LUND UNIVERSITY

Introduction: Lexical contrast in discourse

Murphy, M. Lynne; Paradis, Carita; Willners, Caroline

Link to publication

Total number of authors:
3

Editorial

Introduction: Lexical contrast in discourse

Thinking about the role of contrast in language, the American amongst us is reminded of the Dupont Chemical Corporation's advertising slogan of the 1970s: ''Without chemicals, life itself would be impossible.'' In trying to sum up the fundamental nature of the building blocks of our world, one is left with a statement that seems at the same time profound and trivial. Without contrast, language itself would be impossible. It is a notion that has been around as long as and in most traditions of linguistic study. A phoneme is recognizable because it differs from other phonemes. Propositions are identified in formal semantics by the conditions under which they are true or false. Words carve up semantic fields into complementary concepts. Scenes are conceptualized with some information foregrounded and some backgrounded and discussed with reference to information that is given or new. And we are moved to talk about things because they contrast with the expected. In fact, we probably need to go further: without contrast, language, thought and culture would be impossible.

The potential for linguistic study of contrast is thus as big as the great outdoors, but this volume concentrates on the intersection of contrast at two levels of linguistic analysis: the lexicon and discourse. At this intersection, a number of wide-ranging questions present themselves. What discourse conditions force incompatible construals of word meanings? Why do languages — and language users — bother with lexical antonyms when affixal and sentential negation processes are available? Can one discuss a word or a situation without introducing its opposite into the resulting mental imagery? Why would one bother to say *black and not white* when one could just say *black*? And are the answers to these questions the same for different languages and different cultures? Even though we have narrowed our area of study to a corner of contrast, the potential is still as big as the great outdoors.

We had that potential in mind when we (with our colleague Steven Jones) sent out a call for interest for an IPrA conference session on Lexical Contrast in Discourse. "Lexical contrast" was meant to capture the notions of antonymy and co-hyponymy, while being general enough to include other instances in which properties of the discourse allow or force contrastive construals. The papers presented here include a selection from that session and other work that was drawn to our attention through that call. They discuss universal contrast phenomena as instantiated in German, Swedish (and English), Japanese, Dutch, and in non-linguistic, graphic communication.

Lexical contrast implies lexical similarity. Antonyms, it has been said, are word pairs that are semantically 'minimally different' (Clark, 1970; Hale, 1971; Murphy, 2003). Given such a definition, it would seem that nothing would make better antonyms than near-synonyms, which are more similar than they are different. Indeed, Petra Storjohann's "Plesionymy: a case of synonymy or contrast?" makes the case that it is as usual for near-synonyms to be used in contrast with one another as to be used as equivalents. The profusion of near-synonymy and the avoidance of true synonymy in language (''languages abhor absolute synonyms just as nature abhors a vacuum''—Cruse, 1986:270) support the view that contrast is central to the pragmatic process of meaning construal (e.g. Bréal, 1900; Clark, 1992). Storjohann furthermore shows that plesionyms are construed as having contrasting meanings when they co-occur in the types of lexico-grammatical frames in which canonical antonyms typically co-occur (Jones, 2002), thus supporting Murphy's (2006) argument that these frames are meaningful constructions, i.e. contrastive constructions.

Next, the volume turns to two studies of antonyms in discourse, using Jones' (2002) methods and taxonomy of antonym functions as a starting point. Murphy, Paradis, Willners and Jones apply Jones' categories to a corpus of

2   *Editorial / Journal of Pragmatics xxx (2008) xxx–xxx*

Swedish antonym co-occurrences, while Muehleisen and Isono explore the same phenomena in Japanese. While we undertook these studies believing that they would illustrate the use of antonymy in two very different languages and cultures, we found some points of similarity that may illustrate ethnographer Åke Daun's contention that Swedes are 'the Japanese of the North' and the Japanese are 'the Swedes of Asia'. In comparing these languages to Jones' work on English, both articles demonstrate that Jones' categories can be applied cross-linguistically and that that different cultures use the categories at different rates. Both hypothesize cultural differences that could account for some of the differences: in Japanese, the practice of *aimaisa* 'indirectness' and in Swedish *lagom*, or 'moderation', values that are also tied to indirectness in the statement of opinions (Barinaga, 1999). Both articles demonstrate difficulties in adapting existing corpus methodologies for different languages and suggest some means to overcome them, as well as a number of new directions in which such research could be taken.

Following these corpus studies, we turn to two experimental contributions, which report on studies that investigate the interpretation of positive and negative means of expression and take pragmatic approaches to their explanation. Unlike the corpus studies described above, which searched for co-occurring words and whether/how they were used contrastively, these studies examine messages in which only one of a pair of contrasting meanings is overtly expressed, and so they can be classified as studies of propositional negation. But they fit here due to the lexical contrasts that are inherent in their interpretation, for instance, the contrast between *fat* and *thin* for a sentence like *He's not thin*. Holleman and Pander Maat demonstrate framing (or 'profiling') effects, in which phrasing the same propositions using lexical items with positive or negative meanings affects the perception of the described situations in positive or negative ways, respectively. Their account of the pragmatic mechanisms underlying framing effects brings together neo-Gricean principles, the notion of argument-orientation from the French Enunciative tradition (e.g. Ducrot, 1980) and the notion of markedness.

Our last contribution goes beyond language, demonstrating negation effects in the visual mode—from road signs to modern art. Giora, Heruti, Metuki and Fein show that visual 'negation' symbols, such as crossing through another symbol, operate in much the same way as morphological negation and have the same effects in the interpretation process (cf. Giora, 2006). That is to say, in visual negation, like linguistic negation, the negated element is not unconditionally discarded in comprehending the message, but retained and discourse governed. Thus we can see that the principles and processes involved in the interpretation of negated messages are general communicative principles and communicative/conceptual processes.

These articles demonstrate both the richness of the lexical contrast phenomena and the opportunity for further investigations. We look forward to organizing future conference sessions and networked discussions on these matters. In the meantime, we invite those interested to visit the website for Complexica, the Comparative Lexical Relations research group (http://www.f.waseda.jp/vicky/complexica/), which serves as a clearinghouse for information on on-going studies on all aspects of semantic lexical relations.

Many thanks to all of the contributors to this volume and the participants in the IPrA 2008 session. We are indebted to the colleagues who offered their time and expertise in reviewing submissions for this volume and to Neal Norrick for his help in making this happen.

References

Barinaga, Elena, 1999. *Swedishness* through *lagom*: Can Words Tell Us Anything About A Culture? Research Paper Series 1999/6, Centre for Advanced Studies in Leadership, Stockholm. Available at: http://www.hhs.se/CASL/Publications/CASLResearchPapersSeries.htm.

Bréal, Michel, 1900. Semantics: Studies in the Science of Meaning (trans. by Mrs. Henry Cust). Dover, New York.

Clark, Herbert H., 1970. Word associations and linguistic theory. In: Lyons, John (Ed.), New Horizons in Linguistics. Penguin, Baltimore, pp. 271–286.

Clark, Eve V., 1992. Conventionality and contrast. In: Lehrer, Adrienne, Kittay, Eva Feder (Eds.), Frames, Fields, and Contrasts: New Essays in Semantic and Lexical Organization. Erlbaum, Hillsdale, NJ, pp. 171–188.

Cruse, D.A., 1986. Lexical Semantics. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Daun, Åke, 1986. The Japanese of the north—the Swedes of Asia? Ethnologia Scandinavica 16, 5–15.

Ducrot, Oswald, 1980. Les échelles argumentatives. Les Editions de Minuit, Paris.

Giora, Rachel, 2006. Anything negatives can do affirmatives can do just as well, except for some metaphors. Journal of Pragmatics 38, 981–1014.

Hale, Kenneth, 1971. A note on a Walbiri tradition of antonymy. In: Steinberg, Danny D., Jakobovits, Leon A. (Eds.), Semantics: An Interdisciplinary Reader in Philosophy, Linguistics and Psychology. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 472–484.

Jones, Steven, 2002. Antonymy: A Corpus-based Approach. Routledge, London.

Murphy, M. Lynne, 2003. Semantic Relations and the Lexicon. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Murphy, M. Lynne, 2006. Antonyms as Lexical Constructions or, Why Paradigmatic Construction is Not an Oxymoron. Constructions SV1-8/2006. Available at: http://www.constructions-online.de.

M. Lynne Murphy*
Linguistics and English Language,
Arts B135, University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton BN1 9QN, United Kingdom

Carita Paradis
School of Humanities, Växjö University, Sweden

Caroline Willners
Centre for Languages and Literature, Lund University, Sweden

*Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 1273 678844

14 September 2008