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Paradis, Carita

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

Words as cues to conceptual structure

theoretical considerations and practical applications

Carita Paradis, Centre for Languages and Literature, Lund University

This talk centres on the notion of word and discusses why the idea that words have set meanings is problematic for the description and modelling of meaning using real language data. Rather than thinking of words as having set meanings, words are better modelled as cues to meaning. Sometimes a word is not a word but many words, e.g. *in spite of*, *have a bath*, *all of a sudden* and sometimes, or often, words express meanings that may not be offered by language users had they been asked, e.g. *not* meaning ‘fairly’, as in *not bad*, certain colours describing smells as in *white aromas*, or tactile experiences such as *soft* describing colours as in *soft purple*. Such uses are neither accidental nor rare but pervasive in language and cry out for a fair and equal treatment. A general framework that offers a way of describing and explaining lexical meaning and that furnishes the analyst with a way of tackling the challenges of the dynamics of human communication is outlined.