



# LUND UNIVERSITY

## Are all opposites equal - or are some more equal than others?

Paradis, Carita

2013

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Paradis, C. (2013). *Are all opposites equal - or are some more equal than others?*. Abstract from Irony and antonymy.

*Total number of authors:*

1

### General rights

Unless other specific re-use rights are stated the following general rights apply:

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Read more about Creative commons licenses: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

### Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

LUND UNIVERSITY

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

# Are all opposites equal – or are some more equal than others?

---

*Carita Paradis, Centre for Languages and Literature, Lund University*

At the one extreme, antonyms show up as strongly associated pairs such as *long–short*, *heavy–light*, *hot–cold* and *good–bad* along the dimensions of LENGTH, WEIGHT, TEMPERATURE and MERIT, respectively, while other pairs appear to be less obviously or felicitously opposable and more clearly bound up with specific domains and situations, e.g. *calm–high-strung*, *calm–flowing*, *calm–agitated*, as in ‘I prefer *calm* dogs to *high-strung* dogs’, ‘I prefer *calm* waters to *flowing* waters’, ‘I prefer a *calm* public to an *agitated* public’. In spite of this difference, all of them are used to express binary opposition. In that sense they are all equal. But, what makes the former pairings more felicitously opposable than the latter ones still remains a mystery, at least in part. There are indications that it is the ‘goodness’ of the relations as such that is of importance, not lexical associations or co-occurrence frequency (van de Weijer, Paradis, Willners & Lindgren 2012). But, what then is this goodness?

The purpose of this contribution is to try to determine *why* some pairs are felt to be “better” antonyms than others and therefore more apt to take on special status as canonical antonyms. What is the difference between pairs such as *heavy–light* and *hot–cold* on the one hand, and most other antonymic construals such as *calm–high-strung* or *calm–flowing* on the other? In order to determine this we first need to explain how two expressions can be understood as antonyms, and for that we need a theoretical framework that is capable of accounting, not only for some couplings in language, but also for antonymic meaning creation in text and discourse. Couched in the framework of *Lexical Meaning as Ontologies and Construals* (Paradis 2005), this contribution treats antonymy as a spatial configuration construal grounded in perception and effected through comparison of the opposing properties. Whenever we think of something as ‘long’, ‘good’ or ‘dead’, it will be in contrast to something that lacks or has little of this property, i.e. their opposites. The proposal is that form–meaning pairings in language are antonyms when they are used as binary opposites in a given context. Characteristic of antonyms is that they share an important segment of meaning at the same time as they differ prominently along the same dimension. Configurationally, this translates into a spatial configuration construal where this simple content dimension, bounded (e.g. *dead–alive*) or unbounded (*short–long*), is divided in two parts by a BOUNDARY

In contrast to a categorization by configuration, categorization by contentful meaning structures forms a continuum ranging from the strongly related pairings, referred to as canonical antonyms (e.g. *long–short*) to more peripheral members (e.g. *calm–high-strung*). In order to explain why some lexical semantic couplings tend to form conventionalized pairs, this proposal appeals to (i) their ontological set-up in terms of the simplicity, entrenchment and perceptual basicness of dimensions along which they evoke opposing properties, e.g. *long–short* of LENGTH as opposed to *calm–high-strung* of EMOTIONAL TENSION OF ANIMATE CREATURE, (ii) the configurational clarity and symmetry of the antonyms in relation to the BOUNDARY dividing the meaning structure, e.g. *small–large* is a better pair than *small–huge* because the properties are at the same distance from a middle-ground reference point (Paradis, Willners & Jones 2009, Bianchi, Savardi & Kubovy 2011, Paradis & Willners 2011, Jones, Murphy, Paradis & Willners 2012, van de Weijer, Paradis, Willners & Lindgren forthcoming). Data from a range of textual, behavioural and neurophysiological techniques are used to support the claims.

## References

- Bianchi, I., Savardi, U., & Kubovy, M. (2011). Dimensions and their poles: a metric and topological approach to opposites. *Language and cognitive processes*, 26(8), 22–33.
- Jones, S., Murphy, M.L., Paradis, C. & Willners, C. (2012). *Antonyms in English: Construals, constructions and canonicity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Paradis, C. (2005). Ontologies and construals in lexical semantics. *Axiomathes* 15. 541–573.
- Paradis, C., Willners, C. & Jones, S. (2009). Good and bad opposites: using textual and psycholinguistic techniques to measure antonym canonicity. *The Mental Lexicon* 4(3). 380–429.
- Paradis, C. & Willners, C. (2011). Antonymy: From convention to meaning-making. *Review of Cognitive Linguistics* 9(2). 367–391.
- van de Weijer, J., Paradis, C., Willners, C. & Lindgren M. (2012). As lexical as it gets: The role of co-occurrence of antonyms in a visual lexical decision experiment. In Dagmar Divjak & Stefan Th. Gries (eds.), *Frequency effects in language representation*, 255-279. Berlin & New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- van de Weijer, J., Paradis, C., Willners, C., & Lindgren, M. (forthcoming). Antonym canonicity: Temporal and contextual manipulations. *Brain and Language*.