

Metaphors and Meanings: a Lexicographical Approach

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Talk Outline

- A central task of lexicography is to report the normal, conventional use and meaning of words.
- What is the role of metaphor within this framework?
- Are metaphors and similes 'norms' or 'exploitations'?
- What criteria are there for deciding the literal meaning of words?
- What is the semantic relationship between literal and metaphorical meanings?

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An Important Distinction

Distinguish between:

- Normal, conventional usage
 - The true concern of the lexicographer
- All possibilities of usage
 - Including examples invented by linguists

Few generative linguists make this distinction

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Lakoff and Johnson; Kövecses

- "Our ordinary conceptual system is fundamentally metaphorical in nature."
- "We structure one experience in terms of another."
 - Crudely: we structure much of our abstract thinking metaphorically by using terms that primarily have a concrete sense.
- Cognitive concepts are "experiential gestalts".
- Zoltán Kövecses: Distinguish conceptual metaphors from metaphorical linguistic expressions.
 - Conceptual metaphors are systematic.
 - Many conventional metaphorical linguistic expressions fit into one or other of these large conceptual systems.
 - Some people are good at producing "novel linguistic metaphors based on conventional conceptual metaphors."

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Applying L&J's insights to word meaning

- A word meaning is a linguistic gestalt – a cluster of attributes (not necessarily mutually compatible)
- Abstract meanings are often expressed in terms of conventional secondary senses of words that have equally conventional concrete primary senses
- In this case, the abstract meaning of the word(s) resonates with the concrete meaning.

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Resonance

- If a word or phrase has both a concrete and an abstract meaning, the abstract may resonate with the concrete, but not vice versa. Thus:
 - A. A car in the street outside her hotel coughed and choked and **backfired**.
 - B. Bernard's plan **backfired**.
 - B can resonate with A, but not vice versa
- Even though sense B of *backfire* is 20x more common than A.

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Resonance Quotient

- A *resonant expression* is one whose meaning has potential resonance with a *literal* meaning of the same word or phrase.
- The *resonance quotient* (RQ) of a text can be measured by dividing the number of words in the text by the number of resonant expressions.
 - The text in Appendix I of the paper has an RQ of 22/443, i.e. .05

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Metaphor is a contrastive notion

- There can be no metaphors if there are no literal meanings.
- There can be no literal meanings if there are no metaphors.

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Dynamic vs. conventional metaphor

- Dynamic metaphors – freshly coined
 - *Society is a sea.*
 - *A poem is a pheasant.*
- Conventional metaphors
 - *keeping one's head above water ...*

Conventional metaphors are conventions of the language. They belong in dictionaries.

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Criteria for literalness

- Is the most frequent sense necessarily literal?
 - No! consider *backfire*.
- Historical priority?
 - No! consider *awful, ardent, literal, camera*.
- Concrete, not abstract?
 - Yes – if there is a concrete sense (but cf. *idea*).
 - A word can have two or more literal senses (with no resonance between them): cf. *subject, object*.
- Absence of resonance?
 - a property of literalness, rather than a criterion for it

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Metaphors that should be in dictionaries (examples)

- Peter Radford yesterday **fired the first shots** in a power struggle for control of British athletics.
 - Conventional (5 similar examples in BNC)
 - The first week of February had barely passed when Doctor Staples **fired a warning shot across his bows**.
 - All 7 uses of this phrase in BNC are metaphorical. Literal uses are, it seems, archaic.
 - Much variation in wording. Deciding the 'canonical form' of the idiom will be difficult.
- BUT NOT: She **fired an opening smile** across Celia's desk.
 - A dynamic metaphor -- an exploitation of a norm

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Conventional metaphors as secondary senses (see Appendix I)

- the terrible garbage written about him
- pressure to resign
- bringing the affair to light
- The story snowballed
- ... fast-tracked a visa application
- ... bring the world down on my head
- He hit out at the "lies" that had been printed about him
- ... paid tribute to his ex-wife
- ... the collapse of their marriage
- the vitriol that has been poured upon me

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Other kinds of resonance

- “Sleeping with the enemy, he fell among the most frivolous rightwing effete scoundrels of the Westminster political scene” (Toynbee, 16.12.2004)
 - 1991 film (Julia Roberts) about a murderous relationship.
 - “A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, which stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead.” (Luke 10: 30)

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Word meaning is not always specific

“Sleeping with the enemy, he fell among the most frivolous rightwing effete scoundrels of the Westminster political scene” (Toynbee)

- *effete* > L *effetus* ‘worn out with childbearing’. Toynbee can’t have intended this particular resonance – the sense is obsolete (never made it from Latin to English).
- So what is the literal meaning of *effete*? NODE says “affected, over-refined, and ineffectual.”
- But here it seems to be little more than just a general insult.

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Is resonance only dynamic?

- Both dynamic and conventional metaphors resonate:
 - *Society is a sea* (dynamic)
 - *It is good to see that the railway is keeping its head above water* (conventional)
- The reader often has to work harder to get the resonance of a dynamic metaphor.

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Conventional metaphors

High-frequency conventional metaphors

- appeal to a cognitively salient property
 - The hardness of *iron*
 - The coldness of *ice*
 - The brightness of the *sun*
 - The vastness of the *sea*
 - The barrenness of a *desert*
 - The confusion of a *jungle*

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Convention and reality

- What is an *oasis* really like?
- Acc. to Christiane Fellbaum (who’s been to some), oases are :
 - noisy, smelly, crowded, busy, bustling,
 - full of honking lorries, shouting people, and stalling camels.
- But in (conventional) English ...

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Salient collocates for ‘oasis’ (Wasps)

BNC freq for ‘oasis’: 327

Collocate	Co-occurrences	Salience score
desert	13	20.8
calm	7	14.1
greenery	3	9.6
welcome	4	7.9
green	4	6.6
tranquillity	2	6.0
peaceful	3	5.9
peace	3	5.9
pleasant	3	5.5

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Beyond statistical significance

- Some other cognitively salient collocates of **oasis** (real, but not statistically salient):
 - cool, lush, luxurious, pool, water, trees, palm trees
- Over 40% of uses of **oasis** in BNC are figurative, i.e. they do not designate “a place in a desert where the water table approaches or reaches the ground surface” (CED).

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A cline of metaphoricity

- An oasis in the Libyan desert (*literal*)
- seven antarctic oasis areas (*quasi literal*)
- An oasis of calm in the centre of Leeds
- an oasis of tranquillity (*figurative*)
- An oasis of common sense (*abstract*)

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Some citations for ‘oasis’ (BNC)

- Stoke Mandeville station is a little **oasis**; clean and bright and friendly.
- New Town Hotel -- a relaxing **oasis** for professional and business men.
- She regards her job as an **oasis** in a desert of coping with Harry's lack of direction
- an **oasis** in the midst of this desert of feuding.
- Driffield, which was a pleasant **oasis** in the East Riding of Yorkshire
- The planned opencast site was a pleasant **oasis** in a decaying industrial landscape.

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Teasing out salient property/-ies

- Oases are:
 - tranquil
 - good (positive vibes)
 - surrounded by desert [or city *qua* desert!]
 - isolated

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Some citations for ‘jungle’ (BNC)

- the impression that accounts are a **jungle** into which the untutored layman should not venture
- ... can eventually turn an organization into a **jungle** (if not a zoo).
- New York is a **jungle**, they tell you.
- the music business and see it for what it is, a **jungle** ...
- [R. Branson] ... a predatory animal in the **music business jungle** ...
- the shallow artificiality of life in the **concrete jungle**, and
- the area is a far cry from the city's **concrete jungle** -- and therein lies the reason for its charm.
- ...is thrusting deeper into the **corporate jungle**.
- In this hostile **ideological jungle**, little clearings of socialist culture ...
- In the media **jungle**, Murdoch and Maxwell grew to be elephants.
- ... a seeker lost in the German **metaphysical jungle**
- hard to believe that an inhabitant of the **political jungle** can be nice;
- strolling unwittingly through a **psychological jungle**.
- no need to become trapped in a **semantic jungle**.

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Teasing out salient property/-ies (2)

- Jungles are:
 - confusing
 - bad (negative vibes)
 - Full of dangerous creatures

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Supplementary comments in dictionary entries should reflect corpus evidence

- **oasis:**
 - Oases are conventionally regarded by English speakers as calm, peaceful, and pleasant places. The reality may be very different.
- **jungle:**
 - Jungles are conventionally regarded by English speakers as confusing, dangerous, and lawless places.
 - [IDIOM] The **law of the jungle** is a state of lawlessness in which power rather than the rule of law is the deciding factor: *World public opinion now realizes that the principles of international law, not the law of the jungle, must be respected.*

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Similes

- All metaphors are false (like lies)
 - The speaker deliberately says something false, to alert the hearer to some salient property.
- All similes are trivially true
 - Everything is like everything else.
 - Donald Davidson (1978): *What Metaphors Mean*

Yes, but some things are more alike than others

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Conventional similes

- Appeal to salient properties, e.g.
 - *eyes like a hawk*
 - *run like a hare*

Definitions of *hawk*, *hare*, etc. must account for conventional similes

But the meaning is not always clear-cut:

- *treat someone like a dog*

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Not an experiential gestalt

- The only sound in the room apart from a **demented** fly
- Howling like a **demented** banshee
- I look like a **demented** barber
- The idea of God pursuing a whole family like a **demented** genealogist
- My script looks like **demented** knitting
- A single woman in their midst acts like a **demented** lighthouse
- Thrashing plastic like a **demented** clock spring
- The paddle ... thrashing like a **demented** washing machine
- Rising and falling like a **demented** yo-yo

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Similes and logical form

Syntactic displacement:

- He looked like a broiled frog, hunched over his desk, grinning and satisfied.
- The presence of a single woman in their midst acts like a demented lighthouse, enticing hapless men onto the rocks.

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Definitions that fail to explain

dog: member of the species *Canis familiaris*, order Canidae.

spider: member of the order Arachnidae, class Aranea.

second: the duration of 9,192,631,770 periods of the radiation corresponding to the transition between the two hyperfine levels of the ground state of the caesium 133 atom.

Definitions such as these do little to explain the meaning and use of these ordinary English words.

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What else should we say about *dog*?

In addition to categorizing *dog* as *Canis familiaris*, one might say:

- There is a great variety of different breeds of dog
- Dogs bark, whine, and growl
 - Small dogs yap
- Dogs wag their tails when they are pleased
- Dogs have a highly developed sense of smell
- Dogs are kept as pets, trained as guards, as guides for blind people, to find things by smell, and for many other purposes
- Dogs are noted for their potential for aggression and their tenacity
- Dogs are typically loyal to their owners (even when badly treated)
- Dog owners take 'the dog' for a walk
 - on a leash/lead
- To *treat someone like a dog* means to treat them badly
- A *mad dog* is one with rabies and is extremely dangerous

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A complex linguistic gestalt

- We might add that the symbiosis between humans and dogs is now thought by some anthropologists to be largely responsible for the evolutionary success of both species.
- Important to classify *dog* as a scientific natural-kind term, but also ...
- the meaning and use of a familiar word like *dog* also represents a complex linguistic gestalt, which plays a major role in our language (under-represented in dictionaries)

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Terms of Art vs. Natural Terms

2 kinds of words (content words) must be recognized:

1. 'terms of art' (technical terms):
 - CONCEPTS stipulatively defined: necessary conditions
 - Sharp set boundaries between X and not-X.
 - Examples: *mammal*, *vertebrate*, *oxygen*
2. 'natural terms':
 - analogically defined by reference to 'best examples'
 - Fuzzy set boundaries
 - Rich sources of metaphors and similes
 - Examples: *animal*, *beast*, *jungle*, *oasis*, *air*

There is some tension and borrowing between them.
(*Animal* was once a term of art; *reptile* is both).

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Conclusions

- Conventional metaphors and similes are norms and belong in dictionaries.
- Creative metaphors are 'exploitations' of norms (exploiting salient semantic properties) and don't belong in dictionaries.
- Metaphorical senses resonate with the primary sense.
- Similes are more creative than metaphors.
- Similes shed light on salient semantic properties of a word.
- The meaning of an ordinary word is a complex linguistic gestalt which the lexicographer must capture.
- The meanings of 'terms of art' (technical terms) are different: they are defined stipulatively.

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