

A Synopsis of early issues

December '04 – February '05

The first three months of corpus-based work on Lexical Pragmatics gave rise to a whole host of theoretical issues that beg to be further discussed and investigated.

A)

Our corpus-based analyses on 'raw', 'painless' and to some extent, 'boiling' fixed the main focus on an important theoretical question concerning literal meaning. More specifically, it became apparent that grasping the *literal meaning* of an expression is not as straightforward a task as one might had thought. In fact, the task proved more of a 'chore'; we embarked on our search with what we believed at the time were strong intuitions about the literal meaning of the given word-set but before long, these very intuitions started to tremble under the weight of the extremely diverse, thoroughly context sensitive and remarkably creative facts of language use.

These very facts, however, which complicate matters at the level of articulating our corpus findings, at the same time sketch a picture of lexical use which corroborates the main theoretical hypotheses of this project.

At this stage two -at least- issues come into view. The one concerns the 'translation' of these observations into theoretical hypotheses (e.g. do all speakers and hearers share the same literal sense of a word, how do they get to stabilize the senses of words, what are the implications of an elusive literal sense for non-pragmatic accounts of lexical interpretation etc) along the lines drawn by Deirdre during this week's lecture on Lexical Pragmatics and Robyn during the last project meeting.

The other issue is somewhat practical and concerns the research tactics of the corpus strand of the project. In most cases, corpus linguistics works with figures because the types of questions it asks easily allow figures to translate into adequate generalizations. In deciding whether 2co-occurring items consist a collocation or not all you need is figures and indeed I cannot imagine of any complications in translating the figures into the generalization that 'cuddly trout' is not a collocation. But this last search on raw has made me feel that -at least in some of our searches- our attempt to produce numerical representations of our findings maybe is not what we should be doing...

To my mind, the important element in our study of 'raw' (and 'painless' for that matter) is the fact that we have found ourselves witnessing how elusive such a thing as literal meaning is and how laborious the task of eventually pinning it down. We saw our intuitions about literalness shifting significantly (in his first e-mail Tim had the intuition that my example c) is not metaphorical and that was my feeling too; next Amanda came up with that very interesting test in the light of which Tim's intuitions -and mine- shifted and c) had now to be treated as a case of metaphorical loosening), and it is this shift of intuitions precisely that is more important than any numerical figures.

B)

Our investigation of 'boiling' made clear the fuzzy borderline between *implications* and *implicatures*. A question emerged therein, in relation to the extent to which the implications we draw in interpreting a lexical item are implicatures intended by the speaker or conclusions that we draw ourselves on the grounds of existing encyclopaedic assumptions and independently of speaker deliberation.

C)

Another interesting observation relates to the fact that quite frequently the representation of the concept communicated may for various reasons remain open and incomplete. Such 'openness' is compatible with the RT predictions about lexical interpretation (where the speaker is not 'required' to broaden or narrow) but raises problems for any *default account* where the idea of narrowing by default leaves no room for openness or incompleteness.

D)

My intuition is that similar problems might also rise for the *default account* because of the relative instability of intuitions about the literalness of an expression or the direction and extent to which it must be broadened or narrowed. More specifically, in investigating 'boiling' (our most lengthy search so far) I was quite surprised to see how much my intuitions about lexical interpretation varied across times. My feeling is that such instability is very probable to occur constantly across individuals. If for instance one asked a subject to fill out very long questionnaires (so that similar cases could recur with significant temporal distance between them) with what they feel is the intended interpretation of a certain expression the subject would be very likely to come up with different answers for each occurrence of the same case. But this of course is just a hypothesis I am making. Still, if this hypothesis about relative instability of lexical interpretation is of any substance I would be inclined to say that it seems perfectly compatible with the RT agenda (since the hearer is well expected to bring to bear different encyclopaedic assumptions at different times) but would impose problems for a default account of lexical interpretation.

E)

In my study of 'raw' I was surprised to see the multitude of concepts 'raw' was used to communicate, particularly when used metaphorically. In the few hundreds of concordances I have included in my tables, 'raw' is used to mean anything from ORIGINAL through SORE through ROUGH through UNTAMPERED through UNSTICHD through SINCERE and so on and so forth. I have made a selective table of these cases in a separate document. Here, I just want to remark the creativity and flexibility that underlies such plethora of use.

F)

All our searches revealed the high context sensitivity of pragmatic adjustment in the interpretation of lexical items. The 65 concordances of 'red eyes' broke down the idea that the occurrence of a lexical item in the context of another is enough to justify narrowing by default. Instead we observed huge variation in the direction and extent of narrowing even though 'red' steadily collocated with 'eyes'. Simultaneously, the same contextual considerations that had an effect on the narrowing of 'red' appeared to also effect the interpretation of 'eyes' (i.e the loosening of the concept EYES also illustrated huge variation in direction and extent).

G) Our corpus-based analyses of 'raw', 'painless' and 'boiling' provided the first round of data that confirm our initial hypothesis of a continuum across literal use and loose uses.

H) All our searches revealed that concepts do get narrowed and loosened and that narrowing and loosening are not subsidiary or epiphenomenal to language use. At least half the occurrences of 'painless' and 'boiling' are loose and in the case of 'raw' loose uses predominate.