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The lexical entry in lexical pragmatics – a relevance-theoretic view

1. Introduction

This paper is an attempt to examine the status of lexical entries in the relevance-theoretic framework enriched with some insights from the relatively new but rapidly developing field of lexical pragmatics, whose prime objective is to explain how lexically-encoded ('literal') meanings are adjusted and modified in use (Wilson 2004). Using some evidence from both polysemy and homonymy, the paper seeks to demonstrate that polysemous items have one mental representation (be it a lexicalised pro-concept which has to be contextually enriched virtually every time it is used, or even a non-lexicalised broadened concept which is a superordinate of distinct non-overlapping senses), whereas homonyms have distinct mental representations. The paper also poses the question whether the encyclopaedic content of one concept may have any influence on the encyclopaedic information of another concept if they share the same lexical entry, as seems to happen in the case of words whose form makes them homonymous with taboo-words.

2. Concepts, entries and Relevance Theory

According to Relevance Theory, a concept consists of a conceptual address in memory which makes accessible different types of mentally-represented information through three kinds of entry: logical, encyclopaedic and lexical. For Sperber and Wilson (1986/95: 92), it is necessary to distinguish between 'address' and 'entry', since the former term refers to the form of a concept and the latter to its content, constituted by logical, encyclopaedic and lexical information, and this distinction is fundamental for Relevance Theory's

treatment of concepts. This classic relevance-theoretic approach has incorporated Fodor's (1998) view of mentally-represented concepts: atomic concepts (those encoded by lexical items) are not decompositional, they cannot be given definitions in terms of necessary and sufficient features or be structured around prototypes or stereotypes. Complex concepts, on the other hand, are understood as structured conceptual strings, determined compositionally (at least in part), and they are typically linguistically realised as phrases (Carston 2002: 321).

The logical entry of a concept is basically small, finite and relatively stable, it specifies logical relations the concept has with other concepts (Sperber and Wilson 1986/95: 92, Vega Moreno 2007: 45). The encyclopaedic entry is open-ended and variable; it makes available information about the extension and/or denotation of the concept, expert and lay assumptions, associations and connotations, cultural beliefs and personal experiences. According to Carston (2002: 321), "[t]his entry is internally structured in terms of the degree of accessibility of its constituent elements to various processing systems", which means that the more recent and the more frequently used a given item of information is, the more accessible it becomes. The lexical entry contains information about lexical properties such as the phonetic structure and grammatical properties of the word encoding the concept (see Carston 2002: 321, Vega Moreno 2007: 46). Let us look at a possible representation of the concept cow:

(1) **Conceptual address**: COW
Lexical entry: Noun; [kaʊ]
Logical entry: inferential links to other concepts: FEMALE, BOVINE, ANIMAL
Encyclopaedic entry: denotation, general and/or scientific knowledge about the appearance and behaviour of cows, images of cows, personal experiences of, and attitudes to, cows.

While most relevance-theoretic literature focuses on the type of information provided by logical and encyclopaedic entries, the issue of lexical entry is typically brought up in passing and not given much attention. A notable exception is Groefsema (2007), who examines the place of lexical entry in the relevance-theoretic account of concepts and claims to have found problems with Sperber and Wilson's (1986/1995) fundamental proposal concerning concepts. She investigates the content of a concept, assuming that it is made up by a triple of entries. While she agrees that logical and encyclopaedic entries may constitute the content of a concept, she argues that the lexical entry of a concept cannot possibly contribute to its content. Thus, Groefsema rejects the idea that linguistic information contained in the lexical entry can be part of the content of a concept since that would mean that "part of the meaning of a word

consists of its syntactic and phonological information about the word of which it is the meaning" (2007: 138). Her solution to the problem of lexical entry is a mapping relation between a conceptual address and 'a representation of linguistic information' – a given word would activate a corresponding conceptual address, and vice versa. However, it is worth emphasising that there seems to be a major flaw in Groefsema's reasoning (Wilson p.c.), indicating that her criticism is unmotivated and her solution superfluous: Sperber and Wilson have never claimed that the content of a concept is made up of the three entries – the entries make available different kinds of information.

It is worth noting that not all words involve full-fledged concepts; there are words that encode procedures (inferential constraints) and so-called concept schemas or pro-concepts (Carston 2002: 363). Procedures are understood as constraints on the processes of pragmatic inference involved in the interpretation of an utterance (Carston 2002: 57, Blakemore 2007: 45). Classic examples of words involving procedural meaning are *but* or *so*, which do not encode or even indicate a concept but guide the hearer through the comprehension process of the utterance in which they are present (Blakemore 2000: 90-91). Moreover, unlike conceptual representations, procedures cannot be brought to consciousness (Wilson and Sperber 1993: 16, Blakemore 2000: 83). Finally, pro-concepts can be defined as "pointers to a conceptual space" (Carston 2002: 360) which have to be enriched every time they are used. Pro-concepts serve as a basis on which "an actual concept ... is pragmatically inferred" (ibid.). In Sperber and Wilson's (1997: 2) view, pro-concepts are quite frequent – in English, there are many words encoding pro-concepts, typically verbs, e.g.: *put*, *take*, *make*, *do*, *have*, *be*, and adjectives, e.g.: *long*, but also other grammatical categories, as illustrated by such function words as *near* or *my* (Sperber and Wilson 1997: 2; Vega Moreno 2007: 206-207).

3. Lexical pragmatic processes of ad-hoc concept construction

It is worth noting that in Relevance Theory not only words encoding pro-concepts are understood "as pointers to contextually intended senses", words encoding full-fledged concepts can also serve this function (Sperber and Wilson 1997: 19). This basically means that in the relevance-theoretic approach to lexical pragmatics, the lexically-encoded concept is hardly the same concept when used by the speaker; in other words, the concept encoded by a word used by the speaker is regarded as only a clue to the concept intended/communicated by that speaker by the use of that word. This approach is a straightforward result of the assumption defended by relevance theorists that the number of concepts a given speaker may represent mentally is far greater than the number of words

available in that speaker's language to encode those concepts (Vega Moreno 2007: 45). Subsequently, the same word, on different occasions, can be used to communicate different concepts (Vega Moreno 2007: 47). Those communicated non-lexicalised concepts, derived pragmatically by hearers in the process of utterance interpretation, have come to be known as ad-hoc concepts.

There are two types of lexical pragmatic processes of ad-hoc concept formation: broadening and narrowing. In both cases, the resulting ad-hoc concept is in a relation of interpretive resemblance with the lexically-encoded concept; in other words, the ad-hoc concept resembles the lexicalised concept with respect to its content (Carston 2002: 339). In broadening, illustrated in (2), a word is used to convey a more general sense than that of a corresponding lexical concept and there is an "expansion of the linguistically-specified denotation" (Wilson and Carston 2007: 234):

(2) Sally is a *chameleon.* (Wilson and Carston 2007: 235)

In this example, the concept CHAMELEON has been broadened to the ad-hoc concept CHAMELEON* to convey a more general sense and the denotation of this concept has been expanded so as to include not only chameleons but also people who can easily adapt their behaviour to a situation. In broadening, no literalness is preserved since one or more of the logical properties of the concept can be dropped. In (2), for example, the logical property of being a lizard (a non-human) has been dropped, which allows for this communicated concept to be applied to human beings. In the relevance-theoretic approach to lexical pragmatics, cases of broadening form a continuum, but it is possible to distinguish between: approximation, category extension, hyperbole and metaphor (Wilson 2004; Sperber and Wilson 2008; Wilson and Carston 2007). Example (2) could be classified as a case of metaphor, which involves a more radical broadening than the other types. Approximation, on the other hand, involves a relatively marginal broadening to the effect that the communicated concept is close enough to the lexicalised concept for the differences to be inconsequential. For example, the speaker's use of the italicised word in:

(3) There is a *round* stain on the kitchen floor. (adapted from Vega Moreno 2007: 48)

plausibly communicates the ad-hoc concept ROUND* according to which the stain is only approximately round, but the differences between its shape and the shape of a circular surface could be ignored.

In narrowing, the other type of the lexical pragmatic processes of ad-hoc concept formation, a word is used to convey a more specific sense than that of a corresponding lexicalised concept, so there is "a restriction of the linguistically-specified denotation" (Wilson 2004: 344), e.g.:

(4) a. I like listening to the *birds* in the morning.
    b. The *birds* flew above the waves.
    c. She was feeding the *birds* in the square.

(examples from Vega Moreno 2007: 48)

In the examples in (4), the same lexically-encoded concept bird is used to communicate three ad-hoc concepts BIRD*, BIRD** and BIRD***, each of which denotes a different subset of the category of birds. Thus, the denotation of the lexicalised concept is restricted, for example, to robins or larks in (4a), to seagulls in (4b) and to pigeons in (4c). This shows that, in the case of narrowing, literalness is preserved since none of the logical properties of the lexicalised concept BIRD has been dropped – robins, larks, seagulls and pigeons are all bird species. However, what seems unclear is the status of encyclopaedic properties of a lexicalised concept if it is used to communicate an ad-hoc concept. According to Carston (2002: 339), it is possible that an encyclopaedic property of the lexical concept is elevated to "a logical (or content-constitutive) status" in the ad-hoc concept formation. Consequently, the encyclopaedic properties of the concept BIRD as used in the examples in (4): 'being able to sing' (a), 'being adapted to life within the marine environment' (b) and 'living in towns and cities' (c) have been elevated to a logical status in BIRD*, BIRD** and BIRD***, respectively.

It is also worth mentioning that both broadening and narrowing may apply simultaneously and it is possible to construct an ad-hoc concept with a completely disjoint denotation from the lexical concept it was derived from. Finally, it can be seen from the above discussion that the role of lexical entry in ad hoc concept formation boils down to its being a pointer to the concept constructed online.

4. Polysemy and homonymy

The traditional distinction between homonymy and polysemy is based on the assumption that homonymy involves different meanings perceived by native speakers as unrelated, realised by one lexical form; whereas in polysemy multiple senses of one lexical form are felt by native speakers to be clearly related to each other in some way. For example, homonyms mug_1 ('drinking vessel') and mug_2 ('gullible person') are not conceptually related in any way (Hurford, Heasley and Smith 2007: 130). Polysemous senses are conceptually related in a number of ways, for example the two senses of *drink* ('liquid' and 'alcoholic liquid') involve hyponymy, while the three senses of *position* ('location in space', 'opinion', and 'professional post within an organisation') are related by metaphorical extension (Cruse 2006: 133).

The assumption that there are two types of 'lexical ambiguity' raises some important questions concerning the mental representations of homonymous and polysemous items – one of the questions is whether the related senses of a polysemous word are mentally represented in a similar way to the unrelated meanings of a homonymous word. Even though polysemy, unlike homonymy, has been given little attention in the psycholinguistic literature (Klepousniotou 2002: 209), there is some experimental support for the differentiation of 'lexical ambiguity' into these two types. For example, as Frazier and Rayner (1990) report, polysemous words require shorter fixation times in reading tasks than homonyms, which they explain by postulating that polysemy is not subjected to the immediate selection of one of the senses for the processing to continue since they are not incompatible with one another. On the other hand, out of homonymous meanings, which are mutually exclusive, one has to be selected for further processing, which is necessarily time-costly. Such findings show that it is not unmotivated to postulate 'differential representations' for homonymous and polysemous words (Klepousniotou 2002: 210). Homonymous words appear to have several, distinct mental representations, one for each meaning, whereas polysemous words appear to have a single mental representation (Klepousniotou 2002: 216-217).

Within the relevance-theoretic framework, homonymy has never been thoroughly discussed, even though homonymous items, such as $bank_1$ ('financial institution') or $bank_2$ ('side of a river'), have been used as an illustration of the process of disambiguation of the decoded (incomplete) logical form of the speaker's utterance (e.g. Wilson and Sperber 2004: 616-617).

Polysemy, on the other hand, at first ignored or quickly dismissed by relevance theorists, has recently started to surface in relevance-theoretic research (for discussion, see Wałaszewska 2008), which may be related to the plausibility of accounting for the existence of polysemy in terms of lexical pragmatic processes of concept broadening and narrowing. Wilson and Carston, for example, suggest that polysemous senses could be regarded "as outcomes of the frequent and widespread application to a particular lexical item of a single pragmatic process of ad hoc concept construction" (2007: 239). They take into account two possible inferential routes by means of which polysemy may emerge: either polysemy is the outcome of the process of concept broadening with the derived sense being a superordinate of the basic one or polysemy results from the broadening of the basic sense and the narrowing of the resulting superordinate sense, which brings about a distinct sense, non-overlapping with the basic sense.

For example, the latter route could explain the emergence of polysemy in the case of 'double-function' adjectives such as *hard, rigid* or *cold*, which could be assumed to be polysemous between the basic sense (a physical description) and the derived sense (a description of human psychological properties). Let us

look at a possible way in which the polysemy of the word *cold* might have come about. The concept COLD encoded by the word *cold* in its basic physical sense would be broadened to COLD*, whose denotation would include both items involving a property of having a very low temperature and items involving a property of being unemotional or unfriendly. The resulting non-lexicalised superordinate sense would be narrowed to COLD**, with the denotation including items having only a property of being unemotional or unfriendly; thus, this sense would be non-overlapping with the basic sense. Finally, the concept COLD** would in time get lexicalised (see Wałaszewska 2008).

5. Lexical entry in polysemy and homonymy

Based on the fact that homonymous and polysemous items are processed differently and taking into consideration Klepousniotou's postulate of 'differential representations' for homonymous and polysemous words, I would like to claim that, in polysemy, the role of a lexical entry is to point to a single mental representation of different polysemous senses, whereas in homonymy, its role is to make accessible distinct concepts, whose logical and encyclopaedic information is different, encoded by the same lexical form. Moreover, taking into account the heterogeneity of polysemous relations, it seems that the single mental representation could be a pro-concept (underspecified by definition), as illustrated by the polysemy of the word *sad*, or it could be a non-lexicalized broadened concept, general enough to account for the relatedness of different polysemous senses of one word, whose epitome is the basic/central sense of that word, as shown by the polysemy of the word *cow*.

Polysemy of the word sad

The multiple senses of the adjective *sad* appear to be a result of the lexical pragmatic process of narrowing. It seems that this adjective does not encode a fully-fledged concept, but a pro-concept, something along the lines of 'related in some way to the feeling of sadness', which necessarily requires narrowing in the direction indicated by the premodified nouns, for example: *person* in (5a) and *film* in (5b):

> (5) a. a sad person
>   b. a sad film

The narrowing of the lexicalised pro-concept SAD 'related in some way to the feeling of sadness' would involve accessing encyclopaedic assumptions associated with the concepts PERSON and FILM in order to infer the kind of relations holding between the pro-concept and the concept of PERSON, and

between the pro-concept and the concept of FILM, respectively, which would enable arriving at ad hoc concepts SAD* 'experiencing sadness' in (5a) and SAD** 'causing sadness' in (5b) (based on Wałaszewska 2008: 131). The lexical entry containing the information about the grammatical and phonetic properties of the word *sad* makes accessible the lexicalised pro-concept (see Fig. 1).
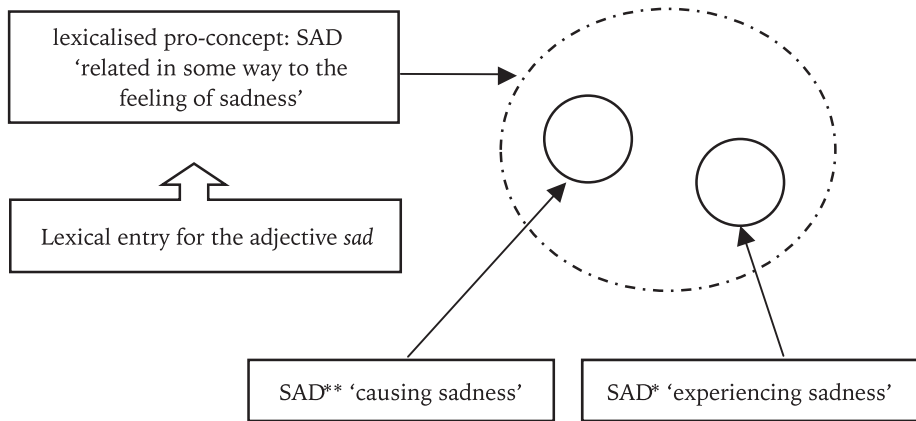

Fig. 1. Polysemy of the word *sad*

Polysemy of the word cow

The noun *cow* appears to be polysemous between the animal and human senses, e.g.:

(6) a. The cow has just returned from the pasture. (referring to an animal)
    b. Is it that silly cow in the office? (referring to a person)

In the case of the lexicalised concept COW, the logical entry contains inferential links to concepts such as FEMALE and BOVINE, thus showing that the properties 'female' and 'bovine' constitute the logical content of the concept; its encyclopaedic entry, apart from the information about the denotation of the concept, may contain associations with bigness, clumsiness, coarseness, etc. The lexicalised concept is broadened to the ad hoc concept COW*, formed on the basis of the lexicalised concept by dropping the logical property 'bovine'. This ad hoc concept further undergoes the process of narrowing to the concept COW** 'an obese, clumsy, coarse woman', formed by elevating the encyclopaedic properties 'big', 'clumsy', 'coarse' of the lexicalized concept to a logical status (see Fig. 2).
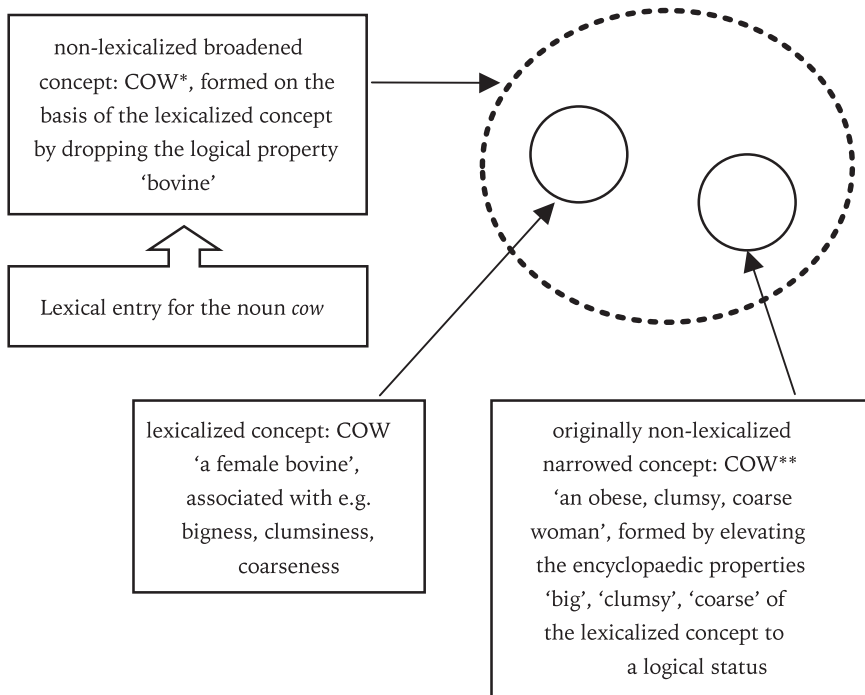
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┌─────────────────────────────┐
│ non-lexicalized broadened   │
│ concept: COW*, formed on the│ ──────→   ( ⋯⋯⋯⋯ )
│ basis of the lexicalized    │         ( ◯      ◯ )
│ concept by dropping the     │          ( ⋯⋯⋯⋯ )
│ logical property 'bovine'   │
└─────────────────────────────┘
        ⇑
┌─────────────────────────────┐
│ Lexical entry for the noun cow │
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Fig. 2. Polysemy of the word *cow*

┌──────────────────────────┐   ┌──────────────────────────┐
│ lexicalized concept: COW │   │ originally non-lexicalized│
│ 'a female bovine',   │   │ narrowed concept: COW** │
│ associated with e.g.   │   │ 'an obese, clumsy, coarse│
│ bigness, clumsiness,   │   │ woman', formed by elevating│
│ coarseness   │   │ the encyclopaedic properties│
└──────────────────────────┘   │ 'big', 'clumsy', 'coarse' of│
                                  │ the lexicalized concept to│
                                  │ a logical status   │
                                  └──────────────────────────┘

Homonymy of the word **cock**

As mentioned above, in homonymy, the lexical entry makes accessible distinct concepts encoded by the same lexical form. The question is whether the fact that they share the same lexical entry may have any influence on the way such concepts are used and interpreted. It has been suggested by Solska (2008: 118), in her discussion of zeugmatic structures, that while interpreting an utterance, apart from accessing encyclopaedic information, the hearer may use information from the lexical entry of the encoded concept featuring in that utterance. I would like to offer a further-reaching claim that, in homonymy for example, the shared lexical entry makes it possible for the information contained in the encyclopaedic entry of one concept to affect the encyclopaedic content of another concept.

Let us look at two lexicalised concepts $COCK_1$ 'male adult chicken' and $COCK_2$ 'penis', the latter being a taboo concept. The concepts are not related to each other in any way, but they are realised by the same lexical form. The word *cock* in the sense of 'male adult chicken' is still used among the British, but it can be rarely found in Australia and it started disappearing from America at the beginning of the nineteenth century (Allan and Burridge 2006: 44). The
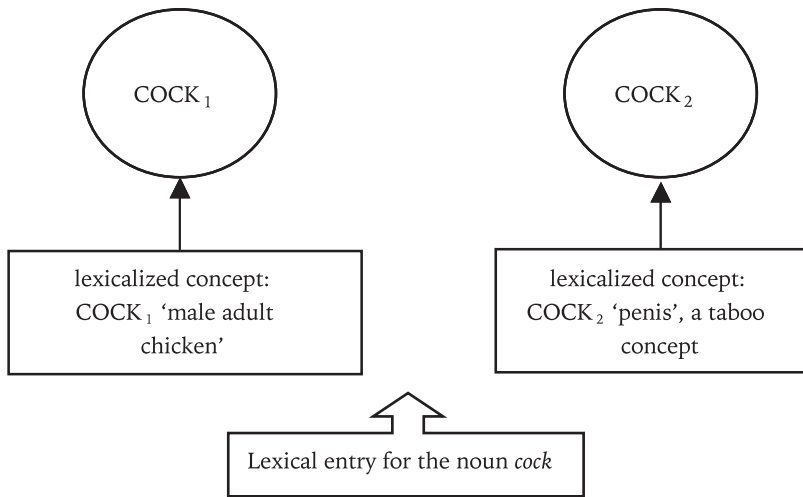
Fig. 3. Homonymy of the word *cock*

most likely reason for speakers' refraining from the use of *cock* in that sense is the fact that its homonym is a taboo term and "[s]uch is the potency of taboo terms that innocent [homonyms – E.W.] may be affected through spurious association" (Allan and Burridge 2006: 242). In relevance-theoretic terms, the taboo associations stored in the encyclopaedic entry of the taboo concept may contaminate the unrelated neutral concept by entering its encyclopaedic entry through the lexical entry, which is the same for both concepts (see Fig. 3). This also shows that the information contained in the lexical entry may, in a sense, affect the content of a lexical concept.

6. Conclusions

The question about the role of the lexical entry in the relevance-theoretic framework, which has been posed in this paper, seems pertinent to Relevance Theory's growing interest in the field of lexical pragmatics, particularly to the relationships holding between lexicalised concepts and ad-hoc concepts, on the one hand, and between these concepts and their corresponding lexical forms, on the other. Some insight concerning the role of the lexical entry can be gained from a relevance-theoretic analysis of polysemy, homonymy and taboo contamination. It turns out that the relevance-theoretic framework makes it possible to postulate that polysemy involves access to a single mental representation, while homonymy makes accessible more than one such representation, which is consistent with some psycholinguistic findings (e.g. Frazier and Rayner 1990, Klepousniotou 2000). Furthermore, polysemy might

give access to a lexicalised pro-concept which has to be narrowed down every time it is used, depending on context, or to a non-lexicalised broadened concept which is a superordinate of non-overlapping lexicalised concepts, one of which is felt to be more accessible than the other(s). Finally, in the process of taboo contamination, which may affect homonyms, the encyclopaedic content of one concept may influence the encyclopaedic information of another concept sharing the same lexical entry, which suggests that the role of the lexical entry may not be restricted to making available information about lexical properties of the word encoding the concept.

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