the component *I say: I don't want to do more of this thing* to account for the meaning stylistically conveyed with the construction *weary + prepositional phrase* (e.g. *weary of struggling with life*) where the condition, although related to the action, does not convey the ability sense (i.e. 'not being able to'); hence, the *don't want* part. (Likewise, the subcomponent *I don't want to do more*

of this thing is postulated for *tired*.) Finally, the most similar expressions *exhausted* and *dead beat* additionally have as part of their meaning 'as if not alive', which is captured in the subcomponent *I can't do anything* (i.e. the degree of tiredness is at its highest so that a person feels helpless, or without any intentional resources to rely on).

Although the primitive THINK figures in all the explications given for this lexical field as part of the general, basic, semantic structure of emotion words, it has been intentionally left out from the explications of *weary* and *overworked* in the KNOW component to highlight the prominence of the "doing" concept as opposed to that of "thinking". *Exhausted*, *weary, overworked* and *dead beat* are further distinguished by the primitive BAD, which relates to the (highest) degree of the explicated state, within the temporal part: *exhausted*, *overworked* and *dead beat* suggest the present time whereas with *weary* it is the protracted period (starting in the past and continuing into the present) that is especially significant.

The fact that concepts may differently be embodied in languages (e.g. some may not be lexicalised or grammaticalised while with some the boundaries may overlap) has important repercussions for vocabulary acquisition and comprehension. This section has briefly examined the concept of tiredness which is, in English, lexically encoded by various expressions (some of which have been subjected to the analysis above). The aim was to illustrate the essence of the NSM approach to meaning and the potential of the theory for vocabulary comprehension. The same aim is maintained in the next section, which illustrates an opposing approach to vocabulary comprehension – the cognitive-pragmatic framework of relevance theory.

3. GOING RADICALLY PRAGMATIC

3.1. Relevance Theory

Relevance Theory (RT) does not provide any "practical tool" (like an NSM explication) which might demonstrate how lexical and grammatical items can be represented to facilitate cross-cultural comparisons and understanding of concepts, either for theoretic or applied purposes.[4] Nevertheless, RT has provided a potentially powerful descriptive and explanatory account of meaning interpretation. In terms of vocabulary acquisition and comprehension, it standardly goes under the rubric of *lexical pragmatics* (see Carston 2002 and Wilson 2003).

A radically pragmatic approach to meaning advocated by RT is captured in the linguistic semantic (as opposed to truth-conditional semantic) underdeterminacy hypothesis: the linguistic parser yields a sparse conceptual

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4 Provided that grammatical expressions of meaning do represent "concepts", which, arguably, may not be the case (see Blakemore 1987 for an introduction to the distinction between conceptual vs. procedural meaning, which was later expanded in the vast relevance-theoretic literature).

representation; viz. the output of linguistic decoding is a skeletal, non-propositional, logical form which has to be pragmatically enriched to yield a fully developed (i.e. truth-evaluable) propositional form that the speaker intends to get across to his/her audience.[5]

According to RT, the division of work between semantics (decoding) and pragmatics (inference) is conceived of as a distinction between linguistically encoded and further, communicated meaning, such that pragmatic inference is a crucial, automatic, response to the addressee's reception of an ostensive (i.e. speaker-meant) stimulus (linguistic and non-linguistic alike).[6] In a nutshell, the addressee is guided by the presumption that the speaker's utterance is worth his/her attention (i.e. the incurred mental processing effort[7]) and that it is, moreover, the most relevant one (considering the speaker's abilities and preferences). The addressee's interpretive heuristics proceeds from the most accessible interpretive hypotheses (relative to his/her personal experience and a particular contextual environment) so as to achieve adequate cognitive effects that the speaker's utterance may bring about. The interpretive process is terminated once this has been accomplished (or is otherwise abandoned if no relevant interpretation can be reached).[8] Relevance, which is thus seen as a cognitive trade-off between the effort invested in the interpretation of an ostensive behavior (e.g. utterance) and the gain achieved thereof, decreases with the former and increases with the latter.[9]

3.2. *Case study:* tiredness

The semantic underdeterminacy hypothesis has been extended to apply at the level of lexis: literal, conceptually encoded, meaning is modulated in use. In other words, there is a gap between the concept (linguistically) encoded by a word and the concept which the speaker communicates by using that word. The communicated, speaker-meant, concept figures as a propositional constituent of the speaker's utterance. Guided by his/her search for optimal relevance and relying on the comprehension ("least-effort") strategy, the addressee is expected to mentally replace the literal concept with the communicated one. The default,

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5 The speaker's *communicated* proposition expressed by his/her utterance – *explicature* – serves as an input to further inferentially derived albeit *implicit* meaning of utterance comprehension (but see, for example, Bach (1994, 2006) and Burton-Roberts (2007) for certain controversies surrounding the issue of the semantics/pragmatics interface).
6 A radically pragmatic hypothesis that inference (vs. decoding) is fundamental in comprehension is succinctly portrayed in Carston's (2002) apt "cake metaphor": pragmatics as a richly-made cake and semantics as a coat of icing.
7 The addressee activates his/her short- and long-time memory. This is an individual factor that depends on the speaker's particular linguistic formulation.
8 *Positive cognitive effects* enhance the addressee's cognitive environment either by enabling him/her to reach the speaker-meant conclusion, or by strengthening some existing assumptions, or by detecting contradiction in some previous assumptions, which may lead to their elimination provided that the addressee accepts the veracity of the speaker's utterance.
9 This subpersonal principle is spelt out in both cognitive and communicative terms as maximal and optimal relevance, respectively (Sperber and Wilson 1986/95).

subconscious, lexical-pragmatic "task" that underlies this type of pragmatic inference, according to RT, is the process of *ad hoc concept construction* (see Carston 2002 for a detailed account of the process).

Modulated meaning-in-use can go in various directions: narrowing/ strengthening, broadening/loosening, a combination of narrowing and broadening or an attributive understanding of the concept encoded by an expression. In narrowing, part of the linguistically specified denotation is picked out so that the communicated, ad hoc, concept is understood as more specific than the encoded one.[10] In broadening, part of the linguistically specified denotation is dropped so that the communicated concept is understood as more general than the encoded one.[11] In contrast to the processes of pragmatic narrowing and broadening of lexical concepts, as instantiations of descriptive (i.e. truth-based) language use, an attributive use of a word to communicate a specific concept constructed on-line on a particular occasion of utterance falls within interpretive (i.e. resemblance-based) language use.[12]

The varieties of the cognitive-inferential process of ad hoc concept construction are unified in the research agenda of the RT-based lexical pragmatics: to explain the rationale behind this lexical-pragmatic process, to examine directions it may take and to determine its termination (given that utterance comprehension is an extremely fast (typically subconscious) cognitive endeavour). Using the concept of tiredness, as exemplified by the central member of the lexical field, in what follows I briefly present how the comprehension task is accomplished according to the relevance-theoretic approach.

Adjectival emotion concepts are semantic templates that necessitate further pragmatic enrichment to become conceptual representations in utterances. Their linguistically encoded meaning is schematic in so far as it enables access to larger, more specific, subparts regarding different kinds, degrees and qualities of emotion. In other words, their meaning undergoes the lexical-pragmatic process of narrowing.

The following example (modelled on Carston 2002: 327) serves as an illustration of narrowing linguistically specified meaning:

(9)   Lara: Shall we play chess after lunch?
       Yuri: I'm tired.
       [Yuri goes on to write a poem after lunch but Lara is not offended]

Lara's question creates an expectation of relevance that Yuri's utterance will provide an answer. The lexical concept TIRED serves as a starting point for

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10 Typically a relevant element from the encyclopaedic entry for the lexically encoded concept is elevated to the status of a defining property of the communicated concept.

11 Depending on the degree of departure from the encoded concept, the modulated meaning can be approximate, hyperbolic or metaphorical. Typically, a relevant defining property from the logical entry for the lexically encoded concept is being discarded.

12 The speaker uses a word to represent a concept which (s)he attributes to someone else (e.g. the addressee, a third person, people in general or him-/herself at a time other than utterance time). The speaker may echo the concept in an approving or distancing attitude (e.g. echoic allusion, irony and metalinguistic mentions). Furthermore, speakers may permanently store attributive concepts in their long-time memory (e.g. vogue and abstract words and words from various functional styles or jargon).

inferring a more specific communicated concept TIRED* which denotes the kind and degree of Yuri's state of tiredness; for instance, unable to engage in any complex computational activity, such as chess or bridge, but able, say, to write a poem as his usual way of relaxing. The concept constructed ad hoc may further be used to supply a relevant contextual premise which, together with Yuri's utterance, would warrant Lara's inferential derivation not only of the immediate implicated conclusion, but also of some other, equally strongly, communicated assumptions:

(10) Explicature: Yuri is tired*

Implicated premise: If Yuri is tired*, he will not want to play chess with Lara

Immediate implicated conclusion: Yuri does not want to play chess with Lara

Further implicated conclusion: Yuri does not want to play chess with Lara because he is tired*

Further implicated conclusion: Yuri will find some other entertainment to relax (e.g. write a poem)

Further implicated conclusion: Lara will have to find some other entertainment, solitary (e.g. read a book) or social (the one which would exclude Yuri)

The processing effort that Lara expends in understanding Yuri's answer as an indirect refusal of her request is counterbalanced by the cognitive effects she gains by the contextual conclusions, and this increases the relevance of his indirect response to her question.

In sum, the lexical-pragmatic process of narrowing linguistically specified meaning, exemplified above by the word *tired*, is triggered by the addressee's search for relevance. It follows an inferential path of the least cognitive effort in that the addressee selects the most accessible set of contextual premises, the most accessible narrowing of the encoded concepts and the most accessible contextual implications, which, on a particular occasion of the speaker's utterance, yield, for the addressee, an optimally relevant interpretation.[13] (This interpretation is, presumably, speaker-meant.[14]) The process is terminated when the addressee's expectations of the relevance of the speaker's utterance are satisfied.[15]

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13 This process is not linear from the explicit to the implicit. On the contrary, it involves mutual parallel adjustment of various assumptions that are brought into play in utterance comprehension: contextual premises, explicit content of the speaker's utterance and cognitive effects.

14 RT considers *successful* communication as its primary descriptive and explanatory goal (contrary to some other inferential approaches to communication that take successful communication for granted; cf. Grice 1989).

15 Otherwise, the process is either terminated (the addressee cannot reach any relevant interpretation) or is subjected to reanalysis. The latter case, however, is an instance of metacommunication in which interlocutors consciously (i.e. at a personal level) engage in repairing the addressee's understanding of the lexical concepts.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper I have presented the gist of two different approaches to meaning comprehension, and have resorted to one lexical field to demonstrate the practical side of the coin whose other side is engraved in the theoretic intricacies of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage and Relevance Theory.

The two theories have intentionally been selected as proper representatives in a contemporary linguistics' "tug of war" between a radically semantic and radically pragmatic perspective on how people understand lexical meaning in use. Given the proclaimed semantic and pragmatic orientations of the respective theories, the selected lexical field, whose central member is the word *tired*, has been envisioned as an illustration that might inspire linguistic practitioners, professionals and laymen alike, to enhance the study of the semantics/pragmatics interface in vocabulary acquisition and comprehension by taking into account ramifications of the existing radicalism.

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KOLIKO STE UMORNI? PRISTUPI RAZUMEVANJU VOKABULARA

Rezime

U radu koristimo, kao ilustraciju, leksičko polje za stanje (ili osećanje) umora/zamora da bismo predstavili dva suprotstavljena pristupa u objašnjenju leksičke upotrebe: semantički radikalizam metajezika prirodne semantike i pragmatički radikalizam teorije relevancije. Cilj nam je da se šira čitalačka publika upozna s ovim pristupima, pogotovo na osnovu prikazanog analitičkog postupka, kako bi formirala sopstvenu evaluaciju datih teorija i sagledala njihov potencijal za proučavanje semantičko-pragmatičkog interfejsa na nivou leksike.

Ključne reči: metajezik prirodne semantike, teorija relevancije, razumevanje vokabulara, *tiredness* ('umor', 'zamor')