Emergent properties in the interpretation of Metaphors

'Bulldozer'

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Hypothesis

Although most approaches to metaphor assume that the interpretation of metaphorical utterances consists in mapping some properties of the vehicle to the topic, it has been observed that many of the properties intended in using a metaphor are not in fact properties of the vehicle ('emergent properties').

[for an investigation of the issue see *Metaphor interpretation and Emergence** by
Rosa Elena Vega Moreno]

Strategy and Objectives

Our objective was to gather corpus- based data of metaphorical utterances along the lines of *X is a bulldozer* [the metaphor 'Robert is a bulldozer' is discussed in Carston, *Thoughts and Utterances,* 2002: 350] with the aim of investigating how the concept 'bulldozer' behaves in actual language use.

Corpus used

The Bank of English

Findings

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Our corpus search in this case (search by keyword 'bulldozer') was not as fruitful as we had expected in the first place.

To our surprise (and quite strikingly as a matter of fact, since our expectation was that bulldozer would also occur rather frequently in metaphorical utterances), the word in question occurs almost solely in literal utterances (with the exception of 2 utterances in which bulldozer was used in a referential metaphor about J. Sirak). As a result, quite reasonably the body of evidence available in the corpus was of no real use to us.

However, it is important that we assess the implications of this latter finding for our further searches.

More specifically, the unexpected findings about bulldozer raise two at least issues related to our search.

The first is the general representativeness of the Bank of English when it comes to issues of lexical rather than grammatical word use. It is rather revealing in my view that without exception the corpus-linguistic literature acknowledges the fact that no corpus is big enough for the investigation of lexical word meaning. With grammatical words occurring at a rate of tens of thousands and lexical words (usually) at a rate of just a few dozens one realizes the glaring and challenging problems the researcher is bound to face when setting out to investigate lexical word meaning. The possibility of a sample not being representative of all instances of use of a given lexical word is undeniably considerable and it is then left at the strength of the researcher's intuitions to decide whether a certain finding disconfirms or not her empirical and introspective intuitions.

The second issue I think emerges therein. If we eventually take the available sample as representative, then we must somehow explain what the disconfirmation of our expectations implicates for our research objectives.

From the outset of this search we adopted Stubb's suggestion that in pragmatics 'introspective intuition must be given the status of data'. If not anything else, this certainly means that it is not necessary that a given example should occur in actual language use. And it eventually not occurring is not necessarily and per se evidence that the example is 'artificial' in any particularly interesting or worrying sense. The example does not lose its theoretical validity, it only loses the tangibility and status of an occurrence of actual language use.

In the case of 'bulldozer', however, one ought to take into consideration matters of historical change together with the representativeness of American English within the resources of the Bank. The following table, revealing of the relative representativeness of American English in the Bank, hints to a possible explanation of the problem we had with 'bulldozer'. Namely, if we assume that the metaphorical use of 'bulldozer' is idiosyncratic to American English and given that the main bulk of the corpus consists in British English, the corpus sample that we examined might not be that revealing after all.

npr	3129222	07	US	National Public Radio broadcasts
today	5248302	11	UK	Today newspaper
times	5763761	10	UK	Times newspaper
usbooks	5626436	09	US	books; fiction & non-fiction
oznews	5337528	01		Australian newspapers
bbc	2609869	06	BBC	World Service radio broadcasts
usephem	1224710	05	US	ephemera (leaflets, adverts, etc)
ukmags	4901990	03	UK	magazines
sunnow	5824476	17	UK	Sun newspaper
ukspok	9272579	04	UK	transcribed informal speech
ukbooks	5354262	08	UK	books; fiction & non-fiction
ukephem	3124354	02	UK	ephemera (leaflets, adverts, etc)

But this of course is just another hypothesis. Now, whether such hypothesis will be further attributed to a historical or other story (Deirdre Wilson suggested that the metaphorical use of 'bulldozer' might relate to a progressive metaphorical transfiguration of an original, literal sense of the word in American English which meant *slave master*) is an important theoretical question related to the study of metaphor but nonetheless, a step removed from the specifics of corpus analysis.

From the corpus analytic point of view the main issues are a) how we want our future research to deal with examples discussed mainly in the American literature on lexical meaning (unexpected corpus-based results like this one might open the way for counterarguments and it would be a good prevention strategy to think how we might want to deal with them) and b) whether we feel that we should attempt further searches in examples of metaphorical emergence (with different keywords e.g. my X is a *butcher* etc) in search for those data that 'bulldozer' could not provide.